SHADOWS OF THE PAST: THE ROLE OF PERSECUTION WITHIN THE SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF YOUNG ASSYRIANS IN NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The Assyrian people (Assyrians) have regularly faced persecution in the Middle East. A contributing factor to the injustices they have experienced is their vulnerable position in the region as a predominantly Christian minority. While Assyrians were targeted by anti-Assyrian forces before the 1915 Assyrian Genocide (*Sayfo*), it is this mass murder that significantly altered the future of the minority thereafter. For over one hundred years, Assyrians have continued to flee the Middle East for the West in search of safety and stability. Generations of Assyrians are being born and/or raised in the West, far removed from the Assyrian homeland primarily found in Iraq. This disconnection has created doubt within the Assyrian diaspora as to whether the Assyrian identity, culture, and traditions will be able to survive in the West. Moreover, a key binding attribute of the diaspora and said aspects is the persecution endured by Assyrians. Often freely discussed, the rhetoric of persecution and Assyrian suffering (*jinjara*) has been transmitted between generations. This has influenced the Assyrian collective memory and identity.

The Assyrian-focused scholarship recognises both the worry raised within the diaspora and the intergenerational transmission of persecution rhetoric. However, there is no existing understanding into the extent to which persecution has influenced young Assyrians' self-identification and perception of their Assyrian identity. Furthermore, the scholarship continues to overlook the Assyrian communities in New Zealand and Australia—of which, the latter forms a significant portion of the Assyrian diaspora. This thesis amalgamates both aspects in questioning the potential role persecution has had on the self-identification of young Assyrians in New Zealand and Australia. To accomplish this, between July and September 2020, one focus group and five semi-structured interviews were conducted online with eight young Assyrians based in Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand and Sydney, Australia. The main finding of this research is that in lieu of a connection to the Assyrian homeland, these young Assyrians have created new, Western-oriented Assyrian identities which are not tied to persecution. Instead of looking toward the past, they are building identities that focus on the prospects of a brighter, more certain future in the West.

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Baseem raba! (Thank you very much!)

Dedication

Mum, there are endless ways in which I could describe my gratitude. Here's one: thank you for being an incredible, loving, and caring mother. Thank you for raising me in an empowering Assyrian environment where you taught me our language and traditions, and encouraged me to always seek knowledge, learn, and question. Thank you for being my #1 fan. You sowed the seeds of love I have for who I am: a proud New Zealander and Syrian-Assyrian. And, well, it has all led to this!

My great-grandfather, Nimrud, who survived the *Sayfo*: there are many decades, generations, and continents between us, but the roots of this thesis lie in his survival. Though we never met, learning about his life spurred years of self-reflection and created many questions. I hope that this thesis answers some of them, but above all, that my great-grandfather is proud.

Yme oo Sawi Nimrud, ayea qalokhn'la. (Mum and great-grandfather Nimrud, this is for you.)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Assyrian people (Assyrians) are a small ethno-religious minority originating from the Middle East,[1] who have been known for their ancient civilisation(s), rich history, and more commonly, mass migration out of the region in recent decades. Over the past one hundred years, Assyrians have been regularly targeted due to their status as a vulnerable and marginalised group in the Middle East. As a result, the Assyrian identity has been shaped to extend beyond history and culture, where it now includes the influence persecution has had in dispersing Assyrians worldwide.

The history of 20th and 21st century Assyrian persecution is divided into four key stages. First, the Assyrian Genocide (the *Sayfo*)[2] took place between 1915 and 1918 in the Ottoman Empire,[3] and is a foundational historical context of this thesis. Joseph Yacoub indicates that at least 500,000 individuals comprised the 'Assyro-Chaldean-Syriac' populace in the Empire, of which half were murdered in the Sayfo.[4,5] Nearly two decades later, in August 1933, the Iraqi army murdered the inhabitants of the Simele and neighbouring villages located in northern Iraq.[6] The Simele Massacre, as it is known, prompted British Captain Gerald de Gaury to state the following: "The people killed were entirely innocent. It was enough for them to be Assyrians to be shot."[7] After the Sayfo and the Simele Massacre, generations of Assyrians continued to be targeted for various reasons by actors ranging from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in Iraq (whose reign lasted between 1979 to 2003),[8] but more notably, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the mid-2010s.

As is explained further below, the Sayfo left a particular mark on the collective memory of the Assyrian people, which exists into the present.[9] At the height of ISIL's actions, Assyrians remembered the experiences of generations before them and questioned whether they were facing a

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[1] Assyrians have often been situated in between south-east Turkey, northern Syria and Iraq, and north-west Iran. David Gaunt, Naures Atto, and Soner O. Barthoma, eds., "Introduction," in *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Berghahn, 2017), 2.

[2] The Assyrian Genocide is also known as *Sayfo*, *Seyfo*, *Ferman*, and *Sheet'et Saypa* (Year of the Sword). It will be referred to as the *Sayfo* throughout this thesis.

[3] Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide, A History*, trans. James Ferguson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid., 18.

[6] Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 109.

[7] Gerald de Gaury, *Three Kings in Baghdad: The Tragedy of Iraq's Monarchy* (London: I. B. Tauris, [1961], 2008), 89, quoted in Donabed *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 111.

[8] Greg Gow, "Watching Saddam Fall: Assyrian Refugees in Sydney and the Imagining of a New Iraq," *Social Analysis* 48, no. 3 (2004), 11.

[9] Naures Atto, "What Could Not Be Written: A Study of the Oral Transmission of Sayfo Genocide Memory Among Assyrians," *Genocide Studies International* 10, no. 2 (Fall, 2016), 183.

second Sayfo.[10] They feared not only what would happen to Assyrians, but to the future of the people as a whole. The rhetoric of persecution, suffering, displacement, historical violence, and past ancestral/cultural struggles forms a significant part of Assyrians' existence. One reason for this is that commonly, whether implicitly or explicitly, as a by-product of being born into the Assyrian diaspora, there are generations of young Assyrians exposed to the rhetoric of persecution and Assyrian *jinjara* (suffering) through their families.[11] Naures Atto explains:

> After the genocide, lamentations were one style through which Sayfo memories were transmitted across generations. The use of lamentations cum lullabies demonstrates the desperate situation in which the post-Sayfo generations lived their existential fears. As bearers of horrific memories, mothers and grandmothers expressed their sorrows to their children and grandchildren within the home. At a very young age, children may have felt the sorrow to which they had been exposed, but they may not have understood the context. Today, grandchildren sometimes mention having seen their grand-parents crying, but comment on how at a young age they did not understand why and only later realized why they were sad.[12]

This has resulted in generations being exposed to feelings of sadness and hopelessness which have, over the decades, helped shape the contemporary Assyrian identity. However, as Assyrians further establish into Western society, there is a deep fear that Assyrians' struggles will soon be forgotten by the younger and/or new generation(s).[13]

Accordingly, this fear helped outline the focus of this thesis, which concentrates on understanding how prominent the rhetoric of persecution is in the self-identification of young Assyrians. The primary research question is, 'To what extent is the notion of persecution present in young Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians in the diaspora communities **of** New Zealand and Australia?' The main argument of this thesis is that, due to their distance from the Assyrian homeland,[14] some young New Zealand and Australian-Assyrians have created stable Western-Assyrian identities which are not centralised around the role persecution has within the traditional Assyrian identity framework. Moreover, as a result of their Western surroundings, young Assyrians are influenced by a generational and time gap. This in turn has led to their creation of positive identities directed around a future in the West.

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[10] Naures Atto, "The Death Throes of Indigenous Christians in the Middle East: Assyrians Living under the Islamic State," in *Relocating World Christianity*, eds. Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 281.

[11] Atto, "What Could Not Be Written," 192.

[12] ibid.

[13] Atto, "The Death Throes," 296.

[14] The Assyrian homeland is located in the north of modern-day Iraq. However, Assyrians traditionally consider parts of south-east Turkey, northern Syria, and north-west Iran as extensions of this land.

The influence of persecution on the Assyrian people unfolds a myriad of themes and theoretical avenues. As such, the literature on the diaspora has determined that Assyrians have been influenced by historical violence, persecution, and acts of extermination for over a century. However, little research has focused on the young, mostly Western-born and -raised Assyrian generation. The lack of consideration of the younger Assyrian demographic in the Assyrian-oriented literature was a prime motivator behind this research, alongside the limited discussion of New Zealand- and Australian-based communities. Moreover, several questions have driven this research, of which the following are the most substantial: What do young Assyrians think of the rhetoric of persecution? Does it help them to feel 'more' Assyrian? Finally, are young Assyrians forgetting about or overlooking Assyrian persecution? If so, why? Between July and September 2020, I sought to test the validity of these questions through one focus group and five semi-structured interviews conducted with eight young Assyrians based in Wellington and Auckland, New Zealand and Sydney, Australia.

The next section provides a historical overview of the Assyrian people, diaspora, and existence.

1.1 From Ancient and Powerful Beginnings to Oppression

Despite the complexities of the Assyrian history, what is certain in the literature is that the Assyrian people were born out of the great Assyrian Empire and civilisation[15] with a rich 5,000-year-old existence rooted in ancient Mesopotamia.[16] Of the various 'types' of Assyrians, the Assyrian Christians specified by Travis "are descended from groups that practiced ancient Assyrian religions and that lived in a place that was called… 'Āṯūr (Assyria) when Christianity arrived."[17] Slowly but surely, Christianity overtook the ancient Assyrian religion(s) based on rituals and various god-worshipping,[18] from the second century A.D. due to the religion's rise in Mesopotamia.[19] Moreover, it is this religious conversion that also brought about the differing labels, such as "Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Nestorians, Jacobites, [and] Arameans."[20] As is elaborated below, these varying names bring with them differing characteristics, their own ideas, and individual historical characteristics which question the Assyrian identity and helped to fragment the people.

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[15] Hannibal Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide: A Tale of Oblivion and Denial," in *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial, and Memory*, ed. René Lemarchand (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 124.
[16] Yacoub, *Year of the* Sword, 2.
[17] Hannibal Travis, ed., "The Assyrian genocide across history: collective memory, legal theory, and power politics," in *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017), 2.
[18] Yacoub, *Year of the Sword,* 4-5.
[19] Shak Hanish, "The Chaldean Assyrian Syriac People of Iraq: An Ethnic Identity Problem," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008), 35.
[20] Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 2.

However, over time, the Assyrian Empire and civilisation dwindled. Joseph Yacoub attributes the ancient civilisation's downfall 2,500 years ago to the subsequent effect of massacres undertaken by the likes of Roman and Byzantine conquerors.[21,22] These massacres paved the way for a considerable increase in polytheistic Assyrians' move toward Christianity, used as protection against the bloodshed.[23] However, as Yacoub highlights, Christianity provided an umbrella under which Assyrians could thrive as a collective—as a people—thus, being "the cement that maintained their cohesion."[24] It is this religious element that led to Assyrians' strongly-held affiliations with Christianity at the face of anti-Assyrian massacres in the past, right into the present. Despite being viewed as a form of protection, the conversion to Christianity did not successfully provide the safety envisioned. Rather, "catastrophic human losses… [and] cultural depredations" continued directly into the twentieth century.[25]

1.2 Assyrians in the 1800s: Bloodshed and an Identity Crisis

To be able to acknowledge and understand Assyrians' historical background, it is particularly important to understand their place in the greater Ottoman Empire—an empire that instigated the growth of Assyrian disunity, as well as the anti-Assyrian sentiments and actions which slowly culminated into the Sayfo. Hannibal Travis traces the historical origins of Assyrians within the Ottoman Empire to the sixteenth century.[26]

Living in the greater melting pot of the Empire had the potential to allow for different ethno-cultural and religious groups to live in harmony with their counterparts. Instead, Assyrians and other Christian minorities were often "treated as second-class citizens," rather than as equals because they were not Muslim.[27] Their movements, actions, and any occupation-seeking were all restricted. Anahit Khosroeva argues that the unequal treatment had a particular effect on Assyrians' economic development, and more importantly, sought to ensure that Assyrians did not establish a united Assyrian front.[28] Additionally, drastic measures were taken to maintain power over Assyrians in the Empire with at least 10,000 murdered between 1843 and 1845.[29] Small massacres continued throughout the mid-1800s and into the 20th century.

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[21] Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 2-3.
[22] Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide: A Tale of Oblivion and Denial," 123-124.
[23] Yacoub, *Year of the* Sword, 3.
[24] ibid., 3.
[25] Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide: A Tale of Oblivion and Denial," 124.
[26] ibid.
[27] Anahit Khosroeva, "Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire and the Official Turkish Policy of Their Extermination, 1890s-1918," in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923*, ed. George N. Shirinian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 106.
[28] ibid.
[29] Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide: A Tale of Oblivion and Denial," 125.

In the meantime, the Assyrian people's own division was furthered by internal clashes.[30] The reality of the Empire as an Islamic theocracy also affected the separation of Assyrians, which "as a rule, [the Empire] divided people according to religious sect";[31] labelling them as either 'Nestorians' for Orthodox- or 'Chaldeans' for Catholicism-affiliated Assyrians. The specificities behind the labels influenced further Assyrian disunity.[32] It was not until the First World War that the label 'Assyrian' was used as an all-encompassing term for Assyrian-related groups after Western nations communicated reports on Assyrian cleansing in the Empire.[33] It was originally believed that using 'Assyrian' as a formal term could help establish the reunification of Assyrian-affiliated groups, but this was unsuccessful. Thereafter, the term 'Assyro-Chaldean' was encouraged as it provided the most unity between the Nestorians and Chaldeans.[34,35]

1.2.1 The Assyrian Genocide: The *Sayfo*

The Sayfo was instigated in late-1914 when the Ottoman Empire voiced its desire to remove non-Muslim communities in the hopes of creating a Turkified, Muslim homogenous nation.[36] The first case of anti-Assyrian massacres was recorded in Urmia, Persia when Assyrian villages were targeted by Ottoman and Kurdish forces.[37] Urmia, comprised of various Assyrian and Armenian villages, was a strategic location as it bordered the Empire's eastern city of Van.[38] As Joseph Yacoub expresses, "These were the early warning signs of the massacres that were to follow some months later."[39] Directly after, Yacoub succinctly states the reality of Christians living in the Ottoman Empire at these times:

> Many distressing events and scenes of horror fill this history, during which hundreds of thousands of people were massacred or died of thirst, hunger, poverty, exhaustion or illness on the road to exile or deportation. The objective was to drive them out of geographical zones considered too politically sensitive by Turkish nationalists and, by weakening and deporting them, to get rid of them, under the bogus pretext that these non-Turks and non-Muslims were disloyal and infidels.[40]

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[30] David Gaunt, "The Complexity of the Assyrian Genocide," *Genocide Studies International* 9, no. 1 (2015), 85.
[31] ibid.
[32] ibid.
[33] ibid., 86.
[34] ibid.
[35] This thesis combines these labels under the umbrella term 'Assyrian'.
[36] Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 13-14.
[37] ibid. 15.
[38] Gaunt, "The Ottoman Treatment of the Assyrians," in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ronald Grigor (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2011), 247. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[39] Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 15.
[40] ibid.

However, the Sayfo did not take place in isolation, but in conjunction with the Armenian and Greek genocides. Collectively, these genocides erased an integral part of the cultural framework of the Empire. According to British figures, Assyrians constituted approximately 500,000 of the Empire's population in 1914.[41] Despite being well-established in the Empire, Assyrians along with other Christians were viewed as barriers to the Empire's policy of Turkification.[42] Genocide was one of the primary means by which Assyrians and Christians could be removed from the Empire, and in doing so, hasten the creation of the homogenous society envisioned by the Empire's rulers.[43] As recent as 2006, it was argued by Taner Akçam that the policy's implementation saw Assyrians as "among the first victims of… [the] policy."[44]

While Assyrians emigrated to the West prior to the Sayfo, a mass Assyrian exodus out of both Turkey and the wider Middle East took place after 1915. Many Assyrians fled to Iraq where they inhabited refugee camps located in areas such as Baqubah, Habbaniyah,[45] and Mindan. The Baqubah camp was located near Baghdad and became a primary source of refuge for Assyrians and Armenians. Stavros Stavridis states that in 1918, 70,000 Assyrians attempted to relocate to Sain Kala, Persia from Urmia.[46] They were supported by British forces and guided by Surma Khanum, an Assyrian woman from Hakkari (part of the Ottoman Empire), who at the time was considered a leader.[47] Instead, Assyrians faced further persecution on this journey, and up to 50,000 of those Assyrians relocated to the Baqubah camp, instead. A large segment of this population had died at the hands of "the Persians, Kurds, and Turks [who] pursued the Assyrians, killing many women and children and taking many captive," as they travelled through Persia.[48]

The Baqubah camp remained for two more years until British forces became concerned over "the danger posed by Arab uprisings around Iraq," which led to its closure.[49] In lieu of a camp, many were left stranded. The British began to devise alternative housing solutions to no avail. As an alternative, they provided financial aid to the refugees who were left to find accommodation on their own. By 1921, Armenians living in Baqubah had been relocated to "Transcaucasia, …the closest possible option to repatriation in the now-defunct Armenian nation-state," whilst Assyrians

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[41] Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide: A Tale of Oblivion and Denial," 125.
[42] ibid.
[43] Anahit Khosroeva, "The Significance of the Assyrian Genocide after a Century," in *An Anthology of Essays on the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War*, eds. Shabo Talay and Soner Ö. Barthoma (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2018), 63.
[44] Travis, "The Assyrian genocide across history," 47.
[45] Little is known about the Habbaniyah Camp in academic scholarship.
[46] Stavros Stavridis, "Lady Surma: the pillar of the Assyrian nation, 1883-1975," in *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies*, ed. Hannibal Travis (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017), 196.
[47] ibid.
[48] ibid.
[49] ibid.

resided in the Mindan camp near Mosul.[50] Importantly, Laura Robson states that Assyrians' residence of said camps allowed them to have the opportunity to establish a semblance of authority and power, with the general and monetary support of Iraqi government at the time.[51]

1.2.2 The Simele Massacre

As previously discussed, the Simele Massacre took place on August 7th, 1933, at the hands of the Iraqi military and lasted for one month.[52] According to Sargon G. Donabed and Shamiran Mako, this was the first action undertaken by the newly created Iraq state, which led to approximately 90 Assyrian villages being destroyed and made void of life.[53] The history behind the Massacre is that between 1919 and 1933, Assyrians sought to establish a British-backed autonomous home in Iraq with the support of the League of Nations.[54,55] This, as during the First World War, Assyrians had supported Britain. When the time had come for Assyrians to begin creating their own state, they assumed that this support would be reciprocated, which never came to fruition. As Stavridis explains, Britain sought to become a strategic ally of Iraq—and for the Assyrians, this was viewed as an act of betrayal.[56]

There are two interlinked reasons behind the Simele Massacre. First, the Iraqi Government targeted Assyrians who were seen as barriers to the new Iraq's success. Donabed highlights the actions taken against Assyrians, emphasising the helpless position they were in:

> The Assyrians feared there was little chance for them in the new Iraq… Iraqi deputies made speeches in parliament on 29 June 1933, inciting hatred toward the Assyrians, which were disseminated and published in *al-Istiqlal* newspaper among others. For the Assyrians, the future appeared bleak…There was no end to the anti-Assyrian fervour, for 'between July 1, and July 14, over eighty leading articles were written in the Iraqi press by all classes of the population, all demanding the final extermination of the Assyrians'.[57]

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[50] Laura Robson, "Refugee Camps and the Spatialization of Assyrian Nationalism in Iraq," in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, eds. S.R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H.L. Murre-van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 251.
[51] ibid.
[52] Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 109.
[53] Sargon G. Donabed and Shamiran Mako, "Between Denial and Existence: Situating Assyrians within the Discourse on Cultural Genocide," in *The Assyrian Heritage – Threads of Continuity and Influence*, eds. Önver A. Cetrez, Sargon G. Donabed and Aryo Makko (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2012), 285.
[54] Stavros T. Stavridis, "The Australian Issue 1914-35: Australian Documents and Press," in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923*, ed. George N. Shirinian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 159.
[55] ibid., 177.
[56] ibid.
[57] Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 101.

Second, and more direct, the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Eshai XXIII Shimun—who had been acting as an ambassador for the Assyrian plight for statehood[58]—was arrested by Iraqi forces in a bid to "take control of the restless Assyrians".[59] Responding to this, 1,500 Assyrian armed men attacked an Iraqi border post which triggered the Iraqi army to begin its massacre of the Simele village.[60] It is within this climate that, early into the massacre period and in the face of injustice, a number of Assyrians fled Iraq on August 7th to land located alongside the Khabour River in the northeast of Syria, where they created 26 villages.[61]

1.3 Contemporary Persecution and the Assyrian Diaspora

In the context of Saddam Hussein's regime, Greg Gow states that Assyrians were not necessarily persecuted upon due to their Christian origins. Rather, much like the rest of the Iraqi population, those who opposed the regime were considered 'enemies of the regime, and thus, targets.[62] A contrasting viewpoint is made by Artur Boháč who stated that "Saddam's policy towards Assyrians was volatile."[63] Boháč expresses further that some Assyrians (namely Chaldeans) were content with working for the Hussein regime due to their desire to "integrate into Iraqi society"—a viewpoint which differs from other Assyrians who "became the target of brutal repressions connected with the war between Iraq and Iran."[64]

In the mid-2010s, Assyrians and other religious and cultural minorities, namely Yezidis and Shi'a Muslims, experienced persecution at the hands of ISIL.[65] Its roots are linked with the defeat of Hussein's regime, following "the marginalisation of Sunnis from power, which in turn led to the radicalisation of this group as well as to the development of a policy vacuum in which IS [Islamic State/ISIL] seized the chance to flourish."[66] Assyrians and Christians living in Mosul, Iraq experienced considerable fear and persecution at the hands of ISIL. Naures Atto states that, for ISIL to identify which homes were inhabited by Christians, an 'N' in the Arabic language was painted using red paint. Furthermore, on July 14th, 2014, ISIL gave Christians an ultimatum of either converting to Islam, paying a *jizya* tax, or having left the city by July 19th. If they did not leave Mosul, they risked execution.[67]

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[58] Stavridis, "The Australian Issue 1914-35," 170.
[59] ibid., 177.
[60] ibid.
[61] Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 124.
[62] Gow, "Watching Saddam Fall," 11.
[63] Artur Boháč, "Efforts of Political Emancipation of Assyrians in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Contemporary European Studies* 3 (2009), 155.
[64] ibid.
[65] Erin Hughes, "Nationalism by Another Name: Examining 'Religious Radicalism' from the Perspective of Iraq's Christians," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15 no. 2 (2017), 34.
[66] Atto, "The Death Throes," 284-285.
[67] ibid., 285.

In Syria, Assyrians faced similar fear and persecution. In early-2015, over 200 Assyrians inhabiting a small number of villages in the Khabour Region, northeast of Syria were kidnapped by ISIL. In turn, the terrorist organisation demanded a significant amount of money for their release. Social media became the vessel through which Assyrians mobilised and collected a portion of the amount ordered. This ensured that all, except three men who were executed in September 2015, were released.[68] As Erin Hughes emphasises, it was clear that ISIL intended to not only rid the region of Christians, but to eliminate them entirely:

> Through this framework, the cleansing of Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs from the Nineveh Plain gains extra significance. ISIL entwines their removal, the destruction of the material evidence of their existence, and the destruction of their homes and villages with rhetoric of cosmic battle and religious judgment. Such a framework positions the ISIL caliphate as genocidal, seeking to eliminate not just their national roots, presence in their homeland, and desire to return, but their existence.[69]

The actions undertaken by ISIL are vast, but this sub-section aims to provide a brief insight into the extent to which the terrorist organisation sought to remove Assyrians, Christians, and other minority groups from both Iraq and Syria, but the wider Middle East region as well.

As noted above, while Assyrians emigrated to the West prior to the Sayfo, a mass Assyrian exodus out of both Turkey and the wider Middle East primarily occurred after 1915. The Assyrian diaspora began forming the skeleton for its present-day existence, with many Assyrians emigrating to the United States, greater Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. The exact number of Assyrians living in the Middle East and West is not entirely known, but in 2003, the world-wide Assyrian population was projected to be at three million individuals.[70] The Assyrian diasporic communities in New Zealand and Australia make a sizeable contribution to this figure. New Zealand's Assyrian community is relatively young, having only been established in the 1990s following the first Gulf War.[71] Additionally, there is little data available on pre-1990s Assyrian migration to New Zealand. Most of this community is contained in the Wellington and Auckland regions, with 1,293 individuals who identify as Assyrian. Of the total number, 41.8% resides in Wellington compared with 55.2% in Auckland.[72]

In contrast, Assyrians' emigration to Australia has steadily grown over 70 years. Though it

[68] Atto, "The Death Throes," 287.
[69] Hughes, "Nationalism by Another Name," 41.
[70] Gow, "Watching Saddam Fall," 11.
[71] Philippa Collie et al., "Mindful identity negotiations: The acculturation of young Assyrian women in New Zealand," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 34 (2010), 208.
[72] "Assyrian ethnic group," Stats NZ, accessed June 21, 2021, https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-ethnic-group-summaries/assyrian.

began in the 1950s and increased in the 1960s, the bulk of the population arrived decades later, in the 1990s, due to the *Offshore Humanitarian Programme* conducted by the Australian Government.[73] The 2016 Australian Census found that there are 46,219 individuals identifying as Assyrian/Chaldean,[74] which is a nearly-16,000-person increase from the number estimated in the 2011 Census.[75] It is estimated that 31,130 Assyrians live in Greater Sydney,[76] with 19,873 in Fairfield City, a suburb known as a 'hub' for Assyrian and ethnic culture, activity, and life.[77]

The current Assyrian-focused literature offers a strong insight into the Assyrian diasporic communities in Europe and North America. Whereas in contrast, there is very little known about Assyrians based in New Zealand and/or Australia. It can be argued that this is due to the smaller number of Assyrians in these countries. Otherwise, most literature is outdated and was published before 2010. As a member of the Assyrian diaspora in New Zealand, I was motivated by this reality to provide research and a voice to young Assyrians in the 2020s, in a bid to shift part of the direction of the Assyrian-focused literature to this area of the world.

1.4 Structure

This thesis is structured as follows: The next chapter forms the theoretical backbone of this study. It first identifies the key themes which emerge out of memory studies, the field in which this thesis is situated. It then highlights several key theories, such as collective memory, the intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the second-generations, which underpin Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theory. This theory is based on the transmission of trauma and lived experiences of the Holocaust by its survivors to subsequent generations. The crucial element of postmemory is Hirsch's argument that the younger generation often considers and 'feels' the trauma to be their own, despite not having lived through the Holocaust. This chapter also identifies the key elements of diaspora and identities studies, respectively. Finally, it situates the abovementioned theories within the Assyrian-focused literature.

The third chapter, the methodology, considers the different elements comprising this research beginning with the preparation undertaken before the online-based fieldwork began. It then discusses how this stage took place in Wellington, Auckland, and Sydney, providing information on

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[73] Greg Gow et al., *Assyrian Community Capacity Building in Fairfield City* (Sydney: Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, 2005), 8.
[74] "Australia - Ancestry," .id (informed decisions), accessed June 22, 2021. https://profile.id.com.au/australia/ancestry?WebID=10.
[75] ibid.
[76] "Greater Sydney - Ancestry," .id (informed decisions), accessed June 22, 2021. https://profile.id.com.au/australia/ancestry?WebID=250.
[77] "Fairfield City - Ancestry," .id (informed decisions), accessed June 22, 2021. https://profile.id.com.au/fairfield/ancestry?WebID=10.

my participant recruitment and the data-collection stage. It also discusses data-protection and -maintenance, ethics, and the methodological challenges which arose pertaining to insider research and positionality.

The fourth chapter concerns the physical connection of young Assyrians to the West in comparison with the Middle East, argues that a lack of physical connection to the homeland has influenced the extent to which young Assyrians can create strong, traditional types of Assyrian identities which may either historical or familial links to persecution. This 'traditional type' of identity is arguably tied to persecution, fuelled by the rhetoric expressed within the diaspora.

The fifth chapter focuses on young Assyrians' perception of persecution and argues that this generation has become somewhat unresponsive to the rhetoric of persecution signified as traditionally integral to the Assyrian identity. This is the result of either viewing persecution from an outsider's lens through the limited-to-non-existent intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma, or, due to the normalisation of persecution that has occurred.

The sixth chapter revisits the main argument of this thesis, that young Assyrians' disconnection to the homeland due to physical location has influenced young Assyrians' creation of a new, more Western-oriented Assyrian identity.

The conclusion chapter summarises my research findings and the study's main theoretical and empirical contributions. I will emphasise the validity of incorporating the voices of young New Zealand- and Australian-based Assyrians as well as Oceanic-Assyrian communities within the existing scholarship. In this chapter, I will also offer an insight into the future direction of the Assyrian-focused research and scholarship.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

The purpose of this chapter is to draw attention to the influence of past events' narrative(s) on the younger generations raised under their shadows, as suggested by many scholars, namely Maurice Halbwachs, Marianne Hirsch, Naures Atto, and Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde. In particular, Marianne Hirsh's conceptualisation of postmemory provides a useful theoretical lens applicable to the Assyrian literature which acknowledges the influence of persecution on the Assyrian people over time. Formulated in the early 1990s, Hirsch's postmemory explores younger generations' exposure to past cultural trauma and historical persecution—namely the Holocaust—as well as on the intergenerational transmission of memories and trauma.

First, this chapter outlines aspects of the memory studies scholarship, within which this thesis is situated. Second, prior to critically analysing postmemory, the internal themes which are present within the theory and have significantly moulded its existence will be evaluated. Therefore, this chapter will explore the key elements which comprise postmemory: Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory and the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma, before delving into postmemory itself. Afterwards, it will identify the key concepts of diasporas and new identities, respectively. Finally, this chapter will turn to the Assyrian-oriented scholarship.

The latter will focus on the publications at the forefront of the Assyrian literature which primarily considers persecution, collective trauma, memory, and identity. It must be noted that, like postmemory, much of the other scholarship is similarly rooted in the Holocaust. In adopting postmemory as its foundation, this thesis itself is connected to the Holocaust and this scholarship. However, a differing viewpoint is offered in focusing on how this scholarship can apply to Assyrian persecution such as the Sayfo or Simele Massacre. Finally, this research helps to diversify the current Assyrian scholarship's approach towards persecution, by directing its attention to the perspectives of young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians.

2.1 Memory Studies

Although the theoretical background chapter advances Marianne Hirsch's postmemory as its central theoretical framework, the research behind this thesis as a whole is placed under the memory studies umbrella. Memory studies, an all-encompassing title for the various facets of memory research, belongs to several disciplines.[78] Due to the varied approaches, the field can be defined in differing ways. Anna Tota and Trever Hagen's definition consists of six aspects and offers a

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[78] Anna Lisa Tota and Trever Hagen, eds., "Introduction: memory work – naming pasts, transforming futures," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.

universal approach to memory studies. However, this thesis primarily focuses on the third and fifth aspects: "memory's relation to public discourse, examining how the past comes to be reconciled or memorialized" and "legacies of traumatic events related to violence, terror and disaster", respectively.[79] First, this is due to the attention placed on memory's role and the memorialisation of persecution by Assyrians. Second, in studying young Assyrians' perception of memory, the legacy of Assyrian persecution passed through generations is analysed. For the Assyrian-focused scholarship, memory studies offers a variety of perspectives on how research can be conducted.

2.2 Postmemory and its Components

In being adopted, analysed, and critiqued in contexts beyond the Holocaust, postmemory has been approached using different lenses. This has made for an even richer theory than it was in 1992. For example, it can be argued that a key portion of the theoretical framework of postmemory is the continuation of keeping memories alive within a community. Therefore, Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory, discussed in detail below, is integral to this structure. This, despite the fact that in her 2012 book, Marianne Hirsch stated that collective memory did not aid necessarily in postmemory's creation. She recalled how the origins of postmemory were assumed to be related to "the 'founding fathers'—Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Michel Foucault."[80] Hirsch agreed that their works were significant, but that she would have instead referred to feminist literature and origins.[81] In the scholarship, collective memory is often at the forefront of what postmemory is and means, irrespective of the factors which influenced Hirsch to develop the theory nearly three decades past. For that reason, it is important to analyse collective memory in conjunction with the intergenerational transmission of trauma and memory. These themes act as the arguable pillars of postmemory.

2.2.1 Collective Memory and Trauma

The concept of collective memory was initially formulated by Halbwachs in the 1920s. Halbwachs argued that collective memory relies on past occurrences being recalled by several people within a particular group.[82] Being a point of concern for them, these memories are bound together by a common identity or identifying features.[83] As time progresses the most impactful memories remain

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[79] Tota and Hagen, "Introduction: memory work," 2.
[80] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 16.
[81] ibid.
[82] Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc, 1980), 43.
[83] ibid.

at the core of a group's collective memory and best emphasise the group.[84] Collective memory focuses on the memories of a group, as well as how they are viewed, experienced, and drawn on by its members. This memory, actively and communally constituted, is also subjective.

Halbwachs argued that the memory's meaning and value differs between subsequent generations once the past event or story that is integral to the creation and sustenance of this memory, becomes "external to them."[85] In addition, this change can be attributed to the idea that "each of these groups has a history."[86] Despite this, the weight of memories past can become difficult for subsequent generations to bear. Paul Connerton argues that Halbwachs' collective memory is flawed as it promotes the idea that different generations within groups must maintain the same collective memories. He states:

> For if we are to say that a social group, whose duration exceeds that of the lifespan of any single individual, is able to 'remember' in common, it is not sufficient that the various members who compose that group at any given moment should be able to retain the mental representations relating to the past of the group. It is necessary also that the older members of the group should not neglect to transmit these representations to the younger members of that group.[87]

Rather, for Connerton, the intergenerational transmission of memory from one generation to the other is not as direct as theorised by Halbwachs. Collective memories need nurturing, through commemorative and/or ritual practices which celebrate occurrences or individuals.[88] Connerton argues that this element has been overlooked by Halbwachs, stating that it leaves room for the following question to arise: "given that different groups have different memories which are particular to them, how are these collective memories passed on within the same social group from one generation to the next?"[89]

In conjunction with collective memory, Halbwachs stated that irrespective of the overall group memory or connecting feature, an individual has the ability and capacity to feel the memory (and memories) to the extent that they wish. Simply put, experiences of the 'combining memories' vary from person-to-person. This is called 'individual memory', the notion that individuals can think of and prioritise their own thoughts while remaining fastened to their group.[90] This individualistic feature of collective memory is discussed by John D. Brewer who emphasises that

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[84] Jean-Christophe Marcel and Laurent Mucchielli, "Maurice Halbwachs's *mémoire collective*," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc, 2008), 148.
[85] Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 79.
[86] ibid., 85.
[87] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 38.
[88] ibid., 61.
[89] ibid., 38.
[90] Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 50.

individual, personal memories often form both the collective as well as individuals' memories."[91] Memories are labelled as 'foundational' as they can affect the type of identities an individual and group has. Brewer reiterates notions similar to Halbwachs', and Hirsch's below, in that memories are only valuable in the present. In having no physical, present-day connection, individuals often focus on past occurrences as they are considered personal memories. Due to this, they continue to "live the present through the past."[92]

Finally, collective trauma should be mentioned. Collective trauma is the idea that a group maintains a collective memory or recollection of past atrocities and trauma. The theory was created by Kai Erikson who found that, in the context of a natural disaster that had occurred in a small community in America, individuals who had not experienced the floods felt an emotional sense of trauma.[93] As Ron Eyerman states, these individuals' emotions were similar to those who witnessed and experienced the floods.[94] Niveen Kassem and Mark Jackson state that collective trauma influences both groups' actions and experiences in the present and their reactions and actions to their history and past.[95] The relationship between trauma and memory continues to affect groups as this memory is likened to their identity.[96]

2.2.2 Intergenerational Transmission of Memory and Trauma (ITMT)

The intergenerational transmission of memory, also deemed a "haunting that spans generations" by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, is the idea that memories of the past—of traumatic experiences—are passed between generations.[97] In having these memories passed down to them, the incoming younger generations become connected to memories that are not their own, thus, are creating "their own sense of loss and longing even for that which they never had."[98] Harvey Barocas and Carol Barocas assert that in the post-Holocaust context, survivors' children were deeply affected by memories of the Holocaust, an aspect attributed to the idea that it has a strong presence in their lives.[99]

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[91] John D. Brewer, "Remembering Forwards: Healing the Hauntings of the Past," in *Post-Conflict Hauntings. Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict*, eds. Kim Wale, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, and Jeffrey Prager (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 31.

[92] ibid., 32.

[93] Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma," in *Social Trauma – An Interdisciplinary Textbook*, eds. Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamık D. Volkan (London: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021), 38.

[94] ibid.

[95] Niveen Kassem and Mark Jackson, "Cultural trauma and its impact on the Iraqi Assyrian experience of identity," *Social Identities* 26, no. 3 (2020), 1.

[96] ibid., 2.

[97] Kim Wale, "Intergenerational Nostalgic Haunting and Critical Hope: Memories of Loss and Longing in Bonteheuwel." In *Post-Conflict Hauntings. Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict*, eds. Kim Wale, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, and Jeffrey Prager, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 204.

[98] ibid., 221.

[99] Karein Goertz, "Transgenerational Representations of the Holocaust: From Memory to 'Post-Memory'," *World Literature Today* 72, no. 1 (Winter, 1998), 34.

Karein Goertz stresses this in asserting that the Holocaust is often perceived as "the single most critical event that has affected their lives although it occurred before they were born."[100] Members of the younger generation have the capacity to become preoccupied with memories of the past—irrespective of their own physical role in the occurrences or even existence—a factor dependent on their proximity to past occurrences and trauma. A cause for this can be the influence families have on these individuals, as Judith Harris informs:

> Psychology and psychoanalysis shed light on how personal identity is rooted in the shared experience of the collective, and more inwardly in the family. Memories of traumatic events live on to mark the lives of those who were not there to experience them. Children of survivors and their contemporaries can inherit catastrophic histories, not through direct recollection, but through projection and through affects passed down within the family and within culture at large.[101]

Postmemory and other memory-focused literature on intergenerational transmission of trauma often highlight the second generation—a generation tied to survivors' families, children, and grandchildren—who have been brought up with memories of the past, directly after traumatic events.[102] Kim Wale touches on Illany Kogan's poignant words on the impact of memories on the second-generation, that the involved are like "museums" containing the thoughts and memories of their predecessors.[103] Conversely, as Ernst van Alphen argues that the second-generation is no longer restrained to direct descendants of survivors. Rather, this term has been extended to include generations beyond.[104] Moreover, van Alphen characterises the second generation as the connection between two generations: the first and subsequent.[105]

Continuing this emotional standpoint, as the second generation is faced with the memories passed down by the generation(s) before them which are riddled with gaps, their own understanding of familial and cultural backgrounds has also been affected. Here, Gabriele Schwab argues that second-generation individuals can notice changes in their parents and those who experienced trauma first-hand, through means as simple as body language. This is aptly summarised by the following, "It is the unconscious that second-generation children absorb."[106] However, an interesting argument made is that in differing from their ancestors, the younger generation is not as

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[100] Goertz, "Transgenerational Representations," 34.
[101] Judith Harris, "An Inheritance of Terror: Postmemory and Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Second Generation Jews After the Holocaust," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 80 (2020), 81.
[102] Ernst van Alphen, "Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer, 2006), 473.
[103] Goertz, "Transgenerational Representations," 34.
[104] van Alphen, "Second-Generation," 473.
[105] ibid., 474.
[106] Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting legacies: violent histories and transgenerational trauma*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 14.

deeply affected by the Holocaust as disseminated in the literature. On the contrary, their trauma is not the product of the Holocaust—of memories of traumatic experiences—but rather, as they were brought up by "a traumatized Holocaust survivor."[107]

The Palestinian diasporic case is a prime example of the effects of the past, through memories and rhetoric, on the younger generation. Wael J. Salam and Safi M. Mahfouz assert that young Palestinians have often self-identified with past trauma passed down generation-to-generation, which "enables them to have a better judgement of their complex identity…"[108] The authors affirm the elder generation's influence on the younger, in that elderly Palestinians are leading the fight for the preservation of memories, and as a result, the Palestinian identity.[109] While this is not exemplary of the perspectives of the entire young Palestinian generation, some members of the demographic might feel obliged to continue to remember historical occurrences, under the guise of it being argued as their 'duty'.[110]

The root of the Palestinian struggle is the 1948 Arab-Israeli War which led to the *Al-Nakbah* (Catastrophe). Due to Al-Nakbah, up to 83 per cent of Palestinians became refugees.[111] Ahmad H. Sa'di argues that the Al-Nakbah forms a significant part of the Palestinian collective memory and identity as a 'location' to which all Palestinians can connect.[112] Location, whether physical, but in this instance imaginary, is referred to by Salam and Mahfouz, who state that "the past is not a mere memory that no longer relates to the present, but rather a place all Palestinians live in."[113] The prevalence of past memories which continue to exist through generations have become the homeland through which Palestinians can live and exercise their identity, culture, and history. Arguably, this is an element that can be adopted by other ethnic groups faced with the predicaments of the Palestinian people, such as no right to a homeland, generations displaced from their homeland, and identities formed and informed by intergenerationally-transmitted memories.

Similar to the Assyrian and Palestinian peoples, Armenians have faced collective memory and trauma due to the 1915 Armenian Genocide which saw between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenians murdered.[114] In their youth-focused article, Dmitry Chernobrov and Leila Wilmers analysed the influence of the Armenian Genocide and 1990s' Karabakh war on young Armenians. Semi-structured interviews with 26 Armenians aged between 18- to 25-years-old, based in France,

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[107] van Alphen, "Second-Generation," 482.

[108] Wael J. Salam and Safi M. Mahfouz, "Claims of memory: Transgenerational traumas, fluid identities, and resistance in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 56, no. 3 (2020), 300.

[109] ibid., 304.

[110] ibid., 305.

[111] Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity," *Israel Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002), 175.

[112] ibid., 177.

[113] Salam and Mahfouz, "Claims of memory," 304.

[114] Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians 1789-2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

the United Kingdom, and Russia took place in 2017. The authors state that this particular age frame was chosen as these individuals represented "the generation that has grown up after the independence of Armenia (in 1991),[115] and are too young to remember the Karabakh war."[116] While interesting, rich data was produced from this study, this sub-section will focus on the rhetoric of postmemory raised. The authors argue that young Armenians have been able to combine their identity with past trauma which results from the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Similar to the type of intergenerational transmission raised by Naures Atto in the introductory chapter and in sub-section 2.4.2,[117] some young Armenians were inadvertently exposed to memories of trauma in passing—and yet, they felt lasting effects. What differentiates Armenians from Assyrians and Palestinians is that they have a legitimised and easily-accessible homeland. Moreover, the Armenian state often contributes to creating these homeland, birthright connections through programs.[118] In having a physical connection to their homeland, through which they can learn further about their history, young Armenians have been more susceptible to a non-familial transmission of trauma.[119] In sum, the return to the homeland can help younger generations to foster new identities on their own terms, which maintain elements of postmemory and trauma within.[120]

2.2.3 Postmemory

Coined in 1992, postmemory was first introduced by Marianne Hirsch as a theoretical foundation to help understand and explain the experiences of young, Jewish people who did not live through the Holocaust, but whose existence had been affected by others' memories of the occurrence as well as their behaviour.[121] Specifically, Hirsch stated that the lives of survivors' children were "dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth."[122] Over the coming decades, postmemory was further developed. In a 2008 article, Hirsch argued that memories have been entrenched into the psyche of the younger generation, so much so, that they experience the memories expressed by survivors and passed down between generations as their own, embodied relations to the violent past.[123] Finally, in her 2012 book, Hirsch summarised postmemory as such:

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[115] Dmitry Chernobrov and Leila Wilmers, "Diaspora Identity and a New Generation: Armenian Diaspora Youth on the Genocide and the Karabakh War," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 5 (2020), 915.
[116] ibid., 918.
[117] Atto, "The Death Throes," 281.
[118] Chernobrov and Wilmers, "Diaspora Identity and a New Generation," 925.
[119] ibid., 926.
[120] ibid.
[121] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008), 106.
[122] Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1992-93), 8.
[123] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 106-107.

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation.[124]

Being exposed to the memories or experiences of others from an early age also leads to younger generations' re-enforcement of these experiences, which in turn triggers a heightened sense of victimhood.[125] This is especially significant as the younger generation seeks to "assert their own victimhood alongside that of their parents in an ongoing struggle of recognition, a battle against forgetting, and, in the case of migrants, the risk of alienation from the homeland and its culture."[126] Furthermore, it can be argued that, beyond postmemory's value in reiterating the past, as well as instilling and retaining memories and experiences in the minds of younger generations, the notion can contribute to a group's bond or connection. The older generation is given the responsibility of ensuring that their group's memories are passed down to another generation. As Neal McLeod highlights, these individuals are responsible for the transmission of memories as gatekeepers of their first-hand experiences.[127] In turn, younger generations' connection to their heritage, collective memories, and cultural stories ensure a bond and ties to that background. For example, the younger generation might also feel compelled to forget or lessen the significance of the memories of the past in exchange for new identities. Such identities are argued as providing this generation with the ability to "break with the heavy weight of their past and allows them to survive, co-exist, or become socially mobile in a new world."[128]

Viewing postmemory through a lens that considers culture unchanging, Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde state that the notion allows for diasporic communities to maintain aspects of their culture which are often at risk of being lost or forgotten, as they soon forget the experiences

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[124] Hirsch, *The Generation of postmemory*, 5.
[125] Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde, "Patterns of migrant post-memory: the politics of remembering the Sayfo," *Communication, Politics & Culture* 43, no. 3 (2015), 43.
[126] ibid.
[127] ibid., 44.
[128] ibid.

of their ancestors. However, relaying the concepts of framing new identities, diasporic communities' younger generations might be more prone to thinking of their group's memories as a 'burden'. As a result, diasporic communities are, once more, at risk of losing aspects of their culture and history.[129]

2.3 Diasporas and New Identities

Much of the diaspora literature is rooted in Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities. Anderson argued that all nations—namely those larger than villages—are considered to be imagined because their members often remain invisible to each other, unaware of any connection(s) which bind them; nations have boundaries; and both their sovereignty and communities are imagined.[130] These elements are raised in Rogers Brubaker's definition of a diaspora which consists of three characteristics. First, *Dispersion* is the idea that communities are spread across lands and beyond (or within) borders. The key signifier is that this dispersion is "strictly as forced or otherwise traumatic…"[131] Second, *Homeland Orientation* refers to the physical or imagined homeland to which diasporic communities connect with. Brubaker identifies four particular features which were first identified by William Safran in 1991:

> These include, first, maintaining a collective memory or myth about the homeland; second, 'regarding the ancestral homeland as the true, ideal home and as the place to which one would (or should) eventually return'; third, being collectively 'committed to the maintenance or restoration of the homeland and to its safety and prosperity'; and fourth, 'continu[ing] to relate, personally or vicariously', to the homeland, in a way that significantly shapes one's identity and solidarity.[132]

The third aspect, *Boundary-Maintenance* focuses on the fortification of a diasporic community's identity in amongst its host community.[133]

As this thesis advances the idea that young Assyrians are forging new, Western-oriented Assyrian identities, it is important to consider the thoughts behind the creation of new identities. Here, Paul Connerton's definition sits at the forefront of this sub-section. In a 2011 book, Connerton stated that forgetting is integral to the creation of new identities.[134] There are types of

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[129] Numansen and Ossewaarde, "Patterns of migrant post-memory," 47.

[130] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

[131] Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005), 5.

[132] William Safran, "Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991), 83-84, quoted in Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," 5.

[133] Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," 6.

[134] Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37, ProQuest Ebook Central.

narratives and aspects, often through collective memory, which have traditionally influenced individuals. However, as these factors soon become forgotten by new generations, for whom these narratives do not contribute to their current identities, new identities are forged.[135]

Finally, Melinda J. Milligan advances the notion that displacement can affect identity continuity, which then creates new identities. Her research was based on the context of the relocation of a university-based restaurant—the "Coffee Shop"—and its effect(s) on past employees.[136] Although the context is different, the findings are pertinent to this chapter. Milligan states that a place or location can be influential for identity-creation and -maintenance, yet when this place is altered or destroyed, the identity is disturbed. When this occurs, any nostalgia which arises as a result inspires the creation of a new identity.[137]

2.4 Turning to the Assyrian Scholarship

My research shows that the same type of rhetoric—of the lost homeland, fortifying an imagined community abroad, and past and present-day persecution—exists within the Assyrian diaspora and acts as the Assyrian-focused scholarship's roots. For nearly two decades, Assyrian-focused scholars mainly based in the West have observed the demise of Assyrians in the Middle East arguably from the side-lines. At the same time, they have viewed the growth of the Assyrian diaspora in the West. The scholarship in the 2000s analysed the prospects of Assyrians early into the 2003 U.S. Coalition-Iraq War (Iraq War). In the 2010s, a wealth of scholarship existed as Assyrians fled the region after ISIL's rise. Over this time frame, the literature turned to understanding Assyrians' new experience(s) of persecution. Contemporary literature of the 2020s explores the latest persecution- and identity-related themes. In this scholarship, the Sayfo and Simele Massacre have been discussed as precedents for the persecution Assyrians have been facing in recent years, as well as the migration which occurred thereafter. This section will concentrate on select publications which relate to themes of the Assyrian collective memory and trauma, intergenerational transmission of memory, diaspora, and identity.

2.4.1 Collective Memory and Trauma

In his 2003 article, the influence of cultural trauma on the collective Assyrian mindset was raised by Greg Gow, who stated:

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[135] Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning*, 37.
[136] Melinda J. Milligan, "Displacement and Identity Discontinuity: The Role of Nostalgia in Establishing New Identity Categories," *Symbolic Interaction* 26, no. 3 (2003), 381.
[137] ibid., 382.

Histories of trauma are familiar to all Assyrians and projected through a variety of imaginings. For instance, one woman, Samiramis, insisted: 'Assyrians see themselves as a crucifix.' She suggests the crucifix represents the collective trauma and the Christian faith—which are both symbiotically related in Assyrian self-imaginations. In this sense, national 'rootedness' somehow lies more in being 'persecuted people' than in a specific homeland or bounded nation.[138]

Nearly two decades later, this rhetoric still exists. Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde's 2015 article, rooted in postmemory, delves into the intergenerational transmission of Sayfo memory across four generations. This study recruited 50 individuals of Aramean, Assyrian, and/or Chaldean descent residing in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden who were linked to the Bote village in Turkey. This village "included about 300 families of Arameans, Assyrians and Chaldeans that typically consisted of between 30 and 50 family members—[and] …that experienced the Sayfo because of its members' ethnicity and their religious affiliations."[139] The participants had familial ties to six Sayfo survivors who originated from Bote. In 2012, Numansen and Ossewaarde interviewed 44 second-to-fourth generation individuals, while six interviews were conducted in the 1980s with the survivors of the Sayfo, who were considered as participants in this study.[140] Pertinent to this sub-section, a key finding was that participants felt a sense of connection to other members of the Assyrian diaspora due to the collective memory of trauma present.[141] The authors argue that, without a homeland, Assyrians could use the rhetoric of persecution—this collective memory—to act as a "symbolic substitute for the homeland."[142] This is similar to Ahmad H. Sadi's idea, that Palestinians use the Al-Nakbah as a point of location that connects them through collective memory,[143] indicating the normalisation of past persecution as a figure and place in time for diasporic communities to connect to and through.

More recently, the newest Assyrian-focused publication released in 2020 investigated the impact of cultural trauma on the Iraqi-Assyrian experience of identity. This study, with a heavy focus on past trauma and present-day identity formation and maintenance, is arguably the first of its kind in this scholarship. In their research, which includes data from 100 Iraqi-Assyrian participants, Niveen Kassem and Mark Jackson define cultural trauma as "a painful collective experience shared by a group of people who have been subjected to traumatic incidents…, such as forced migration, killing, torture, and rape, often the product of cultural groups dominating another."[144] As such,

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[138] Gow, "Watching Saddam Fall," 11.
[139] Numansen and Ossewaarde, "Patterns of migrant post-memory," 45.
[140] ibid.
[141] ibid., 46.
[142] ibid.
[143] Sa'di, "Catastrophe, Memory and Identity," 177.
[144] Kassem and Jackson, "Cultural trauma," 2.

collective trauma often helps to shape a group's sense of identity, becoming integral to it.[145] Kassem and Jackson validate that this idea is present in the context of Assyrians in stating how past traumas, such as the Sayfo, have influenced their desire to retain strong connections with their cultural heritage.[146] This is an action undertaken not only for present-day recollections, understanding, and awareness of Assyrian culture. It is undertaken for the benefit of the future generations who will be the 'carriers' of the Assyrian people and culture.[147] The ideas of Maria Lewicka are highlighted by the authors who assert that "This attempt to preserve their connection with their cultural roots and distinctive heritage, provides a source of 'continuity' and 'uniqueness' for their 'place identity'."[148]

2.4.2 ITMT in the Assyrian Scholarship

Within the Assyrian-focused literature, there is some discussion of memories and their intergenerational transmission, of which Naures Atto's 2017 chapter is at the forefront. Atto emphasises the transmission of memory and trauma in existence within the Assyrian people, arguing that "each generation has experienced a form of continued dispossession, and these experiences have accumulated in the inherited memory of individuals."[149] In viewing present-day persecution, Assyrians are reminded of the past atrocities experienced by ancestors and generations before. As a result, this has led to an "awareness of both a persecuted past and an unknown future, both in the Middle East and in the diaspora."[150] In more recent years, this has been demonstrated by Assyrians' dispersal across the world due to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Moreover, Atto argues that emigration from the homeland and an extensive Assyrian diaspora has also established a fear within the Assyrian people. They believe that lessened physical attachment to the homeland will affect their future, especially as the younger generation has no homeland to visit or return to. As more Assyrians are born in the West, they fear that the Assyrian identity will not be able to survive as "assimilation in the West is occurring too rapidly for their distinctive identities to survive."[151] The growth of the Assyrian diaspora is a testament to this whereby as more generations are born into the West, the less the Assyrian identity and language can survive and co-exist.[152]

It can be argued that the influence persecution has had on Assyrians' dispersal is common knowledge. However, two pieces of literature emphasise the extent to which young Assyrians have

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[145] Kassem and Jackson, "Cultural trauma," 2.
[146] ibid., 12.
[147] ibid.
[148] ibid.
[149] Naures Atto, "The Death Throes," 281.
[150] ibid., 282.
[151] ibid., 296.
[152] ibid., 297.

been affected.[153] In stressing the transmission of trauma to the younger Assyrian generation, Fuat Deniz argues that the context of the Sayfo, "created and caused a feeling of victimisation, a 'stigmatised' identity and fear, not only among those who personally experienced the genocide but also among the younger generations."[154] On the other hand, Atto's 2016 article explores the idea that young Assyrians are prone to being exposed to rhetoric about the Sayfo from childhood, and in addition, that this is the norm. A result of this exposure is that young Assyrian children, despite a lack of awareness of its context, are emotionally-connected to this rhetoric.[155] Atto relays the influence of ISIL's actions in the mid-2010s as contributing to the younger generation's particular attachment to the Assyrian genocide in particular.[156] As they viewed the modern-day attacks on, and subsequent dispersal of, Assyrians, they recalled and understood the experiences of their ancestors.

Furthermore, Deniz states that Assyrians' emigration and refuge-seeking have fed into the people's identity. As the diaspora has further developed, Assyrians have been able to ensure that aspects of their history and culture from the Middle East resume in the West, as part of the identity they maintain. This identity-maintenance is especially interesting given the conditions Assyrians have had to confront and oppose which is "[the] strong pressure to be assimilated into the surrounding populations and their cultures."[157] Referring back to Halbwachs' collective memory, it can be argued that persecution is integral to collective memories created in the Assyrian diaspora, which often centres such stories and remembrances at its heart.

2.4.3 The Assyrian Diaspora and Identity

It is important to begin with the 2003 United States (U.S.)-Coalition Iraq War, due to its significant effect in triggering Assyrians' departure from Iraq who accordingly sought refuge in countries such as the U.S. and Australia—thus, essentially creating the foundations for the extensive Assyrian diaspora we know today. Eden Naby provides an insight into the experiences of American-Assyrians, from their arrival to the United States to societal adaptation, thus acting as a strong foundational insight into the development of the Assyrian diaspora. A primary theme highlighted is the influence of the diaspora in allowing for Assyrians' fight to preserve their identity collectively and consistently. Naby argues that a reason for this is Assyrians' existence "as a stateless people

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[153] Fuat Deniz, "Maintenance and Transformation of Ethnic Identity: The Assyrian Case," in *The Assyrian Heritage – Threads of Continuity and Influence*, eds. Önver A. Cetrez, Sargon G. Donabed and Aryo Makko (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2012), 323.
[154] ibid., 323-324.
[155] Atto, "What Could Not Be Written," 192.
[156] ibid., 194
[157] Deniz, "Maintenance and Transformation of Ethnic Identity," 321.

without the benefit of reliable institutional backing."[158] She concludes her article with a worry prominent in the Assyrian diaspora, that Assyrians will not be able to continue to thrive in the West, stating: "By the end of the twentieth century, the stateless Assyrians are already in danger of losing their language in diaspora and in much of the Middle East. Without a home base, their chances of survival for another two generations is doubtful."[159]

Daniel J. Tower's 2017 chapter outlines how the Assyrian struggle for recognition and institutional support has continued into well the post-Iraq War era. In recent years, Assyrians in the diaspora have fought for their indigenous status in the Middle East using political support to achieve their aim.[160] This section outlines the Assyrian diaspora as being in line with William Safran's characteristics of a diaspora, primarily as Assyrians maintain a strong belief in and tie to the homeland, whose autonomy they seek. Deeply impacted by their ancestral history, the idea of the homeland continues to be a significant facet of the Assyrian identity, that this land was inhabited by Assyrians before, as it should now.[161] In Australia, the Assyrian demographic has fought in conjunction with the rest of the diaspora for Assyrians to be protected in the homeland as well as the recognition of Assyrian autonomy.[162] During the ISIL era, Australian-Assyrians conducted a series of protests as they sought after autonomy. In one case after a protest in early-August, two motions for debate took place in the Australian House of Representatives in the following month. Here, Tower argues that Assyrians' action demonstrated that the Assyrian diaspora, in using its indigeneity and religious affiliation, is capable of obtaining political support for this cause as well as for the "persistent narrative of trauma."[163]

Philippa Collie et al.'s 2010 study, which continues to be the only in-depth, scholarly work that concentrates on Assyrians in New Zealand reviews the identities and bi-cultural intricacies of young Assyrians (aged between 16- and 25-years-old) women in New Zealand.[164] This study, using a holistic approach, brought together the perspectives of 60 Assyrian women and 72 adults as well as three teachers who had taught young Assyrian women.[165] Its primary focus was on how the young women maintained their Iraqi-Assyrian-New Zealand identities every day. Arguably battling between the differences of each identity and cultural entity, Collie et al. sought to understand

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[158] Eden Naby, "The Assyrian diaspora: Cultural survival in the absence of state structure," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, eds. Touraj Atabaki and Sanjyot Mehendale (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 214.

[159] ibid., 227.

[160] Daniel J. Tower, "The Long Road Home: Indigenous Assyrian Christians of Iraq and the Politicisation of the Diaspora," in *Religious Categories and the Construction of the Indigenous*, eds. Christopher Hartney and Daniel J. Tower (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 178-179.

[161] Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," 5.

[162] Tower, "The Long Road Home," 190.

[163] ibid., 193.

[164] Collie et al., "Mindful identity negotiations," 211.

[165] ibid.

whether, and how much, these young women had adjusted to New Zealand. This study found that young Assyrian women maintained a sense of connection to their home, Iraq, which they viewed with both pride and sadness—as a country full of memories for them, and as one which was unsafe to them. New Zealand was seen in a similar positive-negative outlook, as a safe haven and country where they could have better lives as well as a nation where discrimination was likely.[166]

In contrast, Önver A. Çetrez analysed young Swedish-Assyrians' sense of Assyrian identity and connection to their culture, using results from twelve interviews conducted with Assyrians aged between 19- to 23-years-old.[167] Çetrez found that the participants maintained a link to their ethno-religious Assyrian background. However, some struggled with their identity as individuals of Assyrian descent in Sweden in being made to feel like outsiders by non-Assyrians. Particularly, one participant was faced with the assimilation-promoting language used by teachers, who questioned the participant's use of their Assyrian name. The teachers argued that in adopting a non-Assyrian name, the participant could "become something in society."[168]

In essence, Collie et al. and Çetrez's respective studies indicate how young Assyrians have been at a cross-roads when considering their identity. While they maintain a sense of connection to the homeland or Assyrian ethnicity and/or religion, they are able to keep elements of their heritage alive in the West. However, they have also demonstrated that there are barriers to their Assyrian-Western existence in being reminded of their place in their respective countries as 'outsiders', whether through discrimination and/or assimilationist tactics.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the several theories which underpin this thesis, of which Marianne Hirsch's postmemory has been integral. Through its 'components'—collective memory and the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma—this theory has emphasised how younger generations can be affected by memories of trauma experienced beyond their generation. More pressing, that these memories can continue to live and thrive within this newer generation. The Assyrian-focused literature has highlighted how younger Assyrians remember the rhetoric of persecution that exists within the collective Assyrian memory, an aspect only furthered by the Assyrian diaspora. However, without a physical homeland to connect to, it is often this rhetoric that allows young Assyrians to feel a sense of connection to either the Assyrian homeland or diasporic members.

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[166] Collie et al., "Mindful identity negotiations," 213.
[167] Önver A. Çetrez, "'I feel Swedish, but my parents are from there…' Crossing of identity borders among Assyrian young in a multicultural context," in *Borders and the Changing Boundaries of Knowledge* (Transactions, vol. 22), eds. Inga Brandell, Marie Carlson and Önver A. Çetrez (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2015), 167.
[168] ibid., 168.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides information on the research design and methods used in this study. It will specify details on participant recruitment, participants' demographics, the focus group and focus group stage, data-protection and ethical considerations, and the process through which data was uncovered and analysed. The chapter concludes with an assessment of methodological challenges, primarily related to my position as a researcher of Assyrian descent.

3.1 Research Design and Methods

Notably, qualitative research methods, which are employed in this thesis, ensure that optimal research outcomes are produced given the data's complexity and richness. It can be argued that qualitative methods offer a more humanised approach to research, as "the researchers become a part of the research, attempting to understand the lives and experiences of the people they study."[169] Furthermore, qualitative researchers rely on interviews or focus groups to gather data, whereas in contrast, quantitative research is objective, numbers- and statistics-based. A quantitative researcher is removed from the research due to a potential preoccupation with the procedures used, such as questionaries or experiments.[170] Ashley Castleberry and Amanda Nolen offer a well-rounded outlook of qualitative research, arguing:

> The primary aim of qualitative research is to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon through the experiences of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon, recognizing the value of participants' unique viewpoints that can only be fully understood within the context of their experience and worldview.[171]

From the onset of this research, it was clear that qualitative research methods would be adopted. However, when designing this project I considered the prospects of producing surveys, which would be released in the same timeframe as when the fieldwork was being conducted. This raised two issues. First, including surveys would have added the risk of raising superficial responses. Moreover, as this topic is under-researched, responses from surveys could have clouded or over-powered in-depth and genuine responses. Simply, I wanted authentic over randomised data.

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[169] Alicia Jencik, "Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research," in *21st Century Political Science: A Reference Handbook*, eds, John T. Ishiyama and Marijke Breuning (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 507.

[170] ibid.

[171] Ashley Castleberry and Amanda Nolen, "Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds?" *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning* 10 (2018), 807-808.

The second issue was that the dissemination of a survey via social media platforms such as *Facebook* or *Instagram*, due to their respective wide-reaches in the Assyrian diaspora, could have impacted the legitimacy of the responses I was reviewing. It would have been difficult to know whether they were from genuine, young Assyrians. This research's sensitive and contentious nature influenced my concern(s) over 'trolls', individuals online who conduct negative behaviour, who could obtain access to the publicised survey. Their potential access could have influenced the authenticity and integrity of the data collected, upon their potential completion of the survey. Therefore, quantitative research would not have been feasible for this research at this time due to the inability to obtain in-depth answers. As the perspectives of young New Zealand- and Australian-based Assyrians on persecution- and identity-related themes have not been brought to light in this manner before, it was fundamental that interviews and focus groups were primarily adopted.

Lastly, what must be mentioned is that, while qualitative research was the most suitable method for this project, it has its faults. Alicia Jencik highlights three key points in particular: that qualitative research is narrow and its participant-focused agenda often means that researchers "fail to make their results generalizable to a larger population."[172] Moreover, difficulties are raised as a researcher's position is questioned, in both their ability to analyse data and remain objective. Lastly, Jencik argues that adopting qualitative research methods requires time, from the fieldwork to data-analysis stages.[173]

I decided to recruit participants from both New Zealand and Australia due to the limited research undertaken which explores the Assyrian diasporic communities in each country. However, in March 2020, my initial plan of conducting in-person meetings was radically adjusted as the reality of COVID-19 became clear and countries world-wide, including New Zealand and Australia, went into lockdown. The pandemic dramatically altered the course of this research, delimiting any opportunities to physically meet with both prospective and confirmed participants. As the fieldwork stage needed to be undertaken online, I was concerned about difficult it would become to find participants became a primary point of concern from March to September 2020. Despite these challenges I managed to complete my data-collection online. When the interviews began in July, the use of video conferencing software such as *Zoom* had by then become the 'new normal'. I believe this created a greater sense of comfort for both my participants and myself, which allowed me to connect with them in a different way.

As detailed below, I interviewed eight young Assyrians in total: three in a group interview/focus group and five one-on-one interviews. The focus group was conducted with participants based in Wellington, whereas three of the single-participant interviews were conducted

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[172] Jencik, "Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research," 511.
[173] ibid., 511

with Sydney-based participants and the two remaining with a Wellington- and Auckland-based participant, respectively. To recruit participants, I sought the help of two individuals. One is an Auckland-based family member who is well-connected in the Auckland-Assyrian community and St. Mary's Assyrian Church of the East (ACE), while the Sydney-based connection is a family friend who is equally as connected in the Sydney-Assyrian community and church circles. The Assyrian community strongly ties inter-personal connections with the church, which acts as the community's centre. Notably, within the Assyrian diaspora, the various Assyrian churches act as important 'hubs' which "[allow Assyrians to] connect with one another, and to affirm (through embodied worship) a continuity of survival… [acting] as surrogate 'homelands' where the imagined family of believers are globally 'rooted'."[174] Therefore, due to churches' strong role and place in the community, I could easily adopt the snowball method in my participant-recruitment stage.

To fulfil my primary goal of understanding the younger generation's perception of persecution and its influence on their identity, potential participants had to conform to three main characteristics: they had to be of Assyrian origin, aged between 18- to 30-years-old, and residing in either New Zealand (Wellington and Auckland) or Australia (Sydney). Otherwise, this research welcomed individuals from various backgrounds: male and female, high school and tertiary education graduates, employed and unemployed, or Middle East-born, with the latter having recently emigrated to either New Zealand or Australia in the mid-2010s.

3.1.1 Participant Recruitment

I used the snowball and convenience sampling methods to recruit participants. The former draws on the networks of existing contacts and participants to engage others. This method is useful in contexts where potential participants cannot be easily found, as was the case in this project.[175] On the other hand, the latter is based on researchers recruiting participants who are accessible to them, often within their surroundings and circles.[176]

I originally planned to consult community church-associated groups through which I could directly speak with potential participants. However, the transition from proposed in-person to online interviews meant that this could not happen. For my research, all but four participants were gathered by word-of-mouth upon the recommendation of my connections associated with the ACE parishes in Auckland and Sydney. The remaining four Wellington-based individuals were recruited using the convenience method as they were approachable people I already knew.[177] Much like the

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[174] Gow, "Watching Saddam Fall," 13.
[175] Janet Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2015), 122.
[176] Laura M. O'Dwyer and James A. Bernauer, *Quantitative Research for the Qualitative Researcher* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2014), 83.
[177] Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews*, 121.

snowballing method, applying the convenience sampling method can raise ethical issues if the researcher knows their participant(s) well on a personal level.[178] I maintained a level of professionalism which I believed could prevent any potential ethical problems.

In early-July 2020, the data-collection stage commenced. I relied on previously known connections to recruit the Wellington-based participants. As an Assyrian born and raised in Wellington, my family ties have meant that I am connected to various church-related circles. I was able to recruit two participants as a result. The first port-of-call was a friend who I had considered for this research from the onset. I contacted her through *Facebook Messenger*, enquiring about both her interest and that of others in my project. She was interested, and subsequently shared the information about this research with her own connections, which led to the Wellington-based focus group consisting of three individuals. Later in the fieldwork stage, I conducted the second Wellington-based interview with another friend.

Whilst my connections were a significant asset in helping to connect me with at least three participants, I could not rely entirely on them to find participants outside of New Zealand. This research needed a human-to-human element that would allow me to directly discuss the project's basis, significance, and its sensitive themes with prospective participants. By either relying on connections or social media posts that only provided a snippet of this research, I was unable to connect with prospective participants myself. In other words, to be the human 'face' of this research. Moreover, I believe the language used in the social media posts—of a professional, serious manner—could have been a deterrent for prospective participants who might have assumed that they had to be knowledgeable in the research's themes. As a result, these factors impacted the extent to which I could reach young Assyrians as the majority of participants had to be found digitally.

While looking for Auckland- and Sydney-based participants, I was also concerned about how my research would be perceived and understood by those contacted due to its sensitive themes. After attempting to find contacts using an existing Auckland-based connection, I contacted the ACE Auckland parish through *Facebook*. With time, it became increasingly clear that I would not be able to connect with potential participants through this mode of communication. I communicated with my connection once more, who then referred me to the sole Auckland-based participant. A similar pattern was seen in the journey to finding Sydney-based participants. I first began contacting the ACE through a '*Contact us*' tab on its website.[179] Using my insider knowledge as an Assyrian, I was aware of the assumption that the older generation often tends to have various church- and local

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[178] Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews*, 130.
[179] Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East (Archdiocese of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon), "Contact us".

parish-related social media accounts. Therefore, in using this formal mode of contact, I was concerned about who would receive my message via the ACE's website and whether they could interpret my message. Despite this, I sent through information about my research, but it yield a fruitful result.

Subsequently, I chose to contact the ACE youth branch, *Assyrian Church of the East Youth Association*, on *Facebook Messenger*. In contacting the youth directly I had a higher chance of finding participants. However, I questioned whether I could receive a response back from the youth branch. Not until I contacted my Sydney-based connection, who was able to expedite this process, did I receive a response. Yet, the procedure behind finding participants in Sydney was relatively fruitful as, in passing information about my research to young Assyrians, two participants contacted me. I was referred to the final Sydney-based participant at the end of my interview with the second Sydney-based participant.

Upon contacting potential participants and confirming their interest, I subsequently emailed more extensive information about this research, informing them of its premise, how participants' data and anonymity were to be protected, and the overall procedure. After receiving a final confirmation of their participation, I emailed the consent form which was either pre-signed or verbally consented to at the beginning of the interview. Lastly, in the process of planning for the interviews, I ensured that participants could partake in this research using a variety of password-protected video-conferencing platforms to interview participants, depending on personal preference. These included: *Zoom*, *Facebook Messenger*, and *Skype*. Out of six interviews, five were conducted via *Zoom* and one interview on Facebook Messenger.

As I mentioned above, despite not being able to recruit and meet potential participants face-to-face, I believe that conducting the interviews online was extremely beneficial. As both myself and my participants took part in the interviews from home, there was a greater level of comfort. The value of conducting Assyrian persecution-focused interviews at participants' homes was brought to attention by Sofia Numansen and Marinus Ossewaarde who argued that "it was important that they [participants] felt safe, given the intensity of the emotions associated with the catastrophe they were invited to speak about."[180]

3.1.2 Participants – The Demographics

Of my eight participants, six were women and two were men. All were university-educated and had an average age of 21. The majority of participants were Western-born, with two born in Wellington, New Zealand and three in Sydney, Australia. Three participants were born in the Middle East—in

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[180] Numansen and Ossewaarde, "Patterns of migrant post-memory," 45.

Iraq, Jordan, and Syria, and raised in New Zealand from a young age. In terms of family origins, all but one participant identified with Assyrian tribes, villages, and/or sects. They are as follow: Albaknaye, Ashetnaye, Chamanaya, Diznaye/Diz, Maligipa, Mawana, Tekhoome, Tel Skopa. One participant also identified as part Chaldean. The remaining participant was unsure of her family's tribal history.[181]

3.1.3 Focus Group(s) and Interviews

The entire participant recruitment stage led to one focus group consisting of three people and five one-on-one interviews conducted between July and September 2020. The average duration time of both the focus group and interviews was 66 minutes. I drew up a list of thirteen questions through which I could understand whether participants raised themes of persecution in their Assyrian identity, as well as to consider the potential differences between people born in New Zealand and Australia, compared with those born abroad. I began my interviews by first inquiring about personal aspects such as ages, places of birth, education level, families' departure from the Middle East, and ancestral homeland/villages. After this, I enquired about participants' lives in New Zealand and Australia as Assyrians, and their Assyrian heritage, respectively. Questions three to five concentrated on Assyrian persecution or *jinjara* (suffering) and its effect(s) on participants. Two questions were dedicated to feelings or perceptions of displacement. Questions eight and nine sought to gain an insight into recent migrants' lives in either New Zealand or Australia. However, as I was unable to recruit any participants with recent-refugee backgrounds, these questions were not asked. The final questions, ten to thirteen were focused on stories of Assyrian history and culture throughout participants' childhoods, and the Sayfo and Simele Massacre, respectively.

Usually focus groups are conducted before interviews, which was the case for this project. They are used to gather rich data and information via a single group meeting.[182] Martha Ann Carey and Jo-Ellen Ashbury state that this happens as focus groups provide comfort for participants—and thereby, a higher level of detail in their information, and richer data for the researcher.[183] Since there is no existing extensive research on this topic, my fieldwork began with focus groups, an ideal method for under-researched topics. Based on an "'informal discussion among selected individuals about specific topics',"[184] according to Romney et al., if the participants acquired for the focus group(s) are strongly knowledgeable in the research matter, then even four participants can be

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[181] A table compiling participants' information and background(s) is found in the Appendix.

[182] Martha Ann Carey and Jo-Ellen Ashbury, *Focus Group Research* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2012), 15-16.

[183] ibid., 16.

[184] L. Beck, W. Trombetta, and S. Share, "Using focus group sessions before decisions are made," *North Carolina Medical Journal* 47 (1986), quoted in Sue Wilkinson, "Focus Groups – A Feminist Method," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23 (1999), 221.

enough to provide accurate data.[185]

     Focus group are characterised as formal group interviews which the researcher facilitates.[186] However, my perception of focus groups differed as I wanted an informal setting where, although I would steer the conversation using questions, the participants would be able to speak freely and comfortably. Importantly, so that they could build mini-discussions on top of each participant's opinion(s) and perspective(s). For my research, I recruited a friend who shared information about my research with two of her own family friends. In including focus groups in this research, I was conscious of the potential clashes which could surface from multiple-participant discussions. Despite this, the sole focus group conducted in Wellington was successful due to the participants' connection(s) with each other. The participants' sense of comfort enabled for a free flow of responses and critical thought as they discussed the topics together.

     This research also used semi-structured interviews to obtain an in-depth insight into young Assyrians' perspectives on historical or contemporary Assyrian persecution. According to Janet Salmons, there are two types of semi-structured interviews. In the first, in conjunction with the pre-written questions used to help guide the interview, the researcher can ask follow-up questions. For the second, named *standardized open-ended interviews*, the researcher can ask pre-written and follow-up questions, but the latter can vary between interviews.[187] I adopted standardized open-ended interviews for this research. In comparison with other methods such as surveys or questionaries, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were chosen as, not only would confidentiality and privacy be maintained, but this ensured that the responses produced were effortless. Here, the participants could lead the discussion, allowing them to wholly contemplate on the project's themes and their experiences of persecution, as well as their personal experiences and understanding. For example, if surveys were used, there was no guarantee that the data acquired would be suitable for two reasons. First, the responses would likely be shallow. Research of this nature called for in-depth responses. Additionally, in publicly circulating a survey with anonymised responses (and especially through social media), I would not be able to confirm that the respondent was an Assyrian (and one who fitted the characteristics outlined). Second, surveys would not be acceptable as the ramifications of respondents' exposure to sensitive, persecution-based rhetoric would not be entirely known.

     In the oral history-based literature, it is argued that interviews are preferred as they capture participants' perceptions of memory well. For example, with unstructured interviews, participants can become more in control of their participation, especially when directed through the interview(s)

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[185] Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Kevin McKenna, "How many focus groups are enough?," *Field Methods* 29, no. 1 (2017), 5.

[186] Nigel King and Christine Horrocks, *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010), 66.

[187] Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews*, 59.

using topics/themes.[188] Emily Keightley discusses her own research methods, asserting the value of one-on-one interviews based on sensitive information, particularly when communicating with female participants. One-on-one interviews bring more comfortable for the participant, in the sense that any issues which result from interviews conducted with partners, peers, or other individuals can be avoided.[189]

In the focus group and interviews, I used a mixture of the English and Assyrian languages. With the latter, the majority of participants were either fluent or proficient, with only one non-Assyrian-speaking participant. The interviews themselves were primarily conducted in English for convenience reasons, but Assyrian was used when Assyrian contexts, stories, and names were discussed by either my participants and/or myself. Halilovich argues that the decision to use an ancestral language helps when "tap[ping] into or divert[ing] from different cultures" is required.[190] Likewise, when communicating with participants, the use of language is important as it can affect their response and participation. Halilovich argues further that participants' level of trust in the researcher, who might be considered an outsider, may depend on the use of ancestral language(s).[191] For myself, I often found that speaking Assyrian added a level of personal comfort. It was a reminder of my personal standpoint in this research, as an Assyrian. However, I believe that this comfort was exemplified in my participants as well, whereby the use of Assyrian words or phrases, would show a sense of joy in participants' facial and tonal expressions. This use of a common mother tongue helped to re-enforce our commonalities as Western-born and/or -raised Assyrians with similar experiences—despite our place(s) at either end of this research project.

3.1.4 Data Protection and Ethical Considerations

The focus group and interviews were recorded on two devices, a *Sony* voice recorder, and an iPhone. Subsequently, the recordings were saved onto *Microsoft OneDrive* and *Dropbox*. To physically protect participants' data and anonymity, the number of physical notes or interview transcripts used throughout the research process was limited. The handwritten notes from interviews and focus group were typed-up and saved to OneDrive, and physical notes were destroyed as soon as possible after the interviews.

The ethical considerations of this research were important, given its nature and sensitive background. I kept the protection and anonymity of my participants' data, which was paramount, in

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[188] Emily Keightley, "Remembering research: memory and methodology in the social sciences," *International Journal of Social Research* Methodology 13, no. 1 (2010), 61.
[189] ibid.
[190] Hariz Halilovich, "Behind the *Emic* Lines: Ethics and Politics of Insiders' Ethnography," in *Insider Research on Migration and Mobility: International Perspectives on Researcher Positioning*, eds., Lejla Voloder and Liudmila Kirpitchenko (Farnham: Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 94.
[191] ibid.

mind at all times. The application I made to the University's Human Ethics Committee (HEC) in order to conduct this research provided the opportunity to revise my research project. A key example of this was the HEC's concern about data-protection within the community. They questioned how this would be maintained, asking how likely it is that this research can be kept confidential in the Assyrian community. Moreover, they raised the idea that participants were not being asked to keep the details of the interview confidential. What impact would this have on the community? In response to this, I had to add an additional layer of anonymity-protection, taking into consideration the Assyrian communities of New Zealand and Australia. Both are well-connected and information is routinely passed between diasporic communities across the Assyrian diaspora. Therefore, the consent sheet was amended to include the feature that participants were advised to not disclose their participation in this research.

This two-way approach to anonymity-protecting was the most suitable method I could use to ensure that the participants remained unknown in the community—whether as the research was being undertaken, or in the future. Upon consenting to their participation, participants were also in agreement with the clause that their participation would remain private. This amendment was approved shortly thereafter. Moreover, for focus groups, there was a further level of protection added by way of the focus group rules.[192] The key rules were that the contents of the focus group were confidential and could not be discussed outside of the meeting, focus group members' responses must be respected, and that this was an inclusive focus group where all answers are welcome.

3.2 Data Analysis and Synthesis

After concluding the interviews, the next stage began: reviewing the interviews and generating the key themes which emerged from this research. For this research, thematic analysis (TA) was the primary data-collection method adopted, one which is often used in qualitative research.[193] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun state that TA begins with small points—codes—found within the data, which are then connected with other data, thus forming themes that are "underpinned by a central organizing concept – a shared core idea."[194] Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio argue that TA is the most suitable data-analysis method for research utilising 'real-life'-type data, relating to, for example, individuals' experiences.[195] TA was the appropriate means by which the data could be analysed as I wanted to collate the key themes which emerged from the interviews, from the

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[192] The focus group rules can be found in the appendix.
[193] Castleberry and Nolen, "Thematic analysis of qualitative data," 808.
[194] Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Thematic analysis," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2017), 297.
[195] Michelle E. Kiger and Lara Varpio, "Thematic analysis in qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 8 (2020), 847.

participants' lives and experiences.

For this study, interview transcriptions were key. Keightley contends that transcripts are often labelled as a necessary means by which memory-related and -focused data can be analysed.[196] She further describes her own qualitative approach to research, stating that she examines the different themes which emerge from transcripts. Looking for key themes is a feature of memory studies research to help researchers find "themes arising from the accounts and identifying recurring commonalities in the form or content of the experiences."[197] I initially transcribed the interviews using the 'Transcribe' feature on the online version of *Microsoft Word*. Subsequently, while listening to the interview recording, I thoroughly edited and amended the transcription to ensure accuracy. During this stage, I began to highlight particular themes and interesting points of observation on a minor scale.

Following this initial meta-analysis, I began to use *NVIVO 12* but soon found that the software was lacking the 'hands-on' approach I wanted. Therefore, I manually coded the data. For each transcription, I created a separate document with a table comprising of two sections—one for the transcript and the other for notes on emerging themes from the data. On a second document, I included a table consisting of six sections dedicated to each interview and focus group. The emerging themes from each interview were placed in their respective, colour-coded section. Now in the same document, I reviewed the themes over several periods, highlighting the notable key points.

In a separate and final document, I listed the six most prominent themes beneath which the sub-themes—and the quotes discussing each theme—emerging from the interviews were listed. To differentiate between each interview, I continued to highlight the themes using their respective colour. On a great and extensive document as such, I was able to then choose the data which resonated strongly with myself and the 'message' of each overarching theme. The six themes were:

- *Recollection of contemporary persecution,*
- *Discussion of persecution and cultural trauma through parents' eyes,*
- *Feelings of displacement which have affected participants' identities*,
- *The influence of physical location*,
- *The formation of secure Western-Assyrian identities*, and,
- *Pride*, *resilience*, and *perseverance*.

These initial themes were condensed into three broad themes: *persecution*, *location*, and *identity*. These are the broad themes for chapters four to six, which are specifically titled *Physical*

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[196] Keightley, "Remembering research," 65.
[197] ibid., 64.

Connection to the West versus the Homeland, *Young Assyrians' Perception of Persecution*, and *Young Assyrians' Identity*, respectively.

3.3 Methodological Challenges

As with any research, issues in the methodological stage can arise. In my own, I faced two issues: insider research and my positionality as a researcher of Assyrian-descent behind this project.

3.3.1 Insider Research

Insider research originates from the idea that communities and groups, with a collective common identifier such as ethnicity,[198] could only be carefully understood by their members. Therefore, the personal associations of "'native' social scientists" are normalised in research.[199] Other scholars identify insider researchers as "'participant[s] immersed in the actions and experiences within the system being studied',"[200] which is the definition adopted in this sub-section. Derya Ozkul highlights the words of Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney who encourages researchers' insider perspective(s) for their "important contribution" to research.[201] However, the insider perspective is argued as of an "incomplete and unstable nature."[202] This only intensifies the complications which result from the researcher-individual relationship. Moreover, Janet Salmons recognises the influence insider researchers may have, in which she argues that they:

> …Must be able to explain whether, or to what extent, they are working from an outside or inside position. The position of the researcher will inform not only the perspectives the researcher brings but also lenses used to analyze the data.[203]

While the researcher-individual bond produces the battle between the "two selves",[204] the unity between the "cultural insider" and "professional outsider" selves is possible.[205] Hariz Halilovich writes of his own experience in which he has beneficially used his 'cultural insider' perspective, stating:

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[198] Derya Ozkul, "Emotive Connections: Insider Research with Turkish/Kurdish Alevi Migrants in Germany," in *Insider Research on Migration and Mobility: International Perspectives on Researcher Positioning*, eds., Lejla Voloder and Liudmila Kirpitchenko (Farnham: Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 117.

[199] ibid., 118.

[200] Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews*, 42.

[201] Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "'Native'" anthropologists," *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 3 (1984), 585, quoted in Ozkul, "Emotive Connections," 118.

[202] Patricia O'Connor, "The conditionality of status: Experience-based reflections on the insider/outsider issue," *Australian Geographer* 35, no. 2 (2004), 69, quoted in Halilovich, "Behind the *Emic* Lines," 88.

[203] Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews*, 42.

[204] Halilovich, "Behind the *Emic* Lines," 88.

[205] ibid.

Being a 'cultural insider' has definitely been an advantage in understanding the issues and gaining access to prospective participants and establishing trusting relationships. At times, the insider status provided me with access to information that might have been off limits to outside researchers (Edwards 2002). Not that I subscribe to the view that a researcher needs to come from the same ethnic, religious or social background in order to understand their subjects…[206]

Insider research is often thought to originate from within the researcher. However, participants can project the themes which arise from this theory just as intensely. Halilovich reiterates the thoughts of Selma Porobić who explores the idea that "the insider positioning comes foremost from the informants themselves, who perceive the researcher as 'one of us' and whose role [it] is to present their stories accurately to the outside world."[207] Insider research acknowledges the role an individual's personal background may have on their research from multiple angles.

3.3.2 Positionality

From its inception to the final stages of this research, I had to closely analyse my position as both primary researcher and an Assyrian. Akin to my participants, I was deeply connected to the themes which form the backbone of this research. Throughout this research, my proximity was under continuous consideration as I sought to recognise my own positionality and need to maintain objectivity, as much as is possible. Objectivity was raised by Charlotte Aull Davies, who stated that "all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research."[208] From my experience undertaking this research, I found this to be accurate.

Positionality can be argued as the various characteristics of a researcher, from their age or gender to their lived experiences, all of whom being aspects that can inform their research and research process(es).[209] Pascale Bos draws attention to positionality in the context of Holocaust studies stating that researchers can be in close proximity to the Holocaust, whether through first-hand experience(s) or as descendants of the genocide.[210] Additionally, the role of positionality can extend to researchers' interpretation of scholarship which they "read autobiographically", whereby they examine the literature with their own experiences and emotions in mind. Bos sees the inclusion

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[206] Halilovich, "Behind the *Emic* Lines," 90.
[207] ibid., 91.
[208] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3, quoted in Halilovich, "Behind the *Emic* Lines," 89.
[209] Roni Berger, "Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research," *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2 (2015), 220.
[210] Pascale Bos, "Positionality and Postmemory in Scholarship on the Holocaust," *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 19 (2003), 52.

of the autobiographical lens as somewhat problematic, arguing that there must be greater awareness of what this will mean for scholarship.[211]

Being an Assyrian-descent researcher meant that there were difficulties that arose as I dealt with my 'two selves'. I found that the easiest way to approach this issue was to be an 'insider' when conducting my interviews and an 'outsider' when considering the Assyrian-focused literature. This was accomplished as, over the course of this research project, my own personal connection as an Assyrian helped me connect with potential participants. This was furthered by my Auckland- and Sydney-based connections who were familiar with church circles in each respective city. What is more, I found that in being close to this research, a level of familiarity with participants was added which I believe aided in acquiring rich data. When considering the literature, there were times when I was incredibly affected by the hopelessness and helplessness which was prevalent in the discussion of Assyrians' past and present-day experiences of persecution. To provide a remedy, I had to review and analyse the literature objectively, as an outsider. In doing so, I removed myself from the stories shared by participants throughout the literature, whereby I reviewed the rhetoric and emotive expression with the imagined impartiality of a non-Assyrian.

3.4 Conclusion

This research's success depended on a strong methodological background. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced my first hurdle whereby I had to quickly conduct my fieldwork online. While this affected the potential reach of this research, it contributed to the procurement of the small pool of participants found which became an asset. In conducting one focus group and five semi-structured interviews, I was able to acquire rich data which was aided by the informal (yet professional) approach taken in the focus group and interviews to ensure that participants were comfortable, such as in bonding over shared similar stories and lived experiences, to speaking the Assyrian language. This positively affected the data-analysis stage as I could analyse the data and emerging themes with more intensity. Finally, while my position as an individual and researcher of Assyrian descent brought with it complexities, in being self-aware of my role I was able to mitigate any issues. Ultimately, my background only added to this research project.

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[211] Bos, "Positionality and Postmemory," 57.

Chapter 4: Physical Connection to the West versus the Homeland

This chapter looks at the influence of physical location on young Assyrians' identities. It argues that a lack of physical connection to the homeland has influenced the extent to which young Assyrians can create strong, traditional types of Assyrian identities which may include either historical or familial links to persecution. The main findings are that, first, young Assyrians' identity-creation and -maintenance are influenced by their location and communities. Second, as individuals of Assyrian descent living in New Zealand and Australia, some participants had at times been triggered by feelings of displacement. These feelings could arise both within the individual as well as being reinforced by non-Assyrians. Third, in line with the argument of this chapter and thesis, a lack of physical connection to the Assyrian homeland has influenced young Assyrians' direction toward Western-oriented identities. In its discussion section, this chapter refers back to Melinda J. Milligan's concept, that displacement can help create new identities.

4.1 Influence of Location and Community

This sub-section is strongly informed by the perspective of Ishtar (21F, Sydney).[212,213] The importance of physical location, the key theme of this chapter, was first stressed by Ishtar who underlined how strongly location can help young Western-Assyrians connect with their Assyrian heritage. Ishtar highlighted how having been born in Australia made it difficult for young Assyrians to connect to the homeland. Western-born Assyrians do not have direct, personal connections to locations they had never known or visited. This response arose from the key question raised, based on what came to participants' minds when hearing the words 'Assyrian persecution' (and *jinjara* in Assyrian), which was rooted in understanding their most initial and natural thoughts on the foundational theme of this research. When asked this question, Ishtar relayed the challenges Assyrians would have experienced as they faced displacement whether 50-years-ago or in recent years, expressing, "even in our generation, this is still continuing."

When it comes to connecting with past persecution, Ishtar contended that it would also be difficult to do so while living in Australia. If she could visit important sites and speak with Assyrians about these locations' significance, this could deepen her connection, one "we don't have." Moreover, when asked if she felt displaced, Ishtar spoke of displacement from a 'physical' perspective. She has experienced mixed-feelings of displacement towards both her district, Fairfield, due to its size but also during particular instances when she left her community, brought

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[212] 'Ishtar', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 1st, 2020.
[213] All participants' names have been anonymised. Generic names often used by Assyrians have been put in place.

on by non-Assyrians' unawareness of the Assyrian people or culture. Yet, with time, the community has developed into a place where comfort can be found by Assyrians. The primary reason for this is knowing that the younger generation has the opportunity to attend Assyrian primary and high schools Secondly, this district is one in which recent migrants' integration can be easily and successfully undertaken.

At a younger age, Ishtar disliked Fairfield as it signified restriction and confinement; a place where traditional values were maintained. Moving between an 'Australian' and a 'non-Australian' suburb like Fairfield meant that it was difficult to exist and be, as Assyrian/Middle Eastern societal and cultural pressures were placed on others, even by strangers. From wearing particular attire to being with certain friends, Ishtar found the fear of others' perception difficult, which lead to her internal question primarily aimed at older Assyrians: "Why can't you just assimilate and be normal[?]…" Speaking as a 21-year-old, she viewed Fairfield with a different lens. Now, "I wouldn't want to live anywhere else…," she stated.

In recent years, the Fairfield City Council has boosted its recognition of the Assyrian community by assisting recent migrants and coordinating Assyrian New Year celebrations for the public. As a result, she was appreciative that Fairfield has been able to become a 'mini home' and haven for Assyrians, where they do not necessarily feel displaced. For example, elderly Assyrians can shop without any language barriers, as Assyrian and Arabic are some of the dominant languages used. Interestingly, she stated that a love for Fairfield has even been developed by Assyrians visiting Sydney from overseas who viewed the district as more 'Syrian' or 'Iraqi' than when Assyrians inhabited those respective countries. Ishtar expressed how "it's good for them [Assyrians visiting Fairfield] to feel like home."

Here, the comfort felt by young Assyrians in such a densely-Assyrian location helps to ensure that, far away from the Assyrian homeland, they are able to grow and exist in the 'next-best' area. In Fairfield, and a rich Assyrian diasporic community as such, young Australian-Assyrians have the privilege of connecting to their heritage more deeply than most of their diasporic counterparts. In contrast with participants based in Wellington and Auckland, a similar, Assyrian communal space of this level does not exist. The reason for this is New Zealand's smaller Assyrian population, one which is not substantial enough to establish a small Assyrian 'home' whereby the respective Wellington and Auckland City Councils recognise and celebrate the Assyrian New Year, for example. For New Zealand-based Assyrians, any cultural and/or religious celebrations are undertaken by the community, for the community.

4.2 Displacement

Traditionally, feelings of displacement can be argued as applying to individuals who have migrated to a new country, rather than being strongly associated with their Western-born and/or -raised children. In leaving their homeland and emigrating to new-found land(s) in the West, migrants can be faced with inner allegiance-based arguments in having to grapple between 'old' and 'new' identities.[214] In cases where migrants are torn between identities, where do their loyalties lie? For this research, it was important to seek an answer to the question about feelings of displacement given this context of Western-born and/or -raised individuals who were born under the setting of the persecution and suffering which is often unknown to them from a first-hand perspective. In the context of this chapter, a loss of connection to the homeland has affected participants' identity continuity. They lose the ability to connect to the persecution element of their identity, or perceived identity, and unbeknownst to some, they have the opportunity to establish a new type of Assyrian identity. Whereas in contrast, others are actively engaged in creating Western-Assyrian identities.

This was demonstrated in the Wellington-based focus group by Lina (20F), Atour (24F), and Sonia (25F). Lina and Sonia reinforced that they did not feel a sense of displacement due to their upbringing in New Zealand. For example, Lina stated that she felt welcomed in New Zealand as soon as she arrived from Jordan in the early-2000s. A significant contributor here was the connection she had with her family which made New Zealand feel "like this is my home." Particularly, in growing up with family members of a similar age, she stated: "We've grown up together and I feel like in a way we've helped each other to find our place here." At times of struggle, when "we didn't have anyone [of Assyrian descent at school as a child]," they often stuck together—and in doing so, this alleviated any feelings of being out-of-place. What is more, Lina conveyed how the limited feelings of displacement she felt were linked to not having experienced racism at her ethnically-diverse high school.

Similarly, Sonia felt like she belonged in New Zealand. However, she did attribute a part of her personality to her parents' influence, which was, itself, influenced by their own displacement. She has developed anxiety and a tendency to overthink due to her parents' "experience [of] being kind of kicked out of the country or just fleeing a dangerous place." Due to this, there is a fear of the unknown, of uncertainty, as "to them, anything can happen because they've seen everything." Furthermore, while she has inherited a sense of gratitude due to her parents' migration to New Zealand, she questioned why her parents continued the mentality of being "too scared to strive for more." They do not "ask for too much because we have to be really thankful for what we have"—a stance she disagreed with as she began to "grow into someone who feels like they can expect more

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[214] Agnes Szabo and Colleen Ward, "Identity development during cultural transition: The role of social-cognitive identity processes," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 46 (2015), 15.

from life." This can be argued as a step closer towards a new Western-Assyrian identity in which the persecution and displacement experienced by Assyrians is not highly considered. Young Assyrians' expectations, informed by their birth and/or upbringing in the West, have led them to seek more beyond the traditional expectations placed on them by their parents, greater community, and/or diaspora. In attempting to live and grow like their Western counterparts—the same manner as third- or fourth-generation individuals born in New Zealand and/or Australia— there is a chance for young Assyrians to develop new Assyrian identities on their terms and beliefs.

Persecution and family struggles have led to much of the Assyrian people's displacement— and this was the context within which I asked participants about their own sense of displacement (if any existed at all). However, an interesting interpretation of the question was highlighted by Atour who argued that non-Assyrians reinforced her feelings of displacement due to their ignorance and/or lack of interest. She found it difficult to understand why her friends could not accept that she lived at home with her family—a common feature within the Assyrian culture—in contrast with her peers who were sharing apartments with friends or living alone. Despite years of friendship, she continues to be asked why she practises this lifestyle. This made her feel as if she was "not doing the right thing" by New Zealand standards, to which she firmly responded, "…at the same time, …I know… everything's fine and this is how it is."[215] In answering the question about whether displacement has affected her identity, Atour referred back to this idea of non-Assyrians creating a sense of displacement. She felt that when she was younger, she was more affected by her peers' comments on aspects such as her ethnic food. However, with age, she developed a fervently strong sense of identity and pride, stating:

> …Now it's just, like, I don't give a crap… I know I'm different and I know I'm ethnic, it's to the point where, like, New Zealand is ethnically diverse, you have to get used to it. White is not the right way, …like, it isn't. And it's not the only way. I think we're more opened-up to the idea that people live different lives, but Western people cannot understand that. So, it's like, at the time, I feel displaced when I'm with my Western friends.

In contexts where Atour is with Western friends and is feeling a sense of displacement, she has often found comfort in the presence of individuals of Assyrian or Middle Eastern descent, irrespective of their cultural and/or religious background. If she shares a similar background, she feels a bond with them. To her, they were people she could "instantly" connect to. In these instances, Atour and other ethnic-origin individuals begin to "have this thing where you all look out for each other."

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[215] 'Atour', 'Lina', and 'Sonia', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, July 19th, 2020.

In Auckland, Ashur (24M) first discussed feeling displaced as New Zealand did not feel "like this is… [his] true home." He stated further: "I feel like a *nokhra* (foreigner) because I have my own heritage, my own Assyrian heritage, my own Assyrian culture, and all the values and beliefs and characteristics that make up that and then it constantly clashes with my Kiwi upbringing." While connected to his Assyrian heritage, Ashur shared his experience(s) of feeling at odds with his Assyrian-Kiwi[216] existence, an aspect perpetuated by non-Assyrian peers. Due to his physical appearance, at work Ashur is often asked, "Where are you from?", to which he responds that he was born in the Middle East and raised in New Zealand. However, his colleagues often state back to him, "You're a Kiwi." In maintaining an attachment to his Assyrian identity, Ashur does not deny that he is not also a Kiwi. However, these types of questions and responses strengthen the sense of displacement he feels "because it's almost like an indirect way of saying, 'Oh, you're not originally from here. And, you're not 100 per cent a Kiwi.'" While he will "passively agree" to others' 'You're a Kiwi' comment, he often demonstrated a very strong connection to his Assyrian heritage, stating:

> But, deep down… I'm not Kiwi. I am an Assyrian who lives in New Zealand who's a New Zealand citizen, but I'm an Assyrian, first. I'm not a Kiwi. I'm not an *Inglesnaya* ('English'/White)… I am an Assyrian-Kiwi, and I'm not gonna throw away my Assyrian identity and just become a Kiwi… That's wrong. And so, that's what makes me feel displaced. It's like, yeah, I've grown up here most of my life. Yeah, I speak the language. Yeah, but I also speak my own language. I go to my own type of church, I have my own community, own heritage, [and] tradition that's thousands of years old. I can't just throw that away.[217]

Much like Atour, Ashur demonstrates a strong sense of self-confidence and -awareness in his own background and upbringing. While being born and/or raised in New Zealand, and at one point were made aware of their 'different' ethnic background by the majority, neither has expressed any sense of defeat. They did not allow the majority to thwart their self-awareness. Moreover, in Ashur's case, non-Assyrians' comments on his background and in labelling him a Kiwi, despite his own preferred attachment to his ethnicity, have ultimately increased his connection to being an Assyrian.

4.3 The Homeland

Having been born in the Middle East, New Zealand-based participants Ashur and Helen (21F, Wellington) felt a sense of physical connection and belonging to the region. Neither forgot where

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[216] 'Kiwi' is often used as a pet name for 'New Zealander'.
[217] 'Ashur', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 20th, 2020.

they came from. Ashur moved to New Zealand in 2002 but visited the Khabour Region in northeast Syria six months before the Syrian civil war began. This trip, which lasted between two-to-three months, rekindled and increased the sense of connection he had to his homeland after seeing the Assyrian villages and traditional way-of-life. This final visit to Syria was especially significant as he got to see relatives who are now dispersed across the world. He added that it was "crazy" to imagine that within a short timeframe, the family he once saw were now refugees.

An important comment was made which reiterated the cyclical-type life Assyrians have had to lead for generations, that: "All of our land, all of our villages, all about property, all of our hard work that the same refugees from Hakkari [in southeast Turkey] built up, their descendants ended up fleeing from it again due to the same exact reason." For Assyrians, there has been a pattern of building stability and then experiencing sudden displacement as generations have had to leave their homes, and often the wider Middle East, in search of safety and protection. Notably, of all the participants involved in this research, Ashur demonstrates one of the strongest ties to his Assyrian identity and heritage—for whom, his trip to Syria reinforced feelings towards a more 'traditional' sense of Assyrian identity which recognised the Assyrian struggle as an integral and significant component.

Similarly, Helen did not forget her Iraqi roots—partly because of where she was born, but also the Wellington-Assyrian community's memorialisation of the Sayfo which took place in 2018.[218],[219] Helen stated, "seeing that memorial, that made me feel really [physically] connected… to Iraq, to our country… [S]eeing that, not just the statue kind of thing, it like also having these events like… the reminder of the… *sahde* (martyrs)." As the community remembered and celebrated the sacrifice of the martyrs, Helen's sense of connection to her home, to occurrences to which she did not have a direct connection as she was born decades later were furthered. Nonetheless, she expressed how emotionally-connected she felt to these events and remembrances. "You never want to hear about it [past atrocities and events]," she stated. Here, both Ashur and Helen's respective perspectives outline how, in the face of their connection to separate parts of the homeland, they have had different experiences of it. Naturally, each is informed by various actions and experiences which have led to the current feelings they have towards the homeland. This ultimately shows the importance of physical location and first-hand insights in further entrenching young Assyrians' connection to the homeland, which can be translated into the creation and maintenance of traditional-focused Assyrian identities.

Sydney-based participants Ramina (21F) and Sargon (21M) also referred to the homeland in their respective interviews where they raised the idea of a disconnect between Assyrians in the

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[218] 'Helen', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 11th, 2020.
[219] This memorial is further discussed in sub-section 6.3.

diaspora compared with those in the homeland. Ramina first expressed sadness at how little can be done to help Assyrians as minorities in the Middle East; as a group that has no *haqoota* (rights) in this region. Despite being considered indigenous to these lands, governments continue to overlook Assyrians. For Assyrians in the diaspora, they were now dealing with an interpersonal connection between themselves and those in the homeland, as "we don't have the same experiences as the people there." Sargon mentioned this little connection between diaspora- and homeland-based Assyrians, stating that for Assyrians more well-established due to a long-lasting settlement in Australia, they did not have a connection to countries such as Iraq, Syria, or Iraq.

4.4 Discussion

This thesis aimed to understand whether the rhetoric of persecution has affected young Assyrians' self-identification. This chapter outlined how a physical connection to the homeland can influence young Assyrians' ability to create and identify with Assyrian identities more commonly associated with the rhetoric of persecution. The first finding was the influence of location and community on helping young Assyrians, namely Ishtar to connect with the Assyrian heritage. The second finding focused on the idea of displacement. As mentioned in sub-section 4.3, displacement can often be associated with new migrants who are faced with two identities: that, with which they are familiar versus the new. The third finding analysed the role of the Assyrian homeland. This was first viewed in light of Ashur and Helen's respective perspectives as Middle East-born Assyrians residing in the West. Each had different approaches to the homeland based on their personal connection, namely by way of visits. These perspectives were contrasted with those of Ramina and Sargon who believed that a disconnection from the homeland equated to a disconnection between members of the Assyrian diaspora, namely of Western- versus Middle Eastern-Assyrians.

As suggested in chapter two, Melinda J. Milligan's notion offers an insight into how displacement can forge new identities.[220] For this current chapter, I found that Milligan's connection between displacement and new identities can help to provide an insight into how young Assyrians' limited exposure to the homeland has influenced their creation of new Western-Assyrian identities. There are different factors that can influence young Assyrians' inability to visit the homeland to make such connections, whether it be distance, financial circumstances, insecurity due to limited safety in the Middle East, and at the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of young Assyrians' lack of connection to the homeland, often not of their own accord, has influenced the extent to which they are able to connect to the traditional type of Assyrian identity. Instead, this generation is perhaps forced to create a new sense of identity which focuses on the

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[220] Milligan, "Displacement and Identity Discontinuity," 382.

cultural elements which are present in their own, ordinary lives, such as language, food, or religion.

A key finding in this chapter was Sonia's (25F, Wellington) viewpoint of living in her family's displacement and fear of change. Her raised sense of awareness has increased a desire to be able to "expect more from life," which has influenced how she is moving towards establishing a different Assyrian identity. In Sonia's case, she is not tied to the struggles of the past or her parents', and instead is part of a new generation of Assyrians who are creating pathways for themselves.

In Sydney, Ishtar (21F) recognised the value that young Assyrians' connection to their heritage has but knows that without the ability to physically visit the homeland, these ties are limited. As an alternative to the homeland, Fairfield-based Assyrians are living in a mini-Assyria. This is significant in its own right, especially in comparison with New Zealand-based participants, who due to the small number of Assyrians in New Zealand, struggle to replicate the sense of community Fairfield emanates. Yet, for young Sydney-based Assyrians, they have the opportunity to live in different worlds, moving between the 'old' and 'new' Assyrian identities every day. Depending on the extent to which young Assyrians in Sydney are connecting to their heritage, this can influence the type of identity they create.

Both perspectives outline how a loss of connection to the homeland has severely affected their ability to locate their Assyrian identity in the traditional camp. On the one hand, this is due to the desire to actively create an Assyrian identity that does not focus on the past, on the rhetoric of persecution, and loss. Rather, this is a conscious effort made to ensure that a different life to that of the previous generation can be created, inclusive of an alternative identity framework. On the other, the unique nature of a heavily-Assyrian suburb has allowed for Assyrians to be able to connect to a semblance of the homeland, not through physical geography, but through the soft power of the Assyrian heritage, language, and life.

4.5 Conclusion

Without a physical Assyrian homeland to connect to, young Assyrians in New Zealand and Australia cannot create strong identities intertwined with traditional elements, such as persecution rhetoric. Young Assyrians in the West are living at the cross-roads of what it means to be an Assyrian, moving between the 'old' and 'new' ideas of the Assyrian identity in the present. In Sydney, Ishtar's discussion of Fairfield re-emphasised how important this district is for Assyrians—as a hub for Assyrians, for the diaspora, and a location in which Assyrians young and old can thrive. Whereas in New Zealand, the influence of physical location especially highlighted a subjective element, that participants' sense of identity was inherently tied to their limited exposure to the

homeland. Finally, this research demonstrated that young Assyrians are recalling the homeland, irrespective of their connection to the Assyrian ancestral lands or not. However, in both New Zealand and Australia, with the shift of generations, it will be interesting to observe the type of Assyrian identity this generation creates, with what they have.

Chapter 5: Young Assyrians' Perception of Persecution

This chapter focuses on the extent to which the role of persecution is present within these young Assyrians' understandings of themselves as individuals of Assyrian descent, in conjunction with how they have been able to form Western-Assyrian identities. This chapter argues that, while they are aware of the significance of Assyrian persecution—whether in the collective Assyrian memory and/or identity—they are arguably becoming somewhat unresponsive to it. First, this chapter discusses the participants' recollection of past and present-day persecution. Second, the cyclical-type life led by Assyrians, in which generations have been forced to leave their homes only for this to re-occur some years later is studied. Finally, this chapter considers Marianne Hirsch's *postmemory* in light of participants' responses.

5.1 Recollection of Past and Recent-day Persecution

While most participants' initial thoughts of persecution were related to recent-day persecution, some referred back to past persecution and its effects. In Wellington, Helen (21F) was quite firm in stating that she would not think that events like the Sayfo or Simele Massacre were in the past, that "it's gone." Her response was laden with respect as she stated, "everyone was hurt by [these occurrences] in those times." Whereas Sargon (21M, Sydney) felt connected to past occurrences which he believed were "an essential part of our identity—it's a huge chunk of that."[221] While he argued that past persecution was integral to the Assyrian identity, he stated that Assyrians have no access to this "part of the story." Rather, Assyrians were:

> …raised to just know… [that we] are persecuted people and that's it. Not where geographically, not you know, on what land, not at whose hands exactly. There's just an absence of all these factors, and that's what makes a lot of Assyrians complacent, and, because of how complex it's been. But I think I feel connected only because I have, myself, been motivated by how terrible these events are, and I just sort of questioned like, 'OK, what am I? How do I get here?' You know it, it's very existential… Like other stateless groups, you just feel like, 'Is there a future?' So, yeah, those events mean a lot to me… And then this is quite sad, but sometimes I feel like the only way people acknowledge our identity is through those events…[222]

Here, Sargon has shown how deeply connected to past persecution he is, and what it has meant in his quest to understand himself, his place in this world, and his Assyrian identity. One of only two

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[221] 'Sargon', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Facebook Messenger*, September 24th, 2020.
[222] ibid.

participants whose family members migrated to the West prior to the 1990s, the period in which many Assyrians began to leave the Middle East, Sargon offered a valuable insight into the Assyrian identity. On one hand, this is due to his status as being a younger-generation family member within his well-established Australian-Assyrian family. On the other, as an individual who is very interested in the Assyrian-focused literature, his knowledge provided a different perspective in contrast with other participants.

In referring back to past persecution, Ramina (21F, Sydney) offered a very unique outlook—the only of its kind which did not focus on persecution in light of identity or young Assyrians—stating:

> I think what's interesting in terms of like *jinjara* and persecution, is that it's been kind of immortalised in our music, like a lot of *Evin Agassi* songs or [those by] *Ashur Bet-Sargis*,[223] it's all about kind of, you know, these tragic things that have happened to us… [S]ometimes the songs… [by] other artists… [F]or example, if it was a female singer, she's singing about how the guy she likes is gone and she doesn't know where he is. And it's usually referring to, like, war or something like that. So, I just think that it's kind of been so present even currently…[224]

In contrast to these perspectives, the Wellington-based focus group conducted with Lina (20F), Atour (24F), and Sonia (25F) showed that recent-day Assyrian persecution committed by ISIL was more pressing for them over past persecution. The memories they shared on this persecution were associated with feelings of shock and despair. As all participants were well-established in New Zealand or Australia, or had moved in the early-2000s, they had similar responses to the mass persecution undertaken against Assyrians in recent years.

For example, Lina stated that the occurrences were 'eye-opening' and 'a sobering experience' for her. Being far-removed from the atrocities due to a lack of connection with the Middle East, as well as an education on the lived experiences of Assyrians, meant that she was aware of how life could have been drastically different had she been raised in Iraq where she could have been a point of target 20-years-ago. What Lina felt was more emotional, because as Sonia explained, "you [Lina] didn't feel, maybe you didn't feel personally targeted." In also discussing ISIL's rise and actions, Atour recalled how 'crazy' it was that Assyrian history was being destroyed 'a few years ago'. This was in response to Assyrian artifacts being dismantled by ISIL. Erin Hughes explains that in doing so, ISIL was removing Assyrians' connection to Iraq and "their evidence of indigeneity," through the destruction of either piece of ancient Assyrian history as well as

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[223] Two popular Assyrian-language Assyrian singers.
[224] 'Ramina', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 21st, 2020.

churches.[225]

Through ISIL's actions, many young Assyrians were exposed to the type of persecution their ancestors had experienced generations beforehand, through images or word-of-mouth which were wide-spread, as Helen's perspective demonstrates. Her exposure to this persecution was heavily reliant on her connection with the Assyrian community in Wellington. When Assyrians began to be targeted by ISIL, many in the diaspora organised a series of protests demanding that Western nations intervene to protect them. For example, at a protest in Wellington, Helen saw photos of Iraqi-Assyrians' experiences which she found upsetting. "It's not something you wanna see, in any culture," she said. Not only did these photos stir upset, but they also acted as a reminder of what could have happened had Assyrians not left the Middle East as "you don't want to see all that suffering." She was content living in New Zealand "which is amazing," but she continued to remember the suffering she had previously witnessed. Sharing such photos and information over social media was not only for the benefit of the Assyrian diaspora, in the sense that it would be well-informed about the atrocities being committed against Assyrians in the Middle East. It ensured that the younger generation was exposed to the recent-day persecution being undertaken. Here, the persecution was not tied to family histories, memories, or history textbooks, but one being experienced by many Assyrians in the 21st century. This acted as a reminder of how further fraught Assyrians' existence in the Middle East is and continues to be.

In the Assyrian diaspora, there is a strong discussion of Assyrian suffering or *jinjara*, an aspect which is often synonymous with persecution. Therefore, it was important to specifically refer to *jinjara* within this brief sub-section. When Sargon heard *jinjara*, he remembered the amount of suffering Assyrians can experience in a short amount of time. He explained that *jinjara* allows for Assyrians to have shared, common interests through which they connect. Moreover, Sargon stated that *jinjara* leads to the normalisation of past experiences which he believes was prevalent in the Assyrian diaspora and has led to collective amnesia:

> …it's normal because no-one talks about it now and no-one acknowledges it, even other communities don't, or sometimes it's, you know, it's been wiped out of history or, you know, white-washed. Yeah, it's just like a collective amnesia, but I don't think it comes from within us. I think it definitely comes from the outside and [from] many forces.[226]

Whereas, in referring to *jinjara*, Ashur (24M, Auckland) felt two ways. First, he was unsure of why the previous generation—namely church or Assyrian political leaders—had been unable to prevent

[225] Erin Hughes, "Nationalism by Another Name," 39.
[226] 'Sargon', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Facebook Messenger*, September 24th, 2020.

recent-day persecution from occurring. Then, he understood that the generational effects of persecution would have affected diaspora and community leaders in the same manner as ordinary Assyrians, and that this trauma has affected their thoughts and any inability to act. Second, he believed that the assimilation Assyrians potentially faced was due to *jinjara*.

Finally, 'normalisation' is the idea that the persecution experienced by Assyrians was normal, 'OK', and not often worth becoming a point of fixation. Sargon exemplified this normalisation as he recalled the destruction of a friend's Assyrian village in Iraq. Upon hearing of the occurrence, Sargon felt some initial shock before feeling 'normal'. He stated, "…We were in shock. And then, yeah, 'Oh, that's what happens'." Addressing this further, he reiterated that he was not "immune" to feeling a particular way when Assyrians are targeted, but he was concerned that Assyrians were "becoming more indifferent because of how normalised it is." This is a rhetoric similar to that of Sonia in sub-section 5.3 who relayed how she was not affected by persecution as it was not happening to her.

5.2 Constant Departure's Effect on Assyrians

Sub-section 4.3 identified Ashur's outlook on how Assyrians have, for generations, had to flee their homelands, have established new homes and villages, before often needing to repeat the process. In Sydney, Ishtar referred to the cyclical-type life experience and what it means for young Assyrians with limited or non-existent connections to the homeland:

> I think, [it's] shocking how so many communities are being displaced continuously, not just 50 years ago, during war and 30 years ago during another war, like, even in our generation, this is still continuing… you would think by now these kind of things like there's an understanding, but it seems not. So, to see so many people being damaged and then coming to this country and trying … and trying so hard to re-establish [themselves], that's the first thing that comes to mind with persecution. It gets a bit lost in translation with the, I guess, our generation being born here because we never knew what these locations are like, we don't have those connections. I feel like a big part of being Assyrian is that, like, connection and link to our land in the country and land that we don't have… [I]t's just… an outline of where we should be. So, people being displaced from even that… the last connection we had is now being removed by all that's happening over many years, but even more so now recently and that nobody knows about it. I feel like that's what really hurts the most is that so many people are ignorant to what has been happening in terms of Assyrian persecution… It really hurts.[227]

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[227] 'Ishtar', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 1st, 2020.

When it comes to connecting with past persecution, Ishtar (21F, Sydney) contended that it would also be difficult to do so while living in Australia. As previously highlighted in sub-section 4.1, if she had been given the opportunity to visit the homeland, to see important sites, to meet and speak with Assyrians there, she could have a much stronger connection to the past. However, many Assyrians are simply not afforded this chance. Nonetheless, Ishtar hopes to visit the Middle East in the future to understand why past persecution is held in high regard by Assyrians.

Recalling Ashur's perspective, he primarily thought of past persecution, of the Sayfo and Simele Massacre, but more pressing, of the influence both events have had on the dispersal of Assyrians and the diaspora's overall expansion. In the 21st century, with the rise of ISIL came the next generation of Assyrians who fled Iraq and the greater Middle East because of fear and persecution. Ashur argued that so long as Assyrians were without protection, they could not continue to live in the *Dishtet Ninwaye*, the Nineveh Plains, which have traditionally been predominantly Assyrian-inhabited. Much like their ancestors before, Assyrians left: "just like they did in 1915, just like they did in 1936 [1933] with Simele." Ashur further explained why he thought of Assyrians' departure from the region as being synonymous with persecution:

> So, whenever, that's what comes to mind when I hear about Assyrian persecution is just the constant attacks that our people face back in the homeland. And then, when I think about it more, I also think about it as the struggles we experience here is, 'cause even if we're in safe, Western countries, you know relative to the Middle East, we still face hardships—I wouldn't call 'persecution rights'—like what hardships and challenges, as a People. For example, we face the risk of assimilation, losing our language, all that stuff so… Losing our culture. So, I think about all that stuff. And that kind of all, yeah, makes up Assyrian persecution for me.[228]

Additionally, both Ramina and Ashur referred to persecution's effect on creating the Assyrian diaspora. For Ramina (21F, Sydney), being a member of the diaspora meant that was "missing something, not being there [in the homeland]," nor could she have experienced life around "my people." Similarly, Ashur argued that "ninety per cent of Assyrians are in the diaspora for a reason 'cause we've been displaced." Assyrians did not choose to be dispersed and exist in a diaspora, but this resulted from the intergenerational, cyclical experiences of persecution and forced migration.

5.3 Postmemory Rhetoric

'Postmemory rhetoric' refers to the types of ideas discussed by participants which related to the intergenerational transmission of persecution, trauma, and family history. Primarily, this theme

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[228] 'Ashur', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 20th, 2020.

focuses on parents' influence. In Wellington, Lina questioned how Assyrian children can be expected to relate to their identity and heritage when parents do not 'give us any of it'. She referred to non-Assyrians who are often more privileged in knowing the intricate details of their family history, to simply even being able to trace generations on their family tree. The following comments made by Sonia summarise the predicament of Assyrians and their parents:

> We don't really hear that much about our history and we don't really hear our parents talk that much about their time, and maybe it was because it was a lot of negative stuff that happened. But, I also think because they went through so much to get us here and they see this place as so much better and more safe, and a better place for us to grow and become adults, they're like don't worry about that. 'Look at where we brought you.' They tried so hard to come here and they're like, 'just focus on your future here'. They don't even want to talk about [the past].[229]

This highlights that young Assyrians' understanding and acceptance of the discussion of past persecution creates a sense of anxiety for their parents. They acknowledge the struggles and journeys which form their migration and familial histories, and creates a limited expectation or desire to learn about these aspects, though at the expense of their parents' pain. Atour reinforces Sonia's statement through her poignant words: "They're trying to be like, 'This is our history… and this will be their legacy."

Despite this thesis' focus on the value of the younger Assyrian generation's voice, perspective, and outlook, mention of parents' influence must be made. This was explicitly highlighted in the focus group, primarily by Sonia. She viewed recent-day persecution through her parents' eyes before her own, recalling that "they [ISIL] really targeted those places that are parents are from [in Iraq]…" She added, "And, it's pretty sad to see you parents watch the news and go, 'Oh, what are they doing?', you know? Like, 'What have they done to this place that we lived in, it was so beautiful'." Despite having lived in New Zealand for 20 years, at the time of ISIL's actions, her parents continued to feel emotions towards the destruction of their homeland.

In contrast, whilst feeling sadness, Sonia also maintained some distance from the persecution as she viewed the occurrences from the lens of an outsider, rather than an Assyrian. She stated, "It felt very, like, on the outside, looking in, and going, 'Oh, that's really sad, but that's not happening to me,' you know?" This reaction was motivated by the reality that, as a New Zealand-born and -raised Assyrian, she was influenced by her Western-Assyrian upbringing and context. Atour affirmed this, stating that the recent-day persecution would have impacted their parents more as "it's [the Middle East] essentially not our home."

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[229] 'Atour', 'Lina', and 'Sonia', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, July 19th, 2020.

On the other hand, Sargon's discussion of amnesia was the first of its kind in the interview process. He argued that Assyrians were facing amnesia—one adopted intergenerationally from parents who seek to forget the past. What results is that Assyrians are "sort of robbed of our own identity, but it's because of our parents just not wanting to acknowledge the past." There are multiple reasons as to why parents might want to forget or not acknowledge the past. Now living in the West, away from harm's way, they have had the opportunity to establish peaceful lives. Discussing the past can disrupt this. The Wellington-based focus group discussed the difficulties faced by Assyrian parents who are preventing any intergenerational discussion or recollection of family history. This is due to two key aspects: first, as both Sonia and Atour stated, Assyrian parents have often experienced negative aspects which might affect their desire to share facets of their family history with their children. Atour specified, "It's harder for then as well, don't you think? 'Cause… it unlocks memories that they don't wanna unlock." Second, they also referred to parents' decision to focus on life in New Zealand/the West over the past for their children's sake. Essentially, they migrated to New Zealand for the pursuit of a better, more secure, and comfortable life. By dwelling on the past, this ensures that another generation is intertwined with the difficulties they faced and were surrounded by before their departure from the Middle East, instead of focusing on the privileges provided in the West. Sonia highlighted this in expressing that parents state, "'Look at where we brought you.' They've tried so hard to come here and they're like, 'Just focus on your future here'. They don't even want to talk about [the past]."

While young Assyrians are at the forefront of this research, it must be noted that much of their awareness and understanding of the Assyrian identity, heritage, and existence is due to the role their respective families have had in transmitting stories between generations. In particular, parents have affected the way their children view persecution, impacting their interpretation of identity against a Western backdrop. Sargon previously stated that Assyrians were faced with amnesia, an aspect directly tied to their parents' unwillingness to discuss the past. Sequentially, this unwillingness is translated into how Assyrians' identity is promoted and nurtured, both within families and the greater community. "There's no cultivation of this identity from a young age, like language, culture…," Sargon stated. He shared his own experience in recalling the occasion he went to celebrate Assyrian New Year in Fairfield during which he faced an identity crisis. He was unsure of "what an Assyrian was and where our homeland is, historically."

He explained that parents are not taking it upon themselves to teach their children about the Assyrian language or heritage. Instead, they rely on the churches to provide the necessities. This is not their fault, but rather, a product of generations' disassociation from their heritage and/or community. However, he also attributed this disinterest or weak action due to parents' recent migration to, and settlement in, the West. Rather than ensuring that their children know how to

speak Assyrian, are familiar with customs and traditions, and are well-connected with their heritage, Sargon argued that within the Assyrian diaspora, "we've been taught not to feel."

5.4 Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to understand whether rhetoric of persecution have affected young Assyrians' self-identification. This chapter discussed young Assyrians' perception of past persecution. First, the findings of this study show that young Assyrians recollected both past and present-day persecution. This sub-section identified how subjective the participants' perspectives were as some recalled contemporary persecution after having witnessed the mass persecution and migration of Assyrians by ISIL. On the other, Sargon's (21M, Sydney) recollection of past persecution was informed by his awareness of the Assyrian-focused scholarship which is engrained in the discussion of the Sayfo and Simele Massacre. Their connection to persecution helped influence the extent to which they viewed such rhetoric as inherent to their Assyrian identity. While Sargon felt that the Assyrian identity and persecution were connected, in sub-section 5.3, Sonia did not express a sense of connection to recent-day persecution as she was born and raised in New Zealand, far-removed from the persecution which took place on the other side of the world.

Second, some participants were affected by the cyclical-type life led by the Assyrian people who have had to establish homes before being uprooted and forced to flee for their security. Third, 'postmemory rhetoric' was born out of participants' recollection of persecution through their parents' eyes. These findings indicated that young Assyrians are affected by persecution, but that the prominence of such feelings and impact levels naturally differ from person-to-person. This research relates back to Marianne Hirsch's postmemory which argues that younger generations born under after the Holocaust were influenced by the intergenerational transmission of trauma, believing that the trauma was just as much their own.[230] Here, the findings demonstrate the influence the limited intergenerational transmission of memory has had on creating two diverse opinions.

Sargon's (21M, Sydney) outlook towards persecution is particularly notable as he offered distinctive points of view on the issue. As an Australian-born Assyrian whose family moved to Australia before the 1990s, his perspective could have differed from other Assyrians who had moved later, in feeling less connected to persecution. However, the findings show that Sargon was more affected by persecution given this upbringing. Facing an identity crisis, he made attempts to learn about his Assyrian identity through self-teaching which ultimately led to a stronger attachment to the persecution element within the identity. However, despite this, he was not prone to feeling

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[230] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 106-107.

'indifferent' or 'immune' to the discussion of continued Assyrian persecution, much like that of other participants who did not necessarily 'connect' with the rhetoric of persecution.

Another interesting result was the participants' observation of persecution through their parents' eyes, primarily, as it highlighted a duty to protect their parents—while their parents were protecting them (their children) in restricting the discussion of persecution. In the Wellington-based focus group, the participants understood the reasons behind why their parents did not share stories of persecution in their household. First, they acknowledged the difficulties their parents would experience in expressing this rhetoric as it would likely trigger unwanted thoughts of the past. Second, they remembered the sacrifices their parents made to ensure safe upbringings in the West. Here, participants valued their parents' well-being over their own knowledge of Assyrian persecution, and by extension, a significant segment of contemporary Assyrian history. In contrast, Sargon identified that the Assyrian people were faced with an 'amnesia', also tied to parents' disinterest in sharing persecution rhetoric. However, Sargon viewed this differently from the Wellington-based focus group participants as he believed that parents had a duty to continue the intergenerational transmission of memory and trauma, as this was inherent to the promotion and maintenance of the Assyrian identity.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the rhetoric of persecution which exists within young Assyrians' minds. It argued that these young Assyrians are often unresponsive to Assyrian persecution which is influenced by their location, lived experiences in the West, or the non-existent transmission of memory and trauma from their parents. Some participants expressed sentiment towards past Assyrian persecution, stating that they could never see it as remaining in the past. In contrast, as it has become easier for contemporary persecution to be projected throughout the Assyrian diaspora, homes, and screens, other participants have been reminded of their privileged lives in the West, far-removed from the trouble and turmoil faced by Assyrians in the Middle East.

Chapter 6: Young Assyrians' Identity

This chapter focuses on the premise of this thesis, young Assyrians' identity and its potential connection to Assyrian persecution. It follows the main argument of this thesis, that due to a disconnection from the homeland, these young Assyrians are developing Western-oriented Assyrian identities which do not focus on persecution. Moreover, this chapter focuses on times during which some participants were at a cross-roads between their Assyrian and Western identities—an aspect mainly prompted by their childhood education. Finally, it identifies the sense of pride expressed by participants towards Assyrians' resilience and perseverance. While the latter two findings do not directly tie to the primary theme of this chapter, they offer an insight into participants' perceptions of and connections to the Assyrian identity—often away from any rhetoric of persecution. This chapter refers back to the concept of new identities raised in sub-section 2.3 in its discussion of the findings.

6.1 Westernised Assyrian Identities

While some of my participants informed me that they occasionally have difficulties in "fitting in" to their societies, in the Wellington-based focus group, there was a strong regard for the Western identity and way-of-life. This was particularly exemplified by Atour (24F), who was influenced by her upbringing. Three key aspects contributed to this: her family were not "a big part of my tribes," as in she did not know of or have a connection to her familial and ancestral Assyrian tribes or villages associated with them; she does not speak either Assyrian or Arabic; nor was she connected with the Assyrian church(es) in Wellington, either as a child or an adult. This resulted in Atour focusing "more towards the Western" way-of-life.

She later added that the respective differences between the West and Middle East—where the former is seen as having more opportunities, and the latter, more oppression and stringency— meant that she had chosen to attach to the Western identity. While she was happy with her ethnic background and heritage, she found that it was better "to just go towards the easier way, which is the more Westernised world." Lastly, when commenting on the influence of past persecution on her parents due to their ties to the homeland, she specified that she would have been more affected if an individual went to view the Treaty of Waitangi[231] at the National Library in Wellington, and subsequently "ripping that up." She feels strongly to this, as the Treaty is a part of her history as a New Zealand-born and -raised individual.

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[231] The founding document of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed in 1840 by the British Crown and indigenous Māori.

Participants largely either felt connected to their Western context/identity or they have established a balance between the Assyrian-Western identities and ideals. However, the two male participants of this research, Sargon (21, Sydney) and Ashur (24, Auckland) expressed strong connections to their Assyrian identities over their Western equal. For example, Sargon did not associate with his own Western identity. He argued that he has been unable to either connect to this identity or identify with the label 'Australian citizen', because of Assyrians' statelessness, one, "we cannot let go of…, that's always primary." Both participants shared other similar characteristics, namely the self-awareness and action-taking in the pursuit of better understanding their Assyrian identities and themselves. While Ashur took part in community gatherings, church masses, or charitable donations (for Assyrian organisations), Sargon referred to how reading Assyrian-focused literature had supported his connection to his identity and added greater awareness of the Assyrian struggle.

6.2 Not Feeling Connected in the West

As discussed in chapter four, one of the most common post-migration outcomes is how individuals grapple with 'home' identities—such as their families' cultural and ethnic affiliations—and the 'Western' identity which surrounds them in their new country or Western country of birth. The latter influences both migrants and first-generation children, as well as generations after, to better understand their identity in a homeland far from what is conventionally deemed their own, such as their parents' or grandparents' countries. Assyrians' strive to understand their own individual identity behind a Western backdrop is common, as demonstrated by most of the participants involved. The primary mutual theme is that the participants questioned the validity of their Assyrian identity in New Zealand and Australia, especially prominent after being removed from their Assyrian surroundings and into a new and unfamiliar one.

Ishtar (21F, Sydney) stated that as Assyrian children grow up, "being Assyrian [is] basically not knowing much other than that." Children are often brought up in a heavily Assyrian environment where they are enveloped by the Assyrian culture, such as its language, people, food, and religion. For others in Sydney, this becomes an all-day occurrence if they attend the all-Assyrian primary school, St. Hurmizd Assyrian Primary School, and/or high school, St. Narsai Assyrian Christian College. The all-Assyrian education centres are the first of their kind in the West and offer Western-born and/or -raised Assyrians the ability to remain connected to, and immersed in, their Assyrian heritage. Ramina recalled her time attending St. Hurmizd as becoming an immense part of her life as well as "the biggest identity," one she carries to the present.

For young Assyrians who attended either a non-Assyrian primary and/or high school, at

some point they have faced an influential encounter with non-Assyrian people, culture, and language. This encounter allows these individuals to begin to question their Assyrian identity. Often invoking negative connotations with being 'ethnic', they begin to feel that, due to this identity, they are not fully Kiwi or Australian in a conventional sense. Ishtar exemplified this when recalling how attending primary school led to the strong Assyrian upbringing and immersion she knew being "flipped on its head." In beginning to understand that she was 'different', she also began to question her identity. For example, in the context of knowing and learning the Assyrian language and not being allowed to do as her peers did, such as attending Year Five Camp. In turn, this made her feel "very un-Australian." As a child, she asked, "Why am I [an] Assyrian, why can't I be Australian? Because I wasn't doing what an Australian normally does."

For both participants, high school was a turning point which established their appreciation for and pride in their Assyrian heritage. In the past, Ishtar did not understand or value her heritage and identity, often asking questions such as, "Why am I [an] Assyrian?" and "Why are we not assimilating?" With the latter she stated, "…I appreciate that we haven't because that means… [we] might be, in the future, able to pass it [the Assyrian heritage/culture] on." She became more "indifferent to it"—to her identity—accepting the reality that she was an Assyrian. She later added:

> …You start to think, 'Oh, wait', sharing the Assyrian culture—it's very special, it's unique. How many years has it been that they've been able to carry it and were the first generation to be essentially born in a Western country, and it's a responsibility for us to now carry it…[232]

While attending a non-Assyrian high school, Ramina (21F, Sydney) found it difficult to adjust whilst surrounded by predominantly White students, to being cautious of her accent, one she had developed due to her upbringing and education around Assyrians. Soon thereafter, for the purposes of fitting in, she attempted to lose her Assyrian identity which "was not a fun time." She reverted back to appreciating her identity and now she is "really into it again." Though she moved between the Assyrian and Australian identities and cultures with age, she stated:

> …That doesn't mean that I haven't, you know, felt at home here as well, because this is all I've known. And, there's something different about, I guess, Australian-Assyrian culture that I probably would not be able to connect with Iraqi- or Iranian-Assyrian culture.[233]

Both experiences emphasise how young Assyrians have been faced with identity hurdles, mostly due to their education, which in turn has led them to doubt or question their Assyrian identity and

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[232] 'Ishtar', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 1st, 2020.
[233] 'Ramina', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 21st, 2020.

existence. Moreover, with time and age, they have naturally reverted to formulating stronger ties with their Assyrian heritage.

6.3 Pride, Resilience, and Perseverance

The heavy nature of this research did not deter participants from continuing to feel pride in their Assyrian heritage. On the contrary, in the context of Assyrians' hardship, all participants described them as a resilient and persevering people. This rhetoric was expressed by Helen (21F) in Wellington, who found solace in the knowledge that the Assyrian people continues to exist today, in "knowing that we're still strong." As an Iraqi-born Assyrian, Helen both considers New Zealand to be her home, but she does not forget her place of birth either. Interestingly, she recalled how being asked curious questions about her Assyrian identity by non-Assyrians often boosted a sense of pride in her heritage as well as Kiwi upbringing. She stated, "…As soon as I say 'Assyrian', they're really interested and stuff… Yeah, it's amazing living and growing up here."

In our interview, Helen introduced me to a small monument located at Makara Cemetery in Wellington which commemorates the Sayfo and was funded by the Assyrian community in Wellington.[234]

Figure 1 The Assyrian Martyrs' Memorial located in Makara Cemetery, Wellington, New Zealand

Revealed on November 25th, 2018, the monument consists of four panels. At the top of the first panel, a bloodied '7' and the Assyrian translation for the month of August are combined together. This is the symbol often used to commemorate the Simele Massacre which began on August 7th, 1933. At the centre, a hand associated with the ancient empire due to the accessory worn, holds the

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[234] Photos taken by Nashie Shamoon on June 17th, 2021.

modern-day Assyrian flag which, viewed from an aerial perspective, is depicted at the top and base of the monument. At the bottom, the Sayfo is remembered through this quote: "To immortalise the souls of the Assyrian Martyrs, who lost their lives in the atrocities of 1915." In the second, the winged bull or lion, *Lamassu*, is a key signifier of the ancient Assyrian history—a symbol in frequent use. The third memorialises the Sayfo through the statement: "Never forget –1915 – Assyrian Ferman"[235] and the inclusion of a large cross. The latter of whom are a statement to Assyrians' Christianity and a symbol commemorating Assyrian martyrs. In the final panel, both the ancient empire and contemporary persecution are amalgamated. A key segment of this panel is an illustration of the ancient Assyrian god *Ashur*, with the inclusion of "*Sahda Ashuraya*" (Assyrian Martyrs). Each panel represents a facet of the collective Assyrian identity, interlocking the ancient Assyrian civilisation with 20th century persecution.

Assyrians' resilience was first introduced by Lina (20F) in the Wellington-based focus group, upon being asked about the influence of displacement and/or historical violence on their identity. She initially focused on the minor irritation she experienced at a younger age, when not allowed to 'act' as her non-Assyrian friends did by attending sleepovers or visiting friends' houses. With age, she moved past this point of contention as she recognised the unique nature and value of her heritage, stating, "…As I got older, …I'm like, 'Yes, I am Assyrian, this is my culture… I feel no shame from it… and it's the resilience in us, especially Assyrians… You know, our parents have gone through war and I feel like their resilience is passed onto us'." She refined this in arguing that it is this resilience which has allowed for Assyrians to "stay true to our identity."

Comparably when Ishtar remembered other Assyrians' movement and suffering— coming from her perspective as an Australian-born Assyrian—the resilience and perseverance demonstrated by these individuals were a powerful reminder that she, too, could be resilient and persevere. She added that what drives her is her history, her roots, and "our history of being able to persevere." These aspects are what make Ishtar "love everything about us." Sargon cited this resilience in the context of Assyrians recognising that they are not "as small as we think we are." Furthermore, in identifying the power and strength this resilience has given Assyrians, Sargon explored the idea that it has also made Assyrians feel powerless, above all:

We've never been able to be to feel powerless or truly recognised that we are powerless, 'cause we're constantly trying to lift our heads up to the point where we don't even wanna acknowledge history because that will make us feel small, but we aren't. That's the truth. We aren't small. We are not small people. Yeah, but event events like that [the Assyrian Genocide or Simele Massacre] did make

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[235] *Ferman* is another word used in place of the Assyrian Genocide.

us feel small, I think…[236]

The recognition of Assyrians' resilience and perseverance acts as a reminder that Assyrians' experiences, whether past or present, are not being ignored by the younger generation. What often arose from the interview process is that participants found some difficulties in amalgamating their Assyrian and Western identities together. Yet, despite this, pride was a significant, underlying theme which acted as a reminder that the Assyrian heritage's positive elements outweighed the negative. Growing up in an Assyrian-Australian context, Ishtar grappled with these difficulties involving the Eastern-Western dichotomy—for example, resulting from the expectations placed upon her by either her family, community, and herself. Over time, she began to seek a greater connection to her Assyrian heritage which then translated into a deep sense of pride for her ethnic background. This pride arose in recent years as she recognised the value of her culture, whether it be through her ability to speak multiple languages, access to unique food or cultural festivities, the morals and values inherited, as well as being brought up in a well-knit, multi-cultural community, in Fairfield, Sydney. She articulated that the Assyrian heritage is extremely unique, so much so that it is only up to the younger generation to continue the progression of this culture, identity, and people into the future, "against everything that's going on." For Ishtar, to undertake this is a privilege.

6.4 Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to understand whether rhetoric of persecution have affected young Assyrians' self-identification. This chapter focused on young Assyrians' identities. The first finding, rooted in the Western-Assyrian identity concept, identified how the participants were feeling more connected to their Western ways-of-life and surroundings. This had influenced the direction of their identity towards being less persecution-, suffering-, or hardship-focused. Using Paul Connerton's idea of new identities being created out of younger generations' limited access to narratives of the past,[237] it is clear that some participants are headed towards a more simplified Assyrian identity which are not concerned by the pressures of the Assyrian history and traditional identity, but one which simply allowed them to 'be'. The second finding highlighted the difficulties which came with being an individual of Assyrian descent in a Western world. The third finding expressed the sense of pride participants had, in both being of Assyrian descent, and towards Assyrians' resilience and continued perseverance. These findings indicated that young Assyrians

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[236] 'Ishtar', interview by Nashie Shamoon, *Zoom*, September 1st, 2020.
[237] Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning*, 36.

were focused on building lives in the West whilst continuing to honour and respect their Assyrian heritage.

One finding here was Atour's (24F, Wellington) strong inclination towards the 'Western way of life' over traditional Assyrian traditions and customs. This perspective is normalised for many individuals with ethnic backgrounds who favour or value the stark difference between their Western and ethnic identities and lives. However, I found Atour's approach particularly interesting. Due to her limited connection to her Assyrian heritage through family, religion, or language, she expressed how the destruction of New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, was more personal over Assyrian persecution. This was heavily influenced by her Western upbringing and environment. As is the premise of this chapter and thesis, without the ability to visit and/or physically connect to the homeland, is it likely that young Assyrians will move away from Assyrian persecution as a deep-seated characteristic of the Assyrian identity.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the various identity-focused elements behind this research. It began with an insight into the type of Western-Assyrian identity formed, in stark contrast with some participants' determination to ensure that they do not lose their connection to their heritage. In section 6.2, the participants shared an insight into life as Assyrians in Australia as young children. At younger ages participants began to question who they were, and why they were Assyrian over Australian. At more mature times in their lives, each understood and welcomed the unique nature of being an Assyrian. Finally, the third finding acknowledged that young Assyrians were proud of Assyrians' resilience and perseverance—argued as aspects existing within them— which, too, reminded participants of the uniqueness of the Assyrian identity in a greater sense.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The Assyrian people's existence has lasted thousands of years. They are likely more well-known for their rich culture and ancient heritage, as descendants of the Assyrian Empire and civilisation. However, furthered by their status as a small, predominantly Christian minority in the Middle East, for more than one hundred years, Assyrians have experienced persecution. Whether at the hands of the Ottoman Empire, Iraqi governments, or terrorist organisations, Assyrians have not been allowed to establish permanent villages and homes in which they can live and thrive. Rather, due to these forces, Assyrians have periodically left their homes over the past one hundred years, seeking refuge in other parts of the Middle East but primarily in the West.

This is the reality of modern-day Assyrians. Without a place to call home, without a state to cling onto to, without a military to protect them, the Assyrian diaspora is the next-best option in which the future of the Assyrian people is made certain. It is in considering this context, that it is important to recognise and analyse the progression of the Assyrian identity into the 21st century through the perspectives of generations of young Assyrians who are being born and/or raised in the West at a higher rate than ever before.

The primary aim of this thesis was to share the previously untold story of young, Western-born and/or -raised Assyrians' perception of persecution—and whether this perception was intrinsic to their sense of an Assyrian identity. While participants expressed that persecution continues to have an important role in the collective Assyrian identity, they did not see persecution as a key part of their own identity. Instead, some were forging a new, more Western-focused Assyrian identity that combined their cultural heritage with their Western cultural and physical surroundings. As mentioned in chapter one, young Assyrians are not using the past to help shape their identity, but are instead considering the prospects of a new future.

This research was motivated by the non-existent consideration of persecution's direct and potential influence, as well as the identities of Assyrians born and/or raised in New Zealand and Australia. While two studies on young Assyrians in Sweden and New Zealand respectively exist, there is a minimal understanding of this generation through a persecution lens. What is more, New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians have yet to be considered side-by-side in this manner. This raises two issues: first, a significant demographic of the Assyrian diaspora continues to be unnoticed, and second, beyond young Assyrians, the Assyrian communities in New Zealand and Australia remain overlooked. Therefore, this research project sought to bridge this gap: to provide a much-needed insight into an under-researched demographic, whilst adding to the Assyrian-focused scholarship.

Although this research project included the perspectives of a small number of young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians, the rich data acquired was sufficient enough to gauge an understanding into the question at hand. In questioning the extent to which the identities of young Assyrians in Oceania were influenced by the rhetoric of persecution, six themes arose which were condensed into three overarching chapters: *Physical Connection to the West versus the Homeland*, *Young Assyrians' Perception of Persecution*, and *Young Assyrians' Identity*. Chapter four highlighted a need for young Assyrians to be able to physically connect with the homeland. To locate themselves in the ancestral lands of their people ensures that they can better associate with the traditional Assyrian identity for which persecution and displacement are deeply integral, as well. However, as the prospects of this occurring become slimmer, should the Assyrian diaspora move towards creating suburbs and areas of a similar nature and density to Fairfield? If so, will such a suburb last the changing of hands and generations? Chapter five emphasised that, despite a move towards Western-Assyrian identities, young Assyrians continue to recognise the significance of persecution within the Assyrian existence, even if it does not necessarily influence their own identity-creation and -maintenance. Finally, chapter six restated the primary argument of this thesis, that a limited to non-existent connection with the homeland has further influenced young Assyrians' explicit or sub-conscious move towards Western-Assyrian identities. As they cannot return to the homeland, this will arguably be the most natural path for future generations of Assyrians living in the diaspora.

7.1 Limitations

Two main limitations arose within this research project. First, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not conduct any in-person interviews in Wellington, Auckland, or Sydney. While, after July 2020, it could have been possible to meet with Wellington-based participants, as New Zealand was not under lockdown, I continued to conduct interviews online in case of any sudden changes. Additionally, the nature of this research can be confronting in asking participants to consider traumatic events in contemporary Assyrian history. In particularly relying on social media to share this research, I found it difficult to convey the themes of persecution present in this research in an appealing manner. Without being able to meet face-to-face with prospective participants, I could not share my project in a comfortable environment, such as a church youth-group setting, as well as to be the 'friendly face' of this research. Additionally, the circumstances behind this research meant that I was only able to recruit eight participants. This benefitted the overall research project as I could analyse and consider the data more deeply. However, while this small number allows for an insight into the prospects of young Assyrians' identities being hindered by persecution, or not, I

cannot necessarily generalise from this data to any extent.

Moreover, extending to other means such as surveys to reach a wider audience would not have been ideal as I would need to consider the various side-effects involved. Surveys could not guarantee that respondents would provide in-depth answers. Whereas, in promoting this research via social media, there was a possibility that the data-analysis stage could be compromised, if non-Assyrians responded to a survey without my knowledge and/or awareness. Finally, it was not appropriate to share surveys that propagated the sensitive topics of this research without knowing its impact(s) on respondents. This project needed rich, reliable data to achieve its objectives.

Second, from the early stages of this project's development, I was determined to include the perspectives of young Assyrians who had sought refuge in New Zealand and/or Australia in the mid-2010s. As these individuals would have left the Middle East primarily due to the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, I was interested in understanding their outlook on this research. As individuals who had been born and raised in the homeland, would they feel a stronger connection to the persecution rhetoric within the Assyrian identity? If not, what did they connect to? In viewing the perspectives of Western- and Middle East-born Assyrians side-by-side, what types of similarities or differences would be raised? Including the perspectives of Middle East-born Assyrians would have been integral to providing a well-rounded insight into the young Assyrian demographic, which would further enhance the Assyrian-focused scholarship. However, in reality, I was unable to acquire the perspectives of any recent migrants. This meant that an important segment of the young Assyrian voice was missing from this research.

7.2 Future Research

Taking this into consideration, a large gap within the Assyrian-focused scholarship continues to be the non-existent consideration of Oceanic-, European-, and/or North American-Assyrian perspectives side-by-side. Until now, the Assyrian-focused scholarship has solely focused on the lived experiences of Assyrians in Europe and North America. The Assyrian communities in New Zealand and Australia have not yet been as deeply and consistently analysed. While the reasoning behind this is unclear, this could be due to the perception of New Zealand and Australia's respective communities as small and physically distant. However, there are two reasons as to why this should attract, rather than deter, future research. First, only one study has been undertaken that solely focuses on New Zealand-Assyrians. While it remains integral to understanding the lives and opinions of Assyrians in New Zealand following the 2003 United States-Coalition Iraq War, it is outdated. Additionally, it does not reflect New Zealand-Assyrians today, taking into consideration the actions of ISIL in contemporary Assyrian history, nor of the present-day younger Assyrian

generation.

For the Assyrian scholarship to have a wide-ranging insight into the diaspora, the Assyrian communities in New Zealand must be studied. This is valuable for the purpose of understanding Assyrians' lives in New Zealand, as well as their place in the wider diaspora, leading to questions such as: in place of living in densely Assyrian areas, how are Assyrians connecting with each other? How do they connect with members of the wider diaspora? To what extent is social media significant in further connecting the Assyrian diaspora with itself?

Second, the Assyrian community in Australia is much larger and more established. Although it forms a substantial part of the Assyrian diaspora, the scholarship has not yet directed its attention to this community. This is more pressing when considering that, between 2011 and 2016, Australia saw a significant increase in the number of Assyrians inhabiting its lands—a change that can be attributed to its refugee intake. This leads to the primary question: has the arrival of Assyrian refugees changed Australia's existing Assyrian communities? If yes, how? If not, why?

Finally, as mentioned earlier, a generalisation from the data acquired cannot be made from such a small pool of participants. Therefore, future research particularly focused on young Assyrians would need to reach a wider and larger audience. Depending on the research context and whether sensitive themes are present, surveys could be used to obtain a much-needed insight into a broader range of young Assyrians' perspectives.

This thesis explored the extent to which persecution is prominent within the self-identification of young Assyrians. It has found that a disconnection from the homeland has resulted in some young Assyrians' creation of new, Western-Assyrian identities which are not persecution-heavy. The scholarship highlights that a new identity can be created when younger generations lose access to an awareness of the narratives which have traditionally shaped their people's identity. In the face of loss, these generations' current lives, experiences, and circumstances can eventually culminate into contemporary identities. Therefore, it can be argued that without a homeland to visit and connect to, young Assyrians are bound to create more Western-oriented Assyrian identities which focus on a peaceful and secure life in the West. This is a concept far-removed from those—namely persecution, hardship, *jinjara* (suffering), and tragedy—which have often surrounded the Assyrian people. However, as the world becomes ever-globalised and inter-connected, we must ask: can the identities of ethno-religious diasporic peoples such as the Assyrians survive? With the birth of new Assyrian generations, this will be a worthy point of focus.

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Interviews

'Ashur', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Zoom*, September 20th, 2020).

'Atour', 'Lina', and 'Sonia', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Zoom*, July 19th, 2020).

'Helen', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Zoom*, September 11th, 2020).

'Ishtar', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Zoom*, September 1st, 2020).

'Ramina', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Zoom*, September 21st, 2020).

'Sargon', interview by Nashie Shamoon (*Facebook Messenger*, September 24th, 2020).

Appendix

Participants' Information and Background

Name	Age	Place of Birth	Location	Occupation	Assyrian Tribal Affiliations	Date and Location of Interview
'Ashur'	24	Diz Village, Khabour Region, Syria	Auckland	Physical Therapist	Diznaye/Diz	September 20th, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Atour'*	24	Wellington, New Zealand	Wellington	Analyst	N/A	July 19th, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Helen'	21	Mosul, Iraq	Wellington	Student	Maligipa	September 11th, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Ishtar'	21	Sydney, Australia	Sydney	Student	Ashetnaye and Chamanaya	September 1st, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Lina'*	20	Amman, Jordan	Wellington	Student	Tel Skopa and Chaldean	July 19th, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Ramina'	21	Sydney, Australia	Sydney	Student	Mawana	September 21st, 2020 via *Zoom*
'Sargon'	21	Sydney, Australia	Sydney	Student	Tekhoome	September 24th, 2020 via *Facebook Messenger*
'Sonia'*	25	Wellington, New Zealand	Wellington	Architectural Graduate	Albaknaye and Ashetnaye	July 19th, 2020 via *Zoom*

*Wellington focus group participants

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

General Facebook Post:

Hello. This year I am working on my MA thesis, researching into young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians. For my Assyrian friends, I am looking for participants aged between 18- to 30-years-old who are interested in discussing their Assyrian identity. My interviews will be broad. I will be asking questions about life in New Zealand or Australia, identity, and historical occurrences which have impacted Assyrians. If you are interested, please message me. Thank you, Nashie.

Facebook Post to Organisations in New Zealand:

Shlamalokhn. My name is Nashie Shamoon; I am an Assyrian studying towards my Master of Arts in Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington. For my thesis, I am researching into young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians. I am looking for participants aged between 18- to 30-years-old who are interested in discussing their Assyrian identity. My interviews will be broad. I will be asking questions about life in New Zealand, identity, and historical occurrences which have impacted Assyrians. If you are interested, please message me. Thank you, Nashie.

Facebook Message to Organisations in New Zealand:

Shlamalokhn. My name is Nashie Shamoon; I am an Assyrian studying towards my Master of Arts in Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington. For my thesis, I am researching into young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians. I am messaging to ask if you would be able to connect me with young Assyrians, aged between 18- to 30-years-old, who would be interested in my project. My interviews will be broad. I will be asking questions about life in New Zealand, identity, and historical occurrences which have impacted Assyrians. If there is any interest, I can be contacted through my Facebook. I look forward to hearing from you, Nashie.

Facebook Post to Organisations in Australia:

Shlamalokhn. My name is Nashie Shamoon; I am a New Zealand-Assyrian studying towards my Master of Arts in Political Science at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. For my thesis, I am researching into young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians. I am looking for participants aged between 18- to 30-years-old who are interested in discussing their Assyrian identity. My interviews will be broad. I will be asking questions about life in Australia, identity, and historical occurrences which have impacted Assyrians. If you are interested, please message me. Thank you, Nashie.

Facebook Message to Organisations in Australia:

Shlamalokhn. My name is Nashie Shamoon; I am a New Zealand-Assyrian studying towards my Master of Arts in Political Science at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. For my thesis, I am researching into young New Zealand- and Australian-Assyrians' self-identification as Assyrians. I am messaging to ask if you would be able to connect me with young Assyrians, aged between 18- to 30-years-old, who would be interested in my project. My interviews will be broad. I will be asking questions about life in Australia, identity, and historical occurrences which have impacted Assyrians. If there is any interest, I can be contacted through my Facebook. I look forward to hearing from you, Nashie.

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

Pre-interview questions:

1. Age

2. Place of Birth

3. Occupation

4. Brief family history

> - How you came to be in New Zealand or Australia

> - Where your family originates from – country, village(s), ancestral history

Interview questions:

Q1: What has it been like growing up in [either New Zealand, Australia, or abroad] as an Assyrian?

Q2: [For New Zealand- or Australian-born or -raised Assyrians] Growing up here, have you felt connected to your Assyrian heritage? If yes, how much and how?

Q3: What comes to mind when you hear about Assyrian persecution?

Q4: What is your perception of Assyrian persecution or '*jinjara*' (suffering)? How would you define it? Is there a defining occurrence or event?

Q5: What effect have these words of '*jinjara*' (suffering) or persecution had on you and on your thoughts about the Assyrian peoples and/or Assyrian identity? Even hearing about them now, do they create any feelings or thoughts?

Q6: [For all] Do you feel displaced?

Q7: [For all] Have the feelings of displacement and/or historical violence affected your identity? If yes, how?

Q8: [For recent migrants] Growing up in the Middle East, in [X country], did you feel more

connected to our Assyrian culture?

Q9: [For recent migrants] What do you think about life in [either New Zealand or Australia]?

Q10: [For all] What kind of either positive, neutral, or negative stories did you hear about Assyrian history and culture while growing up?

Q11: [For all] Have you heard of the Assyrian Genocide or Simele Massacre?

Q12: [For all] [If, both yes and no] What do you think about, when you think of them?

Q13: [For New Zealand- or Australian-born or -raised Assyrians] Here, we live far away from the Middle East. But, do you feel any connection to either the Genocide or Simele Massacre?

Information Sheets, Consent Forms, and Focus Group Rules

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

Who am I?

My name is Nashie Shamoon and I am a Masters student in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my Master of Arts thesis in Political Science.

What is the aim of the project?

In this project, I want to explore young Assyrians' perception of their identity as Assyrians, by interviewing Assyrians who were born and grew up in New Zealand and Australia, or migrated to either country in recent years. I would like to focus on their thoughts towards displacement and historical violence as significant features of the Assyrian identity, perpetuated by historical occurrences such as the 1915 Assyrian Genocide, 1933 Simele Massacre, or persecution in recent years. What does historical violence mean to ordinary Assyrians? I want to learn more about your perspective as a young, Western-born Assyrian, or an Assyrian who has moved to New Zealand or Australia, to get a better understanding of how the past affects the present and future. Not only will your participation support this research by adding real-life thoughts on the current conceptions of the Assyrian identity, but it will help form an opinion on Assyrians' existence in the West. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

How can you help?

You have been invited to participate because you are, an Assyrian, between the ages 18 to 30, and were either born in New Zealand or Australia, or recently migrated to New Zealand or Australia. If you agree to take part, I will conduct the interview through either Zoom, Skype, or telephone. Additionally, although these interviews will be one-on-one, you are able to bring a support person if you wish. At the beginning of the interview, I will ask for your opinion on life in New Zealand or Australia as a young Assyrian. This will be followed by questions about thoughts on your own self-identification, and ideas what you think about the Assyrian identity. After this, I will ask you questions about the Assyrian Genocide, Simele Massacre, and other contemporary persecution.

The interview will be conducted via either Zoom or Skype, or a preferred means, such as Facebook Messenger. The interview will last between 30 to 40 minutes but can take place for longer than this if you wish. I will be taking notes during the interview. Additionally, with your permission, I will audio record the interview and transcribe it after. You can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. It must be noted that for Zoom meetings, to prevent 'Zoom-bombing', I will provide a personalised one-off password.

You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before October 31st, 2020. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you. If you were a part of a focus group, and wish to withdraw, your contributions will not be used in this project. By providing consent, you must keep the information discussed confidential.

If you wish to participate, the consent form can either be signed and returned to me via email, or, consent can be given via an audio recording — both, provided prior to the interview. Upon writing my thesis, I will provide feedback via email. I will provide you with the opportunity to keep a copy of the interview transcript.

Lastly, you will receive a small koha (gift) of a supermarket voucher, as thanks for your participation.

What will happen to the information you give?

This research is confidential. This means that the researcher named below will be aware of your identity, but the research data will be combined, and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. However, you should be aware that in small projects your identity might be obvious to others in your community. Only my supervisor and myself, as both student researcher and transcriber, will read the notes or transcript of the

interview. Your personal information and identity will only be known to myself.

Although physical copies of the interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed on March 31st, 2021, with your consent, I will continue to keep a digital copy of these files until March 31st, 2030. I have chosen to keep this data until 2030 as I am keeping the option of pursing a PhD thesis in Europe, focused an altered version of this project which would analyse the Assyrian diaspora in Europe. In this situation, I would need to refer to this data. The data would include identifiable information such as your name, age, and location, as well as the interviews themselves. Alongside this, de-identified data which will not contain your information, such as post-interview notes made or any un-published written work will also be kept. This information will be securely protected. If you choose to withdraw before October 31st, 2020, all information provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

What will the project produce?

The information from my research will be used in my Masters dissertation. Additionally, the findings may be published in academic or professional journal, or discussed at academic or professional conferences, or a PhD thesis.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study before October 31st, 2020, after which, your recording will be destroyed or returned to you;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- receive a copy of your interview transcript;
- be able to read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact myself or my Primary Supervisor:

[Contact information]

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, you may contact the Victoria University of Wellington HEC Convenor.

[Contact information]

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW

This consent form will be held for one year.

Researcher: Nashie Shamoon, School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

- I agree to take part in an audio recorded interview.

I understand that:

- I may withdraw from this study at any point before October 31st, 2020, and any information that I have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.

- The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on March 31st, 2030.

- If I am a part of a focus group, my contributions will not be used.

- Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the student researcher and supervisor.

- I understand that the findings may be used for a Masters dissertation.

- I understand that the findings may be published in academic or professional journals.

- I understand that the findings might be publicised at academic or professional conferences.

- I understand that the observation notes/recordings will be kept confidential to the student researcher and supervisor.

- I consent to information or opinions which I have given being attributed to me in any reports on this research: Yes ☐   No ☐

- I would like a copy of the transcript of my interview: Yes ☐   No ☐

- I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email Yes ☐   No ☐ address below.

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

Who am I?

My name is Nashie Shamoon and I am a Masters student in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my Master of Arts thesis in Political Science.

What is the aim of the project?

In this project, I want to explore young Assyrians' perception of their identity as Assyrians, by interviewing Assyrians who were born and grew up in New Zealand and Australia, or migrated to either country in recent years. I would like to focus on their thoughts towards displacement and historical violence as significant features of the Assyrian identity, perpetuated by historical occurrences such as the 1915 Assyrian Genocide, 1933 Simele Massacre, or persecution in recent years. What does historical violence mean to ordinary Assyrians? I want to learn more about your perspective as a young, Western-born Assyrian, or an Assyrian who has moved to New Zealand or Australia, to get a better understanding of how the past affects the present and future. Not only will your participation support this research by adding real-life thoughts on the current conceptions of the Assyrian identity, but it will help form an opinion on Assyrians' existence in the West. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

How can you help?

You have been invited to participate because you are, an Assyrian, between the ages 18 to 30, and were either born in New Zealand or Australia, or recently migrated to New Zealand or Australia. If you agree to take part in this focus group, the interview will be conducted using a service which can accommodate multiple people, such as Zoom, Skype, or Facebook Messenger. At the beginning of the interview, I will ask for your opinion on life in New Zealand or Australia as a young Assyrian. This will be followed by questions about thoughts on your own self-identification, and ideas what you think about the Assyrian identity. After this, I will ask you questions about the Assyrian Genocide, Simele Massacre, and other contemporary persecution.

The interview will last between 30 to 40 minutes, but can take place for longer than this if you wish. I will be taking notes during the interview. Additionally, with your permission, I will audio record the interview and transcribe it after. You can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. It must be noted that for Zoom meetings, to prevent 'Zoom-bombing', I will provide a personalised one-off password.

You can withdraw from the focus group at any time before the interview begins. You can also withdraw while the focus group it is in progress. However, it will not be possible to withdraw the information you have provided up to that point as it will be part of a discussion with other participants. The information shared during the focus group is confidential. That means after the focus group, you may not communicate to anyone, including family members and close friends, any details about the identities or contributions of the other participants of the focus group. By providing consent, you must keep the information discussed confidential.

You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before October 31st, 2020. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you. If part of a focus group, your contributions will not be used in this project.

If you wish to participate, the consent form can either be signed and returned to me via email, or, consent can be given via an audio recording — both, provided prior to the interview. Upon writing my thesis, I will provide feedback via email. I will also
provide you with the opportunity to keep a copy of the interview transcript.

Lastly, you will receive a small koha (gift) of a supermarket voucher, as thanks for your participation.

What will happen to the information you give?

This research is confidential. This means that the researcher named below will be aware of your identity, but the research data will be combined, and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. However, you should be aware that in small projects your identity might be obvious to others in your community. Only my supervisor and myself, as both student researcher and transcriber, will read the notes or transcript of the interview. Your personal information and identity will only be known by myself.

Although physical copies of the interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed on March 31st, 2021, I will continue to keep a digital copy of these files until March 31st, 2030. I have chosen to keep this data until 2030 as I am keeping the option of pursing a PhD thesis in Europe, focused an altered version of this project which would analyse the Assyrian diaspora in Europe. In this situation, I would need to refer to this

data. The data would include identifiable information such as your name, age, and location, as well as the interviews themselves. Alongside this, de-identified data which will not contain your information, such as post-interview notes made or any un-published written work will also be kept. This information will be securely protected. If you choose to withdraw before October 31st, 2020, all information provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

What will the project produce?

The information from my research will be used in my Masters dissertation. Additionally, the findings may be published in academic or professional journal, or discussed at academic or professional conferences, or a PhD thesis.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the focus group;
- withdraw from the focus group while it is taking part however it will not be possible to withdraw the information you have provided up to that point;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;

- receive a copy of your focus group/interview transcript;
- be able to read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact myself or my Primary Supervisor:

[Contact information]

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, you may contact the Victoria University of Wellington HEC Convenor.

[Contact information]

Shadows of the Past: The Role of Persecution in the Self-identification of the Young Assyrian Diaspora in New Zealand and Australia

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN FOCUS GROUP

This consent form will be held for one year.

Researcher: Nashie Shamoon, School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

- I agree to take part in an audio recorded focus group.

I understand that:

- I acknowledge that I am agreeing to keep the information shared during the focus group confidential. I am aware that after the focus group, I must not communicate to anyone, including family members and close friends, any details about the identities or contributions of the other participants of the focus group.

- I can withdraw from the focus group while it is in progress however it will not be possible to withdraw the information I have provided up to that point as it will be part of a discussion with other participants

- The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on March 31st, 2030.

- I understand that the findings may be used for a Masters dissertation.

- I understand that the findings may be published in academic or professional journals.

- I understand that the findings might be publicised at academic or professional conferences.

- I understand that the observation notes/recordings will be kept confidential to the student researcher and supervisor.

- My name will not be used in reports and utmost care will be taken not to disclose any information that would identify me.

- I would like a transcript of the focus group: Yes ☐   No ☐

- I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email   Yes ☐   No ☐ address below.

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

Focus group rules

- The information shared in this meeting is confidential. Please do not discuss the opinions and comments made by other focus group participants with anybody outside this meeting.

- I would like to establish a safe and comfortable space for you to share information. Please respect each other's opinions and answers.

- My thesis relies heavily on the different experiences of the Assyrian people. Please know that your experience and opinions are unique and valued. There are no right or wrong answers, what every person brings to this meeting is important.

- The meeting is audio recorded, therefore, please, one person may speak at a time.

- Please turn off your phones/notifications.