

From: *Michael Rakowitz*, curated by I. Blazwick, C. Christov-Bakargiev, H. Rashid, M. Vecellio, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 7 October 2019 - 19 January 2020), Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2019, pp. 50-67.

Culinary Ghosting: A Journey through a Sweet-and-Sour Iraq

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Michael Rakowitz's diasporic Iraq art project evokes the region's vivacious history of communal multiplicity, while also gesturing, even if only as an imaginative desire, toward its hoped-for potentialities. This multipronged project digs deep into the recent and distant past, engaging with what could be remembered from the fragments left in the wake of wars, sanctions and massive dislocations. Rakowitz revisits the widely circulated narratives about the Iraq war, alluding as well to earlier British interventions and colonial inventions. But rather than constituting a mere lamentation about forced departures and possible returns, the work takes the viewer/participant on a reflexive voyage into the politics of memory – all against the persistently devastating backdrop of violence and destruction. A century-long, epic dislocation of people and objects within/from the Middle East continues to be embedded in the forceful production of the 'enemy'.

The culinary arena forms a significant site for Rakowitz's engagement with Iraq. Ongoing projects such as *Enemy Kitchen (Matbakh al-'adu)* (2003), *RETURN* (2004), *Spoils* (2011) and *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)* (2013) involve the production, consumption and circulation of food. Whether in its raw materiality or in its refined display, the performance of food preparation comes to allegorise 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 the massive politically generated loss, but also with the creative desire to survive in physical terms and regenerate in cultural terms. Historically, migratory movements and networks of trade routes – such as the Silk Road that connected Mesopotamia and China – also made food and agricultural knowledge 'travel', cultivating new modes of producing and consuming foods across vast regions. (Pasta, for example, despite its association with Italian cuisine, was made possible by two cross-regional and transcontinental encounters: Marco Polo's stumbling upon the Chinese noodle and the Spanish 'discovery' of the Aztec tomato.)

With globalization and massive postcolonial dislocations, such trendy culinary fusions have become de rigueur. The presence of displaced Indians/Pakistanis in the UK, 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 US has also witnessed such culinary transformations. But in the case of Middle-Eastern cuisine, it is usually Levantine dishes that exert their appetising 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 in the region, Iraq's culture generally, and its cuisine more specifically, remain invisible. Rakowitz's Iraqi culinary project counterbalances this lacuna. But

rather than display Orientalist-fashioned exotica, the project challenges the seductive view that bellies full of humus, falafel and kibbi somehow come to master the 'Arab mind'. On the contrary; in his work, through acts of dining and digesting, bellies are incorporated into the critique of an all-consuming *casus belli*.

Since 2003, *Enemy Kitchen* has mobilised food as part of active opposition to the war. According to Rakowitz, the project gradually came about after witnessing a long line of people waiting to eat in the New York Afghani restaurant, Khyber Pass, 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 for the owners and staff of the restaurant. This gesture of solidarity 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 New York public art organisation, where Rakowitz cooked with a group of middle- and high-school students, some of whom had relatives in the US Army stationed in Iraq. Through the process of cooking and dining, 'Iraq' emerged as a subject of conversation transcending the media's anesthetised, green-tinted images of an abstracted shock-and-awe destruction. The project, as Rakowitz described it, 'functioned as a social sculpture', displaying a heated debate.

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 refugees cook while US veterans of the Iraq War serve as sous-chefs collaborating in the preparation of delectable 'enemy dishes'. The project denaturalises the occupier/occupied power relations, and reverses the war hierarchy in which the US military dictates orders and regulations to Iraqis. Now it is the 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. But the flag is rendered in the colours of the Iraq flag – white, red, black and green – thereby fusing the Mideast and the Midwest. Indeed, in *Spoils*, Rakowitz reflexively yokes the horror of war in Iraq to the pleasure of dining in the U.S. Iraqi cuisine-inspired dishes, infused with date syrup, were served on paper replicas of the plates looted from Saddam Hussein's palace. (Rakowitz purchased the plates on eBay from an active US soldier serving in the unit that captured Saddam, and from an Iraqi refugee living in Michigan.) Linking the two geographies, *Spoils* suggestively evokes the devastation engendered both by a repressive regime and by invading forces, resulting in post-2003 catastrophic cycles of violence.

Iraq's civilisational heritage and cultural institutions have been ransacked and ruined. The cry against such acts is probably most vividly remembered in the camera-captured moment of the Iraqi curator, Amal Al-Khedairy, courageously chasing away looters. Eventually the founder and director of Al-Beit Al-Iraqi (The Iraqi House), an arts and cultural centre 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 remainders were stolen. In the post-Saddam era, the disfiguring of a millennial civilisation ensued, including the national museum and library. (As Defense Secretary Donald 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. Using the description of objects on the Interpol and the Oriental Institute of Chicago websites, aimed to deter antiquity dealers from purchasing looted artifacts, the team re-

creates the lost works. 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 to be discarded, forms the found-material from which the art objects are made. In this sense, the reconstructed object becomes a living testimony to the long period of cultivation in the region – where food and art are intimately linked. The act of ecological recycling comments on yet another aspect of the devastation brought by the decades of war – the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure that has injured its ecosystem and biodiversity, spawning negative public-health consequences 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 through escalating cancer rates, for example. 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 to reconstruct Iraq's ancient artifacts serves to connect agriculture and culture, making a conceptual link between the usually separated realms of excavated artifacts and contemporary food production. His reconstruction also draws a continuum between the aesthetics of the past and the materials of the present. Unlike a Eurocentric glorification of the archeologist as the rescuer of Mesopotamian antiquity, the project forges a genealogical connection between antiquity and present-day inhabitants, 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 iconoclastic version of the monotheist tradition. Its 'video-selfies' display idol-smashing performed in ancient sites (the demolition of the Jonah/Nebi Yunus Shrine, for example) as well as in cultural institutions (such as the toppling and smashing of statues with sledgehammers in the Mosul museum). Especially visible in the media was the ravaging of the protective deity Lamassu – the Assyrian human-headed winged bull created around 700 BC, a protective deity that once graced the entrance to the Nergal Gate that led to Nineveh until it was destroyed by ISIS in 2015. In response, in 2016, Rakowitz created a maquette of the dismantled Lamassu. Awarded the Fourth Plinth Commission prize, he reconstructed the Lamassu in 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 war. The sculptural reconstruction thus simultaneously fuses antiquity and modernity, its form reincarnating the image of the ancient hybrid figure, 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 practices that have lasted from Mesopotamian antiquity to Iraqi modernity, but which are now subjected to contamination and possible disappearance. The reincarnated Lamassu, in this sense, cries out against the multiple contemporary forces that enact the catastrophic liquidation of human lives, of ecological equilibrium, and of agricultural inheritance.

The placement of the work in the heart of a famous square at the very centre of the colonial metropolis is also emblematic of another layer in history – that of the British empire and its Mesopotamian campaign, which was accompanied by the scientific project of archeology.² The indigenous objects were removed and placed in the antiquity sections of London's British Museum, Berlin's Pergamon Museum, Paris's Musée du Louvre and New York's The Metropolitan Museum

of Art, testifying to a monumental history of imperial dispossession. Yet even the inadvertent safe-keeping of these objects in the West, with its bittersweet irony, hardly washes away the bitterness of the colonial theft of history. Nor can it erase a more recent history of postcolonial displacements to the metropolitan centres of the West encapsulated in the slogan: 'We are here because you were there!' A kind of Mesopotamian haunting of empire, the London Lamassu mirrors a city with its own generations of dislocated Iraqis, whose grocery stores and restaurants bear names like 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'.³ The hybrid figure of the Lamassu, one could argue, seems to perfectly encapsulate the cultural hybridity of postcolonial displaced communities generally and of Iraqis more specifically.

The ghosting of food also plays a fecund role in Rakowitz's *RETURN*. The artist opened a temporary store in Brooklyn, using the same name as his grandfather Nissim Isaac David's business, Davisons & Co., which imported and exported goods between the U.S. and the Middle East. Departing from Iraq with his family in 1946, David first went to Bombay and then moved to Long Island, 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 members of his Jewish-Iraqi community, was unable to return. The portraits of the grandfather and the artist on each side of the shop's vitrine embody the project's intergenerational dimension: the artist continues the grandfather's practice, affording the grandson a virtual return to Iraq. But rather than being an expression of sheer nostalgia, the reenactment intervenes in the contemporary U.S./Iraq political landscape. In this reincorporation of the old company, Rakowitz returns, as it were, to his family's roots and routes, now enveloped in recent issues and concerns. His gesture of sending and receiving goods is especially meaningful against the backdrop of the 1990s sanctions that inflicted much suffering on Iraqis, which they circumvented through fake repackaging. Labelled as products of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia or the U.A.E., Iraqi staples were distributed globally under different guises. Yet *RETURN* features the 2003 invasion as a source of freshly troubled border-crossing, making the return to the grandfather's import/export business an unfulfilled desire.

Rakowitz's renewed flow of goods between the U.S. and the Middle East offers a dynamic platform for narrating Iraq's plight. His Brooklyn shop was intended to sell imported dates, but the first consignment did not actually make it past the Syrian border. While waiting for the shipment, Rakowitz stocked the store's shelves with date syrup and mamoul date-filled cookies. The store also sold a substitute, Californian dates grown from Iraqi seeds, an Iraqi-American hybrid, emblematic of cultural cross pollination. The interior walls of the shop, meanwhile, displayed a travelling chronology of the Iraqi dates. The plight of the fruit was followed by the visitors who had initially come to purchase the dates, and later to inquire about the progress of their movement from Hillah (a city adjacent to ancient Babylon) to New York. The trials and tribulations of the resilient dates, the heartiest of fresh fruits, 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'.⁴ In this transnational allegory, the project does not simply depict the global circulation of goods, but also represents the murky prospects for Iraqis in the wake of the war, both within and outside 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 art-site stories of the goods travelling from and to Iraq became a kind of metaphor and metonym for the dangers of cross-border movement of people subject to the conflicting local/global forces that rule over their lives, generating a kidnapped existence. Rakowitz documented his various interactions with the visitors, offering a living diary and history in action. For those customers informed only by the dominant media, Rakowitz's site made possible a vivid presentation of experiences of multiple traumas, prompting identification with Iraqis on the ground and with their relatives in New York. More generally, it became a pedagogical process of re-seeing the region beyond reductive images of terrorism and Islamism. In a North American context, where Arabic script in public spaces provokes ambivalent responses, the store's façade displaying signs in both Arabic and English was visibly hospitable to different languages and perspectives, both literally and metaphorically polyglot and dialogical.

By generating space for Iraqi stories to circulate, *RETURN* also goes against the hegemonic representation of Iraqi-Jews that separates their cultural creativity from Iraq as a whole. Indeed, tens of thousands of Jewish-Iraqi documents were taken from the flooded basement of the Ba'ath intelligence headquarters by a U.S. Army team. To pose the question of legitimate belonging (to the U.S., Israel or Iraq?) constitutes more than a mere debate over ownership of an archive; it also concerns who possesses the right to narrate the official history of dislocation. A process that began with the arrival of colonialism and nationalism to the region, and especially with the ensuing Arab and Jewish conflict over Palestine, only intensified with the cross-border movement of Jews outside of Iraq, engendering a historically new identity crisis for Arab-Jews. Rakowitz's project, in this sense, goes against the grain of the hegemonic 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 within many Jewish institutions and publications.

Pronouncing an incorrigible Arab or Muslim anti-Semitism, furthermore, all too conveniently places the burden of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict on the Palestinians themselves. In the era of post-9/11, of the War on Terror, spreading Islamophobia, as well as of ISIS-led destruction, the campaign on behalf of 'Jewish refugees from Arab lands' has gained some momentum in the public sphere. Yet against the backdrop of the Arab-Spring turned Arab-Winter, of bloody repressions and of sheer decimation of Iraq and Syria that has led to the current refugee crisis, 'the forgotten refugees' project turns a blind eye to other dislocations. Current violence in the Middle East often frames the departure of Arab-Jews as proof of the essentialist argument that one 'can't trust the Muslims'. The many legitimate claims of Arab-Jews become problematic when ignoring the complex circumstances that led to their ejection; when such claims are utilised to nullify Palestinian claims; and when oblivious to current devastations causing the exodus from the Middle East to Europe. In contrast, Rakowitz's *RETURN* orchestrates a polyphonic narrative for the displaced Arab-Jew.

The dialogues that Rakowitz captures in his diary-blog during *RETURN* have provided a platform for another unheard communal voice in the media representation of Iraq. The artist documented the following conversations with one customer, the Iraqi-Jew Shamoan Salih:

Sunday, 12/3/2006: ‘When I think of Iraq, I feel I am there emotionally. I left in 1960, but I was defined by the system, the stamina, the discipline. And I look at what is happening there now...’ His voice trails off. He recalls listening to the radio during a series of important trials in the late 1950s and one of the testimonies that stood out for him was that of a man, originally from Mosul, in the north. He was a Christian and a communist, and was exiled to Turkey by the king in the 1940s. After the coup that brought Qassem to power in 1958, he was able to return to Iraq. He was a witness in one of the trials against the monarchy and he entered the court with a bag of dirt. The judge asked him what this was. He said it was a bag of dirt that he brought with him from Iraq to Turkey. ‘The judge said, “what’s the big deal? They have dirt in Turkey”. The man said, “this is thikra. This is the memory of the dust of the beloved homeland.”’ Shamoan pauses. ‘I remember being very moved by his words. I thought to myself, this man is a patriot.’⁵

In this multi-layered project, the story of Jewish Iraq is narrated within and in relation to the various dislocated Iraqis, not simply as a story of Jewish persecution, but as cross-community identifications.

Rakowitz’s work is attuned to the pitfalls of the Zionist doxa about an eternal chasm between Jews and Muslims. It consciously rearticulates rooted Jewish belonging in the region while also displaying its various routes inside and outside the region. Instead of being presented as a singular Jewish story of victimisation, the displacement of Arab-Jews is represented within the imposed regional tragedies from within and from without, including that of Palestinians. Jews and Muslims emerge ‘between-the-lines’ as rounded figures with intimate relations sharing aesthetic sensibilities, explored through the prism of the culinary. *RETURN* reveals the cultural continuities among the region’s various communities, including those of Middle-Eastern Jews. And rather than isolating Jewish-Iraqi stories, Rakowitz’s projects ground them within multiple relationalities. Thus, the nutritional and culinary centrality of the date to regional taste and tradition is related across various communities, including the Jewish community. The culinary lexicon, for example, of preparing dishes with ‘*asal al-tamer* (date syrup), highlights shared flavours, smells and cooking practices.

Even when the project focuses on Iraqi-Jews, the narrative eschews an isolationist approach. Indeed, *Dar Al Sulh*’s menu/brochure begins with the story of the date:

An Introduction. A Wish.

Tonight we open the meal with dessert first: a date.

Dates are legendary in Iraq, renowned as the best in the world, with a yield of over 600 different varieties. In the first moments of life, it is traditional for parents to place a date in the mouth of their newborn baby, so its first taste of life is sweet. A harbinger of good things to come.⁶

In another kind of return, this time performed not in the U.S. but in the Arab world, the project specifically focused on the Jewish-Iraqi story, evoking its difference and similitude vis-à-vis the region. A pop-up restaurant in Dubai, which operated for one week from 1–7 May 2013, was conceived as the first restaurant in the Arab world to serve the cuisine of Iraqi Jews since their exodus. The title deploys the Muslim notion of *Dar al-Sulh*, or Domain of Conciliation – a territory that marks an agreement between Muslims and non-Muslims, providing religious autonomy and

protection. Invoking this concept, which informed the way Jews lived within Muslim spaces, the project challenges the widespread narrative of persecution of ‘Jews in Arab lands’. Through this framework, the project engages the disappearing past while also reclaiming the notion of the ‘Arab-Jew’.

The performance, furthermore, featured the recipes of Rakowitz’s Jewish-Iraqi mother and grandmother, whose mixture of ingredients reflects the encounters among various cultural geographies. Through a culinary performative act, the performance sheds light on multiple roots and routes. Some of the dishes revealed the traces of Bombay, where, especially since the nineteenth century, a large Jewish-Iraqi community has settled, and to which Rakowitz’s family moved 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’.⁷ Here too, rather than presenting a purist narrative of ‘one people’, Rakowitz accentuates the diasporic and the syncretic, turning culinary fusion into a metaphor for multiple displacements and cross-pollinations.

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 looted from Saddam’s palace, in *Dar Al Sulh* the metal plates were the remains of objects ‘travelling’ with the departing Babylonian-Iraqi-Jews who survived long after their journey out of the country. Two of the trays had belonged to the Great Synagogue of Baghdad; now they were travelling back to the region, close to the place of their creation, most likely in *souq al-ṣafafeer*, Baghdad’s centuries-old coppersmith marketplace. And as with *RETURN*, *Dar Al Sulh* generated a space through which dialogue across geographical and communal borders could take place. It allowed the participants to imaginatively journey back to an era when Jews and Muslims lived together; and in Rakowitz’s words:

to reactivate a space when there was harmony, when Jews had not yet abandoned their Arab selves, before Jewish populations in the Arab world were assumed to be complicit with Zionism. 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.⁸

Each night for a week, the team cooked together and received more than fifty dinner guests from different countries, regions and communities. Hosts and guests gathered for a gastronomic sojourn, digesting to the sounds of Iraqi music, while also listening to the brief comments by the project’s co-hosts/collaborators about the dishes (by Rakowitz), the music (by independent curator Regine Basha) and cultural politics (by the author). The dinner embraced a wide variety of participants, including from the U.A.E. and the Gulf, from Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, as well as from Europe, North America and Latin America – a reflection of transnational Dubai. Providing an Iraqi soundtrack for the dining experience, the gallery also hosted *Tuning Baghdad*, an ongoing project initiated by Basha. It archives rare audio/visual materials (including those of Basha’s father) and supplies historical background about Jewish-Iraqi musicians in the first half of the twentieth century, an era when a relatively large number of Jews were composing and performing Arabic music. It also includes the *maqams* of the musician Salah Al-Kuwaity, who directed the orchestra of the Iraqi National Radio from its establishment in the 1930s. The last generation of Jewish-Iraqi musicians who performed in Baghdad is gradually disappearing. The screening of footage of *hafflas* (parties) drawn from Basha’s home-movies offered the participants a sense of the displaced Arab-Jews who nonetheless have been carrying ‘Iraq’ with them into their diasporic homes.

Whereas in New York Jewishness is a norm, Arab-Jewishness is an oxymoron. In Dubai, meanwhile, Arab-Jewishness is something that is historically familiar yet hidden. There, to be an Arab-Jew is not seen as an absurd idea. Nonetheless, because of the long absence of Arab-Jews, the very physical presence of Iraqi-Jews (Rakowitz, Basha and the author) became a new kind of anomaly. In two or three generations, the Arab-Jews' disappearance from the Arab world has turned the presence of Iraqi-Jews there into an 'event'. Articulating the idea of the Arab-Jew within an American context has triggered immense hostility, especially from the Jewish establishment, while in Arab spaces the idea tends to be embraced. Invoking the complexity of Arabness, *Dar Al Sulh* allowed a sense of homecoming for the displaced hosts/guests. Such an encounter across the modern Arab/Jewish divide comes in the wake of a historical wound – that is, the psychic injury impacting not only Arab-Jews but also Arabs in general. The departure of Jews from Arab spaces left a kind of scar on the Arab body-politics. The performance, meanwhile, facilitated a remembering of Arab-Jewish presence told as testimonies by those participants who directly experienced co-existence, or by those whose elders passed on such memories. Some Arab guests spoke about missing their own Jewish neighbours and friends who had disappeared overnight. Some even asked: 'Do you happen to know so and so? He was my neighbour in Bataween.' At the same time, second- and third-generation guests who had never experienced having Jewish (Iraqi) neighbours, were extremely curious about this untold history. The performance took place ten years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, in a country near Iraq, a region where multiple generations of exiled Iraqis now live. Engaging the multiplicity of Iraqi identity, a novel subculture has emerged, excavating pre-partition Arab spaces in search of its religious and ethnic 'cosmopolitan' past, leading to a resurgence of interest in the once-silenced story of Iraqi Jews and in the question of Arab Jews more generally.

Yet nostalgia, as in all Rakowitz's projects, cannot be reduced to a fixation about the past, since the emotion here is invested in a cautious hope and desire, at times melancholic, for a different future. 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 emphasised a departed community, an absent tribe from Iraq, thus subverting the association of the word simply with Bedouin identity or with a Biblical sense of filiation. Furthermore, by re-introducing the absent Jews into the idea of Iraq, but without announcing it as such, the event also navigated around 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 well publicised, and most visitors heard about it by word-of-mouth.) Thus, the unannounced presence of the Arab-Jew paradoxically calls attention to the same conflicting forces that historically produced the absence of the Arab-Jews.

Conceived around a daily theme, the menu aimed at triggering various sensory experiences. Each evening was orchestrated around the properties of the specific dishes; the *'amba* salad surfacing as the single refrain. And each meal appealed to one of five different palate sensations – bitter, sour, salty, sweet, umami. The nightly table conversations would spark general comparisons of the diverse types of regional cuisines, including Iranian, Turkish and Syrian, but also more specifically bringing about reflections on the place of Iraqi-Jews within Iraq's history and culture, about the commonalities, despite some difference, in food practices. Some Iraqi guests wondered why the dishes were defined as 'Iraqi-Jewish', given the overlap and even barely discernible differences.

The question of what defines ‘Iraqi-Jewish cuisine’ inevitably came up. Indeed, the project can be viewed as a meta-commentary on the issue of culinary belonging that comes to allegorise cultural affinities beyond the Arab-versus-Jew binarism.

Although the event revolved around Iraqi-Jewish cuisine, the designation is in a sense used under erasure, as if to simultaneously evoke and question the concept. In the context of Dubai, these terms become meaningful precisely due to the recent Jewish absence from Arab spaces. But the event also highlights Jewish-Iraqi cuisine as part of a continuum of regional cooking. In the end we find a spectrum of subtle differentiations, including among Iraqi-Jews themselves, depending on cities and towns in which they lived. Along with commonalities, we also find differences among Muslim Iraqis, among Christian Iraqis etc.; in short, we find differentiated commonalities. In this sense, the hyphen between ‘Iraqi’ and ‘Jewish’ registers a desire to unsettle the cataloguing of dishes as simply uniquely Jewish. It was therefore not a coincidence that the dishes were intimately familiar to the non-Jewish Iraqi guests, inevitably raising the question: ‘Is there such a thing as Iraqi-Jewish food?’ Here the perception of ‘Iraqi-Jewish food’ as completely distinct from Iraqi culinary practices is undermined.

The project’s assumptions could be contrasted with Jewish cookbooks, a genre that engenders a univocal classification of ‘Jewish food’ despite divergent Jewish cuisines. Under one rubric, these publications unify the culinary customs of a variety of cultural geographies, which while obeying *kashrut* dietary laws, widely differ in their flavouring and cooking methods. Polish and Yemeni dishes, Russian and Tunisian dishes, and so on, come to form one continuous culinary zone isolated from their contextual non-kosher cuisines. In this melting-pot vision of the diversity within the Jewish nation, a Eurocentric discourse of ‘exotic Jews’ has segregated Jewish practices from their ambient gastronomy, eliding a millennia of the Judeo-Muslim hyphenation. Middle-Eastern *kasher* and *halal* are performed within the same cooking grammar, while Ashkenazi dishes are related to Eastern-European cuisine. In this sense, Jewish-Moroccan cooking is intimately linked to Maghrebian cuisine in general, just as Jewish-Iraqi cooking is deeply infused with the recipes, flavouring, spices and smells of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. Whether implicitly or explicitly, a certain kind of a nationalist ethos has informed this delinking of Arab-Jews from the larger Arab culinary geography. Around *Dar Al Sulh*’s table, some of the guests commented exactly on this issue, asking in effect: what makes it ‘Iraqi-Jewish cuisine’ if the dishes are identical to Iraqi cuisine in general? Indeed, as variations on a theme, Jewish-Iraqi dishes are deeply ingrained in the region’s culinary aesthetics. The very unfolding of the conversation, meanwhile, reflexively underscored the unusual occasion of Jewish-Iraqi cultural presence in an Arab space.

At the same time, the project’s emphasis on the ‘Jewish’ in the ‘Iraqi food’ category reflects an approach of actively re-remembering Iraq, not simply of what it was, but also of what it could become – an inclusive place. The project does not deny certain specifically Jewish religious practices (analogous to specifically Shi’a dishes cooked for specific holidays) but unfolds them within the region’s multiplicity. The Sabbath evening meal featured the traditional heavy *tbeet*, a stuffed chicken dish slowly cooked overnight, with the rice filling sewn in with a needle and thread. The name points to a specifically Jewish-Iraqi dish associated with the Sabbath celebration. But the dish – its spicing, stuffing and the sewing of the chicken – reflects the ingredients and cooking methods shared by diverse ethnic and religious communities across the region, and resembles an Iraqi dish called *tanuri*. Cooking practices formed the thread binding the discussion around the table. Some of the participants’ responses demonstrated that they fully understood the issues of identity and

definitions of belonging raised through the culinary act. Others were understandably more baffled, often due to the expectation of tasting presumably authentic Iraqi-Jewish dishes. For Rakowitz, the conversation about cultural sameness among Iraqis of diverse backgrounds was a critical moment of the event:

One of the participants, a Dubai resident and a Sunni, originally from Mosul, had his arms folded and said, irritably: ‘I don’t get it. I don’t understand. What’s so Jewish about all of this? We make all these dishes! We came here for an Iraqi-Jewish meal! And this is just Iraqi!’ And then his daughter, who generously joined the cooking team, whispered: ‘That’s the point!’ And he said with relief: ‘Oooh! So when Michael comes back we’re going to open up an Iraqi restaurant together.’⁹

Regional sameness is at least as significant as religious variation. Some dishes in the South, in Basra, such as *fasanjoon*, are shared with Iranian/Persian cooking. In the North, in Mosul, dishes are closer to Aleppo (Syria), for instance, *kubbat Halab*. The menu of Iraqi restaurants – such as Al-Masguf in Dubai or Masguf al-Baghdadi in Abu Dhabi – overlap with Jewish-Iraqi dishes. The culinary continuum was evident in *Dar Al Sulh*’s dishes as well as in the immediate recognition by the audience/participants. This same kind of regional variability, including among Jews, could also be illustrated in the realm of language. What is called the Iraqi dialect consists of diverse idioms, even among Jews. Baghdadi Jews, who spoke differently from ‘Anna’s Jews, also spoke a dialect quite similar to the general vernacular of Mosul, deployed in the North not only by Jews but also by Christians and Muslims alike. This mutual linguistic and culinary intelligibility is echoed in Rakowitz’s words about his experience in a Kurdish-Iraqi restaurant called Arbil on London’s Edgware Road. ‘Despite some differences, most of the dishes were recognizably the dishes I grew up with. For example, “Mahshi”, which Iraqi Jews call *mhasha* – the stuffed vegetables – and the boiled rice-flour *kubba* – *Kubbat Mosul*.¹⁰

The representation of a homogenous Jewish culture is reflected in the nationalist genre of Jewish cookbooks. With the increasing acceptance of diversity, Middle-Eastern Jewish food, and by extension identity, is recognised but ultimately remains de-linked from Muslim gastronomy. In contrast, *Dar Al Sulh* is an attempt to rearticulate the complexities of Jewish-Iraqi culture as attuned to Iraq’s multiplicity, demonstrating through food, music and words a cultural affinity inextricable from the region. Dietary kosher codes religiously shared among Jews are also practiced within different cooking methods and spicing registers. And despite some dietary differences that govern Jewish and Muslim codes, there is also considerable gastronomic overlap between regional halal and kosher food – precisely what tends to be forgotten in popular Jewish cookbooks.¹¹ It is not simply a question of a common Judeo-Muslim rejection of pork but rather the fact that, within Arab/Muslim spaces, their cuisines belonged to the same culinary genre. The regional overlapping also encompasses shared cultural practices around dining and hospitality. Each evening *Dar Al Sulh* reenacted blessing rituals, opening with ‘core’ Iraqi phrases, such as *hala*, *hala bikum* and concluding with *’ashtidkem* (blessed be your hands). The background *maqam* sounds similarly conjured up the memory of the once popular Jewish-Iraqi musicians who were fully embedded in the Arabic musical scene. The music, like the food, underscored cross-communal cultural practices, reverberating with the feeling of being-at-homeness.

The project managed to perform a certain Jewish-Iraqi specificity but without turning it into an emblem of Jewish ghettoisation. An older Iraqi who came especially for the Shabbat *tbeet* rendered

his verdict: ‘My wife’s *tbeet* is much better!’ While bragging about his wife’s cooking, he was also, perhaps inadvertently, suggesting an affinity with Iraqi Jews, both proud of the past neighbourly relations and of his wife’s mastery of this Jewish-Iraqi dish. His comment reflected communal intimacy; in his case of a Christian Iraqi who loved his Jewish neighbours and had been missing them. The dish was resignified as a pleasurable melancholic homage for the departed Jewish neighbours. Around the table, *tbeet* had a flavour of memory, allowing for a participatory collective act of re-membling the various fragments of Iraq’s displaced communities.

Some of the Arab guests/participants expressed the sentiment that the amnesia about the presence of Jews in the Arab world was a denial of their own history. In this version of a memorial for a departed community, loss was rearticulated in conjunction with Iraq’s various ethnicities, religions and political affiliations. Despite the indeterminacies of the Arab-Jewish past, which itself has become a kind of a *kan-ya-makan* (there was and there was not), the event afforded a kind of a symbolic return. Although Iraqi Jews may feel left out of Iraq, travelling to Dubai performed an exilic gathering in a proxy Iraq. All Iraqis around the table were displaced, together mourning their various exiles, yet in this coming together they could return, in an imaginary voyage, to *bilad al-Rafidayn*.¹² The restaurant in-transit resuscitated and displayed a kind of a *convivencia* space usually associated with Spain, but which actually also existed in the many ‘Al-Andaluses’ of the Muslim world. As a performance piece, *Dar Al Sulh* ultimately challenges the millennial persecution narrative projected onto the experience of Jews in Muslim spaces – a Eurocentric historiography that I have elsewhere characterised as a tracing-of-the-dots from pogrom to pogrom.¹³ In the case of Iraq, this ideological trend is visible in recent efforts to include the 1941 attack on Jews, the *farhud*, in the Holocaust Memorial Museum as if emblematic of the Baghdadi-Jewish story – an effort to pogromise, as it were, or, more specifically, to *farhudize*, the history of Jews under Islam. Yet from another perspective, the emergence of the Zionist movement could itself be seen as igniting trouble for Middle-Eastern Jews, placing them in an impossible position of having to defend a Jewishness that was for the first time in their history associated not with religion but with nationalism.

In some Arab nationalist discourse, meanwhile, all Jews came to be viewed as ‘traitors’, even though the majority of Middle-Eastern Jews could hardly be defined as actively Zionist or anti-Zionist. The ‘Arab-versus-Jew’ split emerged as a new dilemma, which in the broiling post-1948 atmosphere generated much fear and anxiety, making Iraqi-Jewish dislocation inevitable. Indeed, the haunting question of Palestine formed part of *Dar al Sulh*. One of the walls displayed a photograph – a 1975 image of Palestinian militiamen during the Lebanese civil war protecting Beirut’s Maghen Abraham Synagogue. This image allowed Rakowitz ‘to conjure an earlier event from 1941 that wasn’t photographed, of the many Muslims and Christians who protected their Jewish neighbors during the *farhud* in Iraq’.¹⁴ The photograph documents a moment that made solidarity narratives vividly present in the room, captured in Rakowitz’s words:

Further connecting that photograph to our own history as Iraqi Jews is the beautiful comment that was written by a young Palestinian scholar who attended several of our dinners. She wrote: ‘As a Palestinian in the diaspora, I understand that our struggles are inseparable. In the long term, our liberation will be your liberation. It is our purpose as beings in this world to reclaim the history of Mizrahi Jewry as a monumental chapter in both Arab and world history. In Solidarity and Conciliation.’¹⁵

As collateral damage in the question of Palestine/Israel, the Arab-Jew is mobilised for opposite political ends. In *Dar Al Sulh*, the enactment of culinary memories helps piece together the fragments and mend broken bits. The Arabic *sulh* of the title is related to a word of the same root, *iṣlah*, which refers to mending, fixing, reclaiming, retrieving and piecing together. Iraqi-Jews are represented within the larger picture of an ongoing diasporisation. As with Rakowitz's other Iraq-related projects, *Dar Al Sulh* brought together multiple suppressed histories of the Middle East and of its diaspora. Some members of the younger generation of displaced Iraqis who attended the event had themselves never been to Iraq and had not met Jewish-Iraqis:

This young woman in her 20s just walked in and said, 'I've read all about this. I've watched all your lectures on YouTube and I think you're crazy and I need to work at this restaurant.' She came every day at 4 o'clock after she was done with her job and would cook with us and would be there the whole night. Her boss asked her, 'What are you doing these evenings?' She said, 'Oh, I'm actually helping out at this Iraqi Jewish restaurant that's opened up temporarily here in Dubai called Dar Al Sulh.' Her boss took her by the arm into another room and said, 'I didn't know you were Jewish.' She said, 'I'm not, I'm Iraqi and they are Iraqi.'¹⁶

After a week of intense conversations over collective cooking, serving and cleaning, toward the end of the event, Rakowitz recalls:

She drove us home the night before the last meal. She started to kind of groan a little bit and she said, 'I can't believe this is almost over. What am I going to do when you guys go back? I'm going to have to hang out with all my non-Jewish friends.' And of course that's lovely and funny, but I think there's something about these links to the past that are also propositions for the future.¹⁷

In a kind of a Benjaminian revolutionary nostalgia, *Dar Al Sulh*, then, allowed the retrieval of a history still lost in the epoch of 'smart' wars.

Highly visible in the U.A.E, Iraqi spaces reveal a sense of an ongoing melancholy symptomatic of exilic communities. Within this constellation, the performance entered the psyche of the displaced, intersecting with their own narrative of loss. Their nostalgia for an Iraq that is gone was palpable. But that melancholy sentiment surfaces not necessarily because of idealisation – since no Iraqi would have left Iraq if that were the case – but because of the potentialities of what Iraq could have been, and what a new *convivencia* or *ta'ayush* (to borrow terms from another context) might look like. Exiled Iraqis often make frustrated comparisons of Iraq to the Gulf states: 'We could have been that. We also had oil.' In tones of envy, they say: 'Look what the U.A.E leaders have done with oil for their citizens' welfare.'¹⁸ The analogy, understandable given that Iraq's situation has become beyond disastrous, reflects their current no-exit condition. Living in and shaping the modern Gulf states as lawyers, architects and engineers, they remain for the most part unable to acquire citizenship, which exacerbates their feeling of out-of-placeness. They exist in a limbo; their relation to the Gulf nation-states is highly ambivalent. In transnational Dubai, *Dar Al Sulh* in this sense facilitated a reflection on Iraqi roots and routes accentuated through the ghost of the exiled Arab-Jews.

Taking place in Dubai and not in Baghdad, the *Dar Al Sulh* experience inevitably left a bitter-sweet taste. But as is always the case with Rakowitz's work, the Iraq projects are engrained in historical consciousness and invested in dialogical pedagogy. The project was concerned not so much with the historical facts but rather with the framing of the Jewish-Iraqi story. Traffic Gallery included among its various artefacts a few copies of the DVD of the Iraqi-Swiss documentary, *Forget Baghdad* (2002) by Samir, which delineates the story of the departure of Iraqi Jews from the perspective of writers on the left. 'It was', in Rakowitz's words, 'a kind of closing of a circle – a film about Iraqi Jews by a diaspora Iraqi (of Muslim and Christian backgrounds). We made present this "absent tribe," to use the language that I wrote on the glass facade of the temporary restaurant.'¹⁹ The bitter-sweet history turned the project into a space of re-membering the figure of 'the Arab-Jew'. Because Jewish-Iraqi families were dislocated from Iraq and placed in a new context where their history and culture have been taboo – as the culture of the enemy – the staging of a return became intellectually and emotionally vital within the microcosm of *Dar Al Sulh*.

Through the prism of the culinary, Rakowitz's Iraq project creates an archive of cooking recipes and cultural knowledges in motion. In accentuating the movement between various geographies, the project relays an empowering sense of 'homeness' despite displacement. But it is also a tale of the ghosts of the various departed communities, and, in the case of *Dar Al Sulh*, especially of Arab Jews. The complex Iraqi experience conveyed by the bitter-sweet stories unfolding in the event seem to perfectly resonate in the typical culinary genre called *ḥamedh-ḥelu*²⁰ composed out of the oxymoronic dissonant harmony between the sweet and the sour properties; a savoury flavour achieved by cooking with such ingredients as tamarind and pomegranate molasses. To return to the epigraph of the menu, 'You are Eating a dying language from the plate of a ghost', the disappeared are un-ghosted. The performance evokes a haunting nightmare of dislocation, but it also proposes the potentiality of conviviality. Re-membering Iraq through culinary acts transforms the absentees into a palpable presence, through the collective process of dining and dialoguing. Ghosting food, in sum, testifies simultaneously to a disappearance but also to imaginary returns.

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¹ S. Laughlin, "Rumsfeld on Looting in Iraq: 'Stuff Happens'," in *CNN*, April 12, 2003 <https://cnn.com/2003/US/04/11/sprj.irq.pentagon/> (access. March 4, 2019).

² Gertrude Bell, who played a decisive role in drawing the lines-in-the-sand that mapped post-Ottoman Iraq, was a devout archeologist who actively participated in the excavation of Mesopotamia.

³ "Fourth Panelist Finalists for 2018, 2020 Announced," in *A.T.P. Art, Theory, Practice*: http://art.northwestern.edu/news/fourth-plinth-finalists-2018-2020-announced_ (access. March 4, 2019).

⁴ M. Rakowitz, "Store Blog," in *Creative Time*: http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2006/whocares/projects_rakowitz_blog.html (access. March 4, 2019).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ M. Rakowitz, "Dar Al Sulh' menu/brochure," in *Dar Al Sulh (Domain of Conciliation)*, brochure, ed. by M. Rakowitz, London: The Moving Museum 2013, p.13.

⁷ Rakowitz, in "Don't Choke on History: Reflections on *Dar Al Sulh*, Dubai," 2013. A joint conversation between Regine Basha, Michael Rakowitz, and Ella Shohat, in E. Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings* (London: Pluto Press, 2017) and based on a transcribed radio conversation, Creative Time Reports, New York, June 28, 2013.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Authors such as Claudia Roden and Sami Zubaida, in contrast, have focused on the regional dimension of Middle-Eastern Jewish food.

¹² Arabic for Mesopotamia.

¹³ See E. Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism From the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," in *Social Text*, no. 19-20, Durham, Fall 1988. On the Eurocentric 'pogromisation' of what is seen as a single "Jewish History," one that renders taboo a multifaceted notion of variegated Jewish histories, in which the *convivencia* of Sefarad was hardly an anomaly but rather on a continuum with what could be viewed as the many Al-Andaluses within Muslim spaces, see E. Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and "Introduction" to *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements*.

¹⁴ Rakowitz, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ These observations are based not only on the week-long discussions with Iraqis visiting *Dar Al Sulh* but also on my conversations with exiled Iraqis in Abu Dhabi since 2011.

¹⁹ Rakowitz, *ibid.*

²⁰ In Arabic it refers to sweet and sour.