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Seeking Middle-Classness

University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan

Scott, Katrine

2018

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Scott, K. (2018). *Seeking Middle-Classness: University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan*. [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Department of Gender Studies]. Lund University.

Total number of authors:
1

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Seeking Middle-Classness

University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan

KATRINE SCOTT
DEPARTMENT OF GENDER STUDIES | LUND UNIVERSITY

How do young adult university students in a region affected by war and conflict make sense of narratives of middle-classness? And how do these narratives relate to hegemonic representations of life in a wartorn region?

This thesis explores narratives of aspired middle-classness among university students in urban Iraqi Kurdistan. Ethnographic research in the city of Sulaimani in the relatively peaceful moment of 2012 grasps the ambivalent position of young adult university students at the crossroads between their memories of war and political conflict and their dreams of a peaceful and successful middle-class future.

Printed by Media-Tryck, Lund 2017 NORDIC ECOLABEL, 3041 0903

LUND UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Gender Studies

ISBN 978-91-7753-519-5

9 789177 535195

Seeking Middle-Classness

Seeking Middle-Classness

University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan

Katrine Scott

LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
by due permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Lund University, Sweden. To be defended at Kulturens Auditorium on January 26, 2018 at 10:15.

Faculty opponent
Associate Professor Fataneh Farahani,
Wallenberg Academy Fellow, Dep. of Ethnology,
History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University.

Organization LUND UNIVERSITY	Document name
	Date of issue January 26, 2018
Author(s) Katrine Scott	Sponsoring organization

Title and subtitle **Seeking Middle-Classness – University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan**

Abstract

Narratives of middle-classness are often missing from Western representations of wartorn regions in the Global South more generally and from the Middle East in particular. This thesis is concerned with stories of desires for ordinary everyday middle-class lives among young adult university students in urban Iraqi Kurdistan.

The study is inspired by feminist ethnography and consists of participant observation and in-depth interviews with a group of university students in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan in 2012 at the University of Sulaimani and the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani.

With the central concept of *storytailoring,* the thesis presents a plurality of stories from students that destabilise Western-centric notions of what it means to be modern, middle-class and so-called 'normal'. The study is located in urban (post-)conflict Sulaimani, a bubble of relative peace with historical and present violence close by. Three central themes structure the analysis of students' stories: politics, temporality and gendered middle-class respectability. Central questions guiding the analysis are: *What are the narratives of desired middle-class ordinary life? How are narratives of gendered figurations shaped and performed? And what do these narratives say about life for a section of relatively privileged university students in a (post-)conflict society? How can narratives about desired middle-class ordinary lives tell other stories about a wartorn region?*

Through the concept of *normality-seekers*, the study shows how narratives of desired middle-classness play a specific role among university students at the crossroads between their memories of war and political conflict and their dreams of a peaceful and successful middle-class future.

The theoretical framework for the study is postcolonial, queer theory and feminist epistemological questions of critical knowledge production and analysis. Autoethnographic writing situates the study in both urban Iraqi Kurdistan and in a Scandinavian academic and political context. Poetry, fiction, media texts and photographs are also included in the analysis.

Key words

middle-classness, youth, universities, students, urban, post-conflict, war, narratives, stories, representations, figurations, normality, Middle East, Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, ethnography, autoethnography, feminist/queer/postcolonial epistemologies.

Classification system and/or index terms (if any)

Supplementary bibliographical information		Language English
ISSN and key title		ISBN 978-91-7753-519-5 (print) 978-91-7753-520-1 (pdf)
Recipient's notes	Number of pages 228	Price
	Security classification	

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Seeking Middle-Classness

University Students in Iraqi Kurdistan

Katrine Scott

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Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan 2017

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Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Gender Studies

ISBN 978-91-7753-519-5 (print)
ISBN 978-91-7753-520-1 (pdf)

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University, Lund 2018

”Write a humanising poem,” my pen and paper goad me. ”Show them how wrong their preconceptions are. Be relatable. Write something upbeat for a change, crack a smile. Tell them how you also cry at the end of Toy Story 3, and you are just as capable of bantering about the weather in the post office queue. Like everyone, you have no idea how to make the perfect amount of pasta, still.” (…)

But no. I put my pen down. I will not let that poem force me to write it, because it's not the poem I want to write. It's the poem I am being reduced to – reduced to proving my life is human because it is relatable, valuable because it is recognisable. (…)

So this will not be a ‘Muslims are like us’ poem. I refuse to be respectable. Instead, love us when we're lazy. Love us when we are poor. Love us in our back-to-backs council estates, depressed and washed and weeping. Love us high as kites, unemployed, joyriding, timewasting, failing at school. Love us filthy, without the right colour passports, without the right-sounding English. (…)

If you need me to prove my humanity, I'm not the one who's not human. (…)

(Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, from *This Is Not a Humanising Poem*, The Last Word Festival 2017, UK, my transcription)

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I want to express my deepest gratitude to students at the University of Sulaimani and the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani for sharing their time and thoughts with me. And thanks to the organisations, lecturers and staff for letting me in.

Thanks to the Swedish Research Council for funding through the project *Dreaming Change: Women and the Creation of Civil Societies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America*.

Thanks to Manuela Rossing, Soz Ahmad, Zlatana Knezevic, Hawnaz Hassan Ahmed for help with transcription and translation of recorded interviews. Thanks to Lucy Edyvean for flexible and professional proofreading and copy-editing. Thanks to the interpreter for translation in Sulaimani between Sorani Kurdish and English when needed. Shilan Nuri and Dana Jamil, I am grateful for our friendship throughout the years, and your generous sharing of time and knowledge of everyday life and politics in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thanks to Bawan Baban for the cover photo. And thanks to Gohar Dashti for giving permission to reprint a photo from the series Today's Life and War (2008).

Allan, this project grew out of meeting you. I am forever grateful for the place within the extended family that I was warmly welcomed into in Sulaimani, Denmark and Sweden. I am grateful for the ongoing conversations and continuous support – from small matters, such as how to translate Sorani Kurdish words, to current political discussions and all the hidden angles that we cannot read about elsewhere, the stories that we have to talk about.

Ina Knobblock and Kristin Linderoth, we began this PhD student journey together, moving into our common physical and mental office space and sharing the challenges along the ride. Lovise Haj Brade, Maria Tonini, Anna Olovsdotter Lööv, Riya Raphael, Mikael Karlsson, Merel Van

Mansom and Marco Bacio, you have at different stages been part of the doctoral student collective at the Department of Gender Studies – it has felt good to be in it together with you. Thanks too for exciting new energy and insights from visiting PhD students Ewa Maczynska and Nargiza Arjevanidze.

Eda Farsakoglu and Selin Cagatay, always close despite geographical distance. I admire your ability to zoom in and out – always finding ways to reach out. I value that agility highly and dearly. Academia is a better place with you in it.

Over the years, I have had the luxury of discussing and sharing work in progress with the Critical Methodologies PhD group in Lund and Malmö. Vanna Nordling, Emma Söderman, Marta Kolankiewicz, Ann Kristin Lassen, Johanna Sixtensson, Eda Farsakoglu, Pouran Djampour, Kristin Linderoth, Ina Knobblock, Maria Tonini and Tove Lundberg. We built this space for collective reflections across disciplines, a sense of belonging. Thanks to Les Back for participating in a workshop with us in April 2015.

Bolette Frydendahl Larsen, meeting on the train between Copenhagen and Lund – discussing practicalities of commuter life and sharing thoughts of navigating feminist academic discussions between Danish and Swedish contexts. Our weekly lunches during the last summer of writing were a lifesaver when there were more tourists than people studying at the Danish Royal Library. Ane Havskov Kirk, thanks for the formative years of travelling and working together in Swedish feminist studies – you paved the way.

Diana Mulinari, the most supportive supervisor, engaged listener and conversation partner. You have the ability to be present and focus on the here-and-now important issues despite neoliberal times in higher education. You have been a crucial support and an inspiration.

Sofie Buchhave. You came into my life singing, and I had to sing with you. Thanks for wonderful help with the bibliography and the last bits of final copy-editing. Lone Nielsen, my first penpal, and wonderful friend. Giving me a home in all its meanings. Cooking meals, always checking in on me, your insistence on making appointments to see me regularly so that I wouldn't get lost in my final writing. Thank you.

Anna-Carina Josefsen. The ability to embrace all the beautiful imperfect aspects of life makes your company the best. And there is always space for both a party and a serious kitchen talk. Signe Stubager Bæk, your reflections on engaging in hands-on normcritical pedagogy with children every day is a source of continuous inspiration and admiration.

Liv Hansson, Helga Mathiassen, Anna Folke Larsen, Nina Liv Brøndum, Kristine Jensen and Signe Haubroe Flygare. From spontaneous *Bar Ræv* to organised parties, I am happy as long as you are there.

Kristian Kolstrup, Alva Albæk Nielsen, Lisbeth Nielsen, Max Drasbeck and Bogatyr – creating a common home during my first years of PhD work. I wouldn't have learned so much about kitchen renovations and everyday shared economies without you. Lotte Højensgård Kanstrup, I am so happy that we share the same wonderful neighbourhood in Sydhavnen, Copenhagen. Ämma Hildebrand, thanks for your generous sharing of space in your Lund apartment.

Mathias, Anna, Ole and Janet Scott Jessen. I look at each of you and see parts of myself, annoying at times, as family ties are, and joyful at others. You took me travelling as a child, and I swore that I would stay in one place when I was old enough to decide for myself. But then I had the opportunity to travel as an adult, albeit going back and back to the same place in Sulaimani. You taught me that being good at something comes from practice, taking one step at a time like the character Beppo sweeping the streets one step and one breath at a time, in Michael Ende's novel *Momo*.

Granny. Drinking tea from your cup with the owl, from your tea kettle with the colourful birds underneath the tea cosy in rainbow colours (you wanted bright colours to look at for less happy days). You lovingly taught me the skill of letter-writing in Canadian English.

In 2013 I was invited to the workshop *Global higher education, student mobility, regionality* held at the Swedish Institute, Istanbul with Susan Robertson and Roger Dale. Thanks to organisers Per Anders-Forstorp, Ulf Mellström and Ann Kull for inviting me. Thanks to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES), Lund University, for additional financial support.

In the autumn of 2014 I was a visiting PhD student at SOAS, University of London. Thanks to Knud Højgaards Fond and Augustinus Fonden for

making the stay possible. Thanks to Nadje Al-Ali for valuable and insightful supervision, Gina Heathcote for organising my stay. Thanks to PhD and master's students for enriching conversations in classes and outside. Marie Ahlberg Andersen and Rosita E. Rodriguez, you were the best flatmates for life in London.

Sue Wright, DPU – Danish School of Education, Pædagogisk Antropologi, Emdrup (Aarhus University). You have been a scrupulous reader as my external supervisor, providing hands-on suggestions to link abstract chaotic thinking and put it in order in the text. Asking questions driving me to gather scattered thoughts into concepts linked to both theory and ethnography, encouraging me "to do like the boys" and to proudly introduce my own concepts for consideration. Thanks for office space at DPU and open invitations to participate in seminars and activities. I am grateful for interesting conversations with researchers at Pædagogisk Antropologi.

Thanks to Lena Martinsson for an engaged conversation at my final seminar. And Ulf Mellström for providing a reading and comments at my mid-seminar.

Thanks to the Department of Gender Studies, Lund University for embracing my Danish-Swedish language mix and my coming and going throughout the years between Lund and Copenhagen. Maja Sager and Rebecca Selberg, thanks for sharing your knowledge and experience of teaching, passing it on. In no specific order, thanks to my colleagues Sara Goodman, Kerstin Sandell, Jens Rydström, Lena Karlsson, Irina Schmitt, Matilda Svensson Chowdury, Mia Liinason, Lena Gunnarsson, Helle Rydstrøm, Chia-Ling Yang, Ekhaterina Zhukova, Katherine Harrison, Helena Gyllensvärd, Helena Falk, Camilla Lekebjer and Irene Pelayo.

Thanks to students at the Department of Gender Studies, Lund University, for being curious, asking questions, challenging me, and engaging in feminist conversations in the classroom.

Sydhavnen, Copenhagen, December 2017

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A glimpse of urban Iraqi Kurdistan and the desire for middle-class normality

Miss Kurdistan Beauty Pageant is taking place in the city of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan in October 2016. I see photographs on my Facebook feed of young women fashionably dressed-up and walking the stage in a luxurious-looking hotel setting. The Iraqi-Kurdish news website *Rudaw* is covering the event on their English news site, interviewing Zato, one of the organisers:

> "We are trying to show the world that we are still living," Zato told *Rudaw*. "We are not just the people who are fighting and sitting in the problems. We are now showing the world that we are living normal lives. We have our social lives and everything. So we want to show the world that they can come here. They can join us. They can do business here. They can come for tourism. That is the target of this event." (Field, *Rudaw* 2016)

In the autumn of 2012, I held a lecture on qualitative methods at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) and presented my research project in the making on *Everyday Student Lives* in front of a group of students. After my presentation, a student – I'll call her Nina – came up to me. She had grown up in Europe but now lived in Sulaimani and studied at AUIS. She right away wanted to participate in my study since she strongly wanted people in Europe to know that Iraqi Kurdistan was not all war and suffering – a narrative that she often met when talking with people living in Europe. She wanted everybody to know "how it really is" in urban Iraqi Kurdistan, as she framed it.

Listening carefully to what Nina names as "how it really is" from her perspective as a young adult student, it is about the non-spectacular everyday life in a big city. Nina's and other students' efforts to put on display *the normality* of everyday lives in urban Iraqi Kurdistan is central in my exploration of what I have identified as *the desires for middle-class normality* in a (post-)conflict society. I use the ambiguous term '(post-) conflict' to stress the fact that, even though everyday life in the city of Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, was relatively peaceful in 2012 when I did my ethnographic research, the urban space was surrounded by conflict and war. I describe Sulaimani at the time of my visits (2008–2012) with the metaphor of a bubble because of this relatively fragile peace. Even though parts of Iraqi Kurdistan can be seen as fairly safe relative to the violence taking place in other regions in Iraq, there have been several cases of independent journalists and human rights defenders being subject to arrest, violence and murder (Gulf Center for Human Rights 2014). And as feminist scholar in peace/conflict studies Cynthia Cockburn points out, a continuation of violence at different levels in society is characteristic of a post-war area (Cockburn 2004:43).[1] (Post-)conflict is a term I use to describe the specific situation of Sulaimani; post-invasion or post-Saddam Iraq is a broader description that e.g. Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt use to describe Iraq (including Iraqi Kurdistan) after 2003 (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009a, 2009b).

The Kurdish Region in Iraq has had the status of a *de facto state* since 1991 (Voller 2014) or a *quasi-state*[2] sustained by foreign aid (Natali 2010). Iraqi Kurdistan has consolidated its autonomy after the US-led invasion in Iraq in 2003 (which many Kurds supported) and with the fall of the Ba'th regime.

---

[1] Violence against women is present in Iraqi Kurdistan. Minoo Alinia writes about this: "The formation of gender roles and relations, and violence against women, in Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be understood outside the historical and political processes connected to the formation of the colonial Iraqi state. Nor can it be understood outside the circumstances around the formation of Kurdish identity in relation to the Iraqi state, which has been characterized by oppression and resistance" (Alinia 2013:28-29).

[2] "Quasi-states are political entities that have internal but not external sovereignty and seek some form of autonomy or independence." (Natali 2010:xxi). "External aid not only offers quasi-states opportunities for post-war reconstruction and development, but also provides the international recognition and internal sovereignty necessary for their emergence and survival" (ibid.:xxii).

I am particularly focusing on the meaning of middle-class normality for a section of a new generation of young middle-class university students in urban Iraqi Kurdistan on their way to adulthood. Central to the study are narratives from these students from ethnographic fieldwork in Sulaimani in 2012. These narratives around desires for normality are placed in a wider context by including other sources such as media news, social media and autoethnography from several visits to Sulaimani since 2008. This thesis is an attempt to give space to these narratives of desires for normality, and an invitation to listen properly to students like Nina.

In the first part of this introductory chapter, I will present and discuss Eurocentric representations mirrored in single-story representations of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, and present my aims and research questions. I will introduce my ethnographic study with university students and explore relevant methodological dilemmas. In the second part of the chapter, I will present central theoretical concepts and conversations that form the foundation of the study.

With the words of Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail, I will invite the reader to join this journey of storytelling.

- You've got your story
and I've got mine:
two different beginnings
but the end is the same.

- And between the beginning
and the end
are all those details
that are killing you
that are killing me.

- And because the plot was hard to follow,
it bored the readers:
they fell asleep
and saw us as nightmares,
and that was the end of it.

- So let's cast our stories into the sea
and move on.

(Mikhail 2013/2014:52, from *The Old Olive Tree*, translated from Arabic)

Telling other stories – aims and research questions

The story of Miss Kurdistan Beauty Pageant, and Nina's everyday life as a university student, are not included in the mainstream media representation of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan in Western media.[3] In the following, I will illustrate and discuss the consequence when only a single story is told about a whole region and the people living there.

The danger of a single story

"Iraqis are being shrunken down to a narcissistic 'Iraq'", writes Cynthia Enloe in the foreword to Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt's *What Kind of Liberation? – Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Enloe in Al-Ali and Pratt 2009a:ix). Enloe is describing the kind of *shrinkage* that happens when the people of a whole country with a long history and a present heterogeneous plurality of politics, conflicts, culture production and lived experiences are described as this specific 'Iraq' from the viewpoint of American and British coalition forces as if there had been no Iraq before the 2003 invasion. Al-Ali and Pratt analyse and criticise this very strong hegemonic Western representation of Iraq that is the story of the US-led invasion in 2003. The story starts when a certain 'we' enter the field with the rhetoric of fighting for freedom against terror and weapons of mass destruction. Al-Ali and Pratt deconstruct this one-sided perception of Iraq as a place with passive Iraqis just waiting to be rescued. They show in particular how Iraqi and Kurdish women had been active political subjects long before the Americans and allies came to their rescue (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009a; see also Al-Ali and Al-Najjar 2013). Anthropologist Hayder Al-Mohammad also describes this gap between Iraq as it is described in newspapers and "(…) Iraq that is found in the streets, the markets and the daily lives of its citizens" (Al-Mohammad 2011:18).

Likewise, 'Aah, IN-dia' is a reaction that anthropologist Kirin Narayan has met in various ways when she tells people in the United States where she grew up: people's heads are filled with different kinds of stereotypic

[3] This is a general issue of media representations in the Global North of the Global South (see Alam 2007). Stereotypical representations of 'the Other' have been famously coined by Stuart Hall in "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" (Hall 1992).

images about what India is like (Narayan 2012:28). In the same way, people have strong images of either 'Ah, Iraq' (surprised) or 'Oh, Iraq' (fearful) when I have spoken about my travels and research throughout the years: the warzone Iraq, Iraq of sectarian violence, Iraq invaded by the United States-led coalition (including Denmark), Iraq with the Abu-Ghraib prison, the oil-rich Iraq, or Iraq with the Kurds fighting for autonomy.

The shrinkage of a plurality of stories into only a representation of one single story is addressed by writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie when she warns against *the danger of a single story* that describes e.g. Africa as one place with only one story (Adichie 2009).[4] In 2016, Adichie follows up on the same line of thought and comments on the so-called 'refugee crisis', deconstructing the stereotypical picture of the refugee as a person who is only a refugee and not a human being with dreams and desires.

> In my language, Igbo, the word for 'love' is 'ifunanya' and its literal translation is, 'to see.' So I would like to suggest today that this is a time for a new narrative, a narrative in which we truly see those about whom we speak. Let us tell a different story. Let us remember that the movement of human beings on earth is not new. Human history is a history of movement and mingling. Let us remember that we are not just bones and flesh. We are emotional beings. We all share a desire to be valued, a desire to matter. Let us remember that dignity is as important as food. (Adichie 2016)

Focusing on new narratives inspires hope for the possibility of a plurality of stories around desires to take shape and find their way out into the world where they can be seen and listened to. This is my ambition in this thesis. In the following, I illustrate my encounter with the problem of the single story.

Travelling between different versions of 'Iraq'

August 13, 2009. It was a Thursday and I was sitting on a plane flying back from Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan to Copenhagen. At the same time, my friends in Copenhagen, many of them activists in solidarity networks with

[4] Also see Lundberg and Farahani (2017) reflecting on the concept of the single story.

migrants and refugees[5], had gathered in front of a church, Brorsons Kirke, in the middle of the night, where around 60 'Iraqi' refugees had sought asylum since May 2009. This action was called *Kirkeasyl* (church asylum)[6]. Denmark had made an agreement with Iraq to send back refugees to a wartorn country (Ministeriet for Flygtninge, Indvandrere og Integration, May 13, 2009). Seeking asylum in the church was a final attempt to avoid deportation. I had been active on the outskirts of the action, participating in demonstrations, spreading information, and keeping an eye on eventual deportations, ready to react. The people threatened by deportation were named 'the Iraqis in the church' by the media and activists, despite the fact that the group of refugees had diverse backgrounds such as Kurdish and Arab from Iraq. As Denmark was part of the coalition forces at war in Iraq[7], the left-wing scene in Copenhagen simmered with feelings of responsibility to help refugees coming from Iraq. They criticised the double standards of going to war while not wanting to help the people affected by the same war. This was an extreme double standard as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs was advising Danish

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[5] The naming of people crossing borders and seeking asylum is loaded and carries 'discursive luggage' (Sager 2011:22). In recent years, there has been a split in the meaning attached to the categories of 'migrant' and 'refugee', which is addressed as problematic among scholars and activists: "[T]he refugee is understood as legitimate while the migrant is understood as illegitimate. Refugee is defined in the narrowest manner, both legally and rhetorically: as a victim, preferably impoverished, who should not own smartphones or be in good shape, and should originate from certain, very few, war-torn nations. Whereas migrant has previously been used as an umbrella term for anyone crossing borders, today, migrant denotes a suspicious welfare scrounger driven by economic greed and convenience" (*visAvis* 2016:6).

[6] In Denmark, the church Blågårdskirke in Nørrebro, Copenhagen had previously served as a refuge for 143 Palestinians in 1991 when they feared deportation (Skriver and Tved 2011:92).

[7] Despite Danish military engagement in Iraq, the Danish Iraq Commission was closed down in June 2015 before any results had been published. The Commission was founded under the former Socialdemocrat-led government (2011–2015) in order to investigate whether the parliament had received the right information when Denmark decided to go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan and how prisoners of war had been treated. The decision to close down the Commission was taken by the new government (June 2015–), consisting of the party Venstre, a centre-right party (conservative liberal). This is the same party that was in power when the former Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was a leading voice in making Denmark go to war in Afghanistan (January 2002) and Iraq (March 2003).

citizens not to travel to the area. Due to the Ministry's advice, it had been difficult for me to find an insurance company that would cover my trip.

On that Thursday night, I was on the plane coming back from a seminar on *Youth, Activism and Gender* with participating young Danes and Kurds in the city of Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan.[8] I had organised the seminar together with my then partner, who had grown up in the city. We had been flying back and forth to Sulaimani several times during 2008 and 2009 in order to prepare the workshop, to visit family, and for me to do fieldwork in relation to my bachelor thesis on gender and women's activism in the city (Scott Jessen 2008). Besides my travels and my studies, I worked at the reception desk of one of the big Danish newspapers. I was invited to contribute with a collection of diary-style essays from my trip, telling about the everyday life in the city that a Danish readership would rarely hear about. I had agreed to do so, and the plan was to write while being there, and then to go over my texts with the editor when I returned.

Sitting on the plane that Thursday night in August 2009, when police forces were evicting people from the church in Copenhagen and using violence against those who protested, I knew that I would not be able to write the peaceful everyday anecdotes from urban Iraqi Kurdistan. I would not take the risk that my story could be used against the struggle for asylum on behalf of refugees from the region. I silenced myself and never published any essays in the newspaper. The single story of Iraq as a dangerous place did not leave space for the nuances of everyday life in a warzone.

So why tell peaceful everyday stories? For whose sake? For what purpose? Through a Foucauldian lens, power and knowledge are intimately entangled as "[w]e are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault 1980:93). From this perspective, telling stories is not an innocent business, but a question of exercising power through the production of storytelling of what is perceived as 'the truth'. The Danish state's established hegemonic narrative around 'safe countries' to return refugees to; refugees who were not perceived as

[8] Sponsored by the Danish Youth Council in collaboration with Socialist Youth Front (DK).

‘worthy asylum seekers’[9], is a specific production of truth through which power is exercised in regard to asylum legislation and practices. The paradox of the Danish state’s story was that Iraq was safe enough for some (Iraqis) but not for others (Danish citizens).

A counter-hegemonic public narrative in response, in the form of Kirkeasyl trying to produce another truth claim around the right to asylum, had a limited storyline to cling to in order to produce a story that the media would find relevant as a reply. Internal discussions during Kirkeasyl evolved around how strategically to talk back against this hegemonic narrative of ‘Iraq as safe for Iraqis’, and the group (including both Danish citizens and asylum seekers) settled on a collective struggle or forms of resistance arguing for the ‘Iraqis’’ right not to be sent to ‘the dangerous Iraq’ that Danish citizens were advised not to go to (personal conversation with a former Kirkeasyl activist, January 2017). A collective mobilising around what can be described by Spivak’s concept of a *strategic essentialism* of the ‘Iraqi’ identity (Spivak and Rooney 1997) and thereby not buying into the asylum system’s (often impossible) demand for the individual to prove persecution. The risk of organising around a strategic essentialist identity category, that may be successful sometimes, is the risk of this strategy turning into a fixed single story.

I experienced that ‘the Iraqi from the church’ became a persistent figure. One weekend, a few years after 2009, I was sitting in the living room of my friend’s shared apartment. A roommate, ‘Peter’, entered to say that a guest would be moving in for a while. The guest was a former ‘Iraqi from the church’. This was how the guest was presented since everybody in that circle of acquaintances knew what an ‘Iraqi from the church’ meant. Peter added a sentence about “the fucked-up situation with ISIS”. The closeness of war vibrated in the living room air with ISIS as the reason for the guest’s need to stay in the small extra room in the apartment. Welcoming a guest fleeing from ISIS is a narrative that also creates an identity for the host (including myself), which is not my object of study but important to look into in order to understand why certain

[9] A similar argument can be found in Anderson 2013; Sager 2011; Sager, Holgersson and Öberg, eds. 2016; Squire 2009.

figures and narratives persistently keep returning.[10] Continously telling one story about war risks closing down from understanding the actual complexities of lived experiences and the many facets of living in a region affected by violent conflict.

In this study, my aim is to go beyond both the hegemonic and the strategic counter-hegemonic storyline of the 'Iraqis'. Quoted out of context, bits and pieces of my research could be used to spark fire to the talk of anti-immigration politics arguing that the bordering region close by is the best place for a refugee. I have for a long time been afraid of that happening, and at the same time I wish to question the stories and figures that keep popping up in both public manifestations and in the private context of living rooms. Stories that are produced as counter-hegemonic replies, but that also risk excluding entry points into the complexity of lived lives.

Throughout this thesis, an overarching understanding of storytelling is that certain narratives are dominant and hegemonic around Iraq, Kurdistan and the people living in the region or migrating as refugees. Mobilisations such as Kirkeasyl have certain limitations for creating counter-hegemonic narratives that, in order to be successful, have restricted possibilities of exploring fractures and contradictions. The Danish asylum regime works with very rigid categories of war and peace, danger and safety, and does not leave space for nuances.

This study is an attempt to create a platform from where I can provide a more nuanced story with all the in-betweens and ambivalences between these fixed representations of Iraq and Iraqis. Even though looking for the complex seems like a cliché, this is also what sociologist Avery Gordon is pointing out:

> That life is complicated may seem a banal expression of the obvious, but it is nonetheless a profound theoretical statement – perhaps the most important theoretical statement of our time. (Gordon 2008 [1997]:3)

Going back to the student Nina's effort to tell her story of "how it really is" in urban Iraqi Kurdistan from the point of view of a university

[10] Also see "Politik hinsides velkomst" [Politics beyond welcoming] (Bissenbakker, Danbolt, Myong and Nebeling 2015) for an analysis of Refugees Welcome activism in Denmark, and the need to continuously question the underlying structural premise of who is the host and who is the guest.

student, I as a researcher have tried to orchestrate a space where this story can unfold and be heard if we listen carefully. Sociologist Les Back underlines the importance of a researcher's ability to engage in what he calls *sociological listening* (Back 2007). In the same line of reasoning and also inspired by Back, sociologist and media scholar Adi Kuntsman developed an epistemological standpoint in regard to listening to silences in research. Kuntsman's study concerns silences in relation to queer immigrants and figurations of violence and belonging in Israel/Palestine:

> (…) I propose that one way to refigure violent racist or homophobic speech might be by listening to silences. I do not mean the literal lack of voice, but rather, silence as an epistemological category that allows imagining the unimaginable, and listening to those who cannot speak and cannot be spoken for, but whose absence can be a form of 'seething presence' (Gordon 1997: 8). 'To move outside the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject', notes Butler (1997: 133). Yet the unspeakable does not mean not existing. On the contrary, Butler emphasises that the unspeakable is that which brings the subject into being and then haunts its speech, becoming what Linda Randolph, the artist that inspired Haraway's work on figurations, calls a '**metaphysical space in between**', a 'place where change occurs' (Randolph 1993 in Haraway 1997: 273). (Kuntsman 2009:239, my emphasis)

Setting up a space from which Nina's and other students' stories can be heard in all their nuances, I want to open up this "metaphysical space in between". Nina and others *can* speak, but are often not *heard*. In my research, this *space in between* is situated with hegemonic narratives of Iraq on one side, and with the everyday experiences of living in urban Iraqi Kurdistan on the other; the everyday life that is so much more than what is represented in hegemonic narratives on Iraq as a warzone dangerous for some but safe enough for others. This *space in between* is a space that can capture the complexity of life with all the desires, wishes and dreams that young adult students embody. Kuntsman wishes to question "(…) a simplistic and reductionist understanding of social, political and cultural life there [Israel/Palestine], coming from both activists and some academics" (Kuntsman 2009:x-xi). In the same way, I want to add important stories into the windmill of mainstream story production about Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Scholar in International Relations (IR) Annick Wibben captures with the image of *fighting with windmills* the power of mainstream narratives and the hard work it takes trying to put other narratives up against the current (Wibben 2011). Wibben works in IR studies and focuses on lived experience through a narrative approach, rather than seeing IR as only a matter of studying state-level politics. She asks: Who is seeing? Who perceives? What is perceived? From what perspective is the story told? In Wibben's study of US female engagement teams in Afghanistan, she describes how their engagement was told as a story of success in Western media despite no real success on the ground (McBride and Wibben 2012). Part of the storytelling of success was linked to Laura Bush's proclamation in 2001 that "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (McBride and Wibben 2012:201). The image of the Muslim woman as a victim in need of being saved in Western representations is also addressed and strongly critiqued by Lila Abu-Lughod (2013). She names this representation "the common Western story of the hapless Muslim woman oppressed by her culture" (Abu-Lughod 2013:9).

Narratives can *limit* and *enable*, according to Wibben (2011), and listening to her giving a talk at SOAS, London, in the autumn of 2014, she posed a question and a statement that has stayed with me: *What are the material effects of framing the story one way or the other? It is not about finding 'the right story'*.[11]

In this thesis, I'm not searching for 'the right story'; I'm presenting a plurality of stories from young adult students in urban Iraqi Kurdistan that destabilise Western-centric notions of what it means to be modern, middle-class and so-called 'normal'. And I'm looking into what it means to desire and aspire to ideas of middle-class ordinary peaceful lives in a bubble of relative peace in (post-)conflict urban Sulaimani with historical and present violence close by. The central research questions that I pose in this thesis are:

> *What are the narratives of desired middle-class ordinary life? How are narratives of gendered figurations shaped and performed? And what do*

[11] Seminar at Centre for Gender Studies, SOAS, University of London, October 16, 2014 with the title: *Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan: Examining Security/Identity Narratives*.

these narratives say about life for a section of relatively privileged university students in a (post-)conflict society? How can narratives about desired middle-class ordinary lives tell other stories about a wartorn region?

Scenes from a scattered field – methodological reflections

> Ethnography is a set of practices and style of writing, but it's also a mode of inhabiting one's life. An affective orientation – a specific attunement – ethnographic fieldwork is a way of moving through the world. Ethnography means attending carefully to what's around you; it entails presence and attention, and interest above all. On good days I joke that I am curious for a living – to me this is the pleasure and privilege of our work. (Johnson 2016)

Ethnographic fieldwork is not only taking place in some remote and clearly defined field 'elsewhere' (Amit 2000). During my work with this dissertation I have experienced how situations from my own (academic) everyday life have influenced my research; a tailoring of stories is taking place in Europe as well as in urban Iraqi Kurdistan, and in media spaces. As described above, Kirkeasyl was an event that made it clear to me how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic narratives around 'Iraq' and 'Iraqis' were shaped in Copenhagen. Below is a mosaic of some other key and eye-opening scenes from what I have come to see as my scattered field of study.

> **War as a hot topic**
> October 2014. I am sitting in the library at SOAS, University of London, reading news on ISIS's horrible attacks in Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan. This morning I had planned to go over my recorded interview material and notebooks in another round. But I need to keep track of the things going on at the moment. And I am struck by the feeling that I should say something now that my research region has once again become a hot topic. But I don't say anything: 1) because I am not an expert on ISIS, on war, on international politics; 2) my material on everyday lives of university students does not fit into the picture of a war going on. Once again I am silent. I am silencing myself. I am once again asked curious

questions about the danger of a planned return to Sulaimani. I have to listen to (white, male) admiration of the cool (read: good) looks of female Peshmerga[12] fighters, and on my Facebook feed I see that the clothing company H&M has launched a green jumpsuit looking very similar to the Peshmerga uniform.

Solidarity with Kurdistan

Sitting in a conference hall at Copenhagen University, February 24, 2015. I am in the audience listening in on a debate on *Kurdish Women at the Front* with panellists including both scholars and journalists. I am writing in my notebook:

How to talk about my research project in this field when 1) ideas about feminism are understood in singular terms of 'Western feminism' versus 'Kurdish feminism'; 2) gender and conflict is equal to (and only about) women and war; 3) Orientalist perceptions of 'us' and 'them' are structuring the debate (even though it is a well-meant 'hooray' kind of essentialising); 4) the talk in this room 'here' about violence 'there' is taking place without reflecting on racist discourses in Scandinavia on the 'violent Middle Eastern man'?

Changing landscapes

March 11, 2008.

We have landed. Chaos and airport circus, a cancelled flight, standby to a place on a plane flying over Beirut. Finally on our way, and I did not vomit. But nauseated during the four hours' drive from Erbil to Sulaimani. On the front seat, asleep. *Nan* + *mast* + *cha* (bread + yoghurt + tea) along the way. Lamb meatballs (*shifta*) and clean fresh herbs when we arrive *home*. I hope I will not get trouble with my stomach. The luggage is not with us, delayed maybe for one week. A nap in the cold room downstairs in the basement. Using the toilet with a very clean and fresh sensation as the outcome – and wet panties. Awakening to the sound of the minarets summoning people to prayer. Strange/foreign/ new/unknown sounds. I am trying to open up myself and make them mine.

I slept through the landscape that I wanted to see. Almost newly blossomed spring-green mountains, dusty roads and already the heat. An aunt has made a spring-coloured Newrooz [Kurdish New Year] dress for

[12] *Peshmerga* is a general Kurdish word for armed Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Their name translates as 'those who face death'.

> me. Very bright and disco, but perfect in size. I am '*duana*' (beautiful) and get the best parts of the food handed in front of me on the flowery plastic tablecloth. We are sitting on the carpet, and I have borrowed pyjamas and blouses from a cousin. Tomorrow, we will shop for the necessary things in the city centre. (…)
>
> The electricity is cut off in the middle of a conversation. It was the neighbourhood private generator that was cut off. The public one is put to work, luckily it works. At other times there is a complete private generator. Three different kinds of power supply. Shifts between darkness and light.

I read this description from my old 2008 notebook in March 2016 while seeing Newrooz greetings on Facebook. I did not have a Facebook account on my first trip in 2008 when I landed. But on later visits to Sulaimani in 2009, 2010 and 2012, the electricity supply was more and more steady and access to the Internet was widespread. In 2012 when I visited Sulaimani as a PhD student, I was meeting university students, and many of them preferred to use Facebook as a means of communication. The earlier everyday routine of shifting between two different SIM-cards on the cellphone from two competing telephone companies, that charged highly to call numbers belonging to the rival, was no longer necessary. With the better electricity supply, routines of using the washing machine and vacuum cleaner, previously scheduled for the few hours of the day with public electricity, also changed. In the spring of 2008, I made notes in my diary in the living room in front of the *sopa* (petrol-fuelled heater) with the sound of the simmering teakettle on top. On later visits, electric heaters (*split*) in middle-class homes became more and more widespread. An annoying electrical motor turning on and off while blowing hot air into the room had overtaken the sound of the always simmering tea and the slight smell of petrol. The *sopa* became summer cottage equipment for middle-class urban residents. For me, travelling to Sulaimani also became a smooth ride as I no longer had to rely on small Kurdish-Swedish aeroplane companies changing routes on a daily basis. I could travel directly from Copenhagen via Istanbul to Sulaimani airport at the scheduled time, following the same direct route as that of the oil pipelines from Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey. And my luggage did not get lost on the way.

In 2012, I stayed in Sulaimani in February and again for three months during October to December. In February 2012 I held a couple of interviews with students outside the university. In the autumn I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork at two universities in the city – the public University of Sulaimani (UOS) and the private American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). I was hanging out, engaging in conversations, and I also participated in lectures. I was hanging out with some of the students inside and outside the university campuses, and others I only met for semi-structured interviews. I held semi-structured interviews with 18 students at UOS (five in Kurdish with an interpreter, the rest in English) and with 15 students at AUIS in English. I also held a discussion-based group interview at each university. Most interviews lasted around an hour, but they varied in length from 20 minutes to two hours. I interviewed both female and male students. I interviewed some students twice. And a few students were interviewed in pairs. The students were aged 19–25, except for one older student. On top of that, I held one interview with the AUIS Director of Communications as an extension of an ongoing conversation. I don't believe ethnography can be described in numbers, but interlocutors always ask for them. My snowball method of meeting new students lasted until I began to hear similar stories.

My previous visits to the city since 2008 added an important background to my ethnography during 2012. Without knowledge of life in the city from those earlier visits, and without always helpful and caring family relations and friends in the city, this project would not have happened. And, as I came to realise, the field I studied was not only in Sulaimani, but also in Scandinavia and in media stories, travelling together with me back and forth. Language and translation have been a central part of my ethnography, which I will unfold in the following.

Language – turning the knob on the washing machine

The new washing machine had arrived, imported from Turkey as a 'good quality product' as opposed to imported goods from China that were 'cheap'. The instructions on the machine were in Turkish. The grandmother was excited by the arrival of the new machine. She could not read the Turkish letters; actually, she could not read Sorani Kurdish either since she had not had many years of formal education. Nobody in

the household read Turkish, but the accompanying manual included a section in English that explained the different washing programmes.

As a child, I had often gone down to the basement when visiting my granny in Montréal, Canada, to help her with the washing. Since she lived on the seventh floor of the old people's home, and her walking was not good, we would stay in the basement while the machine went through its cycles. So I had a well-practised laundry vocabulary in English from an early age, though it is not the language I use these days when I go down three floors to do my laundry in the common washing room in the basement of the building where I live in Copenhagen. Sometimes I meet older people who sit on the single chair in the room and wait for their laundry to be done, so they don't have to go up and down the stairs many times.

Back in Sulaimani in 2009 on the arrival of the new washing machine, I drew a sketch of the turning knob and plotted in the different washing programmes in the right places, translating from English to Danish after reading carefully in the manual. Then, my partner translated from Danish to Kurdish to his grandmother while pointing at the knob and making a live demonstration of how many times to turn the knob in different directions and the outcome in terms of washing programmes suitable for different textiles. I realised that knowing the difference between wool, cotton and synthetics depends on whether you have grown up with a choice of woollen and cotton clothes as the most 'suitable' for children. If you spent your childhood running around in the rubber boots that the UN gave you, and the cheap imported clothes that were available in the bazaar, the delicate wool programme on the washing machine becomes quite unnecessary and exotic. We managed the performance of translation and of turning the washing knob, and we succeeded in getting clean clothes when the public electricity supply was available and made it possible to run the washing machine.

Trying to figure out how to translate words and meanings from one language into another takes time and careful consideration. Annelie Bränström Öhman reflects on going astray in "the English-language laundry procedure" when English is the lingua franca in many academic conferences (Öhman 2012:37). Important nuances might get washed out in the translation into English.

I held most conversations with students in English, and I worked with an interpreter in some interviews conducted in Kurdish. I have been able

to navigate in very basic Kurdish (Sorani dialect), but was not able to conduct interviews in Kurdish. The interpreter was a student in Engineering, but was waiting for his visa to go to the United States, where he had been accepted at a film school. Language played a bias in my research project; the group of students with English language skills at the public university (UOS) do not represent the whole population of university students, but a specific group of students, though also not homogeneous in any way.[13] Some students who are good at English have attended a private high school, but not all. At the private American University (AUIS), all classes and assignments are in English, and English is the common language between students with Kurdish and Arabic as their first language. The group of students that I have been engaging with come from homes with middle-class privilege or are aspiring to become middle class through their higher education. Being aware of the role of fluency in English, my analysis focuses on a group of relatively privileged young adults, which is the scope of this project.

Bogusia Temple and Rosalind Edwards raise the question of the role of the interpreter during interviews. They describe how the interpreter functions not only as a translator of words, but also actively engages in the analytical understanding of concepts. Language is not just a technical tool, but carries "particular cultural, social, and political meanings that cannot simply be read off through the process of translation" (Temple and Edwards 2002:5). Temple and Edwards suggest that one should actively include the interpreter in the analytical phase by interviewing the interpreter to understand their social location. Exploring the social location of the interpreter situates the starting point of the interpreter's translation of words, concepts and meaning in a specific context, which can be useful to include in the analysis (ibid.:4). I actually met my interpreter through doing an interview with him. I was looking for an interpreter at the time, and during the interview it was clear to me that he had a very good understanding of English and an open and curious attitude. When I returned home to my apartment that night, I called him and asked if he wanted to do some translation work for me, and he

[13] I estimate that more than 50% of the students at UOS were able to hold a conversation in English. This estimation is based on my own experience and from people living in the city. There are links between attending a private high school, fluency in English and class background among the students at the public university.

responded positively right away. When we started working together, it felt good that I had already got to know something about his own thoughts on the questions that we were now asking together to other students. He translated five interviews, and participated in a couple of others that I conducted in English, where the participants felt happy for him to be there in case they could not express themselves adequately in English. And then we hung out together on campus, and through his network I came into contact with more students to interview. The negative side of working with an interpreter can be the loss of the feeling of intimacy and closeness with an interviewee. When interviewing through the interpreter, I would not have the same immediate feeling of where to draw the line when asking personal questions. As a result of this, I restrained myself a bit and tried not to ask questions that could make the situation too awkward when the answers had to be shared with both the interpreter and me.

Moving around in Sulaimani mainly by using the English language has shaped my ethnography. With the scope it offered of engaging in conversations with university students who are in contact with English through curricular texts, films and the Internet, it has to a great extent – and with the help of the interpreter when needed – been adequate inside the frames of this research project focusing on urban well-educated young adults' narratives.

Travelling with the same question

Anthropologist Kirin Narayan reflects on the revisiting of places in a 'then' and another 'then' or 'now' (Narayan 2012:35). In 2016, I reread the diary from my first trip in 2008 to what I at that time named Kurdistan as the people living there named their home and as the sign at the airport stated "Welcome to Kurdistan". Later, I began using the description Iraqi Kurdistan that is commonly used in news and academia to clarify the geographical place for readers. Reading my old diary, I revisited ways of thinking about travelling and how to understand and write about people who live in places distant from my own of everyday living and writing my thesis.

I also found a diary from a one-month trip to Cambodia in 2003 that I made with a group of other young people as part of the Danish student organisation *Operation Dagsværk*[14] working with educational projects worldwide. Before travelling, I felt very concerned about how I would be able to meet people affected by many years of war, when I did not myself have any experience of this. I found a print-out of an exchange of emails between myself and my father, who as a journalist had travelled to Afghanistan to write articles. I had also consulted my 'uncle' Martin (a friend of my parents), once a teacher and now a fiction-writer, who had previously worked as a volunteer with teenagers in the former Yugoslavia. In January 2003, at the age of twenty and preparing myself mentally before my trip to Cambodia, I wrote to Martin (translated from Danish):

> What I find difficult about going is how to adjust to visiting a country filled with mines and where all adults carry with them traumatic war memories. Could you tell me about how you experienced your stay teaching in a refugee camp in ex-Yugoslavia? How was it to be with people who have experienced things that it is not possible to understand because you have been lucky enough not to have experienced it yourself?

He wrote back to me:

> To make it short, my experience of being with people with traumatic war experiences, the shocking part was how ORDINARY they were. I mostly spent time with teenagers and children, and they sought normality. They wanted to arrange disco nights, music events, sports days and that sort of thing. And they wanted to laugh, and the teenagers wanted to get drunk and have fun and find a girlfriend/boyfriend. About the same things as everybody else.

In a strange way, this old print-out of email correspondence resonates with the same themes I am grappling with in my PhD thesis. How am I as a researcher able to represent other people's life experiences? And what does it mean to live an everyday life in an area affected by conflict and war?

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[14] Translated into English it would be something like 'Operation a good day's work'. I had worked as a volunteer for this organisation as a high-school student and as a full-time volunteer for a whole year after my high school graduation.

Looking for the ordinary everyday normality – theoretical explorations

How to grasp desires to lead ordinary middle-class lives in the specific context of urban Iraqi Kurdistan and in the context of certain hegemonic master narratives about Iraq?

Here, I will present central theoretical debates and concepts into which I am situating my research. These concepts are starting points and the foundation of my thesis, and I will continuously introduce theoretical-analytical concepts throughout the chapters where relevant, inspired by an essay-style of working with theory, analysis and empirical material in thematic clusters.

Storytailoring

Stories are important, as I have shown in this chapter. Stories and narratives are ways of understanding ourselves and the world we live in. Sociologist Margaret Somers underlines how narrative studies have shown "(…) that social life is itself **storied** and that narrative is an **ontological condition of social life**" (1994:613–614, emphasis in original). Somers works with different dimensions of narratives from *ontological narratives* of identity as a *becoming* to *public narratives* of e.g. family and nation (ibid.:618–619).[15] I am inspired by this concept of ontological narratives of students' *becoming*, their aspirations, desires and stories of who they want to be. These narratives should be understood in relation to the context of public narratives on the Kurdish and Iraqi nation and its past, present and possible futures. I am specifically focusing on public narratives of middle-classness as students tell them.

I have developed the concept of *storytailoring* to capture both the level of public narratives and their hegemonic power over the stories that are possible to *tailor* about Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, and at the same time stressing the verb's inherent possibility for other stories to be tailored.

Pierre Bourdieu elaborates on the construction of the object of study. He states that sociology should not mirror the world as it presents itself, but undertake a theoretically informed reworking and analysis when doing empirical research (Bourdieu 1990). This means moving away

[15] Somers lists a total of four dimensions of narratives: ontological, public, metanarrativity and conceptual narrativity (Somers 1994:618–619).

from perceiving science as a *recording* tool and give attention to the always present theoretically informed *construction* of the empirical world we study (ibid.:249). My concept of *storytailoring* is a theoretically informed construction of my object of study. The field in which the storytailoring takes place is seen through my analytical gaze; it is not a mirroring or recording of lived lives as they present themselves in a lived present.

Trinh T. Minh-ha reflects on the structuring of narratives in anthropology:

> The structure is therefore not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person's **way of handling realities**, here narratives. (Minh-ha 1989:141, emphasis added)

Writing the social, reading the social, and structuring the social from analysis into text is a *way of handling realities*, as Minh-ha describes it. She criticises the illusion of the traditional colonial anthropologist claiming to "tell it the way they tell it" (ibid.:141), the illusion of being able to mirror stories from 'the field' without interfering with the structure of the storytelling. Through autoethnographic writing, I *tell it the way I tell it* as a feminist scholar. My presence is the handling and structuring of the argument, and I want to make myself visibly responsible for the stories I tailor, in line with what sociologist Avtar Brah writes about knowledge production as a "(…)'hailing' and being 'hailed' within the discourses that produce us and the narratives we spin (…)"[16]. This means a multilayered analysis including the subject of the researcher who is hailing herself into the framework of interpretation (see Ettorre 2017 on Autoethnography as Feminist Method; and Livholts, ed. 2012 on Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies).

The concept of *storytailoring* borrows from the rich imagery of fabrics being cut, shaped, sewn together and transformed into specific clothing. Talking about clothing and hanging out in shopping malls and bazaars with imported clothes and textiles have been pivotal while moving around in the spheres of middle-class urban Sulaimani. The image of *storytailoring* grows out of and resonates with the present consumption of

[16] Also see Phoenix and Phoenix (2012) for an elaboration on Avtar Brah's methodological reflections on analysing racialisation.

clothes among middle-class young adults. Weaving a tapestry of stories is also a commonly used metaphor. In Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men* (2011), a woman stitches covert motifs into pieces of patchwork. What at first glance looks like flowers is, on closer inspection underneath the top layer, a woman sucking up a town and its inhabitants with a vacuum cleaner. Feminists have been reclaiming knitting and embroidery as emancipatory tools by stitching political messages onto the traditional private-sphere activity of embroidery. I am borrowing from the imagery of a feminist reclaiming of sewing, knitting and embroidery, at the same time having in mind the power of the tailor to cut and fashion textiles into certain outfits and not others (see also Collins 2000; and Knobblock forthcoming 2019 on *writing-weaving*).

Storytailoring captures the different levels of story production – including both public narratives on 'Iraq' from a Western perspective and public narratives on Iraqi Kurdistan within the region as well as public narratives of everyday desires for middle-class normality that are of importance in this thesis. The analysis of these narratives is theoretically informed by *gazes* that work as my analytical filters. In the following I shall situate and explore these theoretical-analytical gazes, where the queer gaze on norms and normality is central. I am reclaiming the word gaze from the concept of *the male gaze* (Mulvey 2004 [1975]) to underline the situated knowledge production as seen through the gazes I have chosen to work with. bell hooks writes about the "power in looking" (hooks 2015 [1992]a:115) and describes a reclaiming of an oppositional gaze: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (ibid.:116).

The feminist situated gaze

The methodological questions arising from being a body with particular experiences (gendered, racialised, classed among others) moving around and asking questions is linked to epistemological questions of the way of looking, the gaze that we see the world through. Donna Haraway reacts against what she perceives as a disembodiment of knowledge production, and she develops a new form of objectivity in feminist knowledge production presented as *situated knowledges* (Haraway 1988). Haraway's notion of *situated knowledges* is central. She stresses that partial and embodied vision is the way forward for feminist scholars and states:

"Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (Haraway 1988:583). In other words, feminist science is not about doing the 'God trick' of looking down upon the material from a disembodied, universalist 'objective' position; feminist knowledge production should be located and situated and embodied (ibid.:581). According to Haraway, feminist accounts of the world should come from a specific place, from a specific body that sees something and not everything.

Feminist researchers are not only looking at gender as an object of study (see Liinason 2011; Lykke 2010). The field of Gender Studies has long ago moved away from only studying the object of gender, and towards looking at how different social categories such as gender, class, sexuality, race/ethnicity, ability and age/generation (to name the most commonly used analytical categories) intersect and position people in hierarchical, structural power relations. This approach is widely known as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005). Looking at the crossroads of different axes of *intersecting* or *intrasecting* social categories (Lykke 2010:51), or how it is all a messy business of *assemblages* (Puar 2007), nuances and specifies the feminist analysis of how gender is woven into complex and multilayered patterns of social categories and power relations. Tracing how different threads are interwoven is an important analytical manoeuvre. Following this tradition of an intersectional approach, I am taking into account in my analysis that students in Sulaimani are not just positioned as a generation of young adults, neither as simply women and men, but their different backgrounds and gendered and racialised experiences all together play into how they narrate themselves into the world.

Feminist theory gazing on the everyday

Feminist scholars have expanded the analysis of politics under the slogan of *the personal is political*. With a critique of a traditional narrow understanding of politics focused only on actors in the public arena, the private sphere has been theorised as a political space and the boundaries between the public and the private have been critically scrutinised (Tucker 2011). Not only the private arena, but also the lived everyday experiences of marginalised groups outside the scope of mainstream

social science have become an entry point for feminist sociological inquiry (Collins 1986; Smith 1987).

The politics of everyday life has become an analytical scope with important contributions in the field of Middle East studies from, among others, sociologist Asef Bayat (1997) and political anthropologist Diane Singerman (Singerman 1995). Singerman and Bayat have expanded the study of politics to include more than formal politics taking place in traditional political organisations and at a state level. By investigating politics in the forms of everyday practices among urban Cairenes (Singerman 1995) or studying street politics in Iran (Bayat 1997), the ordinary and everyday is put at the forefront in the analysis of politics. The concept of *politics* and the *political* is conceptualised by these scholars as an open question by examining everyday life outside of political organisations as political. Middle East and gender studies scholar Katherine Louise Natanel has written a rich ethnography on politics as an everyday practice among Jewish Israelis, looking into how normality is reproduced and "how things stay the same" (Natanel 2013:14, 2016). While Natanel shows how conflict is sustained through the normal everyday, I am interested in looking into the desires for normality in a specific (post-)conflict-setting. I am inspired by, and further developing, this tradition of studying the everyday as political.

The postcolonial gaze – looking for the ordinary

Focusing on the ordinary among university students in Sulaimani, I try to unwrap the package of strong links between Iraq, Kurdistan and war and let the students' everyday experiences unfold in a framework that is not already analytically fixed. My gaze is inscribed in a theoretical tradition of critical postcolonial scrutiny of the Western-centric representations of the Middle East.[17] In Edward Said's *Orientalism*, he shows how knowledge and power works through the Western imagery and cultural representations of 'The Orient' (Hall 1992:296, Said 1978). The historian

[17] Watenpaugh describes the colonial and Eurocentric residues of the term the 'Middle East' as a label "by Western historical and political thought" (Watenpaugh 2006: preface). It is a challenge to create "new descriptive vocabularies of geography" (ibid.), and therefore Watenpaugh uses this label in the title of his book *Being Modern in the Middle East*. I follow the same critical-reflexive ambivalence.

Dipesh Chakrabarty engages in a similar project of *provincializing Europe*, stating that the gaze from Europe is local and specific and does not cover a universal position even though it is often used exactly as such (Chakrabarty 2000). In the same vein, I could describe my research strategy as a *de-exotification* of Iraqi Kurdistan by linking connotations of the urban with Kurdish, which is not the mainstream connection that is immediately made when hearing about Iraq or Kurdistan. The image of deconstruction of colonial understandings is also to be found in Uma Narayan's concept of *undoing the package picture of cultures* (Narayan 2000). She underlines the importance of not understanding cultures as neatly wrapped homogeneous packages. In relation to my research, this means that there is no authentic neatly wrapped homogeneous package of Kurdish culture that is disconnected from the rest of the world.

A queer gaze on norms and normality

Queer-theory-inspired studies have paved the way for focusing on the construction of normality as an analytical lens in opposition to studying what is already pointed out as Otherness. The queer-inspired gaze is trying to unfold what passes for normal and how this becomes invisible and unnoticed, such as the white male body in a Western context that is the picture of the universal politician, board member etc. The queer focus on the norm has become popular in Scandinavian gender studies in the field of education (see, among others, Ambjörnsson 2003; Bissenbakker 2008; Brade 2017; Brade et al. 2008; Bromseth and Darj 2010; Kirk et al. 2010; Martinsson and Reimers 2008). This focus and sensitivity to grasp norms and normalities is central in my study, and what I am bringing into the context of urban Iraqi Kurdistan.

The concept of *normal* and *normality* has several meanings. Social anthropologist Fanny Ambjörnsson underlines this in her study of gender, class and sexuality among young female high-school students in Sweden (Ambjörnsson 2003). Ambjörnsson works with the concept of *normal* as an analytical tool, and writes about the several meanings attached to it:

> The term normal is double-sided in the sense that it concerns both the existing average and the desired, the standard and the ideal (…). Imaginations of normality are therefore not only descriptive, but also equally work constitutively. Thus, they can be described as figurations of power relations. (Ambjörnsson 2003:21, my translation from Swedish)

Normal is a statistical measure describing the most frequent numbers, and at the same time *normal* also characterises an ideal that can be strived for. Inspired by a Foucauldian reading, Ambjörnsson sees *normality* as a regulatory force that operates through people's own will to fit into societal norms by means of self-discipline (Ambjörnsson 2003:21). Ambjörnsson's study shows how different processes of normalisation shape different kinds of female high-school students in relation to class (ibid.:24).

Norm-critical pedagogy in recent years has become a popular term among academics and practitioners, especially in a Swedish context. Norm-critical pedagogy is inspired by the queer critique of the regulatory function of societal norms at work in educational settings. The overall aim of the pedagogical project is, put simply, to question hegemonic norms at work, and thereby create more inclusive educational spaces that will allow children and students to express especially gender and sexuality in a variety of ways. As Janne Bromseth frames it: "By creating other narratives questioning the social hierarchies which exist in our societies, and how we are expected to occupy space within these narratives, we can challenge and transform the structures" (Bromseth 2010:49, my translation from Swedish). A central focus in these projects is on transforming structures, challenging norms, or what is also labelled 'antinormativity'.

Scholar Biddy Martin describes what she in the field of queer studies labels as *radical antinormativity*: "An enormous fear of ordinariness or normalcy results in superficial accounts of the complex imbrication of sexuality with other aspects of social and psychic life, and in far too little attention to the dilemmas of the average people that we also are" (Martin 1997:133). Martin is underlining the risk of the antinormativity reading with a fear of normality that does not allow analytical attention to the complexity of the ordinary.

Antinormativity as a central analytical focus in queer theoretical inquiry has also been addressed and questioned by scholars Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson:

> (…) we want to consider the role that antinormativity now plays as a privileged rhetorical formulation and analytic destination that frames the critical and political innovation regularly claimed for the field. What objects of study, analytic perspectives, and understanding of politics might emerge if we suspend antinormativity's axiomatic reality? (Wiegman and Wilson 2015:10)

Queer scholar Jack Halberstam reacted critically to Wiegman and Wilson's idea of queer studies without antinormativity at its centre, stating that it would be "disciplinary, neoliberal, no stakes, straight thinking" (Halberstam 2015). This debate mirrors queer theory's successful entry into the broader field of gender studies, and what queer inquiry becomes when absorbed by a wider range of scholars. This tension around a discussion of object of study and the scope of a theoretical approach is well-known in the field of gender studies as a discussion between gender/sexuality as the object of study versus feminist knowledge production in a broader sense.

Central to my study is this tension between working with theoretical concepts from the queer-inspired field of gender studies that have transformative antinormativity anticipations, and at the same time working with empirical material consisting of narratives filled with desires for the same normality that this body of theory tries to unravel. In my study on *desires for normality* among university students, I explore how a queer-inspired gaze on normality can bring to the forefront important narratives in order to understand the lives and dreams of a section of a new middle-class generation in urban Iraqi Kurdistan. I am also aspiring to contribute to a conversation relevant for the development of a queer theoretical field with a nuanced understanding of *desired normality* with my ethnographic study in a non-Western (post-)conflict context.

Queer scholars Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir K. Puar are working across traditional disciplinary boundaries between queer theory and so-called 'Middle East studies'. They ask the fundamental question: "Can queer theory be recognizable as such when it emerges from elsewhere?" (Mikdashi and Puar 2016:215). They question the foundational role of the

US as the place from where queer theory and method is read, understood and developed.

> At the outset, the work of queer theorists in area studies (rarely read by queer theory as "Queer Theory" and often relegated to "sexuality studies") is understood as a "case study" of specifics rather than an interruption of the canonical treatments of the area studies field at large. (Mikdashi and Puar 2016:216)

Mikdashi and Puar underline the study of the Middle East as transnational and not limited to an *area case study*, applying the canonical Euro-American *Queer Theory* in capital letters.[18]

A broad notion of cross-disciplinary queer inquiry beyond the scope of studying sexuality (only) is also mirrored back in the issue of *Social Text* "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" (2005). The editors discuss "queer as an engaged mode of critical inquiry" (Eng, Halberstam, Muñoz, 2005:2–3) and underline the centrality of cross-disciplinary discussions between the field of queer studies and other fields:

> The various essays gathered here insist that considerations of empire, race, migration, geography, subaltern communities, activism, and class are central to the continuing critique of queerness, sexuality, sexual subculture, desire, and recognition. At the same time, these essays also suggest that some of the most innovative and risky work on globalization, neoliberalism, cultural politics, subjectivity, identity, family and kinship is happening in the realm of queer studies. (Eng, Halberstam, Muñoz 2005:2)

From this cross-disciplinary idea of a *queer critical inquiry*, I am inspired by queer theory's sensitivity to grasp desires and focus on normality. And I see the potential for a queer theoretical-inspired inquiry into the desires of normal middle-class lives among university students in Sulaimani.

[18] "Queerness", as a theoretical lens useful to investigate a broad spectrum of objects of studies across disciplinary fields, is also discussed in a special issue of *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Amar and El Shakry 2013:333).

Desiring normal lives – theoretical conversations

Looking for the ordinary, the average, the everyday, and the desires of normality, despite the surrounding conditions, questions assumptions of 'ordinariness' and 'normality'. What can pass as 'normal' in a specific context? Who gets to decide? And what does it mean to desire normality? Here, I am engaging in theoretical conversations relevant to these questions at the core of my theoretical framework.

In the film/documentary *Paris is Burning* by Jennie Livingston (1990), we meet queens of colour from New York's queer drag ball scene in the 1980s. The drag balls were part of a subculture where queers of colour performed fashion shows. Judith Butler and bell hooks have critically discussed the documentary's representation of norms and lived experiences, which is relevant for my theoretical argument on doing research on the desire for normality. But first, I'll leave the floor to the queens Octavia and Venus as they appear onscreen in the documentary.

> OCTAVIA: I believe that there is a big future out there with a lot of beautiful things. A lot of handsome men, a lot of luxury.
>
> VENUS: I want a car, I want to be with the man I love, I want a nice home away from New York, up the Peekskills or maybe in Florida – somewhere far where no one knows me. I want my sex change.
>
> OCTAVIA: I want to live a normal, happy life – whether it is being married and adopting children, whether it is being famous and rich.
>
> VENUS: I want to get married in church in white.
>
> OCTAVIA: Sometimes I sit and look at a magazine, and I try to imagine myself on the front cover, or even inside.
>
> VENUS: I want to be a complete woman. And I want to be a professional model behind cameras in a high-fashion world.
>
> OCTAVIA: I want so much more. I want – I want my name to be a household product. I want everybody to look at me and say: 'There goes Octavia!'
>
> VENUS: I want this, this is what I want, and I'm gonna go for it.
>
> (Octavia St. Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza in Jennie Livingston's film/documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), my transcription)

In these dreams of their futures, the drag ball queens Octavia St. Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza express a desire for a "normal, happy life" and a white wedding. The film is meanwhile cross-clipping between Octavia and Venus, both lying on their beds. On the wall behind Octavia's bed, there is a display of posters featuring mainly white models. bell hooks writes about the film and states:

> So much of what is expressed in the film has to do with questions of power and privilege and the way racism impedes black progress (and certainly the class aspirations of the black gay subculture depicted do not differ from those of other poor and underclass black communities). (hooks 2015 [1992]b:152)

hooks underlines how racism and classism intersect and stresses the general feature of a poor black underclass aspiring to live the dream of white middle-class luxury. We see this aspiration clearly in the character Venus, who wants to marry a man and live with her husband in a house in the suburbs. Venus is murdered, we learn from the film, and is brutally bereft of her striving to live out her dream. This narrative of dreaming about white middle-class normality stands in contrast to the documentary's spectacle of the drag ball subculture.

Venus, telling us about her dream of white middle-class normality, has followed me since I watched the documentary/film for the first time as a master's student in Gender Studies. My own unarticulated expectation for the queens portrayed in the film to embody the questioning of antinormative lifestyles was deeply and forever punctured. And it made me question what does it actually mean to desire normality? For whom? Where? And when? These embodied desires for normality opened up for a phenomenologically inspired questioning into what kind of complexities are entailed in desire and orientation towards ideas of normality. This questioning fills out the empty box of 'normality' and tries to understand the movement and urge to try and make it into that box. This movement of normality-desiring bodies risks being left outside of the radar in an analysis with a rigid focus on antinormativity at its centre.

Just as Octavia's and Venus's explicit desires for normality made an important analytical impression on me, I see a parallel to the times when I present my research (to Western audiences). Interlocutors have often seemed to be surprised that I am interested in so-called *normal lives* in urban Iraqi Kurdistan. A presumption underlies the questioning: that people cannot be normal in such unnormal living conditions affected by war. There is a tension between, on the one hand, an urgent desire to live a 'normal' life, which I have found is very present among university students' narratives in Sulaimani as it is also expressed by Octavia and Venus, and, on the other hand, the gaze that defines what kinds of lives can and cannot pass as 'normal'. In *Paris is Burning*, the defining gaze is both that of the director of the film and the gaze of the audience watching it; and in relation to my study, academic colleagues have certain gazes on my project in Iraqi Kurdistan, and there is a specific gaze among a wider audience consuming mainstream media narratives of war and conflict in the Middle East. I don't want to make a direct comparison between the lived experiences of Venus and Octavia in 1980s New York and middle-class university students in Iraqi Kurdistan. The comparison works on the analytical level focusing on how to understand and study desires of normality.

Miming – performances of desired subjectivity

A central tension in trying to unfold embodied desires for normality is a complex balance between the desires for futures to come and the contrast with the everyday lived experiences. I have been struggling with how to understand and read different visions of futures among a section of the emergent middle class in Iraqi Kurdistan – do these (utopian/dystopian) visions underline the despair of the now? Or do they inspire hope?[19] The relation between lived experiences and desired fantasies is central in the discussion by Butler and hooks.

[19] Related to futures is the role of imagination: "If globalization is characterized by disjunctive flows that generate acute problems of social well-being, one positive force that encourages an emancipatory politics of globalization is the role of the **imagination** in social life" (Appadurai, ed. 2001:6). Appadurai describes how imagination is a site for states and markets to control and discipline citizens and at the same time a site for "collective patterns of dissent" (ibid.; see also Appadurai 1996).

bell hooks criticises *Paris is Burning* for showing the drag ball scene as a "spectacle" and not focusing on lived experiences in a "'real' world" of family and community by situating the participants in a broader context outside of the ball scene (hooks 2015 [1992]b:154–155). Judith Butler confronts hooks's dichotomy of *spectacle* versus *'real' world* and underlines how she sees the relationship between subject and norms as deeply intertwined:

> In the drag ball productions of realness, we witness and produce the phantasmatic constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded, a subject founded in the project of mastery that compels and disrupts its own repetitions. (Butler 1993:131)

Butler stresses how the performance of racialised and gendered norms in the drag balls is both "a kind of talking back" and at the same time a rearticulation of hegemonies in a Gramscian sense (Butler 1993:132). The *repetition* and *miming* underlines the general nature of repetition of norms as a process where perfect repetition is sought for, but *miming* is the outcome as there is always a slight discrepancy/gap between the norm and the performative repetition.

The discussion highlights an understanding of subjectivity that I perceive as performative, and mimicry, in order to try to embody one's own desires and the legitimating norms. In my study of university students performing modern urban middle-class subjectivities, these performances include both spectacles of desired futures and everyday lived experiences of moving around in the city.

The spectacle of *miming* can be linked to Homi Bhabha's concept of *mimicry* in relation to culture. Bhabha writes in a preface to his book *The Location of Culture* about his own experiences of coming from a middle-class background in Bombay and moving to Oxford to study English; and he describes this as "the culmination of an Indian middle class trajectory" (Bhabha 2004 [1994]:x). The paradox of travelling to the "canonical center" of English literature, but only finding a dream or an illusion (ibid.:xi), was one factor leading to his declaring:

> I do want to make graphic what it means to survive, to produce, to labor and to create, within a world-system whose major economic impulses and cultural investments are pointed in a direction away from you, your country or your people. (Bhabha 2004 [1994]:xi)

Bhabha points out how "(…) colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, **as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite**. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an **ambivalence**; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (ibid.:122, emphasis in original). This means that "[t]he desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry (…)" (ibid.:126) is an illusion because the mimicry and the repetition will only be almost the same, but not quite. Bhabha puts this succinctly by coining the phrase "the ambivalent world of the 'not quite/not white', on the margins of metropolitan desire" (ibid.:131).

The longing for normality and desiring (Western) modernity by young adult students in urban Iraqi Kurdistan can be perceived through this concept of mimicry. It is a miming and repetition of middle-class norms located in a specific context. It can be perceived as mimicry of ideas of (Western) modernity situated in a specific translation of middle-class modernity in urban Iraqi Kurdistan (bearing in mind that all performances of subjectivity are mimicry).[20]

At the time of writing in 2017, the BBC published a feature on young men in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, who are interested in fashion. They have founded the group Mr Erbil, which is also called "Iraq's first gentleman's fashion club" (BBC Monitoring 2017; MacDiarmid, *Vocativ* 2017). In the pictures they pose in a Western hipster-inspired style with well-groomed beards and fashionable suits in front of the old citadel in Erbil.

[20] For a discussion on politics of modernity and feminism in relation to the Middle East, see *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Abu-Lughod, ed. 1998).

> The style may be Western, but Mr Erbil stress that what they are doing mixes "modernity" and cultural heritage, by harking back to the lifestyles of the traditional Kurdish landowning class, the effendis[21]. (BBC 2017)

This is a very visual example of a specific *mimicry* of (Western) hipster fashion into something that is *modern* in a specific urban Iraqi Kurdistan way. But what is the *slippage, its excess, its difference* that is also produced? There is a slippage in irony about the optimism of the promise of modernity by wearing hipster suits. The unfulfilled promise of (Western) modernity through visual representation and visual mimicry, dressing in 'modern clothes' in order to embody modernity. Wearing clothes is a dressing-up, a carnival, mimicry; it is not material modernity with jobs and salaries and end of conflict and war. I assume that many of these young Mr Erbils are dependent on families who can pay for their tailormade clothes while they are waiting for employment possibilities. There is a slippage telling about urban middle-class privilege of looking good in a confined setting while waiting for better futures.

Normality-seekers

In order to grasp this *miming* and *mimicry* of middle-class norms relating to normality and modernity among young adult students in Sulaimani, I will introduce the concept of *normality-seekers*. In this way, I don't risk reconstructing a binary between something 'real' on one side (as if Western modernity and normality is something real that exists in the West as a more 'true' and 'authentic' phenomenon) and then placing the *miming* and *mimicry* in Iraqi Kurdistan as the non-authentic attempt to do a second-quality version of the 'real' Western normal. The concept of *normality-seekers* underlines the agency of young adults constantly and actively *seeking* normality, and what that means for them in a specific context. This concept underlines the process of seeking normality, and asks open questions about what this desired normal and normality is in the specific context. The concept of the *seeker* is my theoretical construction, and an external image, that I bring into this study in order to

[21] "In earlier days, Kurdish "affendi" [sic] or "lords" – educated or well-respected men – would dress in their finery to attend salons at local *chaikhana* or tea shops" (MacDiarmid, *Vocativ*, 2017).

grasp the business of seeking that I have encountered among young adult students.

In the Harry Potter universe, the figure of the *seeker* is the person in the sports game Quidditch who has to catch the golden snitch, which is a fast-flying little golden ball with wings. The golden snitch is very hard to catch, and captures the image of the desired normality as something very promising and golden, but in real life very hard to grasp, catch and embody. To be the *seeker* is to orient oneself towards the golden promise of normality. The seeking is underlined: the ability to seek the object, to move about and orient oneself towards the golden and desired normality. This is what I want to capture with the concept of *normality-seekers.*

Imaginary thesis defence – summing up

OPPONENT[22]: So, Katrine, how do you perceive the *connections* between the hegemonic narratives that you describe around *Iraq as a single story*, as you name it, and the everyday lives and stories told to you from young adult students, or *normality-seekers*, in urban Iraqi Kurdistan? How are these different levels of storytelling interconnected?

KATRINE: Good question, I'm glad that you are bringing it up. Let me start to answering by travelling back in time. When I wrote my PhD application, I built on the knowledge I had from my previous visits and engagement with urban Sulaimani and people living there. I imagined (naively) that I would be able to go with an empty suitcase to Sulaimani, gather stories of everyday lives from young middle-class adult students, and then take these stories with me back to Scandinavia. There I would try to *fight with windmills* (Wibben 2011) in order to challenge stereotypic perceptions of people living in Iraqi Kurdistan. I want to participate in a wider tradition of postcolonial knowledge production that deconstructs a Western-centric perception of what the world looks like, in line with Chakrabarty's concept of *provincializing Europe*, showing how little it is possible to know from a Eurocentric point of view of all the everyday lives that are lived globally.

[22] Inspired by Lovise Haj Brade's way of writing in the form of fictional interviews (Brade 2017).

Then during my years of writing my thesis, I realised that I had to take seriously my own embodied situatedness of travelling between Scandinavia, with increasingly scary/tight/right-wing migration regimes, and the very strong hegemonic narratives around Iraq as they are presented in mainstream media and the ensuing very limited scope of possible counterhegemonic talking back in forms of political action for refugees' right to seek asylum. So, I had the narratives of a *single story* of Iraq (to borrow Adichie's brilliant concept) on one side, and the narratives from what I have named *normality-seekers* in urban Iraqi Kurdistan performing a mimicking and Iraqi-Kurdish interpretation of (Western) modernity on the other side. These two clusters of narratives left me with a gap between them, and a tension, that at first seemed impossible to bridge or overcome. It left me silent because I could not find a meaningful space into which I could tell these other stories of *normality-seekers* in Iraq. I started to write about my embodied experiences of silences. And inside institutional frameworks I arranged a PhD workshop with Les Back together with a wonderful group of PhD candidates from different departments at Lund and Malmö Universities called *Critical Methodologies*. I had the chance to discuss, share and develop on how to overcome the state of feeling frozen in a silent room, and how to write and tell stories to a world that often does not want to listen. Being inspired by Les Back's concept of *the art of listening* (Back 2007), I was able to go back to my empirical material and focus on listening properly to all the bursting desires for middle-class normality in a (post-)conflict area.

And to answer your question as to how the different levels of storytelling are connected: they are not. At least, not out there in the so-called 'real' world. These narratives from the *normality-seekers* are not given a space, are not listened to in a hegemonic Eurocentric narrative of the single story of Iraq. The hegemonic business of what I call *storytailoring* is not kind and inclusive. The connection between these different narratives is *my* analytical construction of an object of study in what I name *a scattered field.* To be a privileged body and scholar able to travel back and forth, the least I could try to do was to listen. And then write, and make these connections through my own situated knowledge production (Haraway). With a hope of academia (and feminist knowledge production) also being a space where we can create and, in Haraway's words, "insist on a better account of the world" (Haraway 1988:579).

Overview of the thesis

I have now laid out the groundwork for my interest in *storytailoring* and situated my ethnographic fieldwork in scattered fields from Copenhagen to Sulaimani. I have presented central theoretical inspirations for my overall framework, and I will further introduce theoretical tools to think with when relevant in the different chapters in an essay style. I will also continually return to methodological considerations, as they are vital in the analysis. I believe a continuous methodological discussion in close connection with the analysis is a productive way of working with Haraway's concept of *situated knowledges*.

The thesis is structured around three main thematic chapters, with their own specific theoretical concepts, but all building on the central thoughts presented here in the Introduction. To understand the desires of the figure of the *normality-seeker* that I have introduced, I am taking the reader through the three different themes. I will explore how the notion of *politics* is linked to conflict and war and how young adult students position themselves in relation to this in Chapter 3 *Politics and youth(e)scapes*. Following that, I will consider the experiences and narratives of time and futurity in Chapter 4 *Queer times of war*. Then I turn to exploring figurations of both gendered middle-class respectability, that is central to students in orientations in the urban scene of Sulaimani, and figurations of 'the Kurdish female fighter' in Chapter 5 *Representation and orientation*. Finally, I will engage my findings in a discussion of theoretical-analytical reading/writing strategies in Chapter 6 *Reading and writing desires for hopeful normalities*. But first, I will introduce the reader to the relevant public narratives of middle-classness shaping the urban space of Sulaimani and the two university campuses.

CHAPTER 2

Middle-class spaces – the city and the university

> The prevailing image of the Middle East includes neither the middle class nor modernity. (Watenpaugh 2006: preface)

In this chapter, I will analyse what it means to focus on middle-class lives in urban Iraqi Kurdistan in 2012, with a boom in buildings and shopping malls in the broader context of post-invasion Iraq and a very visible, persistent and violent conflict.

The political history of Iraq, as well as the systematic repression of Iraq's Kurdish minority and the Kurdish struggle for national liberation, has been explored by extensive scholarship (see, among others, Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett 1990; Natali 2010; Stansfield 2003; Tripp 2007; Voller 2014; Yildiz 2004).[23] While the scope of this research is outside the field of political history, the political histories of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan have shaped and influenced the ways middle-classness is experienced and performed at the micro-level, which I am exploring.

I will here introduce relevant public narratives of middle-class lifestyles, present the university spaces as part of the urban scene, and give an account of the institutional spaces and how I have entered them, thereby situating my ethnography. It is an introduction to the space and place of the city from the point of view of middle-class lives in the (relatively) peaceful moment of 2012.

[23] Important to mention is also the contribution of scholarship done by the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and the US focusing on Kurdish issues across national borders (for a Swedish context, see Alinia, Eliassi, Khayati and Wahlbeck 2014).

Central questions are: What is middle-classness in the context of Iraq and Sulaimani? And what does it mean more generally to theorise about the middle class in the Global South through ethnography?

Performing middle-class modernity

> The English language is the language of science, an international language, it is the language of research and development, it is the language of science and modernity. Wherever you go, you need it. Wherever you go, if you know it you do not face any problems. (Daban, AUIS)

A central feature of middle-class performances in my ethnography is the in-betweenness of balancing aspirations and possibilities. This in-betweenness is captured in the story of the student Daban, who told me about his desire for and love of reading English books. I met Daban at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), and he told me about his advantage as an AUIS student to learn the English language well in comparison with students from the University of Sulaimani (UOS). He was about to finish his major in Business Administration and a minor in Economics, and when we talked he described the qualities of the English language in the same way as many other students – both at UOS and AUIS: English as *the language of science and research*, and in Daban's words also *the international language of modernity and development.* He told me about his love of reading philosophy (Plato, Socrates, Aristotle) and books like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. With friends he would even organise what he called "reading campaigns", which he explained to me:

> I mostly hang out with people who love reading, love ideas, and read a lot, and most of my friends are those who read. I used to have friends who hated reading, hated being serious. Right now, I want to be more serious, more practical. We even have a programme with some of the friends. Every month – if it is not every month, every two months – we make a campaign, a reading campaign. We go somewhere. It is even like a trip but we take books with us. We read for about 10 to 15 hours for two days. Then the rest, we hang around. For example, we go to resorts and while enjoying the resorts and going around we put aside time to read also. If you know what I mean.

Going away to a resort to read is framing reading both as a serious activity that needs special time and also a privileged position of having the means and the time to indulge totally in this reading getaway.

Daban had travelled to the US on an exchange summer programme focusing on young people and leadership, and he told me about his love for bookstores:

> Daban: When I was in the US I spent a lot of time in the bookstores in America and I bought precious books. I love them.
>
> (…)
>
> Katrine: I have also been to the US and I really enjoy their very big bookstores. (Daban: Exactly. Exactly) So I understand.
>
> Daban: It is really big, with several floors. Not even just one floor. For some of them you cannot – you barely see the end of the bookstore. So, I love it.
>
> Katrine: And then if you get sleepy you can go and buy a coffee and then you can read more books.
>
> Daban: Exactly.
>
> Katrine: I saw in the Parki Azadi [Freedom Park, Sulaimani] that the – there has come like a – it is like a big car, it is like a bookstore. Did you see that?
>
> Daban: Yeah, yeah, I know.
>
> Katrine: Yeah? I did not go into it. It was locked. It was not open. But…
>
> Daban: One of the big things that the university gave me is the English language. The main usage of English language to me is reading English books.

Daban is not really interested in my shift to the library truck that I had seen in the Parki Azadi (see figure 1). He turns the conversation back to the focus on English language and English books. When I visited during my ethnography in 2012, access to English literature (fiction) was not extensive. I managed to find a very cheap copy of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte

Brontë when I finished reading the novels that I had brought with me from Copenhagen.

Figure 1 Library Truck, Sulaimani 2012. Photo: Katrine Scott.

Not only being able to speak English, but also reading Ancient Greek philosophy (in English) and English novels is a way of performing the identity as a well-educated student and also an international, modern citizen. Methodologically, the passage in the interview on bookstores in the States is interesting because I as the interviewer really engage in the conversation with my own excitement and experiences with bookstores in the US. In this way, we are in the interview situation validating the position of being well-educated and having international travel experiences. I recognise and validate his love for English books as important, normal and central and as some kind of 'international capital' that we perform in order to confirm our 'bildung' in the field of English books for each other. It is also part of my own story that I grew up surrounded by English paperbacks in my childhood home. I was fed

pages of international capital, so to speak. Reading (and talking about it) is the performance of belonging to a global educated middle class. The image of the bookstore with "precious books" is like finding the treasure in the enormous castle of the endless bookstore. Written on my plastic bag from the Swedish bookstore Akademibokhandeln (the Academic Bookstore), where I went to buy four English paperbacks for the price of three, is: "Reading is travelling". I am the target of that cheesy expression. And so is Daban.

Daban balances in a middleness between aspirations and insecurities when he performs 'serious' reading habits in order to embody the language of 'development, science and modernity'. It is not enough for him to just casually read; he needs to stress it in a narrative of a well-educated middle-class performance. This shows a performance of acting upon a public narrative of well-educated, middle-class belonging. It also reveals the fragility and the slightly insecure relation to a public narrative of development towards modernity through science and the English language.

A position of in-betweenness evolves as a central feature in ethnographic explorations of global middle classes (Heiman, Freeman and Liecthy 2012). Heiman et al. underline the (relative) privilege and middle-class insecurities which point to the in-betweenness of being in the middle of anxieties, longings and desires (ibid.:20,23). This in-betweenness is a fruitful starting point to unfold the specific aspirations and longings but also anxieties of middle-class young adult students in Sulaimani.

Breathing life into global middle classes

While some scholars argue that the old European and US middle class is declining, there is an emerging middle class in Asia and Africa. And this group is important to study in order to understand world economy and development (Heiman, Freeman and Liechty 2012; Kharas 2010). Scholarly interest in the emergence of new global middle classes brings forth discussions about how to work analytically with the concept of middle class. A critique of merely economic measures in class analysis stresses the importance of qualitative research into what middle class means in a specific context. As very precisely formulated in a report from

a London School of Economics' conference on *The middle class in Africa*:

> (…) there has been limited attention to more localised and historicised qualitative research. Such approaches could complement, or challenge, existing research [with a focus on economic measures, my insertion] to explore the everyday lived experiences of being middle-class for people living in the (often precarious) spaces between poverty and wealth in Africa. (Mercer, James and Lemanski 2017)

The question is, should middle class be conceptualised in economic terms in relation to workforce and consumer power? Or should we as researchers be interested in the emerging middle classes' own subjective perceptions of themselves (ibid.)? In order to explore the relative privilege of an emerging middle class in a specific context, the qualitative focus on the everyday lived experiences of being (and performing, I would add) middle class is a good place to start. This is where I begin the messy business of trying to figure out what the concept of middle class entails among students in Sulaimani.

Anthropologist Lena Kroeker reflects on the many meanings of the term *global middle class* in a blog-post about its definitions:

> Today, the urban dictionary suggests the usage of 'muddle class' with reference to those members of the American middle class who 'try to survive the current economic crisis by "muddling through" with less money and less security'. Is the middle class merely a pun? (Kroeker 2017)

Even though Kroeker here is referring to the unclear definition of middle class in a US context, I find the label *muddle class* relevant from a global perspective. The muddled middle-class position needs to be explored as a relational position of privilege vis-à-vis other groups in society. The analytical concept of middle class in the context of the contemporary Middle East is discussed and overviewed by Karolin Sengebusch and Ali Sonay:

> In this context, we follow López and Weinstein (10) in questioning the view conceiving of Western modernity and its entailing generation of a particular middle class as normative model, while considering middle classes in other world regions as non-original projects. Instead, we aim at understanding middle class in the MENA region as a non-exceptional concept and practice, reflecting also global patterns of contemporary societies, while keeping in mind historical specificities of the Middle East. (Sengebusch and Sonay 2014:6)

The underlining of *global patterns* resonates with the concept of global middle classes that is explored by Heiman, Freeman and Liecthy (2012). They focus on class as a lived experience and particularly on middle-class subjectivities as conceptualised through people's everyday lives, actions and words (ibid.:12,15). Heiman et al. describe their ethnographic theorising about global middle classes as a "(…) desire to explore global economic changes through the lens of the middle classes and to engage universal theories through ethnographies of everyday life" (Heiman et al. 2012:3–4).

The strength of ethnographic research is that it can "breathe life" (Mercer, James, Lemanski 2017) into all the complex meanings and lived experiences of the empty category of global middle-class lives beyond the scope of only economic measures. Exploring middle class as lived life in specific contexts resembles geographer Doreen Massey's take on social relations as "stretched out" in space (Massey 1994:4,22). I work with the category of middle-classness through an ethnographic approach exploring the aspirations, anxieties and performances of middle-class lives among university students in Sulaimani, focusing on middle-class subjectivities in the making in the specific urban space.

The educated Iraqi working woman

Middle East scholars Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt underline how an image of Iraqi women pre-US invasion (2003) has been portrayed as uneducated (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009a:21). In the Western narrative of going to war in the name of freedom for women and fighting terrorism, the histories of Afghan women and Taleban, and Iraqi women and Saddam Hussein are mixed up and bundled together in rhetorics coming out as a single story of the victimised, passive, uneducated Muslim woman with no context or local histories (ibid.:22). In this picture,

middle-class life has no place and is erased out of the story. Al-Ali and Pratt stress how many Iraqi women were both educated and participating in the workforce since this was part of a modernist, developmental discourse under the Ba'th regime between the 1970s and early 1980s (ibid.:31). The figure of 'the educated working woman' and 'the working mother' was an ideal: "Working outside the home became for women not only acceptable but prestigious and normative" (ibid.:31). Al-Ali interviewed a woman who related how a nursery had been set up at a factory after several of the workers had children (ibid.:32).

> Free childcare, generous maternity benefits, and transportation to and from schools as well as workplaces were all part of the regime's attempt to modernize and develop Iraq's economy and human resources. Despite the difficulties of juggling both childcare and work, or even a career, middle-class women generally benefited from the double support of extended families and state provisions. (ibid.:32)

It is hard to imagine when looking at Iraq now (and the representation), that the country actually won a UNESCO award in 1982 for achievements in illiteracy eradication (ibid.:32–33). Al-Ali also points out the (now seemingly ironical) fact that from 1980–1991 Iraq funded a literacy prize related to UNESCO (ibid.; UNESCO 1992).

Oil and middle-class urban economies in Iraqi Kurdistan

In the period after the US invasion in 2003, a larger relocation of funds from the central government to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) led to a boom in middle-class urban economies during 2003–2013 (Cruciati 2017). In this period some Kurds living in Europe (like the student Nina and her family) returned to Iraqi Kurdistan (see also Paasche 2016 on 'return migration'). Oil contracts were handled with Turkey independently of the control of the central Iraqi authorities, which occasioned a power struggle between the KRG and the government in Baghdad.[24] According to a tweet by the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources, "Daily flow rates through the #Kurdistan crude pipeline to

[24] Natural resources in the Kurdish region such as water and oil have historically been controlled by the central Iraqi authorities (Stansfield 2003:30).

Turkey have risen from 185,000 in August to nearly 300,000 in the first week of November, representing an increase of some 60 percent over the last four months" (*Rudaw* 2014). Oil revenues play a crucial role in the Iraqi and Kurdish economy (Tripp 2007) and the independent handling of oil contracts by the KRG is both an economic as well as a symbolic sign of the new position of Iraqi Kurdistan in relation to its neighbouring regions as a state-like actor on the global market. But with the Kurdish direct oil pipeline to Turkey in 2014, disputes between the central government and KRG led to public employees' salaries in Iraqi Kurdistan not being paid for months.

My visits to Sulaimani were during the economic boom, when the Gorran party[25] had a succesful election in Sulaimani in 2009 among the middle classes, seeing the possibility for a shift in the political regime from the historical power division between the two biggest parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In 1992, the first elections in Iraqi Kurdistan were held for parliament and presidency. The PUK and the KDP did not acknowledge the results of the elections and they divided the power between them. During the 1990s, there was a violent Kurdish internal civil war, also called *The Brotherhood War*, mainly between the two Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK. The geographical result of the internal Kurdish *Brotherhood War* was that the KDP was located in the governorates of Dohuk and Erbil, where the regional parliament is situated, and the PUK in the governorate of Sulaimani (Stansfield 2003:99). Sulaimani is often described as the cultural capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The focus on middle class grasps the post-invasion period of economic growth and middle-class urban life in Sulaimani, and brings to the forefront the history of Iraq as a country with a well-educated, professional, trained workforce despite all the atrocities of the Ba'th regime, as Al-Ali and Pratt underline (2009a). Middle class – both as aspiration and performance – plays a significant role in narratives of a section of the new generation growing up in urban Iraqi Kurdistan. Public narratives of middle-class lifestyles with a specific kind of consumerism as a way of hanging out in the city prevail among the relatively privileged, as I shall illustrate.

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[25] 'Movement for Change', a platform and party founded in 2009. Gorran (Change) won 25% of the seats in the KRG elections in 2009, with the biggest support in Sulaimani.

The city

The urban space of Sulaimani can be described as a bubble. The term is also used by Nora Lester Murad to identify the location of Ramallah, Palestine, as a city with a successful economic (neoliberal) profile in the context of war (Murad 2013). Sulaimani and Ramallah are both cities where global middle-class consumption is taking place despite a surrounding conflict, which I will explore in the following.

Shopping

Browsing through a shopping mall, looking at imported products such as clothes, cosmetics and kitchenware, or hanging out in the café in the mall, has been a leisuretime activity that I have found myself doing several times in Sulaimani, though I rarely go to the malls in Copenhagen where I live. Hanging out in the bright and airy shopping mall is very different from going to the bazaar in Sulaimani city centre, which is crowded and where you need to know your way around in order to be able to find what you are looking for. In the bazaar, you make a plan for your shopping. I have browsed in the bazaar, looking at things without a plan, which has pointed me out as a tourist several times (and prices would often go up). But in the shopping malls, browsing and hanging out without a plan was the expected activity. Schluwa Sama writes about neoliberal economic development in Iraqi Kurdistan focusing on shopping malls in Dohuk, Iraqi Kurdistan:

> (…) the need for shopping malls to sell international products contributes to the production of the shopping experience as a profoundly modern, Western and exceptional experience. This experience cannot be obtained in the narrow alleys of the bazaar, and the bazaar is incorporated rather differently into the neoliberal project of modernizing Iraqi Kurdistan: namely as the authentic place of Kurdish culture. (Sama 2015:95)

The author identifies a juxtaposition of the 'modern mall' versus the 'authentic bazaar', which I have also encountered. On one of my trips I wanted to buy a *djardjem* – a handwoven piece of quilt that traditionally has been used to cover folded mattresses and bedding when put away during daytime. In 2012, many urban middle-class homes had bedframes

in bedrooms, and cupboards for bedding, and the futon-like mattresses were mostly used for guests. But I wanted this traditional handwoven quilt, and I was searching through the bazaar in order to find something other than polyester bedspreads imported from China. I was in the bazaar with a relative of mine, who did not understand my obsession with something 'old' when I could buy all the new and fancy imported stuff that my heart could desire. But I did not desire new and fancy. Finally, I found a pile of *djardjems* in a small shop, and the shopowner, knowing its market value to a tourist, charged quite a few Iraqi Dinars for the one I chose. But I was happy, even though few others around me understood my obsession with 'old and traditional', except maybe the elderly grandmother in the family.

In line with Sama's description of the bazaar, I was shopping for 'authentic Kurdish culture'; the bedspread would fulfil a purpose of middle-class capital/commodification/fetish when put on display in my Copenhagen apartment. Most of my acquaintances in Sulaimani who belonged to an urban middle class, or aspired to belong, were more interested in spending their money on imported products signalling 'new and modern'. Sama concludes on the meaning that is attached to consumption in shopping malls in the historical context of Iraqi Kurdistan:

> In the Kurdish context, within my observations and conversations, the fact that especially an older generation could not fulfil so many of their dreams and had lived a life of scarcity was also ingrained into younger generations' narratives of the past. (…) Thus, it is stated that today it is not necessary to suppress one's wishes anymore, especially when being in a shopping mall. Consequently, it is a history of suffering and abundance that is partly legitimizing a new type of freedom that enables Iraqi Kurdistan, exemplified through its shopping malls and mallgoers, to present itself as part of the modern capitalist world system. (Sama 2015: 96)

In other words, a specific kind of 'freedom through consumption', a possibility that did not exist for older generations in Iraqi Kurdistan, is taken up as an activity among the urban middle class because it is now possible. Consumerism is a performance that links to ideas of 'development' and horizons orienting towards ideas of 'middle-class modernity'. It also provides what is fundamental in my study, namely a shift away from the collective political history of 'we' the Kurds and the

suffering of a people due to war where collective political struggle has been a trajectory for hope. And it provides a turning away from these collective notions of being in the world towards individual projections of happiness through consumption of clothes, houses and cars. Consumption can provide a kind of individual form of agency (see also Gottdiener 2000 on consumers and new forms of consumption).

Since the mid-2000s there has been a boom in building shopping malls and new hotels, and anthropologist Diane E. King describes this development in the urban setting in Iraqi Kurdistan as a "Dubaification" with the growth of new buildings trying to reach the sky, resembling the impressive skyline of Dubai (King 2014:25, see also Sama 2015).

Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan was an agricultural economy until the mid-twentieth century (King 2014:13). But in recent years, the economy in Iraqi Kurdistan has been dependent on imports (ibid.:22). Iraqi Kurdistan has been subject to processes of urbanisation and, with the agricultural sector's decline, people have moved to the cities in order to look for jobs. Not all people have succeeded in this, and a relatively new phenomenon of urban poor has emerged (Stansfield 2003:35). Migrant labour is employed in the urban households (King 2014:31,210). Young women from, among other places, Ethiopia are taking care of children, cleaning and cooking while middle-class urban female professionals work outside of the home. Male workers from Bangladesh and Nepal work in the construction industry as day labourers under risky circumstances.

During my stay in the autumn of 2012 I had rented an apartment in a building where young Arabic-speaking men from other parts of Iraq worked in the reception hall at all hours. If I came back late or left early, I would risk waking up the receptionist sleeping on the floor behind the reception counter. I felt quite uncomfortable disturbing somebody else's sleep, but did not know what else to do than to say *sukran* (thanks, in Arabic) when the keys were handed to me. While this encounter may seem banal, it grasps the presence at an everyday level of migrant workers and their working conditions. The middle-class aspirations and positions of university students should be understood in relation to precarious conditions for migrant workers, internally displaced people and a Kurdish working class.

The urban and the rural

When I first landed in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2008, I flew directly from Copenhagen to Hewlêr with a Swedish-Kurdish aeroplane company. A trip that would not have been possible just a few years earlier, where you would have to cross the border to the Kurdish region via taxi from Syria (also see King 2014:49). I was picked up at the airport in Hewlêr by relatives, and we drove for four hours to reach Sulaimani. It was in March, the landscape was still green, and children were selling *nergez* (daffodils) from the side of the road to celebrate the Kurdish New Year (*newrooz*). On later trips, it was possible to fly directly to Sulaimani airport via Sweden or Zurich, and in 2012 the most direct route was via Istanbul. So for me, and the great Kurdish diaspora living in Europe, Iraqi Kurdistan was suddenly easily accessible. Needless to say, the other way around – for most people who have always been living in Iraqi Kurdistan – travelling to Europe is not easy due to visa restrictions.

The roads were being improved each time I came, but even though new paved roads were making the ride between cities less bumpy, the differences between development in the urban space and in the villages in the countryside were still remarkable. People were living completely different lives in the rural and the urban settings. King also underlines this, pointing to the fact that urban middle-class academic lifestyles in Iraqi Kurdistan are more similar and oriented towards a global way of living urban well-educated middle-class lives than to rural life in the region (King 2014:37-38).[26]

Rural areas often serve as leisuretime spaces for the urban middle classes. On Fridays, when most people do not work, families will often gather for a *seyran* (picnic), especially during springtime, when the weather is temperate. Small cottages on a plot of land in the rural outskirts of Sulaimani are attractive to urban middle-class families for family picnics. Some people make it a business to buy land with the prospect of selling it as leisuretime places when the market value has gone up.

King describes the importance of the cultural meaning of belonging to a village, even though the family is no longer living there, and maybe

[26] See also production of 'peripheral spaces' in Iraqi Kurdistan (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann 2013; Mahzouni 2013).

haven't for generations. She states that a patrilineage belongs to a specific village and never leaves it in the symbolic sense, even though people might be living elsewhere. People 'have' a village, even though they do not live in it, and they never leave their village heritage (King 2014:91–92). I can recognise the symbolic meaning of belonging to a village, especially in relation to people telling the story of the origin of their family. But I also see a change among urban inhabitants in relation to rural land. Land plots have become commodified and the value has changed from the historical, symbolic, patrilineal form of value as a place of belonging to a new logic inside the framework of capitalism where land is something you can buy and go to on your day off from work. To own a summer cottage is a symbol of belonging to the urban middle class with consumer power. The value is in owning land in the beautiful rural setting, where the family can go and relax, not in belonging to that specific plot of land through family history.

The Kurdish landscape and scenery that Peshmergas fought for in the struggle for independence has become embedded in the logics of capitalism. But at the same time as a new logic of capitalism is present, the village and belonging to a village is still operating on the symbolic level. When telling the story of the grandparents' generation, the village they originally came from will be mentioned.

I have visited the village of a senior relation, where new divisions of land were being assigned to people who belonged to that village (even though the person in this case had not lived in the village for decades). This old man had a garden allotment in the village. He had periods of illness that prevented him from visiting the plot of land, but every time he felt better he would ask a family member to take him there. He would walk around and pull weeds from the ground and water any plants that were still growing. When I visited Sulaimani in 2008, he was living in a house with a veranda on the first floor. He would plant flowers and greenery with seeds from the allotment in his old village. A Sulaimani style of urban gardening with the symbolic roots of the seeds linking to the original land, but growing in a new urban setting.

Post-conflict reconciliation and land

After the Kurdish internal war, the parties have been allocating plots of land to Peshmerga families. In Sulaimani, where PUK has been in charge, relatives of men who had fought as Peshmergas in support of PUK have been given plots on the outskirts of Sulaimani. Families have built new houses for year-round use, which for the most part have accrued in value very quickly, and some have been resold at a large profit. Diane King describes how many of the urban nouveaux riches are former Peshmerga, and she uses the label "urban social climbers" (King 2014:83). Some people belong to the old aristocracy with the Sheik title or *agha* (landowner) and some are newly rich – it can intertwine or not (ibid.). Giving land to Peshmerga families is a way for the parties to repay the loyalty (and loss) that people have given to them in a patron-client relationship.

A central question in post-conflict reconciliation is *when is justice done?* This complex issue of transitional justice is general for (post-) conflict areas, but always shaped by the specific context (Duthie and Seils 2017). Situated in a historical context of so many people who have been displaced, hurt or killed during Anfal[27] or in the Brotherhood War, and the status now with an established new Kurdish political elite to a great extent disconnected from the everyday troubles and lives of ordinary people, a central unarticulated question seemed to be hanging in the air among the university students that I met: *so much suffering and then what?* Looking out over Sulaimani in 2012, a building boom and new shopping malls seemed to be one answer to this question.

Shopping as an activity of 'freedom through consumption' and the middle-class marker of owning a leisuretime cottage in the countryside are part of what can be described by Somers' concept of a public narrative (presented in the Introduction). Middle-class aspirations and performances should be understood in relation to this existent public narrative of consumerist lifestyles as a promise of the good middle-class

[27] The Anfal campaign was initiated by the Ba'th regime. On March 16, 1988 one of the Anfal attacks took place on Halabja, with chemical gas killing around 4,000–5,000 people, and many more were injured (while exact numbers are disputed, the genocide is not). The Anfal genocide campaign destroyed rural villages, killed 50,000–100,000 civilians between February and September 1988 and many Kurds were displaced (Human Rights Watch 1993).

life, linking to ideas of development measured in the boom in building new shopping malls as Sama also describes.

I will now introduce the two university spaces as I experienced them in the midst of cautious optimism in 2012.

University spaces

When driving into Sulaimani, you see two big university campuses on either side of the main road. To the left is the new 2012 campus of the public Kurdish University of Sulaimani.[28] To the right, you see the private American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. The main road was packed with traffic and it felt life-threatening to cross it on foot. During ethnographic fieldwork at the two universities during October to December 2012, I never succeeded in going to both campuses in one day, since it was almost impossible to cross the busy main road dividing the two universities.

University of Sulaimani (UOS)

The University of Sulaimani has existed since 1968, but in the 1980s it was forced by the Saddam regime to move to Erbil.[29] This was during the Anfal campaign, initiated at the time of the Ba'th regime. The university reopened in 1992, the same year as the first elections in Iraqi Kurdistan were held for parliament and presidency. A new campus was ready at the beginning of the autumn term of 2012. The university has eight faculties:

[28] The old campus in the city centre was also still in use in 2012, e.g. Medicine, Law, Journalism and other subjects were placed there.

[29] One narrative of the history of UOS is that it was *moved* to Erbil. But when talking with people who lived in the city during that time, they tell me that the university was closed down.

- Medical Sciences
- Engineering
- Science and Education Sciences
- Agriculture
- Law, Politics and Administration
- Physical and Basic Education
- Education and Politics
- Language and Humanities

The university hosted a total of around 25,000 full-time students in 2012. Teaching was in Kurdish (Sorani dialect), Arabic and English. A bachelor's degree in most faculties requires four years of study, although medicine requires six years[30]. The university also offers education at master's and PhD level. In the academic year of 2009/2010 there were 924 postgraduate students registered.[31]

Admissions into the different programmes are based on the regional Kurdish high school exam results. Students need top marks to get into Medicine and Engineering. Humanities and Social Sciences were at the bottom of the hierarchy and easier to get into. I saw the effects of the admission procedure when meeting a lot of students studying subjects that they did not choose themselves. Some students that I talked to told me that they tried to get the best out of it; others told me that they skipped classes because they did not find them interesting. According to my interview material, in general it is unacceptable among family members and friends for a student to choose a subject that is below the score that the student achieved. I interviewed Shad, a male student studying Civil Engineering at UOS. He told me that he graduated from high school among the top percentile in the whole Kurdistan region, which meant that he was free to choose any public university and subject in the region. Since Medicine is the top subject to study, the hardest to get into, and will secure you a well-paid job afterwards, he was expected to choose Medicine as all the other top-tier students did. But he chose Civil Engineering, because he wanted to work in his family's contractor

[30] A bachelor's degree in Pharmacy, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine and Architecture requires five years of study.

[31] Statistics from www.univsul.org (accessed October 17, 2013). UOS has since changed to a new webpage where these numbers do not figure.

company. The regional high school exam results and acceptance into the university programmes are made public on the internet for everybody to see. Conspicuous at the top of the list with the choice of Engineering instead of Medicine, he experienced a lot of people asking him why he did not choose to study Medicine. His family understood and supported his choice of wanting to join the family company. His position as a man wanting to join his brothers in the family company made it possible for him to choose a subject 'below' his high school exam score.

Education is free of charge and students are given a small symbolic amount of money every month by the KRG to partially cover expenses regarding transportation and books. Students coming from outside of Sulaimani are offered accommodation in dorms. Female and male students live in separate dorms, with 3–6 students sharing each bedroom. Several people share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Students rely on family members to provide basic food and money to cover daily expenses. I met few students who worked beside their studies, and mostly it would be voluntary work, though some helped out in family businesses before graduation, like Shad in his family's engineering company.

The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS)

The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani opened in 2007, four years after the photographs of the statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled travelled worldwide.

Despite its name, the university is not related to other American[32] universities in the Middle East, but they share the same brand. Lecturers are American or have graduated from an American university abroad. All teaching is in English. The university offers an American-style liberal arts education and hosted around 1,000 students in 2012.[33]

Students were charged a tuition fee depending on their merits from high school. Students with top grades from high school paid less.

[32] America is a contested concept, but here it refers to the US only since I use AUIS' self-description.

[33] Statistics from www.auis.edu.iq (accessed October 17, 2013). AUIS has since changed to a new webpage www.auis.edu.krd. Interesting to note the change from the domain for Iraq (iq) to Kurdistan Region of Iraq (krd).

Students who could demonstrate financial need also got a discount. Annual tuition fees varied from 1,500 to 6,500 USD. Different groups of students could also apply for private funding. AUIS had students from different parts of Iraq, and according to my interviews Turkmens, Arabs and Ezidis could apply for specific private funding. AUIS could offer scholarships to students with top grades from high school.[34] Students on these scholarships needed to perform well every term (but not all scholarships required this). Children of Peshmerga martyrs[35] could be funded by PUK. This raises important questions that are of a general nature in a (post-)conflict situation: When is the conflict over? How do you do justice to those who have lost family members in a political conflict? When is justice fulfilled? This kind of policy should be understood in the process of reconciliation and recognition of suffering by specific families. Sometimes it created tension among students with different privileges.

Students coming from outside of Sulaimani were offered a place in a dorm on campus. Women and men slept in different dorms, and usually two people shared a bedroom and four people shared bathroom and kitchen facilities. The students paid rent for the dorms. Several students that I talked to complained about lack of consistency in water and electricity supplies in the dorms, and some had chosen to rent an apartment in the city together with other students instead.

AUIS's main function is the undergraduate program (four years), which is offered in different disciplines:

- BS in Mechanical Engineering
- BS in General Engineering
- BA in English Journalism
- BS in Business Administration
- BA in International Studies
- BS in Information Technology

[34] The scholarships were sponsored by the KRG and the Iraqi Mansour Bank.

[35] Here, Peshmerga martyrs refer to armed fighters related to PUK who lost their life in fighting against Saddam Hussein's Ba'th regime from 1975 to 1991 or died in the internal Kurdish civil war from 1994 to 1998.

The undergraduate program consists of two years of general liberal arts classes (the *core program*) with mandatory and elective classes such as philosophy, politics and American, European and Middle Eastern History. After the core program, the students do a major in one of the above-mentioned subjects. Students have the choice of doing a minor in addition.

Before entering any of the undergraduate programs, applicants need to complete an English skills test. Students with fluent English (often students from English-speaking private high schools) can enter directly into the undergraduate program. Students who are not fluent in English need to join the Academic Preparatory Program (APP) before entering the actual undergraduate program. The program is divided into four levels, and students are assigned to a level according to their test results in English skills. The aim of the program is to:

> "(…) prepare non-native English-speaking high-school graduates to enter the AUIS undergraduate program by teaching them academic English and critical thinking skills and study habits. (…) Our goal is to insure [sic] that upon completion of the Program, students have the necessary proficiency in English reading, speaking, and writing (…) and awareness of academic cultural norms and expectations to succeed in their undergraduate studies at AUIS." (AUIS 2017)

Even though a language test is the key element in deciding whether a student is going to enter one of the four APP levels, the aim of the introductory program is stated as more than teaching pure English skills. As quoted above, the program will also teach future students to think critically and teach them about "academic cultural norms". From my talks with students, I learned that the teaching of these academic norms has a lot to do with proper academic conduct, with a strong focus on fighting plagiarism. The students even sign an honour code contract, where they state that they will not let anybody help them with their assignments or help others, unless the teacher has directly asked students to do so. This differs from the current Swedish policy on plagiarism. For example, the policy at Lund University defines plagiarism as the "lack of independence in the design and/or wording of academic work" (Guidelines and regulations on plagiarism 2012) and does not focus as AUIS does on the extent to which students help each other with assignments. I interviewed Rebaz and Lale, both students at AUIS, who

were engaged to each other. Lale told me how she had tested whether Rebaz, her fiancé, was interested in her when they first met by asking him questions during classes to see if he was willing to help her. She described how students were often very careful about giving information to one another.

> Lale: (…) here the students are a little bit tense about how much information you can give to your peers or your colleagues.
>
> Katrine: At the American University?
>
> Lale: Yes, here – it's everywhere, actually. There is competition between the students all the time.

Even though she states that competition is the reason for keeping knowledge to yourself, this should be understood in relation to the academic cultural norms around what could be described as a promotion of competitive individualism, where sharing knowledge can be seen as plagiarism. Rebaz did cross the line and answered her questions during classes and related to homework assignments, and they later became engaged.

Change the world with challenged minds

The institutional space of AUIS had its own governing logics of being a private US institution. Since its students come from different parts of Iraq and the lecturers from the US or US institutions abroad, a space had been created that felt to some extent disconnected from the surrounding city, though not totally. In general, the AUIS students I talked to expressed expectations of finding employment in the private sector, and described public sector jobs as easier to access with a degree from UOS. Avin, a student at AUIS, told me how telecommunications companies had come to the campus to hand out business cards to students for future job prospects.[36]

[36] Work benefits in the public sector, like maternity leave and pensions, were talked about in relation to a description of the private sector's paying benefits according to staff performance and hours worked and the lack of benefits such as pensions and maternity leave.

I talked to students at AUIS about job aspirations, general educational aims and the individual experience of being a student at the university. In a group interview with students at AUIS, the meaning of an AUIS slogan was discussed. First, the students tried to remember if the slogan was "Challenge the mind, change the world" or "Change the world with challenged minds"[37]. After that, two of the students, Serhat and Avin, continued to discuss the meaning of the slogan.

> Serhat: But if you think about it, about the part which says "challenge mind", why are they trying to challenge our minds…if the purpose is not to change it? Change the perspective that you have. They are trying to change it. But again, I go back to the old statement: it's always important to think whether you have been changed positively or negatively.
>
> Katrine: Mm.
>
> Avin: So maybe that logo means that because, for a country like Iraq, our system is really totally different from the American system. So before, you know, at the beginning when we came, everyone said: "We cannot do this, teacher. We cannot..." You know, this was our sentence: "We cannot write; we don't have ideas." Because, just like Serhat said, we were just memorising in our high school. We had writing, but it wasn't like this writing. Like how we are doing it now, it's totally different. So maybe related to that, you challenge your mind with new things: you know, a new system of studying, a new system of writing, of reading. I guess this is what it means, not changing perspective.

A general feature of how students among my research participants present the AUIS education is that there is an active relationship between the individual student and the surrounding world, where students' agency and responsibility is stressed. One student, Najla, studying a major in International Relations and a minor in English, described how the education at AUIS had made her able to "switch perspective". She had grown up in Baghdad, in a family with a Shia-Arab background, before she moved to Sulaimani in order to study at AUIS. She told me about her *switch* to claim a new kind of Iraqi identity.

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[37] I have not been able to find the slogan on official AUIS documents, but among the students in the group interview it was well-known.

> This is how I saw it: Arabs versus Kurds. But after studying here – what I came to say: I am an Iraqi before I am an Arab. So I do not care whether I am an Arab or a Kurd. That is not the point. The point is I am from Iraq. And thus being an Iraqi before being an Arab or Kurd or religious or Muslim, Christian, it does not matter. What matters is being from this country, because this is the only – this is the best way to put people together, by saying you are an Iraqi. But if you say that Iraq is an Arabic country, then that will hurt many people. It is just wrong. I think that is one of the major switches that I made.

The ability to switch perspective and see things from new angles is something that she has learned in class and through studying, but also by being among different students on campus and in the dorms. Najla identified the possible agency inherent in the movement of choosing to switch: "So I am switching because I think there are many solutions out there; I need to switch to get them."

I interviewed the Director of Communications and Institutional Development[38] at AUIS about the university's mission and organisation. He underlined the importance of educating *active citizens* in Iraq.

> Director: But we are finding, and what we truly believe, is that as the labour market changes, as the government changes, as society changes, it is going to require a different kind of citizen, really. And that is a new thing too, citizenship – we have had in this region *subjects* for too long. But now with the regime change and what looks to be, or at least promises to be, nominally anyway, a democracy is going to require *citizens*. And citizens need more than just simple hard skills that they are learning at the public universities. They are gonna need these soft skills: communication skills especially.
>
> Katrine: What is the difference between a subject and a citizen?
>
> Director: Well, the way I understand it is that citizens are going to be participants and *actors* in their society. Whereas subjects have their society or have their, ehh, culture, have decisions forced on them. And citizens take active part through voting, through protest, through democratic institutions like a free press. Through parent-teacher

[38] He was the person with whom I communicated in every regard of my coming and going at AUIS. The interview was a kind of extended conversation of the meetings and email correspondence I had with him.

> associations, through many of these democratic institutions. That is how I would differentiate citizens from subjects. And I think that for too long the subjects of both the central government, and even to a lesser extent the Kurdistan Regional Government, had not had the opportunity for their own destinies. So increasingly we're seeing that they are having that opportunity. I by no means want to suggest that this is a full democracy, but I think it is on its way. And I think the university plays an important role in enabling a modern, pluralistic democratic society to function properly.

This statement reflects an optimistic US post-invasion moment of believing in the arrival of democracy in Iraq. And believing in the role of learning US *soft skills* in order to educate the future democratic active citizens of Iraq who will be the agents of change.[39] I met this same idea of educating the future citizens of change among AUIS students. The student Sehla said:

> When we have graduated, we should go out into society and teach people. Because when we finish and when we get a master's degree or a PhD, then we can go and teach in the University of Sulaimani and then give them the freedom that they need. Because then they can write about what they want, and that will improve the society and the culture and how people will think.

In the same line of thought, focusing on a global mindset, AUIS offered an Executive MBA for working professionals with the title International Business Administration and Leadership.[40] The aim of the MBA was described as "(…) to help working professionals become better managers, develop critical thinking skills, sharpen strategic and leadership skills, learn negotiation dynamics and develop a global mindset" (AUIS 2015a). The overarching aims and formulations of educational programmes focusing on critical thinking and a global mindset can be read as a specific discourse on civic participation and Western democracy. These stated aims can be compared against student experiences of the presence (or lack) of everyday institutional democratic practices. One example of

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[39] This relates to a broader debate in the field of education about neoliberalism (see, among others, Hyatt, Shear and Wright, eds. 2015; Reimers and Martinsson, eds. 2017).

[40] The Executive MBA is a collaboration with the private university German Steinbeis-Hochschule Berlin.

this is that students at AUIS could organise and engage in a variety of faculty-initiated student clubs ranging from women's soccer and basketball practice to poetry, debate, a newspaper and a drama club and much more. But there was no student body organisation at AUIS when I conducted interviews in 2012 and students were therefore not represented in a formal way at the decision-making bodies of the university[41]. I talked to Serhat, who had tried to form what he called "a student body government". But he did not succeed due to a very complicated constitutional process, which the head of the Student Department wanted him to go through. He told me about this process.

> I thought about it, and I went to Mr Smith – he is the head of the Student – the Honesty[42] Department – and I told him: "I want to make the government, and I don't have the constitution. Once I make my government, I select the president, the vice-president, and these people who are responsible for the different departments, then we will try to make the constitution." And he made a great argument. He said: "Well, if you don't have a constitution, then how will you do the elections? How will you decide who is going to be the president, the vice-president? How will you decide how many candidates you will have? How do you decide, for which departments, how many delegates there will be?" It is a good argument; you have to have a constitution, which leads to the elections, which lead to the numbers of people who should be involved in the student body government, who should be responsible. It should tell us how powerful the student body government should be. I don't know; the student body government, how powerful will it be? I only know if I get the power to fight a teacher if the majority of students say so. I don't know if I have the power or not. And he said: "We need a constitution to rule it, to lead us to what you are responsible for."

Serhat found it difficult that he needed to write a constitution before he could form a group of students, and he asked if he could constitute a student body government in a different way, which the head of the

[41] There was no student organisation until November 2013. On November 18, 2013, the student body's first constitution was approved after four students had worked with 14 drafts of a constitution throughout a whole year. Elections were held to find the president, vice-president and senators of the Student Advisory Council (AUIS 2015b).

[42] In the interview, Serhat said 'Student Department', and then corrected himself to 'Honesty Department'. It might refer to the AUIS 'Honor Code', which are guidelines for academic conduct that the students sign.

Student Department did not allow. The road to student democracy described in the quotation has Kafkaesque dimensions. Somebody has to create a constitution before you can do anything, but it is unclear who this group of students is that can form a constitution. He gave up trying to form a student body government. Also, he told me that he could not be sure to be elected as the president after going through all the trouble. Serhat told me that students at AUIS needed permission to gather to show support for e.g. Syria or to sign a petition. "There is not that freedom of speech that the AUIS is teaching us", he concluded.

The relationship between students and politics at UOS will be discussed and further explored in the following chapter. The more lengthy description of AUIS here mirrors the very explicit narratives directly relating to ideas of modernity and development as students and the Director of Communications and Institutional Development told them. These narratives are central to public narratives of middle-classness.

Entering institutions

I had already started my exploration of the university spaces when I tried to get permission to enter the two universities. I am not doing a comparative analysis of the two institutions, but I want to introduce my entry into the two university spaces to contextualise and situate my ethnography.

My entry into the University of Sulaimani (UOS)

On a preparatory trip to Sulaimani in February 2012, I visited UOS in order to find out what I needed to do to get permission to hold interviews, carry out participatory observations and hang out at the university. I met with the Vice-President of Scientific Affairs and Postgraduate Studies. He told me that they would need a letter of recommendation from the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science in Lund.

Before returning to Sulaimani in the autumn of 2012, I met with the Iraqi ambassador in Copenhagen because I thought it would be a good plan to keep all doors open and talk about my project to a prominent stakeholder in Denmark. He was Kurdish and had previously been employed as a professor in Political Science at UOS. I told him about my

project and he gave me a letter of recommendation to bring with me to the president of the university. When I returned to Sulaimani at the end of September 2012, I had the letter from the ambassador, copies of the letter from my dean and also a letter of recommendation from my supervisor. I arranged a meeting with the Director of Foreign Relations at UOS, which I had been told to do. He had just returned from a one-month stay in the US, where he had been looking for inspiration from and cooperation with American universities. He showed me photographs of the trip. After presenting my research outline to him, he sent me with a piece of paper to the Vice-President of Administration Affairs. There, I got a letter of admission to the university campus with a signature approving my going in and out of campus. I shook hands with the Administrative Vice-President and went back out into the street with the paperwork that would allow me to start my ethnographic fieldwork at UOS. I had shaken hands with the important decision-makers, and I never had any trouble going through the security check at the university campus gates with that paper in my hand. I held onto it as my precious treasure.

My entry into the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS)

Initially, I had not planned to include the American University into my research. When visiting Sulaimani on the trip in February 2012 prior to the long-term fieldwork, I went to visit the university just out of curiosity together with a group of young people from Denmark from the student organisation *Operation Dagsværk*. They were visiting Sulaimani in order to prepare a campaign around sports activities for youth across Iraq.

After my first visit to the university, I wrote an email to the student services coordinator who had done the tour on the day of my visit, stating that I was interested in including AUIS students in my research. She asked me to write to the Director of Communications and Institutional Development, which I did. We had a long email correspondence back and forth about the possibility for me to undertake fieldwork at AUIS. I sent my outline of the research project to him and we arranged to meet when I would return in the autumn of 2012. He was positive about my research plans. I also contacted a student who had done part of the guided tour in February, and I met up with her when I returned to Sulaimani in the autumn. We met in a café outside of the university campus since I had not yet been granted permission to work inside of the university. I met with the Director of Communications and told him about my project. A newly

hired HR person also participated in the meeting. They asked me to send my interview questions for another person higher up in the hierarchy to read (I was never told the identity of this person). Unwillingly, but due to necessity in proceeding with my research, I sent a rough sketch of some of the main questions I had in mind, but adding that I would do open-ended semi-structured interviews. I offered to give an oral presentation of my project to the students, so that they would know what it was all about. We agreed that I could give the presentation combined with a lecture on qualitative methods and ethnographic fieldwork, since I was told that these methods were new for them at the university. I gave the presentation and lecture to a group of around 40 students in the undergraduate program. After the presentation, five students came directly up to me and signed up for participating in interviews. Four lecturers were also listening to my presentation. I arranged with the lecturer responsible for arranging my presentation that I could start participating in her classes. I presented my project, my research methods and myself at the beginning of every new class I attended. I also made the strategy to follow specific students to several of their classes – upon prior agreement with both the students and the lecturers.

After I'd been hanging out at the university for about a month, the HR person wanted to meet me to have a chat about how my work was proceeding, "from personal interest", as she put it. I was unsure what this was all about; did she want to know what the students had told me? Or did she care about my work, or me? Or was she sent on behalf of the unidentified person(s) higher up in the hierarchy making decisions about my stay at the university? Or did she simply feel alone, having just arrived as a new employee at the university? I went to have this coffee and chat with her, as it felt like something I could not avoid. I did not really tell her anything, but tried to have a general conversation about the prospects of a liberal arts-style university in Iraqi Kurdistan. We talked about the difficulties of going out alone at night as a woman, and she told me about the small and closed community of American expats in the city. Both of us being newcomers to the city and young women, we had some experiences to share, but I tried to keep my distance since it was not clear to me as to whom she might be reporting our conversation.

All the time during my fieldwork at the university I would liaise through the Communications and HR person, never meeting the people taking the decisions about my stay. I had to go through the checkpoint

every morning. At the beginning I needed an exact appointment with a staff member to get in. And then after a while the staff at the gate got to know me and I could get in without appointments, just by showing my Kurdish immigration card[43].

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored ways of theorising about global middle classes through ethnography. With a point of departure in these theoretical explorations, I have identified specific public narratives of middle-classness through the role of the English language, leisuretime in summer cottages and shopping.

New shopping malls and middle-class consumption are ways of embodying ideas of development and modernity. The English language, and the performance of reading books in the "language of science and modernity", as the student Daban put it, is also a middle-class performance and aspiration. This aspiration is related to the public narrative of development and modernity, a narrative that was also very explicit at AUIS.

The building of the new university campuses (of both AUIS and UOS) reflects the general post-invasion building boom in urban Iraqi Kurdistan at the time when I visited. The two university institutions were organised in different ways, but my focus on the students' narratives in a broader sense has not made it meaningful in this study to make a comparative analysis between the two institutions. I have met students who had started at UOS and shifted to AUIS and vice versa, so the spaces are not rigid and intransgressable. I will draw on the context of the university space where relevant in the analysis of students' narratives in the following chapters.

I will now further explore the aspirations and in-betweenness of relatively privileged middle-class lives in the context of a (post-)conflict urban scene.

[43] After my visa applications were processed, I ended up getting a so-called Kurdish Immigration Card, which served as my valid ID and permit to stay in Sulaimani.

CHAPTER 3

Politics and youth(e)scapes

"I just don't want to go into politics," the medical student Beyan told me with a quick and resolute response when we talked about volunteer work and student organisations at the Department of Medicine at the University of Sulaimani (UOS). The emphasis she put on distancing herself strongly from the label of *politics* echoed through conversations I had with other students. Their scepticism towards politics was expressed in different ways and with diverse arguments, from disengagement to direct and actively spelled-out distancing like in Beyan's words. This turning away from the term *politics* as if it was some kind of stinking and dirty object, that it was important for many of the students I met to get away from and not be associated with, made me curious to find out what kind of narratives of politics they were telling and how they were positioning themselves within them. The strong detachment 'hailed' (Brah 2012 [1999]) me into finding out what about politics was so loaded that it was important not to be connected with it among the students I spoke to.

In this chapter I look into how students are trying to turn away from and *escape* (Vigh 2003, 2006) the political landscape of a violent conflict in which they have grown up. A central feature in students' life narratives is that they inhabit the space of youth – the space of not still a child, and not yet completely adult with a promise of a middle-class home, a family and a job. While I do not want to suggest a homogenous category of 'youth', since I focus specifically on a group of middle-class university students, the concept of youth is central in order to understand the political landscape in a generational perspective. In line with anthropologists Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas and Henrik Vigh, I perceive the space of youth "as both social **being** and social **becoming**" (Christiansen et al. 2006:9, emphasis in original). Christiansen et al. are

exploring *youthscapes* of *being* and *becoming* through ethnographic accounts of youth lives across different African contexts (ibid.). They further elaborate on the Appadurai-inspired notion of *youthscapes* (see Maira and Soep 2004) by underlining how a notion of *youth(e)scapes* can capture "*the way they [youth] seek to escape confining structures and navigate economic, social and political turmoil"* (Vigh 2003, 2006). (Christiansen et al. 2006:9, my insertion).[44] I am inspired by this notion of *escape*, as an analytical focus grasping not only the landscape in which youth are trying to move, but also how youth growing up in *turmoil* try to escape the (historical) landscape of political conflict.

The central questions in this chapter are: How are students positioned by the political landscape of conflict and war and how do they position themselves? How do they construct counterpositions and definitions of what the political is? How are politics related to and understood in relation to their aspirations?

In the first part of the chapter, I will go through students' narratives of political conflict through the 1980s, 1990s and up to 2012 – mapping the landscape of political conflict understood from students´ stories. The stories will be explored with a special focus on the consequences that political conflict had on their lives.

In the second part of the chapter, I will focus on students' different narratives aiming at positioning themselves in relation to the field of the political. I will explore a tension between middle-class aspirations and a distancing from and attempt to escape politics.

First, I will jump back in time with the student Narin to her experiences of being a Kurdish university student in Baghdad at the time of the Anfal campaign in the late 1980s. Her narrative maps how the University of Baghdad was embedded in the political landscape and her experience of studying at AUIS in 2012 in relation to this.

[44] I am also inspired by work done on Appadurai notions of eduscapes (Forstorp and Mellström 2013; Madsen 2008).

University studies between repression and 'free speech'

At AUIS I met Narin, a female student in her forties, studying International Politics. She was older than most of the other students, and she was married. She was originally Kurdish from Sulaimani, but she had studied at the University of Baghdad (Law and Philosophy) in 1988. She told me how she had shared a house in Baghdad together with her brother, who was also studying at that time at the art college, while their parents lived in Sulaimani. They had cousins and an aunt living in Baghdad, with whom they would talk on the telephone every day. Mosul and Baghdad Universities were popular and many Kurds from the Kurdish region studied there during the 1970s, when the University of Sulaimani was new and had just opened. Narin told me how it was to navigate as a Kurdish student in Baghdad under the Ba'th regime's control of the universities. Some of the professors were Kurdish or pro-Kurdish or against the regime in other ways but they could not talk openly about politics. She told me how they would talk about the political situation by using coded phrases, such as: "Is it cold in Suli[45]?" In 1988 the Anfal campaign was initiated by the Ba'th regime, with village destruction and forced relocation of Kurds already taking place. Due to the increasingly tense circumstances, Narin had to interrupt her studies in order to go back to Sulaimani. During the 1980s, the Ba'th regime closed down the University of Sulaimani, so Narin could not continue her university studies there.

> So my family, my parents, they asked me, "We are afraid for you because your brother, he could not go back to Baghdad and you are alone." And at that time, Uday, the first son of Saddam Hussein, he was visiting the university every week, he was visiting the Baghdad University and Al-Mustansiriya University just to pick out some Kurds that they did not like – and also they liked beautiful girls. They – yes, as you say, they stole them for Uday and his bodyguards – so, I was not a foul girl at that time and my parents, they were afraid, so they said: "We cannot send you without your brother."

[45] 'Suli' is an abbreviation for Sulaimani that is commonly used by people living in the city.

> (…) And we know that there were ten girls, they were picked out for Uday and they stopped (…) just for ten girls, Kurdish and Arabic, when they were very beautiful (Katrine: Yes) and they [were] picked out just, you know, [by] Uday – like a dictator, the one he liked, he can get [her] without any question. You know dictatorship?

Narin's brother was kicked out of the university because he had refused to participate in a summer training course for "soldiers and security for [the] Ba'thi regime". Narin related how, every year, students had to sign up on the Ba'th party list, but she and others refused. Some students and some teachers showed loyalty to the Ba'th party, and some did not (but, ultimately, do you really have a choice under a dictatorship?). The university was a mini political cosmos, where students and staff had to navigate and not reveal their political non-regime sentiments. As a female student, it was crucial not to stick out too much as 'beautiful' either, according to Narin's narrative, for fear of being picked out in order to be made available to high-ranking Ba'th party members and bodyguards.

Narin was proud of being a top-score student who had achieved a place at the University of Baghdad. She stressed how "Baghdad was the best university in the Middle East".

> I trusted Baghdad University a lot despite the bad, bad regime. I trusted it because there were teachers who were very intelligent, who were excellent, they were really smart people. But I am sorry that Saddam destroyed everything in Iraq, especially Baghdad University.

When I met her in 2012, she was proud to be a student at AUIS, which she also believed had a good reputation outside of Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq. She reflected upon being a student at AUIS and being a student in 1988 in Baghdad.

> For example, we can study everything here [AUIS]. But we could not do that in Baghdad University. For example, we could not read any article or any book about communism, Marx; or learning, for example, Machiavelli or Stalin or… Even though Saddam Hussein respected Stalin, as we read about, but he did not – they did not let any students talk about communism or any philosopher of communism because Saddam was against them. And we could not talk about the Kurdish political economy. No, never. We just had to listen to what they said and we said: "Yes, you are right." Just to save ourselves. And we did not study everything in

> history about Western countries. No, only Islamic. And in the first year of Philosophy College they would talk only about Arab philosophers. Arab. Even Rushd, even Sina – yeah, Arab. For the second year, we were studying Greek philosophers. And after that about the European Renaissance time, yeah. But here [AUIS] we are free to read and to talk about everything in the world.

Narin narrates a juxtaposition of freedom to read and talk at AUIS and her experiences of the regime's repression at the University of Baghdad. But even though censorship of the curriculum or indoctrination existed, she also told me how professors would ask students if they had read outside of the curriculum in order to encourage them to read more. So even though the dictatorship tried to indoctrinate through the educational system, they could never control what students and academics read and thought. And just because students said, "Yes, you are right," as in Narin's narrative, it does not mean that they were not resisting.[46] The everyday subtle workings of not abiding by the ways the university was controlled and repressed under the regime are also exemplified by Nadje Al-Ali with the story of a Kurdish professor working in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Baghdad in the 1970s (Al-Ali 2007:121). The professor refused to join the Ba'th party and she even made an ironic joke in class, where some students were loyal Ba'th party members, whether they thought Babylonian theatre was *Ba'thi*, and she got away with it. Al-Ali stresses that disciplines that are not seen as prestigious might have been a space with slightly more freedom (ibid.).

Navigating in the landscape of political conflict is a fine balance in everyday life. Being a student or an academic is not a sheltered position outside of society. Narin's narrative shows how political conflict was very present at the university in Baghdad and that there was no escape. Compared to this experience, Narin has a perception of AUIS as an apolitical space with the freedom to "read and to talk about everything in the world."

The following stories from Lale and Sehla, both students at AUIS, challenge this idea of the AUIS student as a figure in an apolitical space.

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[46] For further disscussion see also Saad N. Jawad, "The Assassination of Iraqi Academic Life: A Personal Testimony." in Al-Ali and Al-Najjar 2013.

The Brotherhood War – politics and kinship

I met Lale and Sehla, both students at AUIS, and their stories illuminate how the historical conflict during the *Brotherhood War* enters into the present.

Between 1994–1998, the violent Kurdish internal civil war, also called the Brotherhood War, took place mainly between the two Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK. As also described in the previous chapter, the geographical result of the internal war was that the KDP was located in the governorates of Dohuk and Erbil, and the PUK in the governorate of Sulaimani. Middle East scholar Gareth Stansfield has described Iraqi Kurdistan as a "deeply divided society" with a "consociational political system", with the KDP and PUK in opposition to each other but cooperating in sharing power (Stansfield 2003:20). The two parties in coalition ran for election in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region in 2005, which can be seen as underlining the mutual agreement on the division of land and power after the end of the Brotherhood War.

Even though the research participants did not present themselves as belonging to political parties, their stories revealed that family political connections shaped the landscapes in which they were moving around. Lale's and Sehla's stories highlight how a political context outside of the university space functions as a significant feature in university students' narratives. First, I will explore the links between politics and identity formations in order to read Lale's and Sehla's narratives through the concept of *activation of security networks.*

Activation of security networks

When doing research in the Middle East in relation to politics and identity formations, the topic of a central academic and public media debate is how to understand the role and meaning of what is defined as 'sectarian identities'. Scholars studying politics in the Middle East discuss how to use concepts from political science and sociology of *identity* and *class* produced in Western academia and apply them in a Middle Eastern empirical setting. In an issue of the *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, dealing with exactly the analytical and

theoretical grappling with the concept of sectarian identities in relation to the study of Iraq, Eric Davis writes in the introduction:

> The question of sectarian identities has been instrumental in shaping western understandings of Iraq. In the West, an 'imaginative geography' continues to view the core determinants of Iraqi politics as a function of the interaction between its three regionally concentrated ethnic groups, the Sunni Arabs, the Shi'ite Arabs and Kurds. (Davis 2010:229)

A central argument in Davis's introduction is that certain conditions, such as social and political crisis, can *activate* sectarian identities (Davis 2010:239). Using the concept of *activation* points to the ways in which identities should not be perceived as essentialist and inherent to some kind of imagined 'Middle Eastern social and political culture'. Identities are always in flux, in the doing, and can be *activated* and used by actors and circumstances. This analytical gaze is interested in finding out how, why and under which circumstances identities emerge, and not trying to describe some kind of inherent essentialist being of a set of fixed sectarian identities. The concept of *activation* challenges mainstream media headlines displaying and explaining conflict in Iraq (and the region) as different sectarian groups fighting each other, without understanding how these identities and frontlines have become activated in the first place. I will now turn to Lale's narrative of the intertwining of kinship and political identities and how it becomes *activated* according to Davis's concept.

"Named as the Barzani family"

I talked to Lale and her fiancé Rebaz, both students at AUIS. Lale told me how she had grown up in Sulaimani in the 1990s during the Brotherhood War. Lale's family was connected to the Barzani family lineage, which includes both the President of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq from KDP, Masoud Barzani (2005–2017), and his nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani (2012–), also a KDP member. Anthropologist Diane King describes how some Iraqi Kurdish patrilineages produce prominent political characters, as in the case of

Masoud and Nechirvan Barzani[47], which is part of the logics of why family and party affiliation can be intertwined (King 2014:152). In Lale's case, she was from a KDP family, but living in a PUK area.

> My family comes from the Barzani family on my mom's side. When we were here, the Brotherhood War, we call it, there was the KDP and the PUK. We were here in Suli [Sulaimani], and we were from, we were like *named* as the Barzani family. They [PUK-affiliated people] came and they took our house, my grandmother's house. So my grandma and my aunt, she is not married, they came to live in my parents' house. So they found them, and they came and took that house as well. So we went to my great-aunt's house. And they came and took that house as well, and we had nowhere to go, so we ran to a relative's house. By the time we looked back, they had taken all of our stuff and burned down the three houses. My uncle fled away, my dad was working like three jobs to provide for the family. My eldest brother was arrested, and my mom took him away. And the aunt that I talked to you about, the one in Europe, that was the moment that she went. She fled to Europe. She couldn't stand the situation.

Where "they" in Narin's narrative were Saddam, his son Uday, and the Ba'th regime, "they" in Lale's narrative were people affiliated with the PUK. Lale told me that it was only her uncle who was a member of the KDP, but that they were *named* as the Barzani family, which makes "the whole family go down" as she describes it. It is an *activation* of Lale's family identity as belonging to KDP politics through kinship, through the *name*. Coming from a specific family creates danger, but also status. While it could be argued that belonging to a prominent family with political connections has impact in any society, these forms of belonging are even stronger in the context of a (post-)conflict society where political identities are a central principle of societal organisation as an outcome of the history of conflict, as the narratives from the students show.

Lale's fiancé Rebaz participated in the interview too. Rebaz' childhood was also characterised by moving from one house to another, but due to an internal family dispute. Lale told me how she could easily understand

[47] Barzani and Talabani are two renowned family names intertwined with politics. Barzani is related to KDP and Talabani to PUK. The former President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, was from PUK (2005–2014). Jalal Talabani's son Qubad Talabani (PUK) is Deputy Prime Minister in KRG (2014–).

when Rebaz described his childhood experiences: "Literally, I felt them", she says about listening to how his experiences resonated with her own. Rebaz explained how their similar childhood experiences were "attractive" to him. By telling the story of her family's political affiliation, Lale is reasserting her own affiliation to party politics through her family name. But at the same time she is also using the narrative of a childhood lived in the *activated* identity of belonging to KDP politics to distance herself from it and dream of creating, and already planning, a different future adult middle-class life of her own. She is both reproducing privilege, but also longs to just be middle-class (the privilege) without the name (the danger and political affiliation). Lale and Rebaz had bought off-plan an apartment to be built in a new middle-class neighbourhood not far from Lale's family. They were planning to furnish and move into the apartment after their graduation and wedding. Lale emphasised that they did not want to "rush things" and they were "not planning to have kids right away. No, no, no." Her fiancé Rebaz directly continued the conversation and stated:

> Rebaz: Both of our lives, we didn't have a good childhood and a good teenage life. We acted as adults…
>
> Lale: Adults.
>
> Rebaz: …when we were teenagers.
>
> Lale: We just wanna live.

"Our family is known"

Sehla was a student at AUIS. Sehla's father had worked as a politician for PUK and was a Peshmerga[48] in the 1990s. He fled to Europe and Sehla and her family followed. Sehla went through primary and secondary school in Europe, but moved to Sulaimani with her family because her father got the offer of a political job. Sehla told me about her thoughts as to finding out which university to apply for in Iraqi Kurdistan.

[48] The Peshmerga are the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, but are divided and controlled by the parties KDP and PUK. Reforms to unify the Peshmerga forces figure on paper and attempts have been made during the fight against ISIS (see Helfont 2017).

> I wanted to go live in Hewlêr [Kurdish name; in Arabic, Erbil]. I wanted to be like more independent, and to… I wanted to discover things. And because we are from Erbil, we have family there, but I still wanted to live in the dorms. Just a new experience, and I wanted to do that. I always loved to have adventure and everything. (…) My sister was already here [AUIS], and I had a lot of friends like from, those who came from outside, most of them applied to this university, because it is an American university, they liked it. So they said, "Why don't you come and apply here?" I said, "No way am I coming to this university." (…) I got the reply from Erbil in Biology; I really liked biology, so I wanted to go there. I even got the sponsor[49] to go and study there. But my mom said: "I do not want you to go there. The society is not ready for that yet, because like our family is known, and we still have like a kind of tension between the different parties." She said: "I want you to stay here, and go to the university with your sister. Then I can be like happy, and I will not feel like 'what is she doing?' and everything." So after that, I came to this university. But I did not feel sorry because I came, because it was like I just felt like this is American – I am in Europe again, you know?

Political family connections to the PUK prevented Sehla from studying in Erbil, because her mother was worried for her situation. Though they had family in Erbil, her mother did not think it was safe for her to go there and live in a dorm on her own since Sehla was connected to a PUK family and Erbil was KDP territory. The Brotherhood War and the history of conflict and violence were shaping choices of where to study. Even if her mother was just using it as an excuse for not wanting her to move to another city, the underlying argument was still about a historical conflict between two political parties and Sehla's involvement in this through kinship. Sehla was paying a price for choices and events that were made and happened in her parents' generation when she could not study Biology at the university in Erbil. There is ambivalence in her narrative, on the one side stating how she at first "no way" wanted to study at AUIS, and then on the other side her statement that she is not "sorry" that she became a student at AUIS. She is flexible and adjusts to the situation of her mother's worries and the narrative around security and safety.

[49] The university that Sehla was accepted at in Hewlêr was private, and therefore she needed funding, which she calls 'sponsor', in order to be able to pay tuition fees.

I talked to Erdem, a student in Engineering at UOS, who had a similar story. He had previously been studying in Hewlêr, where he had been accepted, and he was called 'the Suli guy' by other students. His father was connected to the PUK. He told me how his mother was worried for him in Hewlêr, and he had succeeded in getting his studies transferred to Sulaimani, though actually he preferred the quality of teaching in Hewlêr.

Needless to say, young people´s life chances depend on their family background and on their parents' life choices. What I would argue is specific to Sehla (and Erdem) is a restriction on movement as an outcome of her father's involvement with the PUK and the war. Sehla did not complain about this, but told her life story of moving to Europe and back to Sulaimani and the decisions around the choice of university as if she was retelling the life of a character in a movie. She told her story with a sense of detachment, and she never directly showed elements of irritation, regret or satisfaction with the ways decisions around her life had been shaped as an outcome of her family's position in relation to war and conflict. During the conversation with Sehla and working with the analysis, I realise how much I am searching for emotions in her narrative – anger, disappointment or despair. But those are my own expectations of emotional responses. Her narrative is built up around figures of 'the political father' who sets into motion their moving back and forth between Sulaimani and Europe, 'the worried mother' trying to adjust to circumstances, and also the figure of 'the sad sister'. When I asked Sehla about her feelings of moving to Sulaimani as a teenager after having had the whole of her primary and secondary education in Europe, she told about her one-year-older sister's reaction.

> Like my elder sister, she was totally not with it. She did not like it. When we came back [to Sulaimani] she cried for so long. It was really hard for her to adapt. And my other, younger, sister, she did not really say much – just like me – we were just like, "Okay, I am here now, and the only thing that I can do is adapt and not think about Europe because we are not going back, so it is better to look into the future and who says, like, it will be better? You never know." But my brother wanted to come back.

Sehla and her younger sister are "adapting" to the circumstances, while her elder sister embodies the emotional response in the narrative, and her brother's position is described as positive towards 'coming back'. Sehla's elder sister was also studying at AUIS, and when Sehla tells the narrative

of the figure of the sad sister, she is representing a sorrow of having to leave behind her childhood life in Europe. This is a narrative of relocating that also includes the difficult feelings.

'Worried mothers' and 'political fathers' (or uncles) are figures that are central in these narratives from Sehla, Lale and Erdem. Figures that are both distancing the worrying and the political from the narrator. It is not Lale, Sehla or Erdem who are worried or political, but they have to navigate in relation to these figures. Emotions and political sentiments belong to somebody else in these narratives, which create a distanced way of narrating emotions. Things happen, and, as we clearly see in Sehla's narrative, she adjusts to the circumstances. The figures of mothers and fathers could also be seen as related to public narratives of the 'mothers' and 'fathers' of the Kurdish nation.[50]

Belonging is important as part of a security system that is *activated* in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sehla is *known*, which is both a limitation to her space of movement, but also a belonging to a security network, and privilege, through her father's political connections, as long as she stays in Sulaimani. Lale's story shows how the *naming* of individuals as belonging to a specific family, and thereby to a specific political position, became reinforced during the Brotherhood War in a process of interpellation of individuals by family names, which Lale cannot escape as an individual because she belongs to and is dependent on her family as her social security system.

Anthropologist Hayder Al-Mohammad analyses social security networks and discusses the re-emergence of 'tribe' in everyday life in Basra after the 2003 invasion (Al-Mohammad 2011). He shows how 'tribe' and 'tribalism' should be understood as a construct that is "historically, socially, and politically determined". (Al-Mohammad 2011:19, 22) and how in the everyday doings of life a specific kind of 'tribalism' becomes activated with the function of being a social security network in a conflict situation where there is no state protecting citizens' rights. The universal need for security networks in every society and for protection in whatever form that is available is described very precisely with the title of the article called "*You Have Car Insurance, We Have Tribes: Negotiating Everyday Life in Basra and the Re-emergence of*

[50] See Nira Yuval-Davis on the role of gender in the making of ethnicity and nationhood (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Tribalism" (Al-Mohammad 2011). The same kind of mechanism is at work in Lale's and Sehla's stories – they are intertwined into their families' positions in a political conflict which creates both danger and privilege.

Lale, Sehla and Erdem are all navigating in youthscapes that are closely connected to political landscapes intertwined with family histories. They cannot escape their belonging to political conflict through kinship. Lale's desire of "We just wanna live" and Sehla's description of herself as "I always loved to have adventure" – these desires have to be negotiated in the landscape of family histories, belongings and positions related to the Brotherhood War.

Narin's narrative of being a student in Baghdad during the Anfal campaign shows in a similar way how being a university student is also about navigating in the landscape of dictatorship and violence, that being a student at university is not a position outside of war, conflict and violence. In Baghdad by the end of the 1980s and in Sulaimani in 2012, the university space in itself did not provide a road leading to the future, since political family histories are part of shaping available future possibilities.

In the following, I will look into a tension between the landscape of political collectives and emerging narratives of individualism among students turning away from these collectives.

Positions in a landscape of politics

I will now focus on how students actively position themselves in a variety of ways in relation to the political landscape through redefinitions of the meaning of politics and through creating escape routes.

I will begin by looking into disapproval of interruptions to university life by student politics; thereafter I will focus on resistance towards political collectives; and finally I will look into ideas of philanthropic volunteering as a modern 'apolitical' activity, and a vision of emerging new forms of politics. The gathering of students at a demonstration at UOS is an example of the contested political collective.

Demonstrations as an interruption to everyday studying

"Raise our money!"[51] A big parade of students were walking slowly through the campus area at the University of Sulaimani, some of them occasionally shouting and demanding a raise in the monthly payment they received as student support from the KRG (40,000 Iraqi Dinar (ID)). The price of transportation by taxi to and from the university campus lying in the outskirts of the city (which many students used) was increasing (a taxi ride cost between 2,000–6,000 ID in 2012 depending on the length of the journey. Some students, especially females, had arranged to go together to and from university by taxi and pay a monthly price of around 40,000 ID per person) On November 7, 2012, the students at UOS were marching towards the building where the University President had his office. The students wanted the President to make a claim on their behalf to the KRG that they needed a raise in the monthly payment. This was what three participants in the demonstration told me when I asked about the logic behind demonstrating on the campus. The organisers of the demonstration stopped on the stairs leading up to the big round main office building of the university and they gave a speech. The sun was shining brightly down over the campus, and over the students walking in crocodile in pairs, female students arm in arm, and male students likewise. Some used study books to give them some shade from the sun; books that were not being used in classes that day, and on many other days where students were demonstrating. The demonstration demanding a raise in the monthly student support was a general demonstration organised for the whole university. But other demonstrations and boycotts of lectures were organised around specific departments.

I talked to Shad, the student in Civil Engineering, about the demonstration (called a 'boycott'). I felt high-spirited after having attended the demonstration, which had gathered many students, drawing on my own previous experiences of demonstrations in Copenhagen as spaces of mobilising collective criticism. But my enthusiasm was deflated while confronted with Shad's narrative of the many 'boycotts' that he did not feel passionate about.

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[51] "*Parakaman bo ziadka"*: literally, "Our money, pour/raise/increase/more". Translation into English by student when I was at the demonstration: "Give more money."

> Katrine: Okay. So do you think you succeeded in your boycott?
>
> Shad: From the start, I was not with the boycott. But when it is general you just have to say "okay" – it is how it happens.
>
> Katrine: Do you normally not support the boycotts that the students have here? Or just this one?
>
> Shad: No, I really support the boycotts. But I don't support the boycotts that would make a change in *our* education, I would support the boycotts that would change the education for *others*. Because I know that it is really late for us to do some kind of change, some very big change. But yeah, if there is a boycott for changing the teacher, I would really consider it.

Changes for future students is in Shad's narrative the only meaningful reason to participate in demonstrations. Shad's own future employment was secured as he was already enrolled in his family's engineering business while studying. Having roads leading to a secure employment, the education for Shad was a period of acquiring skills and a certificate that he could directly use in his family's business. In this perspective, the landscape of boycotts of lectures and demonstrations and the outcome was not of great importance for him, but something that he had to participate in as he explains, "when it is general you just have to say 'okay'." He could not escape it. But neither was he dependent on political connections to ensure a future job.

Another student in Engineering, Dîmen, did not have a family business to secure his employment after graduation, and for him the interruption to the lectures by demonstrations had another meaning. Dîmen's father worked hands-on with gypsum in the building industry and his mother was a "home-wife", as he described it. Dîmen had grown up in a city outside of Sulaimani, and he lived in the university dorms. At the time of the interview I was not familiar with the city, and there was a discussion between him, the interpreter[52] and me as to whether the city where he came from was big or not. The discussion underlined that the divide

[52] The interpreter participated in this interview even though Dîmen and I talked in English. Dîmen had mentioned that he felt more comfortable with the interpreter present in case he needed help to translate between Kurdish and English. The interpreter had grown up in Sulaimani.

between a rural village and an urban city is important. Coming from the countryside is not perceived as high status in the differentiation mechanisms at work among urban Sulaimani university students. 'Rural' here connotes a working-class background and unfamiliarity with urban middle-class life.

Dîmen had ambitions and stated that he wanted to be a teacher at the College of Engineering. Being a university teacher has high status, a narrative that I also adopted by telling students that I was a '*Mamostai zanko la Suede*', 'a teacher at a university in Sweden'. This was the most intelligible way of presenting myself (and also true since part of my PhD education has been teaching), whereas being a PhD student doing research was in general more complicated to explain. Dîmen told me that if the dream of becoming a teacher didn't work out, he would want to work with what he called 'design' as an engineer (construction design). He was aiming to get a job in a higher position than his father's and his grandfather's before him, who worked with "walls" (bricklayers). Coming from a working-class background, Dîmen's access to middle-class capital (in a Bourdieusian sense) was through succeeding in his studies as a top student, and to climb the social ladder and be better than his father in order to have middle-class success. The boycotts got in the way of this ladder-climbing.[53]

Dîmen described himself as belonging to the one-third of students who were eager to learn in class. He repeated a joke about himself that had been told by students whom he perceived as not caring about their studies.

> Yes, they are thinking: "Don't care about him. He is like Assad and he will not change." [laughing]

Being 'like Assad' here connotes being like a dictator with reference to Syria's Bashar al-Assad, studying very seriously and with commitment. Dîmen was studying 'like Assad' in order to be a top-score student with a chance of being accepted in the master's programme at UOS, which is the entry to secure and prestigious employment as a university lecturer. He is reclaiming the Assad joke, which could be interpreted as some kind of

[53] I am inspired by feminist readings of Bourdieu stressing potentials to theorise social agency (Adkins and Skeggs, eds. 2004).

bullying of a nerdy and serious student. He reclaims the nickname by positioning himself as a committed student in opposition to the two-thirds whom he describes as not caring about their studies. Dîmen was, like Shad, critical towards the many boycotts of lectures that he experienced.

> Dîmen: I have been here three years. Each year, 20 times, I see repeatedly that they collect the signature for not entering the lectures.
>
> (…)
>
> Katrine: and what are the demands, what do they say?
>
> Interpreter: (…) Different excuses.
>
> Dîmen: Just to go on holidays, if you want the truth [laughing].
>
> Katrine: So, like the recent boycott that you had, where the students were asking for more money, you think it's just an excuse for something else?
>
> Dîmen: If you want the truth, I know: it is going out. If I say: "Come out," to the pupils, "come out, the teacher doesn't like me," they will come, not because they like me, but because in these things there is a time to be free and there is no going to the lectures. I mean, if you do anything and there is a free time for them, they will do it, if you ask anything.
>
> Katrine: So you don't agree that you need more money…
>
> Dîmen: No, no, no.
>
> Katrine: … from the government?
>
> Dîmen: No, no, no. The main purpose for this boycott was not money, if you want the truth.

Dîmen and Shad both understand politics in the form of 'boycotts' as something that interrupts their education, a question of other students wanting 'free time' and something you have to participate in with an 'Okay'. Demonstrations at the university, in their narratives, create a landscape where it is not possible to move straight from one lecture to the other. The road is suddenly interrupted by a boycott of a lecture or by a general demonstration, which in their narratives are presented as rather

meaningless and without real goals of actually changing things. They don't have a different political vision regarding how to change things; they just want to be students without interruptions. Since I don't include the voices of the organisers of demonstrations here in the analysis, I am not making a general statement as to what extent students support demonstrations at the university and why. Dîmen's and Shad's very different family backgrounds and future employment plans show that students with different options in society can still share the same feeling of being fed-up with political conflict playing out on a small scale on the university campus on an everyday basis. And it shows the desire to position themselves as individuals with their own agency as 'the top student' and 'the engineer', not being dependent on political collectives.

"These groups"

Shad described the university as permeated with political conflicts running along lines of party affiliations, what he called "these groups", not only among students, but also among staff members. Having networks to rely on in order to get a job is a subject discussed throughout conversations with students. At UOS I heard rumours among students that some staff members supposedly were given popular teaching jobs along lines of political affiliation. Shad told me how he had experienced that party politics among staff members hindered the hiring of the best teachers for each subject.

> Shad: (…) once you get into the Civil Engineering, there is a lot of corruption in the administration, I mean in the university itself.
>
> Katrine: Just for this department? Or for all of...?
>
> Shad: No, it is a general thing, but I am aware of my department. There is always a challenge between the teachers, but not like a scientific challenge, but a political challenge.
>
> Katrine: What could that be?
>
> Shad: What could that be? There are some few groups of teachers, they are separated because of political reasons. They just don't talk about that in front of the students, but that is what we feel. So when one of the

teachers in one of the groups – okay, for example, you have heard of Yaketi [PUK]?

Katrine: Yes.

Shad: For example, this group is Yaketi and one of them is the manager of everything. Then, okay, "We will have my group ruling and my group being everything." And that is where the problem begins. These groups.

Katrine: And the other group is Party [KDP]?

Shad: Yes, Party or Gorran [Movement for Change], or there could be others, other groups just because of an idea. Just because of a small idea or because of a challenge about money. For example, in Civil Engineering some are groups, others are other groups because just these people are making more money and those can't. So what happens here? For example, in these groups, when you collect all these groups together you can really have good teachers among them, one good teacher for that subject, another for another specific subject. But when only one group is in charge of the whole thing, then there will be very bad teachers.

The possible relationship between party politics and employment echoed through many stories from students on the importance of knowing somebody in a politically powerful position in order to maximise chances of getting a job in, especially, the public sector in the future. Shad's experience of some of the hiring mechanisms at the university mirrors a general expectation among students on how to find employment after graduation. Something that often came up in conversations relating to employment was the concept of *wasta*.[54] Wasta is intercession, and to benefit from this you need to know somebody who can mediate for you. Wasta could provide a specific job or a quicker processing of a visa application and many other things. The reliance on favours through networks is something that takes place in all societies, from global elite

[54] Cunningham and Sarayrah describe the meaning of the word: "**Wasata**, or **wasta**, means **the middle**, and is associated with the verb **yatawassat**, to steer conflicting parties toward a middle point, or compromise. **Wasta** refers to both the act and the person who mediates or intercedes. In classical Arabic, **wasata** refers to the act; while **wasta** is generally used for both act and actor. In spoken Eastern Arabic, **wasta** is generally used for both act and actor" (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993:1, original emphasis).

business networks to routes to employment in Iraqi Kurdistan. In a society affected by many years of conflict, the need to know the right people in order to achieve your goals becomes even more crucial when due to conflict there is no well-functioning system or state to secure your rights (as I also discuss above in the section on *Activation of security networks*). The university is not a space outside of the complex web of political networks and political loyalties, and this fosters a fed-up syndrome and an urge to escape among students who don't gain anything from the political 'groups', as Shad named them.

Walking alone

Among students at UOS, there was a general complaint that not all teachers were perceived as good at teaching. Hana, a female student at UOS studying Civil Engineering, told me about an incident where she, together with the other students in her class, had signed a complaint about a teacher with whom they were not satisfied. During my time at UOS I experienced and heard about several organised complaints and demonstrations among students. The students in charge of organising this complaint decided that all students should refuse to enter the exam. Hana told me that she had a lot to worry about at the time of the complaint, because her dad had recently passed away. Her mom did not want her to miss any exams, and she decided to enter the exam despite the decision of the organisers, and she got into a dispute with the leader of the group.

> So I told him, "You know my situation, my dad, and I have to enter the exam because I do not want to fail in this subject and then I will fail in the other subjects." So he just started yelling at me. He shouted. He said, "I am not going to allow you to enter the exam." So I said, "Who are you to prevent me from entering the exam?" So he said, "Okay." I think the exam was on a Saturday. He said, "I am going to wait in the front and collect the names of the students who will go and enter the exam." So I said, "Okay, do not worry. Just write my name as the first one who is going to enter." So he became angry and he started collecting the students and he said: "The one who is going to enter the exam, he is going to be *sharafi xoi afroshe* [selling his/her dignity]."

After her decision not to join the common boycott of the exam, half of the students in her class did not want to talk to her. She told me that her view of the leader of the group was that he did not have power as a representative of all the students, but that he had "background power" because of his party affiliation with the PUK. It is a complex picture of who is representing whom, with the existence of different student groups at the university affiliated with political parties. The concept of *background power* underlines the experience of how party politics in the region are linked to the political landscape at the university. Due to the highly politicised climate at the university, even a relatively small incident, like a student not following a group decision about boycotting an exam, became an issue of choosing sides in a wider societal context.

Hana's position can only be understood in relation to the specific context of the university as a politicised space. Hana had decided to "walk alone" at the university, as she describes it. This decision was related not only to the boycott incident, but also to the fact that she experienced being pointed out as different because her dad was Arab, and the fact that she did not speak Kurdish as well as the other students because she had attended primary and secondary education in Arabic. She had moved to Sulaimani from Baghdad in 2001 with her Kurdish mother and Arab father. They were on their way to moving to London, where her grandparents were already living, but they never succeeded in getting a visa for the UK.

Hana's decision to 'walk alone' can be understood as an active process where she tries to make sense of the ways in which she belongs as a student at the university and as an inhabitant of Sulaimani with a partly Iraqi-Arab background of growing up in Baghdad. The attempt to escape the political landscape is conflicted and lonely. But her 'walking alone' is not only a turning away from the collective and a politicised landscape, it is also turning towards something. Hana explained that she wanted to "improve" herself. "So I just decided from this year, I am not going to listen to any student. Because I am not going to improve myself by this way. I have to depend on myself and doing my own business, not listening to anyone." Being part of a collective student group is standing in the way of 'improving oneself' for Hana at this particular moment. In her narrative, it is important for her to see herself as independent, and making her own choices in life. She used the concepts of 'personality' and 'improvement' throughout the interview, which tells something about

the strong discourse on individuality that she is narrating herself into. A narrative on individuality that is positioning her far away from the student collective and party politics. Hana's narrative reflects a public narrative of modernity and development evolving around the autonomy and success of the individual in Iraqi Kurdistan. One way of 'doing one's own business' and thereby 'improving' is through volunteer work, which I will explore in the following section.

To be out of politics – (modern) volunteers

Hana told me about an environmental volunteer project that she had participated in, around planting trees on the street in front of Garden City[55] (the project had not been allowed to plant trees in the university area). She talked about students who did not participate in this project: "And you can say that the students, they – he does not love his environment, because if he loves it he would come and do it. Yeah. They are not interested in [that] stuff." This pointing out of other students as not caring about the environment positions herself as someone who cares. The narrative of environmental volunteering can be described as an engine for self-realisation of the good modern citizen taking responsibility to be an agent of change.

Beyan, the medical student we met at the beginning of this chapter, was very engaged in the idea and practicalities of volunteer work. She told me how she had been participating in several volunteer projects since high school. She had attended a semi-private high school for top-score students, where most teaching was in English. Beyan told me how she was typing English books for students with visual impairments, so they could be printed in braille.[56] She had also been doing environmental volunteering, and was working on her own project on permanent blood donation and at the same time participating in an international medical association, which she described as a "scientific club". Despite all her engagement in different projects, she described her own position as preferring "to be out of politics", and she stressed that she was not a member of a student union:

[55] A new middle-class neighbourhood in Sulaimani like Gundi Almani (see Chapter 5).

[56] A tactile writing system used by people who have visual impairments.

> I am not a member because I just do not want to go into politics. Because if I do something, they will say – eh, I just do not want them to! I do not want to be part of something, to be allowed to do something. Of course, with all due respect, I do not want to be mean to them; I just prefer to be out of politics.

"Politics" are here understood as party politics and "them" are party politically affiliated people. Beyan does not want to be part of *something*, which in her narrative means an arena of party politics, where party politics are in power to *allow* her to do certain activities and not others. Beyan does not perceive volunteering as *politics*, since her volunteering activities are not directly affiliated with any political party. Her narrative of being active in volunteering projects is creating a distance from party politics that are linked with somebody else telling her what to do.

Voice and Exit

Beyan's and Hana's narratives are examples of the way some members of this generation of university students are actively positioning themselves against party politics. This is not an exclusively Iraqi Kurdish feature, but a phenomenon among youth in post-conflict societies. In a study conducted in post-conflict Sri-Lanka on youth and politics, human geographers Fazeeha Azmi, Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund show how Sri-Lankan youth participate in and negotiate political spaces (Azmi, Brun and Lund 2013). They use the concepts of *vocal* and *voiceless* politics to describe the position of having a voice and being heard on the one hand, and remaining silent or being silenced on the other. The authors do not perceive the position of youth remaining politically voiceless in public as a passive, apolitical stance, but as a consequence of a situation that "(…) does not open up new avenues for political engagement because there is no space for challenging the current political discourse" (Azmi, Brun and Lund 2013:116).

In Beyan's narrative, politics are likewise understood as a closed discourse that does not give her any space to participate. She does not want to engage in party politics because she does not want to be in a position where someone superior has the power to deny or *allow* her to do things, as she states, which would deprive her of her own voice. The volunteering projects that she is engaged in can be described as a space

where she has a sense of being vocal on her own terms and doing the projects that she finds important outside the frame of a certain political discourse.

(Re)imagining politics

Sures was a student at AUIS, and she was outspokenly interested in politics, which was noticeably different from the other students' narratives. Sures's energetic narrative around politics was so different from the more detached ones I had heard from other students. Her way of talking about politics puts the other narratives into a new perspective and shows the complexity in students' ways of relating to and talking about politics.

Sures had a wish to work in interior design after graduation, which a major in Engineering could lead to, but she was also thinking about taking International Studies (IS) as her major because of her interest in politics, as she described it: "For example, I like politics and I like philosophy, those things. That is why. Yeah. And I want to read and think about what other people think. That is why I might choose IS [International Studies] as well." She told me how she came from a family where she discussed politics at home with her mother and father. They both worked at the hospital, her dad as an assistant in the laboratory, and her mother as a doctor's assistant. Her father had been an active member of the union (*syndika*) related to the new Gorran party. Sures's statement about being interested in politics was so at variance with other students' narratives that I asked her directly about her interest with slight astonishment.

> Katrine: Why – how did you become interested in politics?
>
> Sures: Actually, because I felt a lot of corruption until now. I have been feeling a lot of corruption in my country. When I was in 6th grade [final year in high school], students paid their teachers and they sold the questions to the students and so they got good grades and they were accepted in those majors that they wanted, and from that corruption I started to think about what other things that they are corrupt in. And then I realised that, "Oh my God, it is not just education; it is health," which I

> know about because my parents work in hospitals and I know many things about corruption in there. And what we call wasta.
>
> Katrine: I know about it.
>
> Sures: And how it does work in there. And because I am a person, like, I really want to work everything fairly, like I want fairness. I do not want unfair things because, when somebody treats you with injustice, then you are nothing [more] than a tool or an animal. With all due respect, like. I think like that. And right now, in Suli, the leaders and the politicians use the people as tools. Like we are just tools working for the politicians and politicians earn money. And I do not want to accept that, actually. I am really with the opposition party [Gorran], and I am not saying that everything they do is right but I really like their job and... Because before that, in our parliament – I do not know if you know about it or not – before that, our members of parliament just did *this*, ordered and fought for *anything*, like, but now the opposition MPs like stand up and speak for the people. Like we feel them. Like we feel them, like, for example, we have Change [Gorran] members of parliament. When they speak and like when they speak for the, for their own people, I feel like this is what is truth and not what *they* do. Like, for example, we have PDK and PUK parties. I do not know. Their MPs are just sitting. Some of them are drawing, are painting. Like I do not know if you know about – because there was this news and they published it by video. One of our MPs was painting in the parliament, which I see like: "The people did not choose you to be there for drawing. People chose you in order to speak for them, in order to like do or tell what the people want to tell the government." Like for these things I started to like politics. And because my mother really likes politics. So. And we have discussions during dinner or when we are sitting together, and I am really interested in it.

Sures is using the metaphors "a tool or an animal" to explain how she thinks politicians are using people for their own benefit instead of listening to them and representing the people in the parliament. She has faith in the new party Gorran/Change, which according to her is not without flaws, but speaks for the people. Growing up and experiencing how wasta plays a role in society has sparked her political concern, and this has been nurtured by political discussions at home. In so many interviews, students asked me if I knew the term *wasta*. I close Sures off in the interview by saying "I know about it", but showing my knowledge of the word *wasta* became a way to position myself as some kind of

outsider-within not ignorant of the surrounding society and central concepts in Kurdish/Arabic. Despite the existence of corruption, she still has some hope for the political system because of the Gorran party's popularity and thereby disturbance of the rigid power divide between PUK and KDP. Coming from a home where politics is discussed during dinner, Sures's indignation has a space into which her thoughts and frustrations can be narrated, discussed and listened to. Unlike Sehla and Lale, who come from families that are named or known as political, Sures's narrative around her family is one of being engaged in political discussions. A narrative she adopts by positioning herself as intellectually engaged.

'Kurdish spring'

Sures explained her frustrations with Iraqi and Kurdish politics by referring to demonstrations on February 17, 2011 in Sulaimani where 11 people were killed.

> The problem is that there is a lot of corruption. My parents vote all the time and with a lot of hope, and like I am one of them like – because I have not voted yet. Like because when they made the elections I was 17 so I could not. Yeah, I could not vote. But here, all of it is corruption. Like there are people, they brought boxes to the polls by like the government, brought like… How can I say? Like… extra boxes, which were full of like papers that voted for them. Who were like who checked them and they counted as like as people did, which was not right. If it is by people, believe me, none of the parties would be elected. Like for sure. Like half or more than half of this region is against the government. But they do not say anything because they are afraid for their life. Their life will be in danger. I do not know if you know about 17th of Shubāṭ [February], what happened to Iraq? What happened to Kurdistan and especially in Suli. What happened was that there was a demonstration and at the demonstration – I do not know how it did go to there, but I know that it went to the KDP place Lqi choar [Branch No. 4].[57] And the people – because the people were really angry, they attacked the place and KDP responded to them by shooting them. People were really shocked and really young people died.

[57] Other *branches* of the KDP are situated in Dohuk (No.1), Hewlêr (No.2), Kirkuk (No.3).

In February 2011, people in Sulaimani went out on the streets to demand the end of corruption and for better basic services (water, electricity). Some have labelled this a 'Kurdish spring' in relation to the 2011 uprisings across the MENA[58] region that were popularly called the 'Arab spring' in Western media. In the demonstrations during February 2011 in Sulaimani, 11 people were killed; and when I visited Suli in February 2012 at the time of the first anniversary of the onset of the demonstrations, people were afraid to gather in big groups in the city centre area in the bazaar or to be visible with a cell phone (for fear of signalling that they were about to organise a gathering). The security forces (*asayish*) were heavily present all over the city centre. Never before had I felt this kind of tense atmosphere on open display in Sulaimani during my previous visits. One of my acquaintances, aged 15 at the time, was imprisoned in February 2011 because he was taking photographs of the demonstrations with his cell phone. He was quickly released from police custody, and even though he had been scared (I could tell, though he did not say), he tried to transform the experience into a political coming-of-age story. In February 2012, while staying in Sulaimani for three weeks, I followed the news and saw how the *asayish* had entered a students' corridor in order to arrest students who they said they thought were organising demonstrations.

Sures is telling me about the February 17, 2011 demonstrations, and she is really shocked that young people demonstrating were killed by the government.

> And there were many other boys who were killed. And like, the Human Rights Watch, I think they are still working on it, and there are some other organisations. They still work on that case, which was really surprising because, like, they were asking you for things. They were asking for electricity, for water, which is their own right, which they have the right to ask for and, as we are represented by our government, it is democratic. You do not have the right to respond to them by shooting even if they threw a bomb to their – to your place. You do not have the right. The Government does not have the right to shoot them, because all of them were youth. Why did not the leader of that party come to listen to them? Why did he not try to collect their representatives, those people who demonstrated, and try to talk to them and listen to them? Like the

[58] The Middle East and North Africa region.

> biggest problem in this region or this country generally is because the leaders do not listen to the people. They just do what they think, and that is why I am saying like most of the people, even more than most of the people, are against them. Unless they are from the party or they participate in the party or they benefit from the party. That is why they support them. Nothing else. Yeah.

In Sures's narrative of the demonstrations, she is stressing the asymmetrical power hierarchy between unarmed youth demanding basic rights, and politicians not listening but responding with deadly bullets.

Prior to the February 2011 demonstrations, an interesting political shift had taken place in the summer of 2009. A new party, Gorran (Change)[59] won 25% of the seats in the KRG elections, with the biggest support in Sulaimani. I was in Sulaimani at the time of the Iraqi and Kurdish elections that summer, and people were driving around in cars in the streets with Gorran flags. Sulaimani simmered with a new kind of hope for the future among the urban middle class that things could actually change and be different, and that politics could work differently. Even the children of people who were working in the ranks of the PUK were dancing around on the streets with the blue Gorran flags bearing the image of a white candle.

Gorran was not initially organised as a traditional party, but presented itself as a movement and through a media platform (other parties also have their own media platforms). The former PUK politician Nawshirwan Mustafa[60] was one of the main figures in creating the new movement/party, which launched itself around a demand for the end of corruption and for regional budgeting to be more transparent.

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[59] The name 'Gorran' (Change) sparks some resemblance to Obama's campaign the previous year during the 2008 US elections with the slogan 'Hope. Action. Change.'

[60] He died on May 19, 2017.

I am reading Sures's burst of hope around political changes, even though she is also pessimistic, in line with the feeling of a new form of politics entering the landscape of urban Sulaimani after Gorran had a successful election.[61]

"I do not want to be in the parliament to paint"

Sures told me that she might want to be a member of parliament herself, but only if she could enjoy freedom of speech.

> **(...)** that is why I am saying that even if I am in politics, if the government tries to prevent me from speaking, why should I be there? I do not want to be there for wasting time. I do not want to be in the parliament to paint. I do not want to be in parliament for sleeping. (…)

She is referring back to video clips showing Kurdish MPs drawing, painting and sleeping in the parliament, which was a much-talked-about case and ongoing joke during my visit in 2012. But a joke with a very sad undertone stating that many people in general had little trust in politicians. Sures is giving voice to a general sentiment among people that the politicians in power (KDP and PUK) are not listening to the people, and the frustration that young people feel at having to ask for basic needs such as electricity and water. She is disappointed about a supposedly democratic government answering the youth with bullets instead of listening to their needs. But she is engaged, and not trying to escape discussing politics. This energetic drive with which she voiced her opinions with indignation and gave long explanations to political events was a narrative that was strikingly different from those of the other students I talked to, who were in general discussing politics in a less energetic and more detached way, as I have shown with Shad's and Dîmen's narratives.

Sures's narrative of liking to discuss politics stands out, but is still related to her individual interests – she is not engaging in a traditional collective political identity narrative. Her interest in politics is related to

[61] The KRG Parliament has not been functioning since August 19, 2015. Masoud Barzani's legal term as President expired, but he stayed in office. Gorran parliamentarians reported that they were prevented from entering the Kurdish capital, Erbil (see Salih 2015). The situation in 2017 is very different from that in 2012 when I met Sures.

coming from a family discussing politics, being interested in discussing politics in class at AUIS, and is intertwined with the story of the Gorran opposition movement (in 2012 a possible new political collective identity not connected directly to the narrative of the Brotherhood War). Sures imagining herself as a politician gives her a platform in a 'now' where it is possible to understand herself as a political being. The simple thought of her body as an imagined future representative of the people in the parliament makes space for a narrative in the present linking her current student/youth status to a political position.

Conclusion

While in the first section I have illuminated how the political conflict that occurred in the region had a powerful impact on my informants' lives and their identities as students, in the second section I analyse how many students respond to these experiences through a disidentification from the field of the political or through a search for new strategies of defining their relation to politics.

Central to students' narratives is the turning away from (historical) political collectives, and a turning towards ideas of individual agency. I have described two types of turning away from politics. One is an attempt to escape because students are fed-up due to lived experiences of conflict. Second is a specific performance of middle-class future-oriented aspiration relying on a turning away from a form of politics that feels like being stuck in the status quo. Even though the 'sample' of students for my study are 'non-party-political', it is still remarkable that they distance themselves so strongly, like Beyan, from 'politics'.

The university space is embedded in political conflict, both in Narin's narrative of being a university student in Baghdad during the Anfal campaign and through students' narratives of navigating and trying to escape the political terrain at UOS. UOS is part of the historical political landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan and steps into the foreground in this chapter, while AUIS, as a new institution post-invasion, is less present (see discussion of AUIS as a political space in the previous chapter). In this chapter, students' narratives describe the university space as a rather

empty arena onto which other narratives of an entrepreneurial volunteer spirit or Kurdish party politics are being projected.

Lale and Sehla embody the internal Kurdish Brotherhood War through their narratives of belonging to the history of political conflict through kinship. Their desires for their own lives to be filled with 'adventure' or simply to 'just wanna live' have to be negotiated from the position of being the daughter of a politically *known* or *named* family. In (post-) conflict Sulaimani a (re)activation of political identities through kinship is inescapable.

The figures of 'the worried mothers' and 'the political fathers' are related to narratives around families, but could also work to explain public narratives of Kurdish nationhood: the political leaders as 'fathers' and the 'mother' reproducing and taking care of the nation; this figure of motherhood that women are expected to embody and that Lale distances herself from by stating outright that she is not planning to have children immediately after graduation.

To know the right people to mediate for you, to have *wasta*, is an important part of navigating future job opportunities for many students. In a society affected by many years of conflict, the need to know the right people in order to achieve your goals becomes even more crucial when due to conflict there is no well-functioning system or state to secure your rights, and other forms of security networks play a central role. For those students I have met who have the privilege of access to such networks, the link between university education and a job is weak. The role of the university as producing a new generation of professionals has been eclipsed by employment opportunities being negotiated through other channels. For the student Dîmen, who wanted to make a career inside the university system, the link between education and career is more coherent.

The narrative of individualism among students serves as a way to imagine a road to a modern future free from old political conflicts. Should we read this as some kind of general global middle-class privilege of being able to escape the trouble of politics?[62] Or should this be read in the specific context of students who have had enough of old political

[62] I have met young construction workers organising in solidarity with migrant workers in Sulaimani, so collective political organising around urgent contemporary matters is not in general absent among the young adult generation.

collectives defining the landscape of politics, and as a strategy of trying to tell a new narrative and imagining a new kind of politics in the relatively peaceful moment of 2012? I suggest we read the turning away from political collectives as an escape in order to try to find a new kind of fragile hope in ideas of individual agency. There is a tension between being named/known/caught in a political history of conflict and trying to exit/escape this narrative and carve out a story of one's own of middle-class aspirations oriented towards a new future. A question remaining is: what kind of future society is imagined in Iraqi Kurdistan among middle-class students based on the politics centred on the individual? I will explore the central concept of futurity in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Queer times of war

We had bought a white paper balloon – one of those that are made of silk paper, and then you attach a firelighter to a metal holder in the bottom, light it and wait for the hot air to fill out the body of the balloon until you can let go of your grip and see it float slowly upwards. But our paper balloon did not want to float; the firelighter couldn't properly catch fire and the paper ended up burning and was scattered in dark flakes swirling around. What was meant to be a poetic small happening at a *seyran* (picnic) in 2009 with a group of young people attending a workshop that I had taken part in organising[63] ended up as a stubborn moment of trying to get that damn thing to fly, before realising the futility of doing so: it was being devoured by flames, with the strong (and poisonous) fumes from the firelighter enclosing the group together with the black dust of the burned silk paper.

I came to think of this event when trying to explain to myself, and to others, the specificity of my feeling of the time-space of urban Sulaimani during my visits. The feeling of Sulaimani, and the people living there, situated in some kind of bubble partly disconnected and sheltered from the violence happening at the same time in other parts of Iraq.[64] A relatively peaceful bubble, almost surreal. This has become a strong visual image sticking to my perception and description of the place in which my study is unfolding.

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[63] Part of a seminar on *Youth, Activism and Gender* sponsored by the Danish Youth Council in collaboration with Socialist Youth Front (DK).

[64] The bubble metaphor came fully alive in conversation with feminist scholar Nadje Al-Ali during my visit to SOAS, London, in 2014. We discussed the specific temporality of urban Sulaimani at the time of my ethnography in relation to other parts of Iraq, on which she has done extensive historical and contemporary research (Al-Ali 2007, Al-Ali and Pratt 2009a).

I describe Sulaimani at the time of my visits (2008–2012) with the metaphor of a balloon bubble because it was relatively peaceful compared to other regions in Iraq and compared to previous violent conflicts, but still situated very close to both historical and present-time violence. The fragility of peace and ongoing presence of violence closeby is not specific to Sulaimani but pertains to many conflict zones. As also presented in Chapter 2, the city of Ramallah in Palestine has been described with the term 'bubble', as explained by blogger Nora Lester Murad:

> Palestinians know what "Ramallah Bubble" refers to, even if they've not heard the term. The city of Ramallah is palpably different from the rest of Palestine. It's the lifestyle, the mindset, the money, and, above all else, the irking feeling that it might suddenly burst. (Murad 2013)

The bubble metaphor covers the bubble as a universe in itself despite closeness to war both in time and in space. And it is also a metaphor capturing the central tension I have found, some years after my fieldwork, in students' narratives of fragile hopes for bright futures, and the foreboding that they might burst and turn into flames instead of taking off, like the paper balloon at the picnic in 2009. I see it as a bubble, both as a scholar and as an outsider entering and leaving the bubble; it is my framing. The analytical metaphor of urban middle-class lives lived in the bubble temporality of Sulaimani is explored in this chapter through autoethnography as well as by engaging with students' narratives of how they experienced time and futurity.

The framework for this chapter is inspired by queer theoretical insights on temporality, futurity and utopia (Halberstam 2005, Edelman 2004, Muñoz 2009), where linear time development is questioned, and by analytical work on the relationship between ideas of time, war and peace (Dudziak 2012). In this chapter I pose the questions: How does living in a (post-)conflict area shape experiences of time? What kind of futures are imagined? And what are the relations between war, peace and time?

Dunya Mikhail is an Iraqi-American poet writing about everyday experiences of war, and in the following poem she captures the link between present and future and the desire for ordinariness that keeps these different time-spaces linked. Illustrative here, the desire for the ordinary is a central theme in this chapter.

In Iraq,
after a thousand and one nights,
someone will talk to someone else.
Markets will open
for regular customers.
Small feet will tickle
the giant feet of the Tigris.
Gulls will spread their wings
and no one will fire at them.
Women will walk the streets
without looking back in fear.
Men will give their real names
without putting their lives at risk.
Children will go to school
and come home again.
Chickens in the villages
won't peck at human flesh
on the grass.
Disputes will take place
without any explosives.
A cloud will pass over cars
heading to work as usual.
A hand will wave
to someone leaving
or returning.
The sunrise will be the same
for those who wake
and those who never will.
And every moment
something ordinary
will happen
under the sun.

(Dunya Mikhail 2013/2014:12, from *The Iraqi Nights*, translated from Arabic)

In this poem, *The Iraqi Nights*, the reader can intensely sense the longing for a future filled with *something ordinary* and everyday where things go as *usual* without the interruption of war and violence. The one thousand and one nights reference to the eponymous stories told by the fictional character Scheherazade is here describing the wartime in Iraq as a period of storytelling that will eventually end and be followed by the *ordinary*. In the fairytale, Scheherazade tells part of a story every night to the wife-killing king Shahryar, and leaves him in suspense to hear the story's end in order to save her life for another night. I read Mikhail's poem as a life-saving story while waiting for the war to end. This story presents the desired arrival in the future of the ordinary everyday. Mikhail bridges wartime with ordinary time by underlining how they are both situated under the same sun, thereby inciting both hope and despair.

The chapter is organised as follows: first, I will elaborate on concepts useful for analysing war, time, normality and futurity. Second, I will focus on two explorations of time through (auto)ethnography from an amusement park in Sulaimani and through ethnography of a history class at the university, stressing the relationship between place and time when talking about a violent past. Then, I will move to how time evolves as a central topic in the form of *waiting* in students' narratives and in autoethnographic accounts. And finally, I will discuss time as futurity in order to understand desires for ordinary futures in a (post-)conflict society.

Queer (post-)conflict temporalities

Just as clock time is based on a set of ideas produced not by clocks, but by people who use them, wartime is also a set of ideas derived from social life, not from anything inevitable about war itself (Dudziak 2012:21).

Historian Mary L. Dudziak has scrutinised assumptions and understandings of wartime from a US perspective asking the fundamental question, *What time is it?* (Dudziak 2012). I am inspired by this focus on time in relation to war in order to understand the specific time of (post-) conflict Sulaimani. Dudziak describes how there is a general understanding of wartime as temporal and always followed by peacetime,

while in fact "(…) wartime has become normal time in America. Because of this, the politics we have during this time are our normal politics" (Dudziak 2012:8).[65] This illustrates a schism between how time is imagined and how time is lived. Distancing wartime from 'normal time' makes it possible to believe in a progressive linear time development despite the disruptions of war. This schism is also present in students' narratives in Sulaimani, whose accounts around disruptions in life due to war coexist with those of a belief in a 'normal time' progression from past to present to future. Dudziak writes about wartime and futurity:

> Once war has begun, time is thought to proceed on a different plane. There are two important consequences of this shift: first, we have entered a time that calls for extraordinary action, and second, we share a belief that this moment will end decisively, so that this shift is temporary. Because of this, built into the idea of wartime is a conception of the future. To imagine the future requires an understanding of the past. In wartime thinking, **the future is a place beyond war**, a time when exceptional measures can be put to rest, and regular life resumed. The future is, in essence, the return to a time that war had suspended. (Dudziak 2012:22, emphasis added)

Dudziak's argument states that wartime is conceptualised as temporary, and therefore the future is perceived as lying on the other side, when wartime is over. Wartime becomes an out-of-time construct, a parallel universe that has a beginning and an end. But, as Dudziak argues, this understanding of wartime and peacetime as separate entities is a cultural feature and constructed categories (ibid.:17). Dudziak's analysis of the construct of wartime as a temporary insertion into normal time development resonates with my description of the temporality of urban Sulaimani caught in a bubble of (post-)conflict time in between ideas of wartime and normal peacetime. The future in students' narratives is fragile in the sense that it is both imaginable as a continuation of the relatively peaceful temporality of the bubble, but at the same time the fragility of the (post-)conflict temporality questions whether the bubble

[65] Referring to Agamben's work on war and the state of exception, Dudziak adds important new analytical insights by analysing not the *mode* of wartime, as Agamben, with its legal and political consequences, but the idea of *time itself* in relation to war (Dudziak 2012:4–5).

temporality really is a peacetime and normal time that will lead to the promised/aspired/desired middle-class, ordinary future.

Ideas of futurity and linear time development have been scrutinised and questioned by queer theoretical perspectives. The theoretical framework in this chapter is inspired by the *openings*[66] that queer theoretical insights have made into critical inquiries about time. My thinking about time as an analytical concept has been opened up by the work of queer scholars Jack Halberstam (2005), José Esteban Muñoz (2009) and Lee Edelman (2004). The bridging of temporality and queerness has been explored and named by Halberstam:[67]

> (…) part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space. (Halberstam 2005:1–2)

Halberstam's analytical scope of looking into *new life narratives* is in line with my overall scope of looking for other narratives and, in this chapter specifically, narratives around time from the bubble-temporality of Sulaimani. The in-betweenness of this bubble-time could be described as a queer temporality. Halberstam writes about the concept:

> I try here to make queer time and queer space into useful terms for academic and nonacademic considerations of life, location, and transformation. To give an example of the way in which critical languages can sometimes weigh us down, consider the fact that we have become adept within postmodernism at talking about "normativity," but far less adept at describing in rich detail the practices and structures that both oppose and sustain conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification. I try to use the concept of queer time to make clear how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality. (Halberstam 2005:4)

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[66] José Esteban Muñoz is using the word *opening* to describe how one can be inspired by theoretical thoughts without having to fully conform: "I am using Bloch's theory not as orthodoxy but instead to create an opening in queer thought" (Muñoz 2009:2).

[67] See also Jasbir K. Puar's use of the description *queer times* (Puar 2005, 2007).

The heteronormative, reproductive middle-class logic of time that Halberstam describes is central in students' narratives of a desired peaceful urban middle-class future with a job, a home, a spouse and eventually children, which I will unfold in this chapter. This narrative about the future is what Lee Edelman names "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004:2).

Ideas of the future are core in order to understand the temporality of the present. José Esteban Muñoz is working with the potentials for the future in utopian queer thinking. Muñoz emphasises the "impulses" (Muñoz 2009:22) of the utopian in everyday life pointing to a queer utopian horizon of futurity.

> To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. (Muñoz 2009:32)

The glimpses of a queer horizon that Muñoz describes can be perceived as a kind of rehearsal of the future in the present: the narratives of utopian futures told in the present time as a reaching out for the desired, but "not yet here" (Muñoz 2009:1).[68]

Having opened up for different narratives of time in relation to war and peace, I will turn to the urban bubble of Sulaimani and my own rather queer experience of visiting an amusement park situated on the site of a former military camp. This experience illuminates the specific kind of (post-)conflict temporality that is at once peaceful and hopeful, and at the same time fragile and full of cracks.

An amusement park on top of a former military camp

I sat in a passenger car on the Ferris wheel going round and round, up and down. From the top point I had a beautiful view of the evening city lights and the colourful blinking light decorations on the main streets. It was a riddle for me how these main street light installations would seem to

[68] Muñoz works with the concept of 'not yet' inspired by Ernst Bloch's ideas of the utopian and 'not yet conscious' from *The principle of Hope* [1954] (Muñoz 2009:2–3). Also see Lotta Johansson's thesis *A Pedagogy of Becoming: Challenging the obvious. A post-qualitative approach to the pedagogical opportunities of the not-yet-seen* (2015).

work constantly despite the public electricity turning on and off in different areas of the city. I had seen the dark areas of the city from the viewpoint of the mountain Goizha, where I would arrive by car and have a splendid view of Sulaimani. In the evening, I could suddenly see a whole neighbourhood turning dark before the electricity supply was restored. But the main streets were constantly bathed in light decorations. It was as if they were vital to city life, alive and blinking.

The Ferris wheel was located in Parki Azadi (Freedom Park) in the centre of the city. It was a big green park area including an amusement park. The area had been used as a military camp during the Ba'th regime right next to the Amna Suraka (Red Prison) where Kurds were tortured, imprisoned and killed[69]. The area was transformed into the Freedom Park after 1991 (see also Abdel Kader 2012). The park was used for jogging, friends and families would hang out there, and children and teenagers would rollerskate. If you paid an entrance fee to the amusement part of the park, you could take a ride on one of the attractions.

"No weapons", stated the sign at the entry, and the security guard checked my bag before I was allowed to enter, as was the custom in many public places. Sitting in one of the passenger cars on the Ferris wheel going round and round, up and down above the soil where the military and prison camps were buried, I was participating in new movements, new orientations, the renaming and remaking of that place, moving up and down, and looking out over the city. Later, I ate bright-green ice cream while sitting on a plastic chair under the neon lights – alive, and now no weapons on top of the place of the former military site. Normal everyday life went on as if nothing unusual had ever happened right there.

A new amusement park situated on the outskirts of the city was about to be built in 2012, and an acquaintance of mine had invested money in the business. Investing in the business of a future amusement park; a sign of the sparks of optimism for the future that could be found among the middle class in 2012. Investing in fun(ny) futures. I couldn't let go of the feeling from sitting in the Ferris wheel and wondering whether it was more funny peculiar than funny ha-ha. There was a gap between the historical violence that took place and a reorientation and remaking of the

[69] Amna Suraka has been turned into a monument and museum of war crimes.

urban space. This tension between historical violence and present relative peace highlights the gap between these two totally different time-spaces, these two temporalities. There is no coherent narrative leading from the military camp to the building of an amusement park.

The concept of queer temporality underlines this nonlinear temporality of the relatively peaceful urban space of Sulaimani that floats like a bubble above the historical violence with the bizarreness of a Ferris wheel on a former military camp. The bubble-time is situated between different temporalities of wartime and peacetime, which makes it difficult to answer clearly to Dudziak's question: *what time is it?* (Dudziak 2012). With the concept of a queer temporality, in the following I will focus on the relations between war, violence and time, and how the subject is discussed in a history class at AUIS (American University in Iraq, Sulaimani).

In the wardrobe of violence – a time for dressing up for Halloween

At AUIS, I attended a history class which was part of the introductory liberal arts-style core programme for all students.[70] The class was given lectures by Mr Hobson[71] on the French Revolution while I participated and took notes.

> Mr Hobson: "Does anybody know where to buy a head? Not a real one!"

Mr Hobson describes how the French 'masses' cut off the heads of Marie Antoinette's guards [pronounced with American accent as 'Mary Antonat'] and how it is funny, according to him, that they put make-up on the severed heads afterwards. It is the month of October and he wants to dress up for a Halloween party with a mannequin head like the severed heads of the guards, and he asks the students if anybody knows where to source this kind of item.

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[70] I also visited lectures on Middle Eastern history, a class that was not compulsory at the time, and only few students attended.

[71] As with many of the lecturers at AUIS, he was a US citizen.

During the class, it became clear that there was a chasm between the curriculum focusing on war in historical France and the present wartorn Iraq.

> Teaching on Napoleon, Mr Hobson explains: "They put explosives in a wagon – imagine one of these old horse-driven wagons."
>
> Two students [smiling and whispering]: "We have this kind of wagon in Baghdad."
>
> Mr Hobson does not respond.

A few days later, Mr Hobson was teaching on Napoleon's fall and describing massive explosions with the image of "bits of men and women falling from the sky". The description has an almost poetic tone, talking of violence as something 'falling from the sky' like rain in a fairytale fantasy, which stands in bizarre contrast to the violent reality of people's bodies being blown to pieces.

The students were doing a group project called 'Put a Dictator on Trial'. They were to choose a dictator, and then present his case before a jury (the class) and a judge (Hobson). One group chose to work with Saddam and two groups were working with Hitler.

> Mr Hobson: "If you were Napoleon, what would you do with people [who were against you]?"
>
> Students: "Kill them, force them, kidnap their children."
>
> Mr Hobson: "I like the way you are going. (…)"

When I talked to the student Karim, he stated that Mr Hobson was popular among the students.

> He [Hobson] would not tell you to just go on and study and write, write, write. He will make you think. That is what I mean: he will open the conversation in class and you have to benefit from these conversations. Because at the exam, one or two questions will be about that conversation. So I mean, that was something good. We do not just talk about nothing, just chatting. You are talking about something and then you have to understand something from that conversation.

According to Karim, Mr Hobson's way of teaching made sense to the students and seemed a meaningful way to learn about history. It appeared that I was the only person experiencing the bizarreness of talking about violence in the history class as something unreal and completely disconnected from present-day experiences of violence. I noted down my reflections, but did not discuss my experience with the students, since it seemed like a normal history class to them. I just closed my notebook. It was not until I reread my rich notes much later that I could actually take in the bizarreness that I had felt and give it analytical space.

I perceive Mr Hobson's narratives of violence as surreal fairytales. He is presenting violence as an available accessory in a wardrobe that can be used as a Halloween outfit with a fake severed head. A disembodied, no-pain wardrobe of violence. The wardrobe of violence as a Halloween masquerade can be captured with the Bakhtinian image of the *carnivalesque* (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]). Mr Hobson's carnivalesque dressing-up in violence mixes unsettling ideas of (serious) historical descriptions and joking, which made me feel slightly uncomfortable in the history class.

This way of talking about violence can be seen as indulging in a Western fantasy of violence as a historical role-play that is far away in time and space and unreal. Set against the backdrop of a classroom in Sulaimani, where suicide bombers blowing people to pieces were not many hours away by car, the description sounded rather bizarre to my ears or at least out of tune with the current surroundings of where and when this history class was taking place. In Mr Hobson's class, history was taught as a single story, as facts that could be displayed and presented no matter the situation, no matter the time and place.

Mr Hobson's history class presents a specific kind of *storytailoring* of war, violence and history from a Western-centric point of view. The feeling of a gap between the narratives around war and violence in the history class and the world outside the AUIS campus, and a feeling of uneasiness about the tension between violence as fairytale and carnival, and violence as lived experience, lead me to ask the question: What time is it when talking about violence in the history class? The history class felt like a non-violent time-space disconnected from Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan and individuals' experiences of war, pain and trauma; the university time-space functioning as an imagined tabula rasa where a new curriculum of Western history can be inscribed on student bodies.

Tensions between narratives, histories and representations of violence and the peaceful everyday spaces were also found inside the home. Violence was close by and far away at the same time. In people's homes, the television was turned on with news from the region. Sulaimani was situated just a few hours' drive away from explosions in Kirkuk and a couple of hours' extra to Baghdad. I remember sitting on the soft carpet in the living room, leaning up against one of the sofas. Family members were gathered, talking, joking, hanging out in their comfortable pyjamas. The television was on in the background as always. It was March 2008, the month held in remembrance of Halabja. The TV was broadcasting footage of Saddam's 1988 gas attack on Halabja, a looping slideshow of horrible pictures on the Kurdish TV channel becoming the wallpaper of the living room. The old granny sometimes looked at the picture loop, shaking her head in dignified, painful remembrance. The images on loop while family life continued around the sofas and the carpet. The annual loop of the Anfal remembrance. A collective remembrance of the people killed in the gas attack, and a collective remembrance of the suffering of the Kurdish nation. Dudziak points out how *war stories* are told and passed down through generations; stories that are built both on personal experiences and public narratives (Dudziak 2012:6-7). In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Anfal remembrance is part of a public narrative around the Kurdish nation (Moradi 2017).[72]

The tension and gap between a broadcasting of historical war stories into the temporality of the peaceful middle-class living room can be compared to the tension found in Mr Hobson's history class and to the remaking of space from military camp to amusement park. But the tensions are also different in character. The Anfal remembrance is part of the making of the Kurdish nation through collective remembrance of suffering. The remaking of space in Parki Azadi can be perceived as a move away from suffering in order to arrive in the peaceful future of normal time. And the tension in the history class is related to a specific kind of disembodied Western knowledge production of History with a capital H, where the privilege of joking about violence in public puts on display the distance between war in the history books and war as

[72] See also Choman Hardi's research on *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Hardi 2011), where she describes a master narrative of Anfal that has sidelined women's experiences (ibid.:6).

experience. Joking about hopeless political situations and also violent events is an activity that I have otherwise encountered only in private living room spaces in Sulaimani among close friends and relatives.

I will now move away from the gap and tensions between different temporalities and take a closer look at time as it is experienced in detail in students' accounts and through autoethnography of being part of an extended family. In the bubble-temporality of uncertainty of the future, a lot of waiting is taking place. In the following, I will explore different narratives of waiting time.

Waiting Time

Waiting was a central experience of time. Two different forms of waiting time were present through students' and my own experiences: the time of waiting for a job after graduation and the time of waiting for family plans to unfold. Waiting is not unproductive time but a part of everyday life where young people are dependent on family and networks when planning for bigger things such as future jobs or the day-to-day business of family gatherings.

Family time

I was waiting while rocking slowly on the swingseat in the shade of the veranda, gazing into endless amounts of hot, still, midday air almost suffocating me. My refuge into the cooler shade saved my skin and enabled me to breathe slowly, and swallow dry and dusty chunks of air one piece at a time. I was drinking yet another cup of strong, sweet black tea, and a delayed sugar rush made me dizzy inside. Fragments of telephone conversations slipped through the open door to the veranda, and I caught words such as '*seyran*' [picnic], '*gosth*' [meat], '*sitak*' [a green area on a hillside outside Sulaimani with summer cottages]. It was Friday, the weekly day off from work. Decisions were being made about where and when to go for the family picnic. Who would buy meat for the big barbecue, which family members would come and what cars to drive and places to pick up people? And when would we go? I had been sitting on the swingseat since my late breakfast, and the midday sun was so

strong that I would soon have to go inside. I had put on what I considered to be practical clothes for a whole day of picnic – blue, light slacks and an airy t-shirt. I had packed my small bag with necessities: sunscreen, an extra blouse for night-time (we often stayed until late), a book in case I got lost in trying to follow conversations in a language that I was trying to learn. I had time to rethink my packing many times. Should I bring my voice recorder in case decisions were made whereby I would end up sleeping at a different house that night, and in case my hoped-for interview appointment the following day would happen? Should I bring smarter clothes in case I had to go directly to the interview from point C instead of point A? I decided to put my voice recorder in the bag (just in case) but I did not bring different clothes. I took the book *A Son of the Circus* by John Irving out of my bag, lay down on the swingseat and started reading while waiting for other people to make the decisions for our departure. I was starting to get hungry, but I wanted to keep space for the huge amounts of food that would be grilled later that day. The unsettled 'later'. It was too hot, and I couldn't concentrate on reading. I went inside the house. The wind was blowing through open doors at both ends of the central hall, and the tiles were cool beneath my bare feet when I slipped out of the pink rubber slippers (*naal*) which made that squeaking sound every step I took. I found occupation in cleaning fresh herbs that had just been bought at the bazaar. Mint, fenugreek, parsley, spring onions. I sorted out the bad leaves, cut the good ones into bite size, let them soak in cold water and washed them three times, so that the parasites that had formerly visited my stomach and other family members' wouldn't be invited to the picnic this time.

Two cousins arrived in the kitchen. They were dressed-up in tight jeans and colourful blouses, hair done nicely and make-up fresh despite the heat. I thought about changing from my practical outdoors clothes to something more party-like, but all of a sudden the big body of family members started moving in a rush; we were getting into different packed cars and I was holding a young cousin around his belly on the front seat. And off we went on an invisible signal that I didn't hear. The day began. I had been ready for it all morning, and by now I was ready to take a nap in the car, exhausted by waiting.

In an interview with Sehla and Avin, both students at AUIS, we shared accounts of family chaos, laughing together about common experiences of not being in charge of planning family activities. I talked about the

extent to which I had ‘my own will’ in planning, but also about not feeling lonely when belonging to a family.

> Katrine: (…) if I was just here alone, I think it would be… lonely.
>
> Avin: It would not be easy.
>
> Sehla: It is much better [to have a family].
>
> Katrine: But there is also a lot of family business to do. You know, I clean the family’s house.
>
> Avin: Here, everything is based on family.
>
> Katrine: Washing the dishes, and “Okay, now we have to go there, and now we have to go there.”
>
> Sehla: Yeah, excactly. [Laughter]
>
> Katrine: It is not my own will, it is just “okay”! [Laughter]
>
> Sehla: “Okay, then I will come.” [Laughter]
>
> Katrine: So I will always bring necessary things, and a toothbrush in my bag because I never know where I am going to sleep. [Laughter]
>
> Avin: That is right, here it [planning] is influenced.
>
> Sehla: Yeah, exactly.
>
> Avin: You know, at the moment I go home, I see my family: “Oh, come to the car,” and then I am in my aunt’s home. [Sehla laughing] It is just like that, you never plan. [Laughter]

When Avin states that planning is “influenced”, she refers back to a logic around planning that she presents as “everything is based on family”. This has a double meaning attached to it when coming from Avin, since she told me how she had grown up with her grandparents due to her parents’ divorce when she was very young. She had lost contact with her mother, and had only recently got into contact with her father, who had started a new family in Europe. Avin had met her father on a planned

holiday in Turkey, and she proudly showed me photographs of this trip. Avin had been brought up by her grandparents, whom she referred to as 'mom' and 'dad'.

In the conversation with Avin and Sehla, I am negotiating my position. I pass as some kind of *outsider within* (Collins 1986) regarding family plans. I connect to Sehla and Avin when all three of us laugh about involvement in family plans. "You never plan," as Avin says, points towards the mode of being where you cannot make your own plans, because somebody can always disrupt that planning with other collective plans that include your participation. My own experiences of waiting-time in Sulaimani, and often not being in charge of planning, made me sensitive to the experience of waiting for plans to take shape. Having a family to wait for, and who will wait for you, is a central and important part of belonging and moving around. It is a privilege to have a family with a car waiting to drive you around. It is a necessary form of belonging to a collective, something that I had to adjust to since it was different from my way of moving around on my bike in Copenhagen with my own schedule and planning. But Sehla and Avin are used to this form of planning and, even though we are laughing about it, they are not really frustrated. They are used to not being in control of what is going to happen in the next moment. This is a privileged and accepted kind of waiting and collective planning. Through situating my own experience of waiting through autoethnographic writing, and discussing waiting with Avin and Sehla, I realised that what could at first glance be read as an unfree way of planning for the individual has to be read as an everyday belonging to planning through a family collective, here narrated from the point of view of two middle-class students.

In the next section, I will look into other forms of waiting that are experienced as more frustrating by students.

Sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating – waiting after graduation

I talked to a group of female students at UOS about the future. Aida and Ariya were studying Statistics and Berin and Fidan Engineering. They presented a description of the time after graduation as consisting of "Sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating". The phrase stuck to me as some kind of circular meditation mantra repeating itself afterwards again and

again, underlining a feeling of not going anywhere but just waiting for something to happen.

> Katrine: So, what do you think about the future? Can you get a good job, and the job you want or..?
>
> Ariya: For example, I am in the last year, the 4th stage. When I graduate, I have to sit at home.
>
> Katrine: Why is that?
>
> Ariya: There is no place to put you, to get work. I have a friend, she graduated two years ago and she sits at home. They do not put her in any places. It is not easy to get a job. We have companies, but not every company can be chosen to go to.
>
> Berin: You can be employed via a person who has a high position in the government. If you are simple, just normal, you are not allowed. They will make you sit three more years like that.
>
> Katrine: So you need to know somebody to get a job?
>
> Berin: Exactly, if you want to get a job directly you have to. Or if you can, you must go and search for companies or some places like that which are not related to the government, so that they may give you a chance to work there.
>
> (…)
>
> Katrine: So if you need to sit at home maybe for three years, what will you do not to get sleepy? [Laughter]
>
> Berin: Network and sleeping.
>
> Aida: Sleeping, movie, and (Berin: Eating) Facebook, eating. That is all.
>
> Fidan: Or find a job that does not fit you. Yeah, maybe.

I met the same kind of explanation when students talked about things they would like to change at the university. It was always "the ones in charge", they should do something. A repetition of the powerful "they"

who could change things and would decide where to "put you". The description of "sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating" is a rather passive position of passing time while waiting for employment after graduation. I ask how they will avoid getting sleepy and the answer (after laughter) is not avoidance but embracing the situation by sleeping: a description of very little agency in order for students to change the problem with unemployment. The adjective 'normal', that Berin used, in this narrative denotes a person without the right connections, without *wasta* that can intercede and lift the newly graduated out of waiting time and into employment.

Anthropologist Craig Jeffrey has investigated the concept of time and especially *waiting* among young educated men in India. He writes in his book *Timepass:*

> During my fieldwork I met large numbers of unemployed young men in north India who were engaged in forms of waiting characterized by aimlessness and ennui. Unemployed young men in Meerut commonly spoke of being lost in time and they imagined many of their activities as simply ways to pass the time ("timepass", as it is often described in India). This waiting was not wholly purposeless, however: it offered opportunities to acquire skills, fashion new cultural styles and mobilize politically. (Jeffrey 2010:4)

Jeffrey's concept of *timepass* is useful to describe the kind of time that some students were expecting after graduation in Sulaimani. The narrative of waiting after graduation that I heard among students (both male and female) in Sulaimani did not include the possibilities of acquiring new skills as Jeffrey describes among students in India. The students I met were relatively privileged in the sense that their families could support them while they were *waiting*, but the timepassing as this group of female students recounted it was centred on restorative private activities in the home. This is a very gendered practice of passive waiting. I will look more into gendered orientations and performances in the next chapter.

During my stay in Sulaimani for three months in autumn 2012, I was puzzled by the many narratives of passivity (as I labelled them at the time) that I met. After meeting several students who critiqued the political regime, but at the same time did not express anger and were not engaged in trying to change the status quo, I started to wonder if I was

meeting a section of a generation of new, well-educated, urban middle-class students who were all depressed – the section of the well-educated whom I would imagine to be the ones to take over central roles in politics and business. I also started questioning my own preconceptions of *resistance* and *engagement* and how my theoretical terminology related to my own experiences of being a university student in Copenhagen and Lund. I realised that I was unconsciously looking for a certain kind of *angry student* that I never found, but instead I met what I perceived as the figure of *the passive waiting student.* I want to question in what ways the narratives that I first labelled as passive, and experienced as rather depressive, can be understood as practices of waiting, as a useful skill of being able to wait for moments of opportunities to arrive.[73] Maybe *sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating* is the most sensible strategy after graduation in a (post-)conflict society where high unemployment rates are a big problem. Instead of just *sitting* for three years as the students Aida, Ariya, Berin and Fidan express in the quote above, the waiting is made meaningful by imagining leisuretime activities. The horizon of possibilities after graduation is very tight in this imaginary, but they might be quite realistic, especially if the students do not know anybody who can help them find a job (*wasta*).

Returning back to Jeffrey's concept of timepass, the time spent in *sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating* might be passive but, in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, it is also a middle-class position of having the material means to hang out and not having to contribute to the family economy by working, or marrying in order to move away from home. Having the means to postpone desires can be seen as a kind of capital in Bourdieu's sense that university students embody since they are able to invest in many years of education and waiting for a job after graduation because somebody can help provide for them materially while they are not earning a salary. When unemployment is the everyday reality, waiting becomes the mode of inhabiting everyday life, as Jeffrey also shows in his study. Waiting becomes the time in which everyday life is lived and an expected dimension of the future after graduation. From a dwelling in waiting time I will continue to explore narratives of futurity.

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[73] Drawing on previous theoretical debates on the concept of *everyday resistances* (Scott 1985, Abu-Lughod 1990) I have come to the analysis of waiting as a skill and a strategy.

(Post-)conflict narratives of (im)possible futures

Narratives of futurity have come up in different versions when talking to students. Here I will present two strong narratives around futurity, one that can be read as quite depressive, and the other as rather optimistic. First, we will meet Karim, who was a student at AUIS.

"The military is giving you more experience than you want"

I was sitting on the hard, cold, stone surface of a bench in one of the corridors at AUIS. Bright halls and corridors in light shades of beige and cream-coloured stone on floors and walls and benches that floated into each other with no lines of separation. The same kind of hard, cold surface of stone that would be so soothing when sitting in the corridor of the family home, sheltered from the hottest hours of midday sun during summer, but sitting on the stone bench at AUIS at the end of the autumn term with the air-conditioning surrounding me it was uncomfortably cold. I had dressed up a bit and put on a jacket to try to look a little more 'professional' in an attempt to match the students, who were very well-dressed in my eyes. The coldness of the bench was seeping into my body and I finally decided to take off my jacket in order to sit on it as a soft and warm shelter; the end of the 'professional' look. Karim was sitting on the bench beside me, and I turned on the recorder.

Karim was in his mid-twenties and studying his major at AUIS. His story of growing up in the Mosul area in Iraq was closely linked to the history of the US-led invasion in Iraq. Mosul had been directly part of the warzone and was not on the outskirts of war and conflict like Sulaimani during the invasion. Karim came from an Ezidi[74] community, his parents had farmland in the countryside that they had to look after, and he grew up with his eldest siblings in the nearest village, where his grandparents took care of him so he could go to school. He attended high school, but during those years he also had a job in the US military.

[74] Ezidis/Yazidis/Yezidis are a Kurdish-speaking religious minority. The Ezidis became known worldwide in the media with the ISIS massacre and capture of the city of Sinjar in 2014.

> Karim: (…) Before my graduation from high school, I also started to work with the military as a translator.
>
> Katrine: With the, with, with the US military?
>
> Karim: Yeah, with the US military. Then after I graduated, in this one year I also worked with them, I continued working with them. Like I was working with them between what we call the 5th class of high school and the 6th, the final class, like the final year. Between then I postponed the school for one year. I worked like for almost 7 months. Then after that I went back to high school, finished my high school. I wanted to apply for the US. I did not get it [visa]. I went back to my home, to the work I was doing.
>
> Katrine: Did you know a lot of other people quitting school to work as a translator?
>
> Karim: Yeah, yeah.
>
> Katrine: Was it a normal thing to do?
>
> Karim: Yeah, yeah, there were a lot. I mean, especially in [the Mosul area], a lot of people worked. (…)

I was surprised by this casual way of talking about his work for the US military in the same kind of unspectacular tone as if he had worked in a shop as a teenager. I hadn't expected this, which shows in my first stammering, and then later in slight disbelief with the question whether that kind of job was 'normal'? Working for the US military did not give Karim a chance of migrating to the US; he "did not get it" as he states, referring to a US visa. Two of his elder brothers also worked as interpreters. Karim told me that it was very common to work as an interpreter for the US forces, especially among Ezidis in the Mosul area, who according to him needed jobs and did not have specific ideas about its being "*haram*" (forbidden) to work with "foreign people who occupy your country" – ideas that some Iraqis had, according to Karim. Between the lines I understand the stigma (by some) of undertaking work with the US military, the foreign occupation forces. Many Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan were pro-invasion, but Karim grew up in the disputed region

between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq. While working as an interpreter, he was once hit superficially by a bullet.

> [Laughing] But we faced a lot of difficulties. I mean challenges. Sometimes there was a sniper, there were explosions, all these things. I mean, somehow the military is giving you more experience than you want. Especially at that time – I was like 17 years old.

Here, the tone changes from working with the military, described as an ordinary job, to underlining that it gave him "more experience" with war than he wanted as a teenager.

Because of the security situation it was difficult or impossible for him and others to continue their studies at the nearest university in Mosul. So the options for young people were to try to find a job in times of war and, with high unemployment rates, work with the US forces that offered jobs for (young) people with English skills, or try to go abroad. He wanted to study English, so he applied to UOS, but didn't get into the English programme. Karim grew up speaking Kurmanji Kurdish; however, having been taught in Arabic during all his school years, he was not literate in Kurdish. Moreover, in Sulaimani, Sorani Kurdish is the main language spoken.

> Karim: I applied for the Sulaimani University. I went to the university like for a couple of days, but the study was in Kurdish [Sorani] and my course was in the evening, not in the morning, evening time, so I just hated myself there. [Laughter]
>
> Katrine: And the subject was International Studies?
>
> Karim: We call it Law and Science (Katrine: Okay), but here [at AUIS] we call it International Studies. So that is…
>
> Katrine: And was it what you applied for? Or this was just what you got?
>
> Karim: Yeah, this was what I just got.
>
> Katrine: Okay.
>
> Karim: You know. So that is the problem when you transfer from Mosul to here – sometimes you do not get what you want because that is…

> because there are… what they call... I mean, if a student graduates from Sulaimani high school he will have more right to be in Sulaimani University than a student who comes from abroad.

Here, 'abroad' is coming from the Mosul area like Karim does. He did not get into the course he wanted at UOS and felt discriminated against because he was *transferred* from Mosul. So Karim quit the education. He went back to the Mosul area, where he met a young woman, who later became his girlfriend. She suggested that he return to Sulaimani to work with her relative as an electrician in order to save money to go abroad. Karim was sent to a European man's house in Sulaimani to fix the electricity because of his English skills. He talked with the man about AUIS. Karim found out, with the man's help, that he could apply for sponsorship at AUIS based on his Ezidi identity because there were specific sponsorships for different ethnic minorities. While he did not succeed in getting a visa for the US, he succeeded in getting a sponsorship and started his studies in the preparatory English classes in 2009 at AUIS.

Cut-off from entering the future

I met with Karim several times. He was doing a research project at AUIS on suicide among Ezidi youth in Iraq from the Mosul area where he grew up, which he told me about.

> Katrine: Why did you want to do research about this topic?
>
> Karim: You know, as I told you, I mean, well, I think I told you before. Because I was one of those who attempted to commit suicide. [Laughter]
>
> Katrine: Yeah, I know you told me but I did not ask you so much about it.
>
> Karim: Yeah, because, you know, I was interested in what other people, what the reason that others – do they have the same reason or do they have a different? And things like that.
>
> Katrine: And how did you come out of your bad situation? What happened for you?

> Karim: Yeah, when I told you that I was facing the same situation – like, for example, I did not go to Mosul to the college because of the security situation. And then when I came here [Sulaimani] I got a different college, not the one I wanted. And it was hard for me to study, so I just gave up here. Then I wanted to go outside. I had no money like that. I mean, I was in that situation, 'one of those who wanted to go outside' situation, to Europe, I mean outside, yeah, Europe. (…)

Outside in Karim's narrative is referring both to the geographical place of Europe as a destination for migration, but also to a more abstract place of *outside* war and conflict. The "yeah, Europe" description seems to be the imagined peaceful Europe far away from war rather than a specific concrete geographical location. Since Karim had no money to migrate, it is a narrative of an *outside* that is unreachable.

Born from Karim's own experience of seeing no way out of a hopeless situation, he was now as a student doing interviews with people in his hometown to learn about the reasons behind young people trying to commit suicide. In his final research paper that he sent to me he wrote:

> I expect my research to light a candle of hope for those whose bonfires of hope have been [extinguished] in the darkness of a mid-night. (Karim, research paper)

During our conversation, Karim described a schism between on the one hand suicide as something that young people talked openly about in a distanced way as something ordinary and then, on the other hand, not knowing whether people participating in this distanced conversation might have suicidal thoughts. This schism made him feel ambiguous about how to talk about the problem of suicide among young people without the risk of spreading suicidal trends. Since Karim grew up outside of Sulaimani, his experiences were specific to the local circumstances of living directly in conflict for many years, but his narrative around suicide tells a general story about limited hopes for the future.

> Like, for example, a student, one of the people I interviewed. Two of them, they were students. They tried to commit suicide. But I asked them, "Why did you try to commit suicide?" They said, "I mean, because of the

> security situation, you know, the bad situation in Mosul.[75] They could not go to the college." So they spend like 12 or 13 years in school without a job. Ending up without a job. So. And those students, they may want to go to Europe, but they say if like that, the same thing, is happening here and there, so they are confused. They do not know where to stand and which road to take.

The narrative of suicide attempts among young people that Karim is both embodying and doing research on was taking place among young people in the Ezidi community who were caught in a 'bad situation', as he calls it, after the invasion. They saw no roads leading out of that entrapment and into the future. In order to travel abroad you need connections and money, and Karim also explained that young people have seen how the ones succeeding in migrating to Europe do not necessarily find a job or are allowed to stay, and that sometimes family members in Iraq have to send money to the ones who went outside because they did not find work. The dream of the future as something you can reach by getting *outside* is not possible to embody, and he, and others, have felt trapped in the *bad situation.*

Doing research and talking openly about suicide is a complex matter.[76] Karim tells of a previous experience he had in his hometown.

> Karim: (…) You know the interesting thing? One of my friends, one day we were talking about committing suicide. We said, "In Sweden the popular way of committing suicide is to eat like a big amount of salt."
>
> Katrine: In Sweden?
>
> Karim: Yeah, Sweden.
>
> Katrine: Where did you hear that?

---

[75] Mosul has become an open warzone again since my fieldwork. Mosul University has been used as a bomb factory by ISIS after the capture of the city. In February 2017, the eastern part of the city of Mosul was liberated from ISIS. Iraqi forces were governing the university buildings that contained remnants of dangerous explosives (Safi 2017).

[76] Minoo Alinia describes how women's rights activists and media reports in post-invasion Iraqi Kurdistan have succeeded in making visible the issue of suicide among women (Alinia 2013:125). This visibility might be an explanation for Karim being able to write a research paper on suicide.

Karim: I do not know. I mean, we were discussing, and one of my friends said that – and we were three. The other friend who was hearing our discussion, he was in that situation to commit suicide. He wanted to find – he told me that, "I was looking for an easy way to commit suicide." He said he just took that advice. The next day he tried to commit suicide. [Laughter]

Katrine: Next day? (Karim: Yeah. He said…) When was that?

Karim: It was 2009.

Katrine: But you did not know?

Karim: We did not know that he is in that situation. He did not tell us.

Katrine: So what happened?

Karim: And then he did not. I mean, he ate salt, like half a kilo, so like 500 grams. Then he finally explained that, so they took him to the hospital to wash his stomach.

Katrine: And then did you – when did you see him again?

Karim: Yeah, I mean, I usually see him, but I did not know until like this Eid, last Eid, last time I went home. I did not know he committed suicide, that he tried to commit suicide. But my other friend, who is his neighbour, he said, "Oh, our friend tried to do it." I said, "Really?" I said, "When?" He said, "After our discussion." [Laughter]

Katrine: So how did you feel about that?

Karim: Yeah, I feel like sad. I feel, you know, I was thinking one of my solutions to this point was to give a lecture about committing suicide. To tell people how many commit suicide. But from this point I was thinking, "Oh, maybe that is a wrong idea. Because we may teach some people how to commit suicide instead of preventing them from it."

Growing out of Karim's own experiences, and research, on suicide is a narrative of being caught in passivity in a *bad situation* with no perspective of getting out of it; wanting to reach outside of that situation, but not being able to. Borrowing from Dudziak's description of war and

peacetime, Karim and his friends are being cut off from entering the future that is *a place beyond war*.

Laughter and the carnivalesque

Talking with Karim about his experiences and research was a fragmented conversation. Karim told his story in a calm and distanced way without drama – things happened, war happened, a bad situation happened. My questions were a driving force and he told me about suffering through the use of what to me sounded like distanced irony and dry laughter. I had to listen carefully afterwards over and over again to be able to put together a narrative of held-back pain. His joyless laughter was the clue to understanding his story.

Laughter can both be a way to create a distance from what is being said, or it can show irony or a sign of despair and giving up. The Bakhtinian image of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]), which was useful to understand the intertwining of joking and historical violence in Mr Hobson's history class, is also useful here. Karim's laughter can be interpreted as a counter-narrative of playing the fool and laughing back at the order of things, and thereby showing where it hurts. But the laughing in Karim's case can also be perceived as a giving up, as a state of being cut off from feelings of pain because there is no space into which it is possible to narrate his story of grief. He is no hero, nor is he a victim in a hegemonic storyline of conflict in Sulaimani, like those who are children of Peshmerga martyrs. The innocent laughter of the child is turned into the distanced laughter of a grown-up with unpleasant experiences. The 'then' of his experienced pain and the 'now' of being a student at AUIS walking around in bright and shiny corridors are not connected in a coherent narrative. The laughter is the sound of the space in between the hope of arriving in a better future at the end of the shiny corridor and the experienced pain that is left scattered and fragmented and kept at a distance when he tells the story to me. In my analysis of Karim's narrative, his laughter is a bomb exploding the surface structure of what is being said, the laughter cracking open and revealing the pain that is difficult to narrate. The laughter as a bomb – crack! The laughter as the silence and dust covering the moment after the explosion. Laughter as the fist hitting you hard in the face. Laughter as the hand caressing your

stinging cheek after you have been hit. The same hand, the clenched fist, the stroking fingers. The same laughter, revealing, concealing. Returning to the Bakhtinian image of the carnivalesque, it is the same kind of double movement, dressing up in order to mock and abstractly 'undress' the normal order and costume of truth and power. So where Mr Hobson is dressing up in a no-pain wardrobe of violence, Karim's laughter is undressing and showing where it hurts.

No Future and No Present

The narrative around suicide as a solution to not seeing any future lying ahead resonates with Lee Edelman's concepts of *no future* and *the death drive* (Edelman 2004). By embracing negativity and *the death drive*, Edelman refuses to jump on the train of heteronormative futurity.[77] Edelman proposes a radical version of queer theory not buying into (falsely) hopeful political visions of the future. Edelman describes the *death drive* as a political positioning with potential for living in a queer now. Translating these concepts into the context of Karim's suicide narrative, I can see both moments of death drive and a strong feeling of no future. But in Karim's narrative, the death drive is a dead end. The No Future materiality and lived experience among Ezidi youth is leading to what I will call a No Present feeling, where suicide becomes an option and a way out of the impossible *bad situation*. There is a danger in using Edelman's concept of No Future in relation to a wartime experience among youth thinking about, and trying to commit, suicide. There is a huge difference between the privilege of living a queer life in a Western urban scene, where a death drive can give space to a queer now, as opposed to not being able to live in the now and therefore not in the future either, because of growing up in a time and place affected by war and conflict. But the centrality of time and future in Edelman's thinking is very useful to understand Karim and others' feelings of entrapment in times of war.

[77] See also Sara Pursley's use of Edelman's concept of *reproductive futurism* in her thesis *A race against time*: *governing femininity and reproducing the future in revolutionary Iraq, 1945–63* (2012).

Edelman cites Virginia Woolf, who ended her life by committing suicide. He quotes a passage from her diary in 1941, where she writes about the future:

> "Yes, I was thinking: we live without a future. That's what's queer…" (Edelman 2004:index cover)

Edelman cuts off the quote after the word queer, but in the original diary entry (as it is printed in the 1985 version) the quote continues:

> Yes, I was thinking: we live without a future. Thats whats [sic] queer, with our noses pressed to a closed door. (Woolf 1985:355)

So where Edelman chooses to see the possibility for a queer politics in a now without a future, the other side is the impossibility and ultimate consequence of a no future in the form of suicide. In Karim's narrative, we can imagine him and other young adults feeling as if they are literally standing in front of a closed door. Karim has worked hard and was lucky to find a way to open the door and be able to start the studies he wanted at AUIS with a promise of a brighter future.

In need of the (normal) middle-class future

Worrying about the future and working in a present now oriented towards a desired future of having a job and getting married is central in Karim's narrative.

> (…) When I do not have a job I have to think, "Okay, tomorrow, how will I marry?" Right? "Tomorrow, how will I do this and do that?" So, when I am busy with something like, with studying or with a job, somehow, if not all of them, half of these ideas will go away. Because I will be busy with things. So, I mean, when I came to school, I mean, it is a different culture, like the school is a different society, so I got away from these things.

Two important things are at stake in this quote. One is the idea of having a job in order to be "busy with things" and thus to keep thoughts of depression and anxiety away ("these ideas") and the other is the role of a job to secure marriage in the future. Edelman's concept of *reproductive*

futurism (Edelman 2004:4) explains this kind of imagination of linear time development towards heteronormative reproduction. Karim expresses a link between a job today that will lead to a future through marriage, which is in line with the logic of reproductive futurism.

The narrative of being busy in order to keep "these ideas" (of depressive thoughts) away is enlarged upon in the conversation when Karim refers to a saying in Arabic, which he translates for me into English: "Unemployment is the mother of troubles". He is relating this to his own life experience of being busy as a means to keep *ideas* at a distance. When translating from Arabic to English in the interview conversation, he searches for the right word and hesitantly uses *idleness,* which I don't understand in the conversation, and I suggest *unemployment*, which implies a question of being in or out of the workforce. But in the above quote Karim is trying to explain the nature of a student or working person as being busy and not idle. The work ethic that Karim is referring to focuses on the process of being a studying or working body, working as practice, working to feel good, to keep thoughts from running away with him – thoughts of anxiety and depression – and to study in order to later find a job where he can earn money and accordingly be able to marry in the future.

Karim has for many years been writing debate articles and poetry, and he tells me that the Lebanese-American writer Khalil Gibran is his "favourite writer". Gibran's book *The Prophet* (originally published in 1923) became widely read in the US in the 1960s. My Canadian mother read aloud to me from *The Prophet* when I was a child. I once again opened my copy of the book, curious since Karim had stated he liked him a lot. Here is what Gibran writes about work:

> Then a ploughman said, Speak to us of Work.
>
> And he answered, saying:
>
> You work that you may keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth.
>
> For to be **idle** is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite.

> When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music.
>
> Which of you would be a reed, dumb and silent, when all else sings in unison?
>
> (Gibran 1991 [1923]:35, emphasis added)

This piece is about the pleasure of working. To be idle, not to work, is to fall out of the time of the seasons. To be idle is to have too much time and to be out of place and the regular rhythm of time. To be idle resembles Jeffrey's concept of *waiting* or *timepass.* But in relation to Karim's narrative, it is not a privileged kind of waiting after graduation, but an unprivileged waiting of being stuck with no roads leading into the future. The narrative evolves around the moment before he got accepted at AUIS and before he could enter the more privileged position of waiting for the future as a university student.

What does it mean to cling onto and desire this kind of ordinary middle-class future when it is difficult to obtain? In Karim's narrative, the desire is both a drive leading to a closed door, but also a desire that leads him to Sulaimani and into becoming a student at AUIS. The clinging onto a linear narrative of reproductive futurity with a job leading to marriage and a future family is a drive to believe that some day he will be able to live this desired ordinary life. And it is also an image of the painfully unattainable, at times when it is not within reach; the dilemma of wanting what is difficult to obtain, the imagined 'normal' that is desired in (nonnormal) experiences of war and conflict.

Karim's narrative adds a new dimension to the queer theoretical scrutiny of *the middle-class logic of reproductive temporality* (in Halberstam's words) by contextualising how the desire for an ordinary, normal, middle-class future in a wartorn region can be an imagined road leading into a belief in a narrative of a better future to come. Queer theorists like Edelman and Halberstam would probably not engage in criticising the normality desires of Karim, since their analysis is on a bigger structural level. What I want to underline is the theoretical conversation and discussion of how queer theoretical insights on time, space and normativity can be useful analytical tools in the study of university students in Iraqi Kurdistan. The desires of normality fulfil a

specific role in this (post-)conflict society that differs from a Western urban space. Karim's story asks the fundamental question to queer theory: Who has the privilege of living a no-future, nonnormative life? Or: in which ways does/can the desire for the ordinary and the normal (as these desires are narrated in a specific historical context) render everyday life meaningful and make it liveable?

Longing for the future NOW

The tension between the hopelessness and difficulties of living in a region affected by many years of war and then the longing and hopes for better and ordinary peaceful futures to come is a tension that runs through students' narratives.

I met Nina together with her friend Hejin, both female students at AUIS, who grew up in Europe. They shared with me their hopes for future scenarios of the city, Nina proclaiming:

> This city is like a baby about to grow up. And right now there is the possibility to stand a chance, join forces, and it is time to shine. There are prospects to open up new companies, and to teach people – the new generation.

Nina had hopes for all the things the city could become, while we were sitting in a café in Sulaimani surrounded by construction sites where new buildings were about to take shape. Describing Sulaimani as a baby about to grow up with a promising future lying ahead connects to Edelman's description of reproductive futurity where the figure of the Child takes a prominent place (Edelman 2004). Edelman shows how the figure of the Child is central in the normative understanding of the whole meaning of the future waiting ahead, and thereby the figure of the Child is also the main star in the politics of the present by representing the centrality of reproduction and linear time development.

> (...) we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights "real" citizens are allowed. (Edelman 2004:11)

On the cover of Edelman's book is a picture of the character Annie, from the 1982 movie version of *Annie,* looking up and out into the future of tomorrow. Edelman explains how the orphan Annie, searching for her parents, embodies the future-oriented/desiring/longing figure of the Child:

> It takes place on the social stage like every adorable Annie gathering her limitless funds of pluck to "stick out [her] chin/ And grin/ And say: 'Tomorrow!/ Tomorrow!/ I love ya/ Tomorrow/ You're always/ A day/ Away.'" (Edelman 2004:18)

Annie is also, I would argue, the classic heroine of the American dream: working her way through poverty and always believing in the chances and promises of tomorrow if she just works hard enough today with the spirit of making it in the future. Nina has the belief in the promise of tomorrow, like the character Annie[78], when she describes the "possibility" and the "prospects" of the city development lying open in front of her.

New buildings growing out of the urban space are central to Nina's and Hejin's narrative around the development of the city. They tell me how the AUIS campus was situated in a small building in the city when it opened in 2007, with only around 50 students, until the new campus opened in 2012. Nina and Hejin described the different university campuses.

> Hejin: Our university, when we were there during the first term, at that time we did not have this new campus. We had a university that looked like a hospital. I remember we said: "Let's go to the hospital." It was really like a hospital when you entered the building. The doors, the classrooms. In general, it was just annoying to be there. During the first months there were no European students, not at all. There were just these four girls. They were from Europe, but they had already lived here seven, eight years. So they had…

[78] As a schoolchild, I went to an audition for the musical *Annie*. I rehearsed Annie's song *Tomorrow* for days, and was optimistic about my chances of being part of the musical. But I didn't make it any further than the audition. When I compare Nina to the character of Annie, it is not to infantilise her optimism for tomorrow, but because I recognise her real hope in all the possibilities that could come.

> Nina: They had got this Kurdish…
>
> Hejin: …attitude.

Their perception of the campus is linked to ideas of development, modernity and Kurdishness. The new campus and the increase in "European students" is a sign of modernity arriving in Sulaimani, according to Nina and Hejin, whereas the old campus ("the hospital") and the students from Europe having adopted a "Kurdish Attitude" is put in contrast to this. The narrative portrays the old campus space almost as a container for 'Kurdish attitude' that spills out over the student bodies.

Ideas of modernity in relation to Global North and South relations are also found in anthropologist Jacob Williams Ørberg's work on elite Engineering students in India. He describes how the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) is perceived as a space of modernity that is neither West nor Indian. Making it into that very competitive institution as a student is already an *arrival in the future*:

> IITs were no longer a mere spectacle of the foreign or the modern, they were modern spaces. Arriving there was arriving in the future. (Ørberg 2016:162–163)

The same kind of idea about 'modern spaces' is found in Nina's and Hejin's narrative of the new AUIS campus as having potential for being a space of modernity. Throughout the interview with Nina and Hejin, the verb *to develop* is frequently used about the city and people.

I asked Nina and Hejin about the future and what they hoped the city to be like in ten years.

> Nina: We are always talking about that.
>
> Hejin: A hotel that is about to be built.
>
> Katrine: Okay.
>
> Hejin: We are always passing by there and saying: "Shit, it must be there, they are building a club." We are like fantasising that it is a club. It really looks like a club.

> Nina: But it is a club. They are building a club. And since they started building, Hejin and I said: "The day they open, we are going towards...
>
> Hejin: ...Europe.
>
> Nina: "...that boundary, and we are going there to have fun." The question is whether we will dare to do it or not.
>
> Hejin: It will most probably not happen. But if girls started to go there, in case it became normal that it would be mixed girls and boys. But I don't have great expectations; I don't think it will be like that. It will be like this, that only boys go there.

At the core of this quote is the tension and the gap between on the one hand their dream of a new club being built with a "normal" space for "mixed girls and boys", and then on the other their *it will most probably not happen attitude*. In their hopes and dreams for the future, they are longing towards what they describe as "Europe" on the other side of the "boundary". Europe, drawing from their own experiences of growing up there, is a place where you can go out as a young female and buy alcohol if you wish to and "nobody will bother", as Hejin describes it. But the story of growing up in Europe is for Hejin also the story of falling into depression when she lived alone in an apartment and found out that she did not want to continue her teacher training. She tells me about that time in her life in Europe.

> And then I sank into depression, because it was too much, I had a burden too heavy to carry. Should I stop [the teacher training]? What to do with my life? I came back here [Sulaimani] instead. I just fled [laughing], if you can put it that way. It became much more simple.

Hejin laughs when describing her own situation as 'fleeing' from Europe and depression to Iraqi Kurdistan. It seems like the wrong story, that it is too bizarre to be a migrant moving in the opposite direction: from Europe to Iraqi Kurdistan. Her laughter, just as in Karim's narrative, bubbles up when narrating a painful episode from her life. There is a tension between an experienced and imagined 'Europe' that Nina and Hejin long for, in the form of being able to go out in a certain way that is difficult to do in Sulaimani as a young woman, and then at the same time they both tell about living in that city as their own decision.

When I presented my research project to students at AUIS and gave a short lecture on qualitative research, Nina was the student who came up to me directly afterwards and asked to participate in an interview because she wanted people in Europe to know that Iraqi Kurdistan was not all bombs and war (as I also explain in the Introduction). She repeats her desire to tell other stories about Iraqi Kurdistan in the interview. She also talks about AUIS students travelling abroad when participating in an international competition in the US and Australia called *Imagine Cup*:

> Our [AUIS] students have travelled to these countries. And it is so cool that they can, that people – that we must spread the reputation about our country. In order to let the world know: okay, Kurdistan has this and that and they are developing and it could be – we can actually develop despite all the wars and what has happened. We can be as good as Europeans or the US.

Nina is placing *Kurdistan* and *Kurds* (”we”) in a hierarchy of development where *Europeans* or *the US* rank highest. This narrative can be seen as an internalisation of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s description of a colonial idea of the Global South as waiting for a certain kind of development to happen.

> (…) countries in the global south were frequently perceived as occupying the “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty 2000:256): a permanent state of “not now, not yet.” (Chakrabarty quoted in Jeffrey 2010:12)

Kurdistan in Nina’s description is exactly in a state of ‘not yet’, not developed yet, but on track of mimicking Europe and the US. Nina and Hejin cling to the idea of possibilities and linear development of the city and its inhabitants towards ideas of (Western) modernity.

Going outside

I have presented central ways of understanding and analysing the concept of *time* from the *queer temporality* of the (post-)conflict urban space caught in between war and peace, the space of *waiting,* and narratives around hopeful or despairing futures. Here, I will unfold a migration narrative that is present in both abstract and more concrete forms through many students' accounts as a central point of orientation in both time and space.

Literature scholar and anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano uses the concept of *frontiers* as something that cannot be crossed, and he is preoccupied with what lies beyond the frontier.

> Unlike borders, which can be crossed (unless they are closed) and boundaries, which can be transgressed, **frontiers**, as I am using the word, cannot be crossed. They mark a change in ontological register. They postulate a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation. My concern is with the role of what lies beyond the horizon, with the possibilities it offers us, with the licit and illicit desires it triggers, the plays of power it suggests, the dread it can cause – the uncertainty, the sense of contingency, of chance – exaltation, the thrill of the unknown, it can provoke. (Crapanzano 2004:14, emphasis added)

Crapanzano underlines how the unreachable that lies *beyond the horizon* and the *frontier* can be very much desired. When Nina and Hejin talk about the club that they dream for, or when Karim talks about *going outside*, both narratives are centred on a desire for the unreachable beyond the horizon. *One-of-those-who-wanted-to-go-outside-situation*, as Karim positioned himself previously, is a description of a situation in a person's life that raises many questions. What is outside, and what is inside? Is outside a physical, geographical place or is it an imagined space or state of being outside of oneself as an escape from the present and unbearable? The imagined 'outside': Europe as a dream, and the geographical 'outside': Europe as a place. Crapanzano's concept of *frontiers* highlights horizons that are activated among students through their narratives of life trajectories and orientations towards the future.

The imaginary of travelling abroad is very present in almost all interviews. Travelling 'outside' in order to come 'back'. Ahmad is 20

years old and in his third year of studying Medicine at UOS. He is talking about travelling.

> Going to America, for fun maybe. For example, you have seen in movies, America is shiny, everything is good there – you want to go there, believe me. I mean, I don't think there is anybody that doesn't want to go there. Everybody likes to travel, okay, but I think Iraqi people like it more than any other country because they haven't done it, so what you haven't done, you just like it. If you have done it, you know, that's just not like that important as if you have always [only] thought about it.

The desire to travel abroad and the dream of a *shiny America* are very persistent in Ahmad's narrative. Young people's desire to travel is global, and many middle-class young adults from the Global North travel as part of an international 'Bildung' experience. But for Ahmad and other young adults in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq, travelling to the US is not easily accessible. For people in Sulaimani to get a passport (Iraqi), you need to go through the trouble of travelling to Baghdad. And with an Iraqi passport, travelling to Europe and the US is very restricted. You need invitations, and to go through visa applications, and you need money and time and institutions and a network of support, and you need to go to embassies etc. To state the obvious, even though Ahmad has the money, he can't just buy a ticket online and board an aeroplane to the US. It is in this tension between the desire to travel and the restrictions on travelling that the *shiny America* is situated on the other side of the *frontier* in Ahmed's narrative.

Ahmad told me how he had been convinced by other people to study Medicine because his future would then be "great and shiny". He had originally thought about becoming a dentist, but when he achieved high grades at his final high school exam and thus the possibility to study the prestigious subject of Medicine, he felt a pressure to do so. He related what people told him about studying Medicine.

> They said that it is a great college and the future is very great and shiny. For example, in the future, after finishing 6th grade, you will be immediately employed in a hospital and your money is going to be great money, you are going to be a rich person. Here, financial problems is one of the greatest, so you don't study just for your entertainment, you study for your future. That's why they told me: "Your future will be great and shiny, you are going to be a great person, everybody will respect you and

> look at you, not just like an ordinary person." Because here, doctors, everybody respects them. When you say: "I am a doctor", everybody thinks that you are clever and know things that others don't.

In Ahmad's narrative he underlines how he has to *study for his future*. It is interesting to remark that for him being an "ordinary person" is not enough; he has very high ambitions of embodying the figure of the knowledgeable, respected doctor with a *shiny* future lying at his feet – the glow of the 'not yet' shining temptingly in the horizon.

The orientation towards a *shiny future* and a *shiny America*, an elsewhere that is better and more promising, is a general feature in stories of migration. The fictional character Obinze in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* is an example of this aspiration for a better life in the future. Obinze grew up in a middle-class home in Lagos, Nigeria, and arrived in the UK, where he lived without papers and did manual work. A scene from the novel where Obinze is a guest at a middle-class dinner party in London describes the ways in which migration, war and the figure of the migrant are talked about and understood from a Western perspective.

> Alexa, flush with red wine, her eyes red below her scarlet hair, changed the subject. "Blunkett [UK politician for Labour] must be sensible and make sure this country remains a refuge. People who have survived frightful wars must absolutely be allowed in!" She turned to Obinze. "Don't you agree?"
>
> "Yes," he said, and felt alienation run through him like a shiver. Alexa, and the other guests, and perhaps even Georgina, all understood the fleeing from war, from the kind of poverty that crushed human souls, but they would not understand the need to escape from the oppressive lethargy of choicelessness. They would not understand why people like him, who were raised well-fed and watered but mired in dissatisfaction, conditioned from birth to look towards somewhere else, eternally convinced that real lives happened in that somewhere else, were now resolved to do dangerous things, illegal things, so as to leave, none of them starving, or raped, or from burned villages, but merely hungry for choice and certainty. (Adichie 2014:276)

Obinze's migration story is not that of being poor and fleeing in order to survive. But he grew up with the dream of a shiny America on his

horizon and a real, conflicted Nigeria with no promising future around the corner for his middle-class aspirations. Obinze is a guest at the dinner party, and a guest in the UK, but only welcome as a guest in the nation if he can produce the right kind of refugee narrative, which is not about middle-class desires. "(…) [M]erely hungry for choice and certainty", as Adichie describes the character Obinze's desires above, is a desire mirrored across students' narratives in Sulaimani. This desire is described by the medical student Ahmad through the image of a shiny America and a shiny future, the desire of something better existing beyond the horizon to fulfil middle-class aspirations.

Queer hopes

How is it possible to understand the bursts of hope that are part of students' narratives? The concept of longing for a future to come and desiring the seemingly impossible, as we see in the poem by Mikhail and in Nina's and Hejin's narrative about the nightclub, resembles the analytical framework in Muñoz' analysis of a queer utopian horizon of futurity (2009). Muñoz outlines the tension and debate between a *No Future* radical queer negativity (Edelman) and his own attempt to work with the concepts of hope and utopia. Muñoz works with queerness as a longing, a horizon, a *not yet* and a potential for utopian dreaming and politics.[79]

> Indeed, to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer. (Muñoz 2009:26)

I am inspired by Muñoz' way of searching for hope and looking for the *not yet* in the present. Focusing on *desire* is a means to understand the materiality of everyday lives and the everyday dreams of the *not yet* futures. In Mikhail's poem *The Iraqi Nights,* presented at the beginning of this chapter, the desire for the peaceful everyday life can be described as a utopian imagination in a wartorn Iraq. But the desire and the hope for the *not yet* is present. This can also be said about Nina, Hejin and Karim dreaming of a

[79] Also see David L. Eng on *the-what-could-have-been* about 'imagining otherwise' (Eng 2010:65).

future, longing and desiring a normality, not yet there, but lying out on the horizon. In my material, there is a tension between narratives of hope and better futures to come and feeling stuck and giving up.

So whereas Karim's life experience before entering AUIS with no hope for the future can be understood (and discussed) with inspiration from Edelman's No Future concept, Nina's and Hejin's utopian dreams of a nightclub for both men and women captures Muñoz' feeling of the desire and hope for the *not yet.* Different moments of hope and unhappiness exist at the same time, and students swing in between hopeful and resigned narratives in an uncertain (post-)conflict bubble-temporality. By focusing on the concept of time, and how time and future are experienced and narrated, we see that students are both struggling with personal and historical difficulties related to war, and trying to navigate and draw utopian desires into the present everyday of what they perceive as different kinds of desired middle-class normalities in the form of going to the club, finding a job, and getting married.

Returning to Dudziak's thoughts on time and war, it is clear that students in Sulaimani navigate in a temporality where the boundaries between wartime and peacetime are not clear-cut. Narratives of optimism and distress are told simultaneously, and experiences of both the promises and the disappointments of the future are both present. But, on top of these everyday experiences swinging between hope and discouragement, there is still a strong utopian narrative that some day the bright future with nightclubs and jobs and marriage will come. Nina and Hejin underline the utopian element of dreaming while talking about the nightclub, which they end up stating will most probably not be for them to enter. But still, the utopian dreaming is taking place in the present, in the same way as Mikhail practises longing for peace as a mantra to keep alive and hopeful in times of war:

> And every moment
> something ordinary
> will happen
> under the sun.

(Mikhail 2013/2014)

Conclusion

Inspired by a queer theoretical sensitivity for understanding the logics governing ideas of temporality and futurity, I have been able to show how students desire ordinary middle-class futures. I have illustrated how the desires of the ordinary are sometimes hopeful and reachable and at times beyond the horizon and unreachable. The (post-)conflict temporality can be described as a queer bubble swinging between narratives and experiences of peace and violence, or what Dudziak names as 'wartime' and 'peacetime'.

The tension between different temporalities is found in the remaking of space with the amusement park, in the history class teaching historical violence from the point of view of Western History, and in the collective remembrance of the Anfal genocide. Karim's narrative of experiences and research on suicide is also positioned in different temporalities between being caught in a No Future moment and being able to imagine an ordinary future from the perspective of a university student.

Waiting time is a central feature of everyday life. Waiting for the future and job opportunities can be perceived as a necessary skill and a relatively material privilege of university students in the bubble of urban Sulaimani.

CHAPTER 5

Representation and orientation – fashionable female fighter figures and everyday middle-class respectability

Photographs of Kurdish female fighters have been widely portrayed (and praised) in media images (especially since the siege of Kobani, Rojava in 2014), and these images have stubbornly marched into my research. At first, I did not want to bring this female fighter into my study but, since she kept popping up – in media, in questions with regard to my research, in scholarly work – I realised I could not simply just ignore her, since she plays a role in the kind of stories that are possible to tell and represent around war and peace, everyday life and forms of resistance. This figure, as Sara Ahmed has coined the word, is 'sticky' (Ahmed 2012 [2004]:89) and brings along a specific set of narratives around Kurdish women, Kurds and Kurdistan both within the region and on a representational level, especially in Western media.

Central in this chapter is the gap between figurations (Haraway 1997) of *Kurdish fighter femininity* and the everyday experience of doing femininity among middle-class students in Sulaimani. My empirical material shows that there is a specific figuration of *Kurdish respectable middle-class femininity* in students' narratives that works as a point of orientation (Ahmed 2006) in everyday performances of subjectivity. In this chapter, I am exploring these two different figurations of Kurdish femininity.

In the first section, I will trace the representation of the figure of the female fighter in a short overview through different platforms. In the second section, I will work with autoethnographic accounts of my own experiences of orienting myself in the city through a middle-class female body, which has been an analytical entry point into perceiving the everyday gendered middle-class orientations that are explored in conversation with female students' narratives.

Visible and invisible figurations

Donna Haraway has worked with the concept of figuration with her *cyborg figure* (Haraway 1991), her *companion species* (Haraway 2003), and in the article "Virtual Speculum" several figures such as the *fetus* or *embryo*, the *pregnant immigrant* and the *queer* in an analysis of reproductive politics and technologies (Haraway 1997). She writes about the concept of figuration:

> Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations are condensed maps of whole worlds. In art, literature and science, my subject is the technology that turns body into story, and vice versa, producing both what can count as real and the witnesses to that reality. (Haraway 1997:29)

To work analytically with figuration or a figure is a way to trace a concept in a broader sense in both a material and a semiotic understanding (Haraway 1997:24). The gaze is lifted from a specific narrow understanding of identity to asking and tracing how figuration as a process is happening, how the figure comes about. An example of this kind of analytical tracing in the field of gender studies in Sweden is how Ulrika Dahl focuses on the figuration of 'femme' by putting the figure to work and exploring meanings of femme in all its complexities (Dahl 2010, 2011; Dahl and Volcano 2008). Haraway explains how figuration work is about exploring and telling new stories:

> Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more "normal" rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem only to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders. (Haraway 2004:47)

Inspired by Haraway, I am inclined to the task of resetting the stage in order to tell stories about figures of middle-class respectability, or what I call *normality-seekers*.

Anthropologist in the field of education Gritt B. Nielsen, in *Student figures in friction: explorations into Danish university reform and shifting forms of student participation*, works analytically with the student as a contested figure (Nielsen 2010). Nielsen underlines that the word figure is both a noun and a verb, which emphasises the dynamic quality of student figures (Nielsen 2010:17). She explains:

> Therefore, the notion of figure is meant to convey a process of figuration which constantly vibrates between emergence/process (verb) and freeze framing/closure (noun) and which takes place through others' and my own analyses of their situations. (Nielsen 2010:18)

Similar to Nielsen's project, I am also working with both the *freeze-frames* of figurations and the *emergence* of new middle-class figurations. In a Western context of representation, the figure of what I have called the *normality-seeker* can be described in Haraway's words as the "missing visual text" (Haraway 1997:52) or what is invisible or the missing gaze (ibid.:51). In her analysis of figurations in reproductive politics and technologies, Haraway refers to anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes' work on recording and making visible child death in Brazilian favelas (ibid.:52). Haraway states: "I want to explore one form of off-screen, out-of-frame positioning for the children of contemporary expanding, marginalized populations" (Haraway 1997:52). In the same vein, though on a very different subject, what I name *normality-seekers* can be perceived as *off-screen* and *out-of-frame*.

The notion of being inside or outside of the *frame* resonates with Butler's argument of war being framed in specific ways through visual Western media representation (Butler 2010). Here, I am presenting a figuration of urban middle-class respectability beyond the hegemonic framing. But first I will present the figuration of the *Kurdish female fighter.*

The focus on figurations of femininity, I would like to suggest, is key in order to understand both hegemonic representations of Kurdishness and everyday orientations towards a middle-class urban Kurdishness through narratives of respectable femininity. Figurations of femininity are

not limited to being only a concern about female bodies, but at the same time female bodies are subjected to orient themselves specifically in relation to these figurations.

The figure of the fashionable Kurdish female fighter

The clothing company Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) created a green jumpsuit for the autumn collection of 2014 inspired by this figure of the Kurdish female fighter, after photographic images of female Peshmerga fighters fighting ISIS in Kobani had travelled worldwide (see figure 3). In October 2014, the front cover of Air France's magazine *Madame* also had a model in a Peshmerga-inspired outfit (see figure 2).

Figure 2 Air France Madame cover 2014.

The white model on the cover is looking cool in her army-inspired outfit in a rocky desert landscape. The green jumpsuit is spiced up with a leopard-print belt which underlines both the 'exotic' quality of the look and at the same time makes reference to the Western feminine punk love for leopard-print. In the magazine, the fighter figure is taken out of the context of war and battle and into a context of consumption. bell hooks describes how capitalism commodifies 'Otherness' as a consumer product:

> Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization. (hooks 2015 [1992]a:31)

Figure 3 H&M advertisement 2014.

Both the H&M collection and the Air France cover displayed 'Otherness' in the form of a Peshmerga-inspired jumpsuit. The presumed reader of both the front cover and the H&M jumpsuit images is a European woman who is consuming a Western fantasy about romantic and heroic women fighting against ISIS. This is an example of the form of commodification

and decontexualisation that hooks is describing. The 'Other', here the Kurdish female fighter, is taken out of context and transformed into a product of consumption for the European reader as an edgy fashion object with no reference to the politics of the actual conflict and war taking place in Syria, Iraq and the Kurdish regions. Western media's fascination with the representation of "'badass' Kurdish women" without being interested in the political struggle is also addressed by Kurdish activist and PhD candidate Dilar Dirik (Dirik 2014). bell hooks coins this process of decontextualisation "consumer cannibalism" by the image of "eating the other" in a Western culture of commodification of difference (hooks 2015 [1992]a:21). This kind of *consumer cannibalism* is taking place all the time; another example is the clothing chain Topshop making a jumpsuit out of the Palestinian keffiyeh, which is the symbol of resistance towards occupation (*AJ+* 2017). Social media protests against this keffiyeh-jumpsuit and the Peshmerga-inspired jumpsuit led to both Topshop and H&M responding that they had no "intention" to offend people (ibid.; Wyke 2014).

The female Kurdish fighter is not only a representation in Western media; the figuration is circulating across different contexts. An example of this is a photograph of a female and male model posing in military outfits in what looks like a fashion show (see figure 4). The photograph was published on a Facebook page called KurdishModernFashion, stating: "This is a group for those who think Modern Kurdish dress is beautiful!" What I am interested in here is the focus on the representational level of the figuration of the Kurdish female (and here also male) fighter in the context of what is named 'modern Kurdish fashion'. This context of modern Kurdish fashion could be anywhere since it is online, and members of the group could be situated anywhere as well since an online group has no geographical boundaries. When I see this representation, or rather the consumption of military uniforms in a fashion context, it shows the gap between an image of a fierce fashionable fighter and military uniform in the context of the battlefield.

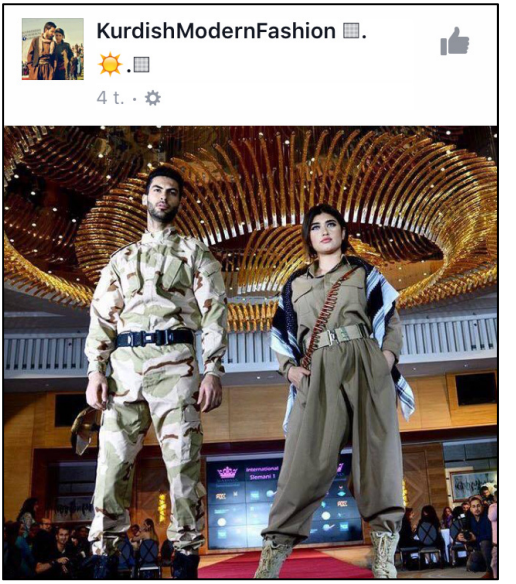

Figure 4 KurdishModernFashion, Facebook September 12, 2016.

Figure 5 Rudaw on Facebook, December 12, 2014.

In the winter of 2014, I saw pictures of university students in Kirkuk dressed up in military uniforms in support of the Kurdish forces, as the text accompanying the photographs stated (see figure 5). This was during fights to liberate Sinjar from IS control. One of the female students dressed up in military uniform pictured wears a red *jamana* (scarf) signalling support for President Masoud Barzani (KDP), who always wears a red scarf (the black *jamana* is used by PUK supporters and others). This picture might not be representative of ordinary students, but could be KDP-affiliated youth doing a photo shoot promoting Kurdish military strength in order to gain international support through the figuration of the *female fighter*.[80] Annick Wibben and Keally McBride analyse the narratives around US 'female engagement teams' in Afghanistan, describing the gendering of counterinsurgency as "a tool of 'soft power' to win hearts and minds" (McBride and Wibben 2012:209). The same analysis could apply to narratives around promotion of the Kurdish female fighter. It has been discussed as to what extent a certain poster-girl effect in Western media has been used by Kurdish leaders to get international support and attention. Dilar Dirik writes about this:

> (…) critics have accused the Kurdish leadership of exploiting these women for PR purposes – in an attempt to win over western public opinion. While there may be an element of truth to such charges in some cases, those same critics fail to appreciate the different political cultures that exist among the Kurdish people as a whole, scattered across Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. They also ignore the fact that Kurdish women have been engaging in armed resistance for decades without anyone's notice. (Dirik 2014)

The figuration of the female fighter is travelling through Western media representations, on Kurdish news sites, in the fashion industry as well as in a Facebook group sharing an interest in modern Kurdish fashion. The figure is decoupled from lived experiences of actual armed resistance. This is not a systematic analysis of the genealogy of the figure of female fighters (as that is outside the scope of my study). It is an illustration of

[80] *Rudaw* is owned by the Rudaw Company affiliated with KDP and it is worth questioning the stories they promote on their English website (aimed at people like me). 'Shadow media' is one description of *Rudaw* (Chomani 2012). It is a general feature of Iraqi Kurdish media that, except for a few independent/private media platforms, they are connected to the different political parties.

how the experience of Kurdish women in a conflict zone is translated into fashion style for consumption by people often located outside the context of direct military conflict. In other words, a romanticisation of the Kurdish female fighter is only possible for those who can choose to ignore the suffering of war.

Leaving the figuration and narrative around Kurdish fighter femininity, I will now explore the figuration of female middle-class respectability through my ethnography in Sulaimani, starting with central autoethnographic encounters.

Figurations of middle-class respectabilities

Sociologist Beverley Skeggs has worked on the concept of performing female respectability (Skeggs 1997). Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Skeggs shows how English working-class women struggle with doing the right bodily performances and appearances in order to be perceived as respectable from the point of view of the scrutinising middle-class gaze (Skeggs 1997). Aware of being an embodied producer of knowledge situated in a specific context, I have had first-hand experiences of participating in the everyday performances of middle-class female respectability in my own life during my fieldwork. At first, I thought of this as mostly a private irritating barrier between me and the world, between me and the people I wanted to interact with. But gradually I came to realise that my body could move in certain ways and was allowed in certain conversations and situations with certain bodies, and kept out of others. I started to notice and be present in the movements that were available or closed to me. I was irritated, grateful, joyful, sad, depressed, but alert and observing my own movements with others, I did not only see it with my academic gaze; I felt it in every cell of my body when walking around. These bodily experiences opened up doors to better listen to and understand students' stories about their material everyday doings. With Patricia Hill Collins' concept of *the outsider within* (Collins 1986), I was expected to perform female middle-class respectability because I was enough of an insider with family relations to know the game, which I would not have to play in the same way if I was just the outsider 'European researcher'.

Ethnographic identities are always negotiated. Marie-Louise Glebbeek and Martha K. Huggins explore female researchers' negotiations of what kind of field persona it can be productive to perform, in their anthology *Women Fielding Danger* (Glebbeek and Huggins 2009:10). Across the different contributions to the anthology, gender incredibility is in focus. Contributor Meera Sehgal elaborates on this with the concept of the always partial and 'veiled' researcher: "as social actors as well as researchers, we ourselves are always partial: We perform and present contradictory and shifting identities that are culturally contextualized and circumscribed by the power dynamics within a particular setting" (Meera Sehgal in Glebbeek and Huggins 2009:12). In my fieldwork experience, performing female middle-class respectability was a central concern, where I had to 'veil' parts of my Copenhagen lifestyle (especially relating to romantic relationship customs, and alcohol consumption). The negotiation of ethnographic identities not only tells something about the positionality of the researcher, but actually reveals the subtle rules of keeping up appearances in a specific location. Meeting a European PhD student with a male-coded body in Sulaimani in 2012, it became clear to me that we had different repertoires available of choreographies for moving about in the city.

We met in a café that served caffe latte and chocolate cake. Soft chairs and dimmed lights. People's faces glowing from the light of laptop screens. A group of young people were having a small birthday celebration at the next table. University students, international NGO workers, private company employees. We were sitting here, sipping our lattes. He was male, tall, striding across the street with big, self-confident steps. His Kurdish assistant handed out his own business cards. The assistant liked to talk about Iraqi Kurdistan – he enjoyed telling me about the history of the Kurds. I already knew; he did not know that I knew, or he did not care, or maybe the talking was part of his job as a research assistant. The PhD student loved being in the city. People were so friendly and helpful, he told me. He could walk everywhere, go everywhere, and do everything. It was amazing, he exclaimed. Later, he ordered raki at the expensive rooftop hotel bar with a splendid view over the evening city lights. I glanced around. I knew that people were looking, and I was mindful of the risk that someone would see me drinking alcohol and disapprove. I was a woman, had family relations in the city, and people were keeping an eye out for me (out of curiosity, out

of care). He poured more raki and water into his glass, seeing it turn milky-white.

My meeting with the European PhD student took place in Sulaimani during the autumn of 2012. We shared the same access to take up space and feel comfortable in the café setting and at the expensive rooftop restaurant and bar – urban spaces where the middle class and expats hang out. But I realised the difference between our ways of orienting and moving around in the city. We were both visible as 'Europeans' when moving around in the city, but he was orienting himself through his male body, whereas I through my female body. And when he told me how he could go everywhere, and when he drank raki without thinking about other people looking at him drinking alcohol (at least, this is what it seemed like to me), I realised that, even though we both felt comfortable in middle-class spaces, our gendered bodies made a difference to the ways in which we were orienting. And it became clear to me how it mattered that I was not solely an outsider and 'European researcher', but that I had family relations in the city and this filled my orientation patterns with concern about notions of keeping up middle-class respectability.

Previously, when visiting Sulaimani, friends and family, with my partner at the time, we never wore symbols of marriage such as rings. When leaving for the three-month stay in 2012, I decided that I wanted to wear a ring on my ring finger. Upon arrival in the city, I went to the bazaar and bought two cheap silver rings. I had a feeling that I would be more credible when going around by myself if I visibly performed 'married woman'. Since I usually do not like to wear jewellery, I always took off the ring when entering the apartment that I had rented. One day, when meeting with an employee at the American University, I realised in the middle of our conversation that I had forgotten to put on my ring when I had rushed out of the door that morning. I had left it in my bag, and I tried to slip it back onto my finger as casually as I could. The employee asked, astonished, if I really did take off my wedding ring at night, and I got myself caught up in some long story about my sensitive, irritated skin. At that moment I realised that nobody else had ever paid attention to the presence of my ring, and I started to think about for whose sake I was wearing it.

Waiting for the elevator at the University of Sulaimani after an interview with Xezal and Tara, two female students at the Department of

Education, Tara suddenly asked me if I had had a romantic relationship with my partner before we got married. I was surprised, as I was usually not asked this type of personal question. Having put a lot of effort and thought into the matter of wearing a wedding ring, I automatically answered right away with the story that I had ready. Yes, we had known each other as friends, but, most importantly, now we were married. I just could not get into the business of telling them about the general status of couples in Denmark living together without being married. I had to cling to my story of the married woman. I was so afraid that somebody would label me as unrespectable, and that it would have consequences for the meetings that I wanted to be able to have with a variety of university students. Afterwards, I felt a slightly annoyed sense of not having told the whole story to the two students to whom I had just asked a lot of questions myself. But not telling is also a way of protecting research participants from the responsibility of fully knowing circumstances that could be perceived as problematic; sometimes boundaries protect. By asking me about my previous experience with relationships before marriage, Tara obviously saw through my act of wearing a wedding ring, but at the same time we kept up appearances together by not digging deeper into the issue. I did not step outside the line of respectability, and Tara did not pursue her questioning. We followed the script of respectability, but we might have chosen differently if we had got to know each other better. There is a gap between norms and cultural practices, and it illustrates how important it is to make things look right even though everybody knows things might be working differently. Being some kind of an outsider within, I handled this gap between how things are supposed to be and how they are practised. This gap is handled by anyone in daily practice of making things look right, as with this example of producing a respectable narrative of becoming and being a couple. Normative ideas of respectability do not necessarily mean that people actually abide by these norms, but that they are the public narratives that one has to engage with and relate to.

In the following I focus on *orientations* towards the figure of middle-class respectability. It is important to bear in mind that these orientations are ambivalent in the sense that on the one hand they strive towards a normative figuration of respectability, but on the other hand this orientation is always ambivalent and full of negotiations. In Gritt B.

Nielsen's words, it is a double analytical movement of seeing both the freeze-frames and the emerging figures (Nielsen 2010).

Orientations

In a phenomenologically inspired analysis, feminist cultural critic Sara Ahmed is interested in how bodies orientate themselves by leaning and *reaching* towards certain objects (Ahmed 2006:552). She illustrates this with an example from her own family gathered around the dining table looking at family photographs. Her sister is indicating similarities in appearance between two boys and their fathers, the eyes of the family members following her finger pointing at the photograph, and thereby all participate in performing a recognition of a specific idea and *orientation* of a family *line* (Ahmed 2006:556–557). Ahmed uses the analytical concept of a *straight line* to understand the lines that bodies are expected to follow and orient towards to become straight and in line with the heteronormative logics of straight oriented bodies (Ahmed 2006:554,562).

I am inspired by the idea of the straight line as a leaning and orientation towards the emerging figure of middle-class respectability in everyday practices in Sulaimani. What is straight in Ahmed's analysis can be translated into respectability in my ethnography. Thinking through the notion of orientations, in the following I will explore what students are orienting themselves towards when they participate in or are the subjects of gossip on campus. When they dance at university parties, how can movements be understood as a choreography of orientations and lines? And what does it mean to drive around on the roads in line with all the other cars in the urban space and have a middle-class home to return to? I will now look into these forms of middle-class orientations.

Gossip

Gossip is a point of orientation that creates lines of being situated on the right or the wrong side of respectability. Gossip in and around the university campus came up in many conversations, with students from both UOS and AUIS. Gossip and rumours about possible romantic

relationships between female and male students was a central theme. Aida, a female student in Statistics at UOS, described how she had experienced some male students on the campus wanting to be seen together with female students, and she explained: "Those kind of friends are just for the face. To tell the other boys: 'Hey guys, I am the man who has many girls; they have made friends with me.'" So while for some male students hanging out with female students could give status, according to Aida's narrative, it seemed to work differently for female students. Perwin, a female student, also in Statistics at UOS, described how hanging out with a "boy" could make people think that he was her "boyfriend", which would not give her any favourable status but, on the contrary, could create rumours.

Gossip around romantic relationships is an orientation relevant in order to keep on the straight line of respectable femininity either by pointing out others who are falling out of line or by trying to turn away from the gossip altogether. Female students worried about this because that line is important.

I interviewed the engaged couple at AUIS, Lale and Rebaz. They told me how they had told their closest two friends about their relationship only just before they got officially engaged. Lale described how they were careful not to transgress any social "boundaries".

> Yeah, because I think the key thing is family, and our families are really open. And still we were even like we are boyfriend and girlfriend: we took the boundaries of the social ideology we did not sit alone, we did not touch, we did not go out alone. So even if it were like in the Suli University [University of Sulaimani] it would have been the same, because we had not broken any boundaries. The only thing was that we were secretly talking to each other.

Even though their families knew about their relationship and approved of it, Lale and Rebaz were careful not to transgress boundaries of proper behaviour in public spaces (not to be alone and close with a person of 'the opposite sex' that is not a family member) in order not to be the subject of gossip. Since their plan was to stay together as a couple, keeping the *boundaries* was a common issue for Lale and Rebaz in order to become a respectable future middle-class couple.

In the group interview with female students at UOS, I was told how students can be 'open' or 'closed', concepts that also came up in other

conversations. Open-minded students are described as communicating with many people on campus; closed-minded students are described as keeping to themselves, not revealing their thoughts and feelings. Being an open person, talking freely to people can make you vulnerable, and the risk is that somebody "points you out as a wrong person, as a bad person", stated Berin, studying Engineering. The movement of *pointing* is an orientation away from being a *bad person*, which can be seen as a way of giving the person pointing a position of being a *good person* or transferring the gaze from the person pointing to what is being pointed out as bad and unrespectable. The group of female students at UOS told me that they would only hang out with four to five people on the campus. They felt they had to find a group of people whom they could trust and who could keep their secrets within the group. And they would stick together. Fidan, studying Engineering, said: "People are like hunters to have your wrongs and talk about you among themselves."

In talks about gossip, looking and being looked at is a central movement of orientation. The student Perwin formulated a very precise statement about how she experienced a gaze that is present at all times as some kind of script that people follow, stating that "Their minds are in their eyes. They only talk about what they see." The gaze is almost like a trap; Perwin's description has a claustrophobic sense clinging to it since the gaze seems inescapable. You cannot do anything without somebody looking at you. It might be too deterministic to use Althusser's notion of interpellation (Althusser 1971), since gossip is a policing that takes place between peers and not a state exercising power through interpellation. But in the case of perceived romantic relationships, I think the concept of interpellation can be useful to some extent. To be interpellated as: "Hey, you with the boyfriend" can mark you as a 'bad person' if you are a female student, and can affect your reputation for a long time, in the same way as if you were interpellated as a criminal subject. The subject of romantic relationships is powerful and full of boundary work between, especially, 'good' and 'bad' 'girls'. Several students told me that female students were more at risk of being subjects of gossip around 'bad' reputation.

Writing about the figure of the *respectable female student* feels 'sticky' (Ahmed 2012 [2004]:89) in the sense that other narratives and figures easily stick to it. The description of female students as subjects of gossip can be read as a description of a dominant patriarchal culture at the

university. I feel slightly uneasy about this as I see the very sticky hegemonic narrative and figuration of the Kurdish/Iraqi woman as a *victim of both war and patriarchal violence* approaching. It is difficult to write about narratives of gossip and respectable femininity without the fear of these narratives being read by a reader in Scandinavia as 'social control' in a single story about 'brown men controlling brown women's bodies' in ways that are read by a Western audience as a specific oppressive Middle Eastern gender regime (Abu-Lughod 2013). The repertoire of figures and narratives around women/femininity related to Iraqi Kurdistan as viewed from a position outside seems to be either 'hero' (the female fighter) or 'victim'.

I have been back and forth reconsidering the risk of reinforcing this figuration of the 'victim' by stating it here as a fact of representation, when it is challenged by many others than just me. But I got a wake-up call when I participated in the documentary film festival CPH:DOX's screening of a film on Kobani in March 2017 where 'Kurdish culture' and 'honour violence' were connected without any question in a debate after the film. The link between 'Kurdish culture' and 'honour violence'[81] was established by both the (male) film director (living in Europe, born in Iraqi Kurdistan) and the Danish journalist convening the debate. I was reminded of the necessity to clearly state that this is a stubborn representation travelling around and taking up space as a general fact representing 'Kurdish culture' and 'Kurdish women'.

The figure of 'the Kurdish female as victim' is present not only in a Western context, but also in a Kurdish context. In 2008 when I did research for my BA thesis in Sulaimani (Scott Jessen 2008), visiting different organisations and individuals working with a focus on gender and women in different ways (a newspaper, shelters, youth clubs), a common figuration in narratives from middle-class professional women working with gender issues was that of 'the victim of violence' – the victim as the rural, poor, uneducated migrant or young woman. This figuration strengthens the image of a modern middle-class position of the professional woman who is not victimised. Campaigns around gendered domestic violence and shelters are funded both from within the region

[81] I am not here going deeper into the discussion of representations of 'violence in the name of honour', on which Minoo Alinia has done an extensive analysis in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan (Alinia 2013).

and from foreign donors. Bringing this up is not to state that these campaigns are not important, or that violence against women is not crucial to fight and raise awareness about. What I am stating is that when I talked about my interest in 'gender' (actually a word that some professionals use in a Kurdish pronounciation of the English 'gender'), middle-class urban professionals mostly expected me to be interested in violence against women.

The narratives from students around everyday experiences of gossip were not in the context of victimisation, but about irritation over rigid categorisations of 'good' and 'bad' femininities and how to navigate and negotiate them. When these quotes are put here in the context of a thesis they can easily seem to weigh down the text with serious implications, and all of a sudden I fear that narratives around 'females as passive victims of social control' might pop up and stick to the reading. Gossip is working both as social glue and as a control mechanism, but is also negotiated and challenged by students. Gossip was talked about in relation to navigating the university space as a young female student and thinking about what other people might think about you. Gossip is an object of orientation in Sulaimani as elsewhere. By participating in the sharing of relevant information of the social fabric on campus, pointing out what is right and wrong according to norms, especially concerning romantic relationships, boundary work around respectability is negotiated. At UOS, some students told me that gossip is spread because students are bored, due to the fact that many are not studying subjects of their own choice, and because of this students skip lessons and have a lot of time to start rumours.

An orientation around gossip is not specific to university students in Sulaimani. Feminist scholar Fanny Ambjörnsson has shown how Swedish female high-school students are negotiating respectable gendered and classed identities (Ambjörnsson 2003). The specific meanings of being 'respectable' are, though, always context-specific. Being dependent on kinship systems in a (post-)conflict society where there is no welfare state taking care of your needs, your reputation is not only your own business but is of importance to the whole family. Boundary work around 'good' and 'bad' persons becomes important precisely because family interdependency and reputation are fundamental in order to have a chance of getting a future job, get married and move away from the parents' home.

Returning back to Skeggs' reading of Bourdieu on respectability as a form of gendered and classed capital, in the same line of thought I will argue that navigating through gossip and guarding one's reputation for this group of university students is a form of investment in what can be understood as 'family capital'. Perceiving the navigation in relation to gossip and reputation as a capital investment makes it clear that young people do this because they gain something. They gain access to roads leading into respectable middle-class futures. Respectability and family capital among middle-class students can be described as a privilege, and, if they succeed in investing and guarding that privilege by performing middle-class respectability, they will be able to participate in middle-class reproduction for their own benefit.

Respectability does not come as a ready-made product, but is negotiated among students. In a break at AUIS I sat outside in the sun, when I saw the student Nina smoke a cigarette. In public spaces in 2012 it was not often that I would see women smoke; mostly older women, if any. Smoking was mainly a public male activity or an activity for women in private spaces or in bars – bars being a contested space for respectable middle-class female bodies. Nina smoked her cigarette during the break but, when a teacher passed by, she hid the cigarette. It looked like a show of smoking as a way of testing the boundaries – would it be noticed? What would happen if it were noticed? As if the *smoking female student* was a figure Nina could embody as a way to test how, when and where the lines of respectability were drawn in the space of the AUIS campus.

Dancing

Nina and Hejin, who grew up not far away from each other in Europe, did not meet until the entrance exam at AUIS in Sulaimani. They found that they had what they described as the same "mindset" and it just "clicked" between them. They told me about a party on the AUIS campus where their friend, a Kurdish-European student, was the DJ and played English music.

> Hejin: When you start a new semester, then everybody has to get to know each other. But you don't really because everyone is sitting by themselves. But anyways, you enter, you sit there, and then it is 'dancing Kurdish' from six till ten/eleven in the evening. And then you go home. So it is

> basically like a Kurdish party. But [the American guy], he created a party where the DJ was European. It was our friend. He is also European and attends the university. He was the DJ this evening. We had a rapper who came and sang in English. He is a colleague of Nina working at the radio [station]. He turned off the lights so that it became like a disco and club feeling. Played R&B and pop and it was English music. That part lasted around half an hour approximately.
>
> Nina: The point was that this was sufficient for this guy. He is so American that he asked everybody to actually get up and dance without feeling ashamed. At the other Kurdish parties that we have attended – Kurdish dance, I don't know if you have seen how you dance? Everyone is standing holding hands, you go round and round and round. And basically, you do not show who you really are, you just do the same steps over and over again. And you have to look good and, if you fall, then everybody will laugh at you, and nobody will help you. Simply, you have to stand upright like a Barbie, totally perfect. And then when you sit down at the table, then you have to sit nicely. Everything is so formal.
>
> Hejin: Yes.
>
> Nina: But at this other party that the guy arranged, the American guy, everybody was so relaxed, and people danced.

This narrative of different ways of dancing evolves around orientations towards ideas of 'Kurdish' and 'European'/'American'. Nina and Hejin told me that usually at the university parties, Kurdish music is played and the students dance the traditional Kurdish dance, where you dance in a line. As Nina related above, "you do not show who you really are, you just do the same steps over and over again". At the party with the English music playing, students were encouraged to dance individually. Some students did this, and Nina enthusiastically described this kind of dancing as "everybody showed who they really are". Nina said that she also participated in dancing individually to the English music at the party, but Hejin did not dance to the club music. She comes from a known family and she told me that she did not want to create any rumours.

> Even if I would just be dancing and having fun, it could be changed to something completely different. That is the irritating part, but no matter how much I would want it, then it just does not work, it is just no-go.

So, even though Hejin wished to dance to the club music, her status as the daughter of a known family positioned her as vulnerable to gossip, as she described her own situation.

The university campus at the American University is a specific space, and the party taking place there is to some extent sheltered from the gaze of the outside world. The students dancing at the party are oriented towards English music, orienting their bodies in a different way on the dance floor and moving in what Nina perceived as an individualised style *showing who you are*. This way of orienting oneself is contrasted with the collective choreography of the Kurdish dance, where Nina described the choreography as doing "the same steps over and over again" in a collective pattern. Nina and Hejin did not talk about the individual lead part of the Kurdish dance where a person breaks free and swings the *chopy* (scarf) or the expected choreography of dancing individually that Hejin felt she could not participate in. It is an orientation towards what is perceived as Western individualism and away from ideas of a collective movement of a repetition of Kurdish dance steps in a row. From the way Nina described it, I got the picture that the female figure of the *Barbie* participating in these movements is stuck in a line holding the others' hands. In opposition to this is the individualised stepping out of the line, the *relaxed* dancing in the *club feeling* with dimmed lights *without feeling ashamed*. Nina and Hejin's story about the party is not orienting towards the respectability of *the Barbie figure*, but orienting away from what they perceive as her fakeness. She is just a Barbie; she is not a real person showing who she really is. But even though the AUIS campus is sheltered somewhat from the gaze of the outside world, Hejin does not feel comfortable enough about stepping into the individual and *relaxed* Western dancing style. She is afraid of taking a wrong step and being the subject of gossip.

Nina and Hejin pointed out several times during our conversation that people behave in a superficial 'Kurdish' way as opposed to an open and relaxed 'European attitude'. They were referring to the superficial lifestyles in TV series like *Gossip Girl*. They had not thought that this lifestyle existed before coming to Sulaimani, but they experience the same kind of gossip and focus on reputation among students at AUIS caring about clothing and cars. They talked about how some students do not go by name, but are called 'the guy with that car'. They are also engaged in this themselves, describing self-reflexively how they have

entered what they call a "bubble", relating to social life and norms on campus. It can be embarrassing to arrive at the campus by taxi, they told me; it is better to have your own car or driver. But their car is not a fancy Jaguar or Range Rover, like some of the other students' cars, which positions them as more relaxed and only partly in the bubble of social norms. It is interesting to note that Nina and Hejin's use of the bubble metaphor to describe social life on campus (and in the city) is similar to the way I describe the bubble temporality of Sulaimani.

Nina was a volunteer host at a radio station. She described the radio station as a small world of its own where she felt at home. In the studio, Nina and her colleagues could easily communicate about "everything" in a different way than when "outside", she told me. 'European' students from AUIS were running it, and they only played American/English hits. The aim of the radio station was that young Kurds, by way of English music and radio programmes, could learn about European life, as Nina described it. This was based on an idea that the English music as the essence of 'European' culture would leak out into society through the ears of the station's audience. Nina told me that her cousins, who did not speak English, had listened to the station, and one of them had asked in English with a strong Kurdish accent if they could play Fifty Cent. This was progress, according to Nina, like the students dancing to English music at the AUIS party.

Talking with Nina and Hejin about going out and partying, I asked if it would be possible for them to go out as young females in the city and have a beer.[82] Nina shared a personal experience related to going out in public.

> I have some personal experiences related to that. I started to get to know some more Europeans, some from [a big European city]. They had lived in [a European city] for as long as I had lived in [a European city]. So we had the same kind of attitude and way of thinking – that you should be able to do what you like. We went out a couple of times, we had fun all together. We went to [a fancy rooftop restaurant and bar at a hotel]. It is mostly Americans who go there, American teachers and so on. We went

[82] My question about drinking beer as a woman in public may seem very specific and unnecessary, but it comes from my own experiences as a woman of balancing when and where it would be acceptable to drink a beer, as I have described earlier in this chapter in relation to my meeting with the European PhD student.

> there, we had a drink, we had fun. We were mixed girls and boys. Shortly after, maybe two/three weeks – we were there a couple of times, it was not only once – some time after that, we heard from people: "Oh my God, this girl and that girl were with these guys and did this." And it was a shock for everybody. If we had continued to go there, it would have become a big problem, so we stopped directly. We were directly shocked. We thought, "If we want to continue to live in this city, and if we want people to respect us, then we have to stop doing this. For our own sake."

Nina's orientation towards a European experience of hanging out as 'girls' and 'guys' ("mixed") and having a drink was abruptly ended by the realisation that this was not possible if she wanted to keep her middle-class respectability. It is interesting how Nina states that they stopped going out *for their own sake*, which underlines agency in handling difficult situations and the choice to act to avoid unmanageable consequences. Nina and Hejin would occasionally drink some wine at home, they told me, with their siblings, people whom they trust. Doing what they want, but in a space where it is possible and safe and will not harm their public life in the future. They are choosing to lead a publicly respectable middle-class life with all its privileges; the privilege of middle-class respectability that you have to embody and perform in order to keep it, because it can wash off if you don't orient towards respectability in your everyday life. Rooftop bars with Americans and expats and the AUIS campus might be spaces oriented towards (Western) modernity, but they are still spaces connected to the rest of the urban space of Sulaimani.[83]

Gated middle-class communities

I was being driven through the entrance to Gundi Almani (German Village), a newly built, planned neighbourhood in Sulaimani. The security guard was familiar with the big SUV, and the chauffeur drove smoothly over the speed-slowing bump in the road. I was entering the small, gated community of houses and apartments lying at the bottom of the Zagros Mountains in the northern part of Sulaimani surrounded by

[83] Also see de Koning's *Global Dreams* (2009) and Peterson's *Connected in Cairo* (2011) on spaces of transnational modernity.

well-kept green lawns with colourful flowers (requiring a lot of water during many months of dryness), and a private kindergarten.

This new neighbourhood was one of the first gated communities in the city, and more have followed (e.g. Garden City in Sulaimani and American Village in Hewlêr; see also King 2014:222). The new neighbourhoods carry names with reference to Western locations or romantic visions of green landscapes. Lale lived with her family in one of these new urban villages (gated communities), and she, together with her fiancé Rebaz, had already bought off-plan an apartment to be built in a similar neighbourhood (as I also describe in Chapter 3).

The residents of Gundi Almani (and other urban new gated communities) are part of the urban middle class settling on recently developed land in the urban space. They are either newly married couples setting up home in apartments or families with children moving into a house of their own. King uses the term to live "neolocally" to describe the fact that people move to a new place and thus break with traditional patrilocal residence patterns, where the bride traditionally has moved in with the groom's family on the land that belongs to the patrilineage (King 2014:128). The neolocal settling pattern is popular among the urban, nuclear middle-class families. This new way of settling down and starting your own family on land independent of the patrilineal line makes way for new meanings to be made from land – place – home – family, and is an important part of shaping gender relations in the urban nuclear middle-class family (ibid.).

A house in a neighbourhood like Gundi Almani signals middle-class economic and symbolic capital status. Sami Zubaida writes about the modern city that is "spatially stratified in terms of class, status and differential access to services and amenities" (Zubaida 1991:95). But at the same time, Zubaida describes how "'traditional'[84] networks of patronage and primary solidarities" in the Middle East and elsewhere, despite transformation of urban quarters, can still mobilise political organisation (ibid.:96). Shared class interests in security and economy are dividing the urban space in Iraqi Kurdistan into segregated neighbourhoods of class homogeneity such as Gundi Almani and its middle-class residents, who do not share a historical relationship of living

[84] "'Traditional' is put in inverted commas to indicate the superficiality of the designations" (Zubaida 1991:96).

on the same land for generations, but share their desire for and capability of middle-class belonging.

Lale's desire to live in a middle-class neighbourhood similar to the one where she grew up underlines the symbolic (and material) importance of the home as a class indicator: the middle-class home securing middle-class respectability; the future home as an important point of orientation. Through the privilege of inhabiting and imagining this kind of middle-class home, research subjects are distancing themselves from and orienting themselves away from urban working-class neighbourhoods, rural villages and migrant labour working inside homes which are not their own. My own access to enter the spaces of middle-class homes, and to do it in good time before the risk of darkness marked me as unrespectable, was my own orientation towards embodying respectability through belonging to the right kind of home. This made me understand Lale's and others' cautious guarding of the privileges of orienting towards respectability through the middle-class home.

When I heard the sunset prayer (*Maghreb*) calling out from the minarets over the city, and the calm of evening darkness started to fill the streets, I knew it was my cue to return home. Walking uphill from the bazaar, looking at the mountains bathed in soft red evening light. Walking along the streets together with other people on their way home carrying white and black plastic bags stuffed with vegetables bought from the local market, or heaps of freshly baked flatbread (*naanibazar*) or still-warm rolls (*samun*) straight from the oven. Rows of cars on the street, packed with restless passengers. Evening-time calling me home, darkness shrinking my space of movement. Being a respectable middle-class female with a home to return to, with groceries to shop, with a dinner to prepare and eat, with people to be with on soft sofas and clean carpets inside the walls of the home, illuminated by the bright lights from the TV set. Protected from the gaze of those excluded from these privileges.

Having a car of one's own

> Cars, for example, might signal individualised consumption, but they can also be filled with people (one's neighbours or kin, for example). (Mercer, James and Lemanski 2017)

Cultural anthropologist Deborah Durham names cars and houses as two main areas of middle-class consumption in her research on African middle classes (Durham 2017). Like homes, cars can be perceived as a safe space and as an orientation towards respectability. Ahmed's notion of orientation by following a *line* makes me think of the everyday experience of moving about in Sulaimani on the packed streets with endless rows of cars in the rush hours of morning and afternoon traffic. The body in the private space of the car in the public space of the road. Bodies in cars in straight rows are a form of everyday orientation in Sulaimani towards the everyday normality of going from A to B to C. Fitting into the flow of the traffic of so many cars on the packed hot roads, this is a way to be oriented towards the everyday straight line of privileged normal life, lining up in cars. Autoethnographic experiences of being a body in a car are a focal entry point into understanding cars as a way of orienting in middle-class everyday life.

For every time I have visited Sulaimani, I see more and more cars on the roads. Several of the students at the American University were driving back and forth to school in their own cars. A lot of students (AUIS and UOS) bundled together in groups of four and hired a personal taxi-driver to take them to the campus every day for a monthly stipend, even though they could have ridden on public buses for less than half of the price (as I also describe in Chapter 3). As the two university campuses lay on the outskirts of the city[85], to get there required almost an hour's car ride from the city centre through morning and afternoon traffic (not because it was a long way, but because the roads were packed during rush hours and the traffic moved extremely slowly). It was easy to hail a taxi by just stepping out on the street, which I would do, and then settle a price with the driver before getting in. But I would never tell family members that I travelled in a taxi by myself. If they knew, they would feel obliged to drive me in one of the many family cars, which would be

[85] UOS also had a campus in the city centre.

seen as better and more convenient. After a while I realised that family members had found out about my solo taxi rides, and they had started to worry about me. It was impossible for me to pinpoint the nature of the worrying that was taking place – was it because I could get kidnapped or harassed? Or were they worried about what other people would think of me and of my relatives because I was driving around alone in different taxis without their help? In the end, I came to the conclusion that the reason did not really matter, because either way my behaviour was causing worry. My partner at the time and I made the decision to rent a car. I did not hold a driver's licence, so sometimes he would drive me to the university entrance, and often I would just take a taxi in the early morning by myself as I had done before. But with the rent of a car we became credible as a respectable middle-class couple moving around within the boundaries of 'safe spaces'. I just did not tell anybody when I behaved otherwise. Maybe people knew anyway, but this was an agreeable compromise settling the issue, keeping on the track of respectability.

Moving from autoethnography to students' narratives around cars, I am thinking of the day when I went with AUIS students Sehla and Avin in Sehla's very tiny, black, smart car. We had a car, so we could drive everywhere we wanted. We drove to the shopping mall City Star and sat down in the cafeteria to have French fries. And later we browsed through the shops.

I had previously talked with Sehla about her car.

> Katrine: But you have your own car to go here [AUIS]?
>
> Sehla: Yeah, and my sister as well [elder sister, also a student at AUIS].
>
> Katrine: So you have two different cars, (Sehla: Yeah) so you can go whenever it is good for you?
>
> Sehla: Because I did not have it until a month ago. But then I told my dad, because last year our schedules were together, but now this year because she is on the Engineering programme, she also has lab, and she is studying with her friends most of the time. She comes back like six o clock, and I am finished at 11.30 and I want to go home to study, or sometimes I want to have study with friends and then she wants to go home. So I said…

> Katrine: It is difficult to coordinate (Sehla: Yeah [laughing]) and you would never go with a taxi?
>
> Sehla: Ehm, I used to go last year. Oh, you mean a taxi with a driver? (Katrine: Yeah) It is like if you have a driver, then he is not going to take you alone, or he is like charging extra money. Otherwise you should be with a group and then at the time you would have to, like, really early in the morning you would have to wake up and be ready, because he is going to all the houses and then he is coming to the university. So my dad said, "Why not have your own car and at the same time you can do like things for your mom as well" or for my other brother.
>
> Katrine: Oh, you will drive people? (Sehla: Yeah) Okay, so you are becoming a taxi–driver! [Sehla laughs]
>
> Sehla: Yeah, I was like, "I don't need a taxi–driver – I am a taxi-driver myself!" [Both laugh]
>
> Katrine: So how much do you charge?
>
> Sehla: Nothing! [Both laugh] I like to go out, so I don't mind. I am like studying and my mom is like: "Take me to the supermarket – I need stuff." And I say: "Okay." Then my sister is like: "I want to go there. Should we go there and get an ice-cream, or go to look at the shop and, you know, and clothes and, you know, shopping?" And I was like: "Okay." And then my other brother is calling and: "Hey, I'm at the cinema. Can you come and pick me up, okay!" [Laughs] So I don't mind.

Sehla is enjoying the freedom of having her own car. With the car, Sehla is able to move around in a safe space, but she also enjoys being part of a bigger body of family members needing her to drive them around. Asking others for favours inside a family network is similar for men and women. It is an exchange of being taken care of and taking care of others. It is a privilege for Sehla to be able to perform *the taxi-driver*, and in other situations to have others do that for her.

Sehla tells me about the move from Europe to Sulaimani several years earlier, which was a collective family journey by car.

> Sehla: (…) But then my dad came back in the summer [from Sulaimani to Europe], and he bought three cars and he said: "We are going back with the car." So we did not really have time.

Katrine: He bought three cars?

Sehla: Yeah. We are like eight people, and we could not all fit in one car. And we had also like stuff, like clothes, and you could not go with the aeroplane. So my uncle and the cousin of my father drove the other two cars, and from that we came back by car. But it was all in a week – it was really, really like sudden for us.

Katrine: So you did not know about the decision before?

Sehla: Yeah, because the decision was not clear yet. He was like: "You are coming back or you are not." And then this summer he came, and he said: "Okay, we are going back."

"We are going back with the car", as Sehla echoes her father's announcement, is a choice of travel that I am surprised by. Travelling by car is in my imaginary connected to driving around in Europe or to drive around in Iraqi Kurdistan, but not between the two places. My own travels to Iraqi Kurdistan have always been by aeroplane. The journey by car geographically connects Europe and Iraqi Kurdistan in an undisrupted way. The family having three cars of their own, with enough space for their *stuff* and being in charge of the driving, creates a narrative of the move from Europe to Sulaimani almost as if it were just a picnic trip. The car signals agency and middle-class capital and normality. And for Sehla in Sulaimani, her car affords her freedom of movement.

Conclusion

To write about middle-class lives, and in this chapter middle-class female respectability, is in Haraway's words a "missing visual text" (Haraway 1997:52) in many Western representations of the Global South. I have traced the figuration of the female fighter to show representations of Kurdish fierce femininity from a Western gaze, but I have also shown how the fashion of the Peshmerga outfit is desired in a Kurdish context as a mix of strategic politics and fashion consumption. I have shown the gap between the hegemonic story of the female fighter figure and then the stories that I have listened to from students. The desire for specific stories about fierce female fighters risks closing down for both an actual interest

in a nuanced historical understanding of the role of Kurdish women resisting and fighting, and other forms of normative femininity and positions for women, that are neither hero nor victim but, as in this study, middle-class everydayness.

With inspiration from Ahmed's concept of orientation, I analytically describe what students are turning towards and against. These orientations show what is perceived as respectable and modern and worth striving for, reaching for and orienting towards. Inherent in the orientation towards respectability, there is also a turning-away that works as a middle-class distinction towards 'others' – working-class women, migrant women, and 'bad girls', which become the figures of 'unrespectable women' with whom the figure of the respectable middle-class femininity is understood to be in contrast.

Iraqi Kurdistan is a class society and the urban space is governed by class stratification and urban segregation. Cars and middle-class neighbourhoods and homes signal respectable lives and promise *safe spaces* as a class distinction to the imagined *unsafe spaces* on the other side of the line of respectability. By offering the details and narratives of dancing, gossip and driving around in a car, I show what students are orienting themselves towards and against in order to present themselves as the respectable, modern citizens that they want to be perceived as.

My autoethnographic writing has enabled me to sense these microscale orientations (in which I have participated, myself) – which show that gender respectability is not an abstract idea, but something that is embedded in everyday movements. It is important to read these movements in context and see them as both confinement and privilege. I suggest that an understanding of orientations towards respectability in urban Sulaimani should see those as investment in roads leading to middle-class futures. Students invest in this kind of respectability because they have something to lose, a measurable privilege to lose. I am arguing that a detailed analysis of the everyday orientations towards cars and homes needs to be read as privilege outside the logics of a Western focus on a specific kind of individual autonomy as the main signifier of being modern, privileged and middle-class. Embodying the role of the family's taxi-driver, like Sehla does, is a privileged position as well as having family members drive you. Having a home to return to at the right time is also a privileged position. Family interdependency goes hand in hand with middle-class privilege in Sulaimani.

CHAPTER 6

Reading and writing desires for hopeful normalities

In this final chapter, I will present and discuss my findings in relation to methodological feminist dilemmas at the core of relationships between the Global North and the Global South regarding issues of representation, authorship and voice.

Central questions in this final chapter are: What does it entail to read and write about the desires for middle-class normality in a (post-)conflict context in the Global South? How does it relate to notions of fragile hopes? And what are the relations between my reading/writing taking place in Scandinavia and the desires for middle-class normality that I locate in urban Sulaimani?

The chapter is organised into two main sections. First, I will sum up my overall conclusions, and then relate these to a broader epistemological discussion of analytical reading practices of hope and agency in narratives of ordinary, everyday life. Then, I will move to a discussion around how to analytically work with the subject of violence in relation to my study, and I will discuss the relevance of stories of ordinary middle-class aspirations from a region affected by a violent conflict.

Emerging middle-class normality-seekers – conclusion

My study is an investigation of microscale everyday middle-class lives in neoliberal times of globalisation viewed from the urban space of (post-) conflict Sulaimani.

My findings add to an important scholarly discussion on the pressing need to study the emergence of the growing middle classes in the Global South. I show that in a region ridden by conflict, it is still vital to look into class relations in order to understand the organisation of society beyond the reiteration of notions of sectarian/ethnic/religious divisions of people. Ethnographic explorations of global middle-class aspirations in the Global South are important in order to get a nuanced understanding of the Global North/Global South divide.

A central knowledge claim evolving from the study is how the figuration of ordinary gendered middle-class respectability, that is present in everyday lives among students, challenges the image of Kurds or Iraqis in a Western perspective of representation where certain figures of either 'hero' or 'victim of war' or the 'oppressed Kurdish/Iraqi/Muslim woman' are dominant.

The student Lale's narrative that she simply "just wanna live" captures a widespread feeling among students navigating in the (post-)conflict landscape of urban Sulaimani with middle-class aspirations for future times to come. I have illustrated and analysed how much work it takes to *just wanna live* – the work of trying to arrive into a desired middle-class ordinary normality as a young adult being part of an emerging middle class in a temporality of relative peace in the urban space of Iraqi Kurdistan that is situated in a tension between violence and peaceful, ordinary life.

I am arguing that a critical queer inquiry into normativity and temporality is crucial in order to understand the bubble of urban Sulaimani and the desires for normality. The imagined ordinary future and 'normal time' becomes a way to cling on to, or embody a present-day hope for, brighter futures and the progress of time away from conflict. This desire for normality among middle-class university students is both mimicking and illustrating ideas of (Western) modernity interpreted from urban Iraqi Kurdistan. Narratives of middle-class modernity serve a

specific function in this (post-)conflict society with the promise of stepping into an imagined middle-class normality disconnected from experiences of growing up in times of war.

My study shows the ambivalent role of the university regarding both the reproduction of (class) privileges but also in the production of individual and collective professional identities. On one side, students need certificates in the form of university degrees to get employment that fits their middle-class ambitions, but on the other side narratives of dependence on intercession (*wasta*) through family, connections or political affiliation in order to make it into the job market are often told. While students at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) mainly expect to find employment in the private sector, students at the University of Sulaimani (UOS) have traditionally had a more direct link to employment in the public sector. Navigating both sectors is narrated by students in terms of the need for connections, though to a lesser extent in narratives from AUIS students who wish to seek employment in e.g. one of the big private telecommunications companies.

The university space is an arena of young adult life, but to a great extent narrated as a waiting time, a rather privileged time of waiting for the future. The university is in many ways a microcosmos of the surrounding political landscape, and students do not narrate the university as a space where they create important friendships and networks that will help them establish themselves on the job market. Family histories and belongings outside of the university seem vital for students' life trajectories and possibilities, both at AUIS and UOS. For the AUIS student Karim, though, who had moved away from his family and came from a background outside of Sulaimani, the university space was experienced as a "different society" and fuelled his dreams for new future possibilities. Despite the differences, these young adults and university students share similar locations in the urban space, and it is this location that is the focus of the study.

What possible subject positions and public narratives are available for students in a (post-)conflict society in a context where performances of class boundaries are central in the creation and establishing of a global middle class? Narratives and performances of respectable middle-class femininity are one example I highlight in order to show an available subject position of both relative privilege and confinement to context-specific gendered middle-class norms.

Consumerism is also a performance that links to horizons orienting towards 'middle-class modernity' and to ideas of 'development'. Individual consumerism provides a turning away from the collective political history of 'we' the Kurds and creates distance from the suffering of a people due to repression and war. Consumerism orients away from a collective political struggle as a trajectory for hope for social justice and collective notions of being in the world and instead orients towards individual projections of happiness through consumption of clothes, houses and cars. Narratives of agency work through consumption, but also through ideas of participating actively in society by way of voluntary work.

Historical and present political conflicts are not easily escapable for a new generation growing up. The time bubble of Sulaimani at the time of the ethnography (mainly 2012) is filled with students' narratives of both bright horizons of futures with nightclubs, middle-class homes, marriage, job opportunities and engagement in voluntary work. But at the same time, there are narratives of waiting time spent dwelling and *escaping* in a temporality of *sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating* (or with suicidal thoughts), not being in charge of what is waiting ahead. There is a tension around these different narratives existing side by side.

Narratives of 'escapes' should not simply be understood as depression/no-future, but should also be read as ways out, other ways, as survival strategies, and as a making sense of the present. 'Escapes' can also be perceived as an attempt to *switch* (in the word of the student Najla) to the possibilities of other futures. There is a relative privilege of being able to *switch* and wait for the future as a university student. Other futures are narrated through the possibility of an *ordinary* future that the poet Mikhail is longing for, or Karim's urge for the ordinary in terms of finding a job and to be able to get married, or the ordinary that Nina and Hejin dream of in terms of just going out. The students are navigating in a swinging in between the ordinary as a desired (utopian) not yet and the ordinary as a liveable present.

To be able to read fragile hopes, aspirations and desires for the ordinary, normal middle-class life together with a more sceptical, passive, laidback waiting attitude towards the future has demanded methodological reflections on how to read agency and hope for a group that is both relatively privileged, but also highly vulnerable in their privileges. I will engage in this epistemological discussion in the following.

The swinging pendulum – analysing narratives of lived experience

I have been reading Karim's, Nina's and Hejin's narratives of hope and no-hope again and again in an attempt to see the nuances in despair that also has hopeful moments, and hope that also has a depressive hint underneath the surface (see Chapter 4). I have been working with concepts in the analysis stressing the nuances and complexities in how to understand students' narratives. This resonates with Connell's concept of dirty theory.

> The goal of dirty theory is not to subsume, but to clarify; not to classify from outside, but to illuminate a situation in its concreteness. And for that purpose – to change the metaphor – all is grist to the mill. Our interest as researchers is to maximise the wealth of materials that are drawn into the analysis and explanation. It is also our interest to multiply, rather than slim down, the theoretical idea that we have to work with. (Connell 2007:207)

The concept of dirty theory opens up for trying to situate myself in and analyse the narratives that are produced of Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iraqis and Kurds. There are no pure positions, no pure theoretical overview sorting everything neatly into slimmed-down boxes. To *slim down* is to make empirical material fit into theoretical constructed boxes. I am thinking of the feminist slogan "Riots, not diets!" pointing out that the system with its boxes is what we need to change, not the bodies that do not fit into these too-tight boxes. Connell's description of an "interest to multiply, rather than slim down" is, in my framework, to tell more than the single story.

In order to keep open and not fix narratives under rigid labels of either hope or despair, I have used different labels in the analysis of despair, depression, hopelessness, resignation and passivity, using different words to break open the binary between happy/unhappy and hopeful/hopeless in order to show the nuances of feeling resigned, in despair, depressed, passive, distressed, discouraged. I use the variety of terms to grasp students' nuanced narratives and not to identify depression as a clinical diagnosis. Here, I am taking a step back to look at the overarching discussion of what it is that we do, or can do, as researchers when analysing narratives from lived life.

Educational scholar Dorthe Staunæs discusses analytical reading strategies with the image of a swinging pendulum. Staunæs is preoccupied with the analytical problem of deterministic readings of peoples' lived lives. She stresses that it is to a great extent a problem relating to the way of analysing and not just about the choice of theory. Inspired by Foucault, she is working with a governmentality perspective on school lives, and operationalising two different ways of analytically reading empirical material of lived lives. She moves analytically between, on one side, what she names a *hopeful-vital reading* of *resistance* and *trouble*[86] and, on the other, what she names a *sceptical-suspicious reading* (Staunæs 2007:254). Staunæs sees a potential to resist power and governance in the form of resistance that she names 'trouble'. Trouble can be deduced from the hopeful-vital reading, and this kind of reading gives agency to the teachers and students in Staunæs' research when by stirring up trouble they make scratches on the surface of the governmentality rationales.[87] The sceptical-suspicious reading draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term *paranoia*, and this reading strategy sees the negative effects of power and government, such as trauma and self-inflicted mechanisms of suppression (Kirk and Scott 2011; Staunæs 2007:259). Staunæs's analytical swinging like a pendulum between the two reading strategies pinpoints the choices one makes when analysing, and how these choices open and close for seeing agency, resistance and hope.

I, like many other feminist scholars, am preoccupied with reading strategies and their potentials for seeing hope and agency in an analysis of narratives from lived life. I find the image of the swinging pendulum of reading strategies productive and relevant, reaching beyond the framework of a governmentality analysis. When I swing the pendulum to one side and read Nina's and Hejin's narratives through the filter of queer hope, I participate in their expressed excitement about futures to come.

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[86] My translation from the Danish word *ballade*. Laura Gilliam has introduced and developed the concept of 'ballade' in her analysis of students in Danish schools. Gilliam's concept is deriving from her empirical material (Gilliam 2009). In relation to Staunæs' analysis, I read in the term 'ballade' (trouble) a reference to Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990).

[87] She interprets Foucault's notion of freedom of practice as a place where it is possible to do resistance (Staunæs 2007:268).

When I swing the pendulum to the other side and read the fragility and impossibilities of (some of) their desires, I see how much Sisyphus work Nina and Hejin have set out to undertake in order to 'develop' Sulaimani towards their ideas of a specific Euro-American modernity. When I read Karim's narrative of suicide within a No Future and No Present framework, he is caught in despair. But when I put emphasis on his research on suicide with the stated aim "to light a candle of hope" (Karim, research paper), I highlight a present space to move around and transform his experiences of being caught in a *bad situation* into educational capital in the form of research, which underlines the hope in his narrative. The swinging pendulum of reading strategies inviting both hopeful and sceptical readings and writings is my way of structuring and handling students' narratives. A careful handling of ambivalences: not killing hope, not being hyperoptimistic.

The image of the swinging pendulum resonates with my analysis of laughter as a double movement (see section on *Laughter and the carnivalesque* in Chapter 4). Laughter as pain but at the same time also laughing back as a position of mocking power from the margins. A double movement of reading (hopeful) agency that is visible only through a careful analysis of the co-existence of hope and despair in different nuances.

A careful analytical handling of ambivalent hopes resonates with Sedgwick's description of a reparative reading strategy with a potential for inciting some kind of hope as opposed to a widespread paranoid reading or a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that Sedgwick describes as an imperative in critical theory, and especially queer studies (Sedgwick 2002:126).

> Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it did. (Sedgwick 2002: 146)

The reparative reading incites hope as a *fracturing* experience – not a unified single story narrative. I have found this kind of fractured hope in my readings of students' narratives.

My readings of hopeful futures and 'escapes' in students' narratives can be described as reparative. An attempt to engage in a soothing kind of solidary reading that does not instate analytical violence, that does not tear either fragile hopes for the future or no-future narratives apart. A reading that situates and tries to understand the meaning of either daring to dream vividly about the far away not yet future or dwelling in the present of *sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating.* Reparative readings enable an understanding of agency[88] in all its fractured forms and shows how lives are made liveable.

Liveable lives

Political philosopher Judith Butler asks in the title of her book *Frames of War: When is life grievable?* (2010). Inspired by this, I am asking: when/how are lives made *liveable* from a middle-class perspective? Butler's analytical focus is on the Western gaze and evaluation of which lives are grievable and worth mourning when lost, and which lives are not mourned because they are not perceived as worthy/real lives from a Western gaze (e.g. people drowning in the Mediterranean sea). My analytical focus is on how students narrate their own lives as liveable in an ongoing negotiation between desires, disappointments and expectations. A ping-pong movement between hopes for the future and daily adjustments to risks and possibilities in a conflict-ridden region.

I am engaging in *reading sideways*[89] hope alongside despair, trying to capture the complex entanglement. The double movement of reading both freezing frames of figures and emerging new figurations (Nielsen 2010). Double readings of students' narratives being intertwined with the political history of conflict but at the same time trying to escape.

Kejal, a student in Journalism, presented a narrative of her imagined future life that can be captured with the term of *liveability* and analysed sideways – reading desire and restraint together. She talked about the risk

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[88] For a general discussion on agency and feminist theory, see *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (McNay 2000).

[89] In the anthology *Queer Necropolitics,* editors Haritaworn et al. underline how the concepts of *queer livability* and *killability* are read analytically alongside each other in reading practices that Jaspir K. Puar describes as 'reading sideways' (Haritaworn et al. 2014:5).

of being arrested when working as a journalist when I met her in February 2012: "It is normal, it happens [that journalists are arrested], that is the way it is". I met Kejal and her friend Avzen, also a student in Journalism, for an interview at the rooftop café in City Star, one of the new shopping malls in Sulaimani. It was two days after demonstrations marking the beginning of protests in the streets against corruption and for better basic services that had taken place the previous year ('Kurdish Spring', see Chapter 3). Kejal described how a female photographer had been shot in the hand while documenting the demonstrations in 2011. Kejal was on the one hand describing threats and violence against journalists as a 'normal' condition, which she denied being afraid of. On the other hand, she was describing how she would try to avoid writing about politics in her future job even though she was interested in it. She told me how writing about politics would put her at risk of being taken to court, since she did not experience that the political system guarded a free press. The political situation of threats against journalists is 'normal', and it shapes Kejal's narrative of her future career. She is trying to balance between what is possible and what is desirable. Kejal's desire to work as a journalist is imagined possible if she keeps away from writing directly on politics. She is negotiating the content and limits of a *desirable* and a *liveable* career. This negotiation evokes a picture in my head of Kejal drawing lines around herself, trying to contain as much as possible of her own desires and at the same time creating a shape that is liveable in the context of imagining a future career as a journalist in Sulaimani in the present of 2012.

Looking up *liveable* in the dictionary, it has two dimensions:

> suitable to live in, enjoyable to live in
> making it possible to live or to have the things that people need to live properly
>
> (Merriam-Webster online)

On the one side, liveable has positive connotations to something enjoyable. On the other, liveable can mean making it possible to live in order to survive.[90] This tension is also found in Kejal's narrative between

[90] Also see Farsakoglu (forthcoming 2018) for a similar discussion and analysis of reading lives 'in the margins'.

the desire for an enjoyable life and a possible life. Kejal's narrative is related to other students' narratives in the sense that she is imagining her future opportunities within the possibilities given the context, and she is complying with the circumstances. Bearing in mind that the liveability that it is possible for Kejal to imagine is privileged when seen in relation to working-class job prospects, and migrant and domestic labour. Kejal has possibilities to pursue a professional career due to her education and a family background that supports her. This can be described as a projection of hope through her individual career, and thereby a disidentification with hope as a collective political project of previous generations in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Is the glass half-full of optimism or pessimism?

The boundaries between the enjoyable and the possible in Kejal's narrative, optimism and pessimism, need to be read together. In *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010), Sara Ahmed questions the simple opposition between optimism and pessimism by challenging the often-used image of seeing the glass as either half-full or half-empty.

> Say you really didn't like what was in the glass but were being told you must drink it. You look at the glass differently. You might say the glass is half empty as an optimistic orientation toward the object ("Look, I have already drunk that much!" or "Look, I have less to drink!"). In the case of an unwanted drink, the pessimist would be the one who would see the glass as half full ("Look, I haven't drunk that much!" or "Look, I have more to drink!") (Ahmed 2010: 173).

It matters what is in the glass that you have to drink. Ahmed describes how the future can be perceived as optimistic or pessimistic "in terms of what there is or is not left to drink from the glass of the present" (Ahmed 2010: 174).[91] What is in the glass matters. University students in Sulaimani have not chosen, so to speak, what is in their glasses. I have shown in my analysis how they are privileged in the sense of having choices of how to navigate, how to think and give meaning to the drinking from *the glass of the present*. The drinking as an image of

[91] Also see Berlant on *Cruel Optimism* (2011).

(confined) agency and the possibility of hope. The doing[92] hope, not hope as a promise lying out there on the horizon, but everyday hopes. Not hope as an imperative, as a promise, but as a strategy.

I am describing a relative privileged group among university students who need to believe in some kind of hopeful future – they don't have what I would call the privilege of pessimistic thinking. This questions the relation between the present place and the imagined future. The Lee Edelman embrace of negativity and No Future as a possibility to transform and break free from normative life routes takes at least a no-war, relatively stable, peaceful moment of basic survival security. For students like Nina, reaching out for a hopeful future is a means of survival, a strategy to make life meaningful. Other students' narratives that express less belief in a hopeful future are not directly pessimistic in character but laidback, laissez-faire, focusing on the here and now of waiting and not worrying while being preoccupied by timepassing in *sleeping, movie, Facebook, eating*. These students have something to lose: their big aspirations of becoming a generation of adults in a more peaceful moment than their parents lived through. But they don't yet have that secure ground of privilege to stand on that can allow them to express pessimistic future narratives. The privilege is out there; they have to reach for it, have to wait for it.

Emerging fractured hopes – trickster readings and possibilities of failure

How do we then swing the pendulum and engage in reading strategies in order to read fractured hopes beyond rigid categories? When engaging in a critical reflexive research practice, a big challenge is not to be paralysed by the power of one's own critical scrutiny of the always-already dirty business of knowledge production which from a situated perspective is never pure and free from reproducing power relations. In *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Kamala Visweswaran discusses how to engage critically in research questioning power relations, but at the same time not "paralyzing" the researcher (Visweswaran 1994:100). Visweswaran discusses the productive possibilities of what she perceives as an inherent

[92] See Nina Lykke (2010) on *genealogies of doing*.

failure in ethnography (and in all research which dares to acknowledge it, I would add) because it is not possible to give "full representation" or "full comprehension".

> Here I argue for a suspension of the feminist faith that we can ever wholly understand and identify with other women (displacing again the colonial model of "speaking for", and the dialogical hope of "speaking with"). This requires a trickster figure who "trips" on, but is not tripped up by, the seductions of a feminism that promises what it may never deliver: full representation on the one hand, and full comprehension on the other. In this scenario, the feminist as trickster mediates between cognitive failure and its success; it is trickster agency that makes the distinction between success and failure indeterminate, alerting us to the "possibilities of failure." I believe that holding these two terms in tension – the desire to know and the desire to represent – gives us the means, as Spivak suggests, to "question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing her, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility." Feminist ethnographers, then, seek out new possibilities engendered by the recognition of failure, as well as the limiting features of its acknowledgment. (Visweswaran 1994: 100)

Inspired by the trickster figure, Visweswaran describes the "possibilities of failure". Failures are part of the game of indulging in "the desire to know and the desire to represent". Failures, or problems, are central to research. Visweswaran underlines the trickster figure's "art of speaking 'as if' (that is, from the 'native's point of view')" (Visweswaran 1994:100) while knowing that it can't, that it is treacherous, that it is an illusion.

The *as if* works as an invitation to read the (post-)conflict bubble with experiences of both peace and violence through the perspective of *the normal*, *as if* it was in any big city in the world, *as if* these desires for ordinary normality could be the desires of anyone. Not because I want to erase the contextual significance of understanding the specific location of lived experiences, but because I want to start having the conversation from a theoretically inspired perspective of understanding global middle-class desires of normality – a conversation unfolding in the specific historical context. It is in this tension between the theoretical framing and the narratives from students that I think the reader can learn something important about conditions for middle-class lives globally, and about the sameness of desires for 'the good life' across different contexts. The *as if*

reading offers a reading of university students' lives in urban Iraqi Kurdistan outside the hegemonic Western figurations of Iraqis and Kurds as either 'victims of war' or 'heroic fighters' – a much-needed reading with the ambition of *a better account* (Haraway 1988:579) of urban middle-class lives in Sulaimani from the point of view of a different kind of framing.

When I sat on the plane flying from Iraqi Kurdistan to Copenhagen in 2009 with my notes on urban everyday lives, while the police were evicting 'Iraqis' from Brorsons Kirke, the church in Copenhagen (see Introduction), I felt literally out of place hanging in the air between different spaces. My position could be described as the trickster figure *tripping* on the different representations and stories about 'Iraq'. Flying back and forth "with the desire to know and the desire to represent", but failing in my silence. The failure that later became the driving force in this research project; a possibility of failure leading me to scrutinise what kept me silent, leading me out of my state of feeling paralysed.

Tripping on hopeful readings of normality, what does it then actually entail? I am not promoting neoliberal demands of hyper-hopeful readings of the unfulfilled potentials of happiness just waiting out there for strong individuals to make it happen. I am reading hope as a fragile, fractured emerging hope in the making in the form of telling other stories and showing new figurations. A reading strategy that is humbly hopeful, both as a way of reading and as a commitment to display fragments of hopes, because this was what I found in students' narratives. It is intertwined, because we tend to find what we look for – but we also learn new perspectives as scholars when engaging with people (if we want to, if we listen), and my dilemma of reading/writing between hope and no-hope derives from students' narratives. It is a manoeuvre against analytical violence killing the narratives of fragile hopes that I have been told. I am not promoting a single narrative of scholarship of hope, but taking seriously the fractured hopes that are present in students' narratives, the individual hopes. It is not a metanarrative of the arrival of a hopeful future, since nobody knows what will actually happen, but a present listening to an emergence of fractured hopeful narratives. Reading them, writing about them. Reading relatively privileged lives from the margins with all the tensions it entails of trying to create meaningful lives. Reading the desire for normality as a way of making lives liveable in bubble spaces in times of war.

Ordinariness and violence

Tensions between a desired ordinary, peaceful life and experiences and representations of violent events are central to this study. Art photographer Gohar Dashti has captured this tension in her fictionalised series *Today's Life and War* from 2008, drawing on experiences from the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). She writes about the series: "I capture moments that reference the ongoing duality of life and war without precluding hope" (Dashti 2008).

Figure 6 Today's Life and War, 2008. Photo by Gohar Dashti.

Reading violence and resistance

At the beginning of this research process, I did not want to write about violence. Not at all. I had a strong defensive resistance to focusing on war and conflict in my own counterhegemonic narrative to a dominant public narrative around a certain kind of visible war in Iraq. It felt like, if I were to open the first page of the book about violence, there would be no going back and no reading of the non-violent stories. I had committedly set out to talk about the present with university students in a relatively peaceful moment in urban Sulaimani in 2012. And I had set out to listen to their thoughts about the future. But then violence and conflict were present in students' narratives, even though they did not specifically flag it up for themselves. I had to take these narratives into account, as something that is part of the everyday – such as Karim's report on suicide, or Lale's story of her childhood moving from house to house. The past as something that is not done and over, but still alive and creating the present, the fragile (post-)conflict moment where the continuity of violence exists at different levels – in collective and individual memories and as ongoing violent acts in the everyday. I'm not reading violence by focusing on violence. I'm reading violence as part of the ordinary everyday, the inescapable inscription of historical events into the present.

A co-reading of violence and the desired peaceful everyday normality. This going round in a circle from not wanting to focus on violence to seeing narratives of violence as part of the everyday – a reading of violence from the theoretical focus on the ordinary. In my material, violence was narrated as unspectacular, and I read it as unspectacular but present. A framing of reading sideways all the everyday events in a (post-)conflict urban life of a university student, as it is clearly expressed in Kejal's narrative of negotiations of a possible future career as a journalist.

Fetishising pure subjects of resistance

Often, violence is not read and represented as part of the ordinary everyday, but rather as the opposite: spectacular. As if violence and resistance are visible only in certain contours. In a broader perspective from the region after ISIS, I have seen a discourse of cheering news stories about Ezidi women who have suffered violence and capture at the hands of ISIS and who are now taking up arms against them (Ekurd

2017). Rojava has been called "The Most Feminist Revolution the World Has Ever Witnessed" (Ross, *VICE* 2017). And I have seen the same kind of arousal around a group called Queer Insurrection with the acronym TQILA under the slogan "These faggots kill fascists"[93] (Jackman, *PinkNews* 2017). This says a lot about what I will call a desire for 'pure radical subjects of resistance' from a not-in-the-warzone audience. It is not to say that I am unsympathetic to the desire to fight back, but the more I think about it there is some kind of vulgar logic in the victim-hero dichotomy that is running through this desire – the young Ezidi woman who was a victim of violence and now has to be a hero and take up arms to get attention in a metanarrative of a Western media discourse, but also as a promotion from different actors in Syria, Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan (see Ghazzawi 2017; I also discuss this around the female students dressed up as KDP Peshmerga in Chapter 5). It is a reification of binary figurations of hero-victim and shows little interest in the life in between these positions and all the unspectacular everyday (including everyday violence and everyday resistance). And, as I also describe in Chapter 5, it easily slips into becoming a case of the historical experience of Kurdish women resisting oppression and fighting back being written out of the history books. Experiences that have not been given space in representations, while for many years the figure of the 'Muslim woman', and equally the 'Kurdish woman', have been portrayed as oppressed victims (as I describe in the Introduction).

Activist and scholar Razan Ghazzawi articulates the same kind of critique naming the leftist Western interest in TQUILA a "romantic sketching of a revolutionary path to utopia in a conflict that has been termed the "worst man-made disaster since World War II"" (Ghazzawi, *Al Jazeera* 2017). These specific hoorays risk dismissing actual local struggle. I believe the Western discourses cherish these romantic utopian warriors in an attempt to highlight figurations of Middle Eastern bodies that are queer, and women who are brave, as a counterhegemonic narrative to stereotypes. But my argument is that this kind of poster-

[93] "The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA, pronounced "tequila") is a new unit attached to the anarchist International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), a relatively recently established fighting force in Syria's north-east which claims to work alongside the YPG, or Kurdish People's Protection Units (A claim the YPG has denied)" (McKernan 2017).

figure fan culture works inside the same logics of the hero-victim binary and the ontological state of people in the Middle East as always-in-war. Middle East queers as soldiers or victims, Middle East women as soldiers or victims and nothing more.

When I have presented my work in Scandinavia, I have met questions like: "If the students in Sulaimani are just middle-class like everywhere else in the world (read: like Scandinavian middle-class scholars), why should we read about it?" (what I would call a desire and expectation of difference). Or I have met a reading of my text/presentation as focusing only on war when I really try to stress middle class (a denial of sameness, and a desire for and expectation of difference as well). It underlines the strong figurations of difference (from a Western gaze) that this project is up against – victims of war, female fighters, brave queers with arms – in contrast to the sameness of urban middle-class lives from Scandinavia to Sulaimani. And it also underlines the important question specifically to (critical) research: what kind of (Western) desires for pure research subjects of resistance do we cherish? And what kind of stories does this cherishing give space to?

IR scholars Alina Sajed and John M. Hobson discuss the field of Critical International Relations Theory and what they describe as a "Eurofetishist Frontier" that closes down for the ability to grasp non-Western agency, and reiterate colonial dichotomies of "silence vs. defiance" (Hobson and Sajed 2017:1). This dichotomy is exactly what I see reiterated with the hero vs. victim. Hobson and Sajed question the Eurocentric gaze in order to read non-Western agency.

> Interesting here is Robbie Shilliam's (2015, 5) rhetorical question as to whether "the notion of a 'resisting subject' itself [is not] a category born of European fantasies of their own mastery." Insofar as the Western colonial gaze is the Archimedean center of reference, so the agency of the colonized is reduced either to resistance (direct challenge to hegemonic discourse) or to victimization/silence (whereby the subjectivity of the colonized is erased by the colonial gaze)." (Hobson and Sajed 2017:14)

This rigid dichotomy between either pure resistance or complete silence and victimisation is exactly like the dichotomised figures that I have also encountered. The Eurocentric, or Eurofetishist, frontier, that hinders an ability to read beyond these rigid categories, as Hobson and Sajed describe. I touch upon this issue when discussing the narratives of

waiting and how to understand these narratives in their context as positions of neither resistance nor victimhood, but as a form of everyday timepassing experienced in different nuances.

Why are ordinary stories important when there is still a war?

A question that I have returned to many times during the research is: why is it important to write about relatively privileged middle-class university students in the 2012 bubble of Sulaimani when Iraq and its people are being ruined by war?

On February 7, 2017 I read in the Danish newspaper *Information* about the coalition forces' (including Denmark's) air raids in Iraq that are suspected/accused of killing many more civilians than reported (Safi 2017). On the front cover of the newspaper is the photograph of Noor, a four-year-old Iraqi girl lying in a bed in a hospital in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. She is holding onto an iPad (or tablet) and we don't see her damaged legs that are covered by a blanket. The first thought striking me is the choice of showing a victim of war with an iPad in her hand. Will the readers read her as a 'proper victim of war'? I notice the iPad, because this is not the usual gadget in the picture of the 'refugee'. Oh yes, we saw photographs of refugees with smartphones from September 2015 in Danish news when the government were discussing how the Danish state had a right to confiscate valuables from refugees arriving in Demark.[94] So my first impression (looking with my Western gaze) is ambivalent: will the iPad that Noor is holding make the middle-class Danish reader think, "She is just like my child"; or will the reader think, "She is not a victim of war because she doesn't look like one"? It is a complex dead-end with the logics of: "If you look like 'us' [Western middle class], you are not a 'victim'; if you look like 'them' ['refugees'], you might have a chance of getting a temporary residence permit until the

[94] *Smykkeloven* ('the Refugee Assets Bill') gives the Danish police the legal right to search refugees and seize jewellery and other valuables. The bill caught international attention and a caricature of Prime Minister Lars Løkke dressed up as a Nazi was published in *The Guardian* (Bell 2016). Other aspects of law restrictions did not get the same attention, e.g. a prolonged waiting period for family reunifications for people with temporary protection status (Udlændinge-, Integrations-, og Boligministeriet 2015-16, Amnesty International 2016, The Danish Immigration Service 2016).

war in your country is categorised as less dangerous." The Western gaze is reading *middle class*, *war* and *refugee* as separate narratives that are not easily embodied in the same figuration. The photograph of Noor is an example of the difficulty for a Western audience to read middle-class markers outside a Western context, or rather to understand that you can be a refugee AND middle class.

The photograph is an example of an image challenging the figuration of the war victim. It is important to tell stories of urban middle-class lives in a wartorn region because war is not a parallel temporality (Dudziak 2012) that erases identities and histories of people and turns them into mere one-dimensional victims, even when they are forced to become refugees. There is a powerful and emerging middle class in the Global South, and there is a need to study and understand this vast group. This is why ordinary stories are important, as well as when there is a war.

Epilogue

> I have always loved feminist theory for its utopianism, and I hope to contribute to the tradition of dogged optimism that allows its practitioners to understand and experience life differently. (Hemmings 2011:3)

Narratives are not only present in the lived life that we as scholars study, but also in research itself. Claire Hemmings writes about narratives of Western feminist theory from within the field in *Why Stories Matter* (2011). She names her love for the *utopianism* of feminist theory as well as "the potential of non-innocent theorizing for change" (Hemmings 2011:2).

> Feminist theory is certainly bound up in global power relations, particularly when we consider the various ways in which a presumed opposition between Western gender equality and non-Western patriarchal cultures is mobilized in temporal and spatial modes, but it also occupies a position of reflexive non-innocence that can break open those relations. (Hemmings 2011:2)

I'm seduced by the cracking sound of 'breaking open' presumed oppositional relations as Hemmings describes. Non-innocent, dirty theory, breaking open, multiplying and resisting to slim down; I like the sound of that mantra. My utopian vision of feminist research is as a place to discuss complex political struggles. To ask questions, to disagree, to learn, to listen, to show that political strategies and mobilising slogans are responses in a world where action is needed; responses, not truths. This does not mean that these responses are not true, but that life is more complex than a slogan. Working with theory is dirty, but offers the possibility to break open and, with a belief in the possibility, to create better accounts of a complex world.

Iraqi poet Fadhil al-Azzawi is, with a humoristic undertone, playing with world geography and thereby making explicit how colonial history

constitutes and shapes materialities and representations of geographical borders, but also pointing to the necessity to try to change this, as a poet starting with words and imagination. Al-Azzawi's poem *Spare Time* deconstructs world geography in a postcolonial spirit that I read as a *reading sideways* of hope and depression at the same time, a kind of fractured hope, an ability to zoom in and out, a trickster tripping on borders, a utopian deconstruction of world geography with an ironic, dark underlying tone. A kind of laughing back in mockery at the status quo, an undressing and a redressing – at least in spare-time utopian dreaming.

Spare Time
During long, boring hours of free time
I sit and play with a globe.
I form countries without police or prisons
and throw out others that lack consumer interest.
I make roaring rivers flow through barren deserts
and form continents and oceans
that I store away for the unknown future.
I draw a new colourful map of nations:
I roll Germany into the Pacific Ocean, teeming with whales,
and I let refugees sail
pirate ships to her coasts in the fog,
dreaming of the promised garden in Bavaria.
I switch England with Afghanistan
so the young Brits can smoke hashish for free
courtesy of Her Majesty's government.
I smuggle Kuwait from its fenced and mined borders
to the Comoros, the islands
of the moon in its eclipse,
keeping the oil fields intact, of course.
I move Baghdad
into the loud drumming
of Tahiti.
I let Saudi Arabia crouch in its eternal desert
to preserve the purity of her thoroughbred camels.
I accomplish all this before
surrendering America back to the Indians

just to give history
the justice it has lacked for so long.
I know changing the world isn't easy
but it's still necessary despite everything.

(al-Azzawi in Mikhail 2013:37–38, translated from Arabic)

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