The Suburbanization of The assyrian Refugees and Migrant Families and Its Implications on The assyrian Ethnic Identity

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ABSTRACT

THE SUBURBANIZATION OF THE ASSYRIAN REFUGEES AND MIGRANT FAMILIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE ASSYRIAN ETHNIC IDENTITY

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This thesis argues that living in Albany Park, Chicago, is a personal and unique experience for Assyrian refugees and migrant families despite mutual feelings of belonging that residents may experience while living in the neighborhood. Along with the social and political factors that impact one’s experience of mobility and integration, “agency” plays an instrumental role in deciding whether to remain connected to one’s community, potentially impacting one’s Assyrian identity and future generations. I utilize a qualitative research approach by interviewing Assyrian refugees and migrant families to shed light on the stories of the Assyrian community in Chicago. This research demonstrates the importance of Assyrian refugees and migrant families staying close to the Assyrian Church as an anchoring institution to preserve their culture and ethnic identity.
THE SUBURBANIZATION OF THE ASSYRIAN REFUGEES AND MIGRANT FAMILIES
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE ASSYRIAN ETHNIC IDENTITY

BY

SAIDOURI ZOMAYA
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Thesis Director:
Dr. Mark Schuller
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POSITIONALITY

I write this thesis following the footsteps of other feminist anthropologists¹ studying their own cultures by building on their effort to decolonize the field of anthropology. As an Assyrian immigrant born and raised in a tight-knit community in Syria, while I present the personal accounts of fellow Assyrians in this work objectively, I cannot convey their stories without bringing my voice to the discussion, particularly regarding the history, suffering, and trauma that my ancestors have endured for many generations. Being an Assyrian immigrant gives me a deep perspective on the Assyrian community. My participant observations, in a sense, are considered part of my everyday interactions with various Assyrian migrants living in Chicago and its suburbs throughout the years. I use first-person in my writing to include the readers in this work and bring them closer to the Assyrian people and our experiences. With that said, I hope this work brings awareness to the struggles, strengths, and endurance of my Assyrian community and ancestors, a community that still suffers ethnic persecution in the Middle East to this day.

¹ Davina Two Bears, Lila Abu-Lughod, Ruth Behar, Gina Athena Ulysse.
TERMS DEFINED

**Anchoring Institutions:** I utilize this term to refer to the Assyrian churches and community centers that early Assyrian migrants established in the various neighborhoods. These anchoring institutions play a significant role in supporting migrant families, often drawing community members to the areas where they exist.

**Gentrification:** “A fundamental concept of neighborhood transformation consisting of two necessary processes. The first is an inflow of affluent residents and investment (also referred to as capital) into a neighborhood. The second is the outflow of the low-income population from the same neighborhood” (Yeom and Mikelbank 2019).

**Gentrifiers:** Yeom and Mikelbank (2019) state that gentrification in neighborhoods benefits residents of “middle- and upper income and the developers and investors of the project.” Thus, I will be referring to the middle- and upper-class young professionals taking part in the gentrification process as gentrifiers in this thesis.

**Great Recession:** A period of economic decline due to the subprime mortgage crisis that began in 2007, marked by a drop in home value and increased foreclosure rates across the U.S (Demyanyk and Van Hemert 2011).

**Migrants:** UNHCR definition: “Someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status” (United Nations n.d.).

**Refugees:** UNHCR definition: “Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have
seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection” (United Nations n.d.).

The Assyrian Church: A term I used to reference all Assyrian churches in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs, such as the ones mentioned by participants during semi-structured interviews: St.Mary; Mar Gewargis, Mar Sergius, Mar Odisho, Mar Youkhanna, St.Andrews. It is common for Assyrians to attend different Assyrian churches depending on the occasion, distance, or convenience.
“When I meet another Assyrian...even if I only happened to see one once a week, I know at least there are Assyrians here; I know they got my back.”¹ As I recall my conversations with fellow Assyrians during my research recruitment, I cannot express how much this quote stood out to me. When I made the call to meet with one of the Assyrian community members regarding this thesis, I did not know that he would also bring along another knowledgeable member of the community to help me get started on this research. They came prepared with pictures and documents, eager to share their knowledge and expertise with me. At that moment, I knew they got my back. Our conversation helped frame my research question and brought nuances that broadened my understanding of the Assyrian community in Chicago. In the span of our conversation, we discussed topics of mobility, identity, suburbanization, and integration. With such a background in mind, I introduce the subject of my thesis: mobility and identity and what they represent to the Assyrian community.

Mobility has been utilized throughout history to respond to various stresses and shifts in people’s surrounding environment, where scholars describe it as humans’ “oldest survival and adaptation strategy” (Schuller and McKinney 2021). It is a by-product of a myriad of “economic, geopolitical, gendered, and racialized relations” (Hyndman 2013:169). Hyndman (2013) explains that conversation about mobility often focuses on the “agency or lack of agency” that political or

¹Quote by a member of the Assyrian community, unstructured interview with two community members, Dunkin Donuts, Oct 2021.
social groups have in connection with “movement, migration, and access” (170). However, Doreen Massey (2013) explains that the issue is not solely concerning “who moves and who doesn’t,” but it is also about “power in relation to the flows and the movement” (149). She expounds by stating that “different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it” (149). Conceptually, one can view the “mobility” and “immobility” of individuals as the product of the “interplay between the need, the ability, and the aspiration to migrate” (Wiederkehr et al. 2019), which is how I operationalize “agency” in this thesis.

However, Hyndman (2013) explains that to view mobility in terms of agency alone is a limited view. She builds her argument on Massey’s statement on mobility in that it brings up two critical points: “First, the production of space and one’s mobility in it are not simply acts of individual choice; second, in a related vein, mobility is inherently political” (170). Therefore, Hyndman (2013) notes that “mobility, displacement, and migration are all constituted through politico-spatial relations” (170). I employ this argument throughout this thesis while recognizing the significance of “agency” in shaping one’s decisions of mobility and integration and what it means to belong to a neighborhood.

Existing literature discusses the complexity of mobility and displacement, particularly when it comes to its intersectionality with refugees' sense of identity and belonging (Ball and Moselle 2016; Eltokhy 2020). The concept of belonging to a place becomes somewhat convoluted for refugees, as displacement results in losing the sense of home and changes one’s feeling of belonging and identity (Eltokhy 2020:135). This is where anchoring communities
become essential for refugees and migrant families. Wen et al. (2009) discuss the concept of “resurgent ethnicity,” which suggests that all groups have a natural propensity to move to areas of similar ethnic composition, and that is the result of no more than mere ethnocentrism (i.e., viewing life through one's own cultural or group perspective.) However, anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) explains the importance of emphasizing ethnic identity to a group and the social, economic, and political benefits of this shared ethnic identity, specifically, how it helps create a greater sense of belonging to the group while providing more support to its members. Thus, exploring the role of belonging to a shared ethnic identity becomes crucial to understanding how that impacts refugees’ and migrant families’ mobility and the role of social and political environments in making such decisions.

Moreover, cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (2009) explains how individuals’ feelings of “belonging” are innate. He describes such a notion as “cultural citizenship,” which signifies one’s right to belong and participate in a group while effectively deciding one’s future. Here, the word “culture” interjects inherent beliefs concerning “first-class citizenship,” where people in low-income neighborhoods discuss the living conditions in their community that grant individuals fair life opportunities. Such conditions include jobs, health care services, housing, and education (402). Examining this connection between belonging to an ethnic group and individuals’ ability to access the “material conditions” of “first-class citizens” can help us understand how that can impact the internal mobility of refugees and migrant families. Precisely, it can clarify Barth’s emphasis on the importance of ethnic identity to a group and how internal displacement can affect this identity. Such notions propelled me to delve deeper into the factors resulting in the mobility of already resettled migrant communities, particularly ethnic minority
groups such as the Assyrian community to which I belong and how such mobility impacts our sense of ethnic identity.

With such questions in mind, I center my research on Albany Park, a neighborhood described as “a stepping stone from the urban core to the suburbs” (Zomaya 2019), which is also one of the prominent Chicago neighborhoods that have hosted migrant Assyrian families since the early 1900s (Abraham 1984:68). I investigate the interplay between agency and the social and political factors that influence Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park, Chicago, and move to nearby suburbs. In addition, I examine the impact of such decisions on their sense of belonging and ethnic identity. The social factors include gentrification, a process taking place in the neighborhood as its implications have been previously documented in existing work, particularly concerning the rise in rent prices and the competition smaller ethnic shops face from larger chain stores (Huq and Harwood 2019; Zomaya 2019). The second social factor I explore is the role of education, given that comparisons between urban and suburban education have been ongoing for years (Rury 1999). Such conversations are not strange to Assyrian families. As an immigrant, I have often heard families converse about the difference between schools in the suburbs vs. the city and the importance of examining school districts before moving into a new neighborhood. Lastly, I look into the impact of the country’s polarizing political environment and the differences in opinion surrounding the immigration policies (Daniller 2019) on the Assyrian refugee and migrant families and how that shaped their experience living in their new neighborhood. By investigating these factors, this thesis attempts to uncover the main reason behind Assyrian refugees and migrant families leaving the Albany Park neighborhood of Chicago and moving to nearby suburbs, particularly
after their initial resettlement in the area to the present day, and the impact of their movement on their ethnic identity. The following section expounds on the social and political factors I investigate in this thesis. It explores the various works covering the implications of gentrification, education, and polarizing political opinions concerning immigration policies on the internal displacement and mobility of refugees and migrants, both in the U.S. in general and Chicago specifically.

**Social and Political Factors**

To better understand the factors resulting in the mobility of Assyrian refugees and migrant families, it is crucial to look into the general trends covered in the literature that document such aspects. I started with gentrification, which I examine in this thesis as a social factor and its implications on refugees and migrant families. Despite the prevalence of studies concerning gentrification and the displacement of low-income and migrant communities (Anderson 2016; Betancur 2011; Dressel 2018; Kern and Kovesi. 2018), the amount of work investigating the impact of gentrification on refugee communities, in particular, is still limited. Consequently, I utilize the available literature that discusses low-income and migrant communities to provide general information about the implications of the same factors that impact low-income and other migrant groups of refugee families.

In the late 2000s, the country was hit by a major economic crunch, the Great Recession, due to the subprime mortgage crisis that led to the decline in property values and increased foreclosure rates (Demyanyk and Van Hemert 2011). During that time, many cities across the U.S., including Chicago, were experiencing gentrification. Partially as a result, the crisis opened the door to investors to buy residential buildings at low prices, renovate them, and later sell or
rent them out at higher prices to newcomers (gentrifiers), ultimately making it difficult for minority groups to afford such costs (Hyra and Rugh 2016). It is suggested that the mortgage crisis increased low-value cash purchases of buildings in communities with high foreclosure rates, leading to an increase in rent prices. These conditions made it difficult for migrant groups to compete with investors and gentrifiers willing to pay more for those buildings, ultimately pushing migrant groups out of the neighborhood (Shropshire 2016).

Gentrification has also been studied in the Albany Park neighborhood, where Efadul Huq and Stacy Harwood (2019) examined the displacement of marginalized residents and how they coped with it. The implications of gentrification on communities and their long-time residents vary across the literature. The positive impact of gentrification is often discussed in terms of rehabilitating the physical appearance of neighborhoods and decreasing violence and crime rates (Atkinson 2004). Others discuss the fear of the increase in rent prices, the disappearance of smaller mom-and-pop stores, and erasing of neighborhoods’ cultural and ethnic identities (Atkinson 2004; Zomaya 2019). These new waves of settlers (i.e., gentrifiers) often result in the displacement of long-time residents (Atkinson 2004) and new migrant families that just moved into the area in the hope of planting new roots in that community (Dressel 2018). As a result, migrant families often find themselves either unable to keep up with the increase in the rent prices or unable to live in these neighborhoods due to the disappearance of affordable local services geared towards lower income residents (Atkinson 2004). Thus, these families are compelled to leave their homes and look for housing in places where they can hopefully reconnect with other members of their community and find more affordable housing. Unfortunately, some families are forced to decide between staying connected to their
communities while paying high rent prices or living far from them but in more affordable
neighborhoods that may not be of similar ethnic background. Consequently, these families could
potentially become a target of discrimination or racism in these other neighborhoods (Dressel
2018: 48-49). Such critical knowledge necessitates an investigation to discern whether
gentrification and its implications impact the Assyrians in Albany Park and whether it results in
their mobility and movement out of the neighborhood to the suburbs.

Alternatively, mobility due to social factors is not always forced. Refugee and migrant
families can also decide to move for other social factors without being forcibly displaced from
their neighborhood; such social factors include education. According to John L. Rury (1999),
comparisons between schooling in urban and adjacent suburban communities have been ongoing
for many decades, with city schools often viewed as becoming worse with time. For many
immigrant families, education is considered a priority, and parents often find themselves
following the footsteps of other members of their community who had moved to nearby suburbs.
This trend stems from the notion that schools in the suburbs are better funded, and thus they can
provide more resources and better learning for their kids. Consequently, neighborhoods with
“good schools,” which tend to be more prevalent in suburban communities, attract ethnic
minority families, leading them toward suburbanization and spatial assimilation. As a result,
immigrant minorities move away from ethnic enclaves and into areas where the ethnic majority
predominates (Massey 1985, as cited in Alba et al. 1999). Given this notion concerning
education, this research aims to investigate further its effects on immigrant and refugee families’
decisions to move to the suburbs. This is especially valuable due to the limited research focusing
on the impact of education on refugees’ internal displacement. With such an understanding of
social factors, it is also critical to look into the implications of political factors in influencing refugees’ and migrants’ mobility, particularly how this impacts their feelings of safety and belonging to their neighborhoods.

Moreover, Chicago has been historically known as a haven for various migrant communities seeking refuge, protection, and better work opportunities. In recent years, the city was named the most welcoming city in America for immigrants by the New American Economy’s 2019 Cities Index. Specifically, it compared U.S. cities based on their foreign-born population and their city policies regarding “government leadership, economic empowerment, inclusivity, community, and legal support” (Ramos 2019). However, the U.S. today is observing a “stark divide” in opinions where it has seldom been as polarized as the way it is today (Dimock and Wike 2021). Democrats and Republicans have different views concerning the country’s immigration policies; according to the Pew Research Center, “Majorities of both partisan groups say that taking in refugees fleeing war and violence is an important goal. Nonetheless, more Democrats (85%) view it as important than Republicans (58%). About half of Democrats (47%) say that taking in refugees is very important, compared with just 15% of Republicans” (Daniller 2019). Understanding such political dynamics helps examine whether such polarization of political thought affects the Assyrian refugees and migrant families, specifically, if it influences their decision to leave Albany Park and their sense of safety and belonging and whether they still feel welcome in their neighborhood. With such an introduction to the social and political factors shaping refugees’ and migrants’ mobility and ethnic identity, I now present how research questions came about and the methods I implemented to carry out this work.
The Conceptualization of Research Questions

I initially became interested in my thesis question due to findings from a preliminary study I conducted on migrant communities in Albany Park (Zomaya 2019). Specifically, I learned that World Relief\(^1\), Chicago, was no longer resettling families in the neighborhood due to not many landlords being willing to take in refugees as tenants due to their financial risks and competition from the young professionals moving into the area. Such findings piqued my curiosity to further investigate the reasons driving migrant families out of the Albany Park neighborhood and whether it was a matter of their own decision, a product of social and political factors, or a mix of reasons impacting such movement. With such preliminary knowledge, I developed my initial research questions before starting my fieldwork for this thesis. To bind my research in time and space, I chose Niles as my studied suburb due to its proximity to Albany Park. I also decided on the Great Recession as the start of my timeline and leading up to the polarizing political environment we observe today. The following is a list of the initial research questions:

Central Question: What are the leading factors driving refugees and migrant families living in Albany Park, Chicago, to move out of the neighborhood to nearby northern suburbs such as Niles in the period after the Great Recession and leading up to today’s polarizing political environment surrounding immigration issues?

\(^1\) World Relief, a resettlement agency located in Chicago’s Albany Park neighborhood.
- To what extent do the push factors impact refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to Niles? Specifically, to what extent does gentrification and its ramifications of (e.g., increase in rent prices and the disappearance of small immigrant-owned stores from the neighborhood, which will act as indicators) influence these families’ decisions to leave Albany Park?

- To what extent do immigration policies and their ramifications (i.e., fear and discrimination, which will be measured using semi-structured interview questions) impact refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to Niles?

- To what extent do anchor communities and belonging impact refugees and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to Niles?

- To what extent does education impact refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to Niles?

As I began my recruitment for the study, I realized that limiting the population sample to Niles made it more challenging to find participants who fit the research criteria. This was crucial as I also learned through my conversations with knowledgeable members in the Assyrian community that most Assyrian refugees and immigrants they know have either lived in Albany Park a while ago and have now passed on, or moved to other states or that they do not know of any who have lived there in recent years. Those whom they know of mainly were living in West Ridge, Chicago, which is close to Albany Park. Moreover, my informant at World Relief,
Chicago, also could not recall any refugee families recently resettled in Albany Park. Thus, such limitations made finding participants who fit the research criteria more challenging. While many of the initial contacts that I asked during the early stages of recruitment knew where Albany Park was located, it appeared that not everyone in Albany Park referred to it as such. This became evident as one of my contacts who had previously lived in Chicago explained that many of the Assyrians who had lived in Albany Park, West Ridge, or the border of the two would often refer to the whole area as Chicago. With such nuances, I needed to reframe and expand beyond the timeline and the suburb I initially chose for the study to help increase the potential of finding more participants. Lastly, the significance of the Assyrian Church was not originally part of the thesis question. Nevertheless, my conversations with two members of the Assyrian community highlighted the critical role the church serves as an anchoring institution in providing support to Assyrian refugees and migrant families and helping preserve the community’s ethnic identity. Such insights also resulted in changes to the initial research questions. The following list is more representative of the research questions asked during the semi-structured interviews.

Central Question: What are the main factors behind Assyrian refugees and migrant families leaving the Albany Park neighborhood of Chicago and moving to nearby suburbs, particularly after their initial resettlement in the neighborhood to the present day? And what are the implications of such movement on their Assyrian ethnic identity?

-To what extent do the social factor of gentrification and its ramifications (i.e., increase in rent prices and the disappearance of small immigrant-owned stores from the neighborhood, which
will act as indicators) influence Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to the suburbs?

- To what extent does the social factor of education impact the Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to nearby suburbs? Specifically, what have they heard from family and friends about the quality of education in the suburbs vs. the city? What role did that play in their decision to leave Albany Park and move to the suburbs?

- To what extent do political factors such as the polarizing political environment surrounding immigration policies and their ramifications (i.e., fear and discrimination, which will be measured using semi-structured interview questions) impact Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to nearby suburbs?

- To what extent do anchoring institutions, specifically the Assyrian Church, impact Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to stay or leave Albany Park and move to the suburbs? And to what extent does the Assyrian Church affect their sense of ethnic identity?

- To what extent does agency (operationalized as the “interplay between the need, the ability, and the aspiration” to move \(^2\)) impact Assyrian refugees’ and migrant families’ decisions to leave Albany Park and move to the suburbs? To what extent does agency affect their integration experience into their new community?

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\(^2\) Wiederkehr et al. (2019).
For my methods, I implemented a qualitative research approach to investigate the social and political factors contributing to the mobility of the families to the surrounding suburbs. This included non-participant and participant observations and unstructured and semi-structured interviews. For non-participant observations, I utilized the work of Shonna Trinch and Edward K. Snajdr (2016) on identifying signs of gentrification in a neighborhood. I documented the style of writing, the colors, and the type of advertisement showcased on the windows and doors of these storefronts. For the participant observations, I visited grocery stores both in Niles and Albany Park, noting the demographics of the clientele in these stores and the products they carried. In addition, I attended the worship service at St. Mary, an Assyrian church located in Roselle, a northwest suburb of Chicago. After the service was over, I headed to the small hall inside the church, where the congregation was gathered to socialize and have breakfast. My participant observations also included meeting participants at Dunkin Donuts in Niles, where many Assyrians, primarily men, typically gather. It is also where I had my first set of interviews.

The first set was unstructured, where I met up with two members of the Assyrian community. I was informed during my meet-up that the place became even more popular after one of the main Assyrian centers was recently shut down due to the pandemic. Both of my participants were active members of the Assyrian community holding valuable knowledge about Assyrians living in the Chicago area and its surrounding suburbs, despite none of them being residents of Albany Park. One of them is a scholar deeply engaged in the Assyrian community and collects many historical archives concerning Assyrians in Chicago and abroad. The other happened to be one of the active members in the community who had relatives that once lived in Albany Park. During the interview, we discussed the history of the Assyrian people in Chicago
and Albany Park and their movement to the suburbs. The conversation also included the importance of anchoring institutions and being around one’s community, particularly the church and its role in preserving the Assyrian ethnic identity. The unstructured format allowed participants to elaborate on some of the new themes that I had not initially included in my research questions (i.e., identity and the church’s role). Such discussions were critical in refining my research questions and including the importance of the church and its role in shaping the Assyrian identity for refugees and migrant families.

The second set of interviews was semi-structured. Two of the five full interviews were in person, where I visited participants’ homes. The other three interviews were over the phone since my participants were more comfortable conducting the interviews virtually. All five of the participants had been residents of Albany Park who have now moved out to various suburbs, except for one who is still a current resident of the neighborhood. The participants are all Assyrian refugees, except one participant, a second-generation Assyrian American. All participants’ names were changed, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Many of my conversations with different participants, including the two participants from the unstructured interview, were in a mix of Assyrian and English, often spoken simultaneously in the same sentence. Therefore, I translated some of those quotes from Assyrian to English.

The questions asked during the semi-structured interviews were prepared beforehand and ordered from least to most sensitive topics. I started with questions about the participants’ general experience living in the Albany Park neighborhood. I then asked about their opinion about education in the suburbs vs. Albany Park and their experience with belonging to the neighborhood. I followed that with questions about their view on gentrification and whether they
noted any signs of the process taking place in Albany Park while living there. Next, I inquired about their opinion concerning the political environment in the country now vs. past years and how that shaped their sense of safety and belonging. The last questions concerned the role of the Assyrian Church in the community and what it meant to them. The semi-structured interviews gave me a framework to work with that helped better organize the questions and allowed more detailed queries and nuances to emerge. This format also eased my participants into the more controversial and sensitive topics, allowing them to share more personal details about their life experiences. The following is a summary that introduces each participant.

Atour is an Assyrian female refugee and current resident of Albany Park who moved to the neighborhood with her family in the mid-seventies. Atour still lives now in the neighborhood with her parents. When asked how the sense of community has impacted her belonging to Albany park, she responded, “I always felt like I belonged to Albany Park. It always feels like home. When I visit my brothers or family members in the suburbs outside of Albany Park, when I’m driving home, I’m like, I’m home. I always lived in the same zip code, 60625; even though we lived in two different houses here, it always felt home to me.”

Nahrin is an Assyrian female refugee who moved to Albany Park in the early 2010s and left in 2021 with her family to a suburb northwest of Chicago. Like Atour, she felt a sense of belonging to Albany Park, too. She stated, “You can tell when people are friendly or when they offer help if needed or say hi when they see us outside. These things made us feel welcome, and nobody had issues with us.”

Ninos is an Assyrian male refugee who moved to Albany Park in the mid-seventies with his family and left in the mid-nineties. He now lives in a suburb west of Chicago. Ninos had fond memories of growing up in Albany Park, where he shared, “Summer camp was for all the community, mostly
low-income family. They started in the morning, we would go to a forest preserve, and we would be there for three hours and then we walked to the pool. They would provide lunch, and then we would go swimming.” Ninos’s interview was one of the two semi-structured interviews I conducted in person; he smiled, and his face lit up whenever he recalled his memories of living in Albany Park. Sargon is an Assyrian male refugee who moved to Albany Park with his family as well in the mid-seventies and left in the late eighties. He now lives in a suburb northwest of Chicago. When asked to describe his memories of living in Albany Park, he recalled, “I remember really good memories because we grew up there. We would bike everywhere! We would take Lawrence Ave all the way to the lake and go to Foster beach. The hospital and shops were close by; you didn’t have to own a car in Albany park because there was a bus. You can take a bus on Kimble, Lawrence, Montrose, Foster, all those streets. You can take the bus anywhere and the train also.” My interview with Sargon was also in person, and like Ninos, Sargon also smiled, and his face lit up whenever he recalled his memories of living in Albany Park. Shamiram is a second-generation Assyrian American female. She moved to Albany Park with her family in the mid-seventies and left for a suburb West of Chicago in the mid-eighties. She has since moved to a different suburb. Shamiram recalled that growing up in Albany Park there was a lot of gangs and burglary. When asked about her memories in the neighborhood, she responded, “They were very happy, and I would say it was happy mostly because we lived in this building with all of our cousins, and you know a lot of families. The neighborhood was fun, too; there were a lot of kids. It was very very happy childhood, it really was despite all the threats, but it was a very destabilizing childhood.”
While it is challenging to summarize my conversations with participants about Albany Park in one paragraph, I hope this summary can depict a glimpse of the memories they cherished from the time they lived in the neighborhood. The next chapter concentrates on the history of the Assyrians and the conceptualization of our identity. Specifically, I examine the work of fellow Assyrian scholars and other prominent researchers to help bring you closer to the community and develop a better understanding of our plight as a nation.
CHAPTER 1: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH AND ANCHORING INSTITUTIONS IN PRESERVING ASSYRIAN IDENTITY

The Assyrians are the indigenous people of northern Iraq and are the descendants of the ancient empires of Assyria and Babylon. Assyrians rose to power from about 2000 to 612 BC. After the fall of the Assyrian empire, our numbers dwindled tremendously, and we became a scattered nation in the Middle East (Gow et al. 2005:3). After thousands of years of exile, Assyrians still regard northern Iraq as our national homeland, often referred to as Bet Nahrain (the land between two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates; Gow et al. 2005:3). Throughout the 20th century, Assyrians endured religious and political persecution in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey (Gow et al. 2005:3). Some of the most heinous acts committed against our people have been “The Assyrian Genocide [,which] began in late 1914 and continued for more than a decade, with the peak of the violence occurring between 1915 and 1918” (Assyrian Policy Institute 2019:5), and the Simele massacre “known to Assyrians as Pramta d’Simele …The term is not only used to describe the massacre in Simele but the wider genocidal campaign that took place across more than 100 Assyrian villages in Dohuk and Nineveh that led to the death of as many as 6,000 Assyrians” (Assyrian Policy Institute 2019: 8). Today, our nation continues to bear persecution in the Middle East at the hands of ISIS. While it is challenging to find exact data reporting on the number of Assyrians remaining in Iraq, according to the Assyrian Policy Institute (2020), our population is estimated at roughly 200,000.
Generally speaking, national identity for many groups is intricate due to various political, social, and historical implications and what gets jeopardized amidst such discussions. Preserving and protecting one’s national identity can mean the difference between the survival and extinction of one’s nation. Simo Parpola (2004) describes how the massacres and persecutions that came after the downfall of Nineveh have strengthened Assyrians’ national and ethnic sense of identity (19). Christianity has been an integral component of the Assyrian identity since the beginning of the fourth century; it has enabled us to preserve our identity despite the ongoing persecutions, which diminished our population into becoming a minority in our homelands (Parpola 2004:5). Parpola (2004) elucidates the critical role of the Christian faith in shaping the Assyrian identity and how it also subjected the nation to continued persecution. He states:

The single-minded adherence to the Christian faith from late antiquity until the present time has made Christianity an indelible part of Assyrian identity, but it has also subjected the Assyrians to endless persecutions and massacres…These persecutions and massacres have reduced the total number of Assyrians from an estimated 20 million or more in antiquity to well under two million today. (21-22)

When considering this extreme dwindling in the Assyrian population, one must wonder how the Christian faith works in our community in a way where it still prevails despite all the encumbrances described above. Knowing the role of the Assyrian Church in the community allows for a better understanding of the conceptualization of the Assyrian identity and what that means for refugees and migrant families that lived in Albany Park, specifically, how it interacts with other factors that may have contributed to their experience in the neighborhood.

Efrem Yildiz (2012:208) explains how Assyrians’ commitment to the Christian faith dates back to critical changes in the first half of the first century. The first notable change was the religious absorbance of the Assyrian national ideology. The Christian identity trumped the
national one, resulting in religious leaders becoming both spiritual and political leaders of the community. Yildiz (1999) further expounds on this notion in previous work by stating:

With the arrival of Christianity, the institutional church gradually assumed the role of the state, and was transformed into the national Church of the country. Having been deprived of their political leaders and the ruling dynasty, the Assyrians re-grouped around their ecclesiastical institutions. For this reason the Patriarch came to represent for his people not only spiritual, but also temporal authority. In this way the Church became the safe-keeper of the traditions and culture of its people. Had things not been so, the Assyrian community would have had great difficulty in overcoming the countless obstacles it had to face and would probably not have survived to the present day. (22)

The Church’s historical significance helps explain why it is essential for the Assyrian refugees and migrant families today to maintain their connection and proximity to the Assyrian Church, where it preserves the Assyrian identity and helps preserve the nation’s culture, language, and traditions. The following section delves deeper into the significance of the Assyrian Church and other anchoring institutions for the Assyrian refugees and migrants resettled in Chicago. I utilize the work of May Abraham (1984), where she examined the Assyrian ethnicity in Chicago at churches, clubs, group-sponsored radio programs, and public schools. She also interviewed church leaders, Sunday school teachers and administrators, educators concerned with school programs, and Assyrian community leaders, business people and scholars. In addition, she also relied on “written sources such as Assyrian articles, pamphlets, and magazines published by community groups as an ethnic source of pertinent information” (2). Therefore, I find her work beneficial to this thesis as it provides a critical account of the Assyrian community in Chicago.

**Assyrians in Chicago**

Based on the Assyrian United Churches Report, Abraham shares that Assyrians arrived in Chicago “in small numbers between 1920 and 1940,” but this changed in the following forty years when more Assyrian refugees began coming to the city, mainly settling on the North Side
around Assyrian churches, businesses, and friends or families. Most of the growth of the
Assyrian community took place “in East and West Rogers Park, Albany Park, Jefferson Park,
Andersonville, Edgewater, Summerdale, and Uptown” (Abraham 1984:68). She notes that this
growth in the Assyrian population demanded the building of several Assyrian churches on the
North Side of Chicago (69). She argues that it was the anchoring institutions, along with other
factors, that prompted Assyrians to settle in places nearby; such factors include:

1. The Assyrian clubs and service organizations are located on the North Side of
Chicago.

2. Many Assyrians had already purchased real estate on the North Side and learned to
develop some economic independence in this area.

3. Most Assyrians love being near a large body of water, such as Lake Michigan. They
also like open areas, such as the parks along the lake. This affinity was brought with
them from the Middle East.

4. Refugees and other immigrants renewed the spirit of Assyrian national pride by
settling near others in the Chicago Assyrian community on the North Side; this feeling
had been swept away from them in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. (Abraham 1984:68)

According to Abraham (1984), Assyrian refugees typically came from Iraq and Iran and were
-sponsored by the World Council of Churches. Upon arriving in the States, they received housing
and other services through different resettlement programs run by various organizations (81). At
the time of her research, more than 60,000 Assyrians lived in Chicago and greater Chicagoland,
mainly residing on the North Side of Chicago around Devon, Clark, Ashland, Lawrence, and a
few in Sauganash and Edgebrook. Other Assyrian families lived in the suburbs of Skokie, Mount
Prospect, Morton Grove, Park Ridge, Northbrook, Lincolnwood, and Niles (82). She explains
how “the Assyrians, living in the city of Chicago, learned at least thirty years ago to organize
their social affairs through social clubs and the churches which facilitate many interactions such
as marriages, picnics, and group gatherings” (82). In recent years, the Assyrian Universal
Alliance Federation has reported that more than 100,000 Assyrians live in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs, with Assyrians making up the largest ethnic group in Skokie, roughly 20,000 in population. In 2015, Skokie also declared that 30% of District 219\(^1\) students were of Assyrian descent (Assyrian Universal Alliance Federation n.d.). Understanding this historical and cultural background, particularly the need to establish churches and community centers, helps better understand how they impacted the participants’ experiences and their decisions to leave Albany Park. The following chapter will delve deeper into these factors and how participants experienced them.

\(^1\) District 219 is Niles Township High School District that serves the families of Skokie, Lincolnwood, Morton Grove, and Niles. https://www.niles-hs.k12.il.us/about-us/about-d219
CHAPTER 2: DATA ANALYSIS OF EXAMINED FACTORS OF MOBILITY AND DISPLACEMENT

Leaving Albany Park

The diverse sample of participants brought much richness to the data. Each participant had a unique experience that varied in time lived in the neighborhood, gender, and family dynamic. These reasons collectively led to a diverse pool of answers to the thesis’s central question. Therefore, the beginning of this chapter is divided into three parts: the first part focuses on what participants reported as the “actual” factors for leaving/considering leaving Albany Park. The second part discusses what participants thought of the “expected” factors (i.e., gentrification, education, and the polarizing political environment surrounding immigration policies) based on questions from the semi-structured interviews. The third part discusses the “unexpected” factors that emerged from the semi-structured interviews.

Actual Reported Factors

Participants had different reasons as to why they moved/considered moving out of Albany Park; this was despite the various similar patterns that emerged from my conversations with them about their experience living in the neighborhood. Those shared patterns included fond memories of Albany Park and feelings of belonging to the neighborhood. The main reasons for
leaving/considering leaving the neighborhood varied from wanting to be closer to one’s siblings, wanting to buy a house, leaving the family home because one got married, moving to warmer weather to accommodate retiring parents, and escaping violence and home invasion. Therefore, their experience was unique and personal, where they each brought their own nuance to the research. Below is a summary of their responses:

While Atour is still living with her parents in Albany Park, she responded that she has considered moving out of the neighborhood to be closer to her siblings who live in the suburbs and because their current home is too big for her parents. However, her mother does not want to leave Albany Park since the stores are too far from each other in the suburbs. Moving to the suburbs would be challenging as Atour’s mom does not drive. At the same time, she does not want her kids, their wives, or anyone to take her; she wants to be independent. Nahrin decided to leave Albany Park with her family because they wanted to own a house. There were not many good options available to them at reasonable prices in Chicago. She explained that parking was difficult for them in the city as the streets were not as open. Her family initially wanted to move to Skokie or Niles since those suburbs were closer to her mom’s family, who live close to Albany Park, but it was hard to find what they were looking for in those areas in terms of price point, house conditions, and mainly taxes. She noted that they ended up moving to another suburb near Niles and Skokie. She explained that they found the area “nice” to have a house in; the streets are not crowded and it is not that far. In addition, they had relatives who lived there that also described the area as nice with a lot of shopping and grocery stores. This was important to her family as they were used to having everything close to them in Albany Park. Ninos left Albany Park and moved to another Chicago neighborhood because he got married. When an opportunity came to purchase a home in a suburb west of Chicago, he moved his family there. Sargon said that his
parents were getting older, and he wanted to take them somewhere warm to retire, so they moved to the West Coast. After his dad’s passing, Sargon said they somehow returned to Illinois. He explained that he chose the suburbs because his family got used to the West Coast’s spread-out streets and did not want to move back to Chicago, which was very congested in terms of traffic. Now he lives with his family in a suburb west of Chicago. Shamiram explained how there were a lot of gangs and burglaries in Albany Park, where their car got stolen repeatedly. Their house got broken into in the middle of the night, forcing her family to move out. Her parents chose a suburb west of Chicago because they wanted wide green spaces, and that suburb had a lot of farms, which resonated with her dad and her mom, who wanted to get far away from the city.

With such an understanding of the “actual” factors that impacted participants’ decisions to leave the neighborhood, the following section attempts to bridge those factors to answers given by participants concerning the “expected” social and political factors discussed in the introduction. While most of such “expected” factors did not directly impact participants’ decision to leave, their responses still brought nuances that helped better understand their personal life experiences and how they shaped their decision to leave the neighborhood ultimately.

Expected Social and Political Factors

Given the complexity of the process of gentrification, I made sure that my participants were aware of what this concept meant before I asked them any questions. I started by reading the
definition\(^1\) to participants that indicated they were unfamiliar with the term. I then followed that with the questions about whether they experienced such phenomena in the neighborhood and if they were impacted by the cost of living, increase in rent prices, etc. When asked if they noticed any indications of gentrification in Albany Park, they all mentioned seeing signs of the process in the neighborhood. One of the detailed accounts given by participants was that of Ninos, where he described the signs he noticed as follows:

I see that mostly in Albany Park, where there is access to the train, closer to the Brown Line, Kimble Ave, and Lawrence, you see more of the beautification of the buildings and condos. Wilson and Spaulding have nice condos and buildings! Where I used to live was, the apartments now are condos with balconies, so they made them into bigger units, into condos. I don’t see them on the inside by Hibbard School. Although they fixed it, all the apartments are still there; they are still low income.

Shamiram did not notice signs of gentrification growing up, but now she does as an adult whenever she drives by the neighborhood. She described it now as “safer, nicer, and more family oriented.” When asked to list some indicators she noticed, she responded, “When growing up, there was graffiti everywhere; now you don’t see that. I remember seeing needles and bullets in the streets; now you see families and a lot of nice new higher-end condo complexes, more gourmet and coffee shops, and little cute specialty stores—things that are more yuppie.” She also noticed ethnic stores closing down in the neighborhood: “The small mom-and-pop shops are definitely disappearing, like I remember this Asian store my mom used to frequent that is not there anymore.” Nahrin, on the other hand, noticed other examples of gentrification in Albany Park, where she recalled:

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\(^1\) Definition of gentrification read to participants: There is a process that is used to describe changes that take place in a neighborhood. Such changes come with both negative and positive implications on residents living in the neighborhood. Such changes include an increase in the number of wealthy individuals that move into the neighborhood and a decrease in the number of low-income residents, beautification of the community, large chain stores replacing smaller immigrant-owned stores, changes in the signs of stores across the neighborhood, and increased rent and food prices. This process is known as “gentrification” or “التطبيع، الاستطباق” in Arabic. Have you experienced gentrification while living in Albany Park?
Close to Northeastern University, they wanted to increase the rent and make it more for students that study there. Also, a few years ago, some areas closer to Lincoln square, such as Lawrence and Western, were being changed and fixed. They looked rich and nice. I would notice people with a higher income who could live there because it was closer to Mariano’s, and not everyone can shop there, maybe those with a higher income.

When I asked if such changes impacted her family’s decision to leave the neighborhood, she responded that they did not. However, she mentioned that the rent was increasing in recent years, so there was no point in staying by then.

When I inquired from Atour about the young professionals moving into the neighborhood causing a rise in rent prices for other residents, she responded that her neighbors and the people she knows are happy because they say it promotes the value of their property and the community. According to her, changes due to gentrification are good changes. “It's like saying the good people are coming in; the families are coming in. I guess that’s what I hear; honestly, I don't hear anything negative.” When I asked Ninos whether gentrification played a role in him leaving Albany Park, he responded, “Other than the house opportunity, I know it costs more to stay in the city.” I then asked if it would have been more difficult for him to start a family in Albany Park, to which he responded, “Yes, I know Albany Park has communities where they have nice homes, but where we were at was mostly rental areas, low income. Parking was scarce; that was one of the top reasons I wanted to get out of the city, and it didn’t look pretty. The neighborhood looks better now because they are fixing everything.” Sargon also thought that such changes were positive. He explained that some of the places that were torn down were very old and they needed to be rebuilt.

Upon analyzing these responses, one can conclude that participants generally viewed gentrification through a positive lens while still addressing the adverse side effects of the process. Nahrin explained that such changes could be both positive and negative for the
neighborhood: “It is positive because people who love more of these things would be good for them. It is also negative because many people can’t afford it and would prefer to go to other areas that they can afford.” As for Ninos, he thought, “For my suburb, gentrification is good, but for Albany Park, it is not; there are too many low-income families living there. I am saying this because I grew up low income, but I do not know the numbers. Albany park will hurt if they do that.” He explained that this is because, in a suburb like where he lives, the mom-and-pop stores will not exist because the cost of rent would be too high, especially as they are competing with Amazon. In the city, people live within walking distance, so they are not worried about spending money on gas, so they will buy whatever they want. When considering these differences in perspectives, it becomes evident that participants experience/view gentrification in Albany Park differently. Moreover, it is also apparent that the experience of those who rented their apartments differed from that of homeowners. Atour, a long-time resident, explained how her parents owned their house and paid a mortgage, so they do not notice the changes regarding rent, and since her parents are on senior freeze, their taxes stay the same. These disparities demonstrate how individual families experience gentrification differently in Albany Park.

In terms of education, it is essential to note that experiences shared by participants reflected various grades and times of when they lived in the neighborhood. For example, Atour explained that she went to school in Albany Park and its surrounding area from kindergarten till college. Nahrin shared her experience studying during high school and college, while Shamiram talked more about her memories around the time she was in kindergarten. Sargon shared his recollections of playing soccer in high school. Ninos recalled the after-school programs (didn’t specify the grade) and how the community would get together. Therefore, one must look at each case with such understanding while carefully considering emerging common patterns. Moreover,
none of the participants identified education as the leading cause for their families leaving Albany Park. With that said, I divided their responses to education into two categories based on what they shared in terms of quality of education: 1) participants who commented about their personal experience studying in Albany Park and 2) participants who commented on their kids’ experience studying in the suburbs vs. Chicago, in general, not necessarily Albany Park.

Out of participants who shared their experience studying in the Albany Park neighborhood, Shamiram, expressed that education in the suburbs was “tremendously better” than in Albany Park. Specifically, she explained how the teacher in Albany Park would release her when she was a child in the city streets, where she would walk home alone until she saw her mom walking toward her along the way. She expounded, “It was very very lousy. Absolutely lousy teachers that didn’t care; you could lie to them all the time, make up whatever you want to get away with anything.” In contrast, she highlighted how teachers in the suburbs “were more engaged, caring, polished, friendly, and intelligent.” Atour and Nahrin had positive experiences overall studying in Albany Park. For Atour, when asked about the quality of education she experienced in Albany Park, she explained that it is dependent on the person. She gave the example of herself and her brothers, where she shared, “If I want to study and learn, I was in school, I didn’t go out. I had some friends who would hang out outside the school and not go to school. In our family, education came first. Our parents wanted what was best for us, so I thought education was good at our schools; that was my experience.” When asked about what she thought of schools in the suburbs, she responded:

Well, I have heard they always say they are better. Honestly, I don't know because I have not experienced those schools, but that’s what I have always heard. That they were better, that they had a better system. They would say that there was more emphasis on education, and the teachers were more on the students. Less class maybe compared to Chicago? Chicago, you can say there are 30-40 students in a class, whereas in the suburbs there are maybe 25-29.
Nahrin described how there was a lot of help when studying in Albany Park, especially for students who did not speak English. She said about her experience:

I remember it being good. I started with ESL classes in high school because I didn’t know English, but it was very good. I had many teachers who worked a lot with me, especially one English teacher; she was my favorite. She helped us a lot with everything, even with other subjects. There was a lot of help for us, especially those who didn’t know the language.

On the other hand, Ninos discussed how his kids had a better experience in the suburbs compared to the city. While he did not specifically comment on education in Albany Park, he explained when describing his kids’ experience studying in the city that it was mainly “play.” In contrast, there were more opportunities for teaching kids more skills (e.g., writing) in the suburbs. Sargon stated that he faced hardship in high school while living in Albany Park since he did not know the language. When asked about his thoughts on education in the suburbs based on his kids’ experience, he responded that there are more opportunities and services than in the city. Given such a diverse and small sample, one can conclude that participants generally shared or heard of schools in the suburbs offering more opportunities and services to students compared to the city. In addition, a few participants expressed their parents’ emphasis on education, such as in the case of Atour and Shamiram. Ninos also shared how he is at the library all the time and how his kids are growing up there. I found this latter statement that Ninos shared particularly interesting, mainly since he associated his sense of belonging to his new neighborhood with how welcome he felt in the library where they know him by his first name.

The topic of political environment and immigration policies brought up a few common notions among participants, where Atour and Nahrin thought that the government did not accept as many Assyrians into the country as some other groups. Atour explained that more Assyrians should be given a chance to come to the States since many of them are living in dire conditions
in the Middle East. Ninos, Sargon, and Shamiram noted the importance of finding a better system for processing migrants. Ninos and Sargon stated that they were in favor of refugees coming into the country, but only through legal means. They both stressed the importance of waiting in line for one’s turn to come here. Sargon explained his emphasis on migrants coming to the U.S. through “legal” means by stating, “When people come here illegally, they are taking a risk. They are drowning and dying in the deserts, like what is happening between Mexico and the United States border. I don’t mind people coming because we too came as refugees, but they need to come here legally. If they come here legally, they get taxed. They get social security, a driver’s license, insurance, and the American dream.” Ninos also thought people should wait for their turn to come here; this was out of good intentions as he would rather have more people come here and work, but no one should go through such a risky journey, which is why he stressed the need to fix our immigration system. Atour thought that “there is a reason why people came here illegally. Of course, they should have done it the right way, but they had to survive; maybe that is the reason.” On the other hand, Nahrin thought there was an explanation behind bans and policies. While she explained that she empathizes with people, she cannot blame the government for wanting to care for its citizens as there are other opportunities to go to other countries as well. Therefore, one could conclude in terms of immigration policies that the general notion among participants called for a more humane, fair, and effective immigration system that can better serve those in crisis.

Moreover, participants Sargon and Nahrin mentioned that they felt the country is now more divided (Democrats vs. Republicans). Also, participants Nahrin, Sargon, and Shamiram brought up the role of media in today’s political environment. Shamiram explained that there was a world before and after social media. Before, people did not have a broad reach or a platform to stir up
political controversy, whereas now, everybody has a platform. She explained, “Politics has always been politics. People, governments, and such will always make controversial decisions. But the level of people fighting against one another and how much you see everything becoming such a hot issue, to me, I noticed the massive shift after social media and after the internet.”

When analyzing the impact of politics on one’s sense of safety, only Nahrin shared that she initially felt safe in Albany Park, whether walking to school or other places. However, that changed in the last couple of years. She had to be more careful, especially when walking by herself at night. She explained that this change happened in the previous few years around elections, and what she would see on the news in regards to shooting, carjacking, and people getting robbed. These reasons combined impacted her sense of safety in the neighborhood. She shared that she now feels a little bit safer in the suburbs. Yet, one can never be sure. Atour informed me that she would drop her mom off at 5:00 am to work, and she never felt scared. She always felt safe in the neighborhood. With such a summary of responses, one can conclude that the political environment did not have the same impact on Atour and Nahrin in terms of safety. At the same time, none of the participants reported safety due to political concerns as the primary factor for leaving Albany Park, including Nahrin. When asked about how they felt now vs. in past years, participants who moved here as refugees all expressed that they no longer identified as refugees and considered themselves Americans who have integrated into the U.S. society.

When examining the impact of politics on the sense of belonging, all participants felt they belonged to Albany Park. Shamiram explained that she felt like she didn’t belong or fit in when she got to the suburbs. When asked about how she felt now as a second-generation Assyrian American vs. when she was growing up, she stated, “Being the daughter of immigrants, you are treated differently as a child. As an adult, I don’t even notice it or care. I think people will have
their perceived notion and judgment against each other no matter who’s who, and as an adult, you understand that better.” Ninos also shared a similar notion to Shamiram. He described, “As a kid, I didn’t mind anything; I didn’t care. I was picked on because of my language, but it didn’t mean anything because we were young. We didn’t have control, so we fought more, but now we have more control because the more educated we get, the more we understand.” For Ninos, he felt a sense of belonging to his current neighborhood since first moving there until now, and he expressed feeling generally comfortable regardless of the change in politics. Sargon also expressed a similar sense of belonging both in Albany Park and the suburbs. Likewise, Nahrin shared that she felt she belonged in Albany Park, where she described how people were friendly and would offer help if needed; this was also her experience in the suburbs. Atour explained that she always felt like she belonged to Albany Park, and it always felt like home to her. Both Ninos and Sargon were smiling when recalling their happy memories of growing up in Albany Park, highlighting the importance of having a sense of community and togetherness that they experienced in the neighborhood.

Unexpected Emerging Factors

Two of the main unexpected factors that emerged from my conversations with multiple participants were the importance of open spaces and having ample parking. I decided to present these factors as unexpected as I did not have them integrated into my initial research questions. Leaving Albany Park in search of open spaces was brought up by a few participants from the semi-structured interviews. Specifically, Shamiram explained that when choosing a new home, her parents wanted to move to an area with wide green spaces and be away from the city. Sargon
also shared that he decided to return to the suburbs after moving back to Illinois since he got used to the spread-out streets on the West Coast instead of the traffic congestion in Chicago.

Nahrin described the suburbs as having more expansive, less crowded roads with ample parking spaces. She mentioned later on in the interview that parking, along with taxes, were a main problem that also influenced her family’s decision to leave. She expressed:

The parking wasn’t as much of a problem when we first moved, but can’t remember exactly, the last two years though, especially our last apartment it was on the main street and it was paid meter parking. The side streets were free but it was so hard to find parking because everyone parked there, especially in the winter with the snow and cleaning the snow, we would get tickets you know. The last five years it became more like that, I would say.

Ninos also explained, “Parking was scarce; that was one of the top reasons why I wanted to get out of the city, and it didn’t look pretty. Everything looks better now since they are fixing everything.” One can conclude that limited parking and congested spaces are a shared pattern indicated by most participants for wanting to leave Albany Park, despite not being identified by participants as the main reason behind their move. Such findings support May Abraham’s (1984) statement where she also discussed the importance of open spaces for the Assyrian community (68). The following section will discuss other common patterns shared by refugee participants, highlighting the impact of their experience in the Albany Park neighborhood on shaping their proud sense of American identity.

**Becoming American**

We often think of ethnicity and ancestry as one combined pennant representing our existence, family history, and allegiance to a greater cause. Yet, a lot goes into the stitching of its fabric, particularly for a minority community such as the Assyrians. Beyond an inherited oral history, or if one is fortunate to have passed down pictures or records that bring the narrative to life even for a moment, political, religious, and environmental threads also go into making this
banner. But what happens when people are displaced, especially in cases of forced migration? Do they add new threads of identity to this pennant, replace it with a new one, or fly it high only when feeling safe and accepted? Anthony Perez and Charles Hirschman (2009) argue that people do not usually change their ethnic identity. Instead, they stress various aspects of this identity depending on the situation. When studying different sources of U.S. ethnic and racial composition, they find that most Americans come from diverse ethnic, racial, and geographic backgrounds, other than those who recently migrated to the States. However, many Americans are either oblivious or tend to downplay their complex identity. Thus, the authors argue that the census measures identity rather than one’s ancestry since identity is “subjective” based on people’s “membership” and “affinity” to a group. On the other hand, ancestry is more objective, although it shapes identities through various factors such as ethnic “blending” and preserving one’s ancestral roots, along with common beliefs concerning race and racial categories (Perez and Hirschman 2009).

Upon examining my data, all refugee participants shared that they no longer see themselves as refugees, in that the refugee identity no longer represented how they felt today. Being an “American” or “Assyrian American” is how they proudly identified themselves. Ninos explained that “high school teaches one to be an American because you are amongst different people, and those different people, you love them all.” Both Sargon and Ninos thought the American identity united them with everyone. Thus, American nationalism is recognized as an added thread to the Assyrian refugee identity. This thread is added to one’s banner after being forcefully displaced and later accepted into a new country. The proud sense of American nationalism is associated with their gratefulness for the opportunity they were offered to come to the States. Therefore, all refugee participants expressed how grateful they were for being granted
that chance. The following section will introduce other factors contributing to participants’ integration into U.S. society by analyzing the church’s role and one’s community in facilitating such experience.

Creating Home Away from Home

Despite the varying reasons for their mobility, all participants felt a sense of belonging to their new neighborhoods after leaving Albany Park, except for Shamiram. This sense of belonging stems from various sources, such as the church or relatives living nearby. Shamiram, being far from her community, found it challenging for her to feel that sense of belonging in her new neighborhood. One’s agency (willingness) to integrate also contributed to the way individuals adjusted to life in a new environment. Albany Park was a “home away from home” for many of these Assyrian families when they first moved to the neighborhood. They were able to create connections with fellow Assyrians at the Assyrian church and, in many cases, with other migrant groups at cafes and various ethnic shops in the area. Even after leaving Albany Park, those participants who did stay connected to the church and the Assyrian community felt more of a sense of belonging and connection to their new neighborhoods. When individuals remain closer to their community, their ethnic identity is emphasized. As a result, they gain social, economic, and political benefits due to embracing this shared identity. Even more, they can feel a sense of belonging and receive support from members of their community (Barth 1969). The following section will expound on such notions of belonging to a neighborhood and the role of anchoring institutions, particularly the Assyrian Church, in aiding the integration process.

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The Influence of the Church

The concept of the church being a crucial part of Assyrian identity was initially brought up during my unstructured interview with two active members of the Assyrian community who were knowledgeable about Assyrians living in the Chicago area and its surrounding suburbs. The following is a summary of our conversations.

The church is our local government. It provides financial and moral support; it keeps our language alive. As a stateless nation, we don’t have our own government; it is because we don’t have a country, so the church is our country. The Patriarch, Mar Shimun³, was our president. He was the leader of the Assyrian people during that time. Thus, the church is not as much of a religious entity but more of a cultural unity for a lot of Assyrians; it is an opportunity to be together. The youth group comes to church to get together and see one another, not necessarily for religious reasons. It is an “ethnical impulse” for Assyrians. Even if they did not like the religious leaders in the church, they still would not give up on the church because leaders come and go, but the church remains.

(Summary of conversation from the unstructured interview with two community members, Dunkin Donuts, Oct. 2021)

The church plays an essential role in keeping the Assyrian people connected and rooted in our culture and community. As a stateless nation, Assyrians do not have an official government nor a bodily president. Thus, the church plays a dual role for Assyrians, as explained by Efrem Yildiz (2012):

The religious leader acquired dual powers, becoming both the spiritual and political leader of the community. This phenomenon signified a change that gradually enforced a spiritual (Christian) identity on all...The first sign of such an attitude was the first official name given to the Assyrian Christian community: mšihaye madenhaye or simply ‘edta d’madenha but the Assyrian people, who were not involved in the political affairs called themselves Suraye/suryoye, which means Assyrian. (208)

³ Mar Benyamin Shimun was a Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East. “In March 1918,” Mar Shimun, “who was recognized as the religious and civil leader of the Assyrian people at the time, was assassinated...during a meeting held under a flag of truce” (Assyrian Policy Institute 2019:7).
When I asked my participants whether they attended any particular churches while living in Albany Park, they all indicated that they did. Atour and Nahrin mentioned that they continue going to an Assyrian church when possible. Atour shared, “I go because my parents went. For me when I go church myself, I feel good afterwards. You know sometimes, I struggle because I only have this Sunday, I want to sleep in. I feel guilty when I don’t go and then when I do go, I feel much better and that I should do this every Sunday.” When asked about the role of church in the Assyrian community, Nahrin stated, “It’s something that brings Assyrians together. It’s a place for kids to learn about Christianity and about our language, so I think it’s important for us and brings us all together.” Sargon, an active member of the Assyrian Church and a regular attendant, also shared on the role of church:

The church plays a big role in keeping our language, identity, and customs. When we have feasts, we socialize and communicate with each other. People meet each other in the church, marry in our community, and get blessed when they get married, so the church plays a role in keeping our faith. The church always commands us to be faithful citizens to any country we live in, to be a good neighbor, be a good role model, be helpful, and not do anything bad, encouraging us always to do positive things.

Shamiram and Ninos had a different relationship with the Assyrian Church than the other three participants. Ninos explained that growing up in Albany Park, he used to go with his parents, but after moving to the suburbs, he rarely went. He mentioned he has been reading the Bible, but he keeps it to his own. Shamiram shared that she now attends an American church and does not keep in touch with the Assyrian community. In Shamiram’s case, her family relocated to a suburb far from her community and church where she expressed that she did not feel welcomed there. She stated, “We were like the weird family, like what’s Assyrian, never heard of that? It was an all-white neighborhood; I didn't feel welcomed in the neighborhood. People were pleasantly rude like they would shun you in the nicest way.” Moving into a far suburb made it challenging for her family to maintain strong ties to their Assyrian community. When asked
about the role of the Church in the Assyrian community and how she would describe her relationship with it, she stated:

When we left the city, we left the Church because there was no Assyrian church in the suburb. There was one sort of years later, but it wasn’t really close to us, so we didn’t really grow up involved with the Church. The Assyrian Church is kind of like the central hub for the Assyrian community because Assyrians don’t separate the Church and the State, like the Church is the State. This is kind of a good thing because it keeps the sense of community a little better, so we didn’t really have that. I haven’t been part of that community, not since we left the city.

In summary, most participants, regardless of their commitment to church services, shared that the church helps keep Assyrians closer to our culture and language. Only Ninos did not go into detail discussing the topic of the Church. Martha Frederiks (2016) discusses the work of various scholars on how both one’s faith and the religious community play a crucial role in shaping migrants’ experiences. She delves deep into the work of Stephen Warner and his explanation of the role of religious communities in providing a place of refuge, physical, spiritual, and emotional support for the migrants in their new communities, along with being a place for them to build and initiate their social and business networks (Warner 1993: 1059–1063; Warner 2005: 88, as cited in Frederiks 2016:16). I found this latter point parallel to what my interviews have revealed about the Church’s role in conserving our Assyrian identity. Assyrian churches are not only places of worship, but they are places that hold the community together. Therefore, even if individuals are not necessarily religious, many would still remain connected to the church because of its role in preserving one’s culture and heritage. In a sense, the church also becomes a cultural center where children get to learn about their heritage and their mother language. Atour’s parents placed an emphasis on their children going to church. To them, preserving the Assyrian language and culture was crucial. Atour shared, “When we move to this country, they wanted you to learn English, and then when we were taught English, my parents
were like, what about Assyrian? So I see that by taking us to church, they brought us closer to our language and the Assyrian culture.”

Warner explains how religious communities, especially ethnic-based religious communities and religious minorities, often serve as a “home away from home” for individuals (Warner 1993: 1059–1063; Warner 2005: 88, as cited in Frederiks 2016:16). This is also the case in the Assyrian community. The church has become our home away from home and our land, where we gather, share our language and customs, and socialize with other Assyrians. Atour recalled how her brothers were in the Assyrian Church choir and that even when her dad was working, her mom would put Atour and her siblings on a train and take them to church no matter what. Her mom did not drive and would still find ways to ensure her kids still got to church despite the challenges, demonstrating that preserving one’s connection to the church requires deliberate effort from the parents. Such stories of families’ perseverance exemplify the significance of the church to Assyrians. It helps us preserve our culture and pass it down to our children so they too can do the same one day in the future. In the same vein, like the church, Assyrian cultural centers also play a vital role in preserving our national identity.

During my discussions with the two Assyrian community members during the unstructured interview, I was informed of how such institutions have become a hub for kids to socialize with other members of our community and learn about their language and culture. The following statement is a summary of such nuance that was revealed to me by the participants:

Many families now send their kids to school in the cultural center (Assyrian National Council of Illinois-Motwa\(^4\)) to learn our language. It wasn’t like that before. We had classes but not in such numbers! They have about 200 students now! There is a new national wave of a young generation that comes to the Assyrian school and learns the language despite assimilation into the U.S. society.

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\(^4\) “The Assyrian National Council of Illinois (ANCI) was established as a non-profit, community based organization in 1986 to respond to the urgent needs of Assyrian immigrants. The Assyrian National Council of Illinois provides a wide variety of charitable, humanitarian services and programs.” See: http://www.ancil.org/#about
Kids can’t be forced to attend Assyrian school but they feel this need to learn about their culture and language. Students feel related to our nation and want to keep the tradition because we have a good heritage that has given so much to the world; we want to keep it. Before, people were not as educated as they are now, but today there are more opportunities for people to be more educated, especially with the presence of the internet. When they learn about their ancestors’ accomplishments, they feel proud. (Summary of conversation from the unstructured interview with two community members, Dunkin Donuts, Oct. 2021)

Thus, regardless of where and why Assyrians move, we have been accustomed to rebuilding our lives despite the circumstances that resulted in our displacement. Having the church and other anchoring institutions helps ground ourselves as a nation, enabling us to feel at home no matter where we go. When we become distant from the church and our community, we risk losing such ties to our ethnic identity. Hence, preserving one’s identity is also dependent on members’ agency and willingness to put in the effort to remain connected to their community. The lack of such action can result in distancing not only oneself from the Assyrian community but also generations to come. The following section delves into how gender and agency interact in this context and what that means to refugee and migrant families.

Agency and Gender

According to Essed et al. (2004), agency “centralises” individuals, whereas social actors can act upon their own matters and those of others (2). The authors explain how agency is crucial to understanding gender differences and how it results in the empowerment of refugees in their new environments, particularly women, where they tend to face new challenges by contesting the traditional gender roles and taking on unconventional responsibilities. Consequently, they are able to develop more robust “political, economic, and social identities” (Essed et al. 2004:8). They explain how when identities get altered due to displacement and resettlement, it is women and young individuals precisely who embrace such transformations that emancipate them from
prior compliance. When examining the migrant experience of the parents\(^5\) in the interviews, it is evident that men and women coped with their new life and integrated into their new communities differently, whether in Albany Park or the suburbs. Atour explained how her mom took on the role of what Assyrians call *mukhtar* (boss, as described by Atour). Traditionally speaking, Assyrians in the Middle East often had a *mukhtar*, an alderman, whom the village people selected that everyone would come to for advice or for resolving conflicts. An alderman is usually a role reserved for men in Assyrian villages. Hearing Atour explaining how her mom took on solving everyone’s problems showed a shift in gender roles that transpired when families had to adjust to a new culture. Talking to the landlord or a government official to solve an issue concerning the apartment building or the neighborhood is a role reserved for men in many Assyrian families in the Middle East. Atour’s mom being deemed the *mukhtar* (boss) in the neighborhood is shifting that patriarchal narrative. Another critical point to note is that women (the mothers of Atour and Shamiram) found it easier to integrate into American society, despite the language barrier. Atour shared that her mom had an easier time picking up the English language since she found it similar to French, while it took her dad a while to learn it because he wanted to work to provide for the family. Shamiram expressed how her parents did not want to “assimilate,”\(^6\) although her mom still did better than her dad despite not driving and having difficulty speaking the language. She explained that her dad had no desire to assimilate because

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\(^5\) Atour’s and Shamiram’s parents.

\(^6\) “Integrate” and “assimilate,” as used by Shamiram, are mentioned throughout this thesis interchangeably, referring here to the willingness to adjust and become part of the American culture while preserving and sharing one’s ethnic identity. With that said, I still decided to continue the use of “assimilate” whenever quoting Shamiram directly as that was the word she used all throughout our conversation. However, her discussion about her dad shows that her use of “assimilate” aligns closely with “integrate.” She explains, “I think he could have done a better job if he had assimilated and created a community for us while also keeping us intact with our ancestry and our origin. We would have grown up much happier and healthier” (Shamiram).
he did not like the American culture as his morals did not align with that in the U.S. Shamiram expounded on this:

My mother was more free-spirited, more rebellious. She never felt people weren’t friendly with her, but I noticed it and would get angry for her. She was always friendly; she had a couple of friends in the new neighborhood, older women (Polish and Italian), she would bake with them. My father had no interest. She tried here and there, but we were pretty isolated. In Albany Park, we had a lot of family in the building and other Assyrians in the neighborhood. The city neighborhood was more accepting. It was more communal. People hung out more, people were friendlier. Everybody hides in the suburbs, close their blinds, and nobody talks to anybody.

The agency of these two resilient women (Shamiram’s and Atour’s mothers) was instrumental in helping them better integrate into their new communities and, as the case of Atour’s mom, forced her to take on a role that’s traditionally limited to men in her home country. According to Essed et al. (2004), “Trauma and loss of resources” may cause some refugees not to recognize the new opportunities that may come their way when they move to a new country (2). I would argue that this is also true in the case of immigrants who leave their old life behind and move to a new country to pursue a better opportunity. In many cases, immigrants face various challenges that may contribute to their inability to realize new opportunities. Cleo Barker (2018) discusses how challenges such as the inability to use one’s non-U.S. academic credentials, along with other social and linguistic obstacles, “present discouraging barriers to labor force integration” (16). I would add that this may also potentially contribute to other integration areas that are worth further investigation. In the case of Shamiram’s dad, coming to the U.S. as an immigrant in pursuit of the American dream did not translate as expected. The constant carjacking, his home being broken into in the middle of the night, and the clash of moral values may have contributed to him not wanting to adjust to the American way of life. Nonetheless, his unwillingness to integrate into American society eventually changed in later years. The participant described how her dad would later comment, “So what if they don't speak Assyrian,
so what? Who cares?” The participant thought that her dad could have done a better job had he “assimilated” and created a community for them while keeping them intact with their ancestry.

She explained:

He would make comments to suggest, like, “Let them assimilate to the local ways,” and I think it’s because he felt guilty because he never did. He would be like, let’s just wipe your whole identity clean. I think he could have done a better job if he had assimilated and created a community for us while also keeping us intact with our ancestry and our origin. We would have grown up much happier and healthier. He never put forward that effort, then he felt guilty about that, then he is like, just wipe your whole identity, so they just did the best they could.

Shamiram’s family experience with integration and its impact on her Assyrian identity captures agency’s instrumental role in directing one’s life and family. One’s individual agency can have a generational effect, such as in the case of Shamiram. Besides moving to a suburb where she felt isolated from the Assyrian community, she also held her parents a bit responsible. She believed they could have made a more deliberate effort than merely speaking Assyrian at home. When asked how the participant stays connected now with the Assyrian community, she responded that she does not. Since leaving the city, she became isolated from the community. Her Assyrian is not that strong, and although she has family and such, she does not go to the events, and she does not have Assyrian friends. When parents physically distance their children from the Assyrian community, despite continuing to speak Assyrian at home, maintaining strong ties to one’s roots becomes more challenging, especially if there are no deliberate efforts from the parents to preserve such ties. This was evident in Shamiram’s case, where she explained that despite speaking Assyrian at home, being separated from her community resulted in a disconnect from her culture. Retaining a solid connection to one’s Assyrian identity requires being closer to the Assyrian community and a conscious effort from the parents to instill the importance of protecting one’s heritage. Therefore, a deliberate and collective action from all Assyrians is
required to instill the sense of belonging to the Assyrian nation in generations to come, be it through church or cultural institutions. The following chapter will conclude the discussion by explaining how the Albany Park experience is different for everyone, despite sharing a sense of belonging that many Assyrians felt when living there.
CONCLUSION: ALBANY PARK, AN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE WITH SHARED NOSTALGIA

Upon analyzing my data, I concluded that all participants had a personal reason for leaving Albany Park and moving to the suburbs despite the similar patterns expressed by participants, primarily being a shared sense of belonging to the neighborhood. The main reasons for leaving/considering leaving Albany Park varied from wanting to buy a house, moving closer to one’s siblings, escaping violence and home invasion, moving to warmer weather to accommodate retiring parents, and leaving the family home because one got married. Such variation in responses resulted from various social and political factors contributing directly or indirectly to their living experience in the neighborhood and, ultimately, their decision to leave/consider leaving. Such factors also influenced one’s agency, such as the case of Shamiram’s parents, who had to leave the neighborhood to escape violence. Unfortunately, the family’s displacement resulted in them becoming isolated from their community and relatives, which impacted their connection to their Assyrian church and its community. Her dad’s refusal to "assimilate" to American culture also affected Shamiram’s relationship with her Assyrian community and church. As a result, Shamiram wished her dad had put in more effort to "assimilate" into the U.S. society so they would have grown up much happier and healthier, keeping them intact with their ancestry and culture. All participants, except for one, shared their thoughts on the Assyrian church and its meaning to Assyrians. Overall, those who commented
expressed its significance in preserving the Assyrian culture, language, and heritage, serving as both a political and religious authority of the Assyrian nation and as a spiritual and cultural anchoring institution that continues to connect generations of Assyrians.

**Limitations**

I am incredibly grateful for the generosity of all the participants who opened their homes, shared their time, and trusted me with their personal stories to conduct this imperative work. This study was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting my access to valuable resources such as connecting with more churches, Assyrian libraries, and community members. Needing to deliver this work in a time-bound manner, being my MA degree thesis, also restricted the number of participants I had time to interview during recruitment. Therefore, my sample size was not large enough to make general assumptions about all topics I wanted to explore in the study. Several nuances emerged from my conversations with participants, which call for further investigation and potentially more longitudinal studies with a larger population sample. The following section will discuss such nuances in more detail.

**Future Research**

Some of the most critical findings from this thesis were how participants viewed gentrification positively while still addressing its implications on low-income families. None of the participants reported forced displacement due to eviction, as discussed in other work conducted in Albany Park (Huq and Harwood 2019). I propose two potential explanations: 1) having a small sample can result in a limited number of responses, and 2) being a refugee vs. an undocumented tenant may also impact individuals’ experiences depending on one’s immigration
status. Therefore, this research calls for a more in-depth investigation into how refugees experience gentrification compared to other migrant groups and whether similar implications would resurface with a larger sample. It would also be critical to consider generational differences and whether participants are homeowners or renters in the neighborhood. Moreover, this study also calls for a further investigation into the impact of gentrification on Albany Park as a welcoming neighborhood for newly arrived refugees, given the limited number of families resettled there in recent years.

The second significant finding involved gender and agency, particularly refugee women’s experience with integration compared to men. This study depicted the experience of two women, a refugee and an immigrant, and how their agency was different from their spouses. A more detailed examination could reveal whether similar trends concerning integration and shift in gender roles would also be present in a larger group of refugee families. This study also contributes to the limited literature discussing refugee families’ experiences of education in the city vs. the suburbs. A more longitudinal study encompassing a larger sample would also be beneficial to understand better how families view suburban education and whether it impacts their decisions to move to the suburbs. Lastly, this thesis calls for a further investigation into Assyrians’ experiences with racism and integration by examining factors of race and religion and the role of the Christian faith in the community’s relative ease of integration into U.S. society.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Initial Semi-Structured Interview Questions:  

Albany Park Interviews

Part I: Respondents’ General Experience Living in Albany Park

1. When did you move to the U.S.?
2. Where were you initially resettled when you first moved to the U.S. (i.e., city, neighborhood)?
3. When did you move to the Albany Park neighborhood?
4. How would you describe the Albany Park neighborhood?

Part II: Respondents’ Opinion about Education in Albany Park vs Surrounding Suburbs

5. How would you describe the education quality that your kids receive in Albany Park, Chicago?
6. What have you heard about the school districts in surrounding suburbs such as Niles?

Part III: Respondents' Experience with Belonging and Anchoring Institutions in Albany Park

7. Do you have any family or friends from the same religion or ethnic group that also live in Albany Park?
8. What services do you use in Albany Park that are more difficult to find or access elsewhere (i.e., grocery stores, community services, places of worship, etc)?
9. Are there any services that you can't find in Albany Park that you have to travel elsewhere to access?
10. How do you define community?
11. How would you describe the sense of community in Albany Park?
12. How has the community in Albany Park impacted your sense of belonging?

Part IV: Respondents' Opinion about Gentrification

13. There is a process that is used to describe changes that take place in a neighborhood. Such changes come with both negative and positive implications on residents living in the neighborhood. Such changes include an increase in the number of wealthy individuals that move into the neighborhood and a decrease in the number of low-income residents, beautification of the community, large chain stores replacing smaller immigrant-owned stores, changes in the signs of stores across the neighborhood, and increased rent and
food prices. This process is known as “gentrification” or “التحوّل، الاستطباق” in Arabic.

Have you experienced gentrification while living in Albany Park?

14. How has gentrification impacted your living experience in Albany Park (i.e., cost of living such as housing or food, etc)?

15. How would you define gentrification in your own words?

Part V: Respondents’ Opinion About the Political Environment in the Country

16. How would you describe the political environment in the country now vs past years?

17. Can you tell me about your thoughts on the immigration policies we have had concerning refugees and other migrants in recent years (i.e., travel ban, lowering the refugee admittance cap, etc)?

18. How did you feel as a refugee living in Albany Park now vs past years?

19. How would you describe your sense of belonging to Albany Park now vs the past years?

20. How would you describe your sense of safety living in Albany Park now vs past years?

21. a) Have you ever considered moving out of Albany Park? If so, what factors make you consider leaving? b)If you have considered leaving Albany Park, what is preventing you from making this decision to leave the neighborhood?

Niles Interviews

Part I: Respondents’ General Experience Living in Albany Park

1. When did you move to the U.S.?

2. Where were you initially resettled when you first moved to the U.S. (i.e., city, neighborhood)?

3. When did you move to the Albany Park neighborhood?

4. How would you describe the Albany Park neighborhood?

Part II: Respondents’ Opinion about the Role of Education in Deciding to Change Neighborhoods

6. When did you move to Niles?

7. Why did you move to Niles?

8. What have you heard about the school district in Niles before moving to the neighborhood?

9. What role did education play in your decision to move to Niles?
10. Have you noticed a difference in the education your kids receive in Niles vs the one in Albany Park?

Part III: Respondents’ Experience with Belonging and Anchoring Institutions in Niles

11. Do you know any friends or family that also reside in Niles that impacted your decision to move?
12. What services did you find in Niles that were not accessible to you in Albany Park (i.e., grocery stores, community services, places of worship, etc)?
13. Are there any services that you can’t find in Niles that are only available or accessible in Albany Park?
14. How do you define community?
15. How would you describe the sense of community in Niles?
16. How has the community in Niles impacted your sense of belonging?
17. Is there anything specific that you miss about living in Albany Park?

Part IV: Respondent’s Opinion About Gentrification

18. There is a process that is used to describe changes that take place in a neighborhood. Such changes include an increase in the number of wealthy individuals that move into the neighborhood and a decrease in the number of low-income residents, beautification of the community, large chain stores replacing smaller immigrant owned stores, changes in the signs of stores across the neighborhood, and increased rent and food prices. This process is known as “gentrification” or “التحوّل، الاستطباق” in Arabic. Have you experienced gentrification while living in Albany Park?
19. How has gentrification impacted your living experience in Albany Park (i.e., cost of living such as housing or food, etc)?
20. What role did gentrification play in your decision to leave Albany Park and find housing somewhere else?
21. Do you experience gentrification in Niles?
22. How would you define gentrification in your own words?

Part V: Respondents’ Opinion About the Political Environment in the Country

23. How would you describe the political environment in the country now vs past years?
24. Can you tell me about your thoughts on the immigration policies we have had concerning refugees and other migrants in recent years (i.e., travel ban, lowering the refugee admittance cap, etc)?
25. (If applicable) How did you feel as a refugee living in Albany Park in recent years?
26. How do you feel as a refugee living in Niles now vs the past years?
27. How would you describe your sense of belonging to Niles now vs the past years?
28. How would you describe your sense of safety living in Niles now vs past years?

Revised Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

Albany Park Interviews

Part I: Respondents’ General Experience Living in Albany Park

5. When did you move to the U.S.?
6. Where were you initially resettled when you first moved to the U.S. (i.e., city, neighborhood)?
7. When did you move to the Albany Park neighborhood?
8. How would you describe the Albany Park neighborhood?

Part II: Respondents' Opinion about Education in Albany Park vs Surrounding Suburbs

22. How would you describe the education quality that your kids receive in Albany Park, Chicago?
23. What have you heard about the school districts in the surrounding suburbs?

Part III: Respondents' Experience with Belonging and Anchoring Institutions in Albany Park

24. Do you have any family or friends from the same religion or ethnic group that also live in Albany Park?
25. What services do you use in Albany Park that are more difficult to find or access elsewhere (i.e., grocery stores, community services, places of worship, etc)?
26. Are there any services that you can't find in Albany Park that you have to travel elsewhere to access?
27. How do you define community?
28. How would you describe the sense of community in Albany Park?
29. How has the community in Albany Park impacted your sense of belonging?

Part IV: Respondents' Opinion about Gentrification

30. There is a process that is used to describe changes that take place in a neighborhood. Such changes come with both negative and positive implications on residents living in the neighborhood. Such changes include an increase in the number of wealthy individuals
that move into the neighborhood and a decrease in the number of low-income residents, beautification of the community, large chain stores replacing smaller immigrant-owned stores, changes in the signs of stores across the neighborhood, and increased rent and food prices. This process is known as “gentrification” or “التحوّل، الاستطباق” in Arabic.

Have you experienced gentrification while living in Albany Park?

31. How has gentrification impacted your living experience in Albany Park (i.e., cost of living such as housing or food, etc)?
32. How would you define gentrification in your own words?

Part V: Respondents’ Opinion About the Political Environment in the Country

33. How would you describe the political environment in the country now vs past years?
34. Can you tell me about your thoughts on the immigration policies we have had concerning refugees and other migrants in recent years (i.e., travel ban, lowering the refugee admittance cap, etc)?
35. How did you feel as a refugee living in Albany Park now vs past years?
36. How would you describe your sense of belonging to Albany Park now vs the past years?
37. How would you describe your sense of safety living in Albany Park now vs past years?
38. a) Have you ever considered moving out of Albany Park? If so, what factors make you consider leaving? b) If you have considered leaving Albany Park, what is preventing you from making this decision to leave the neighborhood?

Part VI: Respondents’ Opinion to the Assyrian Church

39. What Assyrian church do you attend?
40. What does the Assyrian Church mean to Assyrians?
41. What does the Assyrian Church mean to you as an Assyrian?

Suburbs Interviews

Part I: Respondents’ General Experience Living in Albany Park

5. When did you move to the U.S.?
6. Where were you initially resettled when you first moved to the U.S. (i.e., city, neighborhood)?
7. When did you move to the Albany Park neighborhood?
8. How would you describe the Albany Park neighborhood?
Part II: Respondents’ Opinion about the Role of Education in Deciding to Change Neighborhoods

29. When did you move to this suburb?
30. Why did you move to this suburb?
31. What have you heard about the school district in the suburbs before moving to the neighborhood?
32. What role did education play in your decision to move to the suburbs?
33. Have you noticed a difference in the education your kids receive in the suburbs vs the one in Albany Park?

Part III: Respondents’ Experience with Belonging and Anchoring Institutions in Niles

34. Do you know any friends or family that also reside in the suburbs that impacted your decision to move?
35. What services did you find in the suburbs that were not accessible to you in Albany Park (i.e., grocery stores, community services, places of worship, etc)?
36. Are there any services that you can’t find in the suburbs that are only available or accessible in Albany Park?
37. How do you define community?
38. How would you describe the sense of community in the suburbs?
39. How has the community in the suburbs impacted your sense of belonging?
40. Is there anything specific that you miss about living in Albany Park?

Part IV: Respondent’s Opinion About Gentrification

41. There is a process that is used to describe changes that take place in a neighborhood. Such changes include an increase in the number of wealthy individuals that move into the neighborhood and a decrease in the number of low-income residents, beautification of the community, large chain stores replacing smaller immigrant owned stores, changes in the signs of stores across the neighborhood, and increased rent and food prices. This process is known as “gentrification” or “التحوّل، الاستطباق” in Arabic. Have you experienced gentrification while living in Albany Park?
42. How has gentrification impacted your living experience in Albany Park (i.e., cost of living such as housing or food, etc)?
43. What role did gentrification play in your decision to leave Albany Park and find housing somewhere else?
44. Do you experience gentrification in Niles?
45. How would you define gentrification in your own words?
Part V: Respondents’ Opinion About the Political Environment in the Country

46. How would you describe the political environment in the country now vs past years?
47. Can you tell me about your thoughts on the immigration policies we have had concerning refugees and other migrants in recent years (i.e., travel ban, lowering the refugee admittance cap, etc)?
48. (If applicable) How did you feel as a refugee living in Albany Park in recent years?
49. How do you feel as a refugee living in the suburbs now vs the past years?
50. How would you describe your sense of belonging to the suburbs now vs the past years?
51. How would you describe your sense of safety living in the suburbs now vs past years?

Part VI: Respondents’ Opinion to the Assyrian Church

52. What Assyrian church did you attend when you lived in Albany park?
53. What Assyrian church do you attend now that you live in the suburbs?
54. What does the Assyrian Church mean to Assyrians?
55. What does the Assyrian Church mean to you as an Assyrian?
APPENDIX B

FIELD NOTES: NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS, GENTRIFICATION INDICATORS
Sept 26th 2021 @ 3:40pm

Uptown/Albany Park, Chicago

Once I passed by Kedzie, I noticed that the newer stores had less wording, and they tended to stick to neutral colors. The older stores in Albany Park had old signs that were washed out or were in really bright colors and had large letters. The modern buildings had fewer stickers on their walls and had more neutral colors, such as black and white. You certainly see a contrast between the two types of buildings/stores. Once I passed Kedzie, I noticed that the stores were closer to one another, more concentrated. Then I saw some mixed buildings with black umbrellas, but the windows still had pictures of the items and writings of what they carried. So one either saw a building with just the name or a building that was a mix of some posters and fewer colored signs, and then you had stores that are more ethnic with lots of colors, flags, and writings in different languages. Clothes from one store were displayed outside; I saw small vendors on the street, which I did not see in Uptown.
Summary of conversation from the unstructured interview with two community members/Dunkin Donuts Oct 2021:

Reasons provided by participants on why they thought Assyrians were leaving the Albany Park neighborhood and moving to the suburbs:

Albany Park does not have many houses; it is primarily apartments. When people succeed financially, they want to buy a home, so they have to move elsewhere. There were also safety issues concerning gang activities in the 80s. In addition, they were also looking for good schools. Many families moved to Skokie due to its proximity to Albany Park and also since it had vacant homes due to Jewish families leaving the area.