Trajectories of Belonging: Literacies and Intersectionality in the Mobile Phone and

Home Building Practices of Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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This dissertation responds to Syrian nationals' stories of displacement and settlement. Within these accounts, people contend with forced migration through language, personal networks, and technology. A sociomaterial theory of literacy recognizes the way in which these interviewees sought safety and belonging while accessing concrete systems in order to achieve material effects such as mobility and shelter. This dissertation's case studies pertaining to mobile devices and refugee homes contribute to an infrastructural understanding of literacies as semiotic, social, affective, and material practices bearing an affordant and epistemically generative relation to physical infrastructures. The project's interviewees used 2G communication infrastructures while travelling from Syria to Iraq and generated political readings of the powerful actors curating these infrastructures.

These literate practices were motivated by dynamic emotional investments, which I read through the concept of belonging, a process of felt affiliation to people, places, and identities. By viewing belonging in terms of trajectories, I aim to suggest the rise and fall of emotional connection amid processual time and shifts in location. Expressions of belonging revealed that the overwhelming majority of the project's interview participants identify as Kurds, and that they anticipated feeling at home in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). They were generally welcomed, yet a combination of factors tended to introduce vicissitudes into this feeling of belonging, including tensions between the refugee and host communities.

The interviews gathered here suggest that many Kurdish-identifying interviewees experienced nuanced intersectional vulnerabilities co-constituted not only by Kurdish identity but also by language and dialect, social class, gender expression, Syrian origin, and documentary status. Situated intersectionality offers a framework for engaging non-Western categories of belonging and a social justice-oriented logic for articulating historical and political contexts with qualitative findings. Most importantly, it leads here to the disruption of mono-categorical claims about the community under discussion, including the Turkish state's frequent justification of military aggression in the region through the reduction of all Kurds to the figure of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist. In this way, this dissertation cultivates an orientation of transnational solidarity with the Kurdish-identifying Syrian asylum seekers living in the KRI.

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Preface

Given that this research turns upon a series of long conversations with Syrian people whom I met in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (or KRI), my acknowledgements begin with them. Reasons of privacy keep me from naming the people who offered their time, stories, and expertise. I met people who had come to the KRI from all across Syria, from famous cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs, names we in the US had heard on the news during the years of strident armed opposition to the government of Bashar al-Assad. But just as often I met people from less familiar, Kurdish-majority cities like Qamishlo and Kobani, frequently mentioned in Western media when the US was supporting the Syrian Defense Forces in their efforts to repulse ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).

When I say I want to thank the people from Syria I met, I'm thinking of the many fathers who went ahead of their families to the KRI to find work, then called their wives and children to join them; the mothers who often cared for families while contending with displacement in Syria; the countless sons who chose flight instead of conscription, refusing to take up arms for the state; the sisters who circled back across the border to retrieve papers, facilitate others' journeys, or attend funerals. I want to express my gratitude to the irreproachably kind people who let me come into their homes, served tea and coffee, and sometimes pressed me to stay for lunches sheepishly declined.

I never would have had the chance to speak to Syrian asylum seekers in Iraq, though, were it not for the equally profound generosity to be found in the KRI host community and the people of the fair city of Sulaymaniyah in particular. From the beginning, the Kurdish people I met there

offered help that would, as the last few years attest, change my life. My sincere thanks, especially, to Ardalan Fryad and his circle of friends, including Botan, Zana, and Dwin, who exerted themselves on my behalf well before we knew each other. *Zor zor spas*, the injustice of this world offers no easy path to reciprocate your kindnesses, though I will try.

Official recognition is due the Civil Development Organization, or CDO, in Sulaymaniyah, without whose support this work would not have been possible, and the management of the Arbat Camp, including Kak Kheredeen, the resident community mobilizer who arranged so many of the interviews informing this dissertation.

Above all, though, this project owes a profound debt to the research assistants who worked on it, including a man I refer to, pseudonymously, as Bijar Daban, and another, comfortable in my use of his name, Massoud Hezil. To say that I worked with "interpreters" in Iraq does not do justice to the cultural mediation and social tutelage offered in 2017 by Bijar, an Iraqi-Kurdish life-long resident of Sulaymaniyah, and Massoud, who is from the Syrian city of Amuda in Rojava across the border from the KRI in Syria. It was an honor to work with you, "Bijar," and Massoud; whatever strengths this work possesses are linked quite literally to your words, and its many weaknesses are surely the product of my imperfect capacities to hear them.

Thanks are due as well to my University of Pittsburgh committee and California proofreaders. First, I am moved to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Tyler Bickford, who served as the co-chair of this project, and was also my advisor prior to its conception. It is not an exaggeration to write that I would not have completed my PhD at the University of Pittsburgh without his support, guidance, and friendship. I would also like to acknowledge the many and robust contributions of my co-chair Professor Annette Vee, my mentor in both my research field of literacy studies and my professional home of English Composition. To Professor Shalini Puri I

1.0 Introduction: Refugees, Technology, and Literacy Studies

The use of mobile technology by refugees was a distinguishing feature of the displacement caused by the Syrian Civil War. As the conflict escalated, Western media frequently depicted the use of mobile phones by migrants bound for Europe with overt wonder and tacit trepidation. Even while refugees remained defined by the UN framework and constrained by state mobility regimes, the new figure of the mobile phone-wielding refugee upended inherited constructions of refugee powerlessness.

Media representation of Syrian refugees is therefore the point of departure for this inquiry into mobility, technology, and settlement, which I approach through the lens of sociomaterial literacy studies. Working against media and scholarly tendencies to engage questions of migration and technology in European settings, this dissertation examines relationships between the mobility, use of communication devices, practices of home building, and felt affiliations of Syrian refugees who went to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) after the Syrian War began in 2011. Much of the communication underpinning Syrian refugees' regional mobility was realized through 2G ('Second Generation') voice calls, partly by virtue of the infrastructure at hand in the early years of the war. These calls linked families in "mobile networks of belonging" spanning the Syria-Iraq border (Diminescu 573).

While the media advanced a neoliberal rhetoric equating free movement with mobile devices, the Syrian nationals who came to the KRI—the overwhelming majority of whom identify as Kurds—grappled with multiple, intersecting, and fluid social positionalities as they responded to displacement through the varied materiality of languages, technologies, and infrastructures. This

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dissertation finds that cellular phones amplified but did not determine the mobility and resilience of transnational networks of belonging informed mainly by Kurdish ethnolinguistic identification, histories of resistance to state repression, and intra-regional politics. Tracing links between migration and settlement, I also conclude that refugee homes, however provisional, materialized nodes of care and support within the networks under discussion.

My attention to these matters is animated foremost by the theory and qualitative methods available to English composition through literacy studies, a cross-disciplinary subfield owing much to anthropologists like Brian V. Street. I recover the field's early critique of narrow conceptions of literacy which, by recognizing and valuing only alphabetic reading and writing, upheld a dominant Western paradigm complicit with the perpetuation of social hierarchies at home and colonial asymmetries abroad. From more recent developments in literacy studies, I present a view of sociomateriality characterized by relational logics. This configuration of sociomateriality rejects the flat ontology of discourses like new materialism in favor of an emphasis on the environmental affordances to be found among and folded between objects of distinct material kind. By informing this general outlook with critical infrastructure studies, I recognize literacies' role in processes that compose identities and access concrete systems to achieve material effects, such as mobility or shelter. The case studies of mobile devices and refugee homes contribute to an *infrastructural* understanding of literacy, this dissertation's central theoretical contribution to the field. This project urges conception of literacies as semiotic, social, affective, and material practices bearing an affordant relation to physical infrastructures. By extension, a specifically digital form of literacy is not helpfully defined merely as the use of particular devices, but as practices bearing an affordant relation to digital infrastructures, such as the mostly 2G systems in place in Syria when the war began in 2011. This dissertation will further demonstrate sociomaterial

literacy practices evincing the epistemic generativity long recognized in English composition and writing studies as a crucial feature of the literate practice we call *writing*.

But this infrastructural emphasis is part of, rather than a replacement for, the contextual and often ethnographic style of analysis that has been, since Street's early work, a focus of literacy studies (Heath and Street).This emphasis pairs well with the attention to affective motivations for literate activity to be found in contemporary writing studies and literacy studies (Bartlett; Jacobs and Micciche; Micciche; Hall; Mapes and Hea; Byrd; Vieira, *Writing for Love and Money*). If literacy bridges affect and infrastructure, attention to emotional motivations can suggest a particular convergence of infrastructure's distributive and amplifying properties with human ends and agency.

It is in this light that I invoke *belonging* as an emotional process of felt affiliation to people, places, and identities and *situated intersectionality* as a way of identifying culturally unfamiliar categories of belonging, such as Kurdish ethnolinguistic identification. Belonging names the emotional process of aligning oneself *to* something, such as "spaces and places to which people are accepted as members or feel that they are members . . ." (Anthias, *Identity and Belonging* 7). Both social and affective (Ahmed 2004; Wetherell 2012; Bartlett 2007), belonging is neither singular nor constant (Anthias, *Identity and Belonging* 6–10); my contention, following Yuval-Davis, is that expressions of belonging surface terms useful in a dialogic approach to situated intersectional analysis ("Situated Intersectionality" 97–98). I read the Trajectories of Belonging ('TOB,' hereafter) interviewees' experiences of belonging, essential to the networks enabling both mobility and settlement, as having been enabled, amplified, and distributed by literate practices whose instrumental, social, and affective effects were mediated by the affordances of devices and infrastructures. The experience of Kurdish belonging, though, is also a source of vulnerability

within the society of states that tends to regard Kurdish nationalism as tantamount to terrorist activity. Situated intersectionality rather than literacy studies alone guides my assessment of the confluence of vulnerabilities contributing to the social positionalities experienced by Syrian refugees within the KRI.

The TOB interview participants' flight from Syria to the KRI was a moment in which bodies, languages, technologies of communication, and built environments—from border crossings and bridges to residential neighborhoods and vacant gardens—were at play within a context rife with historical and political division. Even as they reserved hope that they would return to Syria, the TOB interviewees, especially the predominance of Kurds among them, anticipated acceptance within the KRI, a place where they would feel at home. Did they? Considering this question brings literacy, emotion, migration, and situated intersectionality together in this dissertation's binding concept: *trajectories of belonging*. By linking the term *trajectory* to belonging, I mean to suggest the rise and fall of emotional affiliations amid processual time and possible shifts in location.[1] Because a felt sense of belonging does not depend upon geography, its trajectories are not limited to either pole of the mobility/immobility binary (Brun 423; Thimm 2). Thus, the 'trajectory' here is a metaphorical, a tracking of feeling, rather than strictly geographic or empirical. Although ready to consider relations between people and objects and their environments, I am primarily invested in interviewees' own reflective and affective accounts of their own social and material practices. This understanding of *trajectory* works toward interviewees' experiences of mobility, a concept that entails both physical movements and relative shifts in social class or other negotiations of hierarchy (Long and Crisp 56). To consider

[1] Benson offers another useful approach to "trajectories of belonging" (2014).

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trajectories of belonging is therefore to work with interview participants' experiences of and thoughts about the dynamic interplay of place, power, and positionality.

I propose this framework in the first instance because Kurdistan beckoned to so many of the TOB interviewees as a place ethnolinguistic acceptance, safety, and opportunity. Yet this sense of community belonging was experienced inconstantly, often intensifying during times of arrival and welcome and diminishing when TOB participants experienced divisions between host and refugee communities. Many of the participants experienced a complication, tempering, or revision of their often enthusiastic feeling of connection to Kurdistan and the KRI. The TOB framework, inspired by my research experiences, reflects literacy studies' longstanding emphasis on interlocutors' experiences of communicative practices within an ethnographic sense of context. Attention to infrastructure provides a sociomaterial basis for the dilation of the scope of analysis from individual literacy acts to broader territories and regions.

Engaging disciplines outside of literacy studies, especially, urges careful thinking through of longstanding ethical questions and Orientalist problems (Said; Abu-Lughod). In my reading of Said, I emphasize the conceptual enclosure of the non-Western body in an anti-historical ontology. The Orientalist construction of a timeless Asia is at odds with both political contestation that cannot be re-reduced to this essence and the use of technology familiar to the West. I argue, therefore, that the TOB interviewees' ongoing generation of situated political and technological knowledge evinces a disruption of Orientalist logics. Recognizing the anti-orientalist qualities of the TOB interviewee's comments requires a robust engagement with the study's contexts. Sociomaterial literacy studies as I understand it is explicitly historical and political, and I argue that a nuanced engagement with these aspects of context equips readers to grasp TOB interviewees' knowledge-making outside of an Orientalizing schema. Disrupting any trends

toward anti-historical representation of the people I discuss is of particular importance to me as a white, US-born researcher with limited relevant cultural or linguistic competence. As Said wrote, "for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second" (20). The TOB project is therefore both an attempt to engage in ethical knowledge-making with people displaced by the Syrian War and a reflection on the specific positional asymmetries that make such an endeavor possible.

In what follows, I first provide a compact overview of the TOB study introducing its central findings and their relation to the theoretical framework described above. I then consider the climate of media representation that helped motivate the project. Focusing on portrayals of refugees with mobile phones, I theorize a shift from an earlier 'abject' figure to that of the 'connected' refugee. The implications of this transition urge a discussion of *Orientalism*, which accounts for the 'abject' figure's essential quality of privation and provides a basis for understanding the 'connected' refugee as a vehicle of neoliberal affirmation. A close reading of *Literacy in Theory and Practice* follows in which I link Street's well-known critique of 'autonomous' literacies to Said's work. Street's position offers an apt lens to regard the problem of technological fetishization identified within yet perpetuated by recent work on refugees and mobile devices in the field of digital migration studies. I respond to the limitations of digital migration studies by demonstrating how an infrastructural conception of sociomaterial practice avoids the exclusions that technologically fetishized inquiry can create.

1.1 Trajectories of Belonging: Study Overview

Adapting methods current in transnational literacy studies,[2] I recruited participants for the TOB study in Arbat, a UNHCR asylum-seeker 'camp' community in the KRI, and Sulaymaniyah, the nearest host-community city. Working with local and Syrian research assistants/interpreters, I conducted fifty-three interviews with individuals and family groups in the summers of 2017 and 2018. Syrian community members guided the study's purposive sampling of possible participants toward a mix of experiences and backgrounds. Queries about mobile devices and digital technology formed a thematic arc throughout, but were posed in the context of respondents' descriptions of themselves and their journeys. Open-ended by design, these interviews had both semi-structured and narrative qualities. In sum, the project engaged 76 people, 35 of whom presented as women (46%) and 41 as men (54%). 4 of the interviewees (5%) identified as Arabs and 72 as Kurds (95%).

"The approximately 30 million or more Kurds famously constitute the largest nation in the world without its own independent state," writes Gunter. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims, "although there are also Shia, Alevi, and Yezidi Kurds, among others" (*The Kurds: A Modern History* xi). After Syria became independent, Kurds faced an adversarial Arab-majority state that pressured them to assimilate (Gunter 87-90). As Syria's largest ethnic minority, Kurds were the target of government policies, including Arabization campaigns that engineered internal

[2] Including: Leonard, "Traveling Literacies: Multilingual Writing on the Move"; Leonard et al.; Leonard, "Writing Through Bureaucracy: Migrant Correspondence and Managed Mobility"; Lagman; Vieira, "Undocumented in a Documentary Society Textual Borders and Transnational Religious Literacies"; Vieira, "Doing Transnational Writing Studies: A Case for the Literacy History Interview"; Vieira, "Writing Remittances: Migration-Driven Literacy Learning in a Brazilian Homeland."

displacement and a 1962 census producing generations of qualified citizenship and outright statelessness (Hassanpour and Mojab 218; Knapp et al. 19). As a result, "about 10 percent of Syrian Kurds did not have citizenship" until 2011 and some of the TOB participants had been stateless in Syria (Crabapple).

The largest group of the project's interviewees comprised people from the Kurdish-majority area of northeast Syria, Rojava ("west" in Kurdish). The TOB interviewees from Rojava often reported limited educational and professional opportunities; family backgrounds tended to include farming and manual labor. Their situation contrasted with that of Syrians whose successful flight to Europe correlated, generally, with relative advantages in affluence and education (Betts and Collier 198–99). For Kurdish women in the Rojava group, especially those over thirty, the range of options reported was even more limited. As Hozan,[3] a woman from Qamishlo, said: "We didn't have a lot of opportunity to study in Syria because of poverty. Girls got married."

The second-largest group of TOB participants included Kurdish people living in or near Damascus and Aleppo. Many maintained family ties to Rojava but reported enjoying somewhat greater economic and educational opportunities despite the suppression of Kurdish language and culture. Often displaced from these urban areas by front-line fighting between regime and opposition forces, this group fled east to cities in Rojava such as Kobani and Qamishlo before going to the KRI. Those who passed through Rojava early faced the wartime economic collapse; those who were displaced after 2014 had to negotiate the added danger of ISIS.

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[3] Pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation to safeguard the privacy of TOB participants and the research assistant referred to as Bijar Daban.

The TOB participants' movements therefore spanned two sub-state authorities, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), formalized within Iraq's 2005 constitution (Kelly 727) and the more radical Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Rojava's democratic-confederalist aspiration to polyethnic, feminist, and municipalist governance (Kaya and Whiting; Öcalan). But prior to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, western colonialism, and the drawing of contemporary state borders, Kurdish people lived throughout a region defined mainly by the Zagros Mountains, which extend from Iran through the KRI, abut Rojava, and include a large swath of Turkey (Chatty 232). From this perspective, the Kurds with whom I spoke, though displaced from their homes in Syria, remained resident within a non-state geography of common cultural affiliation.

For this reason, state-based descriptors like "Syrian" and "Iraqi" did not adequately reflect the ethnolinguistic milieu of the TOB study; nor did the legal terms "refugee" or "asylum seeker." To engage this context, I draw upon refugee, Kurdish, and Middle Eastern Studies for background and situated intersectionality as a theoretical framework for assessing the implications of the identifying categories reported during interviews, such as 'Kurd' and 'Arab' (Yuval-Davis, "Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality").[4] Syrian-Kurdish interviewees, for example, anticipated feeling at home in Kurdistan and were generally welcomed by Iraqi Kurds. In the Arbat community, I asked Hozan why she had wanted to come to the KRI. She said, "Because it's our

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[4] Additional relevant sources on intersectionality and its growing importance in refugee studies include Carastathis 2014, Carastathis et al. 2018, Crenshaw 1989, 1991, Collins 2015, and Thimm et al. 2017. I discuss situated intersectionality in more depth in Chapters 2 and 4.

nation, our language . . . . If there is Kurd anywhere, he feels that nation, it feels like home . . . . It

is your land, your region; that's why it is better for us."5 Hozan had never been to Kurdistan before.

Such feelings may be read in terms of belonging, "an emotional (or even ontological)

attachment, about feeling 'at home'" that is essential to imagined futures (Yuval-Davis, *The*

Politics of Belonging 9), as well as vicissitudes in that feeling, the aforementioned *trajectories* of

belongin*g*. For example, the inclusive feeling of Kurdish belonging reported by interviewees such

as Hozan sometimes became complicated by tensions between the refugee and host communities.

Bauan, a Syrian Kurd whose home language is the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, recounted

moments when speakers of Sorani, the Kurdish dialect common in the KRI, replied to him with

Arabic, the language of the Syrian state. Bauan was distressed by these interactions, for they hailed

him as a foreigner in Kurdistan—the place where he said he expected to find "people who can

understand me, who have the same language, who can feel me." Transformations in Bauan's sense

of belonging to the KRI did not, therefore, cease with his arrival; on the contrary, his narrative of

settlement in the KRI plots a multiform rise and fall. From an intersectional perspective, asylum-

seeking status, Syrian nationality, and the speaking of Kurmanji co-constituted his social location

within, and potential exclusion from, KRI society. Another Kurdish man from Syria, Dijwar,

expressed the irony of such circumstances: "In Damascus, I was a Kurd. Here, I'm a Syrian, not a

5 Unless it limits intelligibility, I will not standardize the English offered to me in the KRI, whether
it was spoken by a research assistant or an interviewee. Instead, I approach the archive with a translingual
disposition. According to composition scholars Lu and Horner, this radical embrace of linguistic difference
rejects all forms of monolingualism (310). As such, it is aptly applied to this project's linguistic surround,
a tripartite nexus of code-enmeshed Arabics, among them Iraqi and Levantine dialects (the latter spoken by
almost every Syrian interviewee); Kurdishes, including Kurmanji (also spoken by most interviewees) and
Sorani (widely spoken among Iraqi Kurds); and all manner of Englishes. Some interviewees conducted part
or all of the interaction in English, but these were few enough that I do not reference it, for it might pose a
risk to their privacy.

Kurd." By exploring these intra-cultural fault lines, this study works to avoid methodological ethnicism in its portrayal of Kurdish identities (Vertovec, *Transnationalism* 21).

Most of the Syrian people who took part in the TOB study followed at least one relative to Kurdistan, affirming prior understandings of the importance of "the growth and elaboration of migrant networks" (Massey 306). This is consistent with Massey's observation that "a 'family and friends' effect . . . channels later streams of immigrants to the same places . . ." (306). Although rarely addressed directly by the TOB interviewees, gender was heavily implicated in their familial journey narratives. Men but not women, for example, were likely to have previously spent time in Kurdistan as economic migrants, and men tended to travel to the KRI ahead of their families. Comparatively speaking, the KRI offered many more chances for employment than the shattered Syrian economy, at least until a series of economic crises swept the region after 2014. As a result of these dynamics, many of the families I met in the Arbat community had taken up residence in the camp only after several years of renting in Sulaymaniyah; the fading job prospects had compelled many to resort to the humanitarian options available to them as UNHCR asylum seekers.

Men tend to predominate within "circular migration," but in the TOB study it was women who reported making return journeys to Syria, typically on family or official business (Vertovec, "Circular Migration" 5). The primary reason for this gendered dynamic was the threat of conscription experienced by men. Young men of legal age could be compelled to perform their mandatory military service by the Syrian Arab Army, and men who had already served could be recalled for emergency service. Less formally, many Kurdish men also felt pressure to serve in groups like Rojava's YPG (People's Defense Forces). A situated intersectional lens problematizes such sets of "differential positionings" as they relate within their gendered social contexts (Yuval-

Davis, "Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality" 99). Women describing what I refer to as counter-migratory journeys offer infrastructural and political insights unavailable elsewhere, a matter to which I return in Chapters 4 and 5.

The cellular broadcast regions emanated by digital infrastructures have been theorized as "signal territories" by media scholar Lisa Parks (Parks, "Earth Observation and Signal Territories"). Signal territory is anchored within, yet not isomorphic with, state bounds. The interrelationship between signal territories, literate practices, and infrastructures is evident in the case of Syria-Telecom, the regime's state-run carrier (Warf 221). Despite its widespread coverage, TOB interviewees described Syria-Tel as both unreliable and transparent to state security forces. When there was no viable alternative, people responded to the threat of surveillance by habitually censoring their speech during calls. When possible, many used foreign carriers. Multiple TOB interviewees confirmed the use, for example, of Turkish Vodafone SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards in Rojava's cities along the Syrian-Turkish border. Some interviews went further, relating this phenomenon to the political fortunes and capacities of the Syrian state. Hozan, mentioned above, described the use of Turkish cell carriers in her home town of Qamishlo:

> Most of the people use Syria-Tel, but there was a Turkish company close to the border. That's why they were using Turkish SIM card which [were] working effectively because the [Syrian] government left[6] . . . . If there was a problem with the towers that provide service to the cell phones like Syria-Tel, the government would not repair it. That's why they bought Turkish SIM cards.

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[6] As noted, I will generally leave translated comments as they were offered by the TOB project research assistants unless, as in this case, this practice risks introducing problems of intelligibility.

Hozan recalls how the Syrian government's forces "left" Rojava in 2012, creating a power vacuum that invited the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy (Gunter 18). But, as a result, she explains, the Syrian government stopped maintaining Syria-Tel's communications infrastructure ("the towers"), thereby limiting service. Digitally literate users of cell phones could adapt to the new circumstances by acquiring the SIM cards needed to access Turkish cell phone carriers whose signal reached over the order into Syria.

Where signal territories ran closer to sovereign borders, transitioning between them was commonplace. Aram, a young Kurdish man, came to Kurdistan via an "informal" (not legal) route from a town in Rojava near the border. Before leaving, he used his Nokia to call members of his extended family who had been living in Kurdistan for years. Speaking Kurmanji, they arranged to meet in the KRI. After making the trip, Aram switched his Syrian SIM card to Korek Telecom, a company based in Kurdistan. He then called back to Syria from within Korek's signal territory, and the subsequent conversations informed the legal movement of a group including Aram's mother and sister.

Aram's narrative is highly representative of the kind of experiences reported by TOB interview participants. It illustrates how digitally literate practices enabled the voice calling through which strong social ties were maintained during displacement. These strong ties composed transborder "networks of belonging," sources of knowledge, care, and mutual obligation that informed further movement (Diminescu 573). Bearing out Diminescu's description of "migrants as actors of a culture of bonds which they themselves have founded and which they maintain even as they move about," the familial TOB networks were both mobile and resilient within their mobility (567).

Aram's sense of belonging to the Kurdish-majority community in the KRI bears as well upon the future prospects of Syrian asylum seekers in the KRI. During our interview, Aram communicated through political discussion a sense of transnational solidarity among Kurds, but this sense of belonging had a limit. There "is a line" he said, above which, as a Syrian refugee in the KRI, "you can't stand." Aram's sense of the implicitly restricted opportunities for Syrian asylum seekers in Kurdistan suggests the co-constitutive intersection of Syrian, Kurdish, and asylum-seeking identities. It urges Aram and those in similar positions to think of themselves, at least at times, not only as Kurds, but as Syrian refugees—obligated to return to their state-defined home, accept a sense of bound possibility in the KRI, or consider another destination.

A factor in such a reckoning is the material matter of housing. In Arbat these were houses built mainly by the residents themselves while in Sulaymaniyah these were rented properties. In both cases, though, these houses lent mobile networks a point of "regrounding" (Ahmed et al. 2), allowing friends and family a place to stay, live, contact other family members and friends, and then sometimes depart, returning to Syria, journeying on to other cities in the KRI, or taking steps toward a European destination, typically via Turkey. For those whose larger-scale movement slowed after coming to Arbat or Sulaymaniyah, these homes invited practices of settlement and dwelling.

Biyan and his family, for example, left a Syrian town near the Iraq border in 2012, entered the KRI legally, and, after a period of renting a home in Sulaymaniyah and then a stay in a more temporary camp, took up residence in Arbat soon after it opened in 2013. Biyan described building a house there: "We took everything outside of the tent, and we start over to build our house with our hands." Like other residents who invested precious resources into these projects, Biyan expressed a complex set of contradictory feelings about his house in the Arbat community.

Although he was proud of building it, the house represented sunk costs, impossible to recoup, and an obstacle to migrating to a preferred destination outside of Iraq. "If I spent that much money to find a way to escape this country, I would be successful, I would reach my destination," he said. As Leonard writes, the "choice to move or stay put is itself a form of power . . . " ("Traveling Literacies" 15). The nuances of exercising this power, however, are much reduced if construed as a binary choice. "The meaning of belonging in their future," Ozakalelli writes in her work with Syrian women, "is linked not only to how the self is located in the new place but also to their relationships with their family and the particularities of the national and transnational communities with which they will interact" (17).

Building a house often worked against other factors enabling movement, such as the capacity to communicate by phone with relatives who had travelled elsewhere. It was common for families to mention a relation in another country of refuge, often Europe; transnational contacts could be of help, if only there were the means and opportunity to travel. While tending to work against the likelihood of this form of mobility, a house also enabled regrounded practices of dwelling, such as those motived by parental hopes to provide for children. "As long as our life is destroyed," Biyan explained, he felt a sense of obligation to build again, to "sort out" the situation for his children, to "provide a good life—that's why we're doing our best to make them happy."

1.2 Refugees, Phones, and the Media: Figures of Abjection and Connection

Refugee movement to Europe peaked in 2015-2016 (European Parlaiment). With over "6.3 million people from Syria classed as refugees" by the close of 2017, comparisons between their

exodus and the human calamity of WW2 became commonplace (UNHCR, "Global Trends -

Forced Displacement in 2017"). Although the numbers are staggering, WW2 and the effects of the

Syrian War are only comparable if Syrian refugee movement is aggregated with forced migration

from across the globe. "At the end of the war in 1945, more than *30 million* people remained

displaced from their homes . . ." (Brathwaite et al. 6, my emphasis); in 2017, there were 24.5

million registered refugees, *world-wide,* in a more generalized group of forced migrants[7] nearly

thrice that size (UNHCR, "Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2017"). Rendering an

equivalence between the number of refugees entering Europe in the 2010s with the even more dire

refugee situation created by WW2 was therefore an exaggeration indicative of the West's

embattled outlook on a global phenomenon of which the Syrian case is only a part.

The plight of WW2-era European refugees was in fact among the first orders of business

to be taken up after 1948 by the newly-minted United Nations. The need for an international

response to those displaced by the war urged the approval of the 1951 Convention on Refugees.

As stated in the first article of the Convention, a refugee is someone who, "owing to well-founded

fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social

group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality" (UNHCR, "Convention and

Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees"). Although it was originally intended to deal only

with people displaced by WW2, its terms were extended indefinitely by the 1967 Protocol. This

dilation of its scope to encompass non-European contexts represents, according to Betts and

Collier, a "a classic instance of Eurocentrism" in which:

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[7] "Forced migration" has become, in refugee and migration studies, a useful umbrella term referring to both political and non-political sources of displacement, including environmental degradation; refugees are one kind of forced migrant (Loescher, "Human Rights and Forced Migration" 234).

a convention explicitly focused on state persecution of individuals in postwar Europe was applied globally and permanently in 1967 without modification. Unsurprisingly, several of the countries that provide the main havens for refugees —notably those in the Middle East and Asia—have not signed it, believing it not to fit the realities of refuge in their regions. (5)

Although Turkey, for example, now shelters 3.6 million of the 5.6 million Syrian nationals who have registered as asylum seekers (UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response: Total Persons of Concern by Country of Asylum), Ankara has never actually granted these people refugee status, instead dubbing them the recipients of "temporary protection" (Yıldız and Uzgören). Iraq, by contrast, is sheltering fewer than 300,000 Syrian asylum seekers, and was not a major haven for displaced Syrians at any point in the war (UNHCR, Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response: Kurdistan Total Persons of Concern). And while it is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior signed a 2016 "memorandum of understanding" with the UNHCR recognizing asylum seeker and refugee rights, and the UN describes Iraq as having been "a generous host for refugees and asylum seekers for decades" (OCHA, "UNHCR, Ministry of Interior"). Thus, even in law, the term *refugee* is realized through international, regional, and local refugee regimes in which its usage sometimes corresponds with and at others departs from the UN's attempt at a universal legal definition. Even so, I observed the UNHCR as unavoidably present in the lives of the refugees in the KRI, especially those residing in camps, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

During the years of greatest refugee movement in the 2010s, there was a flurry of media reportage on the use of mobile devices by Syrian refugees. Examples include a 2015 *New York Times* piece, "A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone," explaining how

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"[t]echnology has transformed this 21st-century version of a refugee crisis, not least by making it easier for millions more people to move" via tools like "smartphone maps, global positioning apps, social media and WhatsApp" (Brunwasser). Also in 2015, the *BBC* reported on "[t]he 'vital' role of mobile phones for refugees and migrants" (Lee). In 2016, *Democracy Now!* played Human Rights Watch footage of a boy explaining how he had used wi-fi access and WhatsApp to text the Greek Coast Guard from a sinking boat, thereby saving himself, his family, and many others from drowning in the Mediterranean—and thereby avoiding the tragic and much publicized fate of Aylan 'Kurdi' Shenu, a migrant child who did not survive the infamously dangerous journey, and whose ethnicity became folded into the early reports of his death (Demir; Walsh).

Perhaps the most pointed message of these 2015 pieces was O'Malley's, "Stop acting surprised that refugees have smartphones," in which he asked, "Surprised that Syrian refugees have smartphones?" and answered, "Sorry to break this to you, but you're an idiot." The article's byline reads: "You don't need to be a white westerner to own a relatively cheap piece of technology." Such commentary addresses audience expectations that refugees from Syria would arrive destitute and without the digital devices commonplace in the West. But in pointing out that people who are not white Westerners can also own cellular phones, O'Malley's piece moves from the expectation of entrenched difference to the comforting implication that cellular access for Westerners and Syrian refugees—a group presumably requiring no differentiation—is essentially the same, a proposition which the TOB study complicates.

The O'Malley piece suggests the need to revise an entrenched representational trend: the figuration of the refugee in terms of abject poverty. I derive this formulation from Mason, whose 2011 piece on Iraqi refugees in Jordan alludes to the "wider global processes that have pathologised and criminalized—and in the process im-mobilised—the abject figure of the refugee"

(Mason 2011). Similarly, in a study of European-bound migrants, Witteborn writes, "Asylum seeker or refugee is the least desirable label . . . as it is associated with images of being poor, needy, sick and otherwise inflicted [sic]" (356). Or, as Arendt put it in 1943, "'refugees' are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive without means and have to be helped by the Refugee Committees," the charitable organizations of her day (110). Contrary to the largely political conception of the refugee described in the human rights framework, the abject figure of the refugee transmutes a legal status created by the fear of persecution into a material lack of resources.[8] Within a field of representation featuring both the media figure of abject poverty and the legal/humanitarian concept propounded by the UN framework, any revision to the figure of the refugee is likely to be rife with meaning.

In contrast to the abject figure, Witty's 2015 photo essay portrays a group of refugees taking a selfie upon reaching the Greek isle of Lesbos. Published in *Time,* the copy reads:

> Refugees fleeing war-torn territory have come to rely on their phones to make a passage to a better life. They use messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Viber and Line to communicate with loved ones back home. They navigate border crossings via Google Maps and Facebook Messenger. Their travails are documented on Instagram. A smartphone is often the only item they carry.

[8] Some scholars describe refugees in terms of "bare life," which Agamben proposed was endemic to camps in an increasingly carceral modernity (75–99). Agamben's phrasing has become a staple of refugee studies (Owens 567). Betts notes the "misappropriation of the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben characterizing refugees as bare life" and as "passive political victims" (19:18). Agamben's view of the refugee works towards universal claims about the nature of the state. Its conceptual engagement of the refugee body to advance this critique is contrary to the forms of situated inquiry literacy studies underdertakes.

Later, after commenting on the novelty of being able to connect with loved ones and consult the internet for the purpose of navigation, the piece cites a Human Rights Watch director who comments, "Most of the Syrians fleeing are educated and urban, so they have the funds and the exposure to use smartphones effectively." Such a statement might suggest that all Syrians compelled to flee the war were urban and educated. It also might imply that there is a correlation between movement, smartphone use, and relative advantages of social class. Only in the Human Rights Watch quotation are the migrants under discussion actually identified as Syrian. Neither their nationality nor the politics of the war that compelled their flight is the thrust of the story; the photo essay directs readers' attention to the technology of travel, not the context that created the "war-torn territory" left behind, as this image demonstrates:[9]

[9] Image reproduced here with written permission for academic use only.

Figure 1. "Refugees take a selfie after arriving on the island of Lesbos in Greece" (Witty)

Instead of arriving in Europe destitute and in need of aid, the migrants in the picture are memorializing the journey from Western Asia to Europe. The apex of the image's triangular composition is the phone, which not only mirrors Witty's own capture of the image but offers a causal explanation for the successful journey. Through movement achieved without any sort of humanitarian council or committee, these refugees have, at least in this representation, evaded the

immobilization often visited upon their abject counterparts; they neither wait for official permission to travel nor languish in a confining camp. Refugees enjoying digital connectivity, the image suggests, enjoy not so much the human right to freedom of movement—which might imply governmental imprimatur—but rather a form of mobility premised upon access to portable digital technology.

The disparity between Mason's characterization of the abject refugee and the messaging to be found in Witty's image suggests the mediatized transformation of the formerly abject refugee into a new figure, that of the 21st-century or *connected* refugee characterized by the same technology available to Western media consumers. "The appearance of digitally connected refugees," write Leurs and Ponzanesi, "was perceived as incongruent with Eurocentric ideas of sad and poor refugees fleeing from war and atrocities" (6).10 Or, as Twigt writes:

> In summer 2015, the realization that smartphones were frequently used by many of
>
> the people traveling in(to) Europe was a source of contention on Twitter and in the
>
> printed press (Gillespie et al., 2016; Leurs, 2016). The image of the forced yet

10 Leurs and Ponzanesi draw attention to Diminescu's earlier and influential theorization of the connected *migrant*. They succinctly summarize:
> Rather than defining migrants solely on the basis of life experiences of disruption and uprooting, she innovatively made a plea to consider migrants' mobility, media use, and space-making on a relational continuum: Rather than in "twofold absence" (Diminescu, 2012, p. 451) from one's "home" country and "host" country, the use of digital technologies is indicative of the "portability of the networks of belonging" (Diminescu, 2008, p. 573). Connected migrants can maintain a sense of co-presence, of being "neither here nor there but here and there at the same time" (Diminescu, 2008, p. 578). (10)

My comments on the figure of the connected refugee are not meant to evoke Diminescu's rather different construction of the connected migrant. I acknowledge my debt to Diminescu, instead, by relying on the idea of networks of belonging. In suggesting pan-Kurdish forms of belonging, the TOB research sites complicate the home/host binary, which can advance a statist logic.

connected migrant (Diminescu, 2008) does not fit with the stereotypical idea of the "poor, vulnerable refugee." (1)

Witty's photograph may therefore be understood as compelling a scene of recognition, a moment in which Western readers of *Time* could realize that they, as digitally literate users of the same devices as Syrian refugees, unexpectedly share an axis of social location with refugees. The (possible) shock of finding commonality with the supposedly abject other in this image is cushioned by the familiar: the mobile phone, and the practice of taking a selfie.[11] Although populated by non-Western bodies, the photo does not only commend their achievement—it tacitly celebrates the order that made it possible, the powers that have shaped handsets, laid long miles of optic cable, raised omnipresent towers, and maintained cellular networks.

As human geographer Barney Warf writes, the communications structure under discussion "originated in the 1990s when consortia of telecommunications companies laid an enormous global grid of fiber optic lines," a massive investment invited by the concomitant deregulation of national communications systems (221). At the outset of the *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey avers that firms' interest in "maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" incited investment in "information technologies" that would facilitate these exchanges over an expanded "geographic range" (3–4). Globally, these aims drove the creation, miniaturization, and dispersion of cellular networks and devices.[12]

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[11] Working from a new materialist perspective, Hirsu9/3/2020 2:50:00 AM offers a rich reading of Syrian refugees' use of mobile phones that arrives at somewhat similar conclusions.

[12] Bashar al-Assad directed Syria's pivot to neoliberalism. Before him, Hafeez al-Assad pursued the Ba'ath party's idiom of ethnonationalist socialism. In Knapp et al.'s assessment:

> [T]he authoritarian system shed its social aspects and shifted to neoliberalism. The state now promoted economic liberalization. State-owned lands were privatized, and public resources were re-distributed based on nepotism. Commercialized agriculture depleted the

This neoliberal proliferation of information technology has particular purchase upon the Syrian Civil War if, as political scientist Marc Lynch urges, we view it as an episode of the Arab Spring, which began in 2010 with Tunisia's revolt against Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Lynch notes that the "decade prior" featured "a steadily rising wave of popular opposition and a stunningly rapid transformation of the regional media environment, which challenged autocratic regimes from all sides" (14). He argues that "[t]he proliferation of communications technology represented a profound structural shift in the nature of politics in the Middle East" such that, by virtue of information's "entirely new order of magnitude, speed and intensity," states could not exert over it their traditionally near-absolute control over media discourse (35). The international scope of the Arab Spring has a parallel in the escalation of the Syrian Civil War, the flames of which were fanned by "transnational flows of money, information, people, and guns" (5). Already enmeshed in the national and regional scales of the conflict, communications technology would play a role in the mobility of Syrians displaced by the war. This was the representational and technological moment to which this dissertation was conceived as a response.

groundwater, and price controls on pesticides and animal feed were lifted. Assad turned against the unions, even though they were cowed and loyal to the state—he now considered them an obstacle to economic liberalization and cut off their financing. Economic liberalization led to an influx of foreign investment, especially from Kuwait, Qatar, and the Emirates, but plunged the rural population into poverty. Rojava was one of the regions most affected, forcing Kurds to migrate to the cities. As the last remnants of the social state were dismantled, and as the public sector was devastated and capital accumulated in the hands of the few, popular suffering heightened. (14)

1.3 Literacy Studies and Orientalism

The recasting of the figure of the abject refugee in terms of connectivity may be read as performing a compensatory function for Western audiences. That is, the loss of the hierarchical status suggested by the abject figure could be assuaged by an alternative mystification. Whereas the abject figure was defined by material lack, the connected figure celebrates the incorporation of previously marginalized people into a neoliberal commons of digital consumers, people who can be individually responsible for their own material well-being. The fuller implications of this reading entail articulating this abject figure with the West's lineage of Orientalist representation.

Said presents Orientalism as a discursive strategy in which Western thinkers construct people in the 'East'—anywhere from the 'Middle East' to East Asia—in terms of their "radical *difference*" from their counterparts in the West (45, my emphasis). Of the orient and people living there, the Orientalist "creates an image outside of history of something that is placid and still, eternal—which is simply contradicted by the facts of history. It's a creation of an ideal other" (Said qtd in Jhally 7:03-:51). This other is ideal because it is *ontologically incapable* of entering into the processual time and historical moment of modernity in the manner of the West (Said 150). Any knowledge made according to these terms necessarily inscribes this asymmetry. Said writes:

> The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a "fact" which, if it develops, changes; or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. (40)

The production of orientalist knowledge is therefore premised upon an ontological enclosure binding the spaces and peoples it appropriates to an unchanging identity, static amid the historical transformations of other societies. The "stable ontology" (40, above) advances a form of "tested and unchanging knowledge" constructing "Orientals" according to "a Platonic essence which any Orientalist (or ruler of Orientals) might examine, understand, and expose" (46).

The anti-historical essence of the Orient therefore positions the West as the creator and executor of modernity, those social and material spaces of Western rationality, science, technology, bureaucracy, education, and infrastructural extension. Presuming the inherent appropriateness of the West's extension of these logics across the globe, Orientalism entails an enmeshed set of projects that are colonialist, hierarchical, and epistemological. For if the orient is outside of modern time, the burden of guiding it falls to the West. To govern, the West must learn about the East and disseminate that knowledge. Colonial projects authorized by Orientalism can then achieve a material efficacy that further justifies and perpetuates these logics. As Said writes, "Never has there been a nonmaterial form of Orientalism" (31).

Proposing an overlap between the abject figuration of refugees and Orientalist thinking does much to explain *why* the use of digital technologies by Syrian refugees would garner headlines, as in Witty's "See How Smartphones Have Become a Lifeline for Refugees." Without a backdrop of presumed cultural essentialism, there would not have been anything newsworthy to comment upon, much less render in photographic spectacle. "Smartphones, as objects that define contemporary conditions of connectivity," writes Hirsu, "are at the core of infrastructural support" and "index modern living . . ." (150). The possession of devices freighted with these meanings by Western Asian refugees unsettles the tacit Orientalist presumption that they are the inheritors of an anti-modern essence inimical to full participation in history, and, by extension, technological

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modernity. The critique of Orientalism reveals the ontological construction underpinning the abject figure of the refugee, its naturalization of material lack.

In the case of Syrian refugees, the 'connected refugee,' in its neo-liberal celebration of technology, replaces the Orientalists' sense of *radical*, essentializing difference—a principle at work in the tacit ontology of the abject refugee—with an inverse movement toward the radical *erasure* of situated and relative difference, whatever its origin, be it political, social, cultural, etc. That is, the opposite figure, the connected refugee, tends to render legible *only* relations to technology. Its implicit neoliberal rhetoric suggests that if difference is not a matter of ontological essence, as previously supposed, there is nothing to know.13

Before I engage further with questions of technology, more needs to be said about Orientalism and this project as a work of literacy studies. Two factors require its discussion. First is my own positionality, which has nothing in common as far as ethnicity, home language, national origin, religion, or culture with the Western Asian people whom I discuss. Second is the fact that Street's most widely cited ideas in his 1984 *Literacy in Theory and Practice* were generated in close dialogue with anthropological work conducted in rural Iran during the late 1970s. Here, I will attend to the latter in detail and return to the former in the Conclusion to this dissertation.

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13 I hear in Ahmed's theory of *Strange Encounters* another way to explore these issues. She writes that "the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger' . . . . The alien stranger is hence, not beyond human, but a mechanism for *allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond"* (3, original emphasis). With this idea in mind, the Orientalism at work in the abject figure of the refugee is a means for the West to find in a non-Western figure evidence of the anti-historical ontology, an essence "beyond" the West, that it has already supposed it will find. In contrast, the neoliberal triumph of the connected figure presumes digital technology to have eclipsed difference altogether. The cultural details that once relegated non-Western people to a space outside of history are, with connection, suddenly superannuated.

Part of a broader scholarly elaboration of a sociocultural rather than cognitive understanding of meaning in the 1980s and 1990s, Street wrote against the way earlier literacy researchers approached literacy and text. He observed scholars describing the salutary properties of text in a manner masking their own culturally and socially inflected valuations of it (*Literacy in Theory and Practice* 29, 154). Street famously critiqued the work of anthropologists like Jack Goody who argued, upon the basis of comparative cultural study prizing the achievements of ancient Greece, that the styles of thought engendered by print held cognitive "consequences" for entire societies, such as superior capacities for reasoning (44–65).[14]

Literacy in Theory and Practice posed this critique as a theoretical distinction between an "ideological" model of literacy suffused at all points with social valuation and a contrasting view taking instrumental effects to be an intrinsic function of literacy's "autonomous" agency (3, 8). Steeped in history and in command of the scholarship of their day, the scholarly purveyors of the *autonomous model* searched for a mechanism to explain broad trends of cultural differentiation across a dizzying range of non-Western contexts; the phenomenon upon which they settled was widespread *alphabetic literacy*. Purveyors of the autonomous school found in "literate individuals" that alphabetic text could cultivate praiseworthy traits, such as being "more 'modern,'

[14] Goody and Watt's method in "The Consequences of Literacy," for example, is intensely comparativist, engaging a stunning range of examples—nearly all of them non-Western, save perhaps for a reference to "plains Indians" (311) —ranging from "Bedouin Arabs and the Hebrews of the Old Testament" to the "Tiv of Nigeria" (308), rendering capsule summaries of the "Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, and Chinese" civilizations (313), making points about the Akkadians and Babylonians (314), leaping from Mesopotamia to Japan (315), and so on, until finally settling at length upon the Greeks, who are essential to Goody and Watt's discussion. "The rise of Greek civilization," they contend, "is the "prime historical example of the transition to a really literate society" (319), meaning, in context, that not only did the Greek's possess a functional alphabet but also developed a society in which non-elites had at least some reasonable access to it, such that it was likely to have been used by "a wide range of people" (319).

'cosmopolitan,' 'innovative,' and 'empathetic' than non-literates . . . ." (Street, "The New Literacy Studies" 344).

The *ideological model* of literacy, by contrast, considers practices within social and cultural contexts to make plain these kinds investments. Street would later clarify that, for him, "ideology is the site of tension between authority and power on the one hand and resistance and creativity on the other . . . ." (434). Reading ideologically, Street refused to grant reading and writing a technological function manifesting transcontextual attributes outside of situated social practice. Street's intervention remains largely consonant with recent literacy studies scholarship engaging decolonial discourses. Rios writes, for example, that "Walter Mignolo has argued that the spread of Western literacy (as alphabetic writing and European languages) was bound by a missionary, colonial agenda that constructed alphabetic literacy as a sign of 'true' civilization . . . that persists into the present day" (63). An autonomous conception of alphabetic literacy masks such a historical relation; an ideological model surfaces it.[15]

Later in his career, Street would suggest the extension of his critique of autonomy to digital technology:

> All of these features of the autonomous model were rooted in assumptions about technological determinism that the ideological model and new social practice approaches to literacy have challenged and discredited. And yet, we now find the same array of distorting lenses being put on as we ask, what are the consequences

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[15] I hear in Powell's 2020 Conference on College Composition & Communication address a parallel arc of reasoning. Urging the "decolonizing of our discipline, our scholarship, and our teaching" (401), and also engaged with Mignolo, she contends, "The narrative of modernity and the logic of coloniality are two sides of the same coin—inseparable (393), and identifies "Western fixations with print literacy" as an obstacle to be overcome by "critical orientations to knowledge making" (401).

of the present generation of new technologies, those associated in particular with

the Internet and with digital forms of communication? . . . [I]t would be misleading

and unhelpful to read from the technology into the effects without first positing the

social mediating factors that give meaning to such technologies. How, then, can we

take sufficient account of the technological dimension of new literacies without

sliding into such determinism? ("New Literacies, New Times" 7)[16]

Street clarifies that the critique of autonomous literacy is premised upon an opposition to

technological determinism.[17] The TOB project answers Street's concerns by working from

interviewee comments upon their use of mobile devices toward a sociomaterial understanding of

their role within situated communicative practices.

The problem of Orientalism enters into this reading of Street, however, when one considers

that Street wrote from a social location shared with those anthropologists and literacy researchers

whose work he so effectively questioned. Although the second and less-often cited half of *Literacy*

in Theory in Practice includes Street's detailed observations in Cheshmeh, Iran, and draws

nuanced connections between his theoretical apparatus and the social practices he observes, his

critical gaze is quite rarely turned back on himself or the anthropological project more generally,

at least not in the manner we would expect today. This raises the question: should we consider

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[16] This recent statement is consonant with elements of today's explicitly anti-racist technology scholarship. For example, in discussing the racialized character of Apple's Siri voice interface, Benjamin addresses "[t]he view that 'technology is a neutral tool'"—a point of critique available in Street's earliest discussions of autonomy—and goes on to discuss how this constructed neutrality "ignores how race also functions like a tool, structuring whose literal voice gets embodied in AI," a claim distant from Street's work (Benjamin 29). In chapter 3, I outline ways in which a more contemporary approach to literacy studies can embrace the political materiality of infrastructures, including racialized hierarchies of access.

[17] Street's critique of technological determinism owes much to the prior anthropological work of Ruth Finnegan, whom he cites at length in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (96-97).

Street—who was conducting research in Iran while Said's 1978 opus was first published, and just prior to the explicitly anti-Western Islamic Revolution of 1979—an *Orientalist*? [18] And if so, what might be the implications for both the field and for this dissertation?

Given that Said uses the term *orientalist* to mean "several things, all of them in [his] opinion, interdependent," a reasonable answer is both yes and no (10). Academically, as Said writes, "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism" (10). [19] In this academic sense, and with quite different outcomes, *both* Goody and Street certainly inhabited the Orientalist problematic. And, it follows, I do as well.

By today's methodological standards, Street's work is suspect. He doesn't, for instance, disclose the way in which his privileges enable his access to his research subjects. He offers fairly few details how it came to be that he, as white man from Britain, came to be in Cheshmeh for extended periods, though he does discuss his affiliation with the University of Mashad (129). [20] The contextual notes he does provide, though helpful, are fairly skeletal in terms of accounting for one's positionality (Wan). Street writes, for example,

[18] Wan makes a similar observation, and implies the same question. Her broader position is that Street's work fails, methodologically, to adequately address questions of positionality (forthcoming).

[19] Perhaps surprising to some readers may be that this face-value usage obtains today in academic institutions in Western Asia, such as in Amman, Jordan's American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) and *l'Institut français du Proche-Orient à Amman* (IFPO), also known as "The French Institute for the Near East," a transliteration suggesting the lingering use of the word "Orient" within some research-oriented settings.

[20] I have included notes on my own path to research in Iraq in Chapter 1, Chapter 2's discussion of Methods, and the Conclusion.

My knowledge of these situations derives, to a large extent, from field work visits to villages in the hinterland of Mashad, North East Iran during that decade. I also spent a period teaching at the University, the British Council and the Iran-America Society in Mashad. The 1970s saw a dramatic extension and then equally dramatic decline in the Iranian economy, and an upheaval in the political order culminating in the fall of the Shah and the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is against this background that I will consider the nature and significance of different literacies in specific rural areas where I did field work . . . . (129)

The rapid shift from the institutional circumstances of Street's life in Iran to the broader political changes afoot in the country elides the logistical details and smaller-scale negotiations that enabled Street's work. Although Street mentions a handful of Arabic words in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, it is generally unclear, for example, if he spoke Persian or Arabic, and, if so, if he was fluent to the degree necessary to engage in detailed interviewing without the mediation of an interpreter, a common methodological practice increasingly disclosed today, as I discuss in Chapter 2's discussion of methods.

Street's work stands up better in terms of matters developed at greater length in *Orientalism*, such as the nature of the knowledge made about the East by the West. In relation to the Orientalist ontology Said describes, I read Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* as grappling with largely the same pernicious construction, more subtly clothed. Early forms of Orientalism overtly posited essentialized differences between Europe and Western Asia. The version of Orientalism at work in autonomous-model scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that inherent cultural difference was derived, as if by unfortunate happenstance, from the affordances intrinsic to the print literacy, the universal key to civilized thought. In this way, the autonomous

model critiqued by Street shrouded essentialist ideological investments in a technical veneer and a telos of progress. Street writes:

> The supposedly technical and neutral nature of the 'autonomous' model of literacy which they employ appears to absolve them from the charge they are making ideological claims about cultural difference. They can argue, whether implicitly or explicitly, that this new version of the 'great divide'—division between literate and non-literate—does not discriminate between cultures but simply between technologies. Since technologies are 'neutral', then no aspersions are being cast on individual members of cultures which happen to lack a particular technology and are thus taken to lack certain intellectual advantages. (29)

In the neo-Orientalism of the autonomous model's "technical" form of literacy, the conceit is no longer that those constructed as 'Oriental' remained unchanging as per their essential nature. The autonomous model's claim instead is that historical forces left some people enduring a historical distance from key technologies, such as print literacy, and that this lack of access contingently (rather than overtly by race or ethnicity) limits the rational faculties cultivated by the foundational code of alphabetic text (the form of literacy preferred in the West). Much as Orientalist narratives were found by Said to justify the imperial creation of states suitable to the wishes of Western powers, the discourse enabled by the autonomous model of literacy justified educational and corporate interventions in the "developing" world (x, 13).

Despite failing to fully account for his own implication in Orientalist problematics Street developed a theoretical lens capable of intervening in the Orientalist discourses of his day, scholarship in which literacy figured prominently. Insomuch as problems of Orientalism and technology come, for the West, to a point of cultural crisis in the figure of the connected refugee,

as argued above, Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* remains relevant. Although Street's positionality in Iran suggests the asymmetries in positionality and mobility that characterize Orientalist research, his work in *Literacy in Theory and Practice* is at the same time consistent with the central points of Said's critique of Orientalist discourse. In my reading, Street is generally an effective adversary of the neo-orientalist and neo-imperialist ends to which researchers have often directed the study of literacy.

This bears upon this dissertation's disruption of the combination of Orientalism and technological determinism entwined within the figure of the connected refugee. Whereas the media version of this figure elides the contexts, languages and identifications in favor of an emphasis on technology, a view of sociomaterial practices *with* technology links its users to situated contexts, which can be approached materially, politically, culturally, and historically. This opens up epistemological space to represent situated refugee experiences that cannot be reduced to the mystifications of either the abject or connected figures. Because it refuses to grant an autonomous status to technology, literacy studies is well suited for this work.

1.4 Digital Migration Studies: Eurocentricity and Technological Fetishization

This project is far from being the first scholarly effort to discuss Syrian refugees and technology. "[F]ueled mainly by three disciplines—migration studies, media and communication studies, and information science," scholars of digital migration studies pursued parallel questions pertaining to the broader category of forced migration (Borkert et al. 3). As Leurs and Smets write in the special issue of *Social Media+Society* devoted to *Forced Migrants and Digital Connectivity*,

"This emerging research focus . . . seeks to understand the relation between migration and digital media technologies . . . " and couples theoretical breadth with a "plea for reflexive politics of knowledge production" (1). Digital migration studies scholars writing about refugees sought to upend inherited notions of refugee powerlessness and passivity (Borkert et al. 9), those tending to maintain the figure of abjection identified by Mason (noted above).

By 2018, though, digital migration studies had entered a generative moment of reflection. Although gathering an exciting range of interdisciplinary scholarship, the field had, in the estimation of Leurs and Smets, at points risked an alignment with Western media's "technological fetishization of smartphone carrying and selfie-taking refugees" (8). They pointed out the outsized attention paid "when refugees entered Europe, although proportionally much more . . . Syrian refugees were already living in Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, sometimes for years" (7). In response, Leurs and Smets urged digital migration studies to renew its social justice orientation through a commitment to "de-center" not only the field's typically European sites of inquiry but also its foundational focus on the digital (8).

Their reflexive intervention invites re-appraisal of texts widely cited in the digital migration studies literature, such as Gillespie et al.'s 2016 *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smart Phones and Social Media Networks.*[21] Much as earlier scholarship had noted the "vital role of the telephone" among asylum seekers (Leung et al. 7), Gillespie et al. described mobile phones and smart devices as essential to refugee movement while warning of their concomitant vulnerabilities to surveillance and misinformation (Gillespie, Ampfo, et al., *Mapping Refugee*

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[21] Such was the currency of *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* that a digital copy of it was provided to me not by an academic, but by a volunteer supporter of Small Projects Istanbul, an NGO whose work with the Syrian community continues today. See https://www.smallprojectsistanbul.org/.

Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks 9). Circulating while the Assad government's fate was far from certain, *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* combined media studies, qualitative methods and human rights. But in portraying forced migrants as users of technology and seekers of asylum, it de-emphasized the identities, politics, and localities through which they might otherwise be known.

With sociology prominently represented on its team of contributors, *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* included a wide-ranging methodology juxtaposing media analysis, an academic literature review, and interviews conducted with Syrian refugees living in major European cities. "All the interviewees" to participate in their study "agreed that mobile phones ensure their physical mobility," wrote Gillespie et al. (43). *Mapping Media Refugee Journeys* related the role of mobile connectivity in refugees' lives to the various forms of "network capital" (32) supporting movement in the context of a "wider digital and physical infrastructure that shapes their routes, experiences, and destinations" (46). The scholarly team also distinguished between a cell phone's affordances, its "possibilities of action," and its liabilities in terms of possible surveillance (2, 5, 31). Several of the points raised by Gillespie et al. are echoed in this dissertation, including the utility of phones in movement, an awareness of the networks enabling migration, and the discussion of technology in terms of both affordances and infrastructures.

Surprisingly, though, the title of Gillespie et al.'s report, emphasizing "Smart Phones and Social Media Networks," is actually at odds with significant elements of its content. That is, while smart phones were the focus, just as they were in most media stories about refugees and cell phones, other devices were reported in a significant portion of the data. Gillespie et al. wrote, for example, that "not all refugees own a smartphone, and in many cases, refugees may collectively own and use a single low-tech mobile phone" (34). Despite this and similar observations, the text

emphasizes smartphones, maintaining a focus upon them and their use with social media. The study's "Summary of Findings and Recommendations" section, for example, contains six specific references to "smartphones" (5–6), but not a word about the other mobile phones often discussed elsewhere in the report.

One way to interpret this elision is to conclude that *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* enacted something of the "technological fetishization" against which Leurs and Smets would later caution their readers (8). The smartphone, rather than appearing only as a feature of the data collected, figured in the categorical framing of the inquiry and therefore came to overdetermine at least the more concise presentations of its findings. After all, it was the smartphone that allowed the circulation of *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys'* most evocative example—an icon-based guide to Germany, annotated in Arabic. The artifact was subsequently republished by Gillespie with similar messaging, first in an academic blog post and then in a co- authored article for the special issue of *Social Media+Society* edited by Leurs and Smets (Gillespie; Gillespie, Osseiran, et al. 8).

But such distortions have repercussions. Even as *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* advanced an innovative constellation of questions, it also advanced a set of exclusions beyond those already created by its collection of data in European, metropolitan settings. Enduring technologies, such as 2G (second-generation digital) phones, were underrepresented, as were those people using them. This use of the 4G smartphone as an analytic therefore resulted in the further exclusion of people likely to already have suffered forced migration and legal marginalization (Loescher, "Human Rights and Forced Migration" 18). Especially in light of the aspiration of reports like *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* to impact "governments and newsrooms" (5), such

a dynamic undercuts digital migration studies' aspiration towards a "social justice orientation" (Leurs and Smets 8-10).

At the very least, Gillespie et al.'s emphasis on smart phones and digital media enacts a bias against lower-income migrants who might be less likely to own a mobile device, or, if they do, a device that is not a smart phone. *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* contains data and points of analysis indicating the problem. In their analysis of relevant media, Gillespie et al. themselves refer to a "basic, cheaper phone" (9):

Coverage is dominated by young, male Syrians who appear to be physically fit, well-educated and digitally literate. Via smartphones, they pass tips to refugees that follow them about routes, how to approach authorities, cross borders, and cope with everyday challenges on the way: e.g. 'wear smart clothes and use hair gel'. Afghans and some Iraqis in contrast appear to be less well resourced: they use a basic, cheaper mobile phone. (9)

This passage suggests Gillespie et al.'s awareness that refugees may have come to Europe from varying geographic and social points of origin, and that some may not be using smartphones. But the subsequent excess of attention in *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* to smartphones undermines the critical implications of this passage. In this way, a hierarchy evocative of global disparities in migrant mobility is both observed and inscribed within this widely cited study. If, as Van Hear writes, "access to resources—principally money and social capital—shape the migration strategies that can be pursued," then social class mediates access to mobile devices, especially the latest phones (28).

The problems Leurs and Smets describe, a focus on Europe and a tendency to fetishize technology, are not unique to *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys*. Similar problems are evident, for example, in Witteborn's 2015 "Becoming (Im)Perceptible: Forced Migrants and Virtual Practice."

In this piece, Witteborn, a scholar of communication emphasizing digital and forced migration, studies the use of technology by forced migrants in the context of protests against their treatment by the German government. Witteborn is aware that not all of the people with whom she interacts own smartphones or working computers. She writes, "[a]lthough everybody had a mobile phone, sometimes even two, smart phones were rare at the time of the research . . . ." (Witteborn 352). Despite this and the fact that less than half of the study's participants had access to a working computer, the article nevertheless focuses on social networking sites, such as Facebook, and communicative platforms like Skype (354). Much of the population Witteborn contacted, having no consistent access to devices enabling their regular interaction through Facebook and Skype, was therefore marginalized by the study, despite the fact that "everybody had a mobile phone." Witteborn's conclusions about "virtual sociality" (346) necessarily elide from consideration the digital practices of her respondents that are not accessing the preferred technologies. Published before Gillespie et al.'s report, Witteborn's study similarly disregards elements of its own findings, and prioritizes social media and respondents with the tools to access it, such as smartphones. The result is a similar exclusionary distortion that is difficult to explain outside of the concept of technological fetishization proposed by Leurs and Smets.

1.5 Infrastructural Literacies and Enduring Technology

Witteborn's findings about the ubiquity of *cell*phones and the more limited access to *smart*phones compare to what was reported during the TOB study. Bauan emphasized in our interview the easy access to cellphones in Syria, mentioning that "even children had cell phones."

Yet, Majid, a former Damascene professional, explained to me that when the war began in 2011, *smart*phones were still "very expensive" for many working people in Syria. Thus, the Western focus on smartphones and social networking, evident in both popular media and academic work like *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys*, was poorly matched to the experience of the Syrian refugees who participated in the TOB study.

During my first summer speaking to Syrian refugees in the KRI, I found that nearly all of the TOB interview participants either owned a smartphone or lived in a family in which someone owned one. But the majority of these devices had been purchased in the KRI, not brought from Syria. Although iPhone and Android smartphones were released in 2008 (Frith 34), Syria was not a market of early adoption. Instead, the overwhelming majority of TOB participants reported travelling with a basic Nokia or comparable 2G feature phone—devices with slow access to the internet (if any) and essentially no access to social networking sites or messaging apps such as WhatsApp.

Sola, a Syrian woman who was working in an NGO when I met her in 2017, told me about the phone she was using in 2010, just before the war broke out. "When I reached my university stage," she said, "I had my Nokia, the one that was like a slide . . . . Nokia was the most popular, the most famous, the most practical." Sola went on to recall in great detail how she acquired a smartphone more than a year after she had settled in the KRI. In addition to underscoring the matter of the Nokia phone, Sola's comments urge a clarification of the time period under discussion. Although I conducted the TOB study in 2017 and 2018, most of the Syrian asylum seekers I met had arrived in the KRI *years* before. This aspect of this dissertation, then, is a study of the TOB participants' use of the technology *with which they travelled* and that often remained on hand during their initial phases of settlement. In effect, I am discussing mainly interviewee comments

about the years 2011-2015. This project does *not* deal extensively with the use of smartphones after arrival in the KRI, nor does it attempt any kind of general survey of technology use by Syrian refugees.

These details of device and timeframe are important because they pertain to the state of telephony in Syria in the earlier years of the war. According to the Global System for Mobile Communications Association, as late as 2015 only 27% of the mobile devices in the non–GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states (including Syria) were smartphones, and most of the available connectivity remained 2G, typically too slow to meet the demands of data-dependent apps common to 3G and 4G+ 'smart' technology (GSMA Intelligence 19). In the West, 2015 was a year in which the media published multiple stories about smartphone-wielding refugees, such as those noted above (Dekker et al. 1; Gillespie, Osseiran, et al. 1; Twigt 1). But by that time, most of the TOB respondents had already crossed the border between Syria and Iraq, many with Nokia and similarly 'classic' feature phones in hand. And those who did own smartphones in Syria reported using them almost exclusively for voice calling during displacement.

This use of mobile phones along the Syria-KRI border therefore presents a localized example of what I refer to as *enduring technology*, a configuration of devices, infrastructures and sociomaterial practices that are no longer current within the dominant culture of global metropoles. For most people who took part in the TOB study, "the enhanced ability to telephone family members" offered by 2G feature phones—previously recognized as "[o]ne of the most significant (yet under-researched) modes of transnational practice affecting migrants' lives" (Vertovec, "Cheap Calls" 220)—was of far greater consequence than any smart device or application. In the TOB study, these 2G devices and voice calling played a significant role in the maintenance of TOB respondents' transnational networks. Voice calling via these devices allowed families to

maintain, despite displacement, strong ties with family members and close friends with whom they felt the most intense affiliations. Along the KRI-Syrian border, these strong ties composed the transnational mobile network of belonging suggested at the outset of this introduction. Because these networks span the border, they informed the mobility choices through which families coordinated their movements.

Karwan and Rahima's experience offers a vivid example of mobility that would be invisibilized if the TOB study concerned itself only with smartphones or social media use. A married couple I met in 2017, Karwan and Rahima, originally from the Kurdish-majority city of Kobani, were living in Aleppo when the war began. Karwan, a Kurdish-identifying man, often travelled to find work, and so he had been in the KRI previously. Karwan felt compelled to leave Aleppo when tensions intensified between various groups, including "Kurds and Arabs." His Arab-identifying wife, Rahima, stayed in Aleppo with their children. Karwan first went east within Syria to Kobani, his family's home, but couldn't find adequate employment. He and Rahima stayed in daily voice contact via their 2G cellular phones. As the situation worsened in Aleppo, Karwan decided to go again to the KRI, this time legally, as the Kurdish Regional Government had opened the border and was facilitating the entrance of Syrian refugees. The couple kept in touch via frequent calls while Karwan tapped his existing contacts to find work. By the time he was established enough to invite his family to join him, Rahima was already on the move. Finding herself in the midst of a free-fire zone after Karwan had left, Rahima fled with her children through the increasingly generalized violence in Aleppo, and also headed east to Kobani, where she spoke to Karwan by cellphone. Rahima and the children then entered the KRI as asylum seekers. Lacking a SIM card that would function in the KRI, Rahima coordinated her rendezvous with Karwan by borrowing a security officer's phone, and the couple was reunited near the border on the KRI side.

2G devices and communications infrastructure played a key role in this couple's mobility, which evidenced a gendered dynamic frequently reported among the TOB interviewees—the initial departure of a male family member for the purpose of securing employment and housing across the border in the KRI. Karwan and Rahima's journey narrative demonstrates the affective and instrumental importance of 2G voice calling among forced migrants seeking regional refuge during the Syrian War. These dynamics are consistent with Vertovec's claim that "nothing has facilitated processes of global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international telephone calls . . . especially . . . among non-elite social groups such as migrants" ("Cheap Calls" 219).

Voice calling pinpoints the limited construction of the "digital" animating digital migration studies. Work invested in observing and recovering digital and social media encounters a voice call, even one made over a digital infrastructure, as an obstacle by virtue of scholars' limited access its digital trace. But the practice-oriented field of literacy studies, especially in its sociomaterial configuration, is well suited to this work. Vieira's literacy study of Latvian migrants, for example, encompasses literacy objects ranging from letters to laptops and attends to their importance within migratory "literacy networks." She describes the "*digital literacy practices*" used to "sustain transnational family relationships across shifting borders" ("Shifting Global Literacy Networks" 166, original emphasis). Her approach is representative of literacy studies' imbrication of communicative practices with the manifold materiality of both literacy objects and the infrastructures they access. Vee in fact conceives of literacy as "*a widely held, socially useful and valued set of practices with infrastructural communication technologies*" (27, original emphasis).

"Mobile phones" were identified by Gillespie et al. as "part of the wider digital and physical infrastructure that shapes [migrants'] routes, experiences, and destinations" (Gillespie et al. 46).

But digital infrastructures, referenced often in digital migration studies, did not originate with the smartphone. 2G devices themselves, such as the Nokias carried by many TOB respondents, indicate the prior infrastructural shift from "analog to digital" (Frith 31). Yet in digital migration studies, digital literacy often amounts to the effective use of smart devices (Gillespie et al. 5, 9). Equating digital literacy with the use of smartphones excludes people like the TOB respondents, invisibilizing a group already marginalized by displacement.

The TOB example suggests that the concept of a specifically digital literacy should be conceived *not* as the use of specific devices such as smartphones but as semiotic, social and material practices bearing an affordant relation to digital infrastructures. This infrastructural framing of digital literacy reflects the varied development of internet and communications infrastructures while recognizing the agency of forced migrants such as those who took part in the TOB study. If, as Anand et al. write, "[I]nfrastructures are a critical site through which politics is translated from a rationality to a practice, in all its social, material, and political complexity," then a sociomaterial view of infrastructure is likely to yield avenues of inquiry less available in a study focused on media artifacts (20). This infrastructural conception of literate practice is one in which infrastructures can become "ethnographic objects" of inquiry (Anand et al. 13), and it shifts the possibly fetishistic focus from devices themselves to the situated relations between people, devices, infrastructures, and their broader social, political, and historical contexts.

1.6 Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1. Contexts: Colonial, State, and Political

Chapter 1 introduces the political history of the region with an emphasis on the position of Kurds within various forms of coloniality. Through the use of cartography, I suggest the history, scope, and placed quality of the forms of Kurdish belonging under discussion in the chapters to follow. In the discussion of Iraq, I argue the centrality of both refugees and US power in the consolidation of the Kurdistan Region's semi-autonomy. I close with a discussion of Syria that considers the historical harms visited upon Kurdish-identifying people by the Syrian state, and I regard the TOB interviewees' movements in light of that history. The historical and political background offered in this chapter animates the entire project, but particularly Chapters 4 and 5, which do the most to advance my arguments about de-fetishizing the study of technology and disrupting Orientalist trends in the representation of refugees' use of mobile devices.

Chapter 2. Methods and Findings

Chapter 2 first details the TOB research sites and methods of recruiting and interviewing interviewees. I explain the central role played by the Iraqi and Syrian research assistants who worked with me as interpreters. The Methods section also includes a Positionality Statement consistent with other self-reflexive passages throughout the dissertation, culminating in the Conclusion. A discussion of situated intersectionality explains how this version of a feminist theory derived from Critical Race Theory in the US came to extend the methods available to me through transnational literacy studies.

The Findings section expands upon the arguments summarized in the Overview above. Illustrating the breadth of what was reported in the TOB of interviews, it offers extended portraits of several TOB interviews and provides further detail on matters of literacy, networks and

movement, enduring technology, trajectories of belonging, ethnicity among the TOB interviewees, and refugee/host community relations.

Chapter 3. Sociomaterial Literacy Studies: Affordant Relations within Infrastructures

This chapter develops the prior comments on Street in a literature review pertinent to my investment in an infrastructural conception of sociomateriality within literacy studies. My approach to sociomaterial literacy studies is wide-ranging, and argues that the project on hand consolidates an approach that is *relational*, *affordance-based*, *material*, *dialogic, epistemological*, and *political* in its engagement with the people, infrastructures, and contexts informing this study.

Chapter 4. "They say there is nothing . . . but indeed they exist": Transborder Signal Territory, Political Materiality, and Infrastructural Epistemologies

This chapter applies an infrastructural conception of literacy to a pair of TOB interviews bearing upon the matter of cellular broadcast regions—"signal territories," as they are described by media scholar Lisa Parks. Emanating from our globalized communications infrastructure of cellular towers, undersea cables, and orbital satellites, the signal territories of consequence to the Syrian people I spoke to were a geographical patchwork upheld by both state and corporate concerns. I highlight interviewees' critical reflections on the negotiation of these infrastructures during and after displacement. Their narratives link cell phone carriers to the nuanced tensions among local political powers, presenting grassroots knowledge unavailable elsewhere. This phenomenon clarifies the limitations of Parks's earlier gestures toward technical literacy by urging attention to the epistemic generativity of infrastructural practices. In its concluding discussion, the

chapter relates an investment in political materiality, presented in Chapter 2, to the discussion of transnationalism, sociomateriality, and *Orientalism*.

Chapter 5. Upon the Walls of the UN Camp: Situated Intersectionality, Political Belonging, and Refugee Homes

This chapter demonstrates how sociomaterial *relationality* can usefully engage the built environment of the Arbat camp, the material setting in which the majority of the TOB interviews were conducted. Focusing on the houses built by refugees in the camp, I consider their underlying materiality, legal status, and inscribed surfaces—contested space in which the ubiquitous UN logo is disrupted by ornamental facades, muralism, and radical iconography. Commonplace is the mustachioed likeness of Abdullah Öcalan, icon of Kurdish nationalism, and founder of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). Thus, there are at least four ways in which the people of Arbat might locate themselves: as displaced Syrians, as UNHCR asylum seekers, as members of the Kurdish community (both non-state and transnational), and as residents of Arbat (itself a hybrid site of ongoing place-making). These affiliations juxtapose competing projects of political belonging. Using photographs of the built environment to supplement the TOB interviews, I work toward a situated intersectional understanding of the Syrian refugee community in the KRI. I read the built-environmental practices evident in Arbat as evoking resilient regrounding that bears comparison with Rojava, the Kurdish-majority autonomous region across the KRI border with Syria. The experience of Syrian Kurds in Arbat disrupts their mono-categorical representation as PKK terrorists by state powers, and urges—in the style of feminist intersectionality—an orientation of political solidarity with them.

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Conclusion

      This dissertation's conclusion returns to questions of positionality, method, and power with final thoughts on the problem of Orientalism and the importance of situated intersectionality. I discuss my experience being interviewed on the Arbat camp radio station by Massoud Hussein, the Syrian research assistant who supported the project in 2018. I also offer thoughts on disciplinarity and teaching as they pertain to the qualitative research methods I employed in the KRI. The dissertation closes with a reading of mural, "We will Return One day," that questions the scripting of refugee return.

2.0 Chapter 1. Contexts: Colonial, State, and Political

This chapter introduces the political history of the region with an emphasis on the position of Kurds within various forms of coloniality. Through the use of cartography, I suggest the history, scope, and placed quality of the forms of Kurdish belonging under discussion in the chapters to follow. In the discussion of Iraq, I argue the centrality of both refugees and US power in the consolidation of the Kurdistan Region's semi-autonomy. I close with a discussion of Syria that considers the historical harms visited upon Kurdish-identifying people by the Syrian state.

2.1 The Colonial Partition of Kurdistan

I sing my country for the silence that surrounds it

I remember a country forgotten

by everyone else.

—from "My Country" by Choman Hardi

In 2017, I managed to irritate a Turkish gendarme working at the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing between Iraq and Turkey. He seemed positively disposed toward me at first, amused by Turkish phrases I recalled from a summer class at the University of Pittsburgh and a 2016 trip to Turkey. But then I blundered, forgetting myself in the effort to summon the necessary grammar— I said the word *Kurdistan*. I had just been in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and "Kurdistan" was how most of the people I had met referred to the semi-autonomous region. So, when the

Turkish border agent asked where I had been, I accidentally said, in broken Turkish (eliding a case-based particle), "Kürdistan gittim," or "I went Kurdistan." His response included one of a dyad of words used in Turkish to show the existence of something or else its opposite: *var* and *yok*. "Kurdistan *yok*" he replied, pointedly. I understood him: There *is no* Kurdistan.

In this conversation there was an almost Orwellian denial of observable experience, insomuch as I had been conducting research and volunteering in a place called Kurdistan. And I was coming to Turkey with a visa in my passport recognizing the authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) rather than the federal government of Iraq. This part of Iraq, shown below in fig. 2 as the part of the "Kurdish-inhabited area" in the northern part of the country, was formalized after the US-led invasion of 2003 in the provisions of the 2005 constitution (McGarry and O'Leary 677). It by no means encompasses all of the Kurdish-majority areas in Western Asia, as fig. 2 makes clear.

Figure 2. Map of Kurdistan, CIA World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency)[22]

That day at the border crossing, my use of the word 'Kurdistan' earned me a prompt referral

up the chain of command for some light questioning by quizzical young officers, and a slight delay

[22] The CIA World Factbook is in the public domain.

in my travels. To be fair to my first Turkish interlocutor that day, in Turkey, "using the names Kurd and Kurdistan has been, since the mid 1920s, considered a crime against the 'indivisibility of the Turkish nation' and the 'territorial integrity of the state'" (Constitution of Turkey qtd. in Hassanpour and Mojab 215). And, in terms of the hegemonic interstate system, a glance at a typical world map upholds his claim: There is indeed no Kurdish state, despite (at least) 25 million Kurdish-speaking people in Western Asia alone (Chatty 232).

Yet, to be fair to Kurds as well, such a cartography advances an exclusionary statism, an "historically contingent organisational logic that valourises and naturalises sovereign, coercive, and hierarchical relationships, within and beyond state spaces . . ." (Ince and De la Torre 2). Like the disappearance of indigenous peoples' territories from cartographic representations in the Americas, the failure to represent Kurdistan constitutes a violent act of cultural erasure. Clear in the Turkish case is that this disappearance of "Kurdistan" from maps and government-approved lexica has clear historical origins. The Kurdish-majority area of southeast Turkey was historically and popularly "known as Kurdistan, but officially this name was erased after the founding of the Turkish republic in 1923" (Unlu 7). The force of this invisibility was such that sociologist İsmail Beşikçi, who would later be imprisoned for research affirming the existence of Kurdish people in Turkey, was honestly surprised in the 1960s to notice "that the border not only divided two states, Turkey and Iraq, but also partitioned a unified culture and geography—namely, Kurdistan," and to see "frequent comings and goings of Kurds across the border who understood each other's languages, who knew each other, and who sometimes belonged to the same family" (Unlu 7). Unlike the more "multi-ethnic order" of the Ottoman Empire that preceded it, Turkey, like Western

nation-states, would pursue an ideal of ethnolinguistic homogeneity (Chatty 259).23 By 1924, "a

government decree was issued banning all Kurdish schools, associations, publications, religious

fraternities, and schools in a determination to assimilate the Kurds into the Turkish state" (Chatty

261).24

Against such a backdrop, the achievement of a Kurdish state has motivated political parties

and radical programs, including armed resistance, such as the Kurdistan Worker's Party's (PKK)

decades of conflict with the Turkish government (Gunter 16). One commentator refers to "the

Kurdish conflict" as "as Turkey's festering wound" (Kinzer 116). Today, the Turkish government

remains actively averse to not only Kurdish language, culture, and political parties within its own

borders, but also consolidations of Kurdish autonomy abroad, such as in Syria, as will be discussed

further in Chapter 5.

But there was a moment when the great powers recognized the Kurds as a distinct people

meriting self-determination. Infamous in this regard are the years of World War I and its immediate

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23 As Gatrell writes: "The growing acceptance of the argument that the modern state should be ethnically homogeneous had profound consequences: liberal politicians and diplomats embraced the 'unmixing of peoples' (in Lord Curzon's phrase) as a means of separating ethnic groups to reduce the possibility of conflict" (4).

24 The Turkish government continues to suppress the Kurdish language and expression of Kurdish identity. In April, 2020, Political Scientist Weysi Dag emailed via the Kurdish Studies listserve a rejoinder to the position that the Turkish Constitution ensures the equal treatment of Turkey's Kurdish-identifying citizens. In a statement that affirms the ongoing character of discrimination against Kurds, he writes,

> The Article 66 of the Turkish constitution points out that every Turkish citizen is Turk. There is no single reference to the Kurdish cultural identity or language rights in Turkey. The Kurdish names, languages or any other attributes are strictly banned in official state institutions. Even universities use alternative names in order to avoid using the "Kurdish" name. (Dag)

aftermath, including the decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Sykes-Picot plan for the division of the Middle East by Western powers (Chatty 251), the rise of the League of Nations, and the founding of Turkey. The "interwar-period" of nation-state construction is characterized by Khalidi as the "high water mark of imperialism" (*Resurrecting Empire* 154). When the coalition of mainly Western powers that defeated the Ottomans in World War I came to the table to craft a treaty at Sevres, France, in 1920, they simultaneously recognized the Kurds as a people meriting self-determination and a range of colonial prerogatives, including French and British interests in Western Asia, mandates including territory that would become the sovereign states of Iraq and Syria. Chatty writes that the Treat of Sevres

> set out a timetable first for local Kurdish autonomy followed, a year later, by the right of petition to the League of Nations for an independent Kurdish state. However, the ambiguity of the language in many of these articles relating to the Kurds, as well as the recognition of the overlapping interests of the French, British, and Italians in Kurdistan, meant that whatever optimism there may have been regarding Kurdish rights of self-determination was unfounded. (256)

As events would unfold, the idea of a Kurdish state fell victim to not only the contingencies of Western coloniality, including British control over territory that later became the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but also Turkish state-building amid the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. A second agreement, the Treaty of Lausanne, would consolidate the Turkish state and protect colonial interests at the expense of Kurdish autonomy (Chatty 260). In "Lausanne, 1923," Iraqi-born poet Choman Hardi imagines the event:

> Sitting around an old table
>
> they drew lines across the map

> dividing the place

> I would call my country.

Hardi's quatrain draws attention to a Kurdish view of the imposition of state borders on a preexisting "country." Making "no mention of the Kurds" was tantamount to "condemning them to a de facto colonial existence in Iraq as well as in Turkey, Iran, and Syria" (Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History* 63). In figure 2, above, the red shading can evoke, roughly, places where Kurdish-speaking people lived prior to these years of rupture.

This "pan-Kurdish space" was split by four states—sometimes known for their disposition toward Kurdish self-determination as the "four wolves": Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq (O'Leary 355). "While Republican Turkey inherited a piece of the Ottoman pie, Britain and France created Iraq and Syria out of the southeastern provinces of the empire . . . . The result was a re-division of the Kurds among four countries with a small enclave in the Soviet Union" (Mojab 6). In effect, "Kurdistan was dismembered, and the Kurdish people stripped of status. Kurdistan's petroleum-rich regions were apportioned to Syria and Iraq," unstable state entities "cobbled together from various ethnic, religious, and denominational groups" and placed "under the colonial control of France and England . . . " (Gerger qtd in Knapp et al. 11). And thus the state in which I conducted the TOB study, Iraq, "exemplifies some of the problems created by the fact that religion and ethnicity often were not consonant with boundaries that were laid down to suit imperial interests" (Khalidi *Resurrecting Empire* 65). Kurdish-identifying people tended to be marginalized within the new polities, incipient nations in which assimilation was often the only avenue of belonging. "[D]ramatically undermined by the setting out of four state boundaries . . . through the middle of their homeland, Chatty writes, "the Kurds have struggled for self-determination and, in some cases, the mere rights of citizenship for decades" (6).

Resistance to marginalization by states and movements for self-determination are therefore central to modern Kurdish history. "Resistance to the state-building project of Turkish nationalists was extensive in Kurdistan," for example, and "[t]he first major revolt occurred in 1925, two years after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. The suppression was violent; this was followed by other revolts throughout the 1930s" (Mojab 2). The tendency for states to meet Kurdish resistance with repressive measures has made displacement a recurring characteristic of the Kurdish transnational community. Continuing with the Turkish case, a widespread Kurdish uprising in Dersim in 1937, the military suppression which "has been considered a genocide," "sent waves of refugees into neighboring countries" (Hassanpour and Mojab 217). Yet Turkey has also been host to Kurdish refugees, such as those who fled Iraq "in 1988 after the chemical bombing of Halabja" (Thornhill 7). Reading the recent movements of Syrian Kurds within this historical context suggests that state power in Western Asia, in its compulsion toward ethnolinguistic homogeneity, has repeatedly created the political conditions for the forced migration of refugees. As Chatty writes,

> The twentieth century has been one long series of Kurdish revolts and uprisings in an effort for self-determination—if not actual separatism. During and after each uprising in Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurds fled cross the frontiers of these nation-states to reach safety and to regroup among close kin or other Kurds. (266)

From this perspective, the rapid movement of hundreds of thousands of Syrian nationals into Iraq in the 2010s, the event occasioning this dissertation, is legible within a recurrent pattern, a shifting of Kurdish-identifying people from one to another of the four local nation states. Chatty's view of these movements, guided as they are by "close kin or other Kurds" supports this

dissertation's reliance on transnational networks of belonging as shorthand for the style of movement described in most of the TOB interviews.

A unified Kurdistan has been a goal of Kurdish nationalism, and Kurdish media often articulates investments in a "Greater Kurdistan" (Sheyholislami 300; Albert 224). To some degree, this territorialized expression of Kurdish cultural identity reflects the negative pressure of states on Kurdish communities. While there were clearly people who identified as Kurds long before WW I, Greater Kurdistan was not, geopolitically speaking, a unified entity. Historically, the various Kurdish-majority region constituted a variegated and loosely demarcated geographic zone of distinct Kurdish-speaking clans and emirates, including "Baban, Ardalan, Hakkari, Bohtan, Soran," names one can hear, still, in the KRI today (Eppel 250-251). These aristocratic centers of power, language, literature, and culture became allied to the Ottoman empire in the 16th century during its war with Persia, but in the 19th century, the balance of powers underpinning the arrangement shifted (Eppel 239). The Ottomans then subordinated the Kurdish Emirates as part of a consolidating response to the encroachment of the Russian Empire amid the more general "penetration of Western influences and the undermining of traditional economic and social patterns as the Ottoman Empire began to be involved in the growing world capitalist market economy" (Eppel 249). These developments devolved Kurdish power to tribes and Sheikhs, leaving an absence of institutional structure for the consolidation of a broader "national consciousness" that might have been conducive to statehood in the years preceding the breakup of the Ottoman Empire (Eppel 256).

The diversity of the Kurdish language reflects the foregoing history. While the Ottoman Empire spread Ottoman Turkish, and the institution of Islam had already dispersed formal Arabic,

Kurdish remained highly localized. Although Kurdish had become a language of sophisticated literary achievements, such the epic poem *Mem I Zin*,

> the initial growth of a Kurdish literary language did not continue. No political or social force arose which was either interested in or capable of giving any Kurdish dialect an official status or dominant status as the standard language. In the absence of the Kurdish state, there was no standardization of the language as an official language of government; there was no imposition of any one Kurdish dialect as the national language, nor was there any official merger of several dialects . . . . The Kurds reached the threshold of the development of modern nationalist identity at a time when there was no political force which had an interest in fostering, or the ability to foster, the Kurdish language, or to establish one of its dialects as the standard Kurdish language. (Eppel 238)

Kurdish language, only recently recognized by the Iraqi state, is therefore, on the one hand, a source of pride and axis of belonging for Kurdish identity even as, on the other, it is divided into several dialects that are not always mutually intelligible. A "member of the Iranian branch of Indo-European languages," and therefore closer to Farsi than Arabic, Kurdish "has four dialect groups, namely the Kurmanji, Sorani, Zaza/Dimili and Hawrami/Gorani, and Southern dialects. The language has been written for about five centuries, predominantly in Arabic script, but as of the 1930s, also in Cyrillic and Roman alphabets" (Hassanpour and Mojab 215). This lineage bears upon the TOB research and its context, for most Syrians from Kurdish-majority areas speak *Kurmanji* while most Iraqi Kurds speak *Sorani*, though I heard what friends identified as *Hawrami* as well. Many speakers of Sorani may have difficulty fully understanding Kurmanji, and vice-versa, a matter to which I will return in this chapter's presentation of Findings.

The first Iraqi Kurds I conversed with in Sulaymaniyah wanted me to understand at the outset, "We are *not* Arabs." That there are ingrained differences between Arabs, Kurds, and Turks (to name only the most salient groups bearing upon this study) tends in Western Asia to be regarded as a matter of ontological certainty. "Perhaps the most important factor in describing the Kurdish identity," writes Albert, "is recognising how the Kurds themselves feel about being Kurdish," an identification sometimes discussed as "*Kurdayetî,*" which distinguishes Kurds "from other groups in the area, especially the Arabs and the Persian," and can also, as I've been told, suggest the willingness to sacrifice for the Kurdish people (223). Loqman describes the Kurds as being "ethnically and linguistically distinct from their neighbors" (470) although "the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, with several religious minority groups such as Alevis, Yezidis, Ahli-Haq, Christians, and so on" (Hassanpour and Mojab 215).

It would be false, though, to think of the Kurds as a "homogeneous people, but instead one made up of numerous distinct tribal groups . . . " (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 11). Schmidinger cautions his readers that he will not "present 'the Kurds' as a singular actor," and neither will I in this dissertation (Schmidinger, *Rojava* 5).25 And yet, while I join Gunter in rejecting the existence of any primordial Kurdish "essence" free of sociohistorical construction (*The Kurds: A Modern History* ix), I recognize the that 'Kurdistan' was meaningful for nearly all of the TOB interviewees. In listening to them, I heard the word 'Kurdistan' used most often to

25 Of the terms 'Kurd' and 'Kurdistan' Loqman notes:
> The Turkish Seljuk prince, the Saandjar, used the term 'Kurdistan' for the first time in the twelfth century upon the creation a province of that name (Yildiz, 2004:11). . . . As of the seventh century and then after the Islamization of this part of world, the Arab Muslims referred to the people of the region as 'Kurds' (Gunter, 2009). They have lived there for about 4,000 years (Anderson and Stansfield, 2004), an ancient Indo-European people, ethnically and linguistically distinct from their neighbors. (470)

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refer to the KRI, where Kurdish is the official and dominant language; sometimes to a future state capable of protecting Kurdish people, perhaps the KRI, fully independent in the future; and, from time to time, to the pan-Kurdish space currently sundered by the existing regional states. In the sections that follow, I'll discuss in further detail the KRI, where I interviewed the TOB participants, and Syria, where they began their journeys.

2.2 Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, and the United States

> My name is Azad Shero Salim. I am Selim Malay's grandson. My grandfather had a sense of humor. He used to say he was born a Kurd, in a free country. Then the Ottoman arrived and said to my father, "You're an Ottoman," so he became Ottoman. At the fall of the Ottoman Empire, he became Turkish. The Turks left and he became a Kurd again in the kingdom of Sheikh Mahmoud, king of the Kurds. Then the British arrived, so my grandfather became a subject of His Gracious Majesty and even learned a few words of English. The British invented Iraq, so my grandfather became Iraqi, and to his dying breath he was never proud of being Iraqi; nor was his son, my father, Shero Salim Malay. (Saleem 1)

These lines, the opening of Saleem's novella, *My Father's Rifle: A Childhood in Kurdistan*, touch upon the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish state that followed, the British Mandate, and the Iraqi state itself, which gained independence in 1932. The "king of the Kurds" was Sheik Mahmoud Barzinji, "who fought for a Kurdish homeland in the early twentieth century in Sulaimaniya but his small kingdom collapsed following the war with the British forces" (Loqman 469). Sheik

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Mahmoud's resistance is remembered in Kurdistan, commemorated, in fact, by a large statue in the heart of Sulaymaniyah, the city where I interviewed Syrian asylum seekers in 2018. The protean shifts in power suggested by Saleem's memoir would continue, including "[t]he 1958 coup d'etat" in which the Iraqi monarchy (initially installed by the British) was replaced by a republic (Hassanpour and Mojab 218).

While even a surface review of Iraqi history is well beyond my scope here, it is possible to lift up some elements of the US-Iraqi and US-KRG relationships, histories that inform this study, and, one could easily argue, account in no small measure for my ability to attempt it in the first instance. Within recent memory, Kurdish-identifying people in Iraq faced a regime intent on constructing an Iraqi iteration of Arab nationalism and willing to carry out genocidal reprisals in response to Kurdish resistance. Even before the Ba'ath party seized power in Iraq in 1968, the Iraqi government had been at odds with a Kurdish "autonomist movement" which "had been helped and then abandoned by the United States, Iran, and Israel," the eventual defeat of which in 1975, "sent about 200,000 refugees to Iran and several thousand to Europe and North America, and created the first, permanent diasporas in the West" (Hassanpour and Mojab 218).[26] Despite the fickle nature of the US's often CIA-implemented support for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, circumstances would in time render Western support useful yet again.

The rise of Saddam Hussein, who came to power in 1979, and the Iran-Iraq war, which began in 1980, presented circumstances in which Kurdish military forces, often acting in alliance

[26] While Hassanpour and Mojab's piece on the rise a Kurdish diaspora informs my outlook, I will generally avoid conceiving the intra-regional movement of Kurdish-identifying peoples in terms of *diaspora* for two reasons. First, this review of the historical literature suggests the salience of a pan-Kurdish space; diaspora tends to refer to displacement from a homeland. Syrian Kurds could be simultaneously asylum seekers in Iraq *and* maintain their presence within Greater Kurdistan. Second, research framed in terms of diaspora often focuses on Western contexts, from which the TOB study departs.

with Iran, could reestablish themselves such that "by 1987 the mountainous interior of Iraqi Kurdistan was effectively liberated territory. This the Ba'ath Party regarded as an intolerable situation" (Middle East Watch qtd. in Thornhill 26). In response, the Iraqi state launched *Anfal*, Arabic for the "spoils of war" (Hassanpour and Mojab 218), a punitive military campaign that stands out for its brutality, even amid the long list of crimes perpetrated against Kurdish people. Hardi writes:

> The 1988 gassing of Halabja was well documented by the Iranians, who were at war with Iraq. Images of the gassed victims, twisted, blistered, and blue lipped, shocked viewers. While the tragedy of Halabja received some international attention, another campaign which was going on at the same time remained completely hidden. This was the Anfal genocide, which lasted for seven months. Two hundred and eighty-one locations were gassed during this campaign, 2,000 villages were destroyed, and over 100,000 civilians were shot and left in mass graves. ("Poetry's Power to Speak the Unspeakable: The Kurdish Story" 3)

As is clear to anyone who visits the memorial to these events to be seen today in Halabja, Iraq, these events continue to inform Kurdish memory. Yet, as Gunter observes, "[t]hese criminal attempts to reduce the Kurds in the 1970s and 1980s had the opposite effect of fostering further Kurdish nationalism in Iraq" (70).

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 1991 would dramatically change Iraq. Ali, an Arab-identifying sociologist with familial connections in Iraq, writes, "I am convinced that our lives, and the lives of most Iraqis, would have been totally different if popular uprisings against the Ba'ath regime, both before and after 1991, had led to the fall of Saddam's regime, instead of such being accomplished by an imperialist invasion and occupation" ("The Personal is Academic").

The war, then, can be viewed as a period of renewed resistance to the regime, a period of profound sacrifice that had unforeseen, lasting consequences. "In March 1991, within days of the Gulf War ceasefire, spontaneous antigovernment uprisings occurred in both the south of Iraq and in Kurdistan. The uprisings were put down savagely . . . whereupon half of the population of Kurdistan fled to the mountainous Iranian and Turkish borders" (Thornhill 15). That is, many people in Iraq, including Arabs in the south and Kurds in the north, chose to rise up when the Hussein government was attacked. But the consequences for the Kurdish population, and the international response to them, are crucial to any understanding of the KRI. As Gatrell writes:

> When the first Gulf War ended in 1991, around 1.3 million Kurds fled from Saddam's Iraq to Iran and 450,000 to the frontier with Turkey . . . . The US-led invasion of Iraq is widely recognized to have had disastrous results including a refugee population put at nearly four million (including 1.7 million internally displaced), one in eight of the Iraqi population. (259)

The numbers of displaced people here begin to rival those displaced by the Syrian War, which resulted, as of May 2020, in 5,619,860 registered seekers of asylum (3.6 million of whom are in Turkey) and 6.2 million internally displaced in in Syria (UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Sulaymaniyah Total Persons of Concern"). Quoted in a 1991 *NY Times* piece, Court Robinson, "a senior research analyst at the U.S. Committee for Refugees . . . said, 'This was surely one of the largest migrations ever; I can't recall an instance in which so many people moved in so short a time'" (J. Miller). This was the context in which the West, despite leaving Hussein in power, took measures necessary to, on the one hand, prevent the total annihilation of the Iraqi Kurds and, on the other, restrain the exodus (Gunter 70). The Kurds were defended at this time not solely because they had heeded President George H.W. Bush's call for revolt, but because their

representation in the media painted "Operation Desert Storm" as a humanitarian catastrophe. Thus, the spectacle of these displaced people, of refugees created by a Western-led war, was politically undesirable. Further, the high number of Kurds among those driven from the north of Iraq made these refugees even more undesirable to neighboring countries like Turkey. Ironically, the "the movement of Iraqi-Kurdish refugees into Turkey" compelled the West to defend Iraqi Kurds (Gunter 70).

The KRG therefore owes something of its political life to not just the antigovernment resistance on the part of Iraqis, but also to the subsequent flight of Kurdish people from Iraq and the ensuing media attention. Newspapers of the day noted the impact of the displacement on Kurds, including death rates, and historians recall that it was predominantly Kurdish-identified Iraqis that were compelled to flee the fallout of the US-led invasion (Gunter 73). This "horrific Kurdish refugee flight to the borders ultimately led to intervention by the United States in the form of a [United Nations approved] no-fly zone over the north of Iraq," which in time "allowed the Kurds to establish a precariously situated, unrecognized de facto state . . ." (Gunter 70). "Operation Provide Comfort" was authorized by the "unprecedented United Nations Security Resolution 688 of April, 5, 1991," which, re-introducing official discussion of Kurds to world governance, "gave the fledgling KRG support by condemning 'the repression of the Iraqi civilian population . . . in the Kurdish populated areas' and demanding 'that Iraq . . . immediately end this repression'" (Gunter 73). "The so-called 'safe haven' for Iraqi Kurds," Gatrell writes, "was portrayed as 'humanitarian intervention', although it served Turkey's interests by deterring Kurds from seeking refuge in the country, which is home to a large Kurdish minority population" (259). These contingent elements played a role in seeding Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. To paraphrase and qualify

one of Gatrell's theses in his *Making of the Modern Refugee*, states may make refugees, but refugees can also make states—or, perhaps, autonomous regions within them (xii).

Operation Provide Comfort's no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel neutralized the Hussein government's ability to use aircraft against the Kurds (Thornhill xx), and by 1992 elections had been held. The resulting Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG, "the closest approximation of an independent Kurdish state in modern times," began its administration of the region (Gunter 71, 157-159). The road was not to be an easy one. As Hassanpour and Mojab explain, "The landlocked Kurdish homeland was . . . subjected to the economic sanction of the UN against Iraq and an embargo imposed by Baghdad, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, which aimed at undermining the formation of any form of Kurdish statehood" (218). And this pressure from the surrounding society of states was not to be the only problem. Although "precariously situated, and widely "unrecognized," the KRG "increasingly prospered despite vicious Kurdish infighting between Massoud Barzani's KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and Jalal Talabani's (People's Union of Kurdistan) during the mid-1990s" (Gunter 70). This "infighting" was not metaphorical: Hassanpour and Mojab describe the conflict as an "eruption of civil war" (218) and Kelly writes that

> [t]ension between the two main [Kurdish] political parties, which played out in a four-year bloodbath, undermined much of this progress [toward political autonomy]. Massoud Barzani's Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) essentially divided the country among themselves and went to war. (719-720).

Bloody and fractious, this civil war without a state was motivated by kinship, claims to land, and decades of rivalry, yet "the rift was mended, largely due to pressure from the United States" in 1999 (Albert 232). Thus, the US came to play a central diplomatic role in maintaining

the unity of the KRG, a space that it had helped to create through its actions in the 1991 war, its decision to leave Hussein in power, and its support for the no-fly zone required to defend Kurdish people from the Iraqi state. With the US invested in a peaceful and unified KRI, "the factions began focusing on developing their respective portions of the Kurdish economy and opening cross-border links with their Kurdish cousins in Iran and Turkey" (Kelly 723).

When the US military returned to war with Iraq in 2003, the existing relationship with the Kurds was intensified by "Turkey's refusal to allow the United States to use its territory as a base for a northern front to attack Saddam Hussein's Iraq . . . . Courtesy of Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds suddenly were thrust into the role of US ally" (Gunter 162). After the battles, the KRG's semi-autonomous status was written into the Iraqi federal constitution of 2005 (Kelly 727). The US was involved in the negotiation of the document, with the KRG presenting a "united Barzani-Talabani front backed by a team of Western constitutional law experts led by Peter Galbraith and Brenden O'Leary" (Kelly 727). "With an independent Kurdish state off the table, the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan settled for autonomy and regionalism within a federal structure," writes Kelly, adding, "It was a vigorously negotiated document characterized by notable tension between Kurds and Shia on key points, with the United States occasionally weighing in to break impasses" (727). Thus, the US has been a major force in shaping both the peace in the KRI and the place of the KRG in post-war Iraq. While the Iraqi state "has remained intact," it is an "amalgam of hyper-fragmented entities seeking some form of self-protection and self-rule" (Natali 48–49). The KRI is one of these entities, yet it remains itself a fragmented space haunted by the internecine war of the 1990s.

Foschi describes the main Kurdish parties, the aforementioned Democratic Party of Kurdistan (or KDP) and the People's Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as "mirror image" parties dividing

the political power in the Kurdish Region along clearly demarcated lines (120,144). The vertical integration and overt territoriality of these parties leads Foschi to refer to them as "intrastates" (2018 6-7). This is because these parties "control security within their own zones and their respective external borders" (Kelly 720). Kelly notes, and I have to some degree seen for myself, "that the KDP and PUK each control their own peshmerga soldiers, checkpoint guards, border guards and intelligence agents, and adds, "[c]onsequently, there are not one, but two defense ministers and two interior ministers within the regional government—one from each party" (734). As we will see in Chapters 4-5, some of the migratory experiences reported by TOB interviewees cannot be understood other than in relation to these intra-regional divisions.

The US relationship with the KRG was tested in 2014 when ISIS, having taken Mosul, marched toward the KRI. Gunter makes clear that US aid was not a *fait accompli*: "Only after an emergency appeal from KRG President Massoud Barzani for immediate US aid to stem the ISIS tide that had driven within a mere 20 miles of its capital, Erbil, with its 1.5 million inhabitants, was ISIS brought to a halt by US air power in the Iraqi Kurdish region" (180). The US's continuing presence in the KRG was demonstrated in January 2020 when the Iranian government, in retaliation for the US drone-strike assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, fired missiles not only at US forces in Baghdad, but also at a US base in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region (Cummings).

The ongoing Kurdish experiment in semi-autonomy merits consideration from a human rights perspective. Only recently, Freedom House classified Iraqi society in general as "not free," and described political affairs within the KRG as having "proved dysfunctional" on account of the Kurdistan Parliament having "effectively remained suspended" while President Masoud Barzani overstayed his term, expired in 2015, another year (Freedom House, "Iraq"). Even so, the KRG

recognizes the legitimacy of the human rights framework and the region maintains a civil society enjoying "freedoms impossible to imagine in the rest of Iraq" including media "using the Kurdish language and representing a broad spectrum of opinion" (Gunter 22).

2.3 Syria, Rojava, and The TOB Interviewees

The movement of the TOB interview participants spans two different spaces of Kurdish autonomy, the KRI and, across the border in Syria, the area often referred to as *Rojava*, meaning "both 'West' and 'Sunset' in Kurdish" (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 4). The modern state of Syria has its origins in "the French mandate established in 1920," and although the Kurds were sometimes favored by the colonial regime, they faced an adversarial state after Syria's independence in 1936 (Gunter 87-90). Arab identity has been a unifying factor within Syria's diverse polyconfessional society, which enacted oppressive policies targeting the Kurds and the land they held (Gunter 63). A 1962 census, for example, classified over 200,00 Kurds as either "*ajanib*" (foreigners with curtailed rights) or "*maktoumeen*," that is, stateless and therefore rightless (Gunter 96). Among the TOB interviewees were Kurds who had been stateless in Syria, having effectively inherited that status.

In 2011, the Syrian conflict began as mass civil protests in the style of the Arab Spring, but rapidly escalated in the face of a brutal state response and foreign support for factions of the armed opposition. The conflict was at once increasingly dangerous to the average person and an opportunity for Kurdish partisans. Although massive reform-minded crowds took to the streets, a dedicated core of Kurdish activists had been organizing for years prior to the unrest (Knapp et al.

36-37). In fact, although the Syrian state has a long history of oppressing Kurds, it also for many years tolerated the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, whose nationalist radicalism mainly targeted the Turkish state, and whose widely acknowledged willingness to countenance violence has resulted in its classification as a terrorist organization by both Turkey and Western powers (Kinzer 115-143; O'Leary 356-357).

It was the "the civil war" that "suddenly created the prerequisites for autonomy . . ." in Rojava (Gunter 18). The sudden destabilization of the Syrian state allowed a well-organized PKK-inspired group, the Syrian People's Union Party (PYD), to declare political autonomy within the Kurdish-majority region of northeastern Syria in the spring of 2011. Given the media attention to the PYD's militia units, the YPG (People's Protection Units) and YPJ (Women's Protection Units), as well as Arab-majority opposition forces like the Free Syrian Army, it is useful to situate Rojava in relation to other developments in the region. Knapp et al. describe the Rojava revolution as representing a "third path" between the regime and the varied and promethean range of forces, secular and jihadist, constituting the opposition. Given the dire situation it faced in the early years of the war, the Assad regime did not oppose the PYD's declaration of Kurdish-led autonomy in Rojava (Knapp et al. 50). Autonomy after all does not necessarily mean independence, and the revolutionary theory current in Rojava is democratic confederalism, which rejects the state as a revolutionary aim, instead proposing "a society that administers itself through small, self-governing decentralized units" (Knapp et al. 44).

The entrance of the Islamic State into Syria brought the US armed forces and Kurdish-majority militias of Rojava into alliance.[27] The presence of the US in Rojava suggested, for a few years, the possibility that a new season of Kurdish liberation was at hand. Across the border in Iraq, nationalist hopes began to run high, culminating with the ill-fated referendum on Kurdish independence of 2017. But the US-YPG military cooperation ended in 2019, when President Trump abruptly reversed the US foreign policy and, without prior notice to Syrian Kurdish forces, withdrew US troops from positions along the Kurdish-Turkey border, which the Turkish Armed Forces promptly invaded, as President Recep Erdogan had long promised to do.

Nearly all of the TOB interviewees cited the collapse of security in Syria as the main reason for their departure. Their point of origin within Syria, though, had a significant impact on how they experienced this collapse. Among the people to take part in the study were two groups of people who shared a connection to Jazira, historically the region of Syria east of the Euphrates and west of the Tigris situated between Iraq, Turkey, and the rest of Syria. Jazira is also the name of a canton of Rojava, as shown in green in fig. 3, below.

[27] As Sheikmous explains: "The first military engagement by US with YPG forces took place on September 23, 2014 during the [ISIS] onslaught on Kobani. Since then, this cooperation between both sides has continued during the extensive campaign in defeating DAESH [known in the west as ISIS] … especially in the areas east of the Euphrates. Despite heavy protests and threats by Turkey, the US and other Allied forces have continued their cooperation and coordination with YPG (later named Syrian Democratic Forces –SDF after inclusion of some Arab and Syriac forces) because of their discipline and competent fighting abilities in the fight against DAESH…. The US has also built around 15 different military bases in the area that includes the majority of Syrian Oil and Natural Gas resources" (2018).
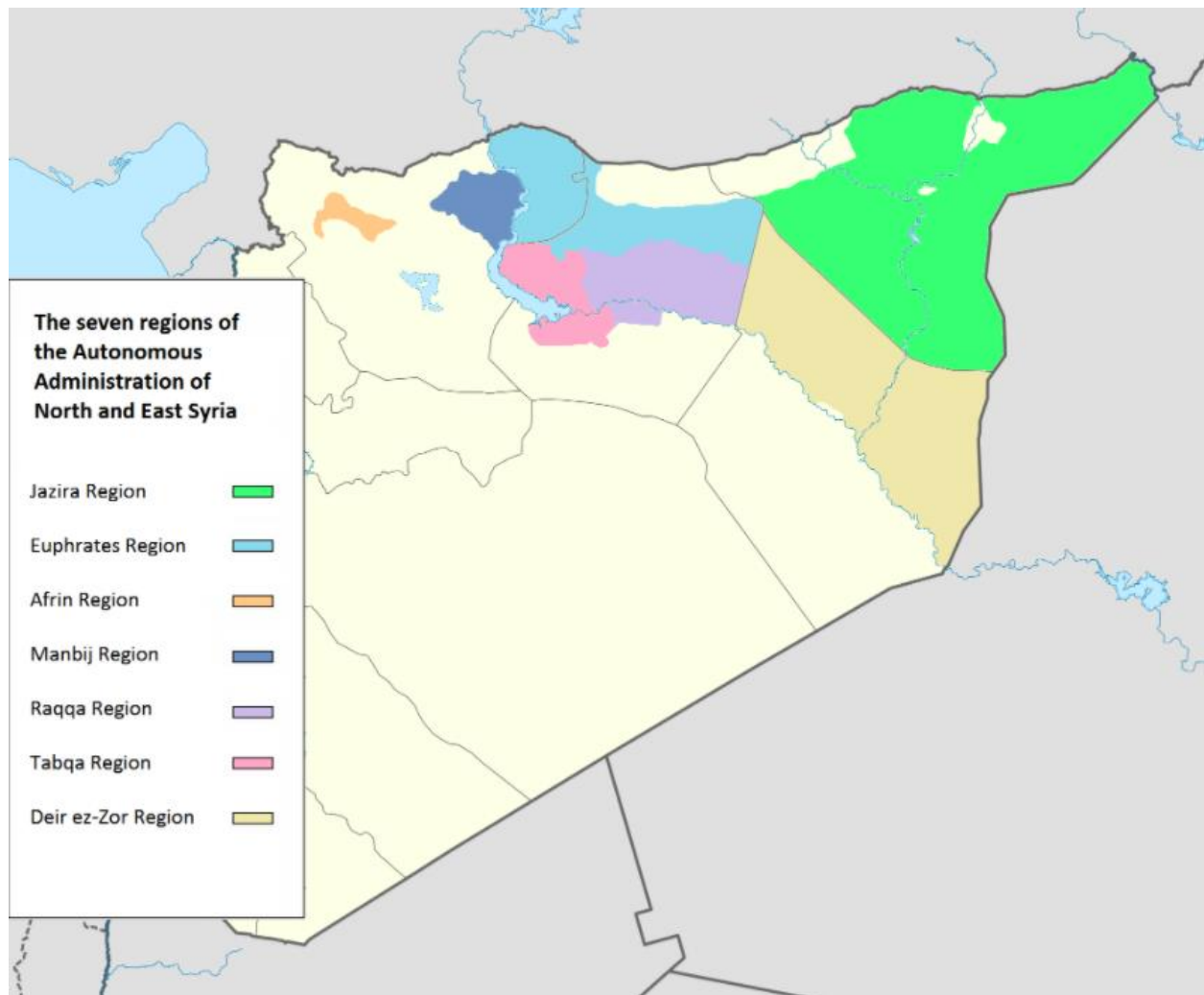
Figure 3. The Seven Regions of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

(Anton)

The main Jazira group comprised participants who had been living there when the war began and could often reach the KRI border in a matter of hours. Because much of the early fighting happened in Syria's urbanized west, this group was less likely to have fled the immediate danger of combat zones until ISIS's 2014 incursion. The Jazira group, however, was particularly vulnerable to the general economic collapse brought on by the Syrian War. People within this

group were more likely than others to report limited educational and professional opportunities; family backgrounds tended to include farming and manual labor.

The second largest group included those who had lived in the West, often near Damascus or Aleppo before the war, but also had tended to have family connections in Kurdish-majority areas in Kobani and Jazira. Of his family, for example, Saman explained, "Our origin is from Qamishli. Because of poverty, he added, "we went to Homs" where "the factories" offered jobs. Well before the war, then, Saman's Kurdish-identifying family had moved from a small city in northeastern Syria, now the capital of autonomous Rojava (and known as well by its Kurdish name Qamishlo), to Homs, a larger metropole in Western Syrian north of Damascus. Thus, the urban group among the TOB interviewees described past decades of internal migration to cities like Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs as a strategy to mitigate the disadvantages of living in the Syrian-Kurdish heartland to the east. My distinction between these cohorts of TOB participants pertains to the assessment of the Jazira region offered by the Washington Institute for Near East policy:

> Prior to the war, the Assad regime deliberately left Kurdish areas underdeveloped, mainly as a way of spurring the Kurds to migrate to big cities where they could be Arabized more easily. Similarly, the Jazira region [of northeastern Syria] was treated as a kind of 'internal colony' devoted solely to grain and cotton production. (Balanche)

The internal colonialism visited by the Assad government upon Jazira, an area home to many of Syria's Kurds, should be seen in the context of Arabization policies devised in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as the 1962 census already noted above. The Syrian Ba'athist state imposed "Arab Belt" policies expropriating Kurdish-owned lands and installing tens of thousands

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of Arab settlers on the "socialized" acreage (Knapp et al. 20).[28] I will not attempt to definitively

gauge the impact of this history on present-day Syria or the people who were compelled to leave

it. Yet it may be fair to consider that these circumstances had an afterlife in the social locations

experienced by the TOB participants. Many of them are connected to a multi-generational trauma

that may not have been the norm for many of the Syrian refugees who travelled successfully to

Europe, a journey correlated with significant advantages in wealth and education.

In *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World*, Betts and Collier contrast the

Syrian population who fled to "neighboring havens" like the KRI with those who went to Europe.

They describe the former as "virtually a random sample of the overall [Syrian] population" and

the latter as both "distinctively affluent" and more likely than others to have enjoyed access to

secondary and university education (198–99). Striking a similar note, Borkert et al. write, "Our

findings support Gillespie et al. (2016) and Wall et al. (2017) that refugees who fled to the EU, in

2015–2016, particularly from Syria and Iraq, are largely well educated and digitally literate"

(Borkert et al. 8). In citing these sources, I am certainly not claiming that everyone who travelled

from Syria to Europe was privileged in these ways. But the trip to Europe, besides entailing

courage and resolve, may have been most accessible for those who could direct resources, financial

and otherwise, toward that endeavor. If "access to resources principally money and social capital

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[28] Knapp et al. cite government documents of the day that suggest the ethnonationalist rather than economic basis of the Arabization campaigns visited upon Syria's Kurds. They write:

> The head of internal security for Hesekê province, Muhammad Talab Hilal, developed a twelve-point plan for the Arabization of northern Syria, which he introduced this way: "The bells of Jazira sound the alarm and call on the Arab conscience to save this region, to purify it of all this scum, the dregs of history until, as befits its geographical situation, it can offer up its revenues and riches, along with those of the other provinces of this Arab territory . . . . The Kurdish question, now that the Kurds are organizing themselves, is a malignant tumor which has developed and been developed in a part of the body of the Arab nation. The only remedy which we can properly apply thereto is excision." (19)

shape the migration strategies that can be pursued," class constitutes one factor impacting the TOB respondents' choice to seek asylum in the KRI (Van Hear 28). More particular to this study, these relative disadvantages in income and education, such as those reported by many of the TOB respondents, may be understood in part as the present-day materialization of the historical harms visited upon Syrian Kurds by the Syrian Arab Republic.

While recognizing the importance of Betts and Collier's analysis and the general salience of class in questions of mobility and resettlement, a different set of issues is raised by the third distinct set of TOB participants, the Afrin group, which I encountered in 2018. It consists of Syrian Kurds displaced from Afrin, the city that had been at the center of the westernmost canton of autonomous Rojava after 2014. The Afrin group was unique in having fled neither the fighting between the Syrian military and opposition groups, nor ISIS's predacious zealotry, but instead an incursion into Syria "by the Turkish army and its proxy forces," formerly opposition fighters, now mercenaries serving the Turkish state in anti-Kurdish campaigns (Crabapple 2018). As Schmidinger writes in *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*, "one reason" for the invasion "was Turkey's fear of having a territory at its southern border ruled by a sister party of its enemy the PKK [Kurdistan Workers Party]"—the organization associated with the face of Öcalan, as I'll discuss further in Chapter 5 ("The War Against Afrin"). Despite the fact that the militias associated with Rojava did not launch attacks on Turkish soil prior to being attacked, the Kurdish civilians of the Afrin group suffered displacement upon the basis of their purportedly "terrorist" allegiances (Schmidinger "Turkish War Preparations").

In essence, the Turkish policy presumes all Kurds in Rojava to be dangerous, and has in Afrin (January 2018) and more recently across Jazira (October 2019) acted upon this categorical condemnation. Kurdish civilians in Rojava are under threat, as confirmed by the civilian casualties

and massive displacement caused by Turkey's recent invasion (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). "Turkey's goal is not just to conquer Afrin and expel the YPJ/YPG, but also to ethnically cleanse the entire region," wrote Schmidinger after the 2018 occupation, and this project continues at the time of this writing in the aftermath of "Operation Peace Spring" ("525 Terrorists Neutralized so Far in Operation Peace Spring, Erdoğan Says"). It is for this reason that this dissertation will engage situated intersectionality in Chapter 5's exploration of the vulnerabilities experienced by Syrian Kurds.

A sense of the histories at play supports my contention that literacy studies can sponsor decolonial, anti-orientalist inquiry. My aim is to offer a context for my claims about the political orientation of literacy studies, situated intersectionality, and Orientalism. Developed in Chapter 3's focus on literacy studies, these are: first, that a sociomaterial approach to literacy studies can recognize the political stakes of technologically mediated expression because it rejects the neutrality in which technology is cast; second, that situated intersectionality can play a role in surfacing categories of analysis for literacy studies work across fields of cultural difference; and, third, that these approaches in tandem can subvert the Orientalist construction of non-Western people as essentialized rather than historical actors. Finally, the political history under review in this section underpins my related argument, following Kynard, that political knowing is aptly engaged by literacy studies, specifically in its sociomaterial and infrastructural engagements. This is emphasized in Chapter 4 and 5, which illustrate how a sociomaterial conception of literate practice can reveal, through relational analysis, how infrastructures are enmeshed with politics and power.

3.0 Chapter 2. Methods and Findings

3.1 Methods

This section describes the TOB project's research sites and qualitative methods, derived primarily from literacy studies. I discuss recruiting interviewees and conducting literacy history interviews with the help of Iraqi and Syrian research assistants. My Positionality Statement makes clear the social location from which I undertook this work and my relevant commitments. Finally, I explain how intersectionality came to inform my coding of interviews and present my understanding of a "situated" view of this theory.

3.1.1 Sites: Arbat and Sulaymaniyah

Knowing that media dramatizing Syrian refugees' flight to Europe was in some senses incomplete, if not misleading, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) offered a chance to work with Syrian refugees in a regional haven. That is, despite media attention to the influx of migrants into Western countries in the 2000-teens, and the concomitant rhetoric of 'crisis,' "nearly 90 per cent of the world's refugees . . . remained in the developing world" (Betts and Collier 3). It is "proximate havens" like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon that are hosting, still, much of the Syrian refugee population (Betts and Collier 31). This dissertation, like Twigt's work with Iraqi refugees in Jordan, therefore "addresses 'methodological Europeanism' . . . by focusing on the mediation of migrants' experiences within another geographic area" (2). In comparison to the millions fleeing

to Turkey, though, the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) represents a marginal case. "By 2011 Iraq was so beset by violent disorder that it was not a credible haven for refugees, although it did host some camps for Syrian Kurds. Further, eastern Syria, which bordered on Iraq, was only lightly populated and so not a major region of refugee flight," write Betts and Colliers (74). But an interest in the counter-dominant is consonant with English Composition's investments in not only inclusive pedagogy, but attending to those writing "on the margins" of society, however construed (Bartholomae; Rose).

By engaging Syrian nationals living both in- and out-of-camp setting, and considering both groups' thoughts about settlement as well as movement, I worked to avoid further marginalizing the urban population or invisibilizing the unique character of the TOB participants' experiences living in the KRI. In a 2016 white paper, "Displacement as Challenge and Opportunity," Dr. Ali Sindi, the Kurdish Regional Government's Minister for Planning, writes, "[T]he situation of out-of-camp populations and the host community has long been overlooked. In the Kurdish Region, the majority of refugees (60% out of 250,000) . . . live in urban areas, co-existing with host communities" (Foreword). Sindi points out that any study of people with asylum-seeker status will be poorly representative if it includes only the voices of those people living in camps or elides their relationship with the host community. Extending the TOB study's scope to engage both in- and out-of-camp refugees was therefore appropriate to the circumstances in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah.

Sulaymaniyah is a major city in Kurdistan, a governorate capital of over 800,000 people. In 2016, the Sulaymaniyah Governorate of 2 million "host[ed] a total of 31,000 refugees, about 12% of the total number of refugees in Iraq" (Ahmeen et al. 14). But this population was overshadowed by the 229,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs), Iraqi nationals displaced by

events such as the fighting with ISIS. Thus, after 2011 when Syrians displaced by the civil war

started coming to the KRI, the labor and housing markets in Sulaymaniyah became increasingly

impacted, with a high degree of competition for rental properties. This situation was compounded

by a series of financial crises in the region, such as that which followed the 2014 ISIS incursion

into Iraq. There was therefore a financial incentive for families to take up residence in camps like

Arbat, facilities supported by the UNHCR, the local government, and various NGOs. [29] While

Sulaymaniyah is a large and vibrant city, Arbat is the official name of the camp community several

kilometers from a small but busy town of that name, itself some 25km from Sulaymaniyah. [30]

Although my research engaged Syrian people in the KRI during the summers of 2017 and

2018, it often invited them to look back on travel and technology several years in their past. And

although technological circumstances have continued to evolve, with greater use of smartphones,

for example, the broader humanitarian situation remains much the same, with slight growth in the

number of Syrian refugees at the TOB research sites since 2017. [31]

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[29] In 2017, Natali published a description of the Arbat refugee camp:

> 6,700 Syrian Kurds (1,751 families) . . . have replaced their tents with concrete homes. While many refugees have sought jobs outside the camps (Syrians, particularly women, are willing to work in service sector jobs that Iraqi Kurds will not or cannot do), they depend on community services, schools, health care, employment and education that demand support from the Iraqi government and the KRG, as well as the United Nations. Competition for jobs during a period of economic downturn has also led to tensions among refugee communities and local populations, adding more pressure on the government to fill the administrative and security gaps (52).

Natali attributes these statistics to her "author visit" to Arbat (60).

[30] Because it abuts a village named Barika, many of the community residents call it this as well, which serves to distinguish it from the nearby Arbat camp for internally displaced Iraqi citizens (OCHA, "Iraq - Sulaymaniyah Governorate - Arbat IDP Camp, General Infrastructure"). Somewhat confusingly, that Arbat IDP camp is also referred to as 'the old camp' by Syrian residents of the Arbat camp for Syrian refugees because some of them stayed there for a few months before the current site opened in 2013.

[31] In March, 2020, the UNHCR listed 22,279 "persons of concern" in the city of Sulaymaniyah, and 9,254 at the Arbat "permanent camp" (UNHCR, "Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response,

3.1.2 Developing the TOB Study: Neither Deficit nor Damage

After visiting Sulaymaniyah and Arbat in 2016, I began shaping the TOB inquiry according to the idea that a successful journey from Syria to Iraq during the Syrian Civil War was an accomplishment worthy of discussion. Such an approach, inspired in part by Gillespie et al.'s *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys*, is also consonant with resilience-focused scholarship in the field of Social Work urging that we consider refugees' "strengths" rather than presuming deficits, and in this way depart from the academy's longstanding fixation upon the refugee "trauma story" (Hutchinson and Dorsett 66). Engaging refugees in this way may resonate with compositionists and rhetoricians whose pedagogies have long resisted and taught against "deficit" models of students (Brannon et al. 17–18; Adler-Kassner and Wardle 72).

Before my first research trip in 2017, the sponsoring NGO, the Civil Development Organization in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, invited me to confer with Dr. Tanyel Taysi, an anthropologist and political scientist with a robust record of research with vulnerable populations in Iraq and Western Asia more generally. She and I agreed that my educational accomplishments did not amount to training in working with psychological trauma, and that I should develop an approach that would avoid questions likely to trigger damaging experiences. Although my prior study in human rights had urged my attention to Syrian refugees, the study would not be a search for human rights violations. Instead, I would emphasize journey and settlement by inviting comments on travel, technology, housing, documents, and education. The semi-structured format of the

Refugees from Syria by Date"). In 2017, the numbers were, respectively 23,288 and 8,497 (UNHCR, *Iraq: Syrian Refugee Stats and Locations, 31 July 2017*).

interviews embraced unexpected answers and topics raised by interviewees, yet I remained committed throughout to avoid what scholar of indigenous studies and decoloniality Eve Tuck describes as "damaged-centered research" in which "one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe" (413). Such an approach, Tuck argues, can become a "pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck 413). Thus, while I recognized Syrian refugees' situations as, necessarily, suggesting something of the state of human rights in the world today, this work does not focus on direct injury to the TOB interviewees.32 Similarly, although life in refugee camps is often thought (and not without reason) to be "tenuous, traumatic, and overcrowded," this was not my dominant experience of Arbat, which struck me, generally, as a working community of Syrian people equipped by the local/UNHCR administration with reasonable infrastructure, some which I will discuss further in Chapter 4 (Fontes 4). In sum, although some residents certainly disclosed grappling with very hard

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32 For those interested in Tuck's critique, the full passage is well worth reading:

> Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. Here's a more applied definition of damage-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation. (413)

While I find it useful to acknowledge historical harms and look, for example, to historical factors such as coloniality to understand something of the positionality of Kurdish-identifying Syrian nationals facing displacement as a result of the war, I try to present findings that do not make any single circumstance the basis of an essentialized status of 'damage.' It would be difficult to advocate for a reversal of the historical harms visited upon Kurdish people without imagining a neo-colonial intervention of outside powers on behalf of Kurdish causes, such as an autonomous Rojava or an independent state based on the KRI. The humbler aim, then, of my work is to inform this project with a sense of the historical and geopolitical context while lifting up findings that disrupt forms of Orientalist knowledge making.

circumstances, this project will not in general attempt to focus on any kind of "trauma story" (Fontes 4).

3.1.3 Positionality Statement

A young Syrian friend living in Istanbul, seeing a post I had written online in support of Rojava, asked, "Why do you support Kurdish people? I mean do you have Kurdish roots?" (Nez). I believe he was assessing the level of tact with which he would proceed to argue against my opinion that the project of autonomy in Rojava deserves support. Like the Syrian state, my friend construes Kurds as newcomers to Syria, a position sometimes used to justify the denial of Kurdish self-determination and other rights.[33] I mention the exchange here because it raises the question of my positionality.

Not only do I not have any Kurdish familial connections, I did not in fact become familiar with the 'Kurdish Question' until I was already working to formulate my dissertation project. I did not set out to study the Kurds. As noted, above, I had originally thought the project might engage Syrian refugees in Turkey. Travelling to the KRI and finding the Arbat camp for Syrian refugees to be a viable research site was a contingent series of events; my focus was still the use of technology by *Syrian* people. My experiences in the KRI, such as meeting Syrian people who identify themselves as Kurds, and making friends with Kurdish-identifying Iraqis in

[33] Chatty offers a comment relevant to this view:
> Many of the Kurds in Syria have been there for centuries; but in the 1920s, a wave of refugees arrived, escaping Turkish repression after their failed bid for independence during the Shaykh Said rebellion. Although the Syrian Kurds represent the smallest minority of this largely mountainous tribal people, the forced migrations in the past century into Syria most clearly illustrate the struggle of the Kurds for recognition as a nation. (232)

Sulaymaniyah, incited my study of history and politics pertaining to the Kurds. Although largely self-directed, I benefited throughout these years from dialog with friends and contacts in the region, both Syrian and Iraqi.

I did bring prior schema to bear on the matter of Iraq. I opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq and, like many others of the 100,000 people said to have taken to the streets of San Francisco, protested against the war and was arrested for my efforts. I regarded the war as a flagrant act of imperialism, and did not accept the Bush administration's claims, long since debunked, that Saddam Hussein was in possession of or bent on acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction. This background and my investment in an anti-war, anti-imperialist critique made learning about the KRI, where many people supported the US-led wars, both challenging and fascinating. Though it might not have altered my position, the fact was that I had not carefully considered the Kurds' situation in my resistance to the Bush-Cheney administration's unlawful attack on and occupation of Iraq. My view was tacitly statist, failing to inquire past the boundaries on offer on the map.

The first day I was in Sulaymaniyah, I mentioned the Iraq War of 2003 to some acquaintances. I expressed my disdain for the war, its US leaders, and their motives. While my criticism was certainly heard, one of my interlocutors, who would in time become a close friend, pointed out: "Yes, but you have to understand—that war was good *for us*." That is, the fall of the Hussein government increased the safety, well-being, and life chances of many Iraqi Kurds. For me, that conversation was an unforgettable moment, an encounter with a perspective I had not considered, and an unsettling of certainties without resolution that I have carried forward ever since.

My interest in working with Syrian refugees derives from a period of my life before and during the first few years of my PhD program (which I started in the fall of 2014), when I was

studying human rights and teaching it as a course theme in English Composition classes. This learning was galvanized by a fellowship with the Stanford Human Rights Education Initiative (SHREI), a program for California Community College Instructors (since discontinued) that I found quite impactful in 2013/2014. International human rights then animated my critical reception of media on the Syrian Civil War, and early iterations of this project emphasized human rights, especially freedoms of movement and expression. Later, I found that the TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society), the umbrella organization of community and activist groups that played a pivotal role in consolidating Kurdish-led autonomy in Rojava, had articulated grassroots support for human rights, a "blanket recognition of all international human rights agreements" into its democratic-confederalist (that is, generally, anarcho-municipalist) principles for self-government (Knapp et al. 112–14). And thus I joined what I discovered was an international group of intellectuals and activists, many of them sharing an anti-state critique rooted in anarchist theory, with a strong interest in Rojava.

As I began preparing to begin the research in the summer of 2017 (by continuing to study Arabic, reading Kurdish history, and frequently consulting contacts in the region), I also began reconsidering the matter of Orientalism, to which I'd been first exposed during my MA program in English Literature at San Francisco State University. As suggested in the Introduction, thinking through this entrenched problematic urges my own self-reflexivity. Re-reading Said has sharpened my sense of, on the one hand, the limitations of writing about Western Asia from a privileged position of social and cultural distance, and, on the other, the potential of presenting my thoughts in such a way that entrenched elements of Orientalist discourse are undermined.

I take seriously the idea that one's positionality, "the social location from which one analyzes the world" has epistemic effects, tending to limit what one can and can't see or understand

(Abu-Lughod 107). It was with intention that I aimed for an open-ended and dialogic mode of interviewing that invited revision of my preconceived ideas and interests. This dialogic orientation was extended perforce to the research assistants who accompanied me throughout the study and held the power to decide, word by word, what I might know or hope to understand. Even the most basic findings of this dissertation, such as the matters of enduring technology and Kurdish ethnolinguistic identity, about which I knew little when I began, are indicative of at least some success in maintaining this dialogic engagement with what the people I met in the KRI were willing to teach me.

I came to this project without any prior cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or personal connection to the people and sites I discuss. The histories animating my position, suggested in the Contexts section, above, are materialized most clearly in the privileges of mobility I enjoyed at the borders of and within the KRI. Said is lucid in noting how Orientalism depends on

> this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand . . . . The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier was in, or thought about, the Orient because he *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part. (Said 15, my emphasis)

My capacity to travel to Kurdistan as a researcher was enabled not only by my affiliation with a university, but also the neo-colonial privilege of US citizenship. US passport holders enjoy visa-on-arrival in the KRI while visas to federal Iraq require a detailed application. At a disadvantage within the world mobility regime, Iraqi nationals, including residents of the

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Kurdistan region, face stringent requirements for travel to the US.[34] I was, by contrast, not only able to travel to the KRI, but consistently able, with time, persistence, local help, a bit of a research budget, and institutional bona fides, to gain access to the places I wanted to go and almost all of the people with whom I wanted to speak.

In sum, I brought to the TOB project an enmeshed set of privileges as a US-born researcher who is white, male, middle-class, and fluent in English. Combined with my accent, my skin tone and blue eyes seem to make me easily recognizable in Iraq as a US national (a matter to which I will return in the Conclusion). There has been neither opportunity nor reason to ever attempt to pass myself off as anything other than what I am, an 'American' researcher and teacher, and I informed each interview participant of my intention to represent them in academic work. I have worked, despite my positional limitations, to take seriously the (usually translated) words and ideas of the people I interviewed for this dissertation. I have sought an ethical relationship with the TOB participants, taking pains, both while collecting data and in representing interviewees in writing, to respect their privacy and confidentiality, my priority being to avoid inviting further risk to a group that is already vulnerable by virtue of having sought asylum in the KRI.

3.1.4 Interpreters as Literacy Brokers

Regardless of my personal characteristics, conducting research in Iraq required the financial privilege of an income and a research budget. For the latter, I looked to various entities at the University of Pittsburgh, a large and well-sourced institution. The preliminary research trip

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[34] I am indebted to the staff of the Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights in Halabja, Iraq, whose conversation helped clarify this point. For the Jiyan Foundation, see https://www.jiyan-foundation.org/.

in 2016, which was intended to scaffold the development of the project in Turkey, was supported by a European Studies Center Klinzing Grant for Pre-Dissertation Research. After I decided to pursue the project in the KRI, I won a Fred C. Bruhns Nationality Room Scholarship and a University Research Council Research in Diversity Grant. All of these were small (less than $5000) grants, and I twice requested and received supplementary funding on a similar or more limited scale from the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh. Together these awards funded the work in the KRI in 2017 and 2018 upon which this dissertation is based. More than once, unexpected or poorly estimated costs meant that I was compelled to rely on personal resources and the generosity of organizations in the KRI with a kindly disposition to Westerners. Though I am not a religious person, these included the Deir Maryam Al-Adhra monastery, which provided lodging when I had exhausted my available budget in the Summer of 2018, and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) office in Erbil, Iraq, where I stayed during several visits to the KRI capital in both 2017 and 2018.

After lodging, my greatest in-country expense, and the one I was happiest to pay, was the retention of qualified research assistants who could provide, in addition to general guidance, interpretation services during interviews. The Kurdish contacts I made in 2016 and maintained through correspondence throughout the year put me in touch with Bijar Daban,[35] who worked with me in 2017. Bijar is an Iraqi Kurd who speaks Sorani and quite fluent Arabic. He is a college educated professional who often comes into contact with Syrian people through his work, and so is more familiar with *Shami*, the form of Levantine Arabic spoken by Syrians, than many Iraqis.

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[35] Bijar, as mentioned in the Introduction, is a pseudonym, and I use it out of respect for Bijar's wish to remain distanced from some of the more political topics I have opted to discuss in this dissertation.

Although he has a full-time job, working with me was attractive to Bijar because of the economic crisis afflicting the KRI in 2017; his willingness to work full-time with me in Arbat while continuing his regular career in the evenings and weekends suggests both his personal resilience and the uncertain economic outlook at the time. I take the depth achieved in several of the Arbat interviews to reflect Bijar's ability to create a positive communicative rapport with the Syrian people we met. But his contribution is much greater than that. Spending hours together in transit, in meetings, and eating meals, Bijar was tirelessly receptive to my questions about the region, the people we met, and the social situations and spaces we negotiated. These conversations provided a lived schema for the historical study reflected in the foregoing discussion of Contexts.

In 2018, though, I wanted to hire a member of the Syrian community.[36] Making inquiries through more NGO-oriented Iraq contacts, I was put in touch with Massoud Hussein, an Arbat resident. A young man with a surprising amount of experience working with international organizations, Massoud accommodated the TOB project among several other commitments, including his completion of a university degree. My intuition is that Massoud's reputation in the Syrian community was essential in recruiting interviews outside of the camp; I may not have been trusted, but he was. Massoud managed the potential awkwardness of meeting busy Syrian interviewees in a wide range of settings, from homes to cafes, with debonair aplomb. Though fluent in Arabic, Kurmanji is Massoud's home language, and he conducted interviews in both of them, sometimes mixing fluidly between them. The advantage of Kurmanji was that it tended to

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[36] At this time, I had some experience hiring and compensating Syrian professionals for their work. In 2017 I volunteered to serve as the Director of Curriculum for Hello Future, a digital literacy NGO project for youth in Arbat. For our lead instructor, we hired Louay Haji, a talented Syrian ESL instructor. In addition to designing lesson plans for his use, I supported Mr. Hajji during a ten-day intensive program in 2017.

be most comfortable for Syrian-Kurdish interviewees. A disadvantage was that, while I could follow something of the interviews conducted in Arabic, especially upon review of the better recordings, I was even more dependent on Massoud's interpretative work when the conversation proceeded in Kurmanji.

Although literacy scholars like Vieira, fluent in both Russian and Portuguese, conduct interviews with non-English speakers themselves, my use of an interpreter makes this project more akin in this regard to recent scholarship with Syrian populations by teams anchored in Sociology (Gillespie, Ampofo, et al.; Gillespie, Osseiran, et al.; Dekker et al.), Information Science (Xu and Maitland) and Political Science (Yıldız and Uzgören). Turkish political scientist Ayselin Yıldız generously advised me via skype on the use of interpretation services in 2016 while I was considering sites for the study and engaging in exploratory conversations in Izmir, Turkey. My use of interpretation is also consistent with Brun's work on refugees and housing in Georgia, a project that depended on "research assistants" to locate "research participants" and "as interpreters" who offered in-field "translations from Georgian to English" (423–24).

In foregrounding the work of these research assistants' interpretation between English and Arabic and English and Kurmanji, I aim to contribute to the matter of interpretation as a point of methodological transparency. According to Gibb and Iglesias's 2017 "On Breaking the Silence (Again): on language learning and levels of fluency in ethnographic research," there is an entrenched tendency among researchers to downplay the challenges of language acquisition. Although Syrian families often appreciated my ability to exchange a few pleasantries in Levantine Arabic, they soon realized that I had difficulty keeping up in any substantive exchange. During casual conversation before and after recording an interview, I was deeply grateful to not only the linguistic dexterity but also the seemingly effortless charisma of both Bijar and Massoud; they

brought much more to these interactions than the instrumental ability to translate. I emphasize this to underscore that, as literacy scholars have come to understand, interpretation is itself a complex literacy practice.

Mihut, for example, whose ethnographic research bears upon the transnational literacy practices of Romanian migrants, sees interpretation as a form of literacy brokerage, a bi-directional admixing of languages and social fields. As literacy brokers, language interpreters "mediate partnerships" (60) in both their procedural and affective senses, and retain a critical agency based upon their communities of membership and knowledge of multiple discursive and juridical systems. Negotiating both "macro-discourses" and situated relations between bodies (73-74), literacy brokers serve as scalar mediators between localized expertise and codes articulating those sites into wider systems.37

In my case, my repertoire and sources of privilege allow me to move and circulate representations in elite spaces bound to English, but in the KRI I lacked not only the local language of Kurdish Iraq, Sorani, but also fluency in the languages spoken by the Syrian community, one of them limited to the pan-Kurdish region, Kurmanji, and the other, Arabic, distributed originally by the global religious institution of Islam. Though these languages were only one element of the interaction, they stand almost metonymically for the worlds of social and cultural understanding I lacked. It would be absurd to presume any kind of transparent ideational transfer between Bijar or

37 A comment drawing upon Blommaert. He proposes viewing sociolinguistic space and time in terms of indexical orders of power in which "higher scale-levels (institutional and community norms and rules)" tend to "prevail over lower scale-levels," including non-national or more local languages ("Sociolinguistic Scales" 6). Although I am generally engaged with Blommaert's views, he somewhat oddly dismisses the term 'trajectory' as a horizontal metaphor (16). But more generally Blommaert's *Sociolinguistics of Globalization* advances ideas circulating widely in literacy studies. See, for example, Lorimer Leonard's discussion of repertoire in *Writing On the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy* (3–11).

Massoud to me; whatever understandings we arrived at were mediated and multiple, imperfectly shared at best, yet rich in possibility within those limitations. What I am suggesting is that Bijar and Massoud left an indelible imprint on this project, not only as research assistants and language interpreters, but as cultural mediators more generally. I did not keep records on my informal conversations with Bijar and Massoud as a means to gauge their impact on my thinking. Even so, as Puri and Castillo write of their experiences with literary fieldwork, "Many of our field-based conversations do not show up explicitly in our writing yet nonetheless infuse and transform the entire project" (2). If this dissertation is the product of my own literate practices, it was deeply informed by theirs, too.[38]

There can therefore be no reflexive transparency on my part that overlooks the fact that the English available to me in the TOB interviews was composed by Bijar and then Massoud through the exigence of simultaneous interpretation, an act in which "interpreters listen, understand, translate, and speak all at the same time" ("Simultaneous Interpretation"). Considering this cultural

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[38] Oddly, Fontana and Frey identify trends that, on the one hand, suggest that work conducted through this form of mediation is inherently flawed, while, on the other, recognizing the importance of just these sorts of relationships as sources of guidance to researchers. They write, for example: "Some researchers, especially in anthropological interviews, tend to rely on interpreters, and thus become vulnerable to added layers of meanings, biases, and interpretations, which may lead to disastrous misunderstandings . . ." (Fontana and Frey 77). True understanding, such a passage presumes, is to be found in the unmediated relation between researcher and interviewee. Yet, at the same time, they acknowledge that anthropologists have noted the value of 'informants' with whom a researcher might engage in ongoing dialogue. Such a dynamic was noted as early as 1977 by Rabinow, who discussed the generativity of his relationship with his "main informant, Abd al-Malik ben Lahcen" who, as Fontana and Frey explain, "acted as a translator but also provided Rabinow with access to the cultural ways of the subjects, and by his actions provided Rabinow with insights into the vast differences between a University of Chicago researcher and a native Moroccan" (78). While I in no way regard this work as comparable in depth to a work of anthropology, and have few records of the innumerable conversations I had with Bijar and Massoud, whatever attainments to be found here are owed in no small part to not only their interpretive work, but also their social and cultural tutelage.

and linguistic mediation leads to questions about methods of coding interview data, such as those offered by Charmaz in *Constructed Grounded Theory*. I find useful Charmaz's distinction between quantitative and qualitative research upon the basis of the use of "*preconceived* categories or codes" in the case of the former and "emergent" codes that "develop as the researcher studies his or her data" in the latter (186–87). More particular to grounded theory's inductive movement from initial codes, which "should stick close to the data," to its successively more theoretical phases, is a particular emphasis on *in vivo* codes (47-71). Citing Charmaz's 2006 edition of *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Leonard writes, "In the axial stage, I used 'in vivo' codes, in which participants' own words—rather than a researcher's interpretation—are used as analytic codes, helping 'preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself'" ("Traveling Literacies: Multilingual Writing on the Move" 19). The use of interpreters complicates this strategy of using participants' *own words* to build their views into the development of further conclusions.

The TOB interview participants own words were, after all, in most cases lost on me. Even so, the words 'belong' or 'belonging' do feature in some of the interviews. Dijwar used the term when discussing what it felt like, as a Kurdish-identifying man, to come to Rojava after the rise of the Autonomous Authority of North and East of Syria: "It was a good feeling to see Kurdish flags instead of other flags! . . . They would not ask, who do you belong to? This is home, home sweet home." This passage is perhaps the most inspirational as far as my centering of the term belonging, for it bears upon feelings of affiliation, ethnolinguistics identity, and political projects of belonging. Chapter 5 includes moments in which Nalin and Sola use belonging to express ownership of a house and control of a region by a political party, respectively. More influential on my thinking in that chapter, however, is Yaran's description of Arbat as a placed possessed, in a

non-legal sense, by the Syrian residents there, yet he did not use the word "belonging" to express this idea. "Belonging" was not a word relied upon by an inordinately high number of the TOB interviewees. The expansive meanings it has acquired in academic use, though, resonated with my hours of listening, both in person—where I felt at least something of the emotional rise and fall of what my interlocutors were trying to express[39]—and later while working with the interview recordings' audio and sifting through research notes. I turned to belonging because it seemed fitted to the kind of *relationships* I was hearing described, starting with the certainty of family but including the more complicated relationship with the idea of Kurdistan and the realities of the KRI as a host community.

There is a tension here, to be sure, in my prerogative to name these things and my wish to maintain a dialogic orientation to the projects' interviewees, yet it is one common to literacy studies. Even scholarship by writers who have an organic relationship with the languages used in interviews bring to bear worlds of discourse distant from their interlocutors' statements. In *Writing for Love and Money*, Vieira cites her subjects' use of the Portuguese term *saudades*, "that feeling of missing, nostalgia, and lack. *Saudades* is a signature sentiment of Portuguese-speaking cultures and characterizes the emotional cost of migration for many" (49). *Saudades*, offers an elegant basis for Vieira's emphasis on emotional motives in literacy practices. It cannot, though, specifically authorize the many worlds of scholarship Vieira brings to bear in the analysis, or her engagement of a community of Latvian migrants (as well as others) in the same text. Nor should it; researchers' repertoires unfold meaning from interview encounters through discourses that are, in the end, not

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[39] I am aware that this line of reasoning could be pursued through the conversation that Ratcliffe incited with *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. My hope in a future project is to regard the corpus of the TOB interviews in terms of their sonic and ambient properties.

likely to be among those shared with research subjects who are not themselves literacy scholars. The hope and promise is that there is, still, a dialogic encounter in which the interviewee impacts interviewer, such that the knowledge produced maintains, despite its mediation by elite discourses, a connection to that encounter. In this, I feel the TOB project is successful, and not despite its interpreters, but rather because of them.

I will close this section with another anecdote about working with Bijar that pertains to yet another question of methods. I had designed a paper survey for use in 2017, but it introduced several problems in the field. First, the camp management did not support the idea of distributing it. Second, some of the interview participants did not read or write, or else wrote only with considerable effort. Third, the slightly officious-looking survey provoked anxieties among some respondents that their written words might be used against them. Although I could not understand the exchange at the time, Bijar informed me that Karwan had been quite worried about the survey. "He's looking for something!" Karwan had said in Kurdish to Rahima, implying that I had ulterior motives and was seeking incriminating information.[40] In a rapid exchange of Kurdish, Bijar, unbeknownst to me at the time, had quickly convinced him otherwise. I had sensed something wrong, but was unsure of the source. It was only after we had left Karwan and Rahima's home that Bijar had explained Karwan's unease and his own intervention. On some level, Bijar vouched for

[40] Lorimer Leonard experienced a slightly similar wariness of exchanging printed documents while conducting research for *Writing on the Move: Migrant Women and the Value of Literacy.* She divulges that she

> collected varied data to support a rich contextual understanding of the participants' writing lives and to achieve data saturation and theoretical detail. I never explicitly asked for participants' writing. In some situations, asking felt too teacherly; in other situations, undocumented participants were uncomfortable with any request for documents. Therefore I decided to look at texts only when they were offered by participants. (149–50).

me and the intentions of the project. After that incident, and facing a packed schedule, Bijar and I had simply decided to discontinue the survey.

3.1.5 Recruiting Participants

I conducted work for the TOB study at the invitation of the Civil Development Organization (CDO), a non-governmental organization in Sulaymaniyah that provides services to displaced people, including refugees.[41] Without the CDO's imprimatur, I would not have been able to secure authorization from the local *asayish* (security/intelligence) to conduct research, in or out of the camp, which was in each year an involved process taking one or two weeks. That being said, the CDO in no way influenced my conduct of the research and their offices did not recruit research subjects for the project. Upon the advice of Syrian members of the refugee community, I declined to conduct interviews in the CDO offices, which are often seen (rightly or wrongly) as governmental spaces, and likely to be surveilled.

In Arbat, I kept the camp management informed of my movements and worked closely with a camp mobilizer, Mr. Kheredeen, a Syrian resident of the community. Camp mobilizers earn a small salary to assist and direct visitors to the camp, such as journalists and researchers. Once I met with Mr. Kheredeen and explained the project, he helped me devise a plan to visit several families within each of the camp's lettered sections. Within this spatial plan, we cooperated to engage as wide a variety of people as possible within the available time, achieving a mix of

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[41] In 2016, Ardalan Fryad took time off from his work as an engineer in Sulaymaniyah to introduce me to Kak Diyar at the CDO. The meeting and the CDO's support paved the way for my future research in the KRI, and I remain grateful to them both.

educational backgrounds, places of origin, genders, and, although the camp is an overwhelmingly Kurdish-majority community, ethnicities. In only a few instances did Bijar and I 'cold call' by knocking on doors, and this was with Kheredeen's knowledge; Chapter 4 develops from an interview arranged in this way.

Whether or not Kheredeen had phoned ahead, Bijar and I always began our work by establishing the terms of informed consent. No one in Arbat hesitated to offer it and, although I was very clear that I would not be reproducing names or other narrowly identifying information, many had no such reservations. More people in Arbat *wanted* to be interviewed than Bijar and I had the time to accommodate. In some cases, there may have been the hope that we might have connections that could be beneficial to them. During interviews where this seemed to be a possibility, I employed an Arabic phrase that I had quickly found useful: *I am only a teacher* (انا معلم فقط). But there were no incidents of people who, after gaining a better sense of my limited role in the world, seemed to lose interest in speaking. Many times, when I was thanking people for their time, they thanked me as well, expressing a sense of unburdening, of being heard. The only promise I made was that I would try to teach people "in my University, other teachers in the US" about what I had learned. This text constitutes some fulfillment of that promise.

Conducting research in the city of Sulaymaniyah was in many ways far more logistically challenging than working in the camp. The first complication is scale; the camp could be negotiated, if one was determined, on foot. The second complication is the dispersion of the Syrian asylum-seeking minority throughout a metropolitan area. Locating and recruiting participants would have been very difficult were Masoud himself not a member of the Syrian refugee community. Whereas Bijar and I had relied on Kheredeen to recruit people interested in participating in interviews, much of this work was taken up by Massoud in 2018. Using his

contacts, we engaged in purposive sampling intended to achieve diversity in educational background, place of origin, and gender. Had we only engaged in snowball sampling, and simply spoken to those most accessible to us, it is likely that the study would feature, by virtue of their close proximity to Massoud's networks and willingness to engage with a Western researcher, an overrepresentation of Syrian NGO workers. With effort and luck, I spoke to Arab members of the Syrian community in Sulaymaniyah as well. Because Massoud's role included recruiting participants, he necessarily spoke to them about my main interests before we met, and my impression is that he usually explained that I was interested in mobile technology, like cell phones, and the journey to Kurdistan. Nevertheless, I introduced the project prior to each interview.

3.1.6 Literacy History Interviews: Travel, Technology, and Settlement

I invited Syrian asylum seekers living in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah to participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews (Fontana and Frey 74). Queries about mobile devices and digital technology formed a thematic arc throughout but were posed in the context of respondents' descriptions of themselves and their journeys. Open-ended by design, these interviews had both semi-structured and narrative qualities (Muylaert et al. 188).

The TOB project was inspired mainly by transnational literacy studies, including work by Vieira, Leonard, and Lagman. Although I came to literacy studies from English, my orientation toward methods is only somewhat like that of my colleagues in *literary* studies who might undertake projects with qualitative methods and find, like Puri and Castillo, their disciplines lacking "a public discourse on fieldwork and . . . no training in how to conduct it" (3). Literacy

studies and writing studies feature active discussion of methods, though training in those methods tends to be more ad hoc.

Methodologically, I imagined the TOB interviews as an adaptation of the literacy history interview (LHI), an approach used extensively in literacy studies.[42] As Vieira writes in "Doing Transnational Writing Studies: A Case for the Literacy History Interview, "LHIs help untangle the knotted threads of literacy and history—which, for those who have lived through migration, a violently changing political regime, or both, may be one of literacy's prevailing mysteries" (139). The TOB interviewees had direct experience of both the "violently changing" regime in Syria and the compulsory form of movement known as "forced migration" (Gatrell 18). A matter of sociomaterial practice is, in the manner of ethnographic work, one inviting a rich sense of context. Even succinct examples of the LHI offered by Vieira touch upon matters of birth, hometown, family, movement, profession, education, socioeconomic exigencies, political changes, jobs—the stuff of life choices amid broader circumstances (138-139, "Doing Transnational Writing Studies").

The state of the art in literacy studies emphasizing the LHI may be Vieira's 2019 *Writing for Love and Money: How Migration Drives Literacy Learning in Transnational Families*, which consolidates previous transnational literacy studies scholarship while elaborating new horizons of theory and practice. Enacting an ambitious comparative methodology, *Writing for Love and Money* is a multi-sited study pursuing connections between migration and literacy in three countries, the

[42] See, for example: Brandt; Vieira, "Doing Transnational Writing Studies: A Case for the Literacy History Interview"; Vieira, "Shifting Global Literacy Networks: How Emigration Promotes Informal Literacy Learning in Latvia"; Leonard, "Writing Through Bureaucracy: Migrant Correspondence and Managed Mobility."

US, Latvia, and Brazil. By centering her research participant's emotional motivations for migration, Vieira demonstrates the breadth and depth of the sociomaterial view of literacy proposed in her earlier work, such as the 2016 *American by Paper,* helped to propound (as Chapter 3 will discuss in detail). As mentioned, Vieira clinches her contention about writing for love in the feeling of "*saudades*" a Portuguese word used by an interview participant to suggest longing for a loved one (49). This affective emphasis on motives for communication underpins Vieira's treatment of all manner of writing technologies, any communicative technology that might be of use in pursuing those needs and desires. Motive, rather than a fetishized emphasis on a particular materiality, is the guiding principle. Letters, laptops, and phones are all enlisted in the service of emotional connection, or financial security, or both. Thus, Vieira presents a way of studying literacy practices that is pan-material yet non-determinist in its engagement of technologies. Of her use of the LHI in *Writing for Love and Money*, Vieira writes:

> While interviews and memories can be unreliable, I was less interested in the objective 'telling of truth' and more in the 'truth of the telling,' that is, in how people's subjective experiences manifested in the stories they shared. In sum LHIs helped me understand both particular slices of literacy's history as well as how people made sense of that history in a moment of rapid technological and global change. (36)

Vieira's approach informs the upcoming discussion of Findings, particularly those pertaining to belonging and enduring technology. Although sociomaterial practices with technology do achieve instrumental effects, my aims in the TOB study are not ultimately empirical. The findings I present may be understood as a dialogue between the ideas expressed by interview participants and my attempt to achieve and then represent some kind of understanding of them.

Although every interview was unique, a general pattern was home situation, family background, education, reasons for leaving, journey, arrival, and then the experience of settling. The emphasis on travel was the result of my engagement with Gillespie et al.' s *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys* "journey methodology" (6). Most often I began interviews with this question: "Can you tell me a bit about your life before the problems in Syria began?" This approach is quite consonant with that of Ozkaleli, who writes of her work with Syrian women, who also began asking "interviewees" about "their life and experiences before the revolution" (18–19). Depending on the response, such questions could easily be followed up with more fine-grained queries about family background and education. Another of my approaches, an invitation for interviewees to "tell me about the trip to Kurdistan" tended to invite a detailed story of travel, part of the "journey methodology" gleaned from my reading of Gillespie et al. Generally, I would wait for interlocutors to mention making calls before I asked questions about phones, an approach that held the advantage of contextualized use. If necessary, I'd ask interviewees' permission to go back and revisit the topic, clarifying the type of phone used and cellular carrier as needed. The approach was, in practice, much more dialogic than the sets of possible questions the IRB procedures at the University of Pittsburgh had required me to list prior to my departure. I was not highly invested in the kind of linear sequences of questions the IRB officers wanted to see, although I certainly asked many of them. As will become evident, though, in the Findings discussion of enduring technology, my interview style in some cases introduced some instances of incomplete data.

To safeguard respondents' privacy, I did not retain any of the interviewees' identifying information, nor did I photograph them for the study. With their permission to use the study's findings for academic purposes and their consent to use a digital recorder, I collected audio at each interview. Even though I sometimes wished I could return to an earlier interviewee to ask follow

up questions, I refrained from doing so. I did not retain identifying information, such as addresses and phone numbers, although I soon knew my way around Arbat and parts of Sulaymaniyah, at least, well enough to retrace at least some of my steps. But, more importantly, I didn't want to attract undue attention to any single interviewee or family, for multiple visits were not what I had agreed upon with the CDO, the camp management, or Kheredeen, the Camp Mobilizer with whom I worked at Arbat. Kheredeen requested a final written list of everyone I had interviewed in Arbat. This seemed inconsistent with my IRB obligations, and I declined to present such a document, though he of course might have compiled a list from his own records.

In representing the TOB interviewees, I have continually weighed the level of detail made available to me against the possibility of inadvertently making them vulnerable through my writing. This has led me to pull back from certain kinds of detail, even though almost all interviewees seemed to speak without reservation. Instead of referring to small towns by name, for example, I have referred to them by way of their proximity to a major city or border (so, for example I might mention 'a town near Homs' rather than specifying 'Qusayr'). Similarly I have been deliberately vague about professions, tending to discuss fields rather than specific jobs ('professional' instead of 'attorney,' for instance).

3.1.7 Interviewing: Associative Flexibility

Interviews conducted for the project were not always conducted with one interviewee at a time. Some individual conversations led to serial interviewing of more than one person in a household. At other times, though, the recorded interactions were group interviews. I see three interrelated reasons contributing to this: space, family, and gender.

It was often necessary to conduct interviews in people's homes. An advantage of this arrangement was the minimum of inconvenience for the interviewees, given the expense of local transit, which is primarily by taxi. Another advantage is the sense of security interviewees seemed to feel when in their homes. They controlled many elements of the staging of the interviews, and nearly everyone who met me in their homes framed the interaction as hosting of guests, graciously serving beverages and settling in for an extended conversation.

Before I left Pittsburgh, a senior faculty member aware of my project had prognosticated, "You won't be able to speak to the women." He was correct insomuch as adult women tended to avoid 1:1 meetings with us. But, more generally, this turned out not to be true, and such an opinion may represent an exaggerated view of gender relations in Western Asia, and perhaps a lack of understanding of Kurdish culture in particular. One logistical reason why Bijar and I spoke to a significant number of women in Arbat was that men were often out of the camp working or seeking employment during daylight hours when I had been given permission to conduct interviews. Some couples met us together, and emphasized the wife's account, or interacted throughout, helping one another to elaborate further detail. But there were times when we interviewed a family and found only the oldest man in the room willing to speak. Several times, we interviewed a man whose wife or adult daughter was at home, but did not interact with us, save perhaps to serve coffee or tea. And several times I found myself speaking to a man while his wife listened. In such circumstances, I would often ask the husband if he would mind if I asked his wife some of the same questions; in no case did a husband ever decline, and some laughed at my hesitation. Once the transition was made, some of these women surprised me with how much they had to say, and how unique their journey was; couples, as noted in the Introduction, often travelled separately. What follows is a

tabulation of the TOB interviewees by site, gender presentation, and self-reported ethnic identification.

Table 1. Interviewees by Research Site, Gender, and Self-Identification

Site	Number of Interviewees	Presenting as Women	Presenting as Men	Arab-identifying	Kurdish-identifying
Arbat	47	23	24	3	44
Sulaymaniyah	29	12	17	1	28
Total:	**76**	35 (46%)	41 (54%)	4 (5%)	72 (95%)

In terms of time, I devoted at least one hour and as much as 2 or 2.5 hours to single interviews if my interlocutors had time and the affective dynamics of the conversations seemed to warrant it. This duration might seem excessive, but it should be born in mind that this includes the time required for introductions, interpretation throughout, and farewells. This often felt appropriate in homes where more than one person responded substantively to the conversation I initiated. An open timeframe allowed us to build rapport, explore a range of topics, indulge asides, and for me to answer questions about my life, home, and motives.

Outside the camp, arranging interviews was a much more difficult process. On the one hand, working with Massoud meant that there was no need to check in with a third-party, such as Kheredeen, the camp mobilizer. On the other, people living in Sulaymaniyah tended to be working and the city is large enough that finding a convenient meeting place was sometimes a challenge. Renting an office was out of the question, given my budget, and I had not been able to build effective bridges to the local universities, which were usually out of session while I was in-country. While some professionals and working people did not hesitate to meet us in a quiet corner of a café, others were more comfortable in a private space, which we sometimes could procure by

asking favors of sympathetic organizations, such as NGOs (with whom Massoud had a prior relationship) or the kindly disposed Deir Maryam Al-Adhra monastery. When we went to contacts' homes in Sulaymaniyah, we often found couples, entire families, and sometimes even neighbors waiting. Both in- and out-of-camp, children were often interested in interacting with us, but could not be interviewed as per the terms of the IRB protocol filed at the University of Pittsburgh.

Scholarly literature on group interviewing acknowledges both the strengths and weaknesses of the format. On the one hand, the group interview's interactivity and multivocality can "produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents, aiding recall; and the format is flexible" (Fontana and Frey 74). I found this to be the case in my interaction, for example, with Laylan, Bauan, and Ziyad, the TOB interlocutors featured in chapter 4. On the other hand, group dynamics can lead to problems. Fontana and Frey caution that "the interviewer must keep one person or small coalition of persons from dominating the group" (72). Although my training and experience as an equity-minded classroom instructor echo this principle, I was concerned that advancing it in the KRI might constitute an act of ethnocentrism. I didn't arrogate the prerogative to tell Syrian asylum seekers in Iraqi Kurdistan who should speak. To be sure, some group interactions emphasized male voices, and some others were dominated by the oldest person in the room.

My point here is that the material, spatial, social, and cultural contexts in which I conducted the TOB study urged my cultivation of *associative flexibility* as a research orientation able to countenance respondents' lives as I found them. Associative flexibility led me to conduct interviews with families and groups whose strong ties would have made an individual interview uncomfortable or inappropriate. In Arbat and Sulaymaniyah, I encountered families in their dwellings, which often put me face-to-face with more than one interlocutor at a time. At no point

was I moved to impose individualistic expectations. Rather than insisting on 1:1 interactions, I let respondents sort out who would take part, and, for the most part, how. When faced with several possible interviewees, I often tried to engage them sequentially, in order to simplify our work and my note-keeping, but this was often not possible, or else felt unnatural—when several family members took an interest, I did not try to silence their contributions. In many cases it would hardly have been culturally appropriate to insist that I speak to each interviewee alone. Respondents exerted significant control over who would take part, and sometimes I conducted, in effect, group literacy history interviews.[43] The most interesting aspect of the group interview situations were moments of polyphony in which "more subjects would participate and thus a broader spectrum of respondents' opinions would be reported" (Fontana and Frey 180). As in the group work I assign as a teacher of English Composition, I see in the group interview the possibility of qualitatively distinct knowledge-making. It may be that my comfort with the format was in part the product of my ten years' experience teaching in institutions valuing a student-centered pedagogy.

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[43] This constitutes a slight departure from scholarship on interviewing that presumes a crisp distinction between individual and group interviewing (Fontana and Frey 62–71). This assumption once was, according to a 1991 piece by Frey and Fontana, a longstanding methodological fixture in both sociology and anthropology (177). Frey and Fontana's work to bring attention to group interviews turns upon the idea that " . . . many field settings naturally lend themselves to the formation of informal and spontaneous groups as well as to formal group organization . . ." (177). I found this to be true, and it motivated me to maintain a flexible orientation toward interviewing groups or individuals. It seemed the only reasonable reaction when interacting with a culture other than my own in built-environmental settings over which I had little control.

These interviews, to be clear, were *not* focus groups. "A focus group interview is a qualitative research technique that includes 8-10 persons brought to a centralized location to respond to questions on a topic of particular interest to a sponsor or client" (Frey and Fontana 182). The focus group's methodological scripting tends to be preliminary or product-oriented. The interviews I conducted were open-ended and much further along in my research plan. Given that follow-up interviews were not part of my proposed methodology, they were single events in which I aimed to achieve as much depth as interviewees' time and interest allowed.

3.1.8 Coding and Analysis: Situated Intersectionality

I did not plan to deploy the feminist theory of intersectionality, originating as it does in US Critical Race Theory, in my thinking about people and situations in Western Asia. It arose, though, in my preliminary coding, which I often started during interviews in moments when Bijar or Massoud related ideas back and forth with interviewees in Arabic or Kurmanji. I worked with a two-column layout allowing me to both take notes on the conversation and jot down broader questions, themes, and possibilities for coding. Women's' descriptions of travelling back to Syria, a journey many of the male interviewees were hesitant to undertake for fear of conscription, urged me to begin writing "GENDER," "GENDER/MOBILITY?," and "INTERSEC" in the secondary column of my notebook. As noted in the introduction, I found more women than men going back to Syria for short visits, which I refer to as counter-migratory travel (rather than longer-term 'return migration'). In time, this recurring category urged me to start thinking of those journey narratives through the lens of intersectionality, a discourse I had encountered in the US, both in and out of academic settings.[44] The more TOB interviewees told me about their lives and circumstances that felt important yet did not seem adequately engaged by readings of literacy studies or digital migration studies, the more important intersectionality became in my thinking.

Yuval-Davis describes "situated intersectionality" as a theoretical framework useful in assessing the interaction of the multiple categories and social locations ("Situated Intersectionality"). She regards intersectionality as a "sociological stratification theory" that does

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[44] I was an active member of Pittsburgh for CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), which wrote the intersectional gender equity ordinance passed by the Pittsburgh City Council in December 2016. The ordinance funded a Gender Equity Commission that subsequently produced the 2019 report, "Pittsburgh's Inequality Across Gender and Race."

not "reduce social hierarchical relations into one [axis] of power" and finds "crucial" the "experiential and identificatory perspectives" of where and how people feel they "belong" ("Situated Intersectionality" 93, 94). She finds social divisions to be "mutually constituted (although ontologically irreducible to each other)" within "particular historical moments . . . social, economic and political contexts in which some social divisions have more saliency and effect" (93). Upon these bases she advocates the wide application of the theory, "and not just to marginalized and racialised women, with whom the rise of intersectionality theory is historically linked" ("Situated Intersectionality" 93). I read her 2015 "Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality" through her 2011 *The Politics of Belonging* and in dialog with a constellation of writers who advance views of intersectionality relevant to its application in non-Western contexts, including Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Floya Anthias, Anna Carastathis, Viola Thimm, Sirma Bilge, and Jennifer Nash. Rather than merely listing axes of oppression at work within a given context, intersectional analysis equips scholars to "consider their interaction" (Nash 468). Pertinent to the TOB study, a refugee's prior social location can be impacted by both displacement and the ongoing experience of settlement within a specific host community.

Dijwar, mentioned briefly in the introduction, is a Kurdish-identifying man who was living near Damascus when the war began. When I met him in Sulaymaniyah, some of his family members were residing in the Arbat community, though he was not. Born in Syria and bearing a Syrian passport, he had experienced the repression of Kurdish language and culture all his life. He came to the KRI with a sense that, after years of struggling for recognition in Arab-majority spaces, he would belong in Kurdistan. "I thought I might benefit from my own people, in the end," he said. He found, though, that his legal status tethered him to Syria. UNHCR and Kurdistan Regional Government offices identified him by his state of origin rather than his Kurdish ethnicity;

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citizenship was off the table. "In Damascus," Dijwar said, "I was a Kurd. Here, I'm a Syrian, not a Kurd. So, when they go to do [official] paperwork, they say, 'Where are the Syrians?' I have never raised the Syrian flag—one of my great achievements!" His statement illustrates the experience of fleeing one categorical exclusion within a set only to face, in another locality, its mirror image. Upon coming to the KRI, Syrian Kurds like Dijwar suffered, paradoxically, the fullness of the Syrian national identity historically withheld from them in Arab-majority Syria. In time, Dijwar's sense of pan-Kurdish belonging, a motive for coming to the KRI, had ebbed and been supplanted by a sense of the abiding distinction between the refugee and host communities. For Dijwar, this sense of difference was undesirable, especially when combined with legal obstacles imposed upon non-citizens, such as the impossibility of buying a home.

Readers may hear an echo of Audre Lorde in Dijwar's description of navigating multiple categories of social division. In "There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions" Lorde recounted, "Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian" (Hunt 131; Lorde). Juxtaposing Dijwar's experiences of being Syrian and Kurdish with Lorde's of being a black lesbian suggests that, despite the many differences between the sets of categories and sites under discussion, intersectionality's central theory of multiply determined oppressions can be of use in at least some non-Western contexts. Dijwar's positionality, far from being reduceable to the legality of asylum-seeking status, is co-constituted by his Syrian nationality and Kurdish ethnolinguistic identification, and realized according to their situated meanings.

3.1.8.1 Critical Race Theory and Refugee Studies

Recent work drawing upon intersectional feminism urges scholars to attend to the multiple vectors of oppression impacting forced migrants' lives. Writing to introduce a special issue of

Refuge, Carastathis et al. claim, "[T]he majority of (forced) migration scholarship" neglects what "intersectional research has consistently shown": the "co-implication of positionalities" indexed, for example, to "hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, religion, and sexuality" (6). Carastathis et al.'s piece relies in the first instance upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's articulations of intersectionality within critical race theory ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex"; "Mapping the Margins") while noting that earlier thinkers, especially black women in the US, contributed immeasurably to intersectionality's antecedent tradition, as other commentators affirm (Anthias, "Intersectional What? Social Divisions, Intersectionality and Levels of Analysis"; Brah and Phoenix; Collins). It is the legal grounding of Crenshaw's work that offers a particularly apt logic for transposing the US-based intersectional framework to the international domain in which refugee status is regulated by the human rights framework, or more precisely, its institutionalization by state or, as in the case of the Kurdistan Regional Government, sub-state actors with state-like powers to police borders and citizenship.

Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" draws upon US cases of employment discrimination against Black women to reveal how "dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (140). The categories of "black" and "woman" were already legible within the cases Crenshaw analyzed; the problem was the distorting effect of mono-categorical reasoning within US jurisprudence, its inability to entertain the consequence of multiple categories of oppression. There is a legal parallel to be drawn with refugees. As an international legal status, a *refugee* "receives certain rights not available to other international migrants . . . . People requesting refugee status and seeking permanent settlement in a country of first asylum to which they have already fled are referred to as asylum seekers" (Loescher, "Human Rights and Forced Migration"

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220). This codification of the terms *refugee* and *asylum seeker* in the human rights framework operates much like one of the "dominant conceptions of discrimination" identified by Crenshaw insomuch as they create a "single categorical axis" along which the disadvantage created by displacement enters public discourse. The refugee/asylum seeking axis can therefore occlude other possible categorizations, the "multiple grounds of identity" (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1245).

In practice, the words 'refugee' and 'asylum' are affiliated, adjectivally, with states of origin, as in the case of 'Syrian refugees.' Despite the necessarily international scale of refugee movement, refugees are, as Turner puts it, "contained within the order of the nation state" (Turner 140). It is this relation to that state that keeps compound expressions like 'Syrian refugee' functioning in a largely mono-categorical fashion; refugee status exists only in relation to the abiding statist logics of citizenship and territory. Generally elided are contexts, languages and non-state identifications beyond the legal recognition of refugees as those who have been compelled "by fear of being persecuted" to abandon their state of origin (UNHCR, "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees"). The TOB participants' frequent self-identification as *Kurds*, though, invites consideration of the intersection of displacement with ethnicity. In this case, the ethnicity under discussion is one upon which the Syrian and Iraqi states have both historically inflicted harm, as noted in Chapter 1.

3.1.8.2 Positionality, Coloniality, Method

Situated intersectionality also takes up feminist theory's longstanding attention to the epistemic effects of positionality (Yuval-Davis, "Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality" 94). It therefore urges recognition of my own social location as a white, male, cis-gender, US

academic who is engaged in the creation of knowledge—however provisional—about Western Asian people and places. To be clear, I do not propose intersectionality as a schema with universal applicability. Given the work of Kurdish-identifying feminist scholars as well as the presence of a prominent gender studies center in the KRI, it would be inaccurate to describe intersectionality as simply an imposition of Western ideas (American University Sulaimani Iraq; Azeez; Hardi, "Kurdish Women Refugees"; Hardi, "Women's Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan"). Yet it might be fair to say that years of study and professional experience in English departments has led me to encounter intersectionality as part of a *normative* academic discourse unlike those dominant in much of the KRI (Bilge 411). Taking stock of this point of origin underpins my awareness that the projection of the categories essential to US intersectionality could amount to what queer theorist Jasbir Puar refers to as "epistemic violence." She writes:

> [T]he categories privileged by intersectional analysis do not necessarily traverse national and regional boundaries . . . . Indeed, many of the cherished categories of the intersectional mantra—originally starting with race, class, gender, now including sexuality, nation, religion, age, and disability—are the products of modernist colonial agendas . . . . (54)

In this passage, Puar questions not only the origins but also the export of the categories of social division with which we are most familiar. Any ethical extension of situated intersectionality to non-Western people and contexts must therefore consider the categories at play while working toward an anti-colonial practice. And these categories must be historically informed. The Kurdish case, after all, touches upon oppressions dating from the fall of the Ottoman empire and the imposition of states whose "formal borders cut across the major Kurdish linguistic and cultural groupings . . . ." (Chatty 233).

In light of the historical circumstances gathered at the Syria-Iraq border as it was negotiated by Syrian refugees—especially Kurdish-identifying Syrian refugees like the overwhelming majority of the TOB interviewees— my approach has been to work whenever possible *from* their expressions of belonging to discern the social categories of consequence to them. Knowing that these categories are likely to be rich in historical resonances that Western academics like myself may need scholarly help to hear, I have considered Syrian interviewees' self-representations in the context of a wide range of sources from Kurdish, refugee, Middle East, and migration studies. The resulting dialogism allows a methodological "strategy of fluctuation and comparison" between categories of social division familiar to me and those brought to my attention in Kurdistan (Winker and Degele 57). Because situated intersectionality as a conceptual apparatus is not explicitly accounted for in literacy studies, I view it within the context of this project as a crucial point of method making possible several of the findings presented in the following section.

3.2 Findings

This section further develops the overview of the project presented in the Introduction through an emphasis on the TOB interviewees. With the project's argument already in place, I center their voices by portraying several interviewees in detail and listing further examples to better substantiate key points.

3.2.1 Literacy Studies and Dialogic Interviewing: Saman's Joke

Saman is a tall, irrepressibly friendly man. The several times I encountered him in Arbat, he was always at the center of a talkative crowd. The idea of *not* arranging to interview him would have been absurd—before we spoke formally, we had chatted in public spaces in the camp. He had kindly encouraged my halting Arabic, and I his English.

Our interview was arranged by Kheredeen, the Community Mobilizer assigned to help us. When we came to Saman's door he greeted Bijar and I like old friends. Saman's home in the camp was comfortable, and several of his grown children as well as their infants could be seen or heard nearby. Our interview, which ran almost two hours, included many moments in which Saman told stories, entertaining or touching asides for which he apologized unnecessarily. He also offered meta-commentary on the interview, sometimes initiating deft transitions. Just as I, taking notes while Bijar engaged in interpretation, listened carefully and waited to circle back to interesting ideas as the rhythm of the interaction seemed to allow, Saman did the same, listening carefully to my questions and, with amusement, helping me to put disparate threads in order. An example of this may be seen in our discussion of literacy, which not only illustrates the dialogic quality of the interview, but also offers a unique perspective, one that demonstrates the imbrication of print-based repertoire and mobile devices. I write about Saman in part because I want to honor the warmth with which he made me welcome. But it also happens that Saman, in his attention to the topic of 'literacy,' clarifies the complexity of my reliance upon an academic rather than popular understanding of the term.

After talking about his home city, Qamishlo, and the place he'd been living when the war started, a village near Damascus, we had discussed his education and employment. Saman was

denied access to education as a result of his family's years of living in Lebanon, informally, when he was boy. Without the requisite papers, school had been an official impossibility, and local headmasters had declined to make an exception for Saman. In the following transcription, Bijar begins translating in the first-person, but switches to third-person pronouns; both refer to Saman.

> Saman (Bijar): You know, as an illiterate person, I just was as a normal worker. I didn't know how to write or how to read, that's why I was just a casual worker.
>
> Jordan: And so if I understand, you speak Arabic and Kurmanji, but you don't write in those languages.
>
> Saman (Bijar): He doesn't know how to write, but he just know how to write numbers only because you know doing . . . work [you] see . . . how to write numbers.

Later in the interview, I turned to questions about the sociomaterial focus of the study, the mobile phone. Even relatively early in our two months of daily work together, Bijar was no stranger to this question. He, like many people in the KRI, carries both a smartphone and a Nokia feature phone, the latter being an economical choice for local voice calling. Because we had experienced some difficulty sorting out what kind of phone interviewees' had carried during their travels (the term 'smartphone' being applied to *any* mobile device), Bijar helpfully started using his own Nokia as a prop during interviews. In this way, our interlocutors could better confirm which kind of phone they recalled owning in Syria when they left for the KRI.

Bijar showed Saman his mobiles and the two men spoke rapidly in Arabic. "He had a phone like this Nokia, which was a normal phone in Syria," Bijar reported. After explaining how his Syrian SIM card had failed to provide service after the border crossing, Saman also explained: "I bought a Korek telecom sim card, and [I] started to call my brother. I have my brother's number

on a paper. But I used the same phone I had in Syria." At this point in the interview, while I was taking a few notes, Saman said something to Bijar in Arabic that induced a hearty chuckle. Bijar interpreted the joke, I believe, word-for-word: "He never asked me the question: If you don't know how to read, how did you recognize which number belongs to who?" The *he* referred to, of course, was me.

And Saman was right. I'd become caught up in the emergent story of the phones that I had forgotten the earlier discussion of reading and writing. Saman then described a series of strategies for using a mobile phone while being unable to read, yet being confident in his numeracy. Having his "brother's number on a paper" when he crossed the border was one such strategy. Bijar offered Saman's full explanation:

> When they came from Syria to Kurdistan, he had all of the numbers [in the old SIM], but he has a good memory and he memorized all of the numbers. For example, this number belongs to my brother, this one belongs to my son, this one belongs to my other son, so that way I could recognize the numbers. And he has another skill, which is when he reads a number on a paper he recognizes or memorizes the picture of the name, you know what I mean? For example, it is written, John, so he cannot read the name, but he can guess that this name is *that* name, even though—so, by these two skills he could call those two persons and he could recognize all the different numbers.

In reviewing the recording, there is a sense that Bijar has become invested in Saman's comments, and is working to elaborate their importance in his own way, providing a Western name, John, in his example (Saman did not use it). All of us in the room were keenly focused, our

attention sharpened by the way Saman had suddenly woven two crucial threads of the interview together.

Even when set up to display Arabic characters, his Nokia's operating system posed challenges for a user like Saman, yet his resourcefulness, visual discernment, and memory were up to the task of devising a workaround.[45] It took the viewpoint of someone with limited alphabetic literacy skills to so effectively illustrate their relationship to communicative artifacts like cell phones. The story also illustrates how my interpretation of literacy studies to include a broad range of communicative practices operates at some distance from popular understandings of literacy as reading and writing, the more narrow yet common meaning of it understood by the TOB interviewees.

But, as this interaction suggests, the variable senses of the word 'literacy' are not exclusive. There is an imbrication of the alphabetic text to be found in the operating systems of a mobile devices' icons, interface (buttons/screen), handset, SIM card, battery, etc. And, further, the alphabetic text to be found in the operating systems requires not just print literacy (in its most elemental sense) to activate it, but other aspects of sociomaterial practice as well, including oral language, physical facility with the handset, and an infrastructural understanding of the nature and scale of the possible interconnections between devices. Of these, only the matter of text posed a problem for Saman, which is instructive: no amount of attention *to the device itself* could have revealed this barrier to access. Saman was denied access to print literacy not by some feature of

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[45] Fidan, an out-of-camp interviewee, shared a somewhat parallel example. Although she had been to school until the 6th grade, she described her reading and writing in this way: "I can just write my name and read my name." She found smartphones, with their icons and pictures, much easier to negotiate than earlier feature phones. Before her son brought her a smart phone, she struggled "because it was a normal phone, it was difficulty for writing, but now [I have] a smartphone [I] use Viber, Facebook, WhatsApp."

the device, but by a statist logic of exclusion, what Vieira refers to as a "documentary infrastructure," which barred Saman from going to school ("Undocumented in a Documentary Society" 451–55). The importance of this detail to Saman's relationship to mobile devices validates the application of literacy studies' contextual, ethnographic approaches to questions of literacy and technology.

I thanked Saman for explaining how he could use his phone so well without being able to read, and I praised his inventiveness. Bijar shared Saman's response, one of several in which he drew upon the details of our conversation to offer a commentary informed by his Muslim faith:

He says that when God takes something from you [he's generalizing, added Bijar, at this point] —that's why as a student I don't know how to read. But I have some skills, some other skills, which recompense, which I miss. So that's why he also thanks God for having some kind of love with people because whenever he goes, people likes him. So he thanks God for this because it is something not everybody have.

3.2.2 Displacement: Safety and Economic Security

The majority of the journey narratives featured internal displacement within Syria and then a trip to the KRI. Thus many of the TOB respondents were internally displaced people (IDPs) prior to becoming international refugees. This dynamic is consonant with Hokayem's observation that a "consequence of the [Syrian War] was the movement of Kurdish refugees from Damascus, Aleppo, and southern and western parts of the country towards the Kurdish-dominated northeast and into Iraqi Kurdistan" (80–81). This first move within Syria was often compelled by threats to

physical safety; the second, to the KRI, by the need to find economic security within a state shattered by war.

Karwan and Rahima's comments illustrate the two-fold problem. Karwan, the breadwinner in the family who came to the KRI first, said this of his motives to leave Syria: "First thing war," and then, "we had a bad situation. No work." For the family to survive, the war had to be avoided, yet the path to safety had, eventually, to offer chances to grapple with their economic precarity. But, while Karwan was in the KRI arranging for their livelihood, the war in Aleppo lurched into their neighborhood. Rahima describes her flight: "I walked to the garage with the bullets in the sky," she said. "What should I carry, my clothes or my children? I crossed this street without anything! I was living in the war, in the battlefield." After reaching her immediate destination, a bus depot where she would find a ride East, she recounted, "checking her [daughter's] body if she's hurt or not . . . if she has a bullet inside her body or not."

Dijwar described a process of decision-making that balanced financial well-being with safety, until there was no choice but to heed the latter's demands. As a professional who had only recently started a firm in Damascus, he was hesitant to leave, and he waited, hoping for the best, even though there was open warfare and the use of heavy weapons in multiple parts of the city. When the violence swung closer and the threat was simply too near to ignore, he and his family hastily departed. Similarly, it was the "bullets in the skies," according to Sheyda, that urged her and her husband "to go to Kurdistan, to keep ourselves safe." She was, her husband, Aso, added, like a "cat with a baby kitten: she wants to take them someplace safe."

For parents like them, especially, seeking a sustainable economic situation was a necessary next step after determining to leave. The KRI economy offered comparatively better chances than northeastern Syria. "I had relatives, Ferhad said, "who told me . . . you can find jobs here in

Salaimani easier than in Dohuk or Erbil." That is, economic factors entered into decision-making, such as which city in the KRI to settle in, after Ferhad had already determined that he would leave Syria. The TOB journey narratives therefore suggest that the need for security was the foremost consideration, but that it would be artificial to consider this factor outside of the context of not only a shattered Syrian economy, but ill-timed economic crises in the KRI. The enmeshed nature of these considerations bear out migration studies' longstanding critique of the analytic division between economic and security-based motives for migration (Chatty 16).[46]

Hozan's journey narrative, quite representative of the TOB interviewees, especially those in the 'urban' group described in Chapter 1, illustrates how physical danger and economic insecurity constituted a cascade of pressures that might be answered with movement. Living near Damascus for almost twenty years before the war, the fighting compelled her, her husband, and adult children to return to her home city, Qamishlo, by bus. Her husband, who had relatives in Sulaymaniyah, preceded her across the border by one month. "He had a cell phone, he called us to

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[46] Chatty explains the consequences of this distinction in cases in which "political repression and economic underdevelopment go hand in hand," such as flight from the combined pressures of "famine and war" (16). She writes:

> Dowty makes clear . . . the distinction between 'economic' and 'political' refugee becomes meaningless (1987: 236). For contemporary social sciences, however, such a distinction is important, as it is the basis upon which mainly Western countries agree or refuse to grant asylum. Being determined a 'Convention refugee' allows a political victim to gain asylum. Others found to be 'economic migrants' in the determination process are generally excluded from entry into the Western state and sent back. These concerns regarding asylum ultimately are of little interest for the Arab Middle East, where forced migrants and other dispossessed and displaced peoples have sought refuge. By and large, such peoples have been welcomed in the new nation-states where they have found themselves and have been allowed to settle and integrate, if not assimilate (16).

While the phrasing "Arab Middle East" elides the ethnic diversity of Western Asia (to which Chatty is almost always highly attentive), the point holds for the KRG; no TOB interviewee described being questioned as the nature of their displacement, and for most, securing their asylum seeking status was largely a formality.

our normal, to our land phone, and used Korek telecom SIM card" she said. Travelling in fall of 2014, she made the trip in the company of many others. She had heard that in August, as many as 60,000 Syrian nationals had similarly sought asylum in the KRI, most crossing the pontoon bridge across the Tigris at the Sahela border crossing. These crowds had urged a coordinated response from the KRG authorities, and "on the border they provide buses for us, we came somewhere near to Dohuk, then we came to Sulaymaniyah." After taking the government-supervised bus, Hozan, finding that her Syrian SIM card was not providing service, asked a cab driver if she might dial her husband's number, and in this way they were reunited.

Their plan to live in Sulaymaniyah was undone not only be the number of Syrian refugees arriving in the KRI, but by the influx of displaced Iraqis fleeing ISIS activity in Iraq, especially the occupation of Mosul. Displaced Iraqi nationals far outnumbered Syrian asylum seekers in the KRI, and the KRI housing market, which had previously accommodated many Syrian families, became woefully impacted.[47] "At that time people came from Mosul, from southern Iraq, so the price were high," said Hozan, adding, "That's why the owners of the houses were asking for more money." The last push toward the Arbat camp, therefore, was largely financial: "They changed the rent from $400 to $800 dollar, and I couldn't pay," said Hozan.

Biyan's experience ran parallel to Hozan's. He and his family faced similarly successive displacements. Another member of what I have described as the 'urban' group of the TOB interviewees, he hails from a Kurdish-majority town quite near the KRI border in the northeast,

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[47] There were 3.5 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Iraq at the time, but "around 2.5 million were added just in 2014. Approximately 46 percent of these IDPs and a quarter of a million Syrian refugees fled to the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), increasing its population by 28 percent in a matter of months" (Karaspan and Kulaksiz).

but had been living for many years in a small city in southwest Syria when the war began. It was, according to Biyan, a city that "stood against Assad" and "became dust" in the ensuing combat. This violence forced Biyan and his family to make the trip east across the country to their home village in Jazira just on the Syrian side of the border with the KRI. They remained there for some weeks, but it was "very difficult for my children . . ." said Biyan, explaining, "when you live in city, they weren't used to living inside villages."

Of the "several reasons" for the second trip, he said (in a statement that echoes Karwan's, above), "the first reason was because of war, and because there wasn't any opportunity for working."[48] In order to provide for his wife and children, he followed in the footsteps of his brother, who had come to Sulaymaniyah months before him, and with whom he spoke by phone about the situation in the KRI. Making the trip in 2012, he and his wife soon brought their children as well. Their early years in the KRI were a hopeful period during which Biyan found chances to ply his trade in the construction industry and the family rented a flat in Sulaymaniyah, thereby enjoying an urban lifestyle somewhat like that which they had left behind in southwestern Syria.

Unfortunately, this bright time was short-lived. "When we came to Kurdistan at that time . . . you have lots of opportunity to find a work to provide [what is] needed for your family," Biyan said, adding, "but you know, now it is different." As other interviewees also emphasized, the

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[48] Biyan's interview was rare in that he did not describe the idea of going to the KRI as a reason, in itself, to make the journey. Even so, Biyan believes firmly in the underlying unity of the Kurdish people, and his off-the-cuff explanation of the Kurdish situation was among the most detailed and compelling that I heard during an interview. He described Kurdistan as "a poor nation who has suffered a lot, surrounded by colonies who wants to harm us, to give us pain . . . . This is a place of revolution against enemies . . . . We have a lot of martyrs." He traced the historical fallout of "Sykes-Picot," in which "they separated Kurdistan into four parts," but was firm in his belief that all of "Kurdistan is the same, it doesn't matter if it's in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, or Syria . . . . Maybe we have different accents, but we have the same language, the same tradition." This viewpoint, though, did not explicitly inform Biyan's travel to the KRI.

tightening labor market led Biyan and his family to enter the camp system, where they began living in a UNHCR tent, a new low point. Coming to live at the camp, Biyan explained,

> [W]as like the end of the world, because there were no opportunity for work, everyone closed their house door to us, and we couldn't find anything to, to provide a basic needs for our family, bread for our family . . . . As soon as we came to the camp, we felt that we are refugees it is not our home. We had that feeling.

As the interview wound to a close, I made sure to invite Biyan's questions or comments, a standing practice of mine that often led interviews to a coda, or even a second wind. He had replied: "I have no question, but I am jealous of your freedom, of your education, of your country, because you have things I want to have." Biyan gestured to the axes of privilege that had allowed us to meet, but could achieve little else, and there was little I could say in return.

Throughout these narratives were any number of stops and starts, decisions to part and then rejoin extended family groups, moments of respite with friends and neighbors, weeks or months spent between destinations waiting to see how the situation might change. Often, interviewees' reported planning to remain in the KRI for a short time. Sola mentioned that she and her family were planning to stay in Sulaymaniyah only three months, but found that they "couldn't go back to Syria." When they first left Syria, Rasha told her daughter Fatima to pack only a few things, telling her daughter, "We will come back." As far as I know, they haven't, yet, and reside in Arbat.

3.2.3 Networked Wayfinding[49]

As stated in the Introduction, I view cellular technology and the communications infrastructures underpinning their function as having amplified the TOB interviewees' chances to move with and through their personal networks.[50] In most cases, interviewees' comments

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[49] When I began research for this dissertation, the working title of the project was "Networked Wayfinding and the Forcibly Displaced." The question guiding the very early phases of the work was: How and to what degree did mobile technology help Syrian refugees to enjoy their human right to freedom of movement? While doubtful about digital migration studies' European focus, I had found in freedom of movement an analytic that seemed both manageable and relevant to regional research. Though I did not realize it at the outset, this narrow focus could have elided the histories and identities that would later prove central to my thinking about trajectories of belonging, and enact much of the that which I would come to critique in Western media figuration of the connected refugee and some works of digital migration studies. Twigt describes how the "literature on the mediated experiences of displacement . . . has focused on practical potentials of digital technologies, for instance, in regard to navigating onward journeys" (1). My emphasis on Networked Wayfinding reflects a similar instrumental emphasis on navigation. But thinking about the nature and composition of the networks that could impact wayfinding allowed me to subordinate it to the other concepts at play within this dissertation. Still, there are dynamics to be seen in the TOB interviews that are usefully regarded through such an analytic: how did these people use cellular phones to effect their journeys from Syria to the KRI?

[50] The word "network" is rife with meaning, but I use it throughout this dissertation to describe social associations. As Latour writes of two major uses of the "ambiguous" term:

> One is of course the technical networks—electricity, trains, sewages, internet, and so on. The second one is used, in sociology of organization, to introduce a difference between organizations, markets, and states (Boyer 2004). In this case, network represents one informal way of associating together human agents (Granovetter 1985). When (Castells 2000) uses the term, the two meanings merge since network becomes a privileged mode of organization thanks to the very extension of information technology. (*Reassembling the Social* 129)

In this dissertation, I find it useful to avoid the pan-material bundling of actants into the networks Latour refers to in "actor-network theory." The reason for this, as I develop further in Chapter 3, is that I want to reserve the term *infrastructure* for the interlinked physical and built-environmental elements I discuss, such as cellular communications towers. This allows me to rely on the term *network* only in describing social networks of relationships between people. Parsing the two recognizes the particular materiality and historical relationships between networks and infrastructures, while still making available to inquiry phenomena that can be best understood in the dynamics of interaction between them. Thus, when I invoke Diminescu's "*mobile networks of belonging*," I mean to emphasize the strong identificatory and affective bonds, often familial in nature, likely to impact mobility choices during displacement (573, my emphasis).

suggested their association with a transnational network spanning the Syria-Iraqi border. Voice calling provided a means to both maintain the bonds constituting that network and set groups within it in motion. Although I did not attempt to trace interviewee ego networks, a method used by some literacy studies scholars (Byrd 35), I did track interviewees' references to those who preceded them to the KRI, and those whom they subsequently encouraged, guided, or helped to make the same trip. In both case, these were typically people with whom a strong tie was shared, such as a family member.

Unlike the version of travel suggested by media and scholarship centered upon migrant journeys to Europe, in which the mobile phone was important in deciding on routes to desired destinations, the TOB interviewees knew where they were going. Of the route from Qamishlo to the KRI border, for instance, Saman said, "As Syrian people we know that, so it was very easy for us to take a cab, a car, he dropped us at the border." Contrary to *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys'* central exhibit of a map to Germany, none of the TOB respondents reported using maps of any kind, digital or otherwise. Instead, the information shared in advance tended to be logistical. There were periods when the relationship between Rojava and the Kurdish Regional Government became strained to the point that the Semalka border was closed. This explains why Bauan called his family in Syria specifically to let them know when it was open. "I called them, I told them that the Kurdistan Region had opened the border. You can come to Semalka and you can cross the border," he said.[51] At such times, according to Hozan, "thousands" of Syrian nationals headed to the KRI.

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[51] The Semalka border crossing was a consistent reference in the TOB interviews. "Since 2012 the Syrian-Iraqi border at Semalka became the first Kurdish-Kurdish border with antagonistic parties on both sides: the PKK ally PYD in Syria and Barzani's PDK in Iraq" (Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* 53)

Networked communication through voice calls therefore tended to impact the *timing* of a decision to travel, rather than the route, which was common knowledge.[52]

The importance of gender was evident in the way in which the people moved according to networked knowledge. As noted in the introduction, men often left Syria first. Biyan, an Arbat resident, preceded his family to the KRI. He said, "I was here, I was looking for three months, alone. After that I talked to my family. I told them, 'please come to Kurdistan.'" Of the TOB interviewees already discussed, this dynamic is also borne out by the journey narratives offered by Saman, Aram, and Karwan. Saman, who followed his brother to the KRI, actually came, in the first instance, with his wife to deliver his mother into the care of other family members already in the KRI. Then, "he called his children to come from Syria to Kurdistan because it might be dangerous for them to stay, like a genocide." Saman's daughter, Nefel, described how her father called her from the KRI and requested the she leave Damascus and join him. Of her trip to the KRI, Parwen, who followed her brother Arwan, said, "every hour I called my brother and my mother until I arrived to Arbat." Her mother, Naz, had preceded her in the company of their father, whose brother was already in Erbil, the KRI capital.

Even men who made the trip ahead of their wives, mothers, or daughters tended, however, to have been guided by a pre-existing transnational network. Ferhad's relations were already ensconced in all three of the major KRI cities, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Dohuk, when he arrived in 2012. Haval, one of the younger men to travel alone, did not have family in the KRI. Instead he

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[52] This may still be regarded as a form of wayfinding. The *Encyclopedia of Geography* presents wayfinding as an iterative epistemic process of prior knowledge and "wayfinding strategies" (Klippel, Alexander and Barney Warf, Ed.). When wayfinding strategies are supplemented by mobile technology, they enlist digitally literate practices.

had a close and well-established friend in the KRI whose family was willing to take him in, treating him "like a son." The aggregate effect of these networked connections, interlinked through voice calling, was successful travel out of Syria and, at the very least, safety from the war in the short term. The TOB study therefore affirms prior scholarship pointing out that "transnational diasporic community networks can contribute positively to the de facto protection of refugees" (Long and Crisp 56).

3.2.4 Enduring Technology

Ferhad, a former industrial worker, now in his later years, smiled from behind spectacles while sharing the nickname of his first cell phone, which he and his family had affectionately referred to as "the sandal" on account of its shape. 2G phones like Ferhad's "sandal" lacked the range of applications common to smartphones, yet they could certainly send texts. When I purchased my first Nokia in 2002 in San Jose, California, I began texting immediately, scrolling through character options by repeatedly pressing keys on the alphanumeric pad. This memory led to surprise when I found that the TOB study informants did not report making extensive use of texts. They used their handsets mainly for calls, not because the phones had no other affordances, but in part because, I suspect, people in the Syria of the early 2010s emphasized voice calling; deferring contact to text was less the norm, an added expense made superfluous if one's friends and family tended to pick up calls.

Figure 4. "An Interviewee's 2G Nokia cell phone," Brought to Iraq from Syria (Hayes)

Aso, Sheyda's husband, had gone to Turkey before coming to the KRI. "When I left Syria

[for] Turkey," he said, "I had this phone, this old phone, I used it a lot because I had relatives in

Turkey . . . . Without this phone, I couldn't do it! Then we came here and I bought my Samsung."

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Although many respondents living in towns along the Syria-Turkey border had been to Turkey before, relatively few traveled to the KRI *via* Turkey. But as far as phones, Aso's story is otherwise quite typical, especially among the Arbat interviewees: he relied on a 2G feature phone while making his way to the KRI and then upgraded to a smartphone quite soon after.

While I did not collect detailed financial information, I suspect a correlation between income, the early adoption of smart phones, and the means to live out-of-camp. As noted above in Hozan's example, many of the TOB interviewees had not come to the KRI with the intention of living in a camp; they had planned to get jobs in cities like Sulaymaniyah and rent housing. Those who were less vulnerable to the economic crises that would befall the KRI might have been better-resourced in Syria as well, and therefore likely to have been able to afford the relative luxury of a smartphone. This is speculation, yet it does seem to be supported by the fact that only Arbat residents reported travelling *without* a cell phone, a situation more likely with women, who generally travelled with a husband or male relative who did own a mobile phone of some kind. What follows is a tabulation of the kind of phone, if any, reported by the TOB interviewees across the study's two sites. While it cannot be taken as statistically representative of the entire Syrian community in Arbat or Sulaymaniyah, it does clarify the basis of my prior claims about 2G phones:

Table 2. Interviewees by Research Site and Mobile Device

Site: Arbat	47 total interviewees
Nokia (or other 2G feature phone)	31
Smartphone (3G+)	7
No phone during travel (women/men)	7 (5/2)
Uncertain	2

Site: Sulaymaniyah	29 total interviewees
Nokia (or other 2G feature phone)	18
Smartphone	8
No phone during travel	0
Uncertain	3
TOB Study total interviewees	**76**
Nokia (or other 2G feature phone)	49 (64%)
Smartphone (3G+)	15 (20%)
No phone during travel (women/men)	7 (9%)
Uncertain	5 (7%)

To the entries on Nokias and Smartphones, I will add that the small but distinct Afrin group of interviewees mentioned in the Contexts section (3 people) had arrived in Sulaymaniyah in 2018, having been displaced by the invasion of Turkey's armed forced in January, 2018. By virtue of the year in which they travelled, they were much more likely to have come with a smartphone than the large cluster of interview participants who had arrived in the KRI from 2012-2014, many of whom settled in Arbat. The "Uncertain" entries reflect interviews that could not be found to definitively answer the question as to what kind of device the interviewee travelled with, sometimes because I had poorly managed a session with several participants.[53]

[53] There were several reasons why, in hindsight, I was unable to determine with certainty if a given interviewee travelled from Syria with a smartphone, and all are indicative of limitations in the methods used or my implementation of them. They include: contradictory explanations on the part of the interviewee (for example, citing a model that appeared after the date of travel), a flawed recording including inaudible sections, an interrupted interview that never arrived at clarity on the matter of phones, the departure of a

Although the prevalence of 2G phones among the TOB interviewees is interesting, it might be an instance of technological fetishism to presume that the mere possession of a smartphone would have shifted the communicative practices in use. Consistent with the lack of reports of text messaging among the TOB interviewees, some people with smartphones were still relying on voice calling among their transborder connections from 2011-2014, at least. Further, as noted in the Introduction, the communications infrastructure maintained by SyriaTel was not, for much of the war, conducive to fast 3G or 4G access. To say as much is not to suggest a hard and fast rule. How many people need to have smartphones and a fast connection before there is a sea change in communicative practices? The TOB information I collected suggests that for many interviewees, this happened only after they came to the KRI.

Fatima, Rasha's daughter, who went with her to Lebanon and Cairo before coming to the KRI, arrived with a Samsung smart phone. She had been using her "Syrian SIM card" before coming to the KRI. She was an early adopter, and estimated that she had changed devices "ten times" before settling on the iPhone she had in hand when we met in 2017. Even so, she does not

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member of a group interview before I asked them about technical details, or simply my own failure to direct the conversation in adequate detail. One challenge in assessing the data was that, as Bijar and I realized early in 2017, there was some tendency among interviewees to use the term 'smartphone' loosely, often describing any cellular feature phone as 'smart.' For the purpose of the study, we considered smartphones those that could access social networking sites or messaging apps, such as WhatsApp. Careful questioning could usually resolve the matter, particularly when Bijar displayed representative devices to illustrate the distinction we were making (as noted in Saman's case, above). Contradictory explanations and problems with recorded audio might have been cleared up with follow-up interviews, but these (much to my later frustration), were not part of the research design. The orientation toward flexible association, noted in the prior section, might have been coupled with a more formulaic set of questions pertaining to devices; in this way, I would have acquired this baseline technical information before any coming and going of respondents. Such a process would have also attenuated the rare cases in which I did not raise questions about devices in enough detail to achieve the certainty required while coding the data. Finally, the successful implementation of a survey, such as that which I discarded in 2017, as discussed in the Methods section, might have provided a clearer picture of which devices were used by the TOB interviewees.

describe using the social networking or internet affordances of the Samsung smart device she had during the journey to the KRI. Similarly, Bauan owned a smartphone before he left Syria. He didn't, however, report using it while taking an informal route through the countryside to Kurdistan. "Of course I had my cell phone," he said, "but I didn't use it a lot because, in Syria, while I was coming on the journey there wasn't any service available, and I came to Kurdistan, and after I came to Kurdistan, I bought an Iraqi SIM card." When I rephrased the question to be sure I hadn't missed something, Bauan confirmed that his smartphone, "doesn't have a role in my journey." He also noted, of SyriaTel, the "bad service of the company . . . in places like Hasekah and Qamishli" because the employees had gone to "to Damascus," abandoning the SyriaTel infrastructure in northeastern Syria. Not only was SyriaTel's infrastructure somewhat dated, but the war led to the neglect of its infrastructure in northeastern Syria (as indicated by Hozan, too, in the Introduction).[54]

The potential for state and non-state actors to surveil refugees' communications, a prominent finding of Gillespie et al.'s *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys*, was widely reported by the Arbat interviewees (2-5, 48, 76). Merely being aware that a given carrier might be compromised was sometimes adequate protection, despite the formal infringement of privacy and chilling of free expression entailed by such a vulnerability. Until leaving Syria in the winter of 2012, Ferhad, the owner of the "sandal" mentioned above, used SyriaTel—despite his understanding that the regime might be listening. "We knew they were overhearing, so we didn't

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[54] Several interviews reference landlines as well. Hozan explains that her husband, who preceded her to the KRI, "called us to our normal, to our land phone." Sola explained how her family had relied upon a landline in Syria, though she had acquired a Nokia when she went to University, and had that device in hand when she came to the KRI and acquired a local SIM.

have an issue," he said. Many interviewees assumed that Syria-Tel, the national cell carrier associated with the Assad regime, was permeable to surveillance, and practiced habitual self-censorship as a result (Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net—Syria Country Report" 4).

When it came time to call family members about leaving the country, Ferhad was unconcerned. While waiting at the border with his family in a throng, Ferhad made hourly calls to relations in both Syria and, up until his service failed, in the KRI. The regime did nothing to interfere with the tens of thousands of Kurds who were fleeing Syria; Ferhad felt that the government "wanted us to leave." After crossing into Iraq, he quickly bought a SIM card registered to Korek, an Iraqi company, so that he could rendezvous with relatives who were already in the KRI.

3.2.5 Trajectories of Belonging

> *In 2017, when the Kurdish MP and human rights activist Osman Baydemir was asked sarcastically by the Deputy Speaker of Turkish Parliament where Kurdistan was, he got up, touched his heart and said: "It is here, Mrs. Speaker: Kurdistan is here." Even if there will never be an independent and united Kurdistan, it lives in our hearts, in our imagination, in our poetry and songs. It is this "imagined" homeland which unites us, this sense of belonging to a defiant community, this shared experience of oppression and resistance.* (Hardi "Poetry's Power to Speak the Unspeakable" 7)

The semi-autonomous region of Iraq often known as Kurdistan pulled to Syrian Kurds in need as a place of ethnolinguistic identification, security, linguistic and cultural expression, and

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opportunity. Syrian Kurds like Sheyda and Aso expressed a longstanding wish "to come and see Kurdistan"; acting on the wish was compelled by the war and facilitated by the KRG's acceptance of asylum seekers. The TOB interviewees often reported both a desire to join the pan-Kurdish community anchored by the idea of 'Kurdistan' and the disappointment of both hard economic circumstances and tension with the host community, despite the common bond of Kurdish identity. Thus, the hope for a broader sense of belonging could rise and fall in relation to embodied experiences and beliefs about that experience. In this section, I will share several interviewees' accounts suggesting the utility of this conceptual framework, beginning with a pair of extended portraits.

When Inan was considering his trip to Syria, he was concerned about his son, who had suffered a serious bullet wound in Syria while on his way to buy bread in the vicinity of fighting between opposition and government forces. Inan was advised, "Why don't you go to your brothers in Kurdistan?" (a locution, Bijar explained, in which the "brothers" were metaphorical). The Syrian Kurds with whom Inan spoke were certain that the KRG would provide the necessary medical care. "They have [a] country, and you are a Kurd and they are a Kurd as well," they suggested to him. Failing that, he was told, "they will provide you on an airplane or a flight to go from Kurdistan to another country." His father endorsed the plan, telling Inan,

> I wish that you can go to Kurdistan because they are free, they have freedom of expressing their opinion, they have a country, they are free to speak in Kurdish, but in Syria we were not allowed, we are forbidden to speak in Kurdish, we had to speak in Arabic, so my father wished us well to go see Kurdistan.

The range of Inan's motivations, then, included the physical well-being of his son and the hope for a life free of the discriminatory pressures Kurds faced in Syria. Although Kurdistan does

have modern hospitals, both public and private, there are cases in which patients are taken out of the country. Inan was neither able to get the care his son needed in the KRI, nor arrange for the UNHCR to take him to another country. "Money," "connection," and a willingness to resort to "force," Inan concluded, were the only elements that could shift the social calculus in which he and his son had been found undeserving. The experience, not surprisingly, diminished his enthusiasm for the KRI. He said:

> It is true that I came to Kurdistan; they are Kurds, and I'm comfortable because I'm in my nation, in my country . . . but about the treatment about their health, it is nothing, nothing that they have. We came, it was not like what they said in Syria, it was not like they described to us in Syria. It was different.

The overly rosy image of Kurdistan Inan imbibed in Syria not doubt contributed to the emotional fall his narrative conveys. The failure of humanitarian medical care left him ready to leave. "I would go to hell, if it helps my son. I don't care if I if I go to the sea to . . .[Europe]. Like, if I die, I don't care if it helps my son." Like other interviewees facing harsh circumstances, Inan hoped that I could arrange help for his son. He pressed me to write down his son's name. Clarifying my role as a teacher and my hope to bring what I learned in the KRI back to the US, I demurred. Again he pressed me, *insisting*. Beyond speaking to Kheredeen about the situation, who explained that such cases are in the UNHCR's hands, I did nothing. It weighed upon me then, and still does today.

The border was "open for us in Kurdistan," said Bauan. A strong sense of belonging can be heard in the way he explained his choice to go to the KRI instead of another regional destination, such as Turkey. "I came to Kurdistan: My nation, my language, my people who can understand me have the same language, who can feel me," he said. He prefaced his reply by comparing Syrian

and Turkey in terms of their respective histories of marginalizing Kurds. He explained, "Turks are just like [Arabs]. For example: Should I to Turkey? Should I pick Turkey to stay? No!"

Bauan and his wife Laylan self-settled outside of the camp, but then came to the Arbat, like many others, as a practical response to a hard financial situation. When we met, Bauan was unemployed. He felt that he had been cheated out of wages by a Turkish employer operating in the KRI, and that the local authorities had been unwilling to intervene, promising only to look away if Bauan assaulted the man with his fists. Discrimination in the KRI was rampant, he argued, "because we are from Syria and we are working in the most of the fields and companies and shops, different fields, and they are saying that you took 50% of the opportunities of working from us, so that's [why they] are doing this as a kind of revenge, behaving in this way." Bauan's frustrations, though, extended beyond lost wages and employment.

Speaking of the host community, he said, "They are dealing with me as an Arab person, because while I was using my Kurdish they are answering me in Arabic. Then I regret; if I had money today I'd go back to my place in Syria." Being treated "as an Arab person" was clearly a particular blow for someone who anticipated feeling a sense of belonging in Kurdistan and, as noted, believed Arab and Turkish people to be similar in their antipathy toward Kurds.

As Anthias notes, intersectional analysis attends to "stigma," links to "inferiorisation and othering," those corrosive "processes that construct hierarchical places or positions in the social order of things" (*Identity and Belonging* 10). Bauan's ironic othering as an Arab turns upon a matter of language, of being answered "in Arabic" even though he has demonstrated, by speaking Kurdish, his identification as a Kurd. When Bauan is answered by fellow Kurds *in Arabic* he is constructed as an outsider in two senses. Given that Arabic is the official language in Syria, being hailed in Arabic designates Bauan as a member of the Syrian refugee rather than the Kurdish-

speaking host community. Further, it misrecognizes Bauan by locating him, via Arabic, within the historical antipathy between Kurds and Arabs, an opposition in which, as seen above, Bauan is invested. Thus, having his Kurdish responded to in Arabic doubly denies Bauan's identification as a Kurdish person.

That such a rejection could be inflicted upon someone attempting to perform Kurdish belonging via language evokes Anthias's observation that while "social divisions . . . can be mutually reinforcing," they may also "function to produce multiple and uneven social patterns and *contradictory* locations at particular conjunctures" (*Identity and Belonging* 14). She offers the example of a man who "may be subordinated in class terms, but is positioned advantageously in relation to his female partner and may exercise patriarchal forms of power over her" (14). That is, even those who are historically disempowered are capable, in situated circumstances, of oppressing or harming others whom they find at a positional disadvantage. A parallel may be drawn to Bauan's experience in the KRI. Historical harms have been visited by state powers, such as the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, on Iraqi Kurds. Iraqi Kurds Bauan encountered chose to hail him within a localized economy of power relations in which they are the majority and Arabs a minority. Arabs, seen as categorically guilty of past crimes against Kurds might, popularly, be thought to deserve whatever the get. Misrecognizing Bauan, treating him *as if he were an Arab*, therefore allows host community Kurds, historically subordinated, to assert a hierarchy in which they are empowered. The mechanism of this assertion, in my reading, is not just language, but the affective denial of the fellow feeling that circulates positive affirmation among Kurdish men. This othering could then make more palatable the exploitation of Bauan's available labor and increasingly desperate circumstances. The ascendant trajectory of belonging Bauan began was

therefore tempered not just by unfair labor practices, but also by moments of sociolinguistic rejection by the host community.

Readers familiar with the region may point out that Syrian and Iraqi Kurds tend to speak different dialects of Kurdish, Kurmanji and Sorani, respectively. Bauan presented a second example relevant to these distinctions as well. Again, language was used to deny the Kurdish-ness Bauan presumed would be effected through its linguistic performance.

> Bauan: I go to a market and I speak in Sorani and he answers me in Arabic.
>
> Jordan: I don't know a lot, but from what I do know, this is meant to be insulting and push you out and make you feel like you aren't a Kurdish person here.
>
> Bauan: Yes. It's like when you go to a place when you use the language. I went to the supermarket, I used the Kurmanji word, but it may have a different meaning here, so they answer me in Arabic. *Sikina* vs. *Keer*. We use one of our expression for knife, in Kurmanji we use a different expression for 'knife' but it means a very rude meaning here.
>
> Bijar: (Interjecting) The issue is that the Kurmanji word is different than the local Sorani word. *Chocko*, here, vs. *Keer* in Turkey and Syria.
>
> Bauan: Yes. The expression has a different meaning here; only in this part of Kurdistan the meaning is different.

In a different context, such linguistic differences could be the basis of good humor, and affirm Bauan's belonging in the KRI. After all, a Sorani-speaking interlocutor could just as easily recognize such a mistake as an error that *only* a Kurdish person could make. Instead, Bauan experienced the exchange as an attack on his performance of Kurdish identity, the recognition of which might be conducive to a feeling of belonging. That Bauan had exerted himself to acclimate

to the KRI is evident in the fact that he attempted to speak "Sorani," the preferred dialect in Sulaymaniyah. A slip, using a Kurmanji word with an unfortunate meaning in Sorani, proves damaging. Combined with his financial woes, Bauan's was a trajectory in which his sense of possible belonging in the KRI had fallen to lower and lower plateaus. Together, Bauan and Inan's examples indicate how belonging can be impacted by negative experiences pertaining to wellness, social recognition, economic opportunity, and fair play.

Not all trajectories of belonging tended toward a downward spiral of disaffection with Kurdistan or the hope of inclusion. Sola, for example, felt a sense of comfort in the camp, and helped me in 2017 toward an understanding of it as a community in its own right, yet, as a recently married woman thinking about children, she had concerns about that the quality of the educational options available in such a setting. By the time I returned in 2018, Sola was gone.

Sheyda and Aso conveyed still a different feeling. Sheyda was both a new mother and completing a degree at a university in the KRI. Aso, a young man of many skills, had, like others in Arbat, opened up a successful business in the camp itself; prospects of reasonable success seemed good. Though they missed Syria, they seemed to have accepted a life in Arbat, somewhat distant from the host community. Given prospects for economic stability, cultivating more immediate forms of belonging, including their family life and community in Arbat, seemed sufficient to their needs. Rahima and Karwan conveyed a similar feeling. Karwan was working, they had their children with them, and the camp community provided social connection. Rahima, in particular, valued the camp as a community that reminded her of home.

Outside of the camp, TOB interviewees tended perforce to be much more integrated economically into the host community Not only did a livelihood ease some of the pressures felt by many in the camp, but it allowed them many more chances to interact with the host community. I

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saw Fatima, Rasha's daughter by chance in Sulaymaniyah in 2018. She had found a job in the city, and graciously gave me a brief tour of the white-collar firm, where I met several of her co-workers from the host community. Being employed in this way, and entering into positive relationships with her Iraqi Kurdish counterparts seemed crucial to Fatima's sense of the long-term viability of life in the KRI, and she exuded a steady positivity.

To return to Dijwar, his story, read in terms of a trajectory, began as so many others did with an expression of pan-Kurdish belonging, of his desire to try living of living among, as he said, "my own people." In time, this feeling had ebbed and been supplanted by a sense of the abiding *legal* distinction between the refugee and host communities. That is, Dijwar was clear-eyed about the forms of subordination imposed upon him as a non-citizen, such as denial of the right to own property. He explained:

> Here, I can't buy a house. You can't buy a house—no property rights, the government can tell you at any time to move, there are stories; you never know when someone might write a report about you and you'll be deported. Personally, I'm whatever the law is; I abide by the law. You can only buy a car that's it. Everything you can do is rent, it's not a way to be stable, because for how long can you pay the rent? What if I lose my job? There's no security at all.

Dijwar is acutely aware of the implications of asylum seeker status, of the formal obstacles to full belonging in the KRI society into which, in many ways, he was successfully integrated. He is prepared, given that status, to *be* "whatever the law" requires. As a successful professional living in Sulaymaniyah, he is in a better position than most of the TOB interviewees to consider long-term interests like home ownership. Even so, coming to grips with years of living in the KRI as an asylum seeker tempered the initial appeal of living in a Kurdish-majority community. His

interview is among a small set that seem, in their questioning of the legal restrictions faced by asylum seekers, to imply a broader question: *Why* is that Syrian refugees, and especially those welcomed as fellow Kurds, cannot be granted full rights, the status of citizens? Dijwar assessed his family's disposition toward the KRI in carefully chosen words: "We are grateful to be accepted in *their* country."

3.2.6 Belonging and Ethnicity

Majid describes the border as he experienced it in 2013 as a place that incited and celebrated the performance of Kurdish identification. Speaking a Kurdish dialect would be answered with a welcome, a certainty of being allowed to cross the border and an affective affirmation of Kurdish belonging. Majid discussed being asked to identify his family in terms of their tribe, a wider and older pattern of networked belonging rarely discussed in the TOB interviews.

> Jordan: At the checkpoint, when you spoke to *peshmerga* [KRG soldiers], you spoke in Kurmanji?
>
> Majid: I spoke Kurmanji. They are asking me, from which tribe you are from? I had to speak Kurdish to let them know I'm a Kurdish person.
>
> Jordan: So when they say 'tribe' in that context, they don't just mean Arab or Kurd—don't they mean something even more specific?
>
> Majid: Because they know Kurdish tribes, that's why they are asking about tribes.

Jordan: So in a sense, they were verifying that you were a Kurdish person? What do you think would happen if you were an Arab trying to get through the checkpoint at that time?

Majid: They didn't let any Arab people to get in Kurdistan because we heard before that, the border . . . the Kurdistan government will not lot any Arab people to come to Kurdistan. There were Arab people with us in the buses and they didn't let them, they told them, just go back to your country. And they [Arab-identifying refugees] were asking us as a favor, can you please tell peshmerga that [you are] our relatives? To let them in.

Jordan: Did you do this?

Majid: No, I didn't do this. Because I feel like the North of Iraq, Kurdistan, is my country, so I wouldn't do that, I won't betray my country. Maybe the person will be a terrorist? How should I support them?

These comments suggest the transnational reach of Kurdish belonging, and how it, territorialized in the KRI, could materialize social exclusions through the disciplinary infrastructure of its border crossings. Majid, in refusing to falsely shelter fellow displaced Syrians of Arab descent by way of his Kurdish language and family, leaves unchallenged his own prerogative of belonging in Kurdistan, his "country." The position he reports being voiced by the Kurdish *peshmerga* is that Arab-identified Syrians belong in the Syrian Arab Republic. Categories of identity, used to marginalize Kurds in Syria for generations, were turned against Arab-identifying people, at least in this account.

Although consistent with the fraught history of the region, it is not a story that (the very few) Arab-identifying TOB interviewees confirmed. Reem, a plainspoken Arab mother from just

south of Damascus, did not experience the vetting detailed in Majid's narrative. She said, "When we came to Kurdistan, it was very normal. It was legal and they let us to get into Kurdistan. [The soldiers] were very polite, and respectful, and they didn't harm us."

Rahima, also Arab-identifying, had positive things to say about the way displaced Syrians were received in the KRI. She praised, for example, the KRG's tolerance for travelers seeking refuge without documentation. "If someone doesn't have his ID, maybe they will put him in a prison, but they didn't! They opened the door for every single person whether they have ID or they don't have ID, and they made some papers for us." Rahima recalls speaking Arabic at the border, yet still being made welcome. "At the time, I was not speaking Kurmanji, I was speaking Arabic," she said. Majid's account, noted above, reflects a different experience. The TOB interviews are, on this point, somewhat inconclusive. It seems safe to say that, at times, the KRG honored the legal universality of refugees' rights to freedom of movement and asylum. At others, soldiers at the border seem to have vetted refugees by requiring performances of Kurdish identity. What is clear within the broader corpus of interviews is that, for those who could speak Kurdish and demonstrate commonplace cultural knowledge, reaching the KRI, and being warmly received by the people there, tended to be a high point in their experience of displacement.

I drew upon my positionality as an outsider to ask, as blandly as possible, about the ethnicity of TOB interviewees. Everyone responded, but many looked slightly surprised, as if the answer were self-explanatory, as it may seem to people familiar with the culture and its subtler cues.55 Sulaymaniyah is a city in which statues, murals, and plaques all contribute to its explicitly

55 Kurdish friends I spoke to felt very confident they could ascertain whether someone was a Kurd or an Arab by sight.

Kurdish sense of place. Arbat, although created as a camp for Syrian refugees, is not only a Syrian community, but also a Kurdish one. Buildings and facilities, such as the Kobani Bakery, are named in Kurdish after counterparts in Rojava. Even so, there are a small number of Arab-identifying people in Arbat. Rahima estimated that there were perhaps 10 dwellings in the entire camp housing "Arab families."

Rahima had spent years in Damascus and Aleppo, and she felt that tensions between Kurdish and Arab-identifying people were particularly keen in Iraq. "The problems that we have in Iraq . . . belongs to the time of Saddam Hussein, but in Syria we don't have such issues." So present is this historical enmity in daily life that Rahima relies upon her ability to speak Kurdish to pass as a Syrian Kurd. "When I go to Sulaymaniyah," she explained, "I won't say I'm Arabic, I say I'm *Kurmanji*." Her ability to perform Kurdishness through the Kurmanji language helped her attain recognition, not as someone unmarked or taken as a member of the host community, but (at least) as a Kurd. While such a position does not invite complete a sense of belonging in the host community, it at least avoids the possible stigma of being recognized as an Arab.

Rahima's own trajectory of belonging is rooted in a positive sense of Syria as a community in which she and her husband started their relationship in spite of their different ethnicities. Rahima felt, I gleaned, a sense affiliation to the Kurdish community through her husband and his family, their children, and her prior experiences living alongside Kurdish people in Syria. She agreed that being identified as an Arab within the KRI *could* be hurtful, but not necessarily. "If someone tells me I am Arabic in a very offensive way, it hurts my feelings, I don't like it at all. It depends on the person" she said. Karwan was quick to note, in addition, how Rahima's personal comportment allows her to create bonds in the Arbat community, one that, it was implied, might otherwise find reason to stigmatize her as an Arab. "She is the most likeable person in the camp, they all like

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her!" he said, with strong feeling, and I could understand what he meant; they were a charismatic couple, and her ebullient charm was undeniable. Their example suggests the possibility for Arab individuals and mixed-ethnicity families to achieve a feeling of acceptance in the Arbat community through skillful social negotiations of otherwise contradictory axes of belonging.

Not every Arab-identifying person in the camp faired so well. Reem, an older woman sharing a home with her adult children, stated her failings on the matter bluntly. Her choice to come to the KRI had been guided by her close bonds with Kurdish-identifying neighbors in Damascus. "We had neighbors who were Kurds in Syria and they gave us advice to come here, especially Sulaimani," she said. Consistent with this advice, Reem reported positive experiences during her days of living in the city of Sulaymaniyah, a period that came to a close as rents increased. Despite being an Arab Syrian and not speaking Kurmanji, Reem's Muslim identity and maternal status presented avenues of social inclusion. She recalled, fondly, her Kurdish neighbors paying her the customary Ramadan visits and referring to her as "mother." Such an experience is consonant with Reem's description of her life before the war. Syria, in Reem's recollection, was a cosmopolitan space, tolerant of difference. "We were neighbors in Sham [Damascus]," she said. "We didn't make any differentiation between Kurds and Arabs, different types of religion or ethnic; the only differentiation we have is *here* because the situation inside the camp." That is, Reem, experienced opposition between Kurds and Arabs more acutely mainly *after* coming to Arbat. As suggested by Rahima, speaking Arabic was a social liability, one taken to perform one's lack of belonging to the Kurdish community. She said:

> Whenever you speak Arabic, they tell you: you are Arabic, you are speaking Arabic. And you are living in the camp? So it seems impossible . . . they forget that we are all Muslim, and we are human and we are from the same region which is

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Islam. We want to get [out of] the camp to live in Salaimani but we don't have money to pay for the rent, for the house, they are expensive.

For her the problem could be expressed only with firm language: "The Kurds here are racist."[56] Despite being Syrian, Reem's Arab identity, lack of fluency with Kurdish, and low income produced an intersectional social location that made her *more vulnerable* in Arbat, a facility for Syrian refugees, than in the Kurdish-majority host community. Reem's feeling of discomfort in the camp was matched with descriptions of being overcharged for services and goods, such as those she needed to build the permanent home that replaced her tent. Expressing her isolation, she said, "I have no one except god in the camp."

Majid and Reem's stories compare ironically in their closing remarks. Majid, who averred his Kurdish belonging at the border, and with whom I had discussed the different views expressed by his Arab neighbors, offered closing remarks affirming a common Syrian experience of displacement:

> Jordan: What else would you like to tell me before I turn off the recorder?
>
> Majid: They only thing I want—I want to convey my message to any people in America, and your teachers, to inform them about our situation, *not* as Kurds. We don't like racism. Just tell them this is the life of the Syrian people, this is how they live, how they spend their life, how they suffer.
>
> Jordan: So, you would prefer me to emphasize "I met Syrian people" before I say, "who were Kurds"?

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[56] A term, it seems useful to note, Dijwar used to describe some of the attitudes he encountered among Arab residents of Damascus. "There were some racists," he said.

Majid: [I prefer], Syrian refugees before Kurds because we don't want to make it like racism. Because you have met Kurdish people, Arab people: all of them are from Syria.

To respond to the spirit of Majid's request, I will close by considering the several points that Majid and Reem have in common. Neither of them can envision a future in which it might be safe to return to Syria. Reem, despite her fond memories, was not a supporter of the government. She described Syria as a place in which running afoul of the regime had dire consequences. Reem did not doubt she could re-enter Syria, but, because her father had been suspected of being "against Bashar al-Assad," she feared that she would be rapidly taken into custody at a government checkpoint. "It is very easy for them because they will distribute, they will give your name to all the checkpoints on the road, and they will have your name and maybe your picture. They will catch you and they will put you in prison." She recounted a niece's experience of being imprisoned. "She's out of prison, Reem reported, "but she has psychological disorder." Many in Reem's family "who stayed in Syria were executed by Bashar al-Assad."

Majid's fears of his home country were much the same. When asked he if wanted to return, he replied, "I cannot. I am wanted by the government of Bashar al-Assad." Similar too, is the way in which both Majid and Reem would not entirely disown Syria, despite this threat and their years of displacement. Addressing my US citizenship and the ability to travel it enabled, he said:

There is no one who hates his own home, his own country. What should we do? You have been to many countries, you know how the world works, there is freedom all over the world! You can express your opinion, you can say, "I don't like my president"; you will not get killed. But in Syria, if you even say, "I don't like my president," you'll get *executed*.

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Majid's feelings of belonging in the Syria were directed to the past, yet had purchase as well upon possible futures for his children. Where would they belong? What of their education? Majid felt there was cause for concern. He said, "I loved Syria, I wanted to stay in Syria. I am comfortable here, I don't regret that I left Syria, but sometimes I regret it because of my children, because of the future."

The interviews portrayed in this chapter exemplify the findings of the TOB project. Saman's interview adds to the introduction's argument concerning the advantages of literacy studies for the study of technology. Biyan's narrative exemplifies the enmeshed pressures of war and economic circumstance driving the TOB interviewees' displacement. The use of cellular phones in the networked communication and movement enabling travel to the KRI was reported by an overwhelming number of the TOB residents, including Karwan and Rahima, Hozan, and Ferhad. I refer to the 2G devices used most often in this networked movement as *enduring technology*. As a sociomaterial analytic, enduring technology recognizes those devices, infrastructures, and communities of use that are not positioned within global metropoles or similarly elite spaces in which cutting edge technology is likely to be widespread. Applied to the 2010s, the idea of enduring technology creates a representational space between the smart devices consolidating the figure of the connected refugee and the Orientalist representation of Western Asian refugees as abject, disengaged by their ontological kind from modern technologies and temporalities. Inan and Bauan's interviews offer detailed portraits of affective trajectories that trace the anticipation of pan-Kurdish belonging and the subsequent diminution of that feeling through not only a lack of access to commonplace social goods such as medical care and employment, but also, in Bauan's case, the social and linguistic rejection of relations predicated on the host community's acknowledgment of his Kurdish identity.

Given the wide-ranging nature of these findings, some readers may wonder why I opted to make trajectories of belonging the binding concept for this dissertation. First, I wanted, somewhat in the style of Vieira's *Writing for Love and Money*, to make sociomaterial literacy studies a means to think about the dialogic encounters I had with the TOB interviews, who had much to say and teach that could not be limited to a technical focus on mobile devices. That is, even as the project compelled the theoretical reckoning constituting Chapter 3, I did not want the TOB interviewees to function mainly as a means to justify my approach to literacy studies. Second, the *trajectory of belonging* framework encompasses my findings regarding enduring technology, displacement, and settlement. It operates, somewhat in the style of academic discussions of mobility, to evoke movement, such as the networked wayfinding consistently reported by the TOB interviewees, without being constrained to an empirical view of it. The phenomena of (forced) migration and settlement, and the role of communicative practices within them, are of consequence in terms of what they meant for the TOB interviewees. Experiences impacting feelings of belonging, such as changes in geographic location and social position, are therefore articulated into the framework of the trajectory in a non-deterministic fashion. Reem and Rahima, for instance, faced some of the same social pressures by virtue of their Arab identification, but composed greatly different relations of belonging to the Arbat community. Technology was not of intrinsic value to the TOB interviewees, independent of use; it was of consequence because it played a role in the maintenance of networks of belonging, many of them transnational in scope, in which the strong ties of family relationships were central. Trajectories of belonging therefore offers a framework that encourages the understanding of technology and devices through an ethnographic research orientation that can countenance multiple and dynamic forms of affiliation.

4.0 Chapter 3. Sociomaterial Literacy Studies: Affordant Relations within Infrastructures

How should literacy studies scholars conceptualize the role of infrastructure? In considering this question, I describe the approach to sociomaterial literacy studies animating this dissertation. This chapter picks up on the introduction's discussion of Brian Street's <u>Literacy in Theory in Practice</u> and engages recent scholarship, often through close reading, and limns contours of comparison and contrast among discourses through which literacy scholars have engaged materiality, including new materialism and actor-network theory.

What I propose here turns upon the dynamic relations, both semiotic and physical, to be found between elements of differing ontological kind, such as between humans and literacy objects like mobile phones. In order to extend New Literacy Studies' critique of technological determinism, I recover JJ Gibson's ecological understanding of the <u>affordance</u>. Affordant relations within environments become the fulcrum upon which turn sociomaterial literacy events and practices. By entering into affordant relations with literacy objects such as mobile devices, users access the extensive and amplificatory affordances of their concomitant infrastructures.

Given that literacy events articulate users' bodies with infrastructures curated most often by corporate and/or state powers, access to infrastructures is necessarily enmeshed in power relations and politics. And, while they are in use, the infrastructures underpinning sociomaterial literacies provide their users with a material basis for the creation of knowledge about them and the powers curating them. By establishing a robust sense of sociomateriality's embrace of the relationships associating humans with objects and infrastructures, this chapter describes the framework brought into focus by and for the TOB project.

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4.1 Sociomaterialities

Literacy studies scholars have in recent years articulated widely varying sociomaterial conceptions of literacy. They entail a dramatic turn toward objects, physical systems, and environments, and there are at least two warrants for this shift in emphasis.

The lineage most proximate to my work can be traced to Kate Vieira and Annette Vee, both of whom use the term "sociomaterial" in two recent books, *American by Paper: How Documents Matter in Immigrant Literacy* (2016) and *Coding Literacy: How Computer Programming is Changing Writing* (2017), respectively. I see Vieira, especially, as continuing the sociocultural approaches consolidated as New Literacy Studies (NLS). Vieira's choice to describe her elaboration of sociomaterial literacy studies with a nod back to Brandt's theory of the 'strong' text evokes a sense of scholarly lineage, and her theory's articulation is driven by familiar qualitative methods including literacy history interviews and grounded theory.

Vieira's rendering of sociomateriality is legible as an extension of the broader social turn, precisely the tendency from which much of the other literacy studies work engaging materiality in the last ten or twenty years seeks to break. "If recent scholarship is any indication," writes Micciche, "the 'social turn' has hardened into a repressive orthodoxy and failed to keep pace with a changing world" (488). Evidence marshalled for this claim includes the social turn's exceptionalist valuation of the human and lack of conceptual tools adequate to the consideration of matter within the natural world (488-490). As a theory-driven conversation, new materialism opens up questions of ontology by allocating agency to forms of matter traditionally deemed inert. Although Micciche discusses actor-network theory within the broader new materialist frame,

Bruno Latour's work has independently influenced materialist composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies, as I will have cause to discuss (Lynch et al.; P. Lynch; Brandt and Clinton).

While a detailed review of these several bodies of thought is well beyond my scope here, I will be able to situate my arguments in relation to them by discussing three approaches to materiality within literacy studies: *ontological,* inspired largely by new materialism, but sometimes describing itself as 'sociomaterial' as well[57]; *strong-text*, Vieira's version; and *infrastructural*, my eclectic proposal here. By discussing examples of the ontological and strong-text scholarship, I will bring to light the reasons for my infrastructural emphasis within sociomaterial literacy studies.

This view takes literacy to be not only semiotic and social, bearing upon matters of contextualized expression and communication, as has long been understood within NLS, but also:

- *relational*, including a dynamic semiotic interaction between human and non-human objects within infrastructures of distributed elements ;

- *affordance-based*, premised upon an ecological model of affordances in which literate activity associates elements of variable ontology in relations of possibility and constraint;

- *material*, depending on our capacity to 'fold' the bases of complex and flexible relationality (such as inscribed language) into literacy objects and infrastructural technologies;

[57] 'Sociomaterial' is something of a contested term. British scholars like Barnett and Merchant also describe their work as 'sociomaterial,' yet the nature of its theoretical commitments are very new materialist (Burnett and Merchant, "Literacy-as-Event: Accounting for Relationality in Literacy Research"; Cathy Burnett et al.; Catherine Burnett et al.; Burnett and Merchant, "Revisiting Critical Literacy in the Digital Age"). To further complicate matters, there is a significant body of work outside of literacy studies, such as in organizational studies, that closely parallels this heavily philosophical rendering of 'sociomateriality' (Orlikowski and Scott; Jones; Hultin). I take these rivalrous uses of the term as an exigence for this chapter.

- *multi-scalar*, traversing and describing spatial bounds according to the dispersion of the elements aggregated by communicative infrastructures;

- *dialogic,* informed by literate users of infrastructure on an ongoing basis, and therefore engaged with emotion, motive, and affect;

- *epistemological*, recognizing the production of knowledge, including reflexive understandings of the infrastructural mediation of sociomaterial practices;

- *political,* understanding bodies in their relations to infrastructures in terms of vulnerability and power.

In listing these aspects of an infrastructural conception of sociomaterial literacy studies, I do not mean to suggest their universal relevance. Rather, they make explicit the understanding of literacy studies that motivated, and was subsequently informed by, this dissertation.

4.2 The Social Turn and New Literacy Studies (NLS)

In identifying her "own approach to literacy as a sociomaterial phenomenon," Vee reminds readers that an emphasis on the material apparatus of literacy was in fact the basis autonomous effects. "Materialities of literacy were once the sole focus of literacy research: books and alphabets purportedly carried out 'revolutions' in thinking. Jack Goody and Ian Watt famously argued that many of the developments of Western society could be attributed to alphabetic literacy. . ." (Vee 30–31). Engagements with *things* was therefore not entirely new when Street critiqued Goody and Watt. The scholarly context of the "social turn" of which New Literacy Studies was a part merits recollection, especially in the matter of materiality.

James Gee wrote that the social turn was a reaction against "the 'cognitive revolution' of the 60's and 70's . . . which privileged the individual mind" and took as foundational thinly constructed suppositions of "[f]act and 'logic'" over "affect, society, and culture" ("The New Literacy Studies and the 'Social Turn'" 5). The complexity of this field is outlined in "The New Literacy Studies and the Social Turn," in which Gee touches upon a "baker's dozen" of fields, composition theory among them, that contributed to the broader tendency. With my prior emphasis on the question of technology in literacy studies in mind, I will quote three of Gee's cases to evoke the broader field that I take sociomaterial literacy studies to extend. In Gee's view, the social turn was advanced by:

> "Sociohistorical psychology, following Vygotsky and later Bakhtin," in which thinking is:
>
> > not 'private', but almost always mediated by 'cultural tools', that is, artifacts, symbols, tools, technologies, and forms of language that have been historically and culturally shaped to carry out certain functions and carry certain meanings (cultural tools have certain 'affordances', though people can transform them through using them in new settings) . . . . (3)
>
> "[S]ituated cognition," which argued:
>
> > knowledge and intelligence reside not solely in heads, but, rather, are distributed across the social practices (including language practices) and the various tools, technologies" while affirming that "[k]nowing is a matter of being able to participate centrally in practice, and learning is a matter of changing patterns of participation (with concomitant changes in identity) . . . . (3-4)

And "science and technology studies," which emphasized the idea that "knowledge is rooted in . . . day-to-day social practices and distributed across (and stored within) those practices and the characteristic spaces, tools, texts, symbols, and technologies that scientists use" (4).

Noteworthy among these contributors to the social turn is a regard for objects and processes of variable materiality ranging from the concrete "tool" to the abstract "symbol" and "cultural tool" and on to the manifold materiality of a "language" or "technology." In its recognition of non-physical objects, the NLS described by Gee may be considered to have been of a more widely varying materiality than that proposed, for example, by Vieira, for whom literacy's "materiality" includes "the surfaces, tools of inscription, scriptural systems, and bodies people use to write and read, as well as the infrastructures that facilitate writing's dispersal. These aspects of literacy are irreducibly material, but they are also irreducibly social" (*American by Paper* 13).

It would therefore be something of a straw man to characterize the social turn and literacy studies scholarship that followed from it as unable to countenance, or else mired in a reductive approach to, materiality, especially in regard to those physical objects that tend to enable thinking or the creation of knowledge. In regard to technology, Gee in 1999 already emphasizes the fraught utility of the term "affordances" and takes care to nest their realization within situated and potentially transformative use, rather than in an autonomous relation to it, a matter to which I will return below. Also evident above is a conception of "practices" not as iterations of known procedures but instead as the epistemically generative fashioning and shaping of socially distributed knowledge. In other passages in the piece, Gee finds common to the various fields of the social turn an understanding of the co-constitutive relation between meaning and context (9-10) and a conception of human agency that grasps how a "person's deeds and body are part of the situation or context" (10). Of context, Gee also proposes that NLS should concern itself with the

way that "[s]ituations are rarely static or uniform" but instead "actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment by moment through ongoing work" (10).

Although Gee's "The New Literacy Studies and the Social Turn" discusses tools, artifacts, and technologies, it does not discuss the pivotal re-theorization of the connection between literacy and technology to be found in the work of the New London Group, of which he was a part. Their discussion of multimodality and multiliteracies broadened the conceptions of reading and writing under consideration within literacy studies. Whereas Street had problematized the oral/print binary yet still emphasized practices of alphabetic reading and writing (*Literacy in Theory and Practice* 1) the New London Group's 1996 "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" "called for an expansion of the definition of literacy beyond the alphabetic to account for meaning-making practices in visual, auditory, behavioral, and spatial modes" (Khadka and Lee 3). The New London Group's argument was driven by technological developments, which put the capacity to render visual composing, for example, within students' reach, but also cultural, a push against the affirmation of dominant national languages in "the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies . . ." (The New London Group). The New London Group, despite its willingness to reconfigure "writing" as a matter of design, maintains in its attention to pedagogy an orientation toward a human agent. This expansion of literacy to include semiotic ends beyond the manipulation and interpretation of print informs this dissertation's reading of mobile voice calling in terms of literate practice.[58]

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[58] I use the terms 'literacy practice' as well as 'literacy event.' Brandt and Clinton define them as follows:

> Generally, a literacy event is considered a social action going on around a piece of writing in which the writing matters to the way people interact. To this is added the more abstract concept of the literacy practice, usually treated as the socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe

In recovering examples like these, I do not to mean to suggest that the attention to materiality available in these earlier years of literacy studies scholarship is *equivalent* to the way in which scholarship engages it today. "Although these researchers point to materialities," Vee writes, discussing NLS and The New London Group, "a focus on social and cultural concerns of literacy tend to swamp those material aspects" (32). Thus, as Miller argues, "[t]heorizing literacy as 'sociomaterial'" helps us see how "the materials of literacy are themselves socially constructed, weighted with assumptions about texts and the tools necessary to produce them" such that the "social and material aspects of literacy are inseparable" (35).[59]

> to those doings. Typically, literacy events are treated as discrete, observable happenings while practices are abstract, enduring, and not wholly observable (Barton & Ivanic, 1991; Street, 1995). These concepts provide important analytical leverage in making literacy understood principally as a form of social participation and literacy learning principally as a form of socialization. (341)

[59] It is not difficult to produce further examples of earlier work manifesting noteworthy engagements with materiality. Gee, advancing his sociolinguistic view of literacy, also attended to the variable materiality of the elements comprising literate practice. For example, in explaining the institutional surround of his own identity as a linguist, Gee noted the implication of "concrete things like people, books, and buildings; abstract things like bodies of knowledge, values, norms and beliefs; mixtures of concrete and abstract things like universities, journals, and publishers . . ." ("Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction" 18). Although the social discourses Gee presumed to underpin literate practice were later critiqued as requiring for their analytic coherence a tacit essentialization akin to Neo-Platonism (Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity: A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in the Academy*), Gee's vision of literate practices as entailing elements of variable materiality to realize social ends remains relevant. And it is not difficult to find compelling scholarship that in other ways incorporates rich conceptions of materiality into literate practice. In a piece that proposes the importance of both material and non-material "cultural artifacts," Bartlett writes: "[D]rawing on sociocultural studies of literacy, I emphasize that literacy is something one actively does, in concert with other humans (who may or may not be physically present) and the material, social, and symbolic world" (53). Though Bartlett characterizes her approach as "sociocultural," her nuanced treatment of cultural artifacts, which "can assume a material aspect . . . and/or an ideal or conceptual aspect," "are constructed as a part of and in relation to recognized activities and figured worlds," and bear upon social processes of interpretation and valuation, might well be characterized as sociomaterial *avant la lettre* (55). Such an approach advances an understanding of the roles played by objects of variable materiality within social practices, yet refrains from a deterministic sense of their effects, leaving the assessment of their possible implications to situated analysis.

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4.3 Re-Reading NLS: Political Materiality

The importance of New Literacy Studies (NLS) remains a matter of ongoing debate, which has implications for the political character of sociomaterial investigation. In recovering the literacy work of black and brown student activists of the late 1960s, Kynard writes:

> It is the work of scholars in New Literacies Studies (NLS) who match most closely the political impulse of black student protest. When I refer to NLS scholars, I mean the original impulse to eschew autonomous models of literacy, which ostensibly represent reading and writing as neutral social activities that, once auto-technocratically mastered, confer power to its users. (Kynard 32)

In this passage, Kynard links her reading of NLS with the book's broader argument that the Black Freedom movement of the late 1960s was pivotal to the opening up of the academy to students of color and others who had generally been excluded by the racist and classist US educational system. Despite the impact of black and brown student activism—work Kynard recognizes as *literacy*—students of color who were then accepted into institutions like the City University of New York (CUNY) faced an institutional hierarchy inimical to expressions of black language. In the academy they helped to open, they were subject to an educational regime invested in white-majority culture that tended to regard the writing and speech of black and brown students as sources of *error*. These students faced an educational regime contributing to what civil rights activist Milton Galamison referred to as "domestic" coloniality (Kynard 158).

Kynard's intervention bears upon this dissertation in two ways. First, it reframes the birth of English composition in terms of intra-state coloniality and discursive violence, a lineage I attempt to work against in my teaching and scholarship. Foundational narratives in the discipline,

at least as I first experienced it, tended to celebrate the elaboration of composition as a social justice-oriented embrace of the racial, ethnic, classed, and linguistic differences to be found in classrooms following the late 1960s 'opening' of the university, much to the consternation (it was suggested) of literature professors too invested in dominant-cultural pedagogy and a mostly white canon to change with the times. Kynard's revisionary history interrogates, for example, composition's early invention, the inherently subordinating field of "basic skills" teaching and scholarship, which, presuming a deficit of competence in basic-skills students, subjected predominantly black and brown bodies to a pedagogy premised upon an autonomous understanding of literate achievement that masked its racism (155).

Second, Kynard's work suggests that work seeking to advance the NLS tradition through an emphasis on infrastructures of literacy must understand the political nature of the curatorship of and access to communicative and educational infrastructures. Although my work here does not emphasize academic spaces, I regard the communicative practices of the TOB interviewees in terms of their political materiality. Recognizing the materiality of language, spoken, inscribed, digitized, or otherwise, must always be a recognition of the body, both vulnerable and agentic, sensate to both itself and the environments in which it moves, and susceptible to violence, physical or discursive—such as in the case of Orientalism's ontological construction and enclosure of 'Eastern' bodies. Further, the social and material caretaking of bodies is necessarily political, for it pertains to logics of privilege that stratify or mediate access to infrastructures.

Anand et al. hold that a group's relationship to an infrastructure may function as a "metonym of their marginality" (Anand et al. 11). They draw attention to the case of water infrastructure in Michigan. Given that "Detroit and Flint are predominantly black cities . . . water infrastructure is a sociomaterial terrain for the reproduction of racism" (Anand et al. 2).

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Considering the political materiality of literacies does much to reveal what Street's work in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, for all its merits, lacks. Although he explains his study's socioeconomic moment in terms of the recent extension of the national transit system to Cheshmeh, it is difficult to find any sense of the people there thinking, speaking, writing, or acting in a manner that expresses their orientation to political power, the motive force, after all, behind the infrastructural developments urging their repurposing of 'maktab' literacy in 'commercial' enterprises. Street writes,

> The literacy skills associated with the particular commercial practices I have described were not just a set of techniques to be easily and quickly acquired but part of a complex ideology, a set of practices constructed within a specific infrastructure and able to be learnt and assimilated only in relation to that ideology and infrastructure: the acquisition of literacy is, in fact, a socialisation process rather than a technical process. (180)

Of enduring use is Street's characterization of the human learning required to interact with infrastructure as "a socialisation process," a complex and non-linear process of acquisition. Yet the ideology to which Street alludes, surely suffusing any relation between body and object or infrastructure, should not be imagined outside of the relationship to the state and the society of states comprising the dominant forms of power in the world, both today and in late 1970s Iran.

Although the Chapter 1's historical and contextual notes emphasized Iraq and Syria, and would be overly long if they were to discuss Iran as well, they suggest the importance of questions of coloniality and state dominance of marginalized groups in Western Asia. If I were to expand those historical notes, I might include research on the Mahabad Republic of 1947, a short-lived attempt by Kurds in Iran to achieve autonomy (if not independence) along territory bordering

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Turkey and Iraq (McDowall 231–48). My point is that there is no political overview of Iran and Cheshmeh to be found in Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. And if the absence of any Cheshmeh residents' account of the political realities animating the infrastructural changes transforming life in their region was the result of Street's nationality, skin color, language proficiency, cultural fluency, or personality, he does not say as much. And it is this tendency toward reflexive silence that makes *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, for all its merits, methodologically questionable (see Wan, forthcoming).

Even so, Kynard views NLS scholars in general as those who "situate literacy in its ideological, cultural, and political locations" and characterizes them as knowing "that literacy is a deep engagement with the political (we either construct ourselves as objects or we are subjects) and an issue of context—personal, social, cultural, geographic, and historical" (32). Sociomaterial literacy studies, in recognizing the implication of infrastructures with power, presents an opportunity to continue, and in my view improve upon, NLS's engagement with political materiality.

4.4 Beyond the Social Turn: Brandt and Clinton's "The Limits of the Local"

Kynard's re-reading of NLS is historical. An earlier piece, Brandt and Clinton's 2001 "Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice," offers a materialist critique of the "social practice perspective" long dominant in literacy studies. Whereas Kynard offers a revisionary view of NLS emphasizing race, equity, and disciplinary narratives, Brandt and Clinton bring to bear early work by Bruno Latour to question the anthropocentrism of the social

practice perspective. Materiality, taken as a social understanding of things, particularly objects shaped by humanity, offers Brandt and Clinton a means to re-envision their field.

A social practice-based approach to literacy, according to Brandt and Clinton, "privileges human actors over non-human actors; it suggests that literacy is not happening unless it can be shown that local human actors at the scene are oriented toward writing or reading" (349). In contrasting "human" and "non-human actors," this passage invites reconsideration of the material basis of literacy practices. Problematizing the "scene" of literate activity reveals the anthropocentric assumption that human activity will be at the center of even a dynamic sense of situation, such as Gee described (10). "Context," they write, "became associated with ethnographically-visible settings (the here and now), and the technology of literacy was demoted in relationship to the human agent who held power in assigning meaning to acts of literacy" (343). Their contention is that NLS and similar scholarship emphasizes the relationships between people and their immediate contexts without adequate attention to objects, tools, and material elements framing and enabling literacy practices more generally. Theirs is a call for a balancing of attention among elements related by literacy events that is not bound to the scene of ethnographic observation.[60] My work in this dissertation is informed by and responds to this intervention.

The theoretical alternative Brandt and Clinton propose is "'[l]iteracy-in-action,'" which "would awaken analytical curiosity in any objective trace of literacy in a setting (print, instruments, paper, other technologies) whether they are being taken up by local actors or not" (349). More

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[60] I hear in Brandt and Clinton a slight misrepresentation of NLS, at least as Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice* may be taken as a fair representative of it. Street in fact dilates the scale of analysis to understand the moment of social change in Cheshmeh, Iran, effected by the articulation of rural villages with the country's national transit system, as discussed in further detail in the final section on Infrastructural Epistemology, below.

abstractly, and with less analytic or material precision, they urge consideration of "how literacy acts as a social agent, as an independent mediator" (349). These two aspects of their argument are exemplified by Brandt and Clinton's discussion of bank loans, which demonstrates their embrace of both human and non-human elements. They write:

> In the example of applying for a bank loan, we would be able to account not only for how human participants interacted with the various forms, instruments, and machines in the setting. We also could consider the role of these things in framing the interaction and figure out the social load, so to speak, that they carry in the setting. . . . . The analysis also could follow the processes by which these things link the setting to other places—how they deliver meanings from other places and transform local actions into meanings bound for or relevant to other places. (350)

The first move suggested here, largely familiar yet still crucial, would amount to the study of literacy events understood as human/non-human interactions. Scholars might consider the qualities and agency of the physical elements with which the human body interacts, such as "forms, instruments, and machines"—a sociomaterial revision of the social practice model. The second move suggested above entails a new regard for the same objects in the several ways they might function outside of their immediate engagement in literacy acts, including a role in more tacit "framing" of the activity. Finally, as an extension of this secondary consideration of objects, there is the pursuit of associations and "processes" that dilate the scale of analysis and/or trace a networked understanding of its translocal association with other spaces. These three moves— pertaining (as I see them) to literacy events, their situated materiality, and their infrastructural extension—share a logic legible in terms of the scholarly discussion of *relationality*, which I will take up in a later section of this chapter.

Also critical to my thinking about the sociomateriality of literacy studies, though, is Brandt and Clinton's introduction of the Latourian view of the tool. Objects, in the view expressed by Latour in "On Interobjectivity," extend agency through space and time by virtue of the specific relationships "folded" into them. A shepherd, for example, "folds" his relationship to sheep into a fence, thereby dislocating his agency from his embodied presence and increasing its duration ("On Interobjectivity" 239). In the same piece, Latour refers to aggregates of objects, perhaps bearing or distributing these 'folded' associations, as "frameworks," and offers the post office as an actor-network framework associated "in time, in space, across levels of materialization" (239). Given my focus on digital devices, which in many cases render mobile such a 'framework,' I find it useful to consider aggregates of objects intended to support literacy practices as communicative *infrastructures*.

The addition of infrastructure to the terminology used by Brandt and Clinton permits some useful distinctions. Building on Latour's example of a farmer folding his pastoral relation to sheep into a fence, they aver: "Similar relationships exist between people and literacy objects. As authors of this article, we fold ourselves into a thing called the *Journal of Literacy Research*, which will disseminate our article and engage our readers while we are doing other things" (353). But a journal and a fence are rather different objects. The fence example is accessible because the farmer can fashion it directly. The creation and circulation of journal, though, are shared endeavors distributed among many bodies and objects. In the first instance, we can assume that Brandt and Clinton interacted with computers equipped with software for writing and internet connections allowing them to forward their essay to the editors of the *Journal of Literacy Research*. If so, the idea of these authors folding themselves directly into the journal elides, just to begin with, the digital infrastructure supporting the creation and transmission of text. Although infrastructures

typically remain unobserved in use, they should not, I am proposing, go unrecognized in sociomaterial analysis.

Especially as a scholar who considers the use of mobile technology as activity legible through the lens of literacy, I find it helpful to distinguish between the literacy objects with which we interface directly and infrastructures, aggregates of those objects closest to us as well as their supporting cast of elements, human and non-human. The former, such as notebooks, mobile phones, or laptops, I will refer to as literacy objects, which tend to include the interface through which a literate user may access both the device and its concomitant infrastructures. The latter includes those objects and sets of objects shaped to extend, relay, mediate, or amplify the literate activity centered around the literacy object (device). In the case of a digital communications infrastructure, this includes physical elements like cellular towers, base stations, and optical cables. Infrastructures therefore take on roles that Brandt and Clinton ascribe to their more capacious concept of literacy objects, such as providing a "medium" through which transcontextual communication can be effected (347).

Varying the available terminology does not alter the sociomaterial thrust of Brandt and Clinton's work. It does, though, help to make legible this project's engagement with critical infrastructure studies, "which draws upon methodologies and frameworks across the humanities and social sciences to historicize and analyze infrastructures ranging from bridges to power grids, from railways to sewer systems" (Parks and Starosielski 7). As have earlier sociotechnical theorists, critical infrastructure studies scholars Parks and Starosielski do not neglect the human element of infrastructures, "attend[ing] to the myriad ways people encounter, perceive, and use media infrastructure—that is, the *affective relations* they generate and become part of" (7). Citing earlier work by Star and Ruhleder, they write that " infrastructure encompasses both technical

bases and social arrangements, extends beyond single events and sites, connects with existing practices and standards, and must be learned and naturalized over time by users" (9). My view is that literacy studies scholarship offers rich theoretical resources for engaging this learning of infrastructural "users" as well as the nature of their semiotic and social "practices." One cannot 'fold' relations into people in the same way as one can into objects and systems thereof. For this reason, I preserve the term literacy alongside infrastructure, regard for the human alongside attention to the non-human.

4.5 Relationality in Sociomaterial Literacy Studies

My investment in these distinctions is counter to the theoretical sweep of literacy studies informed by new materialism. In her 2014 "Writing Material," Laura Micciche suggests the utility of a capacious "bundling under the category 'new materialism'" of "various movements aimed at foregrounding a relational ontology: ecosocial theories, material feminism, affect theory, complexity theory, digital humanities, animal studies, and actor-network theory" (489). The "relational ontology" Micciche presents as the premise common to these discourses is also known as a 'flat' ontology; rather than presuming characteristics inherent to humans or physical objects, for example, it recognizes any given entity as agential, regardless of its material composition, and meaningful only in its relations to others (Kramer). In its challenge to fundamental oppositions, such as that between active agent and inert object, such an ontology is thought capable of dismantling Cartesian dualisms such as those between subject and object. It therefore

problematizes the commonplace ontological distinctions we might tend to assume are inherent to and allow us to usefully distinguish between, for example, a human, a microbe, and a satellite.

A detailed review of the literature informing new materialism is far beyond my scope here. I will, though, distinguish actor-network theory from among the discourses Micciche discusses under the heading of new materialism. In his 2005 *Reassembling the Social,* Latour challenges his fellow sociologists to recognize the degree to which analyses tend to depend on abstractions anchored by tacit disciplinary teloi, such as "groups" or "society" (35–36). By contrast, the actor-network researcher should strive to examine and describe relations as they are found, and avoid a "jump to the global," for example, arbitrarily nesting a "local interaction" within the logic of universal concept culled from a storehouse of disciplinarily approved ideas (such as 'society') (173-183). In his cautioning of scholars against the facile resort to pre-established abstraction, I read Latour as advocating, instead, an exactingly relational method, though relationality is not a term upon which his argument depends.

Literacy studies presents a difficult case for the full application of such a logic, for it orients analysis toward the human body in its semiotic engagements with the world. Sociomaterial literacy studies' investment in the social, historical, and political materiality of the often vulnerable human body is at odds with the post-anthropocentric implications of a truly flat ontology. And particularly problematic according to *Reassembling the Social* is literacy studies' presumption that the abstraction of *literacy* should obtain from inquiry to inquiry. That is, the idea of *literacy* invokes "a stable and absolute third term in which to translate all the vocabularies of the informants" (35). Even if extended by attention to materiality and infrastructure, and even when informed by dialogic participation in qualitative methods, literacy studies in the NLS tradition remains invested in describing *social* practices, and therefore a system of transmuting a range of findings into the

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"same basic homogeneous quality—namely, to be social" (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 36).

This point I concede.

Although literacy studies remains irreconcilable with a truly flat ontology, a criticism suggested in 2018 by Prior and Olinger's reservations about Brandt and Clinton,[61] my view is that a sociomaterial approach can nonetheless engage the sense of *relationality* often derived from a flat ontology, as in Micciche's description of it as a "relational ontology," noted above. Relationality is emphasized, too, in work on mobile literacies. Similar eclecticism is evident, after all, in scholarship across the disciplines that leverage relational thinking, much of it without exhibiting a flat ontology. In their work on mobile literacies, Mapes and Lea cite "Gleason's study of teen Twitter writing defines new literacies flowing through portable devices as 'embodied, relational, and networked'" (74). Further from literacy studies, relationality may be found in

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[61] I regard their critique as accurate on this general point, but less helpful in their attention to scale. Wary that the concepts scholars use in analysis tend to require a kind of neo-platonic "meta-social" essentialism, they write:

> Even uptakes of Latour's actor-network theory can reinscribe . . . metasocial frameworks. For example, Brandt and Clinton (2002) argued research on literate practices has been too local and proposed to remedy this by drawing on Latour to reconceptualize literacy as a thing-in-action, "a transcontextualizing social agent" (p. 351) that can bridge the micro- and macro-social. This uptake, however, conflicts with Latour's (2005) explicit rejection of micro and macro as a legitimate architecture for society. How can Latour be invoked to bridge a gap he argues does not exist? How can a flat architecture that invites us to follow trajectories converging in and spinning off from artifacts and events —things small, mobile, massively multiple, constantly becoming—be invoked in support of literacy writ very large in the singular?" (7).

In my reading of Brandt and Clinton, their attention to relations unfurling from traces of literacy open up space to reconceive scale and achieve translocal analysis, as noted above. For Latour, the problem of scale is not that it cannot be used to describe phenomena under study; the problem is the imposition of predetermined understandings of scale by researchers. Touching upon this matter repeatedly in *Reassembling the Social*, Latour writes: "The problem is that social scientists use scale as one of the many variables they need to set up before doing the study, whereas scale is what actors achieve by *scaling, spacing,* and *contextualizing* each other through the transportation in some specific vehicles of some specific traces. It is of little use to respect the actors' achievements if in the end we deny them one of their most important privileges, namely that they are the ones defining relative scale" (184).

sociotechnical studies of infrastructure (Jewett and Kling), some critical infrastructure studies (Parks and Starosielski), anthropological approaches to infrastructure (Anand et al.), and recent proposals within literacy studies (Chávez and Licona; Burnett and Merchant, "Literacy-as-Event"). Thus, the infrastructural approach to sociomateriality I propose is similarly invested in *relationality* while largely setting aside the theoretical apparatus of a flat ontology.

But if not the methodological implication of an ontological premise, what does relationality *mean*? As a capacious and polymorphous concept invoked across the disciplines, relationality suggests a manner of connection and a co-constitution through association as well. The several moves I noted in my reading of Brandt and Clinton's (Latour-inspired) "The Limits of the Local," above, strike me as a useful set of basic possibilities for working relationally in sociomaterial literacy studies. This includes studying the interaction of human and non-human within literacy events, tracing material connections and orientations within the situated materiality of those events, and the stepwise or serial pursuit of associations among elements pertaining to their infrastructural extension.

This style of relational thinking can reveal the initiation, amplification, distribution, or extension of literate activity tending toward ends that are (still) semiotic, expressive, or communicative. Between human and non-human, as Burnett and Merchant suggest, there may be an instantiation of a literacy event or resumption of a literacy practice ("Literacy-as-Event: Accounting for Relationality in Literacy Research" 45). But between various other elements within a communicative infrastructure, there may be any number of further relations, many of them between non-human elements, such as between a mobile phone, a configuration of cell towers, and another mobile phone. Relationality, then, offers a flexible logic for theorizing the linkages allowing us to make use of the properties of not only literacy objects, but their concomitant

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infrastructures. I will further detail the nature of these relations in the later discussion of affordances.

4.6 New Materialist Literacy Studies: Problems of Method

Micciche's "Writing Material" is a largely theoretical overview. It offers little guidance as to the stakes of taking a flat ontology as the basis for literacy studies scholarship. For an application of new materialism to literacy studies, I will turn to Thiel and Jones's 2017 "The literacies of things: Reconfiguring the material-discursive production of race and class in an informal learning centre." This piece aims to demonstrate the relevance of a new material methodology to questions of social justice in the fashioning of place. The paper, which focuses on the refurbishment and re-opening of a neighborhood youth center, discusses the site of a community "playhouse," including objects like bookcases, fences, locks, and chains (323–28). In a line that resonates with my notes on political materiality, above, Thiel and Jones argue that "educators and scholars engaged in place-making with and for young people are engaging in a political project, perpetuating and disrupting literacies of race and class" (318). As a transnational literacy studies scholar who also has also taken an interest in some of the community activities in my current home of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I deeply admire Thiel and Jones's project. Even so, I will comment on it here mainly to suggest the enduring utility of a sociomaterial approach reconciling a relational attention to objects and infrastructures with the NLS lineage of dialogic interaction with people.

Thiel and Jones's article focuses on the re-imagining and improvement of a space for the black and brown youth of the Southwood neighborhood of Charleston. They attend to objects in

and around the playhouse, including a fence surrounding the building and its previously padlocked gate. "The chains and locks," Thiel and Jones write, "produced literacies of race, social class and ways of belonging or not belonging" (323). "Literacy" in such a reading is animated not by people's communicative, expressive, or reflective practices, but almost entirely by their presence within a community of color and a built environment including objects associate by the authors with carceral technologies. "Belonging" on the part of black and brown bodies is deduced not from what the people bearing those bodies might say, but mainly from the observations of authors who describe themselves as "two white women from the university" (319), and whose accounts and reflections, authorized by theory, are intended to permit the reader an understanding of the nature of the (non)belonging suggested (319). The places and objects under discussion seem to produce racialized and classed place-based literacies through an unspecified agency, an influence that is quite independent of the activity, actions, thoughts, or self-description of the people to whom these abstractions, as presented by Thiel and Jones, pertain.

Instead of discussing interviews or other qualitative methods, the article proceeds by offering observations that are placed in direct dialog with quotations from new materialist writers. For example, the authors draw readers' attention to a fascinating development: the repurposing of bars removed from the centre's windows by children playing with the bookcases, which had been set aside in the driveway. Rather than asking children or adult members of the community to comment on this observation, which they find rife with meaning, they place their interpretations in dialogue with long citations from new materialist thinker Jane Bennett (321-322). They write:

> For Bennett (2010), ''thing-power gestures towards the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience'' (p. xvi).

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Take for example the white metal bars removed from the Playhouse windows and repurposed by the children as a ''prison'' in their reconfiguration of the bookcases and other objects. The metal bars might have been repurposed as ladders or many other things, but their use on the Playhouse windows to keep people out (or in) seemed to continue reproducing a particular "aliveness" as an object of punitive measures even when detached from the windows and reconfigured as a part of a new Apparatus. . . . . Ergo, thing-power (Bennett, 2010) and animacy (Chen, 2012) open up new ways of thinking about literacies and how they produce ways of knowing and being in the world through "dynamic entanglements of human and nonhuman agents, social and political forces, and cultural beliefs" (Thiel, 2015b). (321-322)

The children and community under discussion are silent in this reading of the bars, as they are throughout almost the entire text; this lack of community engagement seems particularly ill-matched to the project (Flower). The article functions, as the passage demonstrates, mainly to advance the proposal that new materiality can inform place-based literacies, a point that subsequently authorizes comments about the raced and classed experiences of particular people in Charleston, from whom we hear very little. There is therefore no possibility for their views to complicate, challenge, nuance, or otherwise alter these (white) writers' understandings of the categories of social stratification they deploy: race and class.

In my view, a more carefully relational literacy studies methodology would include qualitative methods allowing interactive engagement with the people's whose bodies motivate and are intended to benefit from the authors' work. The resort to disciplinary abstractions could be balanced in its relevance to what was offered the researcher through the materialities of language,

gesture, affect. The categorical understandings at play might be, in the style of situated intersectionality, impacted by such a form of inquiry. The potential for dialogic engagement, to be surprised, challenged, or contradicted in one's assumptions about those whom me might represent, remains central in sociomaterial literacy studies, even as it encompasses new forms of embodied and material relation. Without such investments, theory-driven literacy studies can become one more warrant for researchers to enjoy the privilege of saying what they wish (however well-informed or intentioned) about marginalized populations, who become silenced at every phase of the process. Chapters 4 and 5 offer extended discussions of sociomaterial findings that I could not have imagined prior to my engagement in qualitative research with the Syrian refugee community in the KRI.

4.7 Dialogic Methods and the Strong-Text Model of Sociomateriality

Illustrative of a dialogic approach to theorizing the materiality of literacy, Kate Vieira's 2016 *American by Paper* is a study of literacy and identification documents among Portuguese-speaking migrants who come to the US from Brazil and the Azores. Through methods featuring literacy history interviews and grounded theory, and in general consonant at points with NLS (12), Vieira develops a concept of sociomaterial literacy in response to what her human interlocutors have to say about their experiences with documents crucial to migration and citizenship. She locates sociomateriality in the "interplay between process and product . . . ," meaning the relationship between literacy practices and the artifacts they generate (142). "Materiality" in Vieira's handling often acquires a collective valence, allowing it to stand in for a systematized

constellation of literacy objects, including applications and identification cards, immigration offices and detention centers, media images and policy statements, built-environmental spaces effecting border controls, and the legal systems of the various states conjoined by migrant travel (13-14).

Central to Vieira's exploration of sociomateriality is the way in which identification documents and their affiliated governmental systems impact the lives of *American by Paper*'s interviewees. The breadth of the discussion spans the systemic control of populations through documents indexed to residency, citizenship, and professional qualifications, and matters of personal agency, such as religious writing within a church congregation. Documents like visas and passports can not only permit migration, but compel deportation as well, hence their centrality within "migratory trajectories" (27). In the "transnational lives" she depicts, "literacy is best seen as a mobile complex of practices and products, instilled with meaning both by institutions and by the people under their thrall" (142). This investment in practices is of a piece with prior scholarship in the style of NLS, but Vieira's attention to the institutional "products" of literacy marks a departure. The products of systemic literacy represent not just the potential for symbolic violence, but also material dislocation, displacement from homes, distancing of family relations. Though they are clearly only the tip of the iceberg, Vieira maintains a focus on *papers*, in part because this is how her respondents often refer to their documents (23), and in part because hers is an argument that turns upon the circulation of those papers.

There is in this version of sociomateriality none of the animate, or vibrant, or (even) pulsing agency sometimes accorded to matter in new materialist theory (Micciche 490). Even so, Vieira's abiding focus on paper resonates, *sans* explicit citations of new materialist philosophy, with aspects of Micciche's "Writing Materiality." Micciche notes, for example, that while scholarship

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in composition studies has often taken up "digital technologies in relation to writing practices," there are also "low-fi, ubiquitous technologies like paper, which have received less attention . . . " (496). In its emphasis on the importance of paper in the lives of migrants, *American by Paper* therefore contributes to a broader discussion of materiality even as it eschews the explicit attention to the "relational ontology" with which Micciche characterizes the new materialist conversation (489).

A conceptual fulcrum for her treatment of papers is the 'strong text,' which she draws from Brandt's 1990 *Literacy as Involvement*. Vieira writes:

> Recent literacy theorists have rebutted what have been called "strong text" theories of literacy. Popularized by Deborah Brandt in 1990, the term "strong text" summarized what was wrong with previous theories of literacy: They fixated on writing's power as a technology, they gave undue weight to writing as an object that could outlive its author, and they underscored writing's ability to act independently from its social context. (12)

Brandt's model of the 'strong text' is presented as representing a continuity between Vieira's work and Street's earlier critique of autonomous literacy. There are in fact at least some attributes of the strong text, mainly its status as a technology with effects difficult to reduce to the semiotic transactions of readers and writers, which Vieira wants to recuperate in light of the robust corpus of interviews animating *American by Paper*. Vieira explains her reasons for invoking the "strong text" in her discussion of José, an interview participant:

> [T]hese literate artifacts had less to do with a negotiated meaning-making activity and more to do with force, with compliance, with threats of punishment. As a technology, as a thing with a status that could outlive its author, as an object through

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which the state conferred legal power, the document . . . [w]as strong, in many of the senses that earlier literacy theorists meant it. (13)

Sociomateriality emerges in this account as a dialectical accommodation of her work's overall continuity with an NLS-inspired view of text and its need to grapple with the power, the "force" of texts in the lives of *American by Paper*'s interview participants. As Vieira clarifies:

> Put simply, the experiences of migrants . . . demanded that I link older, widely criticized, "strong text" or "autonomous" theories of literacy with more recent, context-sensitive approaches. Bringing these opposing views of literacy together sheds light on what happens to literacy practices in a context managed by its product, that is, in a documentary society in which the border is thickening. The result is a sociomaterialist theory equipped to explain some crucial aspects of literacy in transnational lives. (13)

American by Paper bears out the utility of this view, constituting a powerful statement of the possible advantages of a sociomaterial approach to literacy studies, particularly as a means to encompass migrant/state interactions. Vieira does not suggest textual effects outside of social and cultural reckoning; rather, she tracks those effects in terms of their material bases and potential materialization of legislated harms.

4.8 Beyond the Strong Text

Although the idea of balanced resolution between contending models of literacy is appealing, Vieira's use of the strong text as the basis of a definition of sociomateriality presents

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reasons to elaborate an alternative. Both the autonomous and strong-text models are implicated in technological determinism, a problem this study must avoid, as suggested in the introduction (Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement* 23). Further, both the autonomous *and* strong-text models are implicated in the privileging of text over speech, an obstacle to my decision to regard voice communication through the lens of literacy (Brandt, *Literacy as Involvement* 14; Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* 125). And, more fundamentally, the autonomous and ideological views do not, as offered by Street, constitute a binary opposition. This opposition between context and technical effects, Street would later take pains to clarify, was a canard of the thinkers he gathered within the autonomous model. Street argues:

It is those who employed an 'autonomous' model, and who have generally dominated the field of literacy studies until recently, who were responsible for a false polarity between the 'technical' and 'cultural' aspects of literacy. The ideological model, on the other hand, does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the 'ideological' model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the 'autonomous model.' (435)

Autonomy is an *example* of the ideological model, for an autonomous view of literacy is an ideology of text *par excellence*. Attributing cognitive effects directly to text elides its linkages to a dominant culture invested in a form of modern life predicated upon inequality at home and coloniality abroad. An ideological reading of autonomous arguments reveal the agents they repress by fetishizing the text alone. Thus, the crux of the autonomous model theorized by Street, and the strong text version of it elaborated a few years later by Brandt, was neither, as Vieira would have it, that text had a material basis, nor that it could be used by states to categorize and control

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subordinate groups. Instead, both the autonomous and strong text models are principally theories of text's inherent capacity to shape the *mind*.

Much as Street developed the autonomous model to describe the work of those scholars with whom he disagreed, Brandt offers the "strong-text" view of literacy to sum up the features of scholarship that she will push against in her titular elaboration of *Literacy as Involvement*, such as work by "Walter J. Ong, Jack Goody, David R. Olson, and others" (7). One of Brandt's central concerns the strong-text model's implications for learners. Brandt saw strong-text writers as supposing, first, that print required a kind of distancing of self from sociality, an immersion with text that cultivated advantageous registers of thought unavailable to more oral societies. Thinkers like Olson, supposing this to be true, derived a view of literate education as the need to shed social context, rather than a process of socialization into literate communities (8). Very much in the spirit of Street's autonomous model, Brandt writes that "strong-text descriptions" presume the capacity to pattern a literate person's interior life; "the requisites for literacy appear indistinguishable from the [presumed] qualities of texts. To be literate one must be text-like: logical, literal, detached, and message-focused. The significant literate relationship is with the text" (8).

These are not the concerns of Vieira's work. I believe that literacy scholars would regard it as specious—or worse—if a researcher were to suggest that the kind of documents characterized in *American by Paper* as 'strong,' (passports, visas, residency cards, applications, official correspondence, etc.) somehow re-configure the *interior* life or style of *learning* of migrants compelled to read, write, or carry them. But that is what Brandt's strong text implies. Vieira's theoretical invocation of the 'strong' text in *American by Paper* is therefore unengaged with the features essential to Brandt's model. Even when narrowly applied to the matter of identity papers, the application of the strong-text model presents problems, for documents are ineffectual in and of

themselves. Their power is dependent upon their relation to state infrastructures, such as the judicial, penal, and immigration systems.[62]

Prior to publishing *American by Paper*, though, Vieira wrote "Undocumented in a Documentary Society," which presents material taken up in the book. Pertinent to my approach to sociomateriality, "Undocumented in a Documentary Society: Textual Borders and Transnational Religious Literacies," advances the idea of a "documentary infrastructure." The "documentary infrastructures" Vieira discusses are systems to be found in both state bureaucracies and transnational religious institutions (451–57). In a passage that echoes the twin concerns later developed in *American by Paper*—the use of literate practices by migrants and the imposition of control upon them via a written system—Vieira describes how writing within religious contexts can serve something of a compensatory function in the lives of migrants impacted by the power of 'papers' and an unfamiliar culture. She writes,

[62] Vieira, to be fair, is wary of being misinterpreted as simply endorsing an autonomous conception of text. In her bold 2013 position statement published in *LiCS*, "On the Social Consequences of Literacy," she invokes the idea of the "strong text," and anticipates pushback from those invested in NLS. "To be clear," she writes:

> To track the consequences of literacies' material affordances is not to uncritically rehabilitate strong text views of literacy, in which texts autonomously accomplish magnificent feats independent of the social. Instead, it is a radically social view of literacy—literacy understood from the perspective, in these cases, of migrants and their families—that brings me up against literacy's consequences. When viewed from my field sites, the theoretical distinctions between strong text and context-sensitive theories of literacy begin to collapse. ("On the Social Consequences of Literacy" 30)

This "radically social view of literacy," compelled into even greater relief by her fuller discussion of *American by Paper's* qualitative findings, informs the nature of the sociomateriality described there. But, again, I find the "collapse" of "theoretical distinctions" Vieira notes to be problematic, both because it implies a structural opposition to ideas that are in fact nested (autonomy being itself an ideology of text), and because this re-reading remains at odds with Brandt's rendering of the strong-text view of literacy.

[t]his documentary infrastructure provides imaginative access to the Brazilian homeland, allowing undocumented participants to tentatively transcend a hostile documentary environment through participation in Brazilian spiritual realms. Religious texts here function as transnational touchstones, suggesting that religious documentary societies resonate in participants' literacy lives in part because they transcend and traverse the very borders that are textually policed by the state. (457)

Elsewhere in the article, Vieira describes bible study (453), the accessibility of Brazilian religious texts in the US Brazilian migrant community under discussion (456), and the international movement of Brazilian pastors schooled in liberation theology (455). All of these contribute to transnational documentary infrastructures in which practices of writing, reading, and speaking maintain their coherence and importance across multiple contexts in the US and Brazil.

In this way, Vieira uses the idea of infrastructure to account for the translocal, transcontextual qualities of literate practices and their various sociomaterial effects, mobility/immobility among them. The concept allows Vieira to trace relations pertinent to the practices under discussion, which necessarily, in their transnationality, move beyond the "Limits of the Local." In this way, Vieira's qualitative research identifies actors relationally consequent to the transnational linkages under discussion, human and non-human, individual and institutional, amid processes and products. "*An infrastructure*," as Star and Ruhleder write, "*occurs when the tension between local and global is resolved*" (114, original emphasis).

4.9 Affordances: Ecology and Infrastructure

Many features of *American by Paper's* theoretical argument were already evident in Vieira's "On the Social Consequences of Literacy." In a gesture of disciplinarily iconoclasm, Vieira re-purposed the language of Goody and Watt—those bogeymen entombed by Street and rarely deemed deserving of exhumation—to argue for increased attention to literacy's *consequences,* as per Goody and Watt's 1963 "The Consequences of Literacy," the same piece touched upon above in the introductory discussion of Street and *Orientalism*. Vieira doesn't go so far as to claim that the writers to whom Street objected were correct, but instead suggests the presence of starting premises worthy of recovery. "Goody and Watt argued that literacy's technical affordances allowed the objective recording of historical facts," writes Vieira— knowing that no readers of *Literacy in Composition Studies* would endorse such an idea (26)—yet affirming the idea that "technical affordances" might be of use in the discussion of literacy.

Vieira therefore enlists the concept of the *affordance* to prise open the scholarly ledger on the consequences of literacy (26,30). The consequences of literacy were, in Goody and Watt's estimation, applicable to entire cultures. Are Vieira's 'technical affordances' simply their 'consequences,' re-clothed? In response to this question, this section will propose that a sociomaterial understanding of the affordance is necessarily an ecological one, and that our experience of affordant relations is central to literate activity.

Scholars trace the word's origin to James J. Gibson's environmental psychology of the 1950s-1970s, and it remains a crucial term in studies of both literacy and technology (Heft; Hutchby; Twigt; Nagy and Neff). To begin with a recent reference to affordances in composition studies, Horner discusses the term in "Modality as Social Practice in Written Language." Horner

discusses how modalities, at first being recognized mainly in non-alphabetic texts, were discussed as affordances of the technologies enabling the creation and circulation of those texts. Horner's aim in the piece is to encourage fellow scholars to situate modality within social practice, rather than imagine it as somehow, by virtue of its material characteristics, outside of it, as in the style of the autonomous model. He writes:

> [T]o avert a sense of technological determinism, the notion of "affordances" is typically invoked; these tools do not produce but "afford" specific effects—making them available. But what is afforded is understood to be an outcome of the technology or mode itself . . . . (Horner 5)

Horner's critique suggests that this use of the "affordance" allows it to function as something of a trojan horse for the autonomous model. Pertinent here is Horner's observation that affordances, when presented as inherent to objects, re-inscribe the "neutral" or technological instrumentality of the autonomous school. That the technologies enabling multimodal texts did indeed have material effects once perceived as novel only facilitated this fetishistic collapse of process into object.63 This example clarifies the stakes of the term 'affordance' to literacy studies.

Originating far from discussions of technology, the affordance was theorized as part of Gibson's life's work to understand perception from the standpoint of environmental psychology. According to Heft's reading of *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson

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63 As Horner acknowledges in the same piece, his views draw upon Paul Prior's earlier critique of Gunter Kress's linkage of affordances and modalities in the 2005 "Moving multimodality beyond the binaries: A response to Gunther Kress' 'Gains and Losses.'" In that piece, Prior concludes, "I do not believe that we can account for multimodality and affordances without a focus on the whole of practice—on artifacts, activity, and people alike" (Prior, "Moving Multimodality beyond the Binaries" 29).

defines affordances most directly in the following way: "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (p. 127). The affordances of a given place in the environment establish for an individual what actions are possible there and what the consequences of those actions are. For example, a surface of support at approximately knee height to the individual *affords* sitting on. A seat is a feature of the environment specifiable in terms of properties of the object (i.e., it has a particular mass, height, and width); but its parameters as an affordance are delimited with reference to a specific individual of a particular weight, leg length, and girth. As a result, what constitutes a seat (or affords sitting-on) will vary among individuals with significantly different *body scaling*. The relative nature of seat affordances can be illustrated by the fact that a surface perceived as a seat by a young child may not be perceived as such by an adult. (Heft 3, emphases original)

Gibson's affordance resides not in an isolated tool, but in the relationship between a member of the *anamalia*, such as a human, and the rest of the environment (of which it is, as a living thing, also a part), and all the objects to be perceived therein. The relation of the elements connected through the affordance is situated rather than categorical. Thus, an object's affordances might be *scaled* to some bodies, but not others, depending on their relative size or stage of biological development. And an object might be natural or else, as in the case of the chair, shaped (or 'folded,' to recall the Latourian term) into a range of orientations to the human, who in turn enjoys a non-deterministic orientation in intention to whatever affordances are on offer in a particular environment—as in the case of a child who elects not to sit as directed in a chair, despite the fact that it might be appropriately sized to her. Objects within environments have multiple

"potential affordances" (Heft 22). Even so, "affordances are not subjective in the sense that they reside in mind . . . they are ecological facts. Thus, affordances do not fit neatly into either of these two ontological categories; instead they are *relational* in nature" (Heft 4).64 Affordances in this account achieve relationality across fields of ontological difference within environments of which we are a part, yet also experience. In this way, the concept of the affordance builds an ecological understanding of *relationality* into a sociomaterial conception of literacy studies.65

64 Hutchby, writing in 2001, arrives at similar conclusions. This view of the affordance is evident in later scholarship as well. Ian Hutchby, for instance, uses the term in 2001 to reconcile "radical constructivist" and "realist" views of technology. He writes:

> [A]ffordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. This "third way" between the (constructivist) emphasis on the shaping power of human agency and the (realist) emphasis on the constraining power of technical capacities opens the way for new analysis of how technological artefacts become important elements in the patterns of ordinary human conduct. (444)

Hutchby writes that an affordance-based view of text, which happens to be the technological example he relies on to make his points, avoids the "[A]rbitrariness of the radical constructivist position, with its single-minded view that the discourses surrounding technologies are the only phenomena with any possible sociological (and social) relevance; and to evade the equally unilateral epistemology associated with technological determinism" (Hutchby 453). We can hear Hutchby as consonant with Street here in the latter's determined eschewal of technological determinism in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*.

65 It is for this reason that I am not leading with an ecological view of writing or literacy. I take Gibson's view of the affordance to be broadly consonant with (if not presenting a more nuanced sense human/object interactions *within* environments than) many uses of the term *ecology* within literacy studies. Mapes and Hea, for example, discuss smartphones "as part of a larger ecology of devices," by which they mean smartphones are used alongside tablets and laptops (79). They describe smartphones as "appendages," which "means situating texts, mediums, devices within a broader ecology of 'signs, objects, and bodies,' a phenomenon Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt described as "literacy unbounded" (73). Without a theory of the affordance, such proposals strike me as somewhat vague, though the matter deserves a separate literature review. More relevant to the infrastructural emphasis I propose is Byrd's comment on "ecological writing, which decenters the writer from literacy practice and sees them participating in the circulation of material (e.g. desks, pencils, writing) and non-material (e.g. emotion) objects" (37). An ecological-affordance-based view, such as Gibson's can, in combination with attention to infrastructures, do much to clarify just how such "circulation of material" is accomplished inside and outside the scene of a literacy event.

Although commonly paired with "constraint" in communication and technology studies (Nagy and Neff 1), Gibson writes, in his commentary upon an experiment created by Eleanor J. Gibson, "One can safely walk around the edge of a wall but not the edge of a cliff. To perceive a cliff is to detect a layout but, more than that, it is to detect an *affordance*, a negative affordance for locomotion, a place where the surface of support ends" (Gibson 158). It is within material environments that affordances entail a range of effects, including the inhibition of movement, a matter of concern in Vieira's work, as discussed. And it is clear in such a passage that Gibson does not propose his ecological conception of the affordance as a metaphor, as in rhetoric and composition scholarship that tends to "dematerialize discussions of ecology" (Rios 37).[66] It is the materiality of environmental objects in the first instance that invites perception of the affordant relations into which one might enter with them.

Heft's piece on Gibson goes on to test the concept with a number of scenarios, all of them pertinent to this discussion of literacy, technology, and infrastructure. In my reading of Heft, literacy, including learned orientations that allow us to leverage objects in communicative practices, fills the conceptual gaps that arise when applying Gibson's affordance to objects like typewriters and mailboxes. Heft emphasizes the importance of understanding the body as a locus of intention rather than only mechanical fit with an environment. If a typewriter is taken only as

[66] Although engaging the scholarship on writing ecologies and writing environments is beyond my scope, the ecological theory of affordances as well as the underlying investment in relationality suggests the consonance of these fields with sociomaterial literacy studies. Byrd summarizes:

> Ecological theories of writing seek to "understand how networked people experience multiple encounters with a variety of other people, texts, and objects over time" (Laquintano and Vee 53). In this new materialist formulation, writers are enmeshed in, and not the center of, a complex, constantly evolving system of relationships between the social and the material (Cooper 371–72; Alexis 84–85; Syverson 23). (32)

an object inviting the hands, the typically goal-oriented nature of typing is elided. But, Heft writes, "[f]rom an intentional perspective . . . the typewriter takes on functional meaning, that is, an affordance, within the context of this goal-directed activity. In other words, knowing how to do something is situated knowledge" (13).

Similarly, one's use of a mailbox to send a letter cannot be reduced to the physical capacity of a mailbox to contain smaller objects. Perceiving the mailbox as affording the sending of a letter is therefore informed not only by the broader material environment, but the social world as well; affordances are sociomaterial, inciting situated knowledge. An "intentional act," Heft writes,

> is situated with respect to this object, and its affordance emerges from the relationship, as designated by the culture, between this particular object and this intention . . . . Much of this situated knowledge is acquired within a specific sociocultural context. Moreover, the process of enculturation can be viewed, in part, as one of acquiring a repertoire of acts, each act being situated with respect to a particular set of environmental features, the functional significance of which are socially conveyed. (18)

In its reliance upon ideas like the situatedness of knowledge and the acquisition of "repertoire," we are firmly back on ground common to composition and literacy studies, especially in work influenced by sociolinguistics (see, for example, McCormick and Waller; Blommaert; Leonard). I would add only that Heft's analysis leaves out two ideas that suggest the viability of integrating an ecological understanding of affordances into sociomaterial literacy studies. First, the typing and mail examples presume the ability to read and write a language in a manner appropriate to the device and infrastructurally dispersed throughout the society under discussion. Second, the presence of a typewriter or mailbox as an idiosyncratic object would not activate the

social and cultural knowledge allowing one to perceive their respective affordances; they only function as part of a recognizable set, elements within a physical infrastructure constellating elements of dedicated literacy practices. And it is such an infrastructure that allows the scalar traverse of literacy beyond the "body scaling" of individual objects, as emphasized above (Heft 3). If the environment includes objects that humans have fashioned in affordant relations to themselves, social, materially, and historically, it also includes elements of the built environment, such as those that constitute physical infrastructures.

From Gibson and commentators like Heft, then, I add to a sociomaterial conception of literacy an understanding of affordances, which I take to describe the material, social, and historical conditions of possible relation between entities as they interact within environments. Affordant relations between humans and literacy objects place a person's experiential repertoire in relation to not only literacy objects (into which parameters of possible relationality have been folded), but also the concomitant array of objects and dynamic relations to which that literacy object (device) is related, thereby affording literacy practices *infrastructural* capacities such as extension, amplification, duration, and distribution.

4.10 Infrastructural Bodies

Vieira's work on "documentary infrastructures" is not the only scholarship in recent years to emphasize the connection between literacy and infrastructure. Annette Vee discusses infrastructure in her 2013 "Understanding computer programming as a literacy" as well as her 2017 *Coding Literacy: How Computer Programming is Changing Writing*. Vee gives the matter

careful examination, for it bears upon whether or not media descriptions of software programming as "literacy" are sustained by academic scrutiny. "So, what exactly is literacy?" Vee writes, "[a]nd why might it be useful to stretch its conceptual apparatus to describe computer programming?" (44). In answering this question, she engages the work of Andrea diSessa, who differentiates between literacy, a large-scale phenomenon, and less widely distributed forms of know-how or "material intelligence." "[T]he technologies undergirding literacies," Vee explains, "are more central to life than those for material intelligences" (45). The analysis leads Vee to

> define "literacy" as a human facility with a symbolic and infrastructural technology—such as a textual writing system—that can be used for creative, communicative and rhetorical purposes. Literacy enables people to represent their ideas in texts that can travel away from immediate, interpersonal contexts (to write) and also to interpret texts produced by others (to read)…. Extending diSessa's schema, I propose that: *a determination of whether or not a system of skills is a literacy depends on its societal context*. One can be skilled at leveraging specific technologies to communicate, but a *literacy* leverages *infrastructural* symbolic technologies and is necessary for everyday life. (45, emphases original)

Writing only functions as it does in modern society because it, and the "infrastructural" technologies supporting it, have become common throughout society. It follows in her analysis that computer coding, while pertaining to a digital technology that has in many places attained an infrastructural dispersion, is not yet essential to the daily life of the non-specialist, and therefore may not actually merit description in terms of literacy (45-46). The infrastructural dispersion of "symbolic and infrastructural technologies," is the enabling circumstance for "literacy." It

accounts for the spatial and social extension of communicative and expressive practices within a society, such as one bounded by the borders of a state.

Vee's definition of literacy as a "human facility with . . . with a symbolic and infrastructural technology" (quoted above) urges further consideration of the people engaged in affordant relations with communicative infrastructures. de Sousa e Silva discusses how digital infrastructures, elements of infrastructural technology, can enable a sense of "distributed presence," how "the feeling of belonging to one's communicative network is no longer dependent on a specific place or physical presence, but on space and message exchange" (de Souza e Silva 31). Some scholars of digital media have in fact proposed extensions to the theory of the affordance, either to emphasize the role of design through the idea of "imagined affordances" (Nagy and Naff 1), or else the importance in the emotional maintenance of self through a technology's "affective affordances" (Twigt 2). And in literacy studies, Vieira's *Writing for Love and Money*, Vieira, places emotional motives at the center of her multi-sited study spanning Brazil, Latvia, and the US. She argues that, as a form of "emotional work," "writing can offer a material space to navigate the emotions associated with bodily separation" (26). And she is aware, as well, that writing can only afford this form of connectivity when the "infrastructure of a postal system (or the internet or cell towers) allows paper (or emails or texts) to connect where physical contact is impossible" (29). Recognizing the infrastructural character of literacy in the way the Vee proposes in no way reduces it to a technical description.

4.11 Aggregated Affordances

Thinking about literacy, infrastructure, and affect in the manner that Vieira proposes invites further consideration of the role played by people in relation to communicative infrastructures. If my main interest were to trace and describe the *function* of such an entity, I might prefer to roll the devices, infrastructures, and users of those technologies together in an 'actor-network' or 'assemblage.' But, as chapter 5 will further suggest, the ultimate ends of this project are, in the style of feminist intersectionality, the cultivation of an orientation of possible solidarity with the people who participated in the TOB study. I find this task consistent, as noted, with an abiding attention to the political materiality of the body, and it depends on recognizing bodies as distinct from the systems they use, even when that use also extends the overall functionality of those systems.

There are two brief points to be added to foregoing account, though substantiating them is beyond my scope here. First, the physical elements within infrastructures function serially and in aggregating or networked patterns. If (and retaining the Latourian metaphor) we can 'fold' a certain bandwidth of social relationality into an object, then that folding process can be extended in affordances extending serially between associated objects. So our phones, into which we have digitally folded the affordant basis of any number of possible relations to other users as well as non-human systems, activates infrastructural affordances distributed across the communications infrastructure. It is not the device's affordances but the infrastructure's *aggregated affordances* that allow us to call anywhere within a particular carrier's broadcast region, a matter that informs the following chapter.

Second, the humans articulated within a communications infrastructure extend even these aggregated affordances. Material access to an infrastructural technology allows its literate users to engage in communicative and expressive practices, and enables reciprocal activity among others who might access that infrastructure. We write emails, for instance, with the expectation that others might read them, speak into phones so that others might listen, share photos so that others might see them, etc. The point to underscore is that all of the literate users articulated in potential relations with an infrastructure *extend its affordances* as a communicative technology that facilitates relations, ultimately, among *bodies*. Each human body constellated does so in a manner qualitatively distinct from that of the non-human elements, which tend to mediate, amplify, and distribute, but are less likely to inscribe, emote, or engage in the inventive labor of creating additional relations. It is often at the boundary points of physical infrastructures where humans engage, labor, improvise, and invent. A person with access to a communicative infrastructure and the concomitant literate knowledge to use it can therefore be both an active subject of literate practices, initiating communication and expression, as well as an object of them, reached by, stimulated, impacted, even controlled by them. Because affordances "do not fit neatly into . . . ontological categories . . . " (Heft 4), but rather mediate them through relation, a sociomaterial outlook can embrace the fluctuating between subject- and object-orientations enabled by affordant relations within infrastructures. Literate writers have always been readers as well, and the more users articulated with an infrastructure, the more people one's literacy has the potential to reach.[67]

[67] It is for these reasons that I hesitate to join theorist Abdul-Malik Simone in the characterization of "people as infrastructure" (411). In "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," Simone investigates the ways in which the very poor of Johannesburg devise practices of "economic collaboration" that, though often unrecognized in their importance, fulfill infrastructural roles upon which the city depends, especially among the populace ill-served by the municipality's hierarchies of economic and political power (411). There is an inversion of expectation in Simone's argument; we expect non-human

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Consistent with this reasoning, infrastructures in Vee and Vieira's handling do not collapse the material differences between the elements under discussion. Vee's analysis recognizes the relations between hardware, software, coders, and public discourse representing the meaning of code; *Coding Literacy* is in many senses a rhetorical study of the aims of those who, across popular, scholarly, and professional publics, describe computer programming in terms of literacy. As we have shaped increasingly complex literacy objects and infrastructures, we have cultivated a corresponding array of linguistic, technical, and expressive practices, including those that allow us to become enmeshed in literate infrastructures. Such practices, cultivated by bodies in relation to literacy objects, both animate and extend the aggregated affordances of those infrastructures.

4.12 Infrastuctural Epistemology

As much as this sociomaterial view of literacy builds upon recent writing by Vieira and Vee, it is consonant with elements of earlier scholarship as well. The theoretical influence of the autonomous and ideological models sometimes overshadows the materiality of the fieldwork upon which Street drew in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Street's theoretical framework was

infrastructure, but find humans fulfilling infrastructural roles, occupying the gaps in systems skewed to service more elite positions. While it can be useful to consider how forms of human activity in a municipality it may be dependent on less visible forms of labor, as Simone's piece suggests, a sociomaterial perspective can embrace the relationality of this insight while recognizing, perhaps above all, the vulnerability of the human bodies enmeshed in those relations. Even as bodies versed in literacy practices comprise that infrastructure, those same bodies are "users" of that sociomaterial architecture, which may indeed be legible in terms of a hierarchal distribution of privilege.

developed in dialog with qualitative research in "Cheshmeh, a mountain fruit-growing village above [the city of] Mashad," Iran (*Literacy in Theory and Practice* 129).

In these less frequently cited chapters of *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, we see Street trace the transfer of literacy practices from religious to commercial contexts, specifically in response to the extension of the "economic infrastructure" (180) resulting from a "1970s boom" (159). In his chapter on "commercial literacy," Street describes the social division of a village's cultivable land by family and gender, the material features and community maintenance of the irrigation channels ('jubes') supporting orchards on that land, the distribution of the orchard's produce within local and regional systems of exchange, and the ebb and tide of the national and regional economies impacting local orchards' profitability (158-180). Street was attentive to people who were able to adapt their "maktab" (or 'desk') literate practices, to improvise, invent, and inscribe semiotic elements sufficient for the scheduling, tabulation, and bookkeeping tasks of mercantile opportunity, thereby responding to "the needs of the new large-scale, fruit marketing system generated by the economic growth and infrastructural developments of the early 1970s in Iran" (129). Differentiating 'commercial' from 'maktab' literacies according to the social and material contexts of their use over time, Street describes how the potential transfer of literate practices enabled access to "infrastructural advantages" (157, 168, 180). These advantages might be usefully conceived as well in terms of affordance*s*, for they enabled socioeconomic advantage in the specific environments in which people in Cheshmeh were able to grow and sell their produce. Thus, in the chapters in which Street actually offers an account of his own ethnographic study of literate practices, Street brings to bear an understanding of the physical infrastructures that relate his situated observations through aqueducts and highways to Iran's metropoles and centers of government. Street's descriptions pertain to individuals, yet also take into account the

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impact of the national Iranian economy on the local scene, a nuanced translocal relation. Such a perspective recognizes how social practices can habituate people into roles with overall social and material consequences. "Commercial literacy," in this sense, describes a community organizing a literate infrastructure capable of sustaining participation in relation to Iran's national economy of the day. The example reminds us that it is crucial to note that the constellation of people, practices, artifacts, and physical infrastructures is a time-bound, sociohistoric, and situated phenomenon. Recognizing infrastructure to be "a fundamentally relational concept," Star and Ruhleder argued it was crucial to ask "*when*—not *what*— is an infrastructure" (113). The "[r]each or scope" of an infrastructure "may be either spatial or temporal; infrastructure has reach beyond a single event or one-site practice . . ." (Star and Ruhleder 113). Literacy exemplifies this quality insomuch as its infrastructures comprised of distributed objects can achieve effects at variable scales, and over time.

In addition to its attention to infrastructures, Street's early example of commercial literacy suggests what I refer to as the *epistemic generativity* of literate practices. The inventive transfer of literate practices figures prominently in Street's tracing of the relation between 'maktab' and 'commercial' literacies. He describes, for example, the turning of "non-sequential reading" and textual "retrieval" practices from their original task, the location of apt passages in the Qur'an, to 'commercial' ends (155). In doing so, Street invokes the language of transfer, which remains an enduring concern in writing studies and composition & rhetoric more generally (Miles et al. 507; Leonard and Nowacek). "These particular skills associated with the 'maktab' literacy," Street writes, "were amongst those which were later transferred by some Cheshmeshis to 'commercial' literacy and which served those purposes particularly well" (155). I take Street's early account of "adaptation" and "transfer" to suggest the epistemically generative character of literacies. By

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deploying their accustomed literate practices in new ways, the people Street encountered in Cheshmeh created and circulated the knowledge necessary to take advantage of commercial opportunities unavailable within their region prior to its inclusion within Iran's modernizing transit infrastructure. Although Street's later work in the field of "academic literacies" would be explicitly recognized for an "epistemological" stance, his early work also implies the epistemic generativity of literate practices (Lillis and Scott 7).

This epistemic generativity is derived from the iterative nature of sociomaterial practices with infrastructural technologies. Infrastructural objects, arranged in series or pooled in aggregates, are 'folded' together such that affordant relations are distributed, amplified, extended. This is a concatenate mediation that informs the literacy act itself. Reflexive knowledge about the nature of the infrastructure and its mediating properties may therefore be cultivated through experiences of it. A sociomaterial conception of literacy, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, combines this awareness with relational principles of analysis.

A compelling theorization of such a connection is on offer in Gabriela Rios's "Cultivating Land-Based Literacies and Rhetorics." Rios's work with groups like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers animates the article's dialogic articulation of literacies pertaining to land, farming, community mobilization, and indigeneity (60). Rios writes:

> land-based literacies are literal acts of interpretation and communication that grow out of active participation with land. While these are literacies that are predominantly extradiscursive, they are nevertheless rooted in relations among discursive phenomena (like communication) and ecology. Indigenous relationality recognizes that humans and the environment are in a relationship that is co-

constituted and not just interdependent. Additionally, Indigenous relationality recognizes the environment's capacity to produce relations. (64)

Land-based literacies, entailing "extradiscursive" activity as well as "interpretation and communication" bound up with land, are compelling instances of sociomaterial phenomena that, in being recognized as *literacies*, intervene in historical hierarchies that would subordinate them to dominant cultures' valuation of alphabetic literacies. The relationality here associates elements across fields of variable ontology, such as those to be found "between humans and the environment" (64).

It would be inaccurate, though, to suppose the literacies Rios explains are identical to the model of sociomateriality I have outlined here. While Vieira in *American by Paper* demonstrated the power of the power of 'strong' texts within infrastructural and disciplinary systems, thereby emphasizing literacy's products as well as processes, Rios's positions land-based literacies within the specific investments and worldview of Indigenous culture. Rios writes:

> Indigenous relational ontology recognizes the environment as a relative, and it argues for nature as a primary force in the creation of relations. In short, land-based rhetorics recognize the ways in which nature can produce relations. Therefore, when I refer to land-based literacies, I am invoking a relationship between land and bodies that produces knowledge, and that knowledge provides a "context in which process, product, and self might become one" (Cajete 47). One implication of landbased rhetorics, then, is the valuing of embodied ways of knowing/being derived from land and from with working/living/being with land. (65)

A sociomaterial literacy study, depending on the ends to which it is directed, and by whom, might nor might not enter into a dialogic relationship with such a set of beliefs. Vieira's example

in *American by Paper*, for example, notes the implications of alienating literacy "products" within a Brazilian diaspora. Although I regard an ecological understanding of affordances to encompass, as per Gibson's work, not just bodies and land, but also tools and built environments, an Indigenous relational ontology has its own theorization of the manner and meaning of people's interactions with the earth. Thus, I do not regard Indigenous relationality as somehow occupying a niche within a sociomaterial taxonomy, a schematization that would impose a neocolonial hierarchy of relative value, and one discounting the histories Rios brings to bear, including those of "Latin@ and/or Mexican@" activists (60), "Latin American Indigenous studies" (63), and Indigenous peoples in (what we know as) the Americas more generally.

What I do recognize, though, is Rios's description of non-textual literate practices that foster a form of epistemic generativity particular to the people and contexts she discusses. This reasoning runs parallel to the epistemic generativity, found between bodies and elements of the environment beyond those bodies, essential to the approach to sociomaterial literacy I am proposing here.[68] I close this discussion with the matter of epistemic generativity because it is, of the several attributes I find to contribute to a sociomaterial literacy studies approach to infrastructure, the fulcrum upon which the following chapter's argument will turn.

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[68] A similar dynamic obtains in Chavez and Licona's work presenting a theory of *relational* literacies. In their case, the emphasis is on the relations under discussion being social, pushing against individual knowledge. They write: "Understood as practices, relational literacies imply the labor of making meaning, of shared knowledges, or of producing and developing new knowledges together. In other words, relational literacies are understandings and knowings in the world that are never produced singularly or in isolation but rather depend on interaction."

5.0 Chapter 4. "They say there is nothing . . . but indeed they exist": Transborder Signal Territory, Political Materiality, and Infrastructural Epistemologies

This chapter brings a sociomaterial framework to bear on interviews discussing the use of cellular devices by displaced Syrian nationals along the border between Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). I consider in detail one family's account of an Iraqi cellular company's operation beyond the range purported by its corporate managers. Discussing their transborder experience of cellular service in terms of signal territory, I find their reflections on regional communications infrastructures to constitute knowledge unavailable elsewhere. If, as writing studies scholarship contends, reflection and the cultivation of metaknowledge are essential characteristics of print-literacy, this case of transborder signal territory suggests that literacy studies recognizes practices that are not only relational but also epistemically generative. In this case, the infrastructural knowledge generated pertains to the region's international and transnational politics, phenomena likely to impact future movement. This chapter therefore places literacy studies in dialog with critical infrastructure studies, adding to the latter's material emphasis the models of knowledge construction available in sociomaterial and transnational literacy scholarship. Rather than contributing to a technical or autonomous account of regional communication infrastructures, the interviewees describe a multi-scalar milieu of transnational, state, and sub-state actors with competing ideological investments and aims. Their comments invite a greater understanding of the transnational Kurdish cultural space, the relation of Kurdish-identifying people to the state powers claiming that space, and the divided territoriality of the

semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This situated understanding is antithetical to both the

fetishization of mobile technology and Orientalism's anti-historical ontology.

5.1 An Interview

This chapter focuses on a group interview I conducted during the summer of 2017 at Arbat, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 'camp,' the first of the Trajectories of Belonging (TOB) project's two research sites. From the outset, this interview was unusual, a break from an established routine, and for several reasons it hovers at the margin of the conversations I had with Syrian asylum seekers in 2017 and 2018. Unlike most of the Arbat interviewees, the family I will discuss here was not recruited for participation in the study by Mr. Kheredeen, the Syrian Community Mobilizer assigned by the camp management to facilitate my efforts.

I was with Mr. Bijar Daban, the local Iraqi man of Kurdish descent who contributed to the project as an interpreter and research assistant in the summer of 2017. After a sweltering afternoon walk across Arbat, Bijar and I had found no one home in the dwelling to which Mr. Kheredeen had directed us. Busy with some other matters when we called, Kheredeen invited us to try to recruit a participant from a nearby house. The sounds of splashing water and gleeful shouts drew us to one among many cinder-block enclosures, and I'd rapped my knuckles on the peeling paint of a steel door. It was opened by a bemused bearded man wearing a t-shirt and long shorts; tikes standing in a plastic kiddy pool paused to look, dripping in brief surprise. With an Arabic *ahlan wa sahlan*, we were invited inside a concrete yard by the man, whom I refer to as Bauan. Following

him into the shade of a flat-roofed house, we were also welcomed by his wife, Laylan, and later joined by a younger relation, Ziyad. Our friendly reception was consistent with both the regional culture of hospitality and the relative commonplace of a white Westerner conducting NGO, journalistic, or research business in the community. As we moved from the kindness of water to the pleasure of coffee, Bijar and I explained the project and the group offered their informed consent to take part. If they had been hoping I might lend them material assistance of some kind, they did not say as much; they seemed interested in chatting.

The Syrian Civil War had forced Bauan and Laylan to leave behind a successful life near Damascus. Their displacement began in 2013, when they fled east to Qamishlo, a Kurdish-majority city in northeast Syria, and home to their extended families. As Kurdish-identifying people and speakers of Kurmanji, a dialect of Kurdish, they might have stayed longer in Qamishlo, had the economy not fallen victim to the war as well. Across the border in the KRI, they heard from friends, work was available. And besides, going to 'Kurdistan' had always been a dream of Bauan's. As was a common gendered pattern in the migration described to me in Arbat, Bauan left Syria before Laylan, made arrangements in the KRI, and then, after acquiring a new SIM card, called back to Syria. Laylan, carrying a two-month old child in her arms, had then made the journey along with other family members to join Bauan. Before coming to the Arbat community, Bauan, Laylan, and their growing family lived for several years in Sulaymaniyah, the nearest city. Worsening economic circumstances, fueled in part by the eruption of ISIS in Iraq, eventually led the family to the UNHCR camp. After building a house there, Bauan found it challenging to balance the

expense of the forty-minute commute to Sulaymaniyah with the wages he could earn.[69] "We came, and we regret it," he told me.

Figure 5. "Street and Cinderblock Houses," Arbat Camp, Iraq (Hayes)

Toward the end of our two-hour session, young Ziyad explained how his choice to leave Syria for Iraq turned upon the arrival of his eighteenth birthday and his desire to escape the mandatory military service required by the Assad government. It was a motivation I would hear many times in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah. Like many of the Kurdish men who took part in interviews, Ziyad had no interest in helping the Syrian regime. But, unlike many of the people I met at Arbat who had made the journey while in possession of a 2G Nokia, Ziyad had arrived with a smartphone in hand. With Bijar interpreting from English to Arabic, I'd asked Ziyad if he'd used

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[69] These homes, and the sunk costs of building them, are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

google maps during his relatively short journey from Qamishlo to the Iraqi border. Replying in the negative, Ziyad then noted that he had acquired a SIM card for an Iraqi company, Korek Telecom, prior to his departure.

Korek Telecom was the cellular carrier of choice among nearly all of the Syrian asylum seekers and quite a few of the Iraqi nationals I'd met in the KRI, so I'd already heard of it. "Korek started operating in Iraq in year 2000, notably in the north of Iraq and it is the oldest Iraqi Telecom company" (Korek Telecom, "Introduction"). It had been described to me as a low-cost carrier associated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP, the dominant political power in the KRI.[70] What drew my attention to his comment was that most TOB respondents I'd spoken to had purchased their Korek Telecom SIM cards *after* crossing the border into the Kurdish-majority territory in Iraq. Like digital migration studies scholars completing projects with similar foci, I sometimes presumed the congruity of state borders and cellular service.[71] Bauan, the older man in the room, perhaps sensing my puzzlement, soon interjected an explanation, as my transcription of Bijar's interpretation from Arabic to English reveals:[72]

> Jordan: You're from Qamishli so you probably knew where you were going, but
>
> did you use google maps or GPS to check your progress?

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[70] Though it was claimed to the case by several people I met in the KRI, I have not confirmed the depth of the association between the major political parties and the largest KRI-based carriers. The idea is that the KDP supports and benefits from Korek, and the PUK, Asiacell. Business news coverage suggests that Korek is, at the very least, associated through Sirwan Barzani with the KDP's most prominent family, from whom were elected the former and incumbent Presidents of the KRI, Masoud and Nechirvan Barzani (Arnold).

[71] Borkert et al., for example, write: "After arrival, migrants face the early necessity of acquiring a SIM card or mobile phone . . . to find work and stay connected with family and friends" (3).

[72] I leave all English interpretation in the grammatical form offered by Bijar, as per the translingual orientation noted in the Introduction.

Ziyad: No, I didn't use any of them; in Syria I bought a Korek SIM card.

Jordan: . . . ?

Bauan: Because Korek is now working in Syria, we have service in Syria.

Jordan: Oh, so Korek now gives you signal both in Iraq and Syria?

Bauan: Until Qamishli, Korek Telecom works, but after Qamishli it doesn't work. They brought towers, you know, to provide service to the area, like Derik and Qamishli. They say that there is nothing like that, but indeed it is, there is, you know, like, towers for service.

Jordan: What do you mean 'they say'?

Bauan: They don't say that we have towers in those areas to provide service to people, but indeed they exist, and it is to have *peshmerga* and to help other people at those areas.

Jordan: How— how do you know that?

Bauan: Anyone who thinks about this, he will find out what's going on in the Middle East.

The exchange bears further explanation. "*Peshmerga*" is a Kurdish word referring to Kurdish military forces, "literally: *those who face death*," whom I'll have cause to discuss in more detail (Helfont 1, emphasis in original). Mapping the other regional references suggests that Korek Telecom was accessible in Syria surprisingly far from the border. It's 88 km to Qamishli from the closest city in Iraq, Rabia, but the nearest border crossing, Faysh-Khabur, is 132 km from Qamishli by car, or 100 km as the crow flies (Google Maps).

I was puzzled by the claim. Later, in a meeting coordinated by Bijar, I was able to consult a Korek manager on the matter, which I posed without mentioning its precise source. He rejected

any such idea, explaining that Korek's cellular towers cannot reach nearly so far. His technical disavowal, though, presumed that we could only be talking about cell towers *in Iraq*. This amounts to a rejection of what Bauan had actually argued, that enabling infrastructure had been built in Syria, that, as he said, "they" (whomever that might be) "brought towers . . . to provide service to the area." The idea that unofficial "towers for service" underpinned the phantom extension of Korek's signal was beyond the pale of consideration. Bauan's recorded explanation from the interview seems to anticipate this kind of official denial. As he said, "They say that there is nothing like that, but indeed it is . . . ."

What is the truth of this matter? At the very least it seems that either the Iraqi Korek manager or Bauan is correct. Much as I had approached discussions with the students I'd met in my career as a teacher of English Composition, I took seriously both the TOB interviewees' ability to teach me something about their situation and my capacity to learn something from it. The unpredictable yet dialogic character of the interview brought to my attention Bauan's certainty about the presence of those towers and then, in following up, the Korek manager's certainty that no such thing was possible, which amounts from my standpoint to an aporetic case study. Tracing the sociomaterial relations linking these Syrian asylum seekers through their cell phones to the Korek infrastructure leads to a tension between direct experience and corporate disavowal. Despite my inquiries, this tension has not resolved into a matter of settled fact.

But unearthing the technical details of regional cellular carriers was never an aim of the TOB study. My primary goal was and remains to use the theory and methods of literacy studies as a lens to learn about Syrian asylum-seekers' use of and thoughts about mobile technology. Bauan's particular emphasis on cell towers invites consideration in terms of the infrastructural valence of sociomaterial literacy studies, discussed in the previous chapter. I'll argue below that Laylan,

Bauan, and Ziyad's discussion of the Korek Telecom infrastructure may be usefully regarded as a form of literate activity specifically because it exhibits epistemic generativity, the inventive construction of reflective knowledge.

As will become clear, the particular knowledge on offer in this interview is ultimately political, relating mobile devices, the bodies using them, the infrastructures rendering those devices efficacious, and the corporations maintaining those infrastructures, to the regional and state powers implicated in their operation. For these reasons, this chapter will exemplify, to invoke Street's enduring models, an ideological rather than autonomous approach to infrastructure technology and sociomaterial literacies. As suggested in chapter 3, this work is intended to be legible within the broader tradition of "New Literacies Studies theorists" who "specifically situate literacy in its ideological, cultural, and political locations" such that literacy may be understood as "a deep engagement with the political . . . and an issue of context—personal, social, cultural, geographic, and historical" (Kynard 32). The situated understanding of infrastructure presented here is antithetical to both the fetishization of mobile technology and the enclosure of non-Western bodies by Orientalism's anti-historical ontology, the twofold representational problem set forth in the introduction.

5.2 Transborder Signal Territory

The image below represents Korek Telecom's coverage. It is most dense in northern Iraq, which includes the autonomous Kurdistan Region where Korek is based, but it is also concentrated in Baghdad and along the major transit routes throughout the country.

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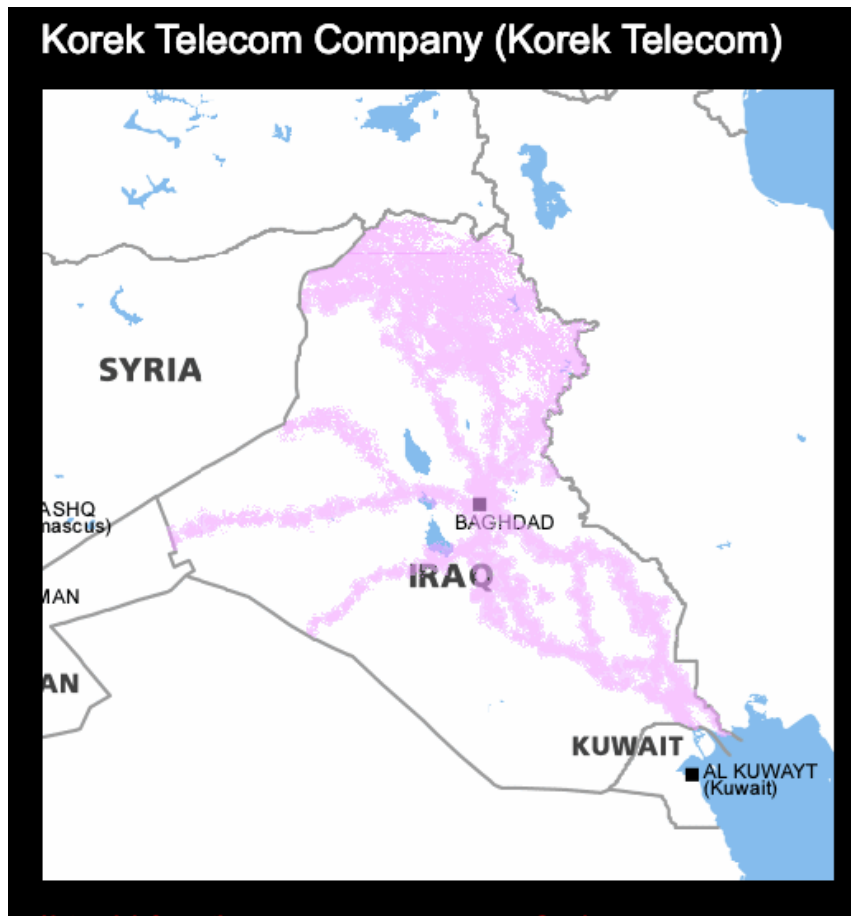
Figure 6. Network Coverage Map, Iraq, Operator: Korek Telecom[73] **(GSMA)**

As fig. 6 suggests, Korek Telecom is within Iraq's borders, but it's coverage is by no means coterminous with them. While Iraq's sovereign territory is an idealized space within those lines, the purple area marked therein represents the extent of Korek's infrastructural capacity.

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[73] This version of the map is no longer online; the URL, https://www.gsma.com/coverage/#251, now displays a newer, more interactive map. The older version is reproduced here for scholarly purposes, only, with permission. Copyright Collins Bartholomew and GSMA 2020.

I regard this phenomenon in terms of "signal territory," a concept proposed by media and critical infrastructure studies scholar Lisa Parks. In her 2013 "Earth Observation and Signal Territory," Parks develops the concept of signal territory through a wide-ranging reading of historical network maps, Google Earth, and field observations. She directs readers to "a screen capture from the Earth-observing platform Google Earth" that

> shows the United States with a layer called FCC Info activated and reveals the country to be one giant signal territory—a landscape not only defined by its sovereign boundaries but also blanketed with colour-coded icons and lines representing an array of broadcast facilities, including stations, towers, antennas, and microwave links. ("Earth Observation and Signal Territories" 2)

The argument turns upon the image's rendering visible the typically unseen or overlooked elements of US cellular infrastructure. In Parks's piece, signal territories are broadcast regions anchored within sovereign states, yet not necessarily isomorphic with their borders. I'd add that a signal territory, though generally unseen, is materialized through the generation and reception of electromagnetic waves, which are not bound by the margins of sovereign space.

Signal territory, therefore, can pass over national borders. Imagining a similar dynamic along the Turkey-Syria border explains why so many of the TOB interviewees used Turkish SIM cards from within Syria, as noted earlier in the introduction's summary of findings. The technical possibility of spillover signal territory was implied by the Korek manager I met with in the company's Sulaymaniyah office.[74] On clear day from a hilltop, he explained, Korek's cell towers

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[74] Although based in the KRI's capital of Erbil, Korek has a large office in Sulaymaniyah as well. Korek's website promises customers a "unique roaming experience in most countries worldwide" (Korek Telecom, "Korek Customer Abroad"). Syria is not listed as a country outside of Iraq in which services like

can project a signal up to 30 km, but on average the range is really quite a bit less, more like 15 km (9.5 miles). Many towers arrayed in series are therefore required to effectively provide coverage within and between cities. Furthermore, cellular infrastructure, as features of the built environment emanating radio waves, interact with topographical, geographical, and atmospheric elements of the overall ecology (Valentine; Environment, Health, and Safety Online). A similar point was posted to *DSL Reports*, a purportedly "neutral place to share ISP reviews, news & tech information." "Being higher up will give the tower an advantage to get over geographical things like trees, buildings, hills, etc. . . ., " writes *Qetwo*, a "premium" contributor to queries on the site (Environment, Health, and Safety Online). They add, "GSM [Global System for Mobile Communication] towers are usually no further than 15 miles [24.1 km] apart without coverage gap." Thus the 15-30 km range claimed by Korek is consistent with industry standards. Even ideal circumstances, then, would not explain the range of the reception Laylan reported getting with her Korek SIM card in Qamishlo.

Wanting to further corroborate the manager's story and working through a friendly academic intermediary at a Kurdish institution, I consulted (by proxy) a higher-placed Korek executive about the matter by email. The reply expresses surprise, yet affirms the general permeability of state borders to signal:

> It is considered a violation of international law to face our tower to Syria or another country. However, the borders cannot be fully controlled, unless there is a Telecommunication [company] operating on the other side blocking our signals. I

a "Voice SMS Bundle is available," but such an arrangement is possible with firms operating in Turkey like Vodafone and Turkcell. If a roaming arrangement was or had been in place, Korek did not discuss it with me, nor did anyone I spoke to whom had been back and forth across the border.

personally am not aware that Korek signals reach Qamishlo or not, but it might reach some high areas inside Rojava, somewhere like the town of Derik. But Qamishlo! I am not aware. (Anonymous Email)

In the Korek executive's view, the city of Derik, known in Arabic as Al-Malikiyah, only 24km from the Faysh-Khabur crossing, might indeed be a place where Korek users in Syria might access the spillover of Korek's signal territory. The email is therefore consistent with the manger's explanation insomuch as the latter suggested a given tower's signal could be accessed, in the right conditions, up to 30km away. A tower in Iraq near the border could explain the spillover signal territory, but that extra range would, as suggested in the image above, bear a close relation to the border, at least as long as the company's towers were arrayed only within Iraq. Bauan's idea, as mentioned, was that that new towers had been built in Syria. The missive's opening note of legal propriety ("violation of international law"), however, suggests that if such an arrangement were made, it could not be made public. And the constraints of GSM infrastructure suggest that Bauan and Laylan's claim about service in Qamishlo could not be simply a side-effect of Korek's regular operations.

In the figure below, my own mark-up of the GSMA map, I extend an arc (in blue) to suggest the possible extent of a signal territory capable of reaching all the way from the KRI to Qamishlo (Al Qamishli), Syria. Even if limited to transit arteries to Qamishlo, such a signal territory far exceeds the spillover discussed thus far, as illustrated below by fig. 7.
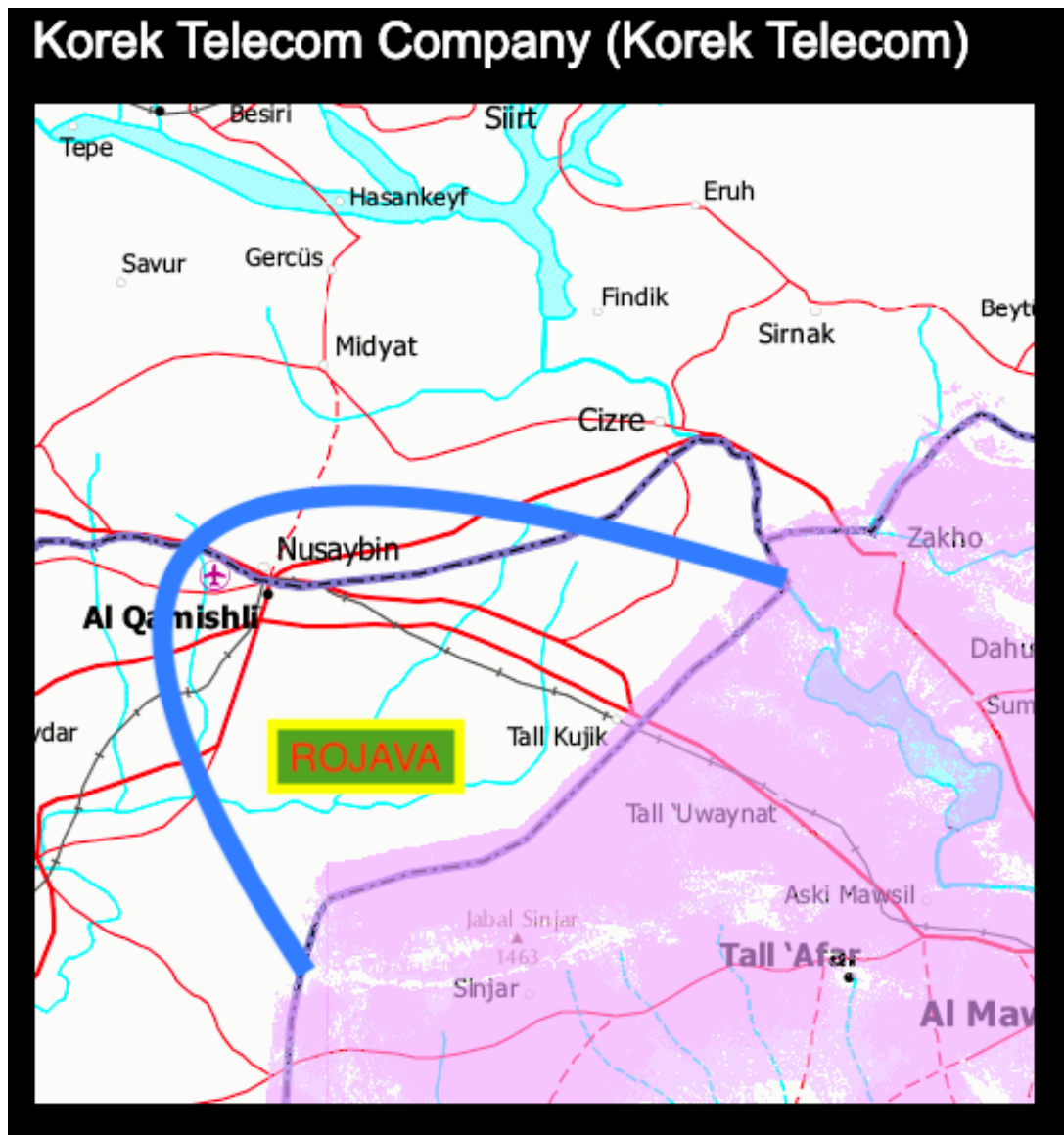
Figure 7. Annotated Close-Up of Korek Coverage Map to Suggest Transborder Signal

Territory (Hayes)

Even more than spillover along the border, the case of Korek Telecom's unusual extension points out a *transborder* manifestation of signal territory. The term 'transborder' differentiates these broadcast regions from those that operate internationally by design and with legal imprimatur. The logic of transborder phenomena is contrary to the state-centered commonplace that polities require controlled borders (Rotberg 4–5; Stagliano 290). As a study of transborder

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signal territory, this case embodies a transnationalism that avoids the pitfall, widely recognized in both migration studies and transnational literacy studies, of methodological nationalism, the presumed validity of an analysis carried out in reference to a single country (Wimmer and Schiller; Leonard, "Moving Beyond Methodological Nationalism").[75]

Noteworthy as well in this instance is that this transborder signal territory was *not* only the product of technical capacities, of cellular reception, but also of a transnational community that was both accessing and accessed by that infrastructure. That is, for this matter to come to my attention as an object of inquiry, the Syrian asylum seekers I spoke to in Arbat had to, first, enter into an affordant relation with infrastructures by using mobile devices, at and beyond the margins of sanctioned use. Second, they needed to create, exchange, and distribute their reflective understanding of those infrastructures. Much as I argued in the previous chapter that the users of a literate infrastructure who can read and write contribute to the aggregate affordances of that infrastructure, a signal territory of any kind requires users to render it a field of communication. Without humans using their digital devices, a cellular signal territory is only a distribution of "radiofrequency radiation" (National Cancer Institute). By making calls between the KRI and

___

[75] This usage of the term 'transborder' can be found in relevant political-scientific discussion. Of Kurdish nationalism, Political Scientist Denise Natali writes, first, that "Iraq's internal sovereignty has been . . . challenged by the economic and political fallout of the Syrian refugee influx and *transborder* Kurdish nationalism" (52, my emphasis) and, in addition, that "since the state formation period, Syrian Kurdish nationalism was strongly influenced by *transborder* Kurdish groups from Turkey and Iraq" (60, my emphasis). In these descriptions, nationalism and group identification of a specifically 'transborder' character suggest networks of actors operating against the state's impetus toward territorial integrity through control of demarcated borders. This emphasis on the transborder nature of the signal territory offers a relationally grounded means to pursue a transnational logic opposed to methodological nationalism. "Methodological nationalism is an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states. In a parallel development in the anthropological imagination, where diffusion studies initially had been important, the territorial fixity of cultures became a common-place" (Glick Schiller and Salazar 185).

Syria to others within the transborder signal territory, users like Laylan realized its affordances and contributed to them as contactable users.

As did several other TOB interviewees, most often women, Laylan visited Syria after settling in Iraq as an asylum seeker. As suggested by Ziyad's motivation to come to the KRI, the men among the study's interviewees were generally hesitant to make the countermigratory journey to Syria because they could be called upon to perform their mandatory government military service, if they hadn't already completed it, recalled to active duty if they had, or else, in Rojava, asked to join the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG). Consistent with this pattern, Bauan remained in the KRI when Laylan returned to Qamishlo. And so she called Bauan from Syria using her Korek Telecom SIM card. She recalls that period in the following lines, which follow a few moments after the portion of the conversation transcribed above:

> Laylan: *When I visit Syria, the Korek SIM card was working from Kurdistan to Qamishli, after that it was not working.* [76]
>
> Bijar: What?
>
> Bauan: Once before one year she visited Syria and she was using Korek Telecom to call. But after Qamishli, at a different place, Ras Al-Ain, Korek Telecom does not work, but until Qamishli it works good.
>
> Jordan : A nice surprise? You picked up your phone and had signal?
>
> Laylan: I already knew that Korek Telecom works there because I have friends

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[76] The italics here indicate the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, which Bijar, an Iraqi speaker of Sorani, found difficult to translate with confidence. Later, I asked a speaker for whom Kurmanji is their home language to provide the translation offered. But at the time, as the transcript suggests, it was Bauan who offered his own interpretation of Laylan's words into Arabic, which Bijar rendered for me in English.

there, and they told me the Korek Telecom works there. But after Qamishli, you

know, I put out the Korek SIM card and inserted SyriaTel SIM card.

When Laylan returned to Syria, she found herself verifying through experience what friends had already told her: Korek's service was accessible from the border of Iraqi Kurdistan to the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishlo (Al Qamishli) in the Rojava region of Syria. It did not, however, reach further west to the town of Ras Al-Ain, another 115km away. Laylan's experience of this signal territory was consistent with others in her personal network. In sum, Laylan described a transborder signal territory that directly contradicts what Korek Telecom staff suggested was possible.

For readers unfamiliar with the region, the commentaries gathered through the TOB interviews do much to acquaint us with the salients of power constellated around the cellular infrastructures on either side of the Syria-KRI border. "When infrastructure shifts," Vee writes, "the technologies and practices built on it shift as well" (28). A transborder shift in signal territory holds manifold implications for state, sub-national, and transnational actors. Given infrastructure's importance, metaknowledge about it can manifest a critical orientation to proximate corporate, military, and governing powers. The following section, though, delays that discussion to consider what literacy and writing studies can suggest about the nature of the infrastructural knowledge-making evident in the interview with Laylan, Bauan, and Ziyad.

5.3 Epistemological Generativity within Literate Practices

Thus far, the interviews under discussion limn a set of relations between Kurdish networks of belonging, 2G devices, and the Korek infrastructure itself. Although the speech genre of the interview may have incited a degree of on-the-spot invention,[77] I take Laylan, Bauan, and Ziyad to have been iterating previously generated knowledge, a set of inferences about the infrastructural underpinning of their mobile devices. Epistemic generativity in such a case means not simply using technology, and not simply entering into affordant relations with a communication infrastructure, but creating knowledge about those relations and that infrastructure. There are clear precursors for this in literacy studies (as noted in Chapter 3) and also in the fields of composition and writing studies, where the 'writing' of typically but not exclusively alphabetic text is often prized for it utility in the generation of ideas and the sharing of knowledge.

Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies gathers short statements intended to express a degree of consensus in this wide-ranging field. Editors Linda Addler-Kasner and Elizabeth Wardle advance a view of writing as an "epistemic activity" (15). Heidi Estrem's contribution to the same volume, "Writing is a Knowledge-Making Activity," notes writing's capacity to "generate new thinking" (19). This epistemic generativity takes on a specific character in reflective and metacognitive processes because they are thought, by "recalling writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation" (Taczak 78), to build upon prior knowledge and facilitate its transfer to "novel situations" (Tinberg 76). In this way writing studies as outlined

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[77] As Bazerman and Prior write, "From a sociocultural perspective we can see genres as mediators of social activities. It is the mediating artifact that gives shape to the activity and affords particular relations and accomplishments" (20).

by *Naming What We Know* affirms not just the generally epistemic nature of literate practices like writing, but also the utility of cultivating the invention of metaknowledge *about* literate practices in order to support their transfer across contexts.

Laylan, Bauan, and Ziyad similarly reflected upon their mobile digital literacy practices and generated infrastructural knowledge unavailable from other sources. Neither the Korek staff, nor its website, nor Iraqi people with whom I discussed local companies like Korek or Asiacell had any sense of the transborder signal territory Laylan and Bauan described. As a literacy studies scholar, I am interested in the generation of this knowledge despite rival accounts leveraging the authority of corporate expertise. "[C]omposers," write Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey:

> actively make use of prior knowledge . . . by drawing on both knowledge and practice and employing it in ways almost identical to the ways they have used it in the past; by reworking such knowledge and practice as they address new tasks; and by creating new knowledge and practices for themselves when students encounter what we call a setback or critical incident . . . . (1)

Although Robertson et al. are referring specifically to college writers, their claims are illuminating in this discussion as well. They imagine a "critical incident" largely in terms of failure, a "situation where efforts either do not succeed at all or succeed only minimally" (13), but the experience of transborder signal territory under discussion here suggests that this concept might usefully be extended to include moments when received wisdom and authoritative claims are overturned by the effect of placing one's experiences in dialogue with others, "epistemic peers" both near and far within one's personal network (Goldman and O'Connor). To develop a social and political view of a transborder signal territory's infrastructural basis, these interview

participants drew upon their own experiences and their "prior knowledge" in order to transfer an understanding of mobile technology from point to point within Korek's transborder territory.

And it is this element of "network epistemology," an inquiry that "incorporates other inquirers as different (potential) sources of knowledge," that is sometimes less emphasized in writing studies (Zollman 1). Although *Naming What We Know* affirms the epistemic nature of writing and the potential power of reflection, it has less to say about the possible importance of groups or communities in fostering meta-commentary about literacy practices like writing. This is where Adler-Kassner and Wardles's version of writing studies may be in tension with literacy studies, for Street specifically argues against letting qualities of writing appear "intrinsic" to it rather than constructed in the social scenes in which it is valued and circulated (3). Tinberg's description of "metacognition" (75) and Taczak's comments on "reflection" (78) each suggest activities distinct from the practice of writing itself, but there is little explanation of the role others might play in the cultivation of these habits of mind. Thus, it is possible to read much of *Naming What We Know* as describing an "epistemic activity" pursuable by a lone writer who can, simply *by writing*, experience its generative qualities, perhaps even its reflective or metacognitive benefits (Addler-Kasner and Wardle 15). To be sure, Addler-Kasner and Wardle ascribe a "social nature" to writing that "encompasses the countless people who have shaped the genres, tools, artifacts, technologies, and places . . ." (18). Yet this otherwise robust sociomaterial description of the writing bears an uncertain relation to the epistemic generativity *Naming What We Know* affirms.

This contrasts with the more directly social, dialogic origin of the interview-based knowledge under examination here. Hawisher et al. offer more pertinent commentary in their 2004 "Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies and the Literacies of Technology." The piece argues the importance of "situating literacies of technology—and literacies more

generally—within specific cultural, material, educational, and familial contexts . . . " (642), and this emphasis on the institution of the family bears comment. Most of the women who made counter-migratory trips back to Syria did so on family business, such as looking after those who had stayed behind, attending a funeral, or gathering official documents. Plotting literacy acquisition among people within a family along the axis of age, Hawisher et al. argue, "Families transmit literacy values and practices in multiple directions," young to old, and old to young (644). But this sense of multiple vectors might be applied spatially as well, back and forth across borders between a transnational network of family members within a broader "*cultural* ecology of literacy" comprising an open-ended array of social, material, and historical elements (Hawisher et al. 644, original emphasis).78 Laylan's network of fellow Korek users included friends and family members who shared their idea of Korek's transborder accessibility with the family node that Bijar and I happened upon in the summer of 2017. As I'll return to below through a re-engagement of Parks, the case study at hand invites the possibility that shared metacommentary upon digitally literate practices within interpersonal networks of belonging offer a powerful means to foster the epistemic generation of infrastructural metaknowledge.

Before returning to the discussion of Parks and critical infrastructure studies, though, I would like to characterize Laylan, Bauan, and Ziyad's co-creation of knowledge about the Korek Telecom signal territory as a counter-dominant, even counter-hegemonic form of literate action.

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78 This line of reasoning is consonant with Gadsen's characterization of research on family literacy as a body of work that "seeks to understand families learning literacy in context – e.g., homes and communities, the relationships that foster learning in these contexts, and the role of the family itself in creating and sustaining literacy learning and engagement" (181). In this case, families are clearly extremely important, yet, as Laylan's account suggests, they are not the sole actors in the networks of belonging informing the infrastructural understanding under discussion; friends matter, too.

In addition to anticipating and rejecting the authority of corporate and government messaging about regional communications infrastructures, their account is legible as a multi-scalar phenomenon, at once transnational and departing from statist logics yet also drawing upon the local, and therefore impossible to grasp outside of its specific moment of regional political tension. Geographer Ibrahim Serkici argues in "Transnational Mobility and Conflict" for greater scholarly attention to refugees and asylum seekers and their form of "transnational migration" (4). He writes,

> Transnational literature helps us to move away from linear migration models to circular, fluctuating and dynamic ties built by human movements across borders making conceptualisations of multiple 'heres' and 'theres' possible as opposed to origin and destination. While emphasizing the process and movement, transnationalism also decentralises the nation and refer[s] to trans-local belongings and identities . . . . (4)

Applying Serkici's view of transnationalism, I read Laylan's network of belonging as not only an affective phenomenon, but also a repository and vehicle of shared thinking that does not depend on the nation-state as its basis. The fact that the transborder signal territory Laylan and Bauan describe remains unclaimed by any state power problematizes the modern association between bounded territory and state sovereignty. The spatial implications of the signal territory operate in tension with the "epistemological centrality" of territorialized states (dell'Agnese 115).

A response to this line of reasoning might be to consider what powers are ultimately responsible for the infrastructures underpinning this matter of Korek's transborder signal territory. Transnational communications infrastructures were, in the most general sense, an outgrowth of an international neoliberal compact between states and corporations. "Throughout the 1990s and 2000s," writes human geographer Barney Warf, "consortia of telecommunications companies laid

an enormous global grid of fiber optic lines, first across the North Atlantic, then across the Pacific, and more recently across the Indian Ocean" (220). The corporatized nature of access to the digital technology and infrastructure should not be downplayed. Yet this reality offers another reason that I refer to Laylan and Bauan's account of Korek Telecom's transborder signal territory as counter-dominant: it reads a transnational infrastructure without abdicating the authority to circulate meaning about it to "consortia" or "companies." Associating corporate power with a broader neoliberal tendency, Warf writes:

> Neoliberalism and the internet—which arose in tandem—have combined in mutually transformative fashion to generate new landscapes of telephony at multiple spatial scales. Deregulation, globalization, and digitization have transformed global telephony markets from a set of sleepy, hide-bound national monopolies into a series of private, dynamic firms operating on a global basis. (226)[79]

From such a vantage point, it follows that most of us, Bauan, Ziyad, and Laylan included, inhabit neoliberal "landscapes of telephony." And this comparison is indeed valid; the experience of using a cell phone was something I had in common with the TOB interview participants. But other points about Korek Telecom's transborder signal territory follow from Warf's statement.

First, the Korek signal territory exists as a conceptual object in this discussion as the result of forced migrants' embodied experience rather than the imprimatur of "dynamic firms" to curate

[79] More particular to the US yet similar in tenor is Parks's observation that "Google has risen to dominance in a media environment characterized by massive deregulation that began during the Reagan era and has only intensified in recent years …." ("Earth Observation" 15).

and advertise communications infrastructures in the public sphere. This suggests that first-hand, and qualitatively distinct knowledge is possible for those bodies entering into an affordant relation with a technological infrastructure, much as noted at the outset of this section.[80] In this case, the literate practices of communicative usage and reflection within a Syrian-Kurdish network of belonging fostered ideas about communications infrastructures, and it is within that context and specific moment that this knowledge had the most purchase.

Second, in regard to the "multiple spatial scales" articulated through neoliberalism's "new landscapes of telephony," the scale of the transborder signal territory under discussion is neither entirely state-bound (in either the sense of contained by or following a national or sub-state border, such as the KRI's) nor is it suddenly (and vaguely) "global." Warf was writing about general trends, not a specific case. So, to vault from Laylan and Bauan's specific account, drawn forth from city to city, to a totalizing conception of a global and/or neoliberal space is contrary to a sociomaterial methodology invested in the tracing of relations as they become present within an inquiry. In this case, Laylan and Bauan's comments do much to delineate the scale of the inquiry, linking it to a space that is both transnational and localized along the Syria-KRI border. The effect of sudden scalar leap to the global, noted as methodological anathema by Latour in *Re-assembling the Social* (77, 171), would be to precipitately enfold the specific challenge posed by the unfamiliar context of the KRI in the habitual proposals of more general theory. This would be a missed opportunity, for the TOB interview under discussion invites further analysis close to the Syria-Iraq border, particularly within the KRI where I met Bauan, Laylan, and Ziyad.

[80] This line of reasoning runs somewhat parallel to Parks's discussion of "fieldwork" as a means to better understand media's relationship to infrastructure (17-18).

5.4 Nalin: Signal Territory within a Divided Kurdistan

Laylan's experience with the Korek signal territory is both corroborated and complicated by another interviewee's off-hand description of a similar phenomenon. The matter came up in the Arbat camp community when I met Nalin, a forthright young woman whom I interviewed in a roomful of younger siblings (who listened to the conversation, commented about it among themselves, watched TV, or used their smartphones while their older sister talked). She explained how the war had interrupted her undergraduate education and compelled most of her family to travel from Syria to Kurdistan.

Like Laylan, Nalin made a trip back to Syria. Unlike Laylan's countermigratory travel, though, Nalin's movements were made under duress. She and her family didn't *want* to return to Syria, but instead felt they had to go back, despite the possible dangers and expense. The problem was that they felt harassed by security forces in one part of Kurdistan, the northern area controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP, the dominant political force in Kurdish Iraq. As a result, when Nalin and her family returned, they proceeded "in an informal way" (as Bijar often referred to unsanctioned border crossing) to the more southern part of the KRI, the district controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the KDP's main political rival. As discussed in the introduction, and as Nalin's journey narrative affirms, the sub-state politics of the KRI are intensely territorialized.

I'll re-examine Nalin's story in the next chapter through the lens of intersectionality, but pertinent to Laylan's interview is the way that Nalin, prior to her second trip to Kurdistan, observed the same unexpected extension of an Iraqi signal territory into northeast Syria. Nalin said, "I just had my Iraqi SIM card which was working until two hours after the border." During her return to

Syria, Nalin specified that she travelled by car. Qamishlo is an 132 kilometer drive from the Iraqi border by car, a distance that a vehicle might cover in about the "two hours" Nalin suggested. Thus, the account offered by Nalin of a transborder signal territory closely accords with that of Laylan, who specified that Korek Telecom functioned "until Qamishli," but not after. There is a difference, however, between Laylan and Nalin's reports. Nalin could not recall if she was a Korek customer.[81] Even so, she felt that her "Iraqi card" was functioning after a two-hour drive into Syria from the KRI border.

Nalin's experience of the territorialized nature of the KRI's intra-regional politics is relevant to Bauan's claims about the purpose of the towers, noted in the first excerpt above. He had said that the reason for Korek's transborder signal territory was to "have *peshmerga* and to help other people at those areas," a conclusion he imagines accessible to "[a]nyone who thinks about this . . . ." Like the two party-based jurisdictions within the KRI negotiated by Nalin and her family, the Kurdistan Regional Government's armed forces, or *peshmerga*, are not entirely one, as suggested by fig. 8, below.

[81] On the interview recording, an adult sister suggests that Nalin might have been using Zain, another regional carrier, yet not one widely cited by other interviewees as being useful in Syria. Zain is a Kuwait-based company that currently operates in eight countries, but Syria is not one of them. For this reason, I am disposed to trust Nalin's recollection that she was using an "Iraqi SIM," and take her statement to mean not only a SIM card purchased in the KRI, but one indexed to an Iraq-based company. The final link in this chain of reasoning is a guess, for Zain is indeed available in the KRI; I used it there myself in 2019.

Figure 8. "Iraqi Kurdistan 1996" (Kermanshahi)[82]

As Samuel Helfont writes,

> Historically, Peshmerga forces have been controlled by political factions rather
> than the government. The PUK and the KDP each have their own Peshmerga:
> Division 70 and Division 80, respectively. Accordingly, each of these political
> parties exert, or attempt to exert, a monopoly on the use of force within their zones.
> (3)

[82] This image, released to the public domain by the author, also appears in Helfont (2).

This division of the *peshmerga* reflects the reality that the PUK and KDP have parallel state functions, a situation inviting Foschi's description of them as "intrastates" that work more like rival governments than political organizations in the Western mold (7, 19, 132). Each of the parties has its own armed forces, governing offices, constituencies (including prominent families and tribal associations), security apparatuses, and checkpoints. When I travelled the KRI, I soon became aware of the different uniforms used by the KDP and PUK officers along an implicit internal border. These divisions extend into both national politics and foreign policy.[83] The KDP is not only politically close to Turkey, its powerful neighbor and trading partner to the north, but has a fraught relationship with the party guiding Rojava's project of radical autonomous government across the Syrian border, the Democratic Union Party, or PYD. As political scientist Denise Natali writes:

> [W]hile most Iraqi Kurdish parties support the [Syrian] PYD and recognize the Syrian Kurdish cantons and declaration of autonomy, the [Iraqi] KDP, which is closely tied to Ankara [Turkey], remains opposed. Instead, the KDP . . . is training its own Peshmerga forces to send into Syria, a mission the PYD has rejected. Thus, instead of merging their geographically contiguous territories under a quasi-unified entity, KDP officials have built trenches between Iraqi Kurdish borders and PYD-

[83] At times, the pair of intrastate entities appear as rivals, with the KDP in league with its neighbor and economic partner, Turkey, and the PUK, similarly under the sway of Iran. But the situation remains fluid. An example that illustrates all three of these dynamics is the fallout of the 2017 referendum for Kurdish independence. The referendum was generally quite popular among Iraqi Kurds, though it was called unilaterally by the KDP. Despite the fact that the measure had a legal basis in the 2005 constitution, both the Iraqi federal government and other regional powers with large Kurdish populations, including Turkey and Iran, were strongly opposed. The maneuvering came to a standoff between Iraqi troops (and supporting Shia militias) and *peshmerga* associated with both the PUK and KDP. The PUK contingent ultimately refused to stand with its KDP counterparts, dooming the referendum as a symbolic rather than sovereign gesture, and inviting claims that the PUK peshmerga acted upon orders from Iran.

controlled regions in Syria (although the KDP and PYD also engage in cross-border commerce and smuggling) (56).

Natali describes the paradoxical situation of hardening borders amid informal economic exchange and, I'd add, extensive transnational family connections and a reasonable sense of more general solidarity between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds. More consequential in light of Bauan's discussion of *pershmerga* is Natali's contention that a cohort of Syrian asylum-seekers were recruited by the KDP as soldiers for the Kurdish Regional Government.

This idea was somewhat familiar to me when I read it. While traveling in the KRI, I met Syrians whose personal experiences confirmed the presence of Syrian refugees in a military force like the one Natali describes. One Kurdish man from Syria whom I met in a cab claimed this force amounted to 20,000 men. The drift of his comments are confirmed by the work of Knapp et. al., whose *Revolution in Rojava* describes the KDP leadership, finding itself unable to make common cause with their more radical Kurdish-majority party counterparts in Syria (Rojava's PYD), took steps to strengthen their hand by setting up camps to train 10,000-15,000 Kurdish asylum seekers, many of who had defected from the Assad regime's armed forces (54).

This force, sometimes referred to as the "Syrian Peshmerga" or "Roj Peshmerga" (Yılıxıatı) could benefit, as Bauan suggested, from a communications infrastructure spanning the KRI and the proximate yet highly contested cantons of Rojava. Although Bauan had also said that infrastructure was intended to support *peshmerga,* the international scene in the region suggests the KDP would be unlikely to orchestrate Korek's presence in Rojava to *benefit* the revolution without antagonizing Turkey, the neighboring state power most essential to the KRI economy, and

most opposed to Rojava's autonomy.[84] This antipathy was confirmed by the 2018 Turkish invasion of the Kurdish-held city of Afrin, which, with the invasion of Syrian territory by Turkish troops and affiliated militias, lopped off the westmost limb of the Rojavan body politic (Hammy). If there is in reality no singular *peshmerga* force, it seem likely that Bauan was referring to the *peshmerga* maintained by the party with a partisan axe to grind with revolutionary Rojava—the KDP.

Yet Bauan did say that Korek's transborder signal territory would also be "to help other people at those areas,." Even powerful neighbors may not always control smaller states as they would like. When I first began the TOB interviews, I had thought I'd find greater evidence of transnational unity between Kurdish factions and actors. When first faced with the fraught case of Korek Telecom, I hypothesized, especially in my initial review of the interview, that transnational solidarity had motivated the creation of an infrastructure likely to link the two Kurdish autonomous regions of Kurdistan, Syrian and Iraqi—precisely what Natali, above, explains as being unlikely. In such a scenario, a working communications infrastructure could help *peshmerga* to maintain security and civilians to coordinate their movements, as it did for Nalin and Laylan.

Which returns the discussion to Korek Telecom's denial that such a transborder signal territory, the basis of all of these speculations, could exist. From my position as a US-based researcher, I could not resolve this aporetic case study. As the next chapter will unfold, the geopolitical field has shifted considerably since 2017-2018. What remains of interest, though, is that the knowledge Laylan and Bauan shared imbricates communications infrastructure with politics and power. For Laylan's experience to have been true, Korek must have (at least for a time)

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[84] The next chapter offers an historical view of Turkey's antipathy toward, and recent military invasions of, Rojava.

managed the infrastructure necessary to project its signal into the radically autonomous space of Rojava, much further than one would expect for a "limited company registered in Iraq to operate and provide GSM [Global Standard for Mobile] services" (Korek Telecom "Introduction"). If one accepts Laylan and Nalin's accounts of an Iraqi company's extension of a transborder infrastructure into Syria, then Bauan's reading of that circumstance is worthy of consideration.

5.5 Infrastructural Epistemologies

Setting aside the unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) question of validity, these examples suggest an overlap between the epistemological concerns of critical infrastructure studies and sociomaterial literacy studies. Launched in April 2018, the *Critical Infrastructure Studies* website announces the presence of an "international community of scholars from many fields who are exploring how looking at the world through the concept of infrastructure—of things and systems made, built, shaped, crafted, interwoven, old, new, lived, loved, hated, sustained, or resisted . . . ." The site describes this domain as the confluence of earlier trends like "large systems theory" and "ethnographic/information sciences" with "new approaches" including "Digital-humanities infrastructure theory," "Feminist infrastructure theory," and "'Media infrastructures' theory." Lisa Parks is featured among the authors identified for their palpable contribution to field, including the 2015 volume she edited with Nicole Starosielski, *Signal Traffic* (Liu).

The wide-ranging materiality to be found within the artifacts and systems studied in media and critical infrastructure studies runs parallel to the discussion of writing technologies by sociomaterial literacy scholars like Vieira. In media studies, Frith, for example, discusses cellular

and smart phones at length as a particular form "locative media," which he situates in a historical evolution including "paperback novels," "train timetables," the "Walkman," and GPS (18–20, 28–30). Critical infrastructure studies, Parks and Starosielski write, "draws upon methodologies and frameworks across the humanities and social sciences to historicize and analyze infrastructures ranging from bridges to power grids, from railways to sewer systems" (7).Vieira's *Writing for Love and Money* refers to both "writing technologies" (9) and "literacy technologies . . . from paper to synchronous chat" (31), and Vieira explains her coding of interview data for "letter, email, video chat, telephone" (174). In additional to advancing wide-ranging material engagements, both sociomaterial literacy studies and critical infrastructure studies advance relational, multi-scalar logics, a key feature of an infrastructural emphasis within sociomaterial literacy studies (as argued in the previous chapter). Critical infrastructure studies' attention to scale is affirmed by Parks and Starosielski in *Signal Traffic*:

> [W]e understand media infrastructures not only as telecommunication networks owned and operated by governments, militaries, and corporations, but as complex material formations that operate at multiple scales. We describe these formations using a relational approach that recognizes the industrial, physical, and organizational interconnections of media infrastructures with other systems. (Parks and Starosielski 7)

Infrastructure, by relating users to larger systems, can therefore limn and traverse any number of scales, depending on one's interests and vantage point. With consonant orientations to materiality, relationality, and scale, sociomaterial literacy studies scholars interested in infrastructure may benefit from engaging the body of work gathered in critical infrastructure studies, both as a theoretical resource and as a corpus of sites and research. The foregoing

discussion, turning upon Parks's concept of signal territory, offers an example of a critical-infrastructural theory available for use in other forms of relational inquiry, such as literacy studies. Just as consequential to the case at hand, though, is the infrastructural epistemology outlined by Parks.

She writes of an "infrastructural disposition" in "Stuff You Can Kick:' Toward a Theory of Media Infrastructures" (359).[85] There, in her extended reading of a US postal service video, "Throwing Mail into Bags," she argues that the difficulty of representing an entire infrastructural apparatus urges an "*infrastructural disposition*" (359, original emphasis). Given that she is working with video, she argues that a representation like a filmic frame acts "as a starting point for imagining and inferring other infrastructural parts or resources . . . . ." (359). The goal of such a disposition is "*infrastructural intelligibility*," which entails working from "images, sounds, objects, observations, information, and technological experiences to imagine the existence, shape, or form of an extensive and dispersed media infrastructure that cannot be physically observed by one person in its entirety" (359, original emphasis). Thus, Parks regards infrastructures as being apprehended piecemeal, through representations, sensations, inferences, and use.

Exemplifying the elements of this infrastructural epistemology suggested by Parks, and suggesting the utility of folding them into a sociomaterial concept of practice, the TOB interviewees in the foregoing example arrive at their conclusions about the "existence, shape, or form" of an Iraqi communications infrastructure (Parks 359, as above). They make "intelligible" not only the transborder extension of this signal territory but also its possible role within regional

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[85] A version of this discussion of infrastructural disposition appears in Parks and Starosielski's introduction to *Signal Traffic* as well (5).

power structures. If epistemology concerns the "conditions of knowledge" as well as the "creation and dissemination" of that knowledge (Steup), Parks's work outlines elements of an infrastructural epistemology which literacy studies can flesh out. Imagining Parks's *infrastructural disposition* in terms of literate practice's epistemic generativity clarifies the origin and nature of its potential to generate metaknowledge about a given infrastructure.

The possible political telos of infrastructural meta-knowledge is consonant with Parks's own invocation of the concept of literacy in "Earth Observation and Signal Territory."[86] Linking infrastructural knowledge and public contestation of the built environment, she writes:

> Though infrastructures have become part of the built environment and surround us in daily life, publics are socialized to know very little about their development, operations, and resource requirements. By highlighting multiple modes of infrastructure mapping, I hope to encourage *infrastructure re-socialization*—a *technological literacy* project that urges publics to notice, document, and ask questions about infrastructure sites and become involved in discussions and deliberations about their funding, design, installation, operation, and use. (19, second emphasis mine)

Here, Parks presents "technological literacy" as an educational project intended to cultivate a widespread awareness among infrastructural stakeholders, implicitly those with the resources to impact their communities. I take Parks's brief inclusion of "technological literacy" within "Earth

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[86] Although the topic of literacy arises in the introduction to *Signal Traffic*, it is given shorter shrift than in "Earth Observation and Signal Territory." Parks and Starosielski write: "[A] focus on infrastructure compels critical assessment of the relation between technological literacies and public involvement in infrastructure development, regulation, and use" (6).

Observation and Signal Territories" as an affirmation of the always-infrastructural valence of literacy practices. Literacy studies offers a rich account of literacy practices' epistemic generativity that has, at least since Street's *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, included infrastructure within its purview. The 'technological literacy' Parks calls for functions as a form of knowledge sponsorship with public consequences, yet its relevance to existing theories of literacy are left unexplored.

The ethnographic tradition to be found within literacy studies, for example, might contribute to alternative account of how an "infrastructural disposition" might be cultivated. Qualitative ethnographic methods informed by questions of positionality, coloniality, and power can be brought to bear upon infrastructural questions, as this chapter demonstrates (Heath and Street 122–23). In fact, "*Signal Traffic* brings together projects that use qualitative methodologies such as discourse analysis, ethnography, archaeology, archival research, industry analysis, and fieldwork" (Parks and Starosielski 16). Generally, then, there may be little difficulty in reconciling literacy studies with critical infrastructure studies.

> Crucial to ethnography is an investment in reflexivity. As Heath and Street write: *Reflexivity*, a process by which ethnographers reveal their self-perceptions, methodological setbacks, and mental states, often includes broad general critiques of the field. Reflexivity enables ethnographers to see their research within historical and structural constraints that result from asymmetrical power distributions. (123, original emphasis)

Consistent with ethnographic reflexivity, In "Earth Observation and Signal Territories," Parks effectively shares some of the ways in which her direct observations of infrastructure inform her thinking. For example, upon visiting a broadcast "transmission facility" (16), she writes, "Rather than a massive system that could be seen from above, infrastructure became something

that could be sensed, felt, and mediated by my own body" (17). But there is a problem of "asymmetrical power distribution" of the kind problematized by Heath and Street in Parks's article's concluding proposal for a "technological literacy program" capable of cultivating public "infrastructural re-resocialization." As already noted above, this would be a "project that urges publics to notice, document, and ask questions about infrastructure sites . . ." (19).

This idea turns in part upon the presupposition that an untutored public is in need of infrastructural education. As Parks and Starosielski write in *Signal Traffic*, "Arguably, one of the reasons that infrastructures and 'public utilities' have been so steadily privatized by governments over the past several decades is a lack of citizen knowledge about and interest in such systems" (6). Teachers of English composition are likely to notice the construction and projection of a lack of ability. The hierarchical logics animating the extension of "deficit models" is especially plain in the case of infrastructures, given that they are mass phenomena, however construed, touching all lives (T. Hall 132). If "literacy represents social and cultural practices, rather than a set of skills to be acquired according to given hierarchies of understanding and social organization," Kynard explains, "literacy is something that people do, rather than something that they have or do not have . . ." (32). While Parks is compelling when she argues that "publics are socialized to know very little about [infrastructures'] development, operations, and resource requirements," her proposal for a program of infrastructural res-socialization seems to overlook the resource of people's everyday experiences with the infrastructures upon which they depend and to which they contribute (19). Accessing this knowledge, and leveraging it in political decision, might better answer Parks's call for community control over infrastructures.

An awareness of the cultural politics of literacy programs has been part of the literacy studies conversation since Street critiqued UNESCO-sponsored literacy programs in *Literacy in*

Theory and Practice. He characterized them as ethnocentric, colonial, and corporate, highly self-interested yet purporting a humanitarian purpose (183-212). I refer to this to illustrate the ways in which literacy studies has, since its inception, questioned literacy programs whose goals, advertised as laudable, might represent the imposition of dominant groups' values and agendas upon the supposed beneficiaries of such efforts. To be fair, Park's brief suggestions about technological literacy in "Earth Observation and Signal Territories" have almost nothing else in common with the UNESCO programs' advancement of capitalist values under the aegis of literacy development (Street *Literacy in Theory and Practice* 184). The example is helpful, though, because it shows how literacy studies tends to take a different tack than critical infrastructure studies.

From Street's intervention forward, the field has elaborated an understanding of literacy that, instead of chiding publics to better heed institutional dicta, urges researchers to take notice of what people, groups, and publics accomplish within constellations of language, belonging, and activity. My academic view of literacy made the word, 'literacy,' itself of limited use as an opening to conversation with people in the KRI (as in the US) because identifying myself as a literacy researcher tended to evoke in my interlocutors' minds a narrow focus on a hypothetical threshold of 'functional' reading and writing, one of many ideas challenged by a thorough reckoning with Street's ideological model. By distancing itself from what people suppose literacy might be, literacy studies imposes an elite-register, scholarly revision of what 'literacy' is. The benefit of this conceptual intervention, though, is an orientation toward vernacular practices at odds with precisely the focus on alphabetic, print, or academic literacies commonly imposed in institutional spaces. This has purchase upon the foregoing conversation in that, while Parks's technological literacy aims to teach the public about infrastructure, a literacy studies perspective would, first,

orient any such project toward people's existing sociomaterial practices pertaining to infrastructures, and second, take seriously the possibility that people are already creating knowledge about them, perhaps through groups or publics about which researchers may not be aware. The TOB interviewees discussed in this chapter support this bottom-up approach to literacy.

The infrastructural knowledge evident within the interviews cited in this chapter are also relevant to literacy studies' problematization of education. For example, the distinction between experiential "acquisition" and more formal "learning" is deployed by New Literacy Studies scholar James Gee in his seminal piece, "What is Literacy?" ("What Is Literacy" 3). The TOB interviewees developed their knowledge about communications infrastructures through acquisition, including direct experience, "trial and error, without a process of formal teaching" in "natural settings," places in which they had reason to use and think about the infrastructures under discussion (Gee 3). In the brief form in which it is suggested, Parks's "technological literacy" proposal might need to be sponsored by institutional learning, but such an arrangement might benefit, as composition teachers well know, from a dialogic orientation with pupils' own experiences and knowledge of infrastructures. Thus, literacy studies' longstanding engagement of both academic and non-academic forms of instruction and expression, evident even in canonical work, bears directly upon the matters absent from Parks's epistemic account of infrastructure and literacy. The TOB interview participants exhibit an "infrastructural disposition," such as Parks describes, which puts in question the need for, or desirable form of, a generalized technological literacy project. Instead, their experiences suggest ways in which knowledge about an infrastructure might be constructed through networks, spatially dispersed and mobile, yet also coming together in close-knit or familial nodes.

Parks and Starosielski emphasize the stakes of infrastructural knowledge in their introduction to *Signal Traffic.* They are particularly interested in ways that infrastructural development projects tend to proceed without public oversight. "[I]nfrastructural changes often occur quickly and without notice, short-circuiting citizen-users' ability to participate in system development," they write (6). While I applaud the call to public engagement to which statements like this contribute, the formulation of "citizen-user" figures the subject of technology as a member of the polity in which they access infrastructure. This evinces a statist imaginary in which one is authorized to "participate" in the function of the polity where one has the status of "citizenship." What of the circumstances faced by migrants, asylum seekers, or refugees? The interviews portrayed in this chapter share the perspective of people who are users of infrastructures in polities in which they do not hold citizenship rights.

My hesitancy to endorse the conflation of "citizen" with "user" is informed by transnational literacy studies. Relevant here is Lorimer Leonard's succinct reading of the implications of transnational theory, "Moving Beyond Methodological Nationalism," which equips us to see how Parks and Starosielski's "citizen-user" might suggest the methodologically nationalist "tend[ency] to reify the singularity of national or cultural experiences" (127). That is, the "citizen-user" seems to nest the user of technology within a determining national framework of citizenship while overlooking other possible experiences and positionalities, such as movement spurred by forced displacement. This proviso is important to consider in light of Parks's concluding call for both "transnational" and non-Western scholarship in "Stuff You Can Kick" (370) and *Signal Traffic*'s engagement of a "global mediascape," with specific chapters on media infrastructure "across different parts of the world, from Sweden to Palestine, from Turkey to Zambia" (17).

Nalin, Laylan, and Ziyad's experiences, for example, hold transnational implications confounding the statist schema of the citizen-user. Laylan purchased her Korek SIM card in Iraq, where she is not a citizen, but an asylum-seeker. Ziyad, travelling and seeking asylum a few years later, purchased his Iraqi SIM card in Syria, yet used it mainly as a customer in the KRI. As to the matter of transborder signal territory, both Laylan and Nalin claim to have accessed an unsanctioned Iraqi signal from within Syria. It would be surprising to see such usage legitimated by an Iraqi company or political party, Laylan and Nalin's' direct infrastructural experience notwithstanding. While my work owes much to Parks's work on signal territory, her concept of technological literacy would benefit from development in dialog with literacy studies. More generally, critical infrastructure studies scholars might find useful the theoretical resources of transnational literacy scholarship and an epistemological framework capable of accounting for knowledge-making through social practices.

Edwards, cited at several points in *Signal Traffic*, attends to the importance of infrastructure within society. He writes:

> As Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder observe, knowledge of infrastructures is "learned as part of membership" in communities (see also Bowker & Star 1999, 35; Star & Ruhleder 1996). By extension, such knowledge is in fact a prerequisite to membership . . . . Belonging to a given culture means, in part, having fluency in its infrastructures. This is almost exactly like having fluency in a language: a pragmatic knowing-how, rather than an intellectual knowing . . . . Infrastructural knowledge is a Wittgensteinian "form of life," a condition of contextuality in which understanding any part requires a grasp of the whole that comes only through experience . . . . In this sense, infrastructures constitute society. (4–5)

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Edwards' citation of Star and Ruhleder's belief that infrastructural knowledge is learned offers further reason to consider infrastructure from a literacy studies perspective. Edwards's contention that "[b]elonging to a given culture means, in part, having fluency in its infrastructures" usefully emphasizes the social and affective, rather than only technical or instrumental, stakes of such learning.[87] It also explains something of both the ease and difficulty of understanding what Laylan and Bauan attempted to teach me about Korek Telecom. While my own access to a cellular phone established a common experiential basis for the discussion, the infrastructural specificity of Korek Telecom and its association with regional powers, was much less familiar, more a matter of the complex range of differences often shorthanded, as in Edwards's statement, as differences between cultures and societies.

But Edward's discussion of infrastructural know-how as "pragmatic" rather than "intellectual" knowledge does not account for the critical form of literacy on offer in Laylan and Bauan's assessment of Korek Telecom. The foregoing discussion suggests, instead, the possibility of a simultaneity, or else a rapid shuttling between, practical and abstract knowledge garnered through practice. That Bauan, Laylan, Ziyad, and Nalin were able, despite our many differences, to teach me about their experiences suggests the depth of their understanding of the infrastructures under discussion. Rather than approach this instance of transborder signal territory through the lens of infrastructure, and then add accounts of social context and knowledge production, a literacy studies approach begins with attention to widespread practices that are necessarily social, semiotic, and material, such as the use of cell phones by the almost 300,000 Syrian nationals who sought

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[87] As noted in the introduction, my folding of literacy, mobility, and identification into 'trajectories of belonging' is meant to present a view of sociomaterial practice that similarly includes but is not limited to consideration of infrastructure's instrumental effects.

refuge in the KRI. As discussed in Chapter 3, sociomaterial conceptions of literacy encompass the devices, objects, and built-environmental elements through a logic of relation, and can turn to the concept of affordances to theorize points of interaction between humans and non-human elements in their environments, such as the use of a cell phone. In this case, Laylan and Nalin used digital devices to activate the affordances of the available infrastructure and then, in dialogue with their interpersonal networks, contributed to knowledge-making about those infrastructures. That Laylan's friends mentioned Korek's presence in Qamishlo to her before her counter-migratory travel suggests that this epistemic process preceded the trip and would continue thereafter.

In explaining a shift in the field of critical literacies from a semiotic focus to a broader sociomaterial view, such as I've relied on here, literacy scholars Cathy Burnett and Guy Merchant write:

> The original model involved considering . . . how we might use semiotic resources to the greatest effect, to position ourselves, our ideas, and our creations in ways that are advantageous. Thinking about what we are doing—or might be doing—from a sociomaterial perspective, however, involves attending to other kinds of relations: from the physicality of digital devices (e.g., their interactivity and the "screen-ness" of screens), through to the intended and unintended affordances of apps and their connectivity within the extensive and fluid architecture of the web . . . Recognizing all of this leads us to think beyond how people, texts, and power are produced in relation, to consider how power is implicit within different kinds of sociomaterial arrangements. Just as we might consider how the production of text is ideologically positioned, so we can explore the ideological positioning of the devices we use and

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the digital architectures we navigate. ("Revisiting Critical Literacy in the Digital Age" 265)

The "relational approach to critical literacy" (266) for which Burnett and Merchant argue, an echo of similar methodological propositions in critical infrastructure studies (Parks and Starosielski 7), is evident in Bauan and Laylan's account of Korek Telecom's transborder signal territory. Their explanation moves from specific uses of mobile devices, to mobile networks of belonging, to the networked observations about those devices and their enabling infrastructures, to the companies, political parties, and state powers associated with those infrastructures—thereby making legible, as Burnett and Merchant suggest, "how power is implicit" within these "sociomaterial arrangements." Bauan's idea that Korek Telecom might have been part of a covert effort to enable KDP-trained peshmerga to move and communicate in Rojava is an intensely political contention, one that theorizes "the ideological position of the devices" under discussion and, in so doing, refutes any view of cellular technology as merely enabling refugee communication, independent of politics and power.

5.6 Orientalism and Infrastructural Politics

Regarding the use of mobile phones by Syrian refugees in a non-Western context through the lens of literate practice, this chapter has traced the infrastructural implications of a pair of interviews conducted with Syrian families residing in the KRI. The possible transborder reach of Iraqi cellular infrastructures was mentioned to me by two women who used their mobiles during counter-migratory travel, short-term trips back across the border to Syria. Such journeys, like print-

literacy events, can produce knowledge, incite thinking. As epistemic processes, literate practices entail the cultivation of knowledge, including the metaknowledge long understood as essential to their transfer across contexts. The TOB study's respondents traverse of the Syria-KRI border engaged not just a digital GSM infrastructure, but also the regional powers (corporate and governmental, national and sub-national) capable of building and maintaining it. In the example I've taken up here, respondents' understanding of that infrastructure was cultivated within and through epistemically generative networks of belonging, Kurdish-identifying groups who used signal territories to maintain familial bonds during displacement and short-term return travel to Rojava.

I attribute my engagement with what Bauan, Laylan, Ziyad, and Nalin believed about the Korek infrastructure to the theory, methods, and orientations of both literacy studies and the discipline of English composition & rhetoric. We don't find *anti-coloniality* among the several commitments noted in Adler-Kassner and Wardle's *Naming What We Know,* yet I don't know a writing instructor who doesn't value critical reflection as a potential strategy of resistance. Literacy studies' perspective recognizes the epistemic and critical agency of its participants and uses the resources of situated analysis to oppose dominant groups' ascription of their own values to literacy practices. This counter-dominant orientation of literacy studies is consonant with my professional enculturation: I was trained to work, read, teach, and listen with marginal voices in mind (Bartholomae and Petrosky; Bartholomae; Goen and Gillotte-Tropp). Kynard argues, compellingly, that composition's embrace of this value owes much to its relationship with the Black Freedom movement, which "emphasized the social causes of marginality and, therefore, the responsibility of institutions to address them" (227).

In this case of a literacy that is sociomaterial in its criticality, interviewees' reflections upon a signal territory illustrate both its transborder traverse of, and tethering to, state territoriality. In the transnational space of Greater Kurdistan, networks of Kurdish belonging transect those state borders drawn up by Western countries and Turkey, a regional power invested in the consolidation of an ethnically homogeneous nation-state. "It is through digital connections" writes Twigt, that "colonial and capitalist entanglements come into force within refugee households beyond Europe's borders . . ." (2). And so the tracing of relations between forcibly displaced Kurds in Iraq and their places of origin in Syria illustrates the presence of a Kurdish nation unrecognized by the privilege of statehood. But in negotiating the alternative cartography of corporate signal territory, Kurdish-speakers such as the interviewees cited in this chapter were able not only to travel, but also maintain the bonds of family and social life in a time of war.

I take working with interviews like those presented in this chapter as a chance to intervene in the already-circulated body of media representations portraying Syrian refugees using cellular phones. If scholarly work undertaken by Syrian Kurds were addressing this matter in my field, I surely would not have undertaken it. But these portrayals, as I argued at the outset of this dissertation, demand scholarly intervention. They engage a long-standing and highly Orientalist figure, that of the 'abject' refugee, only to substitute the newly distorted figure of the 'connected refugee.' This more recent figure was consolidated by a fetish for the mobile technology occasioning this recoding of refugee bodies. The relation between mobile technology and lived circumstances outside of Europe, especially political ones in Western Asia's regional havens, were generally elided or else mystified as a result. In contrast, I offer this chapter's exploration of transborder signal territory along the Syria-Iraq border.

Laylan, Bauan, Ziyad, and Nalin's accounts work against the fetishization of mobile technology as a panacea for the state systems' failure to protect the human rights of refugees. Instead of a celebration of neoliberal mobility, available to relatively few of the people uprooted by the Syrian War (despite the cries of 'crisis' heard in the West in the 2010s), their stories urge a multi-scalar situating of the communicative practices bearing upon families and phone calls, infrastructures and their affordances, corporations and political parties, states and their borders, politics and their historical moment. Such a method is inimical to Orientalist representation, which constructs for much of the non-Western world an ontology removed from technology, politics, and processual time.

Said wrote in *Orientalism* that " the real argument is that Orientalism is . . . a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (20). The "ontologically stable subject of inquiry" cultivated by Orientalism places it outside of modernity, and the West comfortably within (40). But if, as Edwards claims, "[t]o be modern is to live within and by means of infrastructures . . ." (2), the case study presented here suggests the collapse of this conceit. The fluent use of mobile devices and reflexive contemplation of their concomitant infrastructures by the Syrian refugees who fled to Iraq suggests that they were *already* part of this modernity—or reveals the opposition between pre-modern and modern to have already been implicated in the Orientalist conceit, however re-clothed.

This chapter therefore works towards the disruption of both the Orientalist and technologically fetishistic logics identified at the outset of this dissertation. It has presented refugees' accounts of acting in an agential relationship to technologies common in the 'first world,' Western Asian accounts of the dynamic that, in its European manifestations, upended prior

tendencies in refugee representation. What's more, Laylan, Bauan, and Nalin demonstrated not only a practical relation to that technology, but knowledge of it and its concomitant infrastructures. Such insights cannot be extrapolated from an essentialized conceptualization of the Orient as somehow timeless and unchanging amid historical forces. The creation of an agential epistemic relationship to infrastructure by these Syrian asylum-seekers troubles any possible inclusion of them in the passive, timeless ontology of an Orientalist imaginary.

6.0 Chapter 5. Upon the Walls of the UN Camp: Situated Intersectionality, Political Belonging, and Refugee Homes

The following chapter begins by focusing on the houses of Arbat, revealing how building there proceeds despite the denial of property rights to Syrian refugees. Turning from the houses to the public-facing surfaces their walls provide, I address the Öcalan images to be found upon them. I relate these icons, first, to the local and trans-state dispersion of similar likenesses and, second, the TOB participants' wide-ranging commentary upon the political projects of belonging that acknowledge his revolutionary influence. In conclusion, I briefly compare the project of democratic confederalism in Rojava—under occupation by the Turkish military at the time of this writing—and the material practices of building houses in Arbat.

6.1 "Belonging: Three doors"

If you share this information with the university, it's better than 1000 NGOs because I want to send this message to them . . . . It's better than food aid or money because we want to share information, our story, with the people on the outside.

–Shaniya. Interview, Sulaymaniyah, 2018

To whom does a refugee camp belong? Referring to Arbat, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a young man acquainted with both the host and refugee communities told me: "The camp—*it's ours.*" This

feeling, that the camp belongs to the Syrian refugee community, reflects the years that thousands of Syrian asylum seekers have spent building lives in Arbat since it opened in 2013. Rahima, whom I met there in 2017, gestured out a window in her house toward the rest of the camp and said, "It feels like a Syrian society." Like hers, the homes one sees in Arbat were built mainly by the refugee community itself.

But neither putting a roof over one's own head nor feeling at home within it amount to a legal claim to the house itself. A UNHCR representative, speaking to me in the organization's compound in the nearest major city, Sulaymaniyah, clarified that it was the UNHCR who "built the camp" and therefore retains control of the lots upon which residents have built. While the UNHCR is a powerful player in the ecology of forces within the camp, it is not the only voice. Cinder-block dwellings have edged out UNHCR tents, and the ubiquitous UNHCR logo is disrupted by ornamental facades, muralism, and radical iconography.

I rely upon *belonging* in this chapter as a social and affective lens to articulate the variable materiality of these surfaces and inscriptions with the interviews conducted in Arbat. Ahmed argues that "emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" ("Affective Economies" 119). If so, these kinds of affective alignments necessarily entail relations to the materiality of those communities, including housing infrastructures and other elements of the built environment. Methodologically, then, I see this chapter less as expanding the existing study and more as returning the social materiality of this context to my ongoing discussion of the Arbat interviews' recordings.

Upon this basis I consider the multiple forms of belonging through which Arbat interviewees might have expressed, rejected, or qualified an affiliative alignment. I extend the

project's Findings to consider forms of belonging already discussed (state, ethnolinguistic, familial), yet also re-center the discussion on Arbat itself as community *of* belonging, a site of place-making in which affective attachments may be cultivated, incited, entrained, dismissed, particular by way of political memory (Anthias, *Identity and Belonging* 7; Assmann and Czaplicka 132). At points, I consider the spatial imaginaries that seem to animate particular forms of belonging. To do so invokes the concept of scale in its reference to the access of power within sociolinguistic registers (Blommaert, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* 32–37) as well the "relative size domains" (Horton, Zachary 129) we might suppose inhere to those entities stirring feelings of belonging. While I find sociolinguistic descriptions of scale to be useful, I take the nature of sociomaterial practices to entail scalar imaginaries shaped more directly by ideology, especially when the state is likely to construct alternative constructions of belonging in relation to its scalar preeminence (Isin 215). This attention to belonging, scale, and their political valences is consistent with Yuval-Davis's description of situated intersectionality as necessarily working across localities, scales, and temporalities ("Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality" 95).

This chapter therefore further culminates the situated intersectional understanding of the Syrian refugee community in the KRI.

Figure 9. "Belonging: Three doors," Arbat Camp, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Hayes)

A photograph I took while visiting Arbat in the summer of 2017 suggests the field of inquiry (see fig. 9, above). The exterior of the dwelling shown in the photo is typical of Arbat insomuch as it is portrays a house instead of a tent, and includes architectural details—railing, tiles, and (to the far left) a glimpse of a stonework facade—which make it unique, a home, and in some instances a physical reference to a built environment in Syria. What caught my eye, though, was the contrast between the UNHCR logo, to the left; the mustachioed likeness of Abdullah Öcalan, stenciled along with the Kurdish word for uncle, "Apo," by which this Kurdish partisan is generally known; and, to the right, a green door within a decorative frame, a departure from the

UN-blue gates common in the camp. Within the image are at least three different ways in which the people there might locate themselves—as refugees, as Kurds, or residents of the Arbat community.

Within the KRI, 'refugee' functions vernacularly as a term to describe forced migrants from other countries. Globally, the asylum regime is highly variable. Because it can tether people to the country where they file for asylum, extra-legal travel remains one of the most common ways to achieve asylum in Western states (Betts and Collier 48). The asylum regime in Kurdistan is a "hybrid" entity combining the forces of local government, regional NGOs, and the UNHCR (Ramadan 74). Rather than securing UN refugee status, Syrians registering with the UNHCR in the KRI are recognized as *asylum seekers*, a status extended to Arabs and Kurds, both documented and stateless, whether or not their entry was legal—much to the credit of the Kurdish Regional Government. As a form of official legibility that doesn't guarantee resettlement in a desirable third country, asylum seeking can still, according to the will and capacity of local power, uphold crucial protections (Carastathis et al. 5). Kurdistan recognizes, for example, Syrian asylum seekers' right to seek employment. It also honors their prerogative to become residents, which allows them access to the system of camps of which Arbat is a part (Loescher, "Human Rights and Forced Migration" 220). At the same time, asylum seeking underpins the social experience of living as a person referred to as a 'refugee' by the host community.

The tidy blue UN logo symbolizing this system pairs strangely with the stenciled Öcalan icon and its freehand appellation, "Apo." His face invites recognition among the Arbat residents, the overwhelming majority of whom identify as Kurds—the most numerous people to be left

without a state of their own by the colonial division of the post-Ottoman Middle East.[88] Öcalan

has been imprisoned since 1999 for his leadership role in the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK).

This organization is widely regarded by state powers as a terrorist organization because of its

decades of often violent resistance to the Turkish state (Kaya and Lowe 281, McDowall 420–26).

Despite being jailed, Öcalan remains influential. He is the theoretical architect of democratic

confederalism, the revolutionary program taken up in the newly Autonomous Administration of

North and East Syria, or AANES (D. Bookchin)—almost always referred to by the Kurdish people

with whom I spoke as *Rojava*, as already noted. The Kurdish-identifying asylum seekers who took

part in the TOB study hold a broad range of views of the autonomous government Öcalan's

organization and writings have inspired in Syria. By representing this diversity of opinion, this

paper responds to the Turkish state's 2018 invasion and ongoing occupation of Kurdish-majority

areas in Syria. The justification for these aggressions is the presumed categorical equivalence

between Kurdish people in Syrian Rojava and active PKK terrorists. Upon this basis, Turkey

subjected the Kurds of Afrin, Syria, to a project of ethnic cleansing, displacing hundreds of

thousands of civilians (Schmidinger, *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds,* "The Attack on the

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[88] As discussed in Chapter 1, the fraught history of Kurdish hopes for statehood includes the imperial West's sporadic endorsement of Kurdish self-determination and the incipient Turkish state's resolute opposition to it. As Michael Gunter unfolds, the League of Nations recognized that "the non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire should be granted the right of 'autonomous development.'" The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, imposed upon the defeated Ottoman Empire, went further, referencing "local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish area" and suggesting for "the Kurdish peoples'" a possible future "independence from Turkey." After securing itself by force of arms against a war-weary West, the incipient Turkish state effectively struck down these provisions with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which "made no mention of the Kurds, condemning them to a de facto colonial existence in Iraq as well as in Turkey, Iran, and Syria . . . . As a result, the Kurds were in an almost constant state of revolt" (*The Kurds: A Modern History* 61–63).

City of Afrin"). "Operation Peace Spring," launched in October 2019, marks a continuation of this policy in Rojava, not far from the border with Iraq (Uras).

The green door to the right of Apo icon in the image above (fig. 10) is also rich with implications. As a material and aesthetic choice made by Arbat residents, it evokes the particularity of the camp as a built environment, a setting for social and material life that can "represent relationships between people and people, people and things, and things and things" (Rapoport, "Culture and Built Form" 184). I see the built-environmental practices evident in Arbat—construction, aestheticization, and dwelling—as a form of quotidian agency, a rooting in place, a resilient "regrounding" (Ahmed et al. 2). They distance the resulting community from both the temporary quality of a refugee camp (Ramadan 66), and the corresponding narrative of return to Syria. There is, for example, little option for residents other than to make Arbat a kind of home, yet this UNHCR camp, even though it is a "permanent" facility equipped for protracted displacement, is founded upon a presumption that refugees' authentic belonging lies both elsewhere and in other times (UNHCR, "Arbat Camp General Infrastructure"). This presumption informs the UNHCR's foreclosure of Syrian refugees' right to property within Arbat camp, as I'll detail below.

The photo above, "Belonging: Three Doors," therefore juxtaposes three projects of political belonging, each of which might lay claim to the camp (Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*). First, there is the hegemonic position of the UNCHR, allied with local government, and dedicated to the protection of refugees. Second, there is the lineage of movements for Kurdish self-determination represented—adequately or not—by Öcalan. Finally, the green door, part of Arbat's unique built environment, evokes a space of dwelling irreducible to either the UNHCR conception of the refugee or the PKK's radical tradition.

In what follows, I will discuss these forms of belonging in terms of sociologist Yuval-Davis's framing of "situated intersectionality," introduced in Chapter 2's discussion of Methods and Findings ("Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality"). My slight extension of Yuval-Davis's approach is a greater emphasis on elements of varied materiality, including a new materialist approach to visual culture and detailed attention to the homes built by the Syrian residents of Arbat. In general, I contend that intersectionality's fundamental insight into the multiply determined nature of social vulnerabilities can be brought into a dialogic engagement with non-Western categories of self-description. In complicating the mono-categorical description of social harms like displacement, typically subsumed by the word 'refugee,' situated intersectionality offers an interpretive strategy for assessing qualitative findings. By bringing historical and political writing to bear on extended interviews completed with Syrian nationals in the KRI, this chapter contextualizes specific case studies in which Syrian Kurds' experiences disrupt their mono-categorical representation as PKK terrorists by the Turkish government and other state powers. Especially when relied upon as a methodological principle of analysis across complex fields of difference, as it is here, intersectionality establishes what Carastathis refers to as a "provisional" engagement entailing at all points the potential for extension and revision (234). I take the success or failure of such a provisional analysis to be the degree to which it might effectively equip readers to enter into an orientation of transnational solidary with those whose intersectional positionality is under discussion.

At the time of this writing, such an orientation of solidarity compels a discussion of the viability of Syrian refugee return to Rojava. As Schmidinger writes in *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*, "one reason" for the Turkish military's invasion "was Turkey's fear of having a territory at its southern border ruled by a sister party of its enemy the PKK [Kurdistan Workers

Party]"—the organization associated with the face of Öcalan to be seen upon the walls of houses in the Arbat camp ("The War Against Afrin"). Whether motivated by this fear or not, Turkey has presumed the people of Rojava to be dangerous, and has acted upon this categorical condemnation.

6.2 Situated Materiality and Practices of Home-Building in Arbat

Initially equipped by the UNHCR with tents, Arbat in 2017 was almost entirely a community of cinderblock homes. The transition from tents to homes has been ongoing since 2013, when the first of the eight lettered sections of the camp were built. Recollecting his arrival, Majid said, "We arrived here late; that's why we lived in a tent, and five days later I started to build my own house. When the people came before us, previously they also were living in tents. But, when [I] arrived, sections A and B and C were already built . . . by the refugees themselves." The UN tents to which Majid refers were set on levelled plots, conducive to building.

Arbat is of course not the only refugee camp to have undergone such a process. Describing Palestinian camps in Lebanon, for example, Ramadan writes:

> The notion of assemblage evokes the piecemeal and gradual assembling of the camps in Lebanon over the course of 64 years, as people replaced tents first with corrugated iron and then brick and concrete, and the slow accumulation of experiences and memories, births and deaths, buildings and capital. In the camp, people, their legal statuses and identity documents (or lack of such things), their relations, institutions, technologies, infrastructure and the built environment

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combine to create a particular kind of space in which specifically Palestinian values,

identities and practices are produced and reproduced. (70)

Arbat has undergone a parallel if shorter history, complete with a refashioning of a cross-section of Syrian rather than Palestinian society. Turner, writing with a slightly different emphasis, suggests that camp communities not only reproduce but also transform their societies of origin. "[T]he camp," he avers, "is at once a place of social dissolution and a place of new beginnings where sociality is remolded in new ways . . . ." and suggests that "we must explore the precarity of life in the camp by exploring relations to the future in this temporary space" (139).

Taking into account the variable materiality of the elements aggregated there, this section will regard the building of homes in Arbat as a social and material practice. Even as residents have cultivated in their houses sites of familial belonging, they've also contributed to the unique character of the built environment at the aggregating scale of a community. In contrast to the logic of refugee return, this suggests an alternate futurity within the "present-temporary" double-bind identified by Ramadan. More immediately, the claims of the Arbat community upon their homes hold stakes for the governmental powers curating the camp, revealing the limited property rights of both in- and out-of-camp Syrian asylum seekers in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah. Perhaps surprisingly, the mono-categorical status of asylum restricts this refugee community's situated enjoyment of the human right to own property.

Building their homes, even upon ground prepared by the UNHCR, entailed significant investment by Arbat residents. Rahima recounted how her husband Karwan initiated the house-building project before she left Syria. "It was a tent—he built the house and we came." When I asked Karwan how he had managed the task, he said, "You know how—it takes money," the sum coming to "$7000 dollars." Others with experience in construction proceeded differently. Bauan,

reported doing much of the labor himself, including preparatory drafting of a floor plan: "I counted the area and I drew a map." When Hozan's house in the camp was completed, she took pictures with her phone. "We sent them to our relatives in Syria," she said.

This experience of building a house was common to both Arab- and Kurdish-identifying residents as well as households headed by both men women. While Rahima is married to Karwan, a Kurdish man, Reem, another Arab-identifying woman, is a widow. "My daughter built this house," she said. By adding one room at a time, and borrowing sums from her employer, Reem's daughter completed the dwelling, spending "around $4000 to build the house." Reem also clarified that, "'The camp provided the land, the space," but not the materials. In Reem's home, I saw fabric from a UNHCR tent incorporated into the structure of the house's interior in the style of insulation. I asked, "Did the UNHCR help provide some material—the ceiling?" She replied, "It is true that this nylon is from the UNCHR, but we bought it from other people." Her response points out that where people are living, trying to find work, and sometimes earning money, they are likely to develop markets, however informal, for repurposed items, even entire homes.

In fact, by 2017 the Arbat camp management felt compelled to institute a policy forbidding the buying and selling of houses within Arbat. Sola, an Arbat resident whose job brought her into frequent contact with the camp management, explained the situation in detail:

> Because the land belongs to the organization, to the government, they will not let you buy or sell the lands, the houses. Even if you have excuse, 'I have built my house,' they will say 'no, you cannot buy or sell . . . . ' And we are telling them: 'We built the house, and when we are buying and selling our houses . . . . We only buy and sell just to pay the amount that we have spent on the house!'

Marguerite Nowak, who in 2017 was a UNHCR Field Officer in Sulaymaniyah, acknowledged that many Arbat residents "chose to upgrade from a tent to shelter" but affirmed, "we built the camp," as noted in the introduction. The UNHCR's aspiration to give "priority to the extremely vulnerable" is a mission that would be undercut by the market-based allocation of homes, Nowak explained. "As individuals, we can understand that they want to create wealth," she said, and then went on to clarify the UNHCR's broader responsibility to protect the refugee community. "We don't want people who need shelter to be excluded," she said, "nor do we want the camp to become, through buying and selling, a place for wealthier people." In order to protect refugees, the reasoning goes, the camp needs to remain separate from market-based principles of organization, even if they come from within the refugee community itself.

According to Sola, as long as a family resides in a house, it is theirs to use; but if the house goes unoccupied, the camp management is likely to investigate with an eye toward letting another family occupy it. Because the jobs most accessible to refugees in the KRI tend toward service or other less-stable sectors, families are loathe to give up the security of a plot in Arbat (Natali 52). The broader effect, then, is to tether families to a site 25 kilometers (16 miles) from the nearest major city, Sulaymaniyah. The camp, as a space of sunk costs, is likely to *inhibit* future freedom of movement, despite the robust protection of refugees' human rights more generally in the KRI, and the familiar script of refugee repatriation.

Following the philosophical work of Giorgio Agamben, camps have been read as places of legal exception wherein everyday law is suspended (Ek 365–66; Owens 572). The situation surfaced here, though, is not in fact exceptional, for the impossibility of home ownership in Arbat is consistent with the legal situation faced by asylum seekers living in flats and rented houses in KRI cities like Sulaymaniyah. As already noted, Dijwar, who has experienced life both in and out

of the camp, explained that as an asylum seeker in Kurdistan, "You can't buy a house—no property rights, the government can tell you at any time to move." His account resonates with Crenshaw's attention to multiple axes of marginalization within legal contexts. In his predicament, asylum-seeking co-locates displacement and Syrian national origin within a legal status that denies Syrians full property rights inside Kurdistan. That this should be the case today in Kurdistan presents a grim historical irony—Kurds who had been stripped of citizenship by the Syrian state in the 1960s had been similarly barred from owning property. They were referred to as "foreigners" (Chatty 271).

While the right to own the houses in Arbat may not be extended to those living in them, the buildings themselves can materialize residents' enjoyment of the right to self-expression, as the two images below suggest. In light of the decision to effectively ban home ownership in Arbat, it is ironic that the UNHCR has opted to circulate a photograph of a house in which its logo is not in view. A recent version of the camp profile, shown below, features an image of a house with an elaborate facade (upper right-hand corner in fig. 10, below).

Figure 10. "Arbat Camp Profile" (UNHCR 2018)

Amidst the cinderblock-gray dominating the camp, homes like this one constitute an eye-catching minority. Its semblances of irregular stonework are revealed by a facsimile of aged plaster weathering away. These aesthetic improvements to the home seem to imagine a tenure impossible to reconcile with the camp's recent construction.

Even residents of quite appealing homes in Arbat tend to offer practical reasons for their construction. Karwan placed his own home-building project within a broad timeframe: "Maybe we won't be back in Syria in 10 years; that's why we had to build something good." There is a quiet transition here from the house as a practical improvement on the UN tent, the matter of *need*, to a home that has life-enhancing value beyond the pragmatics of shelter—"something good." The

Arbat houses depicted in fig. 10 (above) and fig. 11 (below) attest to the success of the UNHCR's mission of protection, yet they, as manifestations of self-expression, also seem to far exceed this remit, suggesting the possibility that the people living there may no longer be in need of quite the same form of protection-driven stewardship.

In my reading of them, the self-sponsored, public-facing elements of these homes lend their fabricators' expressive craft to the ongoing enculturative experience of Arbat, contributing to its unique character as a place with the capacity to animate thought, jog memory, and anchor senses of both the present and future (Frith 19; Rapoport, "Spatial Organization and the Built Environment" 496). Though they may echo architectural elements understood as Syrian, they fold these memories into a localized present, countering an uncertain future by celebrating the potential value to be found in beautifying daily life. Relevant here is the attention paid in migration studies to the Heideggerian concept of dwelling, "being in the world" such that one is "at home in the world, rather than merely existing" (Brun 426). As places of dwelling, the individualized houses do more than offer shelter, instead nurturing individual families' lives, capacities for further actions, and personal styles, thereby contributing to the camp as a distinct locality, a home in which belonging can be negotiated, renewed, reimagined (Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging* 20).

Figure 11. "(In the Style of) Bricks and Stonework" (Hayes)

Thinking along infrastructural lines toward a conception of Arbat as a *place* and site of place-making, my thoughts about the Arbat homes are motivated, finally, by my own "physical encounter" with them (Puri 62). Although I was in the camp daily only in 2017, I visited several times again in 2018 and 2019, and noted the gradual improvement of its main roads, the increasing numbers of businesses opening their doors. Amid these changes, the beautified houses in Arbat strike me as dramatizing the power of objects to become invested with memory and also to foster future-oriented trajectories of belonging through a tacit claim on the present (Assmann 37). These homes materialize a community's self-realization, a departure from the UN's parceling and labelling of temporary spaces, and a claiming of community in the sense of something uniquely gathered and oriented to the possible fullness of its moment. The houses seem to voice the implicit message, *this, too, might hold beauty*. While the camp's humanitarian purpose integrates it into the

varied scales of governance maintaining the camp (regional, national, supranational), the seeming excesses of the beautified homes are something unforeseen by hired draftsmen, elements of an infrastructure of dwelling. I wonder if they do not celebrate the agential act of making this corner of Kurdistan *home*, or at least making a home *in* Kurdistan, and thereby working in small, daily ways to transform the statist dislocation of the refugee into the routine yet regrounded belonging of the resident.

6.3 Transnational Iconicity and Political Belonging

Figure 12. "Apo in Arbat" (Hayes)

6.3.1 Öcalan, the PKK, and Democratic Confederalism

A sociomaterial logic of relationality moves me to consider the TOB interviews in the contexts in which they were gathered, which includes Arbat and the houses there into which I was welcomed during so many afternoons in the summer of 2017. Those houses, as already shown,

were bereft of neither decoration nor inscription. And so there is a relation there to be considered that, as I will show, has explicit purchase upon the TOB interviews. As mentioned at the outset and as seen in fig. 12, above, the face ghosting the walls of Arbat is that of "Apo," Abdullah Öcalan, the Turkish-born Kurd known for his leadership of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). Öcalan's image signifies in several registers. He is a famous Kurd, and therefore can represent a kind of non-state national pride. More specifically, he represents a history of resistance to the Turkish government's attempt to fashion a homogeneous ethnostate. In saying as much, I do not mean to suggest that other states, particularly my home country of the US, are not bound up with histories and processes of oppression—indeed the roles of people of color and black women in particular in creating the Critical Race Theory framework testifies to the fact. But the Turkish state's particular ethnonationalism is relevant to both the history I am reviewing and the more immediate geopolitical exigence for writing this chapter as I am.

In the 1970s, policies not only antithetical to Kurdish self-determination but also bent on the erasure of Kurdish history, suppression of Kurdish language, and denial (or else appropriation) of Kurdish culture led Öcalan and fellow travelers to adapt the Marxist and anti-imperialist discourses of the day to a program of secular Kurdish-national resistance (Ferreira and Santiago 486; Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History* 57; Kaya and Lowe 13; Saadi). By the early 1980s, their tactics countenanced armed struggle and direct, often violent action against the Turkish state across wide swaths of its territory, especially the Kurdish-majority southeast. McDowall evokes the scope of the fighting and its stakes for both the Kurds and Turkey:

> In August 1984 a hitherto unknown party, [the PKK] launched a series of attacks and ambushes on Turkish forces in the Kurdish region. During the next decade its activities resulted in the deaths of an estimated 12,000 people, and showed no sign

of abating. Meanwhile, the Turkish state, which had briefly shown signs of seeking

to accommodate Kurdish identity . . . retreated into a position of denial . . . .

(McDowall 420)

As a result, the PKK became internationally condemned as a terrorist organization. Expelled from Turkey by force, the PKK entered into a longstanding relationship with Syria, which harbored it. Eventually, though, Turkish pressure made the situation politically untenable. "When the PKK was expelled from Syria after the 1998 Adana Agreement [between Turkey and Syria], it fled to the Qandil Mountains in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, which has been its headquarters ever since" writes Natali (61 fn). In this period, the PKK's aim was still Kurdish independence, even though it had to reach "an understanding" with Iraqi Kurds whose "aim of autonomy" it viewed as both politically conservative and "defeatist" (McDowall 422). As a matter of geography, when displaced Syrian people such as the TOB participants fled to Iraq after 2011, they moved closer to the current headquarters of the PKK, a radical transnational organization with deep revolutionary roots in Turkey and decades of history in Syria as well.

It would be a mistake to relegate Öcalan's influence entirely to the past, and it is here that this history pertains more directly to the lives of many of the TOB interview participants. Though incarcerated, Öcalan is the conceptual architect of democratic confederalism, the program that the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) has worked in recent years to materialize in Rojava. Rather than securing a revolutionary state, democratic confederalism proposes a transformative shift in political self-actualization such that "the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions" (Öcalan 33). An "anti-nationalist" project, democratic confederalism is intended to embrace "ethnic, cultural, and political diversity" and claims "ecology and feminism" as "central pillars" (Öcalan 21–25, 34). Öcalan's version of these ideas owes, as he acknowledges, a

significant debt to social theorist Murray Bookchin, a US-born anarchist (M. Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*; M. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*; De Jong). Democratic confederalism is intended to work toward a bottom-up communalism, "self administration in contrast to the administration by the nation state," which Öcalan regards as a "dead-end street" for effecting meaningful social change (Öcalan 38–39).

On the ground in Syria, Rojava's "implementation of Öcalan's governance principles" has "rendered the PKK's ideology a reality," at least to some degree (Kaya and Whiting 87). Although the ongoing privation of the Syrian War has impeded efforts to transform the region, Rojava has demonstrated a pronounced tactical flexibility in its orientation to state power. Knapp et al. write, "Neither the regime nor the opposition were responsive to Kurdish demands for recognition, so Rojava's Kurdish movement opted for a third path: it would side neither with the regime nor with the opposition. Would it defend itself? Yes. Would it participate in the civil war? No" (50). This policy has allowed Rojava to pursue autonomy without the self-annihilating prospect of total war against the Syrian government. As Turkey and Syria jockey for dominance in what seem to be the last days of the war, this flexibility may help the Kurds of Syria from a complete reversal of fortunes.

6.3.2 Apo as Transnational Icon

In her proposals for a new materialist approach to visual culture, rhetorician Laura Gries advocates a method of "iconographic tracking." It incorporates actor-network-theory's regard for the agency of objects, which in this light are described, following the work of Bruno Latour, as "actants" (Gries, "Dingrhetoriks" 298). Iconographic tracking is

designed to elucidate how images become rhetorical and iconic in the sense that once actualized in multiple versions, they become not only vital actants capable of catalyzing change and producing space (and time) but also readily recognized and culturally and/or politically significant to a wide cultural group. (Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric* 110)

Gries's method recommends that researchers track the reproduction and remediation of images over space and time as a means to better assess their achievement of rhetorical effects across broad audiences. Iconographic tracking is relevant to this discussion in two ways. It is, first, a methodology in which the spatiotemporal scale of the inquiry, rather than being presupposed at the outset, is developed by tracing the associations to be found between actants (Latour, *Reassembling the Social* 180, 184). Situated intersectionality, when pursued relationally, can similarly avoid the methodological fallacy of predetermined scale, as this discussion will suggest. Second, iconographic tracking exemplifies Gries's contention that typical methods of reading visual cultural as distinct media fail "to recognize that in addition to a visual thing's compositional design, a thing's external relations—or exo-relations—are just as important . . . ." (Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric* 299). In the section that follows, the elements of compositional design to be found in Arbat's Öcalan images are of consequence to this discussion mainly because they affirm, via external relations, a specific trans-state distribution of similarly propagandistic artwork.
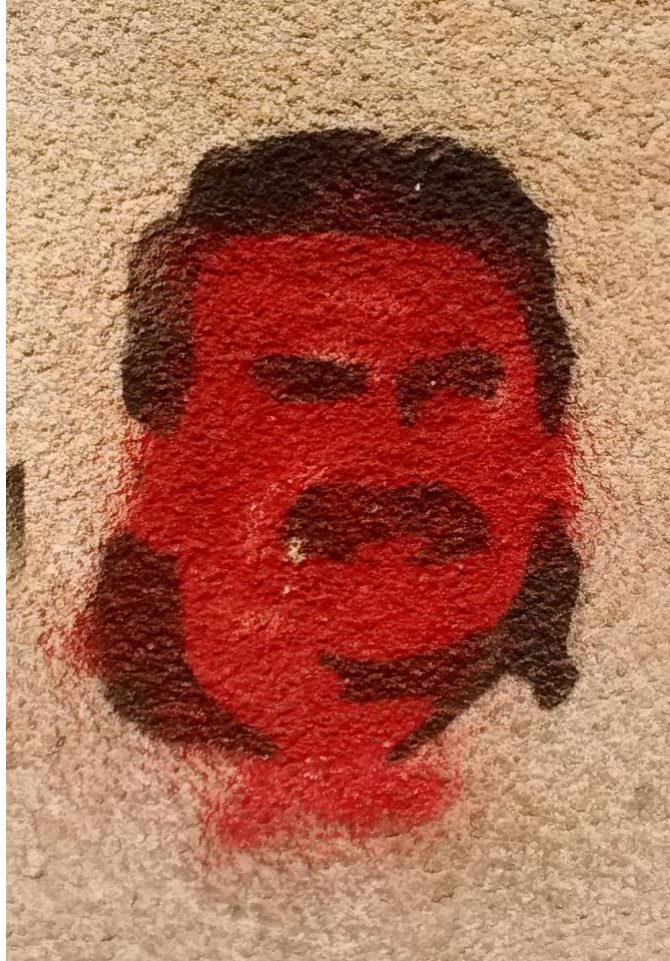
Figure 13. "Öcalan, Red," Sulaymaniyah, KRI (Hayes)

My tracking of the Apo images began before I arrived at Arbat. Figure 13, above, was the

first Öcalan image I encountered in the KRI. In 2016, it could be seen in central Sulaymaniyah,

east of the bazaar. Passing remediations of Apo's face such as this is a daily experience for many

in the refugee and host communities of the Sulaymaniyah Governorate. At the time of my departure

from Iraq in August 2019, similar Öcalan images could easily be seen in some half dozen locations

throughout the city of Sulaymaniyah, such as fig. 14, below, which I'd first noticed in 2017.
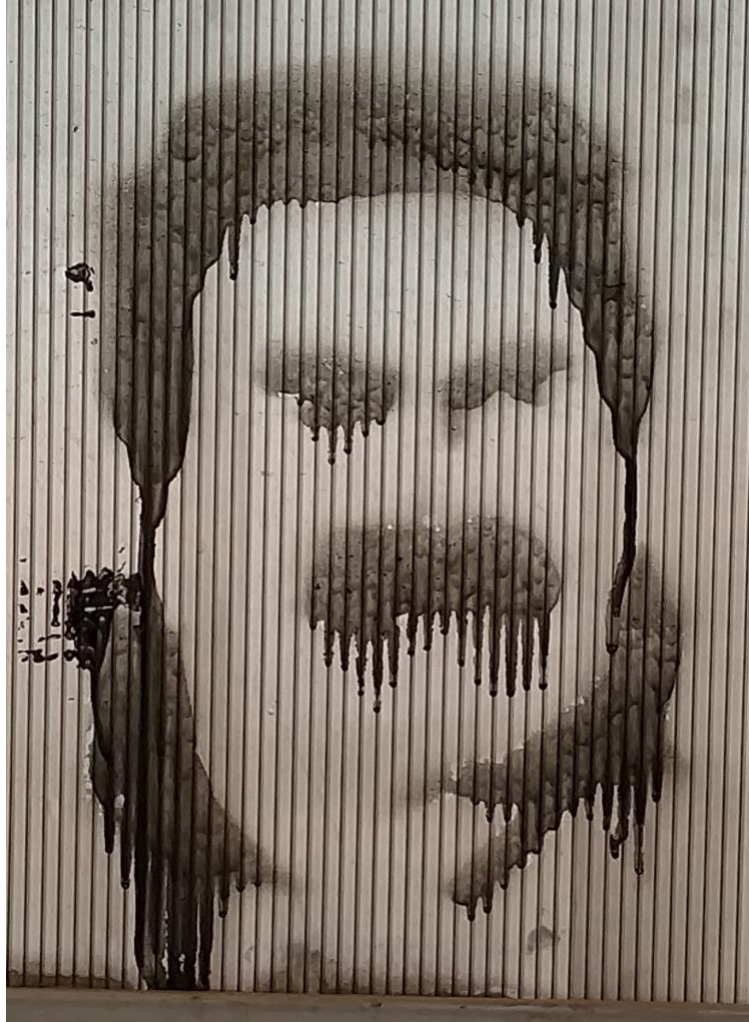
Figure 14. "Öcalan, Overpass" Sulaymaniyah, KRI (Hayes)

A regional cataloging of these images in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah (much less online) in the meticulous style of Gries's iconographic tracking is far beyond my resources and scope. But I will suggest that these images, which span the host- and refugee-community divide, as already demonstrated, should be viewed within a broader, trans-state tradition of re-mediating Öcalan's image. Figure 15, for example, was taken a few years prior in the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakir, Turkey (Krajeski).

Figure 15. "Stencil of Abdullah Öcalan" Diyarbakir, Turkey (Maksudyan, in Krajeski)

Although stylistically different from the images gathered in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah, the faces from Turkey include the central motifs of the moustached face and the "Apo" moniker, features that appear as well in myriad further examples to be found online when searching terms like 'Öcalan graffiti'. Even the examples cited here, though, suggest the transnational dispersion of these images across Turkey and Iraq, states dividing Greater Kurdistan, as discussed in the introduction.

This distribution of Öcalan images invites reading in terms of rhetorician Caitlin Bruce's concept of "transnational icons." She regards them as "generic representations that circulate globally indexing a particular entity or group, yet enable identification through the instantiation of the simplified face." Some of these images, according to Bruce, allow "multiple claims and performances of solidarity and identification . . . ." (44–45). Bruce's concept of transnational

iconicity is useful here because it suggests the power of reproduceable media, including (what I take to be) stencil and spray paint, to foster multiple senses of belonging.

Some TOB respondents commented on the Apo icons. Majid, a Kurdish-identifying man I met at Arbat, described himself as uninvested in radical politics of any kind. He did not have a high regard for Öcalan's politics, either in the heyday of the PKK or as pursued in Rojava. Majid claimed that the Öcalan images in the camp tended to appear at night, anonymously rendered. He suspected that they were created by people visiting from *outside* the camp, perhaps activist youth affiliated with the PKK. Before we left the topic, though, Majid added that, were he to meet Öcalan or see him speak in person, he'd likely be overcome with tears. For Kurdish-identified people, he explained, there are few figures that are so recognizable. After all, as McDowall chronicles, Öcalan's PKK had in its heyday not only challenged Turkish control over wide swaths of territory, but also "create[d] a coherent national movement," "galvanized a great swathe of Kurds," and edged out all "competitors for the Kurdish national mantle," thereby leaving Öcalan as the sole voice of Kurdish nationalism (239). Yet Majid's contradictory disposition suggests that some Kurds might find Öcalan acceptable as a figure of shared belonging without endorsing either his radical past or the current projects being carried out in his name.

In contrast, Dijwar spared no sentiment for Öcalan. "He doesn't represent us," he averred. From his point of view, the use of Öcalan's transnational iconography to lay claim to public spaces by way of the walls of Arbat homes is opportunistic, and should not be taken as a sign of community investment in a radical project. Dijwar's stance refuses the recruitment of his Kurdish belonging into a relationship with the Öcalan story. In doing so he interrupts the "normative" force of the PKK tradition as an adjudicator of what will or will not constitute "political memory" within Kurdish-identifying communities (Assmann 40). As Kaya and Lowe note, "the PYD–PKK

movement aspires to represent one people who happen to be divided by an arbitrary modern border" (Kaya and Lowe 276). That is, the broader movement aims to represent Syrian and Iraqi nationals as, most essentially, *Kurds*—assuming, in an ironic mono-categorical analogue of the Turkish state's distorting logic, that they therefore '*are* PKK' (as the relationship is often expressed in Kurdistan). By refusing the Arbat icons' implicit positioning of Öcalan as *the* face of transnational Kurdish resistance, Dijwar rejects the mono-categorical substitution of the PKK tradition for any other idiom of agential Kurdish belonging. Like Dijwar, there are "[m]any Kurds in Turkey and Syria who do not necessarily support the [PKK or the PYD]" yet "also view their society, culture, and politics as fully entwined" (Kaya and Lowe 276).

6.3.3 Multiple Political Orientations

In what follows, I've compiled four more of the TOB participants' associations with Öcalan, the PKK, the PYD, its affiliated militias, and/or autonomous Rojava. These interviewees texture and particularize the commonsensical position that *Kurd*, as an ethnic categorization, cannot fairly be taken to represent a single political tendency. They demonstrate that the presence of Öcalan icons in Arbat and Sulaymaniyah does not indicate that the Syrian refugee community there lends the PKK or the PYD unequivocal support.[89] And yet they also suggest that some

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[89] Because this section necessarily references several different political entities in addition to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), I'll list them here for ease of reference. In Rojava (officially the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or AANES) there is the:
- PYD (Democratic Union Party), the dominant political party in Rojava attempting to implement Öcalan's program of democratic confederalism. The PYD is often seen as the Syrian branch of the broader PKK tendency.
- YPG (People's Protection Units), the main militia in Rojava, closely aligned with the PYD. The US military allied with the YPG in order to fight ISIS in Syria (see Bookchin 2019).

Kurdish-identifying people are deeply invested in the Kurdish-majority autonomous project in Rojava, and to some degree credit Öcalan's legacy with its gains. Together the array of views gathered here works against the methodological fallacy of a single, facile message. Their details, bearing upon a local political milieu these interview participants wanted to explain to me (and, as we discussed, my likely audience of fellow academics), realize the epistemic agency to be found at the co-constituted intersection of Syrian nationality, asylum seeker status, and Kurdish belonging.

As suggested in Chapter 1, I view this detailed introduction to the regional and local politics as a strategy of confounding the Orientalist construction of non-Western bodies as bound to a primordial and essentialized past. As Said noted of Orientalism, "[O]ne of the problems of orientalism is that it creates an image outside of history of something that is placid and still, eternal—which is simply contradicted by the facts of history" (qtd. in Jhally 7:03-:51). By affording the TOB interviewees space here to share their experience of political actors and circumstances far removed from our own, I hope to confound the Orientalist tendency to assert essentializing principles rather than politics and history.

It bears noting that people in the KRI can be hesitant to talk about political matters with strangers. Yet some of the TOB interviewees were moved to disclose experiences with organizations bearing a relation to Öcalan. This choice should be recognized as overcoming the long-standing culture of silence and fear instilled by the Assad regime and weighing the risk of transnational repression, typically against friends or family still in Syria (Moss 485). Furthermore,

- YPJ (Women's Protection Units), the all-woman military force in Rojava, also closely aligned with the PYD.

Syrian nationals in the KRI are necessarily beholden to the Kurdistan Regional Government, a security-conscious, state-oriented power, conservative in comparison to the Öcalan-affiliated parties or militias. For this reason, I will not share many details of the following interviewees' lives, even though such an approach would otherwise be valuable as a means to more accessibly humanize them. While this manner of presentation de-emphasizes life circumstances that might easily be indexed to each these interviewees, it unfolds experiences and perspectives about which they wanted to teach.

6.3.3.1 Shaniya: PKK and Community

"I'm very happy because [I am] Syrian," said Shaniya. "But I'm Kurdish before I am Syrian. It should be the Syrian say, 'We are happy you are Kurdish; we are happy you are living in Syria.' We don't want a Kurdistan all things [only] Kurdish inside the country, but something [to] protect our rights." The multiple senses of belonging Shaniya communicates here may be surprising in light of her prior experiences with the PKK—at least if the PKK is taken as synonymous with a narrow Kurdish nationalism (or terrorism). As she narrates her past, Shaniya was part of a PKK-supported cultural group well before the Arab Spring or the Syrian War. In her experience, the mission of this organization was to help Kurds maintain a relationship to their language and history, endeavors motivated by the suppression of Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights in Syria. The group sponsored cultural activities gathering Kurdish-identifying people to speak their language (the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish), study history from a Kurdish perspective, and engage in arts and theatre relevant to their experiences. Taking part required precautions to avoid attracting undue attention from the authorities. Shaniya's description of this activism is consistent with Ferreira and Santiago's broader assessment that Rojava "put into practice a project

that has been developing since the early 2000s, but whose roots date back thirty years" and bears "the great influence of Kurdish women" (486). Throughout our interview, Shaniya conveyed a clear sense of belonging to a Kurdish movement committed less to territorial power and more to the preservation of Kurdish language and culture in Rojava.

6.3.3.2 Nalin: A Women's Militia and Fragmented Autonomy

Although she was in Damascus when the war began, Nalin's family is from a near Qamishlo, the administrative capital of Rojava. When she, her parents, and her siblings came to the KRI, they left behind a sister in Syria who was an active member of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the all-woman militia affiliated with the PYD. As mentioned in the last chapter, Nalin and her family were repeatedly interviewed by security forces associated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant party in the Kurdistan Regional Government administrating the autonomous region in Iraq.[90]

The crux of the matter was that the officers possessed intelligence indicating that Nalin's sister was in the YPJ. In the eyes of these security agents, the whole family was therefore suspect. The family's social location at the intersection of asylum-seeking status, Syrian nationality, and (former) residence in Rojava allowed the contingent fact of Nalin's sister's service in a militia to present a liability for them all. Nalin described the conversations: "They said, 'you are PKK,' we

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[90] In the KRI, two major political parties rose to power in the wake of Western intervention in Iraq during and following the First Gulf War of 1990-1991 (see Gunter 2016: 61-70):
- The KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), historically the dominant party in the KRI, based in Erbil, founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani, led by his son Masoud Barzani from 1973-2018, and headed since 2019 by Nerchivan Barzani.
- The PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), rival to the KDP with a strong base in Sulaymaniyah, often associated with Jalal Talabani, now deceased, who helped found the PUK in 1975.

said, 'no we are just refugees who came here to live a normal life. They asked us [for] news about [the] PKK . . . and they asked my father to go to Syria to bring them information—they pushed us a lot." Over the course of several months, the officers played upon the precarity of the family's status as asylum seekers. "Every day they were telling us 'you are YPJ/YPG,'" said Nalin, until finally they "took the refugee status from us, [the] papers." In the end, the situation resulted in the family's re-displacement and loss of the home they'd built in Kurdistan. "They forced all of the family to go to Syria," said Nalin. The officers "said, 'you have to go back to Syria because you are PKK.' We built a house; we spent $7000; they took the house, everything, without paying us."

Nalin believed the Kurdish security forces to be, as she put it, "looking at the [displaced] person there with a political eye, not as a refugee, [but] with a political side, not as refugee." There was in this comment a sense of outrage in the way that regional political concerns overcame the humanitarian obligation to protect refugees. Her narrative demonstrates her family's vulnerability to state and, in this case, sub-state security apparatuses. As refugees, Nalin and her family were compelled to register themselves as asylum seekers, but it was this interaction that placed them in the hands of the Kurdistan government's security forces.

The situated character of their vulnerability, however, also left Nalin's family with options particular to the local political landscape. After returning to Syria for several months and finding the economy in a state of collapse, the entire family came to the KRI again. But this time they went to southeastern Kurdistan through an "informal" route, thereby finding their way to the Sulaymaniyah Governorate. In doing so, they bypassed KDP-controlled territory and came to the area administered by its political rival, the PUK, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

This was necessary, Nalin said, "because we couldn't do it in a legal way . . . they [the KDP] had our names." That is, Nalin and her family felt certain that, given their past interaction

with them, the security agents at the Iraqi border within KDP jurisdiction would refuse them entry,

perhaps detain them—so they went around the KDP territory. They had been "forbidden to live in

[the KDP] region . . .," but the city of Sulaymaniyah "belongs to" another party, the PUK. The

return trip eventually led the family to the Arbat camp, where they did not experience any political

scrutiny. In this successful negotiation of the local security and asylum regimes, Nalin's family

exhibited a savvy, agential orientation to Kurdistan's situated, intraregional geopolitics.

Gender is rarely addressed directly by TOB interviewees, yet elements of Nalin's narrative

merit a gender-based reading. Was the family punished for a *woman's* choice to join the YPJ, an

all-woman, *woman-led* defense force? In their discussion of the way "Kurdish women [leave] their

homes" to "join other women at war," Ferreira and Santiago contend that these women remove

themselves from "a whole civil structure deeply rooted in patterns of gender hierarchy which

supports the state." For this reason, they argue, "Kurdish women as revolutionary agents may turn

family structures into revolutionary cells and challenge the state directly" (489). The fear of this

very possibility—the radicalization of an entire family node by a single female recruit—seems to

have been at least one reason Nalin and her family were scrutinized. Ferreira and Santiago,

operating in a largely theoretical register, argue that the Kurdish experience of state-based

oppression makes it more likely for Kurdish women's radicalization to have an anti-state telos. If

so, the scrutiny of refugee families thought to have a tie to the YPJ might have a gendered

motivation, conscious or not. More certain though is the extensive scholarship and media coverage

documenting Turkey's animosity to the PYD, including its main (and mostly male) militia, the

YPG (Gunter, "Trump, Turkey and the Kurds" 79; McGurk).

Gender plays a more specific role in Nalin's story, however. In addition to the intersectional

marginality experienced by the men in her family as Syrians, Kurds, and asylum seekers, Nalin's

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experience entailed a further dimension. As she put it, "Everyday [the security agents] were asking us to go to the department, young and old girls—it wasn't good for us." I took her to be suggesting, in as clear language as could be shared with a male, white, and foreign stranger in the presence of her family, that the women of her family experienced the compulsory interrogations differently than did the men. Her abrupt departure from the KRI supports this possibility. Nalin came to experience the interviews with security agents so negatively that her father, as she said, "put [her] in a car" so that she could flee the region, sacrificing her hard-earned KRI residency card at the border to escape. It was only "after ten days," she noted, that the rest of her family followed her back to Syria. Her haste is difficult to explain without considering gender as a constitutive aspect of the positional vulnerability already described.

Because Nalin's family had been an object of intense scrutiny by security forces in the KDP territory, the scale of the 'Kurdistan' to which she might comfortably belong contracted to the territory of the PUK, its political rival. Nalin's narrative reflects the KRI's political, administrative, and territorial fragmentation along intra-regional party lines. This state of affairs is at odds with the US-brokered unification of Kurdistan in the 1990s (Albert 232) and its framing as a single sub-state autonomous region within Iraq's federal constitution of 2005 (Kelly 727). Nalin's family's negotiation of a partitioned Kurdistan troubles the conceit, perhaps convenient to neo-colonial interests in the region, of both a unitary Kurdish identity and an integrated Kurdish polity in Iraq. For Nalin, a familial connection to a group associated with Öcalan's lineage resulted in her displacement from one part of the KRI, yet seemed irrelevant in another.

6.3.3.3 Yaran: Revolution and Repression in Rojava

It was Assad's strategic withdrawal of the Syrian Arab Army from Rojava that invited the PYD to undertake the building of the autonomous government now known as the AANES (Gunter, *The Kurds* 18). After this project was underway, the PYD took a dim view of those who wanted to continue the civic protests in Rojava. Protestors, in turn, suspected the PYD of being a tool of the Syrian state. Involved in early street demonstrations against the Assad regime, Yaran had, like other civil-society activists, hoped to form broad coalitions among opposition groups capable of advancing Kurdish rights within a new Syria. But he and other organizers soon ran afoul of partisans who had taken up the armed defense of Rojava. Their message was that the revolution made further local demonstrations unnecessary. The national scale of civil activism was expected to yield to the local scale of revolutionary élan. With both sides firm in their sense of Kurdish belonging, force won the argument. By 2013, Yaran claimed, the "YPG start[ed] to take all the people who come on the street, who want freedom . . . activists, NGOs." Consistent with Yaran's account, Kaya and Lowe write, "There is an inherent tension between the PYD's official positions on the practice of multi-party politics and tolerance and its actions on the ground" (27).

Yaran reported that he and those with whom he had organized came to fear the PYD's intentions toward them, but were determined to continue organizing. In time, he heard that armed men were coming for him, too. And so his commitment as a Kurdish activist to demonstrating against the Assad regime came to compel his displacement. "In order to understand some of the contestations involved in different constructions of belonging promoted by different political projects of belonging," writes Yuval Davis, "we need to look at what is required from a specific person in order for [them] to be entitled to belong, to be considered as belonging, to the collectivity"(Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging* 20). On the face of it, Yaran and the YPG

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soldiers had Kurdish identity in common. But Yaran could not accept the PYD's requirement that he and other activists refrain from demonstrating against the Syrian state, to which Rojava necessarily bears an ambivalent relationship. Although willing to risk himself in the service of Kurdish causes, he could not find a home in the heavy-handed project of Kurdish political belonging espoused by the YPG.

Although he had often managed a fairly comfortable life in the KRI, Yaran had, while self-settling in Sulaymaniyah, experienced unexpected visits by local security forces. Feeling that his Syrian origin invited unfair monitoring by the host community, he chose to live at Arbat, even though he sometimes had the financial means to reside in the city. "The camp—its *ours*," he'd told me. This, in fact, was one of the only expressions of certain affiliation I heard in my interaction with Yaran. He saw the PKK, PYD, and the Assad regime as being all of a single collusive piece. Thus, it is no surprise that when Yaran expressed feelings of belonging, they were to neither Assad nor Rojava, nor even Kurdistan, but narrowed in scale to his hometown, his extended family, and in moments to the camp itself.

6.3.3.4 Hozan: Kurdish Self-Determination in Rojava

A Syrian Kurdish woman whose home displayed emblems featuring Öcalan, Hozan most clearly represents a TOB interviewee who experienced Rojava as the epicenter of a socially transformative political movement. She'd left Syria early in the conflict, and so had not been back to see how, after the Assad regime's canny withdrawal, the PYD had seized the opportunity to begin the work of building an autonomous government (Knapp et al. 48–51). Upon returning to Syria in 2016, Hozan found that the majority of the government offices and services were in the hands of Kurdish-identifying people, and that Kurdish had become the language of public

discourse. "There is nothing better than this feeling," she said, "[E]verything is Kurds! And we have the right to live; we deserve to live." As a peak in her own trajectory of belonging, Hozan's visit intensified her pride in Kurdish identity and endorsed a spatial imaginary in which Rojava might anchor Kurdish belonging for all seeking "to live," not only Syrians.

Interestingly, Hozan's description of Kurdish control in Rojava—which suggests the achievement of a specifically Kurdish regime—is actually at odds with the ambition of the NES government to achieve a pluralist municipalism. According to Öcalan, "Confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils" (Öcalan 26). He notes, explicitly, that democratic confederalism's "goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation-state" (Öcalan 34). Nevertheless, as Yaran's account indicates, democratic confederalism as practiced Rojava may not yet realize the aspirations expressed in its theoretical formulation.

Hozan, Shaniya, Nalin, and Yaran's accounts illustrate the complex range of associations to be traced between the Öcalan icons and the lives of TOB respondents. Hozan and Shaniya each expressed a sense of belonging to aspects of Öcalan's legacy in Syria. Yet it played a direct role in Yaran's displacement and created adverse conditions for Nalin and her family in Kurdistan. In their variety, these experiences exemplify Bruce's contention that transnational icons invite "multiple claims and performances of solidarity and identification . . ." and evoke the rivalrous projects of political belonging to be found within the pan-Kurdish space (Bruce 45). Hozan's sense of Kurdish belonging rose with her return to Rojava. Shaniya, shaped by her involvement in underground cultural groups long before the war, described a transnational trajectory of intensifying political belonging that was built upon decades of identity-based activism. Nalin's family's relationship to Kurdistan was fettered by local politics, narrowing the scale of possible

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belonging to a fraction of the KRI. Similarly, Yaran's trajectory of Kurdish belonging, formerly scaled to the political reform of the Syrian state, and then choked by disillusionment with the PYD's revolution, came in moments to center poignantly upon Arbat. Far from describing the lives of PKK combatants, the TOB participants discussed here suggest the gross inaccuracy of presuming a specific politics to reside within the intersecting social location of Syrian nationality and Kurdish identification.

6.4 Regrounding

This chapter began by noting three possible bases for belonging in Arbat—legal, ethnic, and material. I proposed reading Arbat's built environment of as a space of agential material practice in which houses function as sites of belonging and, as nodes in networks of familial belonging, the bases of possible futures—despite the fact that they are not and cannot be, in the eyes of the UNHCR and camp management, the legal property of the residents who build them. Drawing upon the discussion of intersectionality from chapter 2, in which I noted that *refugee* can function in the style of a "single categorical axis" of subordination, much as theorized by Crenshaw in US cases dealing with race and gender ("Demarginalizing" 140), I showed how *Kurdish* identification cannot be reduced to the radical lineage symbolized by the Öcalan icons in Arbat.

The discussion of Arbat's Öcalan iconography displayed the wide range of the TOB participants' political orientations to the PYD and its militias, the YPG and YPJ. These orientations pertain to the situation faced by Syrian Kurds still living near the Turkish border, thereby disrupting the categorical collapse of Syrian Kurds, soldiers and civilians alike, into the figure of the PKK

terrorist. The resort to this figure by the Turkish government as a justification for aggression against Kurds in Rojava is not hypothetical. Civilian casualties during the Afrin incursion, for example, have been represented by Turkey as "neutralized terrorists" (Schmidinger, *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*, "Advance of the Turkish Troops").

The broad application of this characterization is rendered untenable by the TOB interviews. Shaniya, the only interviewee to claim a connection to the PKK, experienced it mainly before the war as an activist organization dedicated to Kurdish language, history, culture, and rights. Hozan was most keenly enthused by the simple presence of Kurdish people speaking their own language while working in public. Yaran's perspective, deeply critical of the YPG, demonstrates the gross inaccuracy of representing Syrian Kurds in general as PKK or even PYD sympathizers, much less militants. Nevertheless, Kurdish civilians in Rojava are under threat. "Turkey's goal is not just to conquer Afrin and expel the YPJ/YPG, but also to ethnically cleanse the entire region," writes Schmidinger (*The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*, "The War Against Afrin").

Such a campaign is a symptom of the situated vulnerability that has been produced at the intersectional co-location of Syrian nationality and Kurdish identification. Such a finding confirms situated intersectionality's potential to reveal and dismantle messages that leverage mono-categorical claims on behalf of oppressive powers. Such an effect is consonant with Carastathis et al.'s investment in the potential for intersectional feminism to cultivate "trans-national and anti-national solidarity" with forced migrants (Carastathis et al. 3, 9). Relevant as well are the several conceptions of coalitional politics available in the history of scholarship contributing to intersectionality (Collins 9–15). Yet there is no potential for coalition, and no chance of solidarity, when dominant conceptions of oppression, such as *refugee*, occlude the contexts, identities, places, and languages with which less noticeable groups might describe themselves.

The work of building Rojava's autonomy, or at least the hope of doing so, continues despite the "Operation Peace Spring" invasion of October 2019. At the time of this writing, the outcome is unclear; but the Turkish military's ongoing occupation and subjugation of Afrin suggests that the Kurdish-led period of self-governance in northeastern Syria may be at an end. With the withdrawal of US support, Rojava has been compelled to welcome the support of the Assad regime. The autonomous AANES administration reserved this diplomatic option through the pursuit of its '3rd path' between overt resistance and capitulation to the state during the height of the war (Knapp et al. 50), But it remains to be seen if Syrian Kurds will retain anything of the linguistic and cultural rights they enjoyed in unoccupied Rojava.

From its inception in 2014, the construction of a council-based, decentralized polity in north eastern Syria was not only unauthorized, unrecognized, and unprotected by the international community, but also threatened by powerful state actors. As discussed in Chapter 1, such actors, for all their differences and bitter experiences of coloniality, cannot abide a grassroots re-drawing of the current state cartography, despite its origins in the post-WWI moment, the "high-water mark of imperialism" in Western Asia (Khalidi 154). Rojava is a self-determined autonomous region within Syria's sovereign territory, a political project of non-state belonging—however pronounced its own struggles to overcome a tendency toward authoritarianism, and however flawed its ultimate realization of democratic confederalism's heady goals may have been.

There was a moment, in the years from 2014-2019, when the practices of home building in Arbat paralleled Rojava's unrecognized development, albeit at a more immediate scale. Falling similarly outside the authorized scalar hierarchy leading to state authorization, these homes constitute what Ahmed et al. refer to as "regroundings," sociomaterial practices that "can both resist and reproduce hegemonic forms of home and belonging" (2). These houses affirm the

success of the UNHCR's humanitarian mission while also constituting a form of indirect resistance to the extension of that remit as a form of governance—not an overt effort to dissolve the UNHCR's authority over the camp, yet a gesture that cultivates capacities unlooked for in the social scripts emanating from that power and the state-based order enabling it. In the case of the Arbat homes, we can understand their construction as an agential third path, consonant with Rojava's approach to the Syrian War, between passive acceptance of asylum-seeking as a social status with curtailed property rights and an overt movement to assert ownership within the camp. Although residents' future repatriation may be widely assumed outside of Arbat, many among the Syrian refugee community in the KRI continue to build, dwell, and persist. Perhaps Yaran—cited at the outset—is correct, and the Arbat community belongs, already, to its residents.

7.0 Conclusion

الغريب أعمى ولو كان بصيرا

"The stranger is blind even if he can see."

—Resident, Arbat Camp, 2017

When I went to the KRI in 2017, I carried a hardcopy of Street's 1984 *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, purchased second-hand from a fellow University of Pittsburgh graduate student. I drew inspiration from the fact that Street's field work had been in Cheshmeh, Iran, not truly close to where I pursued the TOB study, yet, in comparison to the US and Europe, not so far either. In fact, my attention to infrastructure was crystallized by a moment when in 2017, near the end of a wonderful yet often overwhelming summer of research in Arbat, Bijar and I took a day to explore the countryside east of the small city of Halabja, close to the village of Byara by the border with Iran. It was a day of brilliant sun and welcome shade, a moment of pause and laughter before the culmination of what was, for both Bijar and I, an unusual endeavor amid our professional lives. At some point, our path took us alongside an irrigation system, a cool rivulet flowing briskly through a stone trough stretching almost horizontally across a hillside, tilting a welcome flow down into farms and towns known, by Iraq's standards, for being cool and green.

While strolling alongside the well-maintained ducts latticing the valley, I recalled Street's description of "water channels running along the hillside" near Cheshmeh (160), similar hydro-infrastructural features that had nurtured orchards there in the late 1970s (and may well do so today). My encounter with a similar system within minutes of the Iran-Iraq border (a demarcation shrouded in warning for a US passport holder like myself), revived the decaying schema of Street's

matter-of-fact discussion of 'jubes' in the pages of *Literacy in Theory and Practice.* Street's discussion of them typically goes unremarked by scholars. But my association of them with a similar structure just across the border from Iran in Kurdistan struck me as a singular coincidence, and it consolidated my impulse to think more about matters of infrastructural materiality as I engaged with Syrian refugees in the KRI. Although I was not aware of it at the time, Street had passed away on June 21, 2017, not long after Bijar and I began our season of interviewing in Arbat.

It was Street's work, especially his distinction between 'ideological' and 'autonomous' models of literacy, that animated the fledgling pages of *Literacy in Composition Studies*' inaugural symposium (Glascott et al. 2013), which I had poured over while preparing my graduate school applications. Street's theoretical dyad continues to be taken up in scholarly conferences (Hilberg et al. 2019). Coming to the close of this dissertation urges my reflection upon not only *Trajectories of Belonging* but a longer arc of my own. We almost always come to value our own experiences; producing work that others might find valuable is another matter.

As proposed at the outset of this dissertation, I take the mid 2010s to have seen the unsettling of the longstanding and Orientalist figure of the abject refugee, which was dissolved by the sudden presence of a 'connected' refugee. Looking at images made of Syrian travelers using smartphones, most Western audiences had no reason to suppose that such an image would not hold in all of Syria as well. But collective surprise at the appearance of the connected refugee, the need to circulate it with headlines, showed that at least some audiences in the West—those with no basis for comparison—might just as easily have found credible a set of Orientalist images indicating that Syria was not only mired in technological premodernity, but would likely always be so as a matter of cultural identity. My intuition on this point, which could sustain further inquiry, is that our efforts to shake off the ethnocentric comfort of essentialist delusions past can produce new,

compensatory distortions. The connected refugee unraveled the conceit of the West as the exclusive province of technological progress; a fetishistic fixation on smartphones, the vehicle of that disruption, directed attention away from nuances of social and cultural difference, and tacitly extoled the neoliberal order that had created the smart phone and its enabling digital infrastructures.

For the West, recognizing in Syrian refugees a common agential relation to devices and infrastructures was progress over associations of the Muslim world with ceaseless war or terrorism. But between the sudden presupposition of a new digital universality and the Orientalist fiction of the timeless, anti-modern Orient, lay a more complex Western Asia as it was traversed by the more than five million Syrian people fleeing to proximate havens. Many in the media and scholarly formations such as digital migration studies, especially in Europe, were bent on studying ways that Syrians were using smartphones—even when there was available evidence that those were not the only devices available. As demonstrated in the Introduction, the use of digital technologies was not enough to compel scholarly recognition; 'digital' often meant a preferred set of devices, infrastructures, and practices: those valued in the West.

Ignoring the range of phones carried by refugees further marginalized some groups of asylum seekers. Refugees arriving in the West tended to have had more access to education and higher incomes that those who remained in the region. They were therefore more likely to have the latest devices than those who sought shelter in Syria's neighboring countries. When the war began, not only were smartphones still out of financial reach for many, but the digital infrastructure linked to the state was also fit mainly for second generation (2G) technology. This enduring technology, the 2G devices that Bijar and the TOB interviewees often referred to as 'classic' Nokia feature phones, were used by the majority of the TOB study participants who fled to the KRI from

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2011-2015, the years which saw the growth of the Syrian refugee community in the KRI reach its peak of around 250,000 people (UNHCR, Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response, Refugees from Syria by Date). The infrastructures allowing the TOB interviewees' phones to function during displacement were differentiated by states, despite instances of the spillover of a carrier's signal for short distances across the border. It was mainly the people, and their networked relationships, that were distributed transnationally.

Many of the TOB interviewees had relatives in the KRI when the war in Syria escalated. Others had been there before, sometimes traveling informally to take advantage of economic opportunities across the border. These dynamics are not new, as any survey of migration studies literature suggests (Vertovec, *Transnationalism*; Chatty 10–37). But the overwhelmingly Kurdish-identifying TOB respondents demonstrate these trends in a historically noteworthy context: the movement of hundreds of thousands of people sharing a sense of non-state ethnolinguistic belonging, moving between two autonomous regions, one, the KRI, part of a federal system (and therefore semi-autonomous), and the other, Rojava, established first by *de facto* autonomy from a failing state and later consolidated in a radical program of democratic confederalism. Particularly when the Syrian state was still in retreat, and before the US departure from Rojava, hopes ran high that the Syrian War would somehow usher in a new era in Kurdish self-determination.

Common to both autonomous regions was a sense of Kurdish identity and place-based belonging to Kurdistan. Again and again, the TOB interviewees explained how they had always wanted to go to Kurdistan, the broader cultural region effectively territorialized mainly in the KRI. They spoke of it as a place where they would be accepted, because as Kurds it was in some sense *theirs*, too. After all, like the Kurds of Iraq, they had suffered under oppressive policies inflicted by an Arab majority state unfriendly to Kurdish language, culture, and interests. Although Kurdish

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identity was regarded with ontological certainty, the feelings of belonging to Kurdistan, however construed, tended to intensify with migration, movement, and welcome by the KRI host community. And economic and material welfare, including work and housing, played a role in how the TOB interviewees felt about Kurdistan and the KRI. The majority of the TOB interviewees suffered hardships during the series of financial crises that wracked the KRI after 2014. Against such a backdrop, negative interactions with the Kurdish host community attenuated the sense that Kurdish refugees might, despite their status, come to feel that they belonged there, too. Some seemed to maintain Rojava as a distant space of unwavering Kurdish affinity, but this affiliation was troubled by the subsequent pain of invasions by Turkey's armed forces in 2018 and 2019. Others seemed to find in the Arbat community a locus of belonging that was at once Kurdish yet somewhat hedged from the perturbations of the host community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the Arab-identifying refugees, isolated from these avenues of belonging, expressed the bleakest outlook on the prospect of permanent residence in Arbat or the KRI.

7.1 Humanitarian Questions and Researcher Responsibility

In the middle of the summer of 2018, I visited the Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights in Halabja, Iraq, to give a talk about my ongoing research.[91] The event was arranged by an English language learner I met at the Hangaw Organization, a summer language school in Halabja. The language class's teacher, Halo Ayub, my friend, sat in on the event. My small audience of about

[91] Information on this organization is available at https://www.jiyan-foundation.org/.

fifteen at the Jiyan foundation included the director, administrative staff, and also social services, legal, and psychological professionals. The director and several other people in the room translated my comments, and we broke off from the thread of my presentation at several points for impromptu discussion. Within minutes of beginning, for example, a Syrian professional who happened to be present delivered a pocket lecture stirred by my reference to "qualitative research," the nature and aims of which several of the members of the audience, more invested in quantitative methods, had found somewhat dubious. Overall the room was engaged and friendly, but there were also hard stares, and, I surmised, some doubts about the value of what I was trying to do and my motives for doing it. I felt most affirmed by the audience during my discussion of women's counter-migratory travel back to Syria, in which a line of female-presenting employees, squeezed into a row of chairs on one side of the room, seemed to take avid interest. Two further responses to my talk stand out in my recollection.

The first came from a young man in a tie, who I believe identified himself as an attorney, and who had locked his eyes upon me unwaveringly throughout the hour. He pointed out, rightly, that I should bear in mind that I could come to study *them*, but that they could not go to the US to study *us*. His observation is highly consonant with Said's discussion of a "flexible superiority," quoted at length in my Positionality Statement, entailing not only researchers' privileges of movement, but of concomitant forms of social mobility as well, including access to research sites and, perhaps, invitations into spaces like the Jiyan Foundation (Said 15). That passage from *Orientalism* notes, too, that a Westerner whose métier brings them to the "East," as in the case of a "scholar," for example, "was in, or thought about, the Orient because he *could be there*, or could think about it, with very little *resistance* on the Orient's part" (Said 15, my emphases). The young man's comment, though, might be taken as a form of gentle conceptual resistance insomuch as it

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questioned my positionality and the neo-colonial asymmetries enabling it, rather than my aims and methods, which, as noted, had been a topic of comment and some skepticism from the outset.

At Jiyan, I acknowledged how very right the man was, and suggested that I believed that the US should not only take in a much greater number of Syrian refugees, in the style of the German response to the war, but also facilitate the travel of researchers from Iraq and other Western Asian countries to the US. Since that day, I have maintained that researchers have an obligation to pressure their institutions to work toward equity in research movement.[92] The indices of privilege conspiring to bring me to Iraq were many, beginning with my status as a PhD student at a large research University in the US, a status that I do not view outside of the privilege of class, in which my whiteness is also implicated.

Questions of movement are important to Iraqi nationals, whose passports index them to a worldwide system of control in which they are at a significant disadvantage (Passport Index 2020). Even for educated people of means, securing legal permission to travel to the West can take years of effort and may in the end only be possible with a personal connection able to effect official help. For working people, unofficial routes are generally the only means of travelling to the West; though common, the journey is not to be taken lightly as far as its difficulty, expense, and risks. This dynamic presents a problem of inequitable access to a worldwide infrastructure, the kind of problem legible within sociomaterial literacy studies' emphasis on political materiality.

For a US researcher to go to the KRI without difficulty is to inhabit an asymmetric relation predicated in no small part, in my view, upon the neo-colonial history of US involvement in Iraq.

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[92] Fellow researchers and I have held preliminary discussions about the need for a cross-disciplinary and international association dedicated to this problem, Academics for Equity in Research Movement (AFERM). Helping to launch this effort is one of my long-term aims.

My hope is that sharing research enabled by this problematic state of affairs is, on the whole, better than having a research field or discipline uninformed by such perspectives. This, too, is a situated understanding. It might be in the near future that Kurdish Studies, and perhaps the scholarship of Syrian Kurds, is strongly represented in literacy studies or in English Composition. As I noted in the closing of Chapter 4, the presence of such scholars and scholarship would certainly have impacted my situated decision to undertake this project, especially outside of a collaborative framework. At the time, it seemed that few in my research or teaching fields were responding to the problems and questions I found evident in the media representations of Syrian refugees. There can be no firm reckoning in such a calculation, but through this work of transnational literacy studies I have arrived at the unforeseen aims of equipping US readers to better (1) understand the neo-colonial relation between the US and the KRI (in which they are certainly implicated) and (2) consider adopting an anti-colonial orientation of solidarity toward Kurdish people in Western Asia, in general, but especially those from Syria who have been displaced or whose communities are currently occupied by Turkey's military forces and their allies.

There was a second problem brought up at the Jiyan Foundation, though, that I have yet to touch upon. It was raised by my language school acquaintance and frequent host in Halabja, Halo, who surprised me with a question pertinent to the Jiyan Foundation's mission of providing services to displaced people. "How does this help the Syrian refugees?" he asked of my research. As simple as the question was, I felt pressed to answer it in a way that would satisfy an audience of professionals devoted to providing psychosocial and medical services to people in need. I believe the first part of my reply was a restatement of something I mentioned in most of the TOB interviews: I hoped to share my work with other teachers at my University in the US, most of whom did not have much knowledge about Syrian refugees, Kurdistan, or the KRI. I added as well

that I hoped to contribute to a shift in understanding that would encourage the US to invite more refugees and avoid nativist policies like Trump's 'Muslim Ban.' The room seemed to accept these positions as sufficient.

The second part of my answer was off the cuff, and I am not sure I was understood; several staff members attempted different translations mixing what I heard as Kurdish with resort to Arabic vocabulary, and the need for several versions did not seem to be a good sign. My inchoate suggestion was that I did not see helping refugees as my primary role, that I approached meeting them more like taking classes or even teaching at the University in the US, where I hoped to learn from my students and their writing. I went further, suggesting that it would have been (and here is where I think I lost most of the audience) presumptuous, even somewhat paternalistic, for me to assume that my research, which was after all genuinely an inquiry, could directly aid refugees in the KRI. The register of diction I needed to make the point was no doubt a barrier, but I think the idea, especially for a group so engaged in the delivery of crucial services, may also have been challengingly unfamiliar. Refugees who come to Jiyan, I suspect, truly need serious help. In contrast, the refugees I met were ungrudgingly helping *me*, patiently teaching me about their experiences and outlook.

And while I generally do not find useful for the purpose of literacy studies the style of rhetorical criticism leveled at human rights discourse (see Hesford, for example), I do think it is fair to say that humanitarian orientations to beneficiaries can be paternalistic. This is not to say that Syrian refugees in the KRI (or elsewhere) do not merit assistance. I have met people hoping I might be able to help them access medical care, as was painfully evident in Biyan's interview, for example. I applaud the ongoing work of medical anthropologists whose research has, by design, the potential to inform improvements to the medical infrastructures upon which displaced people

depend. My point is that it would be problematic for someone with my qualifications and limited experience to arrogate a humanitarian role of the kind Jiyan would in general recognize.[93]

The prior discussion of media figuration lends another avenue with which one might approach this thorny problem. The scripting of interactions with Syrian refugees only in terms of 'help' presumes a total and abiding *lack*. It therefore echoes the abject figure of the refugee and configures the host/refugee relationship in a power relation presuming refugee need. Although it might often have a factual basis, this idea is founded upon a categorical rather than situated form of knowledge, which, again, links the abject figure to Orientalist presumptions that such a refugee's penury is natural to them, rather than the product of political contestation. To be sure, I met people who had been through traumatic experiences and faced difficult circumstances. But I met others who did not seem to need whatever help I might imagine providing, and whose homes, families, children, and happiness, I could not regard with anything but admiration, and all the more so because these elements of life's joys had been nurtured despite displacement. By working to avoid a research orientation dependent on lack, as noted in the Methods discussion, I opened up

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[93] This is not say I did not attempt to play a positive role in the Syrian community that was so kind to me. From 2017-2019, the two summers I was conducting research for the TOB project as well as the next, when I taught ESL at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani (AUIS), I organized digital civil society chats between students at the Governor's School for International Relations, hosted by Pitt's Global Studies program during the summer months, and youth of similar age at Arbat. The intention was to create a dialogic space in which these groups, who had lots of ideas about one another, could participate in a facilitated digital conversation. These activities, drawing upon my institutional affiliation and privilege of mobility, were not directly tied to my research or its findings, and I did not attempt to secure IRB approval to fold it into this dissertation. I did not think of these events as delivering humanitarian assistance, but rather to provide a unique experience for all of the youth involved and, I hoped, build a relationship of trust between the University of Pittsburgh's Global Studies Center and the STEP, the partnering organization in the camp, such that the events might continue without me. Syrian students wanted to try out their English, demonstrate their knowledge of Western and international popstars, and assess what the US students knew about them, Syria, and Kurdistan. Often enough, unless the Governor's School teacher were particularly astute and the interaction fortuitously timed, this turned out to be very little.

space for relationships suited to my experience, disciplinary background, and research specialty of literacy studies.

Such a perspective allows for what refugee research participants might be able to teach, to return to the educational schema that I (not surprisingly) brought to the TOB interviewees. A case in point is Rojava, about which the TOB interviewees taught me a great deal. Like many other Western intellectuals reading about Kurds at the time, I was curious about the progress of this experiment in radical autonomy. This topic was not part of my research design, yet it was unavoidably part of the context, and frequently referenced by the TOB interviewees. The majority of them had some experience with the region by virtue of having passed through it, if not actually living there. Especially during the years in which Rojava's militias were fighting ISIS (and therefore supported by the US), there was ample reason for progressives to take an interest, for the Kurdish-majority's program of democratic confederalism was ostensibly invested in one of the most progressive, anti-state, ecologically feminist, and polyethnic social transformations ever attempted in the region. There were times in the development of the dissertation in which I thought progressive movements in the West might well learn from Rojava's example. What I have offered on this subject in Chapter 5, the TOB interviewees' discussion of Öcalan, the PYD, and the armed groups supporting this tendency, is likely to be of interest to those less invested in the moral certainties of revolutionary principle and more willing to countenance the complexity and ambiguities of radical practice.

7.2 Methods: Speech Genres and Scale

There is a small conceptual problem, though, in the foregoing account of my responses to my audience at the Jiyan Foundation in Halabja. On the one hand, I compare interviewing to teaching a class. On the other, I suggest that the humanitarian telos of assistance might be hierarchical. But doesn't teaching presume a hierarchy? This tension urges some explanation of how I think about teaching and learning, central schema for how I (based on my experience) could not help but approach interviews. This helps establish, more broadly, the way in which my prior experience in education provided a basis for my successful completion of the TOB study.

English Composition, as I was introduced to the field, hopes to work against the hierarchical transmission of knowledge from instructor to student, the dynamic famously critiqued by Paulo Freire as the "banking method." In Freire's view, instructors have traditionally deposited prepared nuggets of knowledge into their students, who, not being teachers, are effectively empty until so filled. In contrast, I was taught to devise strategies that would encourage students to activate their prior knowledge and see what might come of extending it to new questions. As such, facilitating discussion in which knowledge is co-created among interlocutors is a foundational activity, and one in which I have been engaged since 2008, when I began teaching in community colleges. Like most of my peers, I am confident in instigating discussion and skilled in refusing to lecture.

Lorimer Leonard explains that open-format, semi-structured interviews let respondents present themselves "as experts in their own lived migration experience," which entails a crucial "yielding of research authority" on the part of the researcher that is particularly important in light of the "power differential inherent in a researcher/participant relationship" (*Writing on the Move*

25). As a compositionist, I hear in such a statement an echo of what we so often strive for in teaching and in our relationships with students. My own accumulated classroom experience leads me to the (not atypical) conviction that we should sponsor open-ended assignments that allow students to similarly become "experts" and that we, as much as possible, should work to minimize the "power differential" inherent in the teacher/student relationship.

Pedagogical activities may be thought of as methodological objects, by which I mean particular sets of processual practices tending to produce certain kinds of interactions, much as do speech genres. As literate practices unto themselves, both classroom dialogues and literacy history interviews constellate our bodies in relation to one another within scenes of interaction. They turn upon our deployment of speech genres that tend to have particular epistemic affordances, that push knowledge-making in certain directions. Of speech genres, Bazerman and Prior write, "From a sociocultural perspective we can see genres as mediators of social activities. It is the mediating artifact that gives shape to the activity and affords particular relations and accomplishments" (20). Also useful to me is Shaffer, who refers to "epistemic frames" as the "organizing principle for practices," particularly those that produce knowledge or reflection on the making of knowledge (228). Like many forms of teaching, my background in English Composition includes rich experience in genres of activity intended to construct or engage epistemic frames. Though I would not go so far as to refer to the interview as a "universal mode of systematic inquiry," as have some scholars, it was clearly a genre of activity with which the TOB participants were familiar, though their suppositions about it may have been different from mine (Holstein and Gubrium qtd. in Fontana and Frey 63). As suggested in Chapter 2's portrait of Biyan, re-iterating an open-ended invitation to further thoughts and questions toward the close of an interview often called forth a kind of concluding summation or coda. One might say that the TOB interviewees and I generally

understood, despite our many differences in positionality, the speech genre of the interview as scripting the desirability for a final gesture from those being interviewed.

As with any artifact or technology of use in literacy practices, it would be a mistake, though, to regard a methodological object like the interview as ideologically innocent. Thinking metaphorically, we are not discussing *an em*pty frame, but a one maintaining a set of scripts and roles suffused with inherited investments, both generative and mediating. I find it helpful to theorize the interview through a sociolinguistic lens in which scale presents an available metaphor for relative domains of power and mobility indexed to certain "indexical orders" of language (Blommaert, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* 32-35). The interview is, in its form, a scalar crossroads, and the occasion for an interview *is* the possibility of a "scale-jump" from the setting in which it is experienced as a speech genre to a broader plane of distribution, an indexical order generally mediated by the interviewer (35-36). So, in journalism, for example, an interview is both a speech genre and an expected remediation of that genre in a publication, a textual space more proximate to the expertise, interests, and control of the interviewer than the interviewee. The academic or literacy history interview, discussed in Chapter 2, is quite similar. Although I certainly secured consent from all of the TOB interviewees, this was somewhat superfluous because we shared an understanding of what interviews *are* what they *do*. The TOB interviewees knew they were not simply meeting me socially. They understood the scalar distribution inherent to the interview, and wanted to take part.

Some fellow academics have difficulty accepting that the TOB research methodology, as enacted specifically by a white cultural outsider, could ever amount to an ethical practice, regardless of what the recruited participants did or said. As I have tried to acknowledge, I view my positionality and its impact on the kind of knowledge I could create in this project as a constitutive

problematic requiring thought and attention throughout the research process. Even so, I find this questioning Syrian nationals' capacity to offer their agential consent to an interviewer to introduce other problems. It can presume that Syrian people do not or cannot understand the (scalar) operation of writing and sharing of research based upon interviews. When deployed categorically, rather than according to specific cases (such as those that might truly indicate the inability to offer informed consent), such a position may also be animated by a tacitly Orientalist ontology, one in which non-Western people are presumed, as a matter of cultural essence, to be unable to negotiate the contradictions and fraught hierarchical fault lines of modern life, such as when we choose to give someone else a modicum of power to represent us.

7.3 Methods: Counter Representation

Although I did not collaborate with a member of the Syrian community in the writing of this dissertation, my experience in the KRI presented an alternative avenue to achieve some degree of reciprocity in research practices. Toward the end of 2018, Massoud interviewed *me*. The interview was broadcast on the Arbat community radio station and preserved digitally. Massoud was in a position to arrange the interview because of his work with the Italian NGO Un Pointe Per ('A Bridge To'). Some of his duties involved training youth to work in the camp radio station, Gardenia FM. I have no idea who in the camp heard the recording or was able to download a copy of it, nor do I know how Massoud or others at the radio station might have shared it or commented on it. My hunch is that it received relatively little enough attention, though it may be that Massoud's improvised interview with me had a greater audience than will any of my academic

work with the interviews he helped me to gather. I entrusted Massoud to curate whatever representational afterlife the interview was to have.

In any event, I understood the scalar bargain of participating in the interview, and was honored to take part. None of my close friends were within Gardenia FM's signal territory or otherwise members of the target audience for the interview, but I supposed that I knew something about who might listen from my experiences in Arbat. I was not acquainted with the Un Ponte Per staff at the radio station to whom I was rapidly introduced, but I had happened to have met Yusef, the young Syrian man who engineered the session, on a prior visit. As Massoud was living at the time in Arbat, he kindly hosted me for coffee and conversation at his shared home, and we visited with some other residents prior to the interview. Comfortable with one another from our long hours of interviewing, taking taxis, handling delays, and relaxing over meals and tea near the bazaar in downtown Sulaymaniyah, I do not recall it ever occurring to either of us to plan the interview in detail. I was surprised to find Gardenia's studio quite nicely appointed, at least by my standards—the last time I'd been in a radio station was as an undergraduate at Oberlin College in the 1990s.

Once things got rolling, Masoud asked about my work and I improvised replies. The speech genre of the interview slightly shifted our ways of speaking, and, despite our familiarity, it felt as if we were composing something new. After some preliminaries, in which I'd offered at least a few phrases of greeting in Arabic and then switched to English, Masoud began improvising questions, which he translated into both Kurmanji and Arabic. What follows is part of the interview, which shares my earnest effort to explain the project before any of the text of this dissertation was written:

> Massoud: Jordan, as you know, we hope that we will complete your research and you will arrive to what you want. But also we have another question. What do you

think about, how did you see the Syrian refugee? So I will translate that question to the Kurdish and after that you can answer.

Jordan: It's an interesting question because my research begins with the discussion of the media and the stories that came out in the West in 2014 and 2015, when the media were very interested in the idea that Syrian people were going to Europe using their smartphones. So the story there was that people were using GPS and Facebook and Google Maps as a way to go where they wanted in Europe. What we were learning just through the media was not a complete picture. So the two things that I very quickly realized I needed to teach my audience of fellow scholars in the US was first about Kurdish people in Kurdistan because most of the Syrians I spoke to identify as Kurdish men and women. Second, the reality was that most of the people, when they were traveling from Syria into Kurdistan, were not using smartphones. They were using classic Nokia or other brand phones, on 2G networks. 2G is still digital, but of course, it doesn't have Google Maps or Facebook and it tends not to have GPS. So . . . when I came here, I realized there was a group of people that the US didn't know much about, Syrian people who identify as Kurds, and that their technological situation did not really match what we saw in the media. And so this made me very curious . . . . But a point I always talk about when I discuss this work in the US is that if you think about . . . Syrian people coming to Iraqi Kurdistan, you're seeing the movement of a transnational community, a community that was here before the four states in the region were created, so before Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, were divided in the map. There were already people here that moved across these regions in connection with their own community. So

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I think . . . it helps us think about Kurdish people transnationally, whereas if in the

US you just look at the map, there is no Kurdistan, so you don't see the people.

It was here that, in my recollection, that the interview became something new. That is, Masoud hadn't heard my thoughts about how the practices we'd been investigating implied a transnational Kurdish community that could be shown to the US through my work. I recall him looking up me with what I took to be interest, although the interview moved on, and we didn't discuss it line-by-line afterwards. Eventually, Massoud was able to send me a copy of the recording, which includes, English, Kurmanji, and Arabic. With no IRB protocol restricting his duplication of the radio content, he was and is free to share it.

During the interview, I experienced a sharpened sense of a Massoud's choices when interpreting my statements into Kurmanji and Arabic. There is a particular feeling of mediated agency when a sudden reduction or expansion of the duration of one's utterance suggests an interpreter's choice to depart from the aim of word-for-word translation and improvise a different, and typically condensed, approach. The audio recording of the interview suggests his decisions to reduce at least one of the two versions he was rendering into a capsule summary. He had to, after all, translate into both Arabic and Kurmanji and maintain a pace appropriate for the attention of his audience, many of whom would be fluent in both Arabic and Kurmanji, and some quite capable in all three languages.

In listening, I could understand a bit of the Arabic he used and, with reasonable confidence, could tell by contrast when he was speaking in Kurmanji. Such experiences recall the way in which translingual theory "recognizes translation and the renegotiation of meaning as operating in all language acts, including those seemingly working within as well as across language boundaries" (Lu and Horner 585). The interview therefore culminated the TOB project as an exercise in

immersive translingualism. English Compositionist has long endorsed students' right to their own language; yet our theoretical investment in translingualism is one thing, and negotiating a rich linguistic milieu like the KRI, another. It was not only a matter of speaking some Arabic and learning some Sorani phrases and numbers sufficient for taking a taxi. It was a period of intense metalinguistic acquisition in which learning to differentiate between languages and dialects overheard cultivated an incipient awareness of how those languages and the common registers of tone within them were keyed to bodies and their performative and placed relations of affect and belonging. I do not pretend to have achieved any consistent competence in such making such assessments, but I felt these questions opening up before me, and they bear upon English Composition's investment in a translingual disposition. It may be that translingual theory can be advanced in spaces where English, so often allowed to function as an unmarked mediator of elite abstraction, is heard in extended contact with others, languages and dialects through whom English's presence in a place is maintained only by evident labor.

7.4 Situated Engagement: Race and White Neo-Colonial Privilege

In the Contexts chapter, I presented my understanding of how the US's imperialist invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 not only created conditions conducive to the KRI's autonomy, but became involved in the maintenance and shaping of it. As the US's role in brokering the KDP/PUK schism in the mid-1990s suggests, it has an interest in a unified Kurdistan, a place where it can base military forces and launch airstrikes, as it did against Saddam Hussein's forces in 2003. Even so, the US has not supported Kurdish ambitions to achieve statehood, as was shown

by the ill-fated referendum of 2017. The controversial vote demonstrated that, while the overwhelming majority in the KRI favor independence, the international community, especially the Iraqi state and the KRI's neighbors, are ready to crush it. A powerful ally that might help to adjust the severe imbalance of power, such as the US or a European coalition, state actors that helped defend the KRI from ISIS, failed to step forward. Having long asserted the need to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, the long-term policy of the US government seems to be to keep the KRI as it is, and to provide robust aid to help preserve the relationship. The US currently pays, for example, "$17 million per month to the KRI security forces," and is being called upon to take action to preserve the KRI's economy, which has become newly vulnerable as a result of falling oil revenues, a side-effect of the Covid-19 epidemic (Knights).

Knights, a Washington Institute policy analyst, refers to the KRI as "the most pro-American part of the country," and I do not doubt the general truth of his claim. The relative *ease* of entering the KRI, as I have mentioned, helped make the TOB project possible. Being able to receive a visa upon arrival in the region facilitated my pivot from Turkey to the KRI while seeking a viable research site. This was all—to once more quote the passage from Said that haunts this dissertation, not just conducive to the fact that I *"could be there,"* in the KRI, but to conduct my work, generally, "with very *little resistance* on the Orient's part" (15, my emphasis). The informal support given to me in the KRI included help facilitating crucial meetings and being ushered past lines in busy immigration offices. Acceptance of my credentials as the basis to conduct research was more difficult to procure, but not overly so: there was an underlying social script available for my work shared on all sides, from the University of Pittsburgh to the Arbat Camp management. Thus, it was Iraqi Kurds in various positions of power who gave me permission to attempt to conduct work with Syrian people in the KRI. I prefaced this this brief accounting with a reprise of

my discussion of the US-KRI relationship to suggest that my participation in such a script, far more available to me than to similarly qualified Iraqi and Syrian academics interested in studying comparable phenomena in the US, is legible as a form of neo-colonial privilege.

Such privilege hinges in my particular case on being a US national, as I have mentioned, yet it bears repeating, as does my hypothesis that *looking* like a dominant-cultural representation of an 'American'—that is, *white*—was no doubt a factor as well. A black or brown US scholar could certainly complete a transnational literacy studies project in the KRI—those crucial keys, the visa, the recognition of academic credentials, would certainly be there. Yet I suspect the social experience might be different, *not* because a black or brown scholar would be denied the kinds of assistance I just mentioned—this I very much doubt—but that the questions they might be asked about their background would likely be different. Despite the depth of black and brown contributions to the US, they might not be recognized so immediately as being a citizen of, and in many situations standing in as a metonymic representation for, the US as a white-majority polity. Being white, I am guessing, made it slightly easier for me to leverage the already privileged positionality of the US researcher in both formal and informal contexts.

I suspect this speculative conclusion, arrived at privately over several years, might be contested, and perhaps hotly, by some Iraqis, especially Kurdish-identifying Iraqis who often describe their culture as having a particular egalitarian or even European bent. Reflection on unconscious bias may be more of a commonplace in my own circumstances than theirs, and critical attention to the unavoidable performativity of the raced body even more so (Warren). If "race must be viewed as a matter of social construction" in which "races are constructed relationally rather than in isolation," then it follows that there is a relation linking my performance of white 'American' identity to the social context in which that performance was welcomed rather than

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resisted (Haney Lopez 196). I am not prepared, though, to speculate further on the attitudes of Iraqi nationals on such a complex matter; my study and interviewing with the Syrian participants in the TOB study are what establish my greater willingness to speak, however provisionally, about their travels, use of technology, and settlement in the KRI.

My racial self-reflexivity is consistent with the situated approach to intersectionality offered by Yuval-Davis. She positions her work in a lineage of "feminist standpoint theory which claims . . . that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent – the researcher or the researched – and challenge [what Donna Haraway called the] 'the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' . . . " (94). Although I have attempted to account for my standpoint throughout the project, I will briefly clarify my decision to rely upon the term ethnicity rather than race throughout this dissertation, despite its appearance in interviews with Reem and Majid in Chapter 2.

As I also described in Chapter 2, I didn't plan to bring intersectionality into the project; rather, it was an available schema that came to mind in-field. It was a framework that helped me engage aspects of the interview conversations that did not seem adequately accounted for by literacy or digital migration studies. Realizing this urged a review of refugee studies literature in which I found calls for greater use of intersectional thinking in refugee studies, as emphasized in Chapter 2's introduction of situated intersectionality. Acknowledging intersectionality's role in this project is therefore a way to work toward my own reflexive transparency, and locating situated intersectionality as a methodological intervention within this project of literacy studies emphasizes its shaping presence throughout the dissertation.

Any discussion of intersectionality necessarily acknowledges the work of Critical Race Theory, most obviously that of Crenshaw, but also the scholarly and activist lineages, heavily

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black and brown, informing her work as well (noted in the Introduction). It also implicates me and my positionality in the oppressive systems that compelled Crenshaw's work and the ongoing movements for racial justice in the US. My thinking through the lens of intersectionality acknowledges the raced milieu to which it responds and the necessarily raced nature of my engagement with it. These understandings are deeply rooted in the US context, though, and I remain wary of extending categories of thought animating intersectional thinking in my home context to the people and settings engaged in the KRI. In the categories I brought to the study, I was concerned about effecting the kind of epistemic violence Puar describes, also as discussed in Chapter 2. The circumstances faced by Kurds in Syria, for example, bring to bear histories and understandings quite different from those that suffuse the discussion of race in the US. For these reasons, following Braithwaite et al.'s contention that "it is critical to take into account the ethnicity of refugees rather than treating them as a homogenous group," I have relied on the idea of ethnicity and ethnolinguistic difference throughout this project (9). This allowed a dialogic engagement with the categories of belonging I encountered among the TOB interviewees and in the KRI more generally. I take this to be the central advantage of supplementing literacy studies with Yuval-Davis's 'situated intersectionality,' though I do not doubt that other positions could invite parallel work. For me, this framework facilitates my reflexive grappling with my own raced and classed positionality in this act of knowledge-making while inviting categories of social experience unfamiliar to the West into an intersectional analysis.

7.5 "We Will Return One Day"

To close this dissertation with a kind of coda, I will return to the discussion of Arbat offered in Chapter 5 and, as a means to think about the possible futures of the people who took part in the TOB study, offer a speculative reading of a prominent building in camp. On an average day, traffic moves steadily in and out of Arbat's main gate. The *peshmerga* military officers on duty rarely stop the motorcycles, trikes, cars, or minibuses; a nod or a wave is usually sufficient. By late afternoon, there is an outbound series of cars as the host-community staff leaves for the day. The commonplace heterogeneity of these movements complicates the legibility of Arbat as a space of categorically *refugee* experience. It is striking how little time the people I spoke to in Arbat devoted to discussing their lives *as* refugees—that was a category I had arrived with in mind, not one they usually emphasized. They tended to present themselves as Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Muslims, men, women, members of families.

There was, though, one consistent contributor to the discussion of 'the refugee' in the camp. Not far from the main gate and its administrative complex are some of the community's larger buildings, including a mosque. Just past it along the main road is the Kobani bakery, named after the Kurdish-majority city in Rojava famous for withstanding an ISIS siege (Mahmood). The bakery is painted a brilliant turquoise and purple. Emblazoned in formal Arabic upon one of the building's walls is the phrase, "We Will Return One Day":[94]

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[94] None of the Arbat residents or staff whom I consulted about the mural could recall precisely who had sponsored it. The consensus was that it had been painted with the help of students from the camp who were attending programs run by STEP UK, an NGO responsible for educational and child-friendly spaces within the community. Several local sources suggested that Florence Robichon, who collaborated with children on a series of smaller but striking murals elsewhere in the Arbat camp, might have also led the

Figure 16. "We Will Return One Day" (Hayes)

To the left, there is a division between purple and turquoise, and a flock of birds, inverting those colors, caught in flight from left to right. Having stared often at regional maps, and noting that one generally proceeds east out of Syria to reach the KRI, I find it difficult not to read this part of the mural as an allegory for the Syria-KRI border. This would allow the migratory birds to represent refugee movement, if not the flight of Kurdish refugees in particular. The birds, although appearing in different shades on either side of (what I take to suggest) the border, have an underlying form in common. This might suggest the underlying commonality of Kurdish people

work on the Kobani bakery, but she has informed me that this is not the case. (Examples of Robichon's project in Arbat are accessible online at https://arbatbrighterfuture.weebly.com/gallery.html.)

from the two countries and perhaps also the way in which the same people might be viewed differently on either side of the border.

The mural's claim may be read as resonating with the UNHCR conceit that camps serve as "temporary measures" distinct from the "three durable solutions . . . . repatriation, resettlement and local integration" originally imagined as the perquisites of refugee status (Turner 142). Long-term asylum seeking is therefore indicative of the international society of states' failure to provide precisely those solutions proposed within the UN framework. In proclaiming that they "Will Return One Day," the mural seems to incorporate Arbat residents within a narrative of repatriation despite widespread recognition that camps tend to correlate with the unavailability of precisely this durable solution (Betts and Collier 53, 137). The average length of "major refugee situations has increased from 9 years in 1993 to 17 years today," though some have questioned the utility of such figures, emphasizing that "forced displacement situations are inherently dynamic" (Loescher, "Human Rights and Forced Migration" 2018; Devictor).

This combination of protracted displacement and dynamic situation animates Ramadan's characterization of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon as "permanent-temporary landscapes of exile, spaces of Palestine in liminality, drawing meaning from Palestine of the past and future" (Ramadan 66). Despite the many differences between the Palestinian and Syrian examples, Syrians in the KRI do inhabit a "permanent-temporary" situation arising from their need to fashion lives in the KRI despite the presumption of their eventual repatriation. "We Will Return One Day," though, turns this predicament into a future-oriented trajectory of belonging, a feeling both invited yet also in part deferred by the promise of repatriative mobility.

Despite the war, most TOB participants remained firm in claiming Syria as their home, an affirmation of the multiple character of belonging. When I met them, Karwan and Rahima were

living in reasonable stability. Karwan was working outside of the camp, a circumstance enjoyed by only some of the Arbat residents. Despite facing a "permanent temporary" condition like the one described by Ramadan, Karwan and Rahima seemed well equipped to negotiate its contradictory impulses. Even as they strived to live meaningful lives in Kurdistan, they shared one another's desire to return to Syria. In speaking to them, I was slightly surprised by their certainty. "The first time, we left everything in Syria, and we can repeat the same thing. We can leave everything behind in Kurdistan," said Karwan. "If they say, tomorrow there is no war," he added, "I'll go there without hesitation." Rahima agreed, and expanded the scope of the claim: "Every Syrian . . . if they hear that Syria is good, they will all go back to Syria without hesitation." Spanning their memories of Syria and the Syria of their future repatriation, the trajectory of national belonging described by Karwan and Rahima runs in parallel with the message of "We Will Return One Day." The mural validates a feeling of home linking Arbat residents to their state of origin. As a public-facing element of the built environment with a mnemonic function, it is poised to invite or even incite ongoing emotional investment in this relation to Syria (Assmann 37; Rapoport, "Culture and Built Form" 184).

Other readings are possible. Might the mural's telos of return gesture not to Syria but to *Rojava*? The bakery, after all, is the *Kobani* bakery, a city whose famous liberation from ISIS brought the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds together in solidarity. Iraqi *peshmerga* volunteers, for example, served in Kobani. If the mural is read as gesturing to Rojava, what might be the logical conclusion if Rojava is occupied, or re-integrated into Syria? Would the pledge to return be delayed according to these circumstances? Considering the mural's purchase on a Kurdish perspective questions the viability of reading it through a single categorical axis, that of the *refugee*, or even the binary categorization available to statist reason, the *Syrian refugee*. Rahima noted that a return to Syria

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depended on conditions being "good." What if the conditions are not good for Kurdish-identifying people like her husband, Karwan? Especially when they and their children are secure in Arbat, there would be little reason to return to such circumstances.

There is yet another way of considering the ambivalence of the pledge. Rather than being oriented toward the future, the bakery may organize thinking about the past. At the center of a camp that looks more and more like a small town with every passing year, the bakery might now evoke a past intensity of Syrian-Kurdish belonging. That is, today, it might mainly remind the community that it once was a group of people who, when they arrived, were certain they would return to their former homes, or needed to express that wish, or felt a sense of affinity with those who shared such a wish. As part of the built environment that constellates what it feels like to be present in Arbat, the Kobani bakery, gesturing toward other places, other times, necessarily contributes to the ongoing fashioning of Arbat as a place and a site of ongoing place-making. If "We Will Return One Day" speaks more to the origin of the Arbat community than to any certain future for it residents, I gather that the people living in Arbat will decide for themselves if, and up to what point, they belong in Kurdistan.

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