Mariam Georgis

Traversing Disciplinary Boundaries, Globalizing Indigeneities

Visibilizing Assyrians in the Present

Abstract: The author's work spans the disciplinary boundaries of political science, Middle East studies, Indigenous studies, and their subfields. Broadly situated within critical theoretical bodies of knowledge, she focuses on an Indigenous nation in what is today known as Iraq. Her work is grounded within particular and fragmented locations that blur various lines and multiple layers of coloniality. This article offers a critical reflection of the invisibility in working on Indigeneity in southwest Asia within the structural imperatives of the academy. It takes up each of these themes by examining the fields of international relations and Iraqi studies to show how the story of Assyrians is invisible or unintelligible across these fields of political science and Middle East studies. Moreover, what the Assyrian story tells us about these disciplines and the multiplicity of coloniality (Patel 2019) is also rendered invisible. Despite the absence of Assyrians from Indigenous studies, the author sees this field as a site from which to potentially globalize Indigeneities. Specifically, she uses Indigenous feminism to construct a more nuanced framework into Assyrian histories, a framework that uses the lens of colonialism, land theft, erasure, and genocide to reframe the Assyrian experience as a remnant of the colonial global order.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Introduction

While Middle Eastern studies (MES) has yet to contend with Indigeneity on a broad basis,[1] now, more than ever, political science and its subfields are inviting scholars to critically reflect on the ways in which our methods, canons, and assumptions contribute to the invisibilization, distortion, and

MERIDIANS · feminism, race, transnationalism 23:1 April 2024
DOI: 10.1215/15366936-10926936 © 2024 Smith College

narrow analysis of Indigenous politics and peoples. This concern for inserting or including Indigeneity, Indigenous analysis, and Indigenous peoples, however, materializes within the parameters, and in turn, constraints, of the discipline, which establish the conditions under which this insertion and inclusion takes place. More problematically, any analysis which does not fit neatly into an already existing or preestablished understanding of Indigeneity or peoples in the discipline becomes unintelligible, illegible, and invisible. This article brings Assyrians into conversation with Indigenous studies, Iraqi studies, international relations (IR) and other critical scholarship of global colonialism, decolonization, and race. In doing so, I am writing to challenge the ways in which Assyrians are made invisible in academic scholarship on Indigeneities, colonialism, decolonization, and solidarity across decolonial struggles. Even worse, when they are taken up, they are often framed in problematic, ahistorical, and distorted ways. I offer a critical reflection of international relations and Iraqi studies to show how the story of Assyrians is invisible or unknowable across these subfields of political science and Middle East studies. Moreover, what the Assyrian story tells us about these disciplines and the multiplicity of coloniality (Patel 2019) is also rendered invisible. This invisibility is the underlying foundation for myths perpetuated by states and scholars of the region on the extinction of the Assyrian people, leaving their territory ripe for the creation of states such as Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and more recently, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Despite their absence from Indigenous studies, I see this field as a site from which to potentially globalize Indigeneities. I use Indigenous feminism to construct a more nuanced framework into Assyrian histories, a framework that uses the lens of colonialism, land theft, erasure, and genocide to reframe the Assyrian experience as a remnant of the colonial global order. In so doing, I argue the Assyrian story *is* a global Indigenous issue rather than a matter of domestic contentious politics. First, I situate myself as Assyrian, as part of the diaspora, and as a scholar of IR who has found this discipline lacking and distorting for my work, which brings an Indigenous feminist lens to the study of the "international" and southwest Asia (Middle East).[2] Second, I discuss the failures of the discipline of IR, which itself is implicated as a legitimator of the Westphalian state, the existing international order, and the colonial legacies that also produce Assyrian erasures, genocides, and displacements. Third, animated by the feminist principle of "the personal is political," I critique Iraqi studies and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

show the commonalities Assyrians share with other Indigenous peoples: invasion, dispossession, displacement, domination, marginalization, ongoing resistance, and the context of the invaders' mythmaking, which passes as political and cultural truth of the states founded on Assyrian territory. Finally, this article uses an Indigenous feminist lens to recount Assyrian histories as told by Assyrians to critique the disciplines of IR and Middle East studies.

Traversing Disciplinary Boundaries: Being Assyrian in the Academy

Spanning the disciplinary boundaries of political science, Middle East studies, Indigenous studies, and their subfields, I focus on a transnational Indigenous nation within the present-day political borders of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. My work is grounded within particular and fragmented locations that blur various lines and multiple layers of coloniality. As my lived experiences are situated along multiple locations, histories, and languages, I reflect on the ways in which my work has been and continues to be shaped by my location in both marginal and hegemonic structures and spaces. I am an Indigenous woman from southwest Asia colonized by multiple waves of Arab and Muslim conquests long before British, Western Catholic, and Protestant missionaries, and later, American colonial violence displaced me from my homeland—rendering me a refugee, and then eventually, a settler on the stolen lands of Indigenous peoples *here*, where I become inadvertently complicit in settler colonialism in Canada. Within settler colonial Canada and its discourses of multiculturalism, I am also interpreted as a woman of color for the first time in my life—as Brown, which has become synonymous with terrorist and/or Muslim during the post-9/11 era and the height of anti-Muslim racism when an Iraqi or a Brown body can be nothing else.

Writing about the ongoing colonization and occupation of the Assyrian homeland in the making of modern states, including the ongoing project for Kurdish self-determination and statehood, I start by acknowledging my location on ancestral and unceded traditional Coast Salish Lands, including the Tsleil-Waututh (səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ), Kwikwetlem (kʷikʷəƛ̓əm), Squamish (Sḵwx̱wú7mesh), and Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm) Nations. It is important for me to also draw attention to the history of my forced displacement from my traditional homeland through imperial and colonial wars and ongoing occupation of my village in what is today known as the Kurdistan Region of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Iraq, as the reason my family and I are presently on these lands.[3] In their thoughtful and careful answer to the question, "What can 'settler of colour' teach us?" Shaista Patel and Nisha Nath powerfully assert that "thinking about the place of settlers of colour in white settler colonialisms also necessitates firmly holding onto multiple colonialisms that bring racialized people to other occupied territories" (Patel and Nath 2022: 146). They remind us that "decolonization *here* will not and cannot happen without shaking the roots of imperialism, war, and ongoing invasions by white settler states that also function as aggressors of empire" (Patel and Nath 2022: 146; emphasis added). Drawing on this important contribution to the lineage of Black scholars and scholars of color who have carefully sought to trace their histories and contexts to understand their positionalities in white settler colonial states and contexts, I am thinking about my own origins, interconnections of racial capitalism and invasion, and multiple forms of dispossession and dis/relocations to white settler colonial Canada. It is my intention in writing about the invisibility of Assyrians in academic scholarship to bring the Assyrian struggle in conversation and in solidarity with decolonial struggles and other intertwined liberation struggles across the globe. I am interested in using Indigenous feminist theoretical and methodological orientations to explore the interconnectedness of coloniality across time, place, and space. Despite important differences in history, context, even worldviews, Assyrians have something to contribute to our understanding of colonialisms and Indigeneities. Assyrian Indigeneity reveals a parallel connection to land and land-based politics, challenging the fundamental legitimacy of the global nation-state structure. They also share a connected lived experience of colonization in its different forms by different powers, which has resulted in their struggle against dispossession and erasure.

My earliest memory of my country of origin involves the sounds of war. But my earliest collective memory is that of a land lost, a people scattered, a nation divided by artificial borders and the politics therein but also of survival, resistance, and a refusal to be erased. As a scholar of IR, I cannot find myself in the story of the "global." Moreover, when IR does turn its attention to events or issues that relate to me, I find that it is not *me* doing the talking. Critical theories and specifically, scholarship within critical postcolonial, decolonial feminist approaches and writers from the Global South make the story of IR more relevant, yet I am still absent. Crossing disciplinary boundaries into Indigenous studies shows me that

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

interconnected experiences exist, but even this field does not mention Assyrians or the experiences of expulsion in the making of the modern colonial states of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran and the ongoing self-labeled postcolonial project of Kurdish statehood. The Assyrian experience is seldom recognized as contemporary or Indigenous, and Indigenous studies, which is becoming more comparative, has yet to take up the Assyrian experience. This might be because Indigenous studies is place-based and scholars within this field are writing from their specific experiences of colonization and Indigeneity. As such, it is important to contribute to Indigenous studies by bringing in the Assyrian story and experiences of colonization and displacement in the context of southwest Asia to build these interconnections and globalize colonialisms and Indigeneities.

The field that seemingly has a greater likelihood of taking up the Assyrian experience is the one that has arguably the most vested interest in Assyrians' erasure. Scholars in this field continue to produce an archive of knowledge that is underpinned by our very absence. The "Near East," "Middle East," "Ancient Near East," "Oriental studies," and other such departments are in almost every university across the world, especially in the Global North in institutions that have studied the Other since contact. Colonial and Orientalist by their very nature, what is remarkable about these departments is the complete absence of Assyrians as a contemporary nation Indigenous to this region in the modern context. Specifically, the Middle East is the study of the "Arab World," the "Muslim World," and sometimes, "minorities," even by critical scholars of the region. Assyrian historian Sargon Donabed writes, "In Middle East Studies, scholars simply reproduce the metanarrative in a different light, which marginalizes Indigenous and minority groups to a citation in history" (Donabed 2015: 11). When Assyrians are mentioned, they are misrepresented because they are inserted as an ethnic and/or religious minority or as "Christian Arabs." Consider, for example, the Middle East Studies Association Conference in the United States with its notable erasure of Indigeneity in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran; absence of any mention of Assyrians in panels on any of these states; and number of panels on "ancient" Assyria where Assyrians are relics of the ancient past instead of contemporary political actors. This reality is formative to my understanding that writing Assyrians into the Western academy needs to be done within MES and Iraqi studies as well, within fields populated by scholars who come from the same place I do, and still discount Assyrians.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

The states in the region known colonially as the Middle East are carved out of "ancient empires" by colonial powers. The Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War ended its rule over the region, a territory long coveted by colonial powers and presently known as the Middle East in reference to its distance from Europe. The Franco-British division of this region due to the Allied victory was formalized by two Foreign Office and Quai d'Orsay officials: Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot in the now famous Sykes-Picot Agreement (Ouahes 2018: 13). Iraq and Syria were both created in this fashion under British and French Mandates while the Republic of Turkey was established by the Treaty of Lausanne as the successor to the Ottoman Empire in 1923. Having unified as an independent state in 1501 under the Safavid Dynasty, Iran was ruled without interruption until the Iranian Revolution when Iran became the Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979. This history is important and marks the "beginning" of the modern Middle East, which usually focuses on Arab nationalism; inter- and intracommunal conflict; authoritarianism; development; politics of the Islamic world, including sectarianism and militant Islam; and the question of Palestine/Israel. The fact that these concepts and ideas about the Middle East are themselves problematic, colonial, and Oriental has been taken up by many important scholars (Said 2014; Mahdavi and Knight 2012; Achcar 2013) and will not be rehearsed here as I am specifically concerned with the absence of Assyrians. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in studying "minority" groups, although the study of minorities has always been part of MES (White 2012; Zabad 2017; Rowe 2018). But the story of Assyrians in *Beth-Nahrain* begins much earlier. This is one of the reasons why Assyrians are usually seen—if they are seen at all—as relics of the ancient past. For political reasons, Assyrians are sometimes seen as disconnected from ancient Assyrians; today, inside Iraq (and elsewhere in southwest Asia) and in Western media and scholarship, Assyrians are referred to as a "Christian minority." The Assyrian identity is so politicized when it is used that I am frequently asked to explain who I am talking about or asked to *prove* Assyrians are descendants of ancient Assyrians in my work, which is both anti-Indigenous and political. The four modern states in question have been built through Arab, Turkish, Iranian, and Kurdish nationalisms on Assyrian land. These nationalisms and states are not the same, even though they are interrelated as they have been formed within one region. The specific historical formations and processes in each of these modern states have resulted in differing yet interconnected

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Assyrian experiences inside each state. However, these states share two commonalities: first, their attempted erasure of Assyrian Indigeneity and second, assimilatory state mechanisms and policies to subsume the Assyrian nation within the larger state as minorities, even if these policies have taken different forms in each state. More importantly, acknowledging or recognizing the existence of Assyrians as a priori to these modern political entities with rightful claims to this land and its resources unravels the ongoing project of the making of these states, especially of the more recent project of a larger Kurdistan in/on these states.

While I find it problematic to respond to questions about the legitimacy of the Assyrian identity, for the sake of increasing awareness of the Assyrian nation through my work, I am using *Assyrian* here to refer to those who self-identify as Assyrian today[4] and who have always and continue to inhabit *Beth-Nahrain* ("the land between two rivers," often referred to as Mesopotamia by Western scholars).[5] *Mesopotamia* refers to southern and southeastern present-day Turkey; northwestern present-day Iran; northern present-day Iraq, which is presently established as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); and northeastern present-day Syria, which is presently considered the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (known as *Rojova* in Kurdish). Assyrians speak Assyrian, sometimes referred to as a modern form of Neo-Mesopotamian Aramaic (commonly known as Neo-Aramaic and Neo-Syriac in scholarly work) with a heavy Akkadian influence, and also use classical Syriac as an ecclesiastical tongue (Donabed 2015: 3). Assyrian historian Alda Benjamen (2019) tells us the Akkadian and Sumerian influences in their language are indicative of their long presence in Mesopotamia or modern-day Iraq and neighboring countries. Those Assyrians who speak a derivative of this language today self-identify as "*Sūrōyō/Sūrāyā* derived directly from the Neo-Assyrian word Assūrāyu" (Donabed 2018: 118). The English word *Assyrian* is used to refer to this nation today in and to the English-speaking world.

Indigeneity is most often studied within settler colonial contexts where the settler is white and geographically bound to the Americas, Oceania, Scandinavia, the Arctic, and Russia. When studies of settler colonialism travel across continents, it is often (and more recently) associated with Palestine and Kashmir. Perhaps part of the reason for the absence of Assyrians might be that Assyrians whose scholarship focuses on Assyrians have only recently entered Western academia and/or are largely unknown to the English-speaking world. Benjamen (2022: 16) tells us the "absence of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Assyrians from scholarly discussion reflects not only their omission from national archives and libraries, but also a lack of language training among scholars." She also importantly reminds us that much of the Assyrian archives and cultural heritage have been destroyed, relocated, looted, or closed in certain nation-states (Benjamen 2022: 16). I add that the four states which make up the Assyrian homeland have been able to portray themselves as Arab, Turkish, and Iranian to the rest of the world. This is a credit to their nation-building projects both politically and academically, at home and abroad, in building these "nations" through the attempted erasure of the Indigenous peoples on whose lands those states are built. Using an Indigenous feminist lens, the following sections analyze the absence of Assyrians in the fields of IR and Iraqi studies.

International Relations: The "Domestic" *Is* Global

International relations as a discipline is concerned with solutions to the problem of war and violence in the international system. International politics in IR are predicated on the taken-for-granted colonial, Westphalian arrangement. This means that the state is the central actor and the main unit of analysis of conventional IR. Almost every undergraduate syllabus in the discipline is introduced to the "theories of IR" in a chronological order beginning with realism, liberalism, the "neo" schools of realism and liberalism, and then the critical theories of constructivism, Marxism, feminism (usually every type of feminism is covered in this week if feminism is allotted a week), and postcolonialism. Depending on the institution and on the professor, often the "critical" theories are lumped together in one week at the undergraduate level and only separated at the graduate levels. The politics inherent in the decisions around curriculum are interrelated to the reasons this process is wholly insufficient as it predisposes scholars to a colonial way of understanding, analyzing, and being in the world. These theories are then applied to concepts and conflicts such as terrorism, international institutions, war on terror, humanitarian intervention—concepts that are themselves mired in the politics inherent in the decisions related to curriculum and what becomes worthy of study in IR. Conventional IR is underpinned by many silences, absences, erasures, and distortions.

Postcolonial IR does the critical work of analyzing colonialism; empire; theoretical and methodological Eurocentrism; global inequality, exclusion and violence; and colonial legacies underpinning global structures and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

politics. One notable and seeming absence is Indigeneity. What I mean is that the discipline of Indigenous studies and insights made by Indigenous scholars on the condition of ongoing coloniality in a "postcolonial" world, the lived experiences of settler colonialism, and enduring Indigeneity are not present in the core of the IR discipline and sometimes not in the critical approaches such as postcolonialism. This might be because postcolonial scholars are writing and thinking about international politics from their locations as formerly colonized, even if colonial legacies that shape their lived experiences and their politics continue in the present day. It might also be because many Indigenous scholars are not in the field of IR; but this too is telling of the discipline's narrow and problematic focus on the "international" system and the taken-for-granted idea of the state. Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) remarks how notable it is that postcolonial theory and American Indian studies rarely have been in conversation given that they formed within the academy almost simultaneously and share a concern with the ramifications of colonial legacies (Byrd 2011: xxxii). What this means for the study of global politics, then, is the erasure of so much ongoing violence, especially in the form of land dispossession and displacement in the making of modern territorial states. It also means that everyday people and communities are always the ones who bear the brunt of state-centric, colonial, and violent policies across the globe.

It is usually easy to forget because of how measurably colonial and Anglo/Eurocentric IR scholarship is, but there exists a tradition of the critical study of race and racisms in IR that dates to the field's inception in the late nineteenth century (Shilliam 2020: 2). Robbie Shilliam (2020: 2) reminds us that there are also many scholars who made significant contributions to the study of imperialism and the postcolonial condition in IR during the 1990s and 2000s.[6] While Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran are not the specific focus of analysis in this literature, their position in the global racial hierarchy can be theorized using this lens. My work on Iraq is greatly indebted to this lineage of scholarship on race in IR, especially in relation to examining imperial powers' infliction of violence on the state of Iraq and more importantly, Iraqis. It is this profound respect and gratitude that compels me to challenge the categorization of Iraq in critical literature as a *postcolonial* state, referring to its independence from the British Mandate in 1932. The same can be said of Syria, which gained its independence in 1943. However, these states were constructed on Assyrian land, a fact that is strikingly absent from analyses of both states, even by critical scholars.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Iran is not studied as a postcolonial state because it was not formally colonized and is itself the remnant of the ancient Persian Empire whose own borders have been shaped and reshaped by various wars across the centuries. Nevertheless, its racialization as a Muslim state in southwest Asia within the global racial hierarchy is the major lens through which it is studied by critical IR today. Similarly, Turkey was not formally colonized and is also the relic of the Ottoman Empire but developed institutions like other postcolonial states in the region. However, Turkey straddles the line geographically (and culturally in certain respects) between southwest Asia and Europe, which has been a focal point in the way it is analyzed, especially in terms of its position in the global racial hierarchy. What I mean to say here is that while these states are racialized and are studied as such by critical IR, the taken-for-granted assumption of these states as legitimate and the absence of Indigeneity are what I am calling in question. When the legitimacy of these states *is* called into question or challenged by critical IR, it is usually with relation to the Kurdish struggle for statehood. The Kurdish struggle is also seen as postcolonial, liberatory, and even democratic and is often couched in these frameworks, with more recent analyses drawing from scholarship on Indigeneity.

Important critical scholars have done the work of revealing IR's colonial roots and the way in which Indigeneity has shaped and underpinned much of the discipline, despite Indigenous peoples' seeming absence from the story (Shaw 2002; Beier 2005; Nayak and Selbin 2013). Yet, Indigeneity and Indigenous politics remain on the margins of the discipline, gaining relevance only more recently. It is at this juncture in IR where I identify an opening for my research on Assyrians. But I find myself having to undo some of the work that has been done on Iraq, which has been the focus of my research so far; specifically, in terms of its postcoloniality, its "Arab" character, and its geographic location on Assyrian land. Similarly, I must complicate this narrative of Kurdish struggle for self-determination that critical IR seems to not only leave unquestioned, but support. Given the centrality of the state and, consequently, sovereignty to IR, nations within multination states in conflict often vie for independence because they view statehood as the answer to their political, economic, and social marginalization. In this context, the Kurdish desire for a state is understandable, even valid. But redressing the oppression Kurds have suffered and continue to suffer in the region must not be at the expense of building a state on occupied Assyrian land, resulting in Assyrians' continued expulsion and subjugation.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Despite IR's insistence that "territorial disputes" within states are not within the purview of the field, I am also situating Assyrians and their assertions of Indigeneity and nationhood in Iraq as an IR problem, and specifically as a problem of global colonial modernity and international state-building. Drawing on an understanding of history as a "selective, collective construction of significant events that form a unifying mythology" (Green 1995: 86) and its role in constructing the nation, I am making a link between the nation-building process and the removal of Indigenous inhabitants. This is not a case of intercommunal conflict where Assyrians and Kurds are competing within a state as is often depicted. But once a narrative is adopted, it is very difficult to unlearn and undo. The prevalence of this narrative is the reason I am often confronted with questions centering Kurdish futurity in the region when presenting my work on Assyrians such as, How, then, should Kurdish oppression be redressed? I am often accused of suggesting Kurds "do not deserve independence" and have to justify my work and make clear that Kurdish oppression and struggle for a state are valid but that they have manifested in colonial and violent ways. Centering Assyrian Indigeneity and nationhood is problematically understood as necessitating and/or denying the suffering of another people within what I argue is a colonial zero-sum understanding of self-determination as statehood. When confronted with these questions, I must make clear that while I agree Kurds have a right to self-determination, Kurdish self-determination must not come at the expense of Assyrian nationhood and sovereignty and result in the further dispossession of Assyrians from their native land to build a *Kurdistan*. Finally, I am always confronted with the need to distinguish between the governing elites of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Kurdish *people* to ensure my critique of the KRI is nuanced and not anti-Kurdish. But this too obscures the complicity of many Kurdish settlers in the KRI who explicitly or implicitly perpetuate and uphold Kurdish ethnonationalist supremacy, which is the foundational logic of the KRI and the ongoing illegal settlement of Assyrian land.

Iraq as a Site of Indigeneity: Invisibilizing Assyrians

Every department that studies southwest Asia includes the study of Iraq. One of the largest Iraqi studies archives is housed at the British Museum and mainly includes colonial documents, which have been significant in shaping scholarship on Iraq. Non-Iraqis have been studying Iraq, an oil-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

rich, geostrategically important state, since its inception—even before that, if you count the European missionaries and their logs and descriptions of this region. Iraqis who study Iraq predominantly publish in Arabic if they are in Iraq and write mostly from an "Arab" perspective; or, if they publish in English, they are usually Iraqis who live in the diaspora. In this way, much of Middle East studies and Iraqi studies problematically focus on major power blocs and Iraq's colonial history with Western powers with little to no attention to Indigeneity. The Anglo-American invasion in 2003, the ensuing occupation, and decades of "democratic nation-building" catapulted Iraq to international and scholarly attention (again), including a debate on its possible dissolution between the three "major" power blocs: Shiʿa and Sunni Arabs and Kurds. This debate and focus on the three major power blocs is not an accident: it reflects MES and Iraqi studies and how they have understood and continue to understand Iraq. The absence of Indigenous groups such as Assyrians in these problematic, yet taken-for-granted, analyses perpetuates and reinforces the ahistorical and colonial narrative of Iraq as an *Arab* state with a *Kurdish* "problem."

Despite notable work on "minorities" (Petrosian 2006; Taneja 2007; Youash 2008; Isakhan 2012), an analysis of Indigeneity, specifically, remains invisible in the Iraqi context. The continuation of the Assyrian identity from ancient to contemporary times, and the way in which coloniality has functioned across multiple frontiers, spaces, temporalities, and geographies, are markedly absent. The discounting of Iraq as a site of Indigeneity means that when Assyrians are included in the literature, they are constructed as a marginalized religious minority rather than as an Indigenous nation resisting ongoing dispossession from their homeland in the makings of various empires and states.[7] I argue that it is important to unpack the term *religious minority*, even if briefly, because these are strategic and politically motivated distortions of the Assyrian identity. I begin with the first portion of the label: reducing Assyrians to their religion is a colonial mechanism with which to deny Assyrians' ancient and ongoing attachment to their specific land in the making of Iraq and, more recently, the KRI. Sargon Donabed (2015) cites the role of Western Christian missionaries in triggering and instigating the fragmentation of the Assyrian identity and its connectedness to place. This is mainly because "almost all nineteenth-century information on the Assyrians that is studied or reproduced is based on sources by Western travelogues" (Donabed 2015: 42). It also allows for the further distortion of the Assyrian identity through

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

a colonial divide-and-conquer strategy, which results in their fragmentation across sects, diluting their resistance and opposition to the state.

There are "Christians" in each state that sits on the Assyrian homeland; I argue that this label facilitates their absorption into the larger society as Arab or Kurd or Turk or Iranian. At the same time, in the context of Iraq, this label also facilitates the myth that all Iraqis, regardless of religion, are inheritors of the ancient Assyrian empire, despite the historical record telling us Arabs invaded this land in 633 CE (Travis 2010). In this way, as the state assimilates Assyrians into the larger society, it appropriates their history and culture to make the foundational myth that Iraq is "ancient."[8] It is a form of violent erasure when Assyrians are stripped of their ethnic identity and reduced to a religious group. Here I am drawing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) and her argument that knowledge is central to the colonial project (Smith 2016). Smith's work on the complex ways that colonialism has been enacted through knowledge production underpins my argument that the erasure of the Assyrian identity from Iraqi studies is a form of epistemic violence with real material ramifications on the everyday lives of Assyrians in Iraq. In short, discursively erasing Assyrians allows for their "political unimagining" (Donabed 2015). Policy and practice are intertwined with theory and scholarship; knowledge enacts colonial policy wherein Assyrians are not considered because Iraq is built on their erasure and exclusion. In other words, imagining Iraq as an Arab state with a Kurdish problem gives rise to "solutions" to this perceived problem that undoubtedly exclude Assyrians because they do not exist. What *do* exist are "Christian" Arabs and Kurds (and Turks and Iranians), who can fit neatly into these states without compromising their Arab or Kurdish (or Turkish or Iranian) character, even as their insertion manifests in unequal citizenship. This logic underpins much of Arabization (Benjamen 2022; Donabed 2021; Georgis 2017), Kurdification (Hanna and Barber 2017; Donabed 2015; Petrosian 2006), and Turkification (Atto 2011), which are assimilatory (state or otherwise) practices and policies that Assyrians experience in these respective states presently, not only historically in the making of these states. The assimilation of Assyrians into larger societies and the expansion of these states on Assyrian territory are part of a continual process of reaffirming and reproducing these states. Indigenous scholars have discussed at length the dispossession of Indigenous communities and the perpetual need for land in the making of settler colonial states (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Green 2019). The connection with land, the dispossession

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

of land, and the cultural and political project of recovering land as a means of recovering both identity and self-determination are shared among Indigenous peoples (Kuokkanen 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012), including Assyrians.

The second part of the label is the designation of Assyrians as a "minority," which is problematic for interconnected reasons that together serve to facilitate the political and cultural erasure of Assyrians as Indigenous. *Minority* as a mechanism of the state is designed to steer and define how Assyrians navigate their political existence and, subsequently, the strategies they adopt in their interactions with the state. For example, labeling them as a minority results in their demands for religious freedom and rights from the state because those are the parameters set up by the Iraqi state and the KRI to define them and their strategies of survival. This also impacts the strategies adopted by diaspora Assyrians in their activism, meaning in their attempts to be legible, their demands for Assyrian rights are couched in minority rights discourse because that is what the United States, Canada, Australia, and European states call Assyrians. It is worth noting here that Indigenous peoples in Canada have resisted the state's attempts to include them as minorities and as part of the multicultural project. The politics of recognition and rights as colonial, and their role in perpetuating colonialism, have been well theorized by Indigenous scholars (Coulthard 2014). *Minority* also obfuscates the processes involved in rendering Assyrians a minority in their homeland. Alda Benjamen (2018) uses the concept of *minoritization* in her study of Assyrians in Iraq to describe a process leading to the creation of minority groups. Rather than labeling Assyrians as minorities within Iraq, which erases the violent processes by which this nation came to be a minority, minoritization for Benjamen "signifies historical and contemporary practices of discrimination that marginalize communities and relegate them to an inferior status within the modern hierarchy of citizenship" (Benjamen 2018: 10–11). The framework of minoritization is essential as it describes the *processes* through which Assyrians became a minority in their homeland. It is not and should not be used as a sociopolitical label, category, or identity for Assyrians. That is, Assyrians are not a minority or a minoritized community; they are a nation that has undergone a process of minoritization specifically because they are Indigenous and modern nationalist state-building has historically and continuously necessitated their removal and erasure as Assyrians. Here I point first to the historical and ongoing forcible removal of Assyrians from

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

their traditional homeland, and second to the political and cultural erasure of Assyrians as Indigenous or descendants of ancient Assyrians through assimilation policies and appropriation of Assyrian history to make modern nation-states within the global colonial order.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the minority label for Assyrians is the fact that Assyrian Indigeneity transcends their numerical status in each state. It is significant to note that most Indigenous populations are numerical minorities in the states built on their lands specifically as a result of the processes of colonization. Moreover, regardless of their number today, Assyrian sovereignty on their Native homeland and self-determination are Indigenous rights, internationally enshrined, transcending the borders of nation-states. Specifically, self-determination and sovereignty are Indigenous rights protected by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Recognizing the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, UNDRIP "speaks powerfully to the importance of land and control of land" (Green 2017: 183). Putting aside the inherent coloniality of the human rights regime, at their core, self-determination and sovereignty rights challenge the supremacy of occupying states and their assertion of sovereignty over Indigenous territories. This becomes an important assertion especially when disrupting the state's and, in turn, the encompassing nation's moral authority to exercise sovereign rule over this land, which is stolen. Rather than appealing to the problematic notion of human rights, an Indigenous feminist lens problematizes the very idea of nation-states constructed on the theft of land, dispossession, and attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous Studies: Expanding Geographical and Temporal Boundaries

Let me say at the outset that my intention here is not to problematize Indigenous studies but to bring Assyrian Indigeneity in conversation with this body of knowledge. Like the scholarship on Indigeneity in Palestine, Kashmir, and elsewhere in Asia, Assyrian Indigeneity expands the geographical boundaries of Indigenous studies to look at the processes through which Indigenous peoples in the Global South have experienced interrelated forms of colonialism, including dispossession, conquest, and the settlement of their land, contributing to furthering our understanding of the globality and "multiplicity of coloniality" (Patel 2019: 4). For the most part, Asia is not included as part of Indigenous studies with the recent exceptions of Palestine and Kashmir. I am specifically referring to the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

academic discipline of Indigenous studies here. I recognize and acknowledge that Indigenous nations in Asia are important contemporary political actors within states, on the continent of Asia, and globally. As previously mentioned, Indigeneity is most often studied within settler colonial contexts and geographically bound to the Americas, Oceania, Scandinavia, the Arctic, and Russia. I understand and recognize that Indigenous scholars in these locations were and are writing and thinking about the meaning of Indigeneity and colonialism from their particular experiences with white settlers in these specific geographical contexts, especially noting that Indigenous theorization is place-based. But what about when settlers are not white but uphold or emulate their occupation and settlement of Indigenous lands on the model of white supremacy, in the form of ethnonationalist supremacy, to build their states? What about when these settlers are *given* Indigenous land to make states that serve the interests of white colonial powers? These are the kinds of questions and interventions Assyrian Indigeneity brings to Indigenous studies, globalizing and pluralizing our conceptualizations of Indigeneities and colonialisms.

Joyce Green (Ktunaxa, English, Cree-Scottish Métis) writes, “Indigenous peoples generally share similar experiences of colonialism, despite different expressions of it among settler states and despite specific Indigenous cultures” (Green 2009: 40). She adds that the terms that make “Aboriginality relevant arise only in conditions of colonial occupation, in relation to those who colonize, settle, and appropriate the territory of Indigenous nations” (Green 2009: 40). Similarly, Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) provide a provisional definition of Indigeneity, stating,

> Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped, and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations, and tribes we call *Indigenous peoples* are just that: Indigenous to lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe *and other centres of empire*. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (Alfred and Corntassel 2005: 597; emphasis added)

Green, Alfred, and Corntassel are placing emphasis on the experience of coloniality as it has meant the physical removal of Indigenous peoples from

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

lands they traditionally inhabit, in relation to that of the settler or occupying people (power). Alfred and Corntassel are also acknowledging that there are multiple centers of empire that have constructed, shaped, and politicized Indigenous identity. Finally, all these scholars emphasize that Indigeneity is place- or land-based and oppositional to the settler/occupier. I see these definitions as opportunities, opening the space for Assyrian Indigeneity, which helps explicate the ways in which colonial modernity has operated across the globe (Georgis and Lugosi-Schimpf 2021). Assyrians, the majority of whom do not speak English (unless they are in the diaspora) and who, since 609 BCE, have been living under the rule of others like the Persians, the Ottomans, the Arabs, and more recently the Kurds, have maintained their presence on their homeland and their identity despite various campaigns to eradicate them (Georgis and Lugosi-Schimpf 2021). While Assyrians in the homeland and the diaspora do not use terms like *Aboriginal*, they do understand themselves as being Assyrian in relation to those who have conquered, colonized, and settled their territories. They have a word they use to refer to themselves in the context of the modern states of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran: *Aslayeh*, which means "Native" or "root." So, they have always understood themselves to be the original inhabitants of this land that was stolen, even if their adoption of the English word *Indigenous* is new. They understand their relationship with the now Kurdish-governed north of Iraq as occupation and describe the extralegal mechanisms the Kurdistan Regional Government and its apparatuses employ to illegally usurp Assyrian land as *zabtanta d'aratha*.[9] This is especially notable in rural villages, which have seen the continual and unopposed encroachment on and theft of their lands (Hanna and Barber 2017).

In her examination of the role of Muslims in aspects of European racist and colonial epistemology in its encounters with the "New World," Muslim feminist scholar Shaista Patel (2019: 4) calls for a "commitment to a relational understanding of transnational workings of colonialism across the continents of Asia, North and South America, and Africa while holding onto the multiplicity of coloniality across these seemingly disparate and differently colonized spaces." Expanding the geographical boundaries of Indigenous studies to look at the processes through which Indigenous peoples in the Global South have experienced interrelated forms of colonialism, including dispossession, conquest, and settlement can reveal how colonial modernity has operated globally (Georgis and Lugosi-Schimpf 2021). This also means thinking about non-Western empires and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

conquerors; specifically, the various conquests of *Beth-Nahrain*, including Arab, Persian, and Turko-Kurdish invasions, and settlement of Assyrian territories (Travis 2010; Aboona 2008). These empires have not had the extensive global reach of Western powers and themselves have been conquered and subjected to Western colonialism and neocolonial processes. However, I contend that the hegemony of Western colonialism does not negate the non-Western conquest, colonization, and dispossession of Assyrians from their homeland. Rather, I am proposing that it is important to complicate these conceptualizations of colonialism and Indigeneities because it renders visible the intertwined colonial experiences of Indigenous groups in the Global South. Non-Western conquest of the Assyrian homeland by Arabs, Turks, Persians, and Kurds paved the way for Western colonialism as nation-states were created in the making of the Middle East, solidifying and entrenching Assyrian dispossession across modern borders. It also shows the extent to which the colonial global order has influenced and shaped the making and building of states in the Global South, even if these states were made by Western as well as non-Western powers.

Iraq is understood as a postcolonial state; most literature on Iraq tells us it was carved out of three Ottoman provinces by Western colonial powers, much like the rest of the region known today as the Middle East, through a series of agreements such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Treaty of Sèvres, and the Treaty of Lausanne. This story operates through and because of a critical omission: the myriad levels of ongoing coloniality at play in the state of Iraq (Georgis 2017), which I am using Indigenous feminism to untangle. The Iraqi state and, prior to that, the Ottoman provinces are taken as givens in the literature, despite their configuration on the land of Assyrians, who were divided across the artificial state borders of modern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran in the making of this region, turning them simultaneously into a transnational and a numerical minority in the newly created states. Put more vividly, European colonial powers divided Assyrian land, which had already been occupied by foreign entities, the Persians, Ottomans, and Kurds, and *gave* this land to Arabs, whose rule they found to be in their best interests. Under the tutelage of the British Mandate, the "modern" state of Iraq set out to build an Arab nation with institutions modeling Britain's. It is not surprising that the first act of the independent state of Iraq in 1933 was to massacre between three and six thousand Assyrians and raze over sixty Assyrian villages (Donabed 2015). This event marked the beginning of what Sargon Donabed (2015) has called the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

"political unimagining" of the Assyrian identity from the fabric of Iraqi society and politics. Similarly, the remnants of the land that was considered (taken for granted) as the Ottoman Empire were then made into modern-day Turkey. The well-documented genocide against the Assyrians (as well as Armenians and Greeks) emptied southeastern Turkey of its Indigenous inhabitants (Gaunt, Atto, and Barthoma 2017). The political reverberations of this genocide are important today; it is the process through which southeastern Turkey was settled demographically by Kurds, who were the Young Turks' coconspirators in the genocide. Assyrian survivors were assimilated as Kurdish and identify as such today (Atto 2011). Modern-day Turkey and the now-majority Kurds have been fighting over this land while Indigenous Assyrians are caught in the middle, their lands seized through the Turkish legal system, and their numbers dwindle even further.[10]

The invaluable work on Kashmir identifying India as a colonizing and occupying expansionary state (Osuri 2017; Ahmed 2020; Junaid 2020; Zia 2020) is generative in terms of thinking about non-white settlers and "postcolonial" states adopting colonial mechanisms (learned through their own colonization) to construct their nationalisms and build their states. My intention here is not to dismiss the calls to hold these states accountable for their violent practices and policies by the people on the ground. But we can speak of the interconnectedness of coloniality, where colonial mechanisms are specific, formed within their current political and social contexts, and racial (caste/sectarian) hierarchies, and where European colonial legacies play a role. Assyrian Indigeneity makes a geographical shift to southwest Asia, allowing for an analysis of the ways in which Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran, and the lands claimed by a greater Kurdistan in the region, operate in colonial ways despite "postcolonial" status. Specifically, it is important to map how these states, or quasi states in the case of the KRI, use similar mechanisms in their exercise of expansionary sovereignty, which recurrently comes at the cost of Assyrians' sovereignty on their territory. It is at this juncture where I see an opening to make space for and learn from Indigenous feminisms to look at the displacement and dispossession of the Assyrian population across and within borders due to violent expulsion via state- and nation-building practices. Specifically, I draw on the work of Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) in *Mark My Words* (2013) to remap the historical context of the colonial division of the Assyrian homeland across the modern borders of the Iraqi, Syrian,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Turkish, and Iranian states. The alternative spatialities that Goeman (2013: 6) examines in her work "imagine that many histories and ways of seeing and mapping the world can occur at the same time, and most importantly that our spatialities were and continue to be in process." Using this lens, I want to focus on the contemporary KRI and its drive for independence. It is important to complicate and disrupt the narrative of Kurdish self-determination from Arab rule by bringing in the question of Assyrian Indigenous claims to this land and their assertions of their political and cultural sovereignty within both Iraq and the KRI. This assertion is pivotal in this moment as the Kurdistan Regional Government's latest bid for statehood in the long Kurdish struggle for self-determination from Arab rule (i.e., the central government in Baghdad) has resulted in the ongoing dispossession, displacement, cultural appropriation, and social, political, and economic marginalization of Assyrians on their traditional homeland.

Despite this reality, there has been significant international attention and support for Kurdish independence in post-2003 Iraq. Decolonization requires an exploration of the expansionary and colonial projects of post-colonial states through their sovereign use of imperial and colonial techniques of power. In this case, Kurdish independence and sovereignty materialize at the expense of Assyrian sovereignty on their ancestral homeland. The KRI narrative tells the story of a Kurdish project to reclaim self-determination rights as part of a long historical struggle against Arabs (and Turks and Persians). The Kurdish Regional Government tells us that they are different than their Arab counterparts; that they celebrate ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, that they are democratic. Audra Simpson (Kahnawake Mohawk) argues that Canada requires the death of Indigenous women to secure its sovereignty, and this in turn requires us to rethink the ways we imagine nations, states, and governance (A. Simpson 2016: 1). She writes that underpinning these arguments is a central premise to the story Canada tells about itself: "In spite of the innocence of the story that Canada likes to tell about itself, that it is a place of immigrant and settler founding, that in this, it is a place that somehow escapes the ugliness of history, that it is a place that is not like the place below it, across that border," the evidence suggests that Canada is a "settler society whose multicultural, liberal and democratic structure and performance of governance seeks an ongoing 'settling' of this land" (A. Simpson 2016: 2). I argue that this premise can also underpin the arguments I am making about the KRI because it also tells a story about how it is a place that somehow

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

escapes the ugliness of history, that it is a place unlike the places that surround it, which have no respect for human rights or democracy. It is, after all, a place that wishes Assyrians a happy new year; but despite these performative gestures, the KRI is a project that seeks an ongoing settling of this land, which, Audra Simpson (2016: 2) reminds us, is "not innocent—it is dispossession." Simpson (2016: 3) also tells us the settler colonial state seeks to destroy what it is not; it does so with a death drive to eliminate, contain, hide, and in other ways "disappear" what fundamentally challenges its legitimacy: Indigenous political orders. Simpson tells us that Indigenous political orders exist prior to founding, to settling, and as such continue to point in their persistence and vigor to the failure of the settler project to eliminate them. While they are subjects of dispossession, of removal, their politics serve as alternative forms of legitimacy and alternative sovereignties to those of the settler state (A. Simpson 2016: 3). In every official capacity, Assyrians are referred to as "Christian," relegating them to a religious minority within larger societies bounded by the newly and colonially created "borders" of the KRI (and Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran). Assyrians are further divided along denominational lines. Simply put, their existence as Assyrian, a continuation of ancient Assyrians from this land, points to the failure of the Kurdish (and Arab, Turkish, and Iranian) projects to eliminate them in the formation of the KRI (and the states of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran). Even as they are removed and dispossessed, Assyrians' continued existence as a political entity serves as an alternative form of legitimacy and sovereignty to that of these states. This is the basis for settler anxieties and the drive for Kurdification, Arabization, and Turkification policies toward Assyrians in those states that make up the Assyrian traditional homeland. Alternatively, but with similar intentions, the Iranian state has "included" Assyrians—albeit divided them into Assyrians and Chaldeans (Assyrian Catholics)—in the governing structure of the state as a way to subsume them into a greater "Iranian" identity and deter them from making Indigenous claims.

Concluding Remarks

Ancient Assyrians have been and continue to be studied in every major university across the Global North, mostly by non-Assyrians. With very few exceptions (Parpola 2004), ancient Assyrians are studied in the past, as if they no longer exist. Assyrian historical artifacts can be found in every major museum in Europe and the United States, displayed as "ancient history" as if these Assyrians are all dead. This article is an exercise in tracing

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

the invisibility of Assyrians in contemporary politics through the examination of two academic disciplines—political science and Middle East studies—and their subfields, international relations and Iraqi studies. In this way, this article is also a critical reflection of the ways in which the Assyrian story is unknowable or unintelligible within these fields. Using an Indigenous feminist lens and calling for the globalization of Indigenous studies and conceptualizations of Indigeneities, it is my intention to bring Assyrians into conversation with these fields and with scholarship on colonialism, decolonization, and race. In doing so, I am challenging the ways in which Assyrians have been invisible in the academy and within solidarity struggles across the globe. Assyrians continue to inhabit locations of marginality such that their survival is at the forefront of their national activities, limiting their abilities as well as inclinations to engage in academic pursuits.[11] Despite their limited engagement in the academy, Assyrians have been historically and actively engaged nationally and internationally in the struggle for recognition and self-governance rights through policy work and advocacy (see Zaya 2019, 2020).

The existence of Assyrians as Indigenous presents a direct challenge to the Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian nation-states, and the project for an ethno-nationalist Kurdish state. In this work, I am also situating Assyrian struggles for their homeland as the missing, invisibilized, political actor in contemporary Iraq by extending the concept of Indigeneity to the southwest Asian context. I am using Indigeneity as a lens to make comparisons to Arab and Kurdish forms of colonial erasures, appropriation of Assyrian heritage, and occupation of Assyrian land in the north of present-day Iraq, which is the contemporary Kurdistan Region. In this way, by centering Assyrian sovereignty and nationhood, I challenge accounts of Iraq as a site of struggle between an Arab majority Orientally characterized by sectarian violence (Shia and Sunni) and a Kurdish "minority." Assyrian Indigeneity has political ramifications as Assyrian claims and sovereignty over their land, their resources, and their political futures unravel the state projects of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and more recently, the KRI. Despite its narrow geographical boundaries, I see the field of Indigenous studies, and especially Indigenous feminisms, as a pathway for potentially visibilizing Assyrian Indigeneity. Making Assyrians visible tells us something about these disciplines but also about the interconnectivity of colonialism globally, forging new pathways for global decolonization. Specifically, the Assyrian story can potentially serve as a site from which to Indigenize the fields of political science and Middle East studies and their subfields of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

international relations and Iraqi studies ontologically and epistemologically. It can also help us truly globalize and pluralize Indigeneities while maintaining local, cultural, and historical specificity.

Mariam Georgis is assistant professor of global Indigeneity in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. She is Assyrian, Indigenous to present-day Iraq and currently living on and sustained by the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the Tsleil-Waututh, Kwikwetlem, Squamish, and Musqueam Nations. Grounded in embodied decolonial feminist epistemologies, her scholarship is located at the nexus of global politics, critical Indigenous studies, and Middle East studies. Her research interests include issues of global security; intersecting structures of global colonialism(s), racial capitalism, and patriarchy; global Indigeneities and decolonization; and politics of southwest Asia.

Notes

I am immensely grateful to Joyce Green for her thoughtful and generative interventions to a first iteration of the article. Earlier versions of this article were also presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Meeting (2021) and at a Mamawipawin: Indigenous Governance and Community Based Research Space workshop (2022). I thank these audiences for their engagement with my work.

1 There have been works on Indigeneity in relation to Palestine (Salaita 2016, 2017; Sheehi and Sheehi 2020, 2021; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Otman, and Abdelnabi 2021). There have also been works referring to Assyrians as Indigenous in the modern context within scholarship on religious studies in the Middle East (Atto 2017); religion and diaspora studies (Hartney and Tower 2016); and cultural and intellectual property (Travis 2009). While important, these works remain on the margins of the discipline of Middle East studies (MES). Moreover, as a discipline, MES has not seriously engaged with the theoretical, epistemological, or methodological orientations of Indigenous studies.

2 Southwest Asia is a more accurate and anticolonial label for this region. Geographically, it refers to its location in the world and not merely its distance from Europe. Politically, it can encompass the heterogeneity of this region since *the Middle East* has become synonymous with Arab and/or Islam.

3 While I currently live on Coast Salish Lands, my family and I have spent the majority of our life in Canada on the traditional territories of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee. This confederacy territory stretches from western Quebec through southern central and parts of southwestern northern Ontario, central and southern Manitoba down to much of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and parts of Michigan. I would like to acknowledge my friend and colleague, Assistant Professor (UTSC, Political Science) Chad Cowie who is Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, for having many conversations with me about his peoples'

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

history. These conversations about the people whose lands have sustained my family and I, have given me historical and ongoing knowledges of this territory.

4 The confusion regarding the names used to refer to this nation can in part be attributed to different European missionaries, conquest, colonialism, and scholars who have studied this nation but are either not Assyrian or have not consulted Assyrians. Relatedly, like any other nation, there have been internal debates and divisions and varying responses by distinct segments of the community during different periods to these historical and ongoing experiences of colonialism, which has also further complicated the name issue. I recognize the fragmentation of the contemporary Assyrian identity along denominational lines, but I argue it is important to contextualize this fragmentation as an effect of historical and ongoing colonial modernity and the sectarianization of the region in general. For more on this, see Donabed 2012.

5 For more on historicizing the Assyrian identity and directly linking this modern Assyrian identity to ancient Assyria and *Beth Nahrain* (Mesopotamia), see Benjamen 2022; Donabed 2015, 2018; Aboona 2008; Travis 2010; Cetrez, Donabed, and Makko 2012.

6 Shilliam is referring to Persaud and Walker 2001, and before this Doty 1993; Krishna 1993; Henderson 1995; Grovogui 1996; Persaud 1997; Vitalis 2000.

7 I have made this argument about Iraqi Studies elsewhere in more detail. See Georgis 2017.

8 I have discussed the appropriation of Mesopotamian heritage in the making of modern Iraq in previous work. See Georgis 2017.

9 In Assyrian, the word is ܒܠܥܬܐ. This phrase and the process it refers to were substantiated by a conversation with Michael Youash, the former project director of the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project and Assyrian policy analyst; he has intimate and long-standing links to Assyrian policymakers on the ground.

10 For more on the impact on Assyrians of the conflict between the state of Turkey and the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), see Youhana, Hanna, and Ishaya 2021.

11 See Kassem and Jackson 2020 on cultural trauma and its impact on the Iraqi Assyrian experience of identity with respect to elitist pursuits like those of the academy.

Works Cited

Aboona, Hirmis. 2008. *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans: Intercommunal Relations on the Periphery of the Ottoman Empire*. New York: Cambria Press.

Achcar, Gilbert. 2013. *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ahmed, Binish. 2020. "Sites of Power Differentials in Kashmir: Self-Determination as Anti-colonial Resistance under Un-/polic/e/y-ed Genocidal Colonial Social Order." *Indigenous Policy Journal* 31, no. 3. http://www.indigenouspolicy.org/index.php/ipj/article/view/736/703.

Alfred, Taiaiake, and Jeff Corntassel. 2005. "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism." *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4: 597–614.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Atto, Naures. 2011. *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

Atto, Naures. 2017. "The Death Throes of Indigenous Christians in the Middle East: Assyrians Living under the Islamic State." In *Relocating World Christianity*, edited by Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood, 281–301. Leiden: Brill.

Beier, Marshall. 2005. *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Benjamen, Alda. 2018. "Minoritization and Pluralism in the Modern Middle East." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 4: 781–85.

Benjamen, Alda. 2019. "The Assyrians, between the State and the Opposition." Interview by Andrew Breiner. *Insights* (blog), Library of Congress, September 26. https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2019/09/the-assyrians-between-the-state-and-the-opposition/#:~:text=The%20role%20of%20Assyrians%20within,promised%20cultural%20and%20social%20rights.

Benjamen, Alda. 2022. *Assyrians in Modern Iraq: Negotiating Political and Cultural Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Byrd, Jodie. 2011. *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cetrez, Onver, Sargon Donabed, and Aryo Makko, eds. *The Assyrian Heritage: Threads of Continuity and Influence*. Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

Coulthard, Glen. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Donabed, Sargon. 2012. "Rethinking Nationalism and an Appellative Conundrum: Historiography and Politics in Iraq." *National Identities* 14, no. 4: 407–31.

Donabed, Sargon. 2015. *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Donabed, Sargon. 2018. "Persistent Perseverance: A Trajectory of Assyrian History in the Modern Age." In *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East*, edited by Paul S. Rowe, 115–31. New York: Routledge.

Doty, Roxanne Lynn. 1993. "The Bounds of 'Race' in International Relations." *Millennium* 22, no. 3: 443–61.

Gaunt, David, Naures Atto, and Soner O. Barthoma, eds. 2017. *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo; The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*. Vol. 26. New York: Berghahn Books.

Georgis, Mariam. 2017. "Nation and Identity Construction in Modern Iraq: (Re)inserting the Assyrians." In *Unsettling Colonial Modernity in Islamicate Contexts*, edited by Siavash Saffari, Roxana Akhbari, Kara Abdolmaleki, and Evelyn Hamdon, 67–87. Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Georgis, Mariam, and Nicole Lugosi-Schimpf. 2021. "Indigenising International Relations: Insights from Centring Indigeneity in Canada and Iraq." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 50, no. 1: 174–98.

Goeman, Mishuana. 2013. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Green, Joyce. 1995. "Towards a Détente with History: Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (Fall): 85–105.

Green, Joyce. 2009. "The Complexity of Indigenous Identity Formation and Politics in Canada: Self-Determination and Decolonization." *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies* 2, no. 2: 36–46.

Green, Joyce. 2017. "The Impossibility of Citizenship Liberation for Indigenous People." In *Citizenship in Transnational Perspective: Australia, Canada, and New Zealand*, edited by Jatinder Mann, 175–88. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Green, Joyce. 2019. "Enacting Reconciliation." In *Visions of the Heart: Issues Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada*, edited by Gina Starblanket, David Long, and Olive Patricia Dickason, 239–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grovogui, Siba. 1996. *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self Determination in International Law.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hanna, Reine, and Matthew Barber. 2017. "Erasing Assyrians: How the KRG Abuses Human Rights, Undermines Democracy, and Conquers Minority Homelands." Brussels: Assyrian Confederation of Europe. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/4ec518_18285c91d7924250aa1c52b0b4c7da9f.pdf.

Hartney, Christopher, and Daniel Tower, eds. 2016. *Religious Categories under the Construction of the Indigenous*. Leiden: Brill.

Henderson, Errol A. 1995. *Afrocentrism and World Politics: Towards a New Paradigm.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Isakhan, Benjamin. 2012. "The Assyrians." In *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy*, edited by Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell, 40–49. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Junaid, Mohamad. 2020. "Counter-maps of the Ordinary: Occupation, Subjectivity, and Walking under Curfew in Kashmir." *Identities* 27, no. 3: 302–20.

Kassem, Niveen, and Mark Jackson. 2020. "Cultural Trauma and Its Impact on the Iraqi Assyrian Experience of Identity." *Social Identities* 26, no. 3: 388–402.

Krishna, Sankaran. 1993. "The Importance of Being Ironic: A Postcolonial View on Critical International Relations Theory." *Alternatives: Global, Local Political* 18, no. 3: 385–417.

Kuokkanen, Rauna. 2019. *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance, and Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mahdavi, Mojtaba, and Andy Knight, eds. 2012. *Towards the Dignity of Difference? Neither "End of History" nor "Clash of Civilizations."* New York: Routledge.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nayak, Meghana, and Eric Selbin. 2013. *Decentering International Relations*. New York: Zed Books.

Osuri, Goldie. 2017. "Imperialism, Colonialism, and Sovereignty in the (Post)colony: India and Kashmir." *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 11: 2428–43.

Ouahes, Idir. 2018. *Syria and Lebanon under the French Mandate: Cultural Imperialism and the Workings of Empire*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Parpola, Simo. 2004. “National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-empire Times.” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 18, no. 2: 5–22.

Patel, Shaista. 2019. “The ‘Indian Queen’ of the Four Continents: Tracing the ‘Undifferentiated Indian’ through Europe’s encounters with Muslims, anti-Blackness, and Conquest of the ‘New World.’ ” *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 3: 414–36.

Patel, Shaista, and Nisha Nath. 2022. “What Can ‘Settler of Colour’ Teach Us? A Conversation of the Complexities of Decolonization in White Universities.” In *White Benevolence: Racism and Colonial Violence in the Helping Professions*, edited by Amanda Gebhard, Sheelah McLean, and Verna St. Denis, 146–62. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.

Persaud, Randolph. 1997. “Frantz Fanon, Race and World Order.” In *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, edited by S. Gill and J. G. Mittleman, 170–84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Persaud, Randolph, and R. B. J. Walker. 2001. “Apertura: Race in International Relations.” *Alternatives*, October.

Petrosian, Vahram. 2006. “Assyrians in Iraq.” *Iran and the Caucasus* 10, no. 1: 113–47.

Rowe, Paul S., ed. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East*. New York: Routledge.

Said, Edward. 2014. *Orientalism*. New York: Routledge.

Salaita, Steven. 2016. *Inter/nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Salaita, Steven. 2017. “American Indian Studies and Palestine Solidarity: The Importance of Impetuous Definitions.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 6, no. 1: 1–28.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera, Abeer Otman, and Rasmieyh Abdelnabi. 2021. “Secret Penetrabilities: Embodied Coloniality, Gendered Violence, and the Racialized Policing of Affects.” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 22, no. 4: 266–77.

Shaw, Karena. 2002. “Indigeneity and the International.” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31, no. 1: 55–81.

Sheehi, Stephen, and Lara Sheehi. 2020. “The Settlers’ Town Is a Strongly Built Town: Fanon in Palestine.” *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 17, no. 2: 183–92.

Sheehi, Stephen, and Lara Sheehi. 2021. *Psychoanalysis under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine*. New York: Routledge.

Shilliam, Robbie. 2020. “Race and Racism in International Relations: Retrieving a Scholarly Inheritance.” *International Politics Reviews* 8, no. 2: 152–95.

Simpson, Audra. 2016. “The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty.” *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4. muse.jhu.edu/article/633280.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2016. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Taneja, Preti. 2007. “Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq’s Minority Communities since 2003.” *Minority Rights Group International*. London: Minority Rights Group International.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024

Travis, Hannibal. 2009. "After Regime Change: United States Law and Policy Regarding Iraqi Refugees, 2003–2008." *Wayne Law Review* 55, no. 2: 1007–60.

Travis, Hannibal. 2010. *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1: 1–40.

Vitalis, Robert. 2000. "The Graceful and Generous Liberal Gesture: Making Racism Invisible in American International Relations." *Millennium* 29, no. 2: 331–56.

White, Benjamin Thomas. 2012. *Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Youash, Michael. 2008. "Iraq's Minority Crisis and U.S. National Security: Protecting Minority Rights in Iraq." *American University International Law Review* 24: 341–76.

Youhana, Rosemary, Reine Hanna, and Maryam Ishaya. 2021. "Caught in the Crossfire: Assyrians and the Turkey-PKK Conflict in Iraq." Assyrian Policy Institute.

Zabad, Ibrahim. 2017. *Middle Eastern Minorities: The Impact of the Arab Spring*. New York: Routledge.

Zaya, R. S. 2019. "What Ancient Stones Still Mean to the Assyrian People Today." *Hyperallergic*, November 1. https://hyperallergic.com/524967/what-ancient-stones-still-mean-to-the-assyrian-people-today/.

Zaya, R. S. 2020. "Iraq's Indigenous Peoples Can't Face Another Conflict." *Foreign Policy*, August 7. https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/07/iraq-assyrian-indigenous-peoples-another-conflict-nineveh-plains-iran-backed-militia/.

Zia, Ather. 2020. "The Haunting Specter of Hindu Ethnonationalist-Neocolonial Development in the Indian Occupied Kashmir." *Development* 63, no. 1: 60–66.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-pdf/23/1/182/2078188/182georgis.pdf by guest on 16 June 2024