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CULINARY GHOSTING: A JOURNEY THROUGH A SWEET AND SOUR IRAQ

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Abstract: *Ella Shohat tell us about the work of Michael Rakowitz and his three art and culinary projects that comment on the transnational flow of images and sounds, of smells and tactile impressions intermingled with the ashes of war and multiple displacements. Iraqi food and its relation with displacement, return, war, visibility are the subjects of the projects and of Shohat's analysis. Through the prism of the culinary, Rakowitz's Iraq cooking projects create an archive of recipes and cultural knowledge in motion. They are also tales of the ghosts of departed communities. The complex Iraqi experience conveyed in bittersweet stories seems to perfectly resonate with the culinary genre hamed-helu, composed of the dissonant harmony between sweet and sour properties. Remembering Iraq through culinary acts transforms the absentees into a palpable presence, through the collective process of dining and dialoguing. Ghosting food thus testifies simultaneously to the disappearance but also to imaginary returns.*

Keywords: *War. Art. Culinary. Diaspora. Iraq.*

Michael Rakowitz's broad, diasporic Iraq art project evokes the region's vivacious, palimpsestic history of communal multiplicity, while also gesturing toward its hoped-for potentialities. This multipronged project digs deep into the recent and distant pasts, engaging the remains and what could be remembered out of the fragments left in the wake of several wars, sanctions, and massive dislocations. Rather than a mere lamentation about forced departures and possible returns, his work takes the viewer participant on a reflexive voyage into the politics of memory, all against the persistently devastating backdrop of violence and destruction. Rakowitz revisits the narratives about the Gulf War and the Iraq War circulating widely in the media, alluding as well to colonial British interventions and inventions. The ongoing, epic-scaled dislocation of people and objects within/from the Middle East, furthermore, continues to be embedded in the colonial production of "the enemy."

The culinary arena forms a significant theme in Rakowitz's engagement of Iraq. Projects such as *Enemy Kitchen (Matbakh al-'adu)* (2003–ongoing), *RETURN* (2004–ongoing), *Spoils* (2011), and *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* (2013) entertain the production, consumption, and circulation of food. Whether in its raw materiality or in its refined display, the performance of food preparation comes to allegorize the politics of class, gender, religion, nation, and diaspora. Contrary to the exotica industry associated with Middle Eastern restaurants and cookbooks, Rakowitz's food projects comment on the transnational flow of images and sounds, of smells and tactile impressions intermingled with the ashes of war. Culinary memories are entangled with massive-scale, politically generated loss but also with the creative desire to survive in biological terms and regenerate in cultural terms. Historically, migratory movements and networks of

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trade routes—such as the Silk Road, which connected Mesopotamia and China—also made food and agricultural knowledge “travel,” cultivating new modes of producing and consuming foods across vast regions. (Despite our association of pasta with Italian cuisine, for example, pasta was made possible only by two transcontinental encounters: Marco Polo’s encounter with the Chinese noodle and post-Columbus Europe’s encounter with the tomato of the Americas).

With massive postcolonial dislocations and transnational globalization, such trending fusions have become de rigueur. The presence of displaced Indians/Pakistanis in the United Kingdom, for example, has transformed English cuisine, just as the presence of North Africans in France has engendered a new culinary landscape across the country. Curry and couscous now form an integral part of Europe’s digestive body. The United States has also witnessed such culinary transformations. But in the case of Middle Eastern cuisine, it is usually Lebanese/ Levantine dishes that exert their appetizing presence, due to the history of Arab immigration to the Americas largely from Greater Syria, dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Despite direct US involvement, Iraq’s culture generally, and its cuisine specifically, remains dramatically lacking in visibility. Rakowitz’s Iraqi food project compensates for and intervenes in this lacuna. But rather than displaying Orientalist-fashioned exotica, his project challenges the seductive view that those with bellies full of hummus, falafel, and kibbeh somehow come to master fully “the Arab mind.” On the contrary: in his work, through acts of dining, the digesting bellies are incorporated into the critique of an all-consuming *casus belli*.

Since 2003, *Enemy Kitchen* has mobilized food for a reflection on war but also on the opposition to war and to acts of solidarity. According to Rakowitz, the project gradually came about after he witnessed a long line of people waiting to eat in the Afghani restaurant Khyber Pass, in the East Village, New York, shortly after 9/11. In response to subsequent incidents of harassment, including the targeting of mosques and Muslim businesses, the people in line were demonstrating their support of the owners and staff of the restaurant. This gesture inspired *Enemy Kitchen*, an ongoing project in which the artist and his mother compile Baghdadi recipes and teach them to different audiences. It was first presented by More Art, a public art organization in New York, where Rakowitz cooked with a group of middle school and high school students, some of whom had relatives in the US Army stationed in Iraq. In the process of cooking and dining, Iraq emerged as a subject of conversation in ways that transcended the media’s processed, green-tinted images of an abstracted military destruction. The project, as the artist described it, “functioned as a social sculpture,” displaying a heated debate:

Some of the discussions were great. Even the problems were important. One day, a girl who had attended a few classes came in frustrated and said, “Why do we have to cook this nasty food? They blow up our soldiers every day and they knocked down the Twin Towers!” Another student spoke up and said, “The Iraqis didn’t knock down the Twin Towers, it was Bin Laden.” Then, it went further. From the stove, another kid said, “It wasn’t Bin Laden, it was our government.” It was incredible to see all this unfold week after week. The students were not really discussing it in school because many teachers regarded it as too touchy an issue. But in this space of cooking and eating, I really started to see how an important segment of the US population that I do not often have the opportunity to interact with feels about the world since 2001. And when you think about someone of middle school or high school age, at least half of their living years have been during wartime (SHOHAT, 2017).

Over the years, *Enemy Kitchen* has been performed at several art institutions and in 2012 it became a fully functioning food truck, popping up on the streets of Chicago. Iraqi refugee cooks and US veterans of the Iraq War serving as sous-chefs collaborate to prepare delectable “enemy” dishes. The project denaturalizes the occupier/occupied power relations and reverses the war hierarchy in which the US military dictates orders and regulations to Iraqis. Now it is Americans who follow (cooking) orders given by Iraqis. The truck features the Chicago flag, which conventionally consists of two blue horizontal stripes on a field of white; between the two blue stripes are four red, six-pointed stars arranged in a horizontal row. Here, however, it is rendered in the colors of the Iraq flag—white, red, black, and green—thereby fusing two locations, the Middle East and the North American Midwest. In *Spoils* (2011), Rakowitz similarly commented on war through the act of dining. Iraqi cuisine-inspired dishes, cooked with date syrup, were served to the participants on plates looted from Saddam Hussein’s palace in 2003, suggestively commenting both on his corrupt, repressive regime and on the ensuing new cycle of violence. Rakowitz purchased the plates on eBay from an active US soldier serving in the unit that captured Saddam Hussein and from an Iraqi refugee living in Michigan.

The cultural heritage of Iraq, including the national museum and library, has been ransacked and ruined. The cry against such acts is probably most vividly remembered in the moment captured on camera of the Iraqi curator Amal Al-Khedairy courageously chasing away looters. The founder and director of Al-Beit Al-Iraqi (The Iraqi House), an arts and cultural center in Baghdad that conserved and revived Iraqi crafts, Al-Khedairy, like many Iraqis, had to leave Iraq. The Ottoman-style house was destroyed and its remains looted. In the post-Saddam Hussein era, the disfiguring of a millennial civilization ensued. (As Rumsfeld so poetically put it: “Stuff happens.”¹) This cultural violence led Rakowitz to initiate a massive reclamation project, entitled *The invisible enemy should not exist*. Since 2007, the artist and his team have recreated around 600 of the 7,000 objects missing from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. Identifying the description of objects on the Interpol and the Oriental Institute of Chicago websites, the team re-creates lost artifacts, aimed to deter antiquity dealers from purchasing looted artifacts. Rather than mimicking the materials from which the statues were made, however, the reconstructions are created from recycled packaging of Middle Eastern foodstuffs.

What would usually be considered garbage forms the found material from which the art objects are made. The reconstructed objects become living testimonies to the *long durée* of cultivation in the region—where food and art are intimately linked. The act of ecological recycling comments on yet another kind of devastation brought on by another dimension of the decades of war: the destruction of Iraq’s infrastructure, which has injured Iraq’s ecosystem and biodiversity, bringing with it substantial public health implications as well. The pollution of air, water, and earth from depleted uranium, poisonous chemicals, and toxic smoke has wreaked havoc on the environment and on human lives, leading to deaths from illnesses, by escalating cancer rates, for example.

¹ Sean Laughlin, “Rumsfeld on Looting in Iraq: ‘Stuff Happens,’” *CNN*, Apr 12, 2003, cnn.com/2003/US/04/11/sprj.irq.pentagon/.

The “shock and awe” bombing of industrial plants has polluted ground water and damaged the sewage-treatment plants, contaminating rivers, drinking water, and locally grown food. Rakowitz’s use of recycled food packaging from the Middle East to reconstruct its ancient artifacts, in other words, makes vital conceptual links between the usually separated realms of the ancient civilizational past and contemporary food production. The reconstruction of archaeological artifacts from contemporary food packaging draws a continuum between the aesthetics of the past and the materials of the present. It also refuses the separation of genres (i.e., between the cultivation of food and the culture displayed in a museum). Instead of deploying a Eurocentric narrative that glorifies the Western archaeologist as the rescuer of ancient civilization from present-day Middle Eastern barbarians—which would delink ancient civilizations from the contemporary inhabitants of Mesopotamia—Rakowitz’s project forges deep links between the archaeological artifacts and the people of these regions, who continue to cultivate, in all senses of the word, but now amid an ongoing ruination.

In yet another, more recent cycle of violence, ISIS has been systematically destroying antiquities and blowing up temples. Physically manifesting its own interpretation of Islam, ISIS has reenacted its own iconoclastic version of the monotheist tradition. Its “video-selfies” display idol-smashing performed in loco in ancient sites (the demolition of the Tomb of Jonah/Nebi Yunus Shrine, for example) as well as in museums (the ravaging of the protective deity Lamassu—the Assyrian human-headed winged bull created around 700 BC, which once stood at the entrance to the Nergal Gate that led to Nineveh). In response, in 2016, Rakowitz created a maquette of the Lamassu that ISIS had dismantled at the Nergal Gate at Nineveh in 2015. Recently awarded the Fourth Plinth Commission prize, Rakowitz in his next project will set up the reconstruction of Lamassu in London’s Trafalgar Square in 2018. The sculpture tells the story, in metal as it were, of the damage inflicted by the ongoing war on Iraqi culture and cultivation. Made of empty cans of Iraqi date syrup, this contemporary adaptation of the Lamassu alludes to a once-renowned industry now decimated by the Iraq wars. The sculptural reconstruction simultaneously fuses antiquity and modernity, its form reincarnating the image of the ancient hybrid gure, but its material content composed of modern tin cans. At the same time, the empty cans denote the absent indigenous date syrup and connote the agricultural environment and cultivated food that have lasted from Mesopotamian antiquity to Iraqi modernity but that are now subjected to contamination and disappearance. The reincarnated Lamassu cries out against the multiple contemporary forces that enact the catastrophic liquidation of human lives, of ecological equilibrium, and of cultural inheritance.

The work’s placement in the heart of Iraq’s colonizer’s metropole will also be emblematic of another layer in the history of the British Empire and its Mesopotamian campaign, which was accompanied by the scientific project of archaeology. (Gertrude Bell, who played a decisive role in drawing the lines in the sand that formed post-Ottoman Iraq, was a devout archaeologist who actively participated in the excavation of Mesopotamia.) The indigenous objects were removed and placed in the antiquity sections of the British Museum, London, the Louvre, Paris, the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, testifying to a monumental history of

colonial dispossession. Yet, even the inadvertent safekeeping of these objects in the Western capital, with its bittersweet irony, hardly washes away the bitterness of the imperial theft of history. Nor can it erase a more recent history of postcolonial displacements to the metropolitan centers of the West as encapsulated in the slogan, “We are here because you were there!” A kind of Mesopotamian haunting of empire, the London Lamassu will mirror a city with its own generations of dislocated Iraqis, with its Iraqi grocery stores and restaurants bearing such names as Babylon and Baghdad. “Rebuilding the Lamassu in Trafalgar Square,” Rakowitz points out, “means the sculpture can continue performing his duties as guardian of Nineveh’s past, present and future, even as a refugee or ghost, hoping to one day return to Iraq.”² The hybrid figure of the Lamassu, one could argue, seems to encapsulate perfectly the cultural hybridity of postcolonial displaced communities generally and of Iraqis specifically.

The ghosting of food also plays a fecund role in Michael Rakowitz’s *RETURN* (2004–ongoing). The artist opened a temporary store in Brooklyn, New York, using the same name as his grandfather Nissim Isaac David’s business, Davisons & Co., which imported and exported goods between the United States and the Middle East. Departing from Iraq with his family in 1946, David left first for Bombay (now Mumbai) and then moved to Long Island, New York, where his company operated until 1960. Because of the vulnerable position of Iraqi Jews in the wake of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, he, like many from his Jewish-Iraqi community, was unable to return. The portraits of the grandfather and the artist on each side of the contemporary shop’s vitrine embody the intergenerational dimension of the project; the artist continues the grandfather’s practice, affording the grandson a virtual return to Iraq. But rather than expressing mere nostalgia for a past Iraq, the project intervenes in the contemporary US/Iraq political landscape. In this reenactment of the old company, Rakowitz returns to his family’s roots and routes, but all enveloped with recent issues and concerns. His gesture of sending and receiving goods is especially meaningful given the sanctions under which Iraqis suffered in the wake of the Gulf War, but which they also circumvented by using fake repackaging, labeled as products of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates and distributed globally. Yet, *RETURN* highlights the fact that the presumed-to-be-renewed relations between the United States and Iraq in the wake of the 2003 invasion constitute far-from-uneventful quotidian acts.

Rakowitz’s renewed flow of goods—mostly dates—between Iraq and the United States offers a dynamic platform for narrating the plight of Iraq. In this long-term project, the small Brooklyn shop sold dates after their delayed arrival. The first consignment of dates did not actually make it past the Syrian border. The trials and tribulations of the resilient dates, the heartiest of any fresh fruit, are turned into a saga consumed by the store patrons/art-site visitors, now witnesses to a transnational *One Thousand and One Nights* tale of the destiny of dates as they “flee” increasing sectarian violence, crossing treacherous state borders, and trying to survive global barriers. “The dates,” in Rakowitz’s words, “suddenly became a surrogate, traveling the same path as Iraqi refugees.”³ The

² “Fourth Panelist Finalists for 2018, 2020 Announced,” accessed May 10, 2017, art.northwestern.edu/news/fourth-plinth-nalists-2018-2020-announced.

³ “Store Blog,” *Creative Time*, Aug 10–Dec 10, 2006, creativetime.org/

project does not simply depict the global circulation of goods but also allegorizes the prospects for Iraqis in the wake of the war, within and outside of Iraq's borders.

The store gradually turned into an updated reincarnation of the old market place, a public space for the traffic of ideas and information. Rakowitz's initial offer to ship items to Iraq for free attracted the interest of passersby on Atlantic Avenue, dotted with many Arab businesses. But shipping to Iraq has been far from a straightforward venture. The story of the objects traveling to Iraq, just like the stories of goods coming out of Iraq, becomes a kind of metaphor and metonymy for the dangers of cross-border movement of people vulnerable to conflicting local/global forces that rule over their lives and kidnap their ability to live. Rakowitz documented these various interactions and stories, creating a living diary of history in action. For those customers informed only by mainstream media, Rakowitz's site made possible a vivid presentation of Iraqi experiences of multiple traumas, prompting identification with Iraqis on the ground and their relatives in New York. More generally, it became a pedagogical process of re-seeing the region beyond reductive discourses of terrorism and Islamism. In a North American context, where Arabic script in public spaces tends to provoke ambivalent responses, the store's facade with signs in both Arabic and English was visibly hospitable to different languages and perspectives. By generating space for Iraqi stories to circulate, the project also goes against the hegemonic representation of Iraqi Jews, which separates their cultural creativity from Iraq as a whole. Rakowitz's project also goes against the grain of the narrative of perennial animosity between Jews and Muslims. *RETURN* revives the deep connections between the various communities of the region. It transcends the quarantining maps of belonging that have perpetuated rigid, sometimes literally concrete, borders and the persistence of the Arab/Jewish emotional divide—whence “the rejection of the Arab-Jew” prevalent in many Jewish institutions and publications.

In another kind of a return, this time performed not in the United States but in the Arab world, Rakowitz's *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)*, a pop-up restaurant in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, which operated May 1–7, 2013, was conceived as the first restaurant in the Arab world to serve the cuisine of Iraqi Jews since their exodus. *Dar Al Sulh* featured the recipes of Rakowitz's Jewish-Iraqi grandmother, whose mixtures of ingredients reflected the encounters among various cultural geographies. A culinary performative act, *Dar Al Sulh* shed light on multiple roots and routes. Some of the dishes revealed the traces of Bombay, where, already in the nineteenth century, a large Iraqi-Jewish community settled, and to where Rakowitz's family immigrated in the 1940s prior to coming to New York. “My mother's recipes,” recounts Rakowitz, “bear the traces of the family's time in India, with many of the traditional Iraqi dishes augmented by spices like curry and chili” (SHOHAT, 2017). Here, too, rather than a purist narrative, Rakowitz accentuated the diasporic and the syncretic, turning culinary fusion into a metaphor for multiple displacements.

As with *Spoils*, the dishes in *Dar Al Sulh* were served on plates and trays from Iraq. But if in *Spoils* the porcelain plates were originally looted from Saddam Hussein's palace, in *Dar Al Sulh* the metal plates and trays were the remains of objects “traveling” with the

programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz_blog.html.

departing Babylonian-Iraqi-Jews that survived long after their journey out of the country. Two of the serving trays belonged to the Great Synagogue of Baghdad; now they were traveling back to the region, close to the place of their creation. And as with *RETURN*, *Dar Al Sulh* generated a space in which dialogue across geographical, communal, and ideological borders could be facilitated. It allowed the participants to return to an era when Jews and Muslims lived together. In Rakowitz's words: "The notion of conciliation was the central philosophy of 'Dar al Sulh,' meant to be reflected in the food and the conversations spoken around it" (SHOHAT, 2017). Each night for a week, the team cooked together and received more than fifty dinner guests—people from different countries, regions, and communities—a reflection of transnational Dubai. Hosts and guests gathered, eating and listening to music and to brief comments about the dishes (by Michael Rakowitz), the music (by Regine Basha), and Jewish-Iraqi cultural politics (by me). As with Rakowitz's other Iraq-related projects, *Dar Al Sulh* brought together multiple suppressed histories of the Middle East and of its diaspora. (An Arabic word of the same root as *sulh* is *islah*, which refers to mending, xing, reclaiming, retrieving, and piecing together.) Iraqi Jews were represented within the larger picture of this diaspora, demonstrating through food, music, and words a cultural affinity that is inextricable from the region.

The absence of Arab Jews was encapsulated in the project's subtitle, "Cuisine of an Absent Tribe," and the epigram "You are eating a dying language from the plate of a ghost," both of which were inscribed on the window of the Traffic Gallery, in Dubai's industrial zone of Al Quoz. Rather than framing the event as "Iraqi-Jewish Cuisine," Rakowitz highlighted a departed community, an absent tribe from Iraq, thus subverting the association of the word "tribe" with its biblical sense of filiation. Furthermore, by reintroducing the absent Jews into the imaginary of Iraq, but without announcing it as such, *Dar Al Sulh* also navigated a diplomatically delicate definition of "Jewish"—a word that, in the context of the Arab world, would have immediately been read as Zionist. (For this reason, the event was not publicized as "Jewish," and most visitors heard about it through word of mouth.) Thus, the unenunciated presence of the Arab-Jew paradoxically called attention to the same conflicting forces that historically produced the absence of the Arab Jews.

Through the prism of the culinary, Rakowitz's Iraq cooking projects create an archive of recipes and cultural knowledge in motion. In accentuating the movement between various geographies, they create out of displacement an empowering sense of home-ness. But they are also tales of the ghosts of departed communities. The complex Iraqi experience conveyed in bittersweet stories seems to perfectly resonate with the culinary genre *hamed-helu*, composed of the dissonant harmony between sweet and sour properties—a savory oxymoronic flavor achieved by cooking with such ingredients as tamarind and pomegranate molasses. Remembering Iraq through culinary acts transforms the absentees into a palpable presence, through the collective process of dining and dialoguing. Ghosting food thus testifies simultaneously to the disappearance but also to imaginary returns.

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Título: *Culinária fantasma: uma viagem por um Iraque doce e amargo*

Resumo: *Ella Shohat nos conta sobre o trabalho do artista Michael Rakowitz e seus três projetos culinários que tratam do fluxo transnacional de imagens, sons, aromas relacionados com guerras e múltiplos deslocamentos. Comida iraquiana e sua relação com deslocamento, retorno guerra, visibilidade são temas dos projetos de Rakowitz e da análise de Ella Shohat. Através do prisma da culinária, os projetos criam arquivos de receitas e conhecimento cultural em movimento. Eles são também histórias de fantasmas de comunidades ausentes. Rememorando o Iraque, grupos e memórias como os judeus iraquianos, através de atos culinários transformam as ausências em presença palpável, através do processo coletivo de jantar e dialogar. Testemunham simultaneamente o desaparecimento e o retorno imaginário. Shohat analisa os projetos *Enemy Kitchen (Matbakh al-'adu)* (2003–em andamento), *RETURN* (2004–em andamento), *Spoils* (2011) e *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* (2013).*

Palavras-chave: *Guerra. Arte. Culinária. Diáspora. Iraque.*



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