TDR: THE DRAMA REVIEW
the journal of performance studies

Tisch School of the Arts
New York University
665 Broadway
New York, NY 10012

21 April 2022

Assistant Professor Alireza Fakhrkonandeh
Modern and Contemporary Drama and Literary Theory
University of Southampton
University Road
Southampton SO17 1BJ
United Kingdom

Dear Professor Fakhrkonandeh,

I am delighted to accept for publication in *TDR* your article, "(Re-)Building a Museum, (Re-)Worlding a Nation, (Re-)Writing History: Aesthetics and Politics of Time, Space, and Memory in Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad*."

Onward ...

Richard Schechner
Editor, *TDR*

Author Dashboard

5 Manuscripts with Decisions

Start New Submission

5 Most Recent E-mails

Manuscripts with Decisions

ACTION	STATUS	ID	TITLE
	• Accept for Publication (11-Apr-2022) • Awaiting Final Files view decision letter	TDR-22-0023	(Re-)Building a Museum, (Re-)Worlding a Nation, (Re-)Writing History: Aesthetics and Politics of Time, Space, and Memory in Hannah Khalil's A Museum in Baghdad View Submission

(Re-)Building a Museum, (Re-)Worlding a Nation, (Re-)Writing History: Aesthetics and Politics of Time, Space, and Memory in Hannah Khalil's A Museum in Baghdad

Journal:	*TDR*
Manuscript ID	TDR-22-0023
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	national museum, decolonizing the imperial museum, ethics of trauma and politics of memory, capitalist extractivism and longue duree, Irrealist Aesthetics and Evental Realism

Abstract:	The premiere of Khalil's A Museum in Baghdad (2019) marks a critical juncture in the history of contemporary British drama. Taking AMB as its focal point, this essay ponders how AMB renders the museum as a multivalent allegorical space and institutional-discursive means whereby the complicities between culture, imperialism, and resource extractivism are revealed. Scrutinizing the spatial, temporal, and formal subtleties informing Khalil's treatment of Baghdad Museum, this essay explores the manifold parallels established between the two processes of museumbuilding and nation-building. Finally, the essay demonstrates how the dramatic aesthetic and historical method informing AMB can be characterized as "evental irrealism".

(Re-)Building a Museum, (Re-)Worlding a Nation, (Re-)Writing History: Aesthetics and Politics of Time, Space, and Memory in Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad*

Dr Alireza Fakhrkonandeh a.fakhrkonandeh@soton.ac.uk University of Southampton, UK

"[Our] cultural treasures [...] owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period…. And just as a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 2003: 392).

"Always there lurks the assumption that although the Western consumer belongs to a numerical minority, he is entitled either to own or to expend (or both) the majority of the world's resources" (Said 1994: 108).

Introduction

It all began (again) with two men having a clandestine meeting in a quaint café corner in London in 1916 not to discuss interregnum avant-garde trends sprouting in London and Paris, but to carve out new countries and territories by partitioning a vast unmapped and nationally un-demarcated geographical expanse left in the wake of a withdrawing and vanquished Ottoman Empire; a territory which later constituted a part of what came to be called the Middle East (see Berdine 2018; Lukitz 2006). The two men were Mark Sykes and George Picot, representing the British Empire and France respectively, who established the premise of a 1916 secret treaty between the two countries with a nod from the Kingdom of Italy and the Russian Empire. The agreement since its implementation came to be known as The Sykes-Picot Agreement (see

Lieshout 2016). Thus was Iraq established as a nation and country – along with three others: Syria, Lebanon, south-eastern Turkey which (along with northern Iraq) were all in the French sphere of control, while Palestine, the rest of Iraq, Jordan, Haifa, and Acre were in the British sphere of control.

It was to the task of cementing British hegemony and the smooth implementation of such an agreement at a local-national level - among native Arabs and Kurds, to wit - that Gertrude Bell was officially appointed by the British government. Notably, however, Sykes and Bell were fierce rivals. This is evidenced by Sykes' hostile description of Bell as "a flat-chested, rump-wagging man-woman - a blethering windbag" (Lukitz 2006: 3). The other significant difference between Bell and her two seniors, Sykes and Arnold Wilson, involved their drastically different concepts of the dynamics of the relationship between the Arab local government and British Empire along with their different stances towards the Arabs as people (see Naiden 2007). In 1911, Gertrude Bell joined British forces as a representative in the Arab world where she worked in various places including Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. Whilst her personal interests in archaeology and culture ran parallel with extensive political enterprises and activities, she worked first under Wilson's and later under Percy Cox's leadership. Variously referred to as an "arch-imperialist" (Melman 1995: 5), "the uncrowned Queen of Iraq" (Wallach 2005: 324), and a "spy" (Wallach 2005: 145), Bell played a prominent role in bringing Faisal to power as the ruler of Iraq, acted as a determining force (along with T.E. Lawrence) in rallying local Arabs to fight and oust the Ottoman Empire, and promoted Britain's hegemony in that region. Both Bell and Lawrence harboured profound admiration for native Arab and pre-Arab culture, language, and history and promoted the political transition to an Arab ruling of Iraq and other Arab territories.

In the misogynist judgment of her male colleagues, Bell was described as "changing her directions each time as a weathercock" (Wallach 2005: 3), while in fact she proved staunchly committed to the cause of consolidating Iraq as a nation and culture, and thus considerably contributed to the establishment of The Baghdad Archaeological Museum, now the Iraq Museum, and hereafter in this article, The Baghdad Museum. She adamantly dedicated herself to preserving the country's heritage. In 1922, Bell was appointed the director of antiquities by King Faisal and fought at numerous fronts to keep important artefacts in Iraq. This is attested by her notable role in the crafting of the 1922 Law of Excavation (Gibson 2008: 33) In 1923, as her political role diminished, Bell began her plans for the museum to serve as a sanctuary for Iraqi artefacts and antiquities. Her efforts eventually culminated in a crowning achievement: the inauguration of the Museum which officially opened its first exhibition space on 16 June 1926 with King Faisal attending the ceremony. During her last years, particularly between 1922 and 1926, Bell withdrew from life. Her social circles and links shrank, she suffered emotional loss, her political activities diminished. She found herself among new British officers and agents whom she hardly knew personally. She spent the final months of her life working on the museum, cataloguing items found at two ancient Sumerian cities, Ur and Kish. Bell died on 12 July 1926 from an overdose of sleeping pills, leaving her death an unfathomable conundrum: an accidental overdose or a suicide?

The neat, chronological account I provided above, concerning both the imperial-colonial constitution of Iraq as a nation-state and Bell's formative role in the establishment of both country and its first national museum, is exactly what Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad* (2019, henceforth *Baghdad Museum*) does not offer. Rather than a chronological, historicist account of the emergence of Iraq as a nation in conjunction with the history of various modes of violence inflicted on it at natural (resources), political, and social-cultural levels, *Baghdad Museum*

confronts us with a manifold, fluid temporal structure where past, present, and future are inextricably entangled. As the stage directions indicate: "*We are in the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad.* […] *We are Then (1926), Now (2006) and Later (this could be in 50, 100 or 1,000 years into the future)*" (Khalil 2019: 3). These three historical folds and temporal layers, far from remaining distinct, prove to have structural co-implications and imbrications. Whilst the 1926-focused fold depicts the nearly simultaneous constitution of Iraq as a nation-state and of the Baghdad Museum as the national museum, the 2006 fold hurls us into the infernal chaos emerging in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq - the ousting of Saddam Hussein under the guise of establishing American-style democracy. *Baghdad Museum* is a non-naturalistic play where the colonial-imperial genealogy of the contemporary woeful condition of Iraq in conjunction with the cyclical dynamics of such a history within a petro-capitalist global system are thrown into relief.

Baghdad Museum, in its juxtaposition of 1926 and 2006 shot through with an indefinite future, probes the ravages of colonialism and imperialism at personal, national, and global levels. As a decolonial critique, what distinguishes the aesthetics of the play is its historical method which is characterized by two features: first, its adoption of an anti-historicist, or anti-historiographical, approach; and second, its conception of historical time in terms of "longue durée" (see Braudel 2012). Into this elaborate aesthetic and historical structure, Khalil weaves allegory and evental realism (or irrealism). The latter are terms I utilize to characterize the distinctive ways in which time (including myth, history, and the relational dynamics between the two), space, and world (ontology) are treated in *Baghdad Museum*.[i] I will have more to say on this later. As a consequence, not only does *Baghdad Museum* draw parallels between the two critical junctures in Iraq's long history of extractivist exploitation, originary displacement, and ideological/imperial alienation. The play also adds a "mythic," or pre-historical (hence immemorial), past fold – an addition which,

coupled with the "indefinite" future fold of the play, not only extends the temporal span of the play into an indefinite past, but also compounds its temporal structure beyond a simply linear or cyclical dynamics, thereby opening up space for the dimension of the evental. *Baghdad Museum*, thus, establishes causal, genealogical, and gendered political-economic links between these widely apart historical periods and practices by situating them in the longue durée of imperial capitalism and phallogocentrism. In so doing, *Baghdad Museum* not only throws into relief the "systemic" and "cyclical" manner in which subaltern subjects (local Iraqis and women) and peripheral countries (Iraq) have similarly been exploited as a point for obtaining cheap resource, cheap labour, and a geopolitically strategic ground. It also opens up a space for the emergence of the immemorial (the erased or repressed memories of disastrous traumas) and the evental (a future not determined by the structures of the imperial-phallogocentric history).

Baghdad Museum presents a compelling retrospective critique of the colonial operations of Khalil's imperial homeland (Britain) in Iraq and evinces commitment to the exposure of systemic political-economic links between the cultural institutes of the colony (Baghdad Museum) and metropole (British Museum). Equally importantly, *Baghdad Museum* reveals how such colonial-imperial operations are informed with a core-periphery logic of extraction and a dynamics of combined and uneven development (Trotsky 1977: 26-7; Shapiro and Lazarus 2018: 1-36) where the cultural institutes (such as Baghdad Museum) were utilized as a camouflaged conduit for the imperial extraction and transferring of the artefacts/treasures to a "safer" home (British Museum). *Baghdad Museum*, however, should not be perceived as instantiating a singular interest in the history of Iraq. The play, in fact, features as one emblematic link in the extended body of Khalil's work which is preoccupied with the broader geography and long history of the Arab world and its political and cultural vicissitudes. A sweeping survey of Khalil's work demonstrates how

her concern with the history, genealogy, and geopolitics of the Arab world extends far beyond Iraq to encompass Palestine, Syria, and more broadly the Middle East as an indelibly linked cultural fabric and historical entity. This is attested by her contribution to the volumes of dramatic works specifically concerned with the ramifications of Sykes-Picot Agreement and the formation of the Middle East (see Pickering 2015).

When asked how aware of the stereotypical representations of Arab culture and Middle Eastern heritage she is, Khalil responds: "Very, very, very - trying to redress the balance of the way Arabs are portrayed on stage and screen is one of the reasons I started writing in the first place. I have always considered representations of Arabs and Muslims to be completely stereotypical and narrow" (Khalil 2021b). However, concerning European colonialism in Iraq, she also refuses to unilaterally condemn the actions of the colonial powers: "It's easy to see colonialism in very black and white terms but the truth is the European colonial influence on the world is a myriad of greys. Without it […] I wouldn't exist! […] Ultimately it feels to me like even if some of the individuals involved in colonial projects had good intentions, the overall aim was for Europe to benefit from those colonized countries' assets" (Khalil 2021b). By accentuating the aporias of colonialism at the level of lived, individual experience, the foregoing passage displays how Khalil perceives colonialism from a phenomenological-existential perspective. Correspondingly, what distinguishes Khalil's take on Iraq's history is her refusal to naively glorify it and to flatly condemn the oppressive nature of western imperialism.

Some of the recurring preoccupations of Khalil's work are the questions of Palestine, (neo-)colonial and imperial violence, cosmopolitanism and hybridity, (de-)colonization, and the precarious life of refugees. Her most prominent works include: *Plan D* (2010), *Bitterenders* (2010), *The Worst Cook in the West Bank* (2014), *The Scar Test* (2015), *Scenes from 68* Years*

(2016), *A Museum in Baghdad*, and most recently *Censor* (2020). Notwithstanding her being a prolific dramatist coupled with her being produced by major theatre companies, scant critical attention has been paid to her work by scholars. This essay is thus the first to undertake a sustained and extended analysis of Khalil's work generally and *Baghdad Museum* in particular.

Along with the manifold issues of time and history, the crux of *Baghdad Museum* is the implicit parallel between the two concomitant processes of museum-building and nation-making where the former constitutes the foreground and the latter the hinterland of the play. Hence in the play, (neo-)colonial and decolonial forces co-exist in tandem and tension. The museum – along with Abu Zaman and Gertrude – is the sole ballast between the two historical periods and an indefinite future plane, thereby providing spatial continuity in the temporal flux of the play. Khalil invokes museum(-making) as a metonym not only for the dynamics of colonial-imperial resource extraction/exploitation and establishing social-cultural hegemony, but also for the process of nation-building. Even though the manifold issues of time and space are indelibly intertwined and play a pivotal role in both the thematics and the political-historical and ontological dynamics of the play, I have decided, because of the complexity of each issue and the extended attention each requires for a rigorous exploration, to keep them apart and tackle only the latter in this essay.

Irrealism and Its Aesthetic, Ethical, and Social-Historical Implications

Baghdad Museum confronts us with a broken hourglass – hence the profuse presence of sand throughout the play. The image-idea of "broken hourglass" is more than a metaphor deployed for describing *Baghdad Museum*'s irrealist treatment of time – evidenced by its non-linear/non-realistic rendition of various historical layers along with its instances of anachronism and moments

of evental near-synchrony. A glass cabinet that starts being filled with sand with Gertrude inside it being incrementally buried; the cumulative influx of sand in the museum; and references to archaeological discoveries unearthed as a consequence of flooding rain, which has washed off monumentally sedimented sands of history to expose hitherto buried (pre-)historical moments, all feature prominently in the play. Once out of their glossy constraint, however, sand grains cease being the dead objects (means of measurement) they once were inside the hourglass. Instead, they assume a life of their own as agential subjects.

As indicated above, *Baghdad Museum* comprises three intertwined and intersecting temporal-historical folds. The 1926 fold depicts Gertrude in her attempt to prepare the Baghdad Museum for its opening with the help of her Iraqi assistant Salim and Abu Zaman (the transhistorical guardian of the museum). Gertrude's endeavour also involves the protection of the museum's artefacts from Professor Leonard Woolley, another British archaeologist who wants to transfer them to the British Museum in London. The 2006 fold presents Ghalia Hussein, a British archaeologist of Iraqi origin, preparing to reopen the museum after its having been looted during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. She is assisted by Layla (an Iraqi archaeologist), Mohammed (an Iraqi curator), and York (a female American soldier assigned to protect the museum). The reopening proves a failure because of Nasiya, a timeless Arab woman who protests the opening by sabotaging one of the valuable artefacts on display. The future fold of the play is presented through Abu Zaman's visions through glass where the Baghdad Museum is raided by masked men who abduct and execute an older Mohammed (now the director of the museum). True to the transversal dynamics of the play, the action, in all three folds, is intermittently punctuated by an eruption of poetic reflections delivered in the form of "choruses" either as soliloquy or dialogue. In these choral reflections – which act as contrapuntal voices and visions – one (often Abu Zaman) or more

characters suddenly comment in a mixture of Arabic and English on the action as if from a different (even transcendental) temporal plane/perspective.

There are discernible correlations between the Then and Now planes of the play intended to accentuate both overlaps and differences between the two (neo-)colonial histories. These include similar events in different time periods unfolding simultaneously on the stage from the beginning:

> *The space is filled with dignitaries and perhaps the odd soldier from Then, Now, and Later.*
>
> *There are three ribbons, three pairs of scissors, three important people.*
>
> *Each important person cuts their ribbon.*
>
> **Important people** I officially open this museum.
>
> **Abu Zaman*** (with chorus made up of Nasiya, Ghalia, Layla)
>
> Again مرة أخرى (Khalil 2019: 3).

Parallelism and intersection between the two temporal layers are further accentuated through the use of identical phrasing and/or overlapping speeches from different temporal folds. Two notable instances are when Gertrude and Ghalia happen to have identical speeches: On one occasion we read: "**Gertrude**/**Ghalia:** I prefer to be amongst the artefacts – that's why I'm here." (Khalil 2019: 23); and on another: "**Gertrude**/**Ghalia:** Thank God she's not damaged. (*Indicating the invisible statue.*) So beautiful" (Khalil 2019: 24). There are also numerous moments when both Gertrude and Hussein say identical lines. In the premiere production, the words of the chorus are split up and thrown around by all those on stage – manifested by the impeccably handled freezes and mime sequences.

This parallelism/intersection is evident when characters from different temporal folds perceive the same objects across time: "*The three exit leaving the crown behind them.* ***Gertrude***

steps forward and picks it up. ***Gertrude***, ***Layla*** *and* ***York*** *all look at it*" (Khalil 2019: 41). In the play's debut production - with Erica Whyman as the director and David Greig and Pippa Hill as the dramaturgs - the stage was also designed to underscore the above parallelisms/intersections with the space and props (two empty display cabinets, shelves, and desks) being shared by characters from different temporal folds. Furthermore, there are choral reflections throughout the play in which characters from both time periods join Abu Zaman and comment on events in the play: "**Abu Zaman*** (with chorus of Ghalia) Safer? أكرث أمانا؟" (Khalil 2019: 5-6) or "**Abu Zaman*** (with Nasiya who speaks in Arabic) You'd have to live forever يجب أن تعيش إىل االبد" (Khalil 2019: 21). The choice of characters that pair with Abu Zaman seems far from random. In fact, such choral moments not only afford us a glimpse into the personalities of those characters, but provide us with analeptic commentaries and proleptic insights. When the word "safety" is uttered, it is Ghalia (and nobody else) who joins Abu Zaman in the chorus. As the play progresses, Ghalia transpires as a person concerned about her safety and ends up leaving Iraq for safety reasons. Correlatively, the reason why it is Nasiya who joins Abu Zaman in the above choral reflection is that Nasiya is a "timeless" character too.

However, it is not these juxtapositions of time periods that render *Baghdad Museum* a work of *irrealism* or *evental realism*, but the nature and dynamics of Abu Zaman's role and his power to affect/change the future by tossing a coin. Put succinctly, "irrealism" designates the instances or manifestation of the disruption, anamorphosis, and subversion of forms and subversion of the (linear and realistic) logics of narrative, time, and space registered at formal (narrative form and language) and psychological (character) levels. The irrealism of form is intended to act as a potent and revealing registration of the destruction and distortion of the local-national realities of history, geography, and demography as lived by the native people in "peripheral" countries (predominantly

the Global South) wrought and exerted by the forces of colonial and imperial petro-capitalism and globalization. As Michael Niblett explains: "If irrealism comes to the fore in those periods when 'all that is solid melts into air'", we might assume that it would "wane as an aesthetic strategy once the emergent conditions have been stabilized and new socio-ecological unities created" (Niblett 2012: 23). We can thus infer that the violence exerted on traditional form is intended to mirror the intensities of political-economic and social-cultural violence resulting from the incorporation of particular territories (as peripheries) into the world-system under duress or hegemonic power. Focusing on the notion of "irrealism" specifically in the context of colonial theatres (such as the Caribbean), Niblett elaborates how the "irrealism" informing the theatrical-dramatic works of Caribbeans is a response to the fact that "colonial conquest involved the near complete destruction of pre-existing social formations." Commenting on other regions – for instance, semi-peripheral Europe or "territories subject to informal colonialism" – Niblett adds: "the penetration of capitalist modes and structures has occurred in less extreme or abrupt fashion" (Niblett 2012: 23). What justifies the use of such a formal component is Khalil's attempt to think beyond the conceptual strictures of linear-official history, beyond the causal straitjacket of historicist periodization and its aesthetic correlate – that is, realism (Jameson 2013: 2-3).

It is this irrealist treatment of time that constitutes the decolonial or evental facet of the play. The decolonial approach to time makes *Baghdad Museum* transcend the historical vision and social-political determinations of both colonial and postcolonial discourses. *Baghdad Museum* transcends the former in its refusal to think and live time/history as a linear progressive time – as prescribed by Western modernity – where the past (colonial-imperial) history should be deemed as a dead object or a now extinct and irretrievably past stage – hence meaningless to return to – in the universal progress of humanity under the aegis of technical rationality. *Baghdad Museum*

transcends a merely postcolonial vision by refusing to cling either to a melancholy mode of remembering of the past or to a revisionary take on the colonial-imperial accounts of it. In the postcolonial vision, the subject writes back and undertakes a revisionary approach to the (colonial-imperial) history and narratives driven either with a revolutionary (hence amnesiac) rupture with the past or an obsessive-compulsive re-writing of, or a melancholy immersion in the past, or an obsessive remembrance of it. In its irrealist aesthetics and decolonial vision, *Baghdad Museum* renders visible the material conditions of possibility of colonial history and its extractive dynamics (and their contemporary persistence in different guises). More importantly, it presents a speculative account of a future for the decolonized people/nation (Iraqi/Iraq) whose temporal-historical and material conditions may not be determined by either a melancholy postcolonial history or a reactionary/revolutionary postcolonial nationalism – both of which would reiterate the violence of the colonial history. Walter Mignolo's argument confirms the point at issue here: "Decolonial time means plurality of times entangled with a Western unilinear idea of time which any 'post' reproduces in its imperiality" (Mignolo 2014: 49).

In the premiere production, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon, in January 2020 directed by Erica Whyman, the transversal choral moments are amongst the most dramaturgically elaborate scenes. Suffice it here to probe the dynamics of five emblematic moments. The first choral moment (Khalil 2019: 7-10) dramaturgically renders the transversal dynamics of time/history pervading *Baghdad Museum* through an intriguing juxtaposition of two visual-scenographic details. On the one hand, we witness a condensed visual rendition of the history of Iraq spanning 1920-2010, in the form of pictures, projected on the backstage wall (where cases and shelves of the museum, schematically and indicatively presented, are placed). These projected images range from those of King Faisal,

Gertrude Bell, Iraq's archaeological sites, British troops, and the life in the 1920s' Iraq to the images of Iraqi children, women, and civilians from the 2000s' Iraq, the statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled by Iraqi people along with the troops and forces of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

On the other hand, we witness, projected on the floor, some mysterious Akkadian words (as if reproduced from one of the ancient Sumerian slates). What can shed ample light on these unfathomable words is a fascinating detail from the production history concerning the process of the development of a befitting set design for *Baghdad Museum*. In her attempt to establish a thematic, visual, and linguistic orchestration between the concerns at stake in each scene of the play and their scenographic rendition in the production, the set designer Nina Dunn drew up a roster of words/ideas that she identified as the key preoccupations of the play (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Then in her attempt to remain faithful to the manifold temporal structure of the play, Dunn had the words/ideas translated into Akkadian by a specialist of Ancient Languages: Dr Selena Wisnom. Accordingly, these words/ideas translated into Akkadian are the ones projected onto the floor of the stage in various choral moments.[ii]

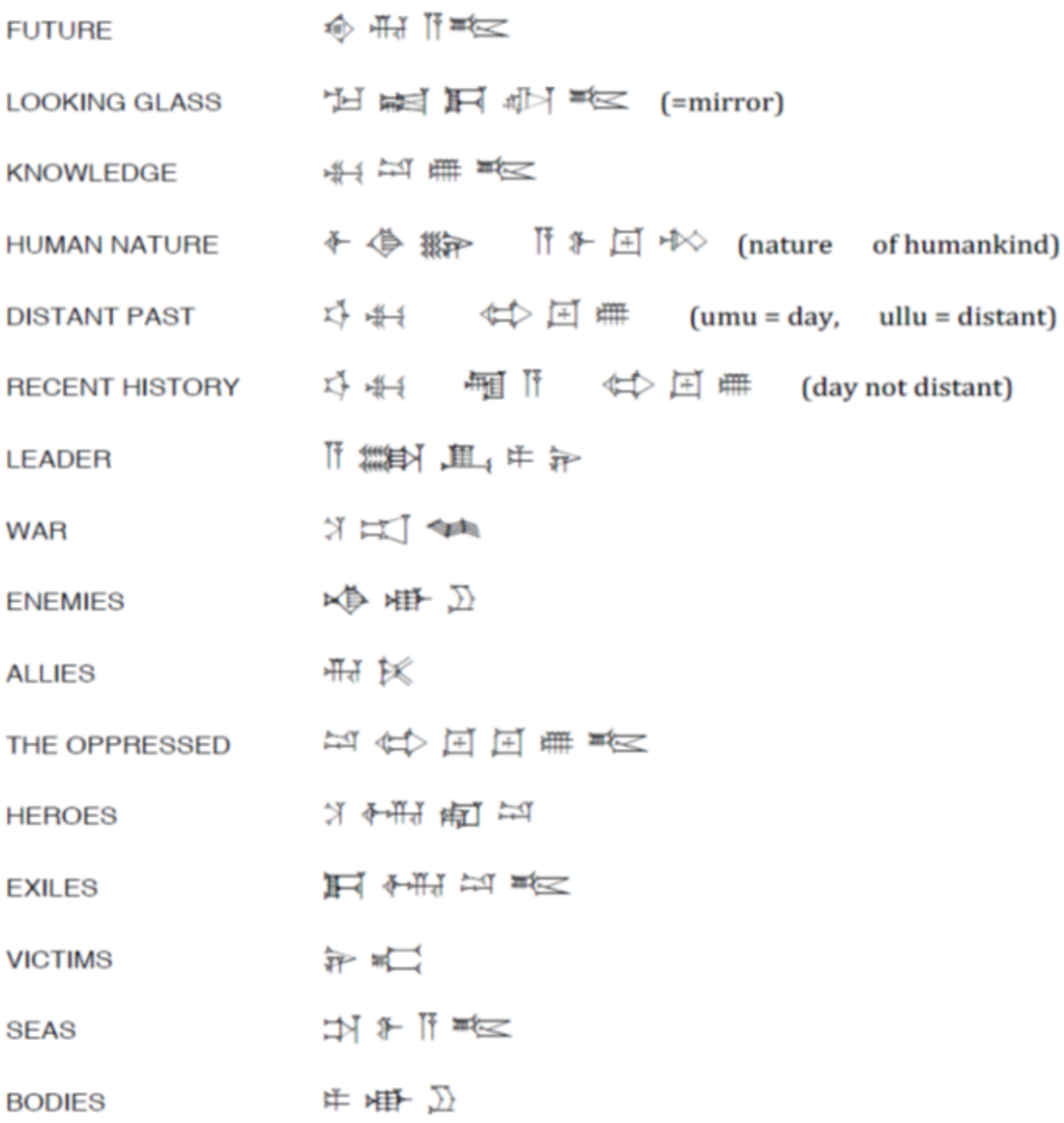


Figure 1. Courtesy of Nina Dunn.

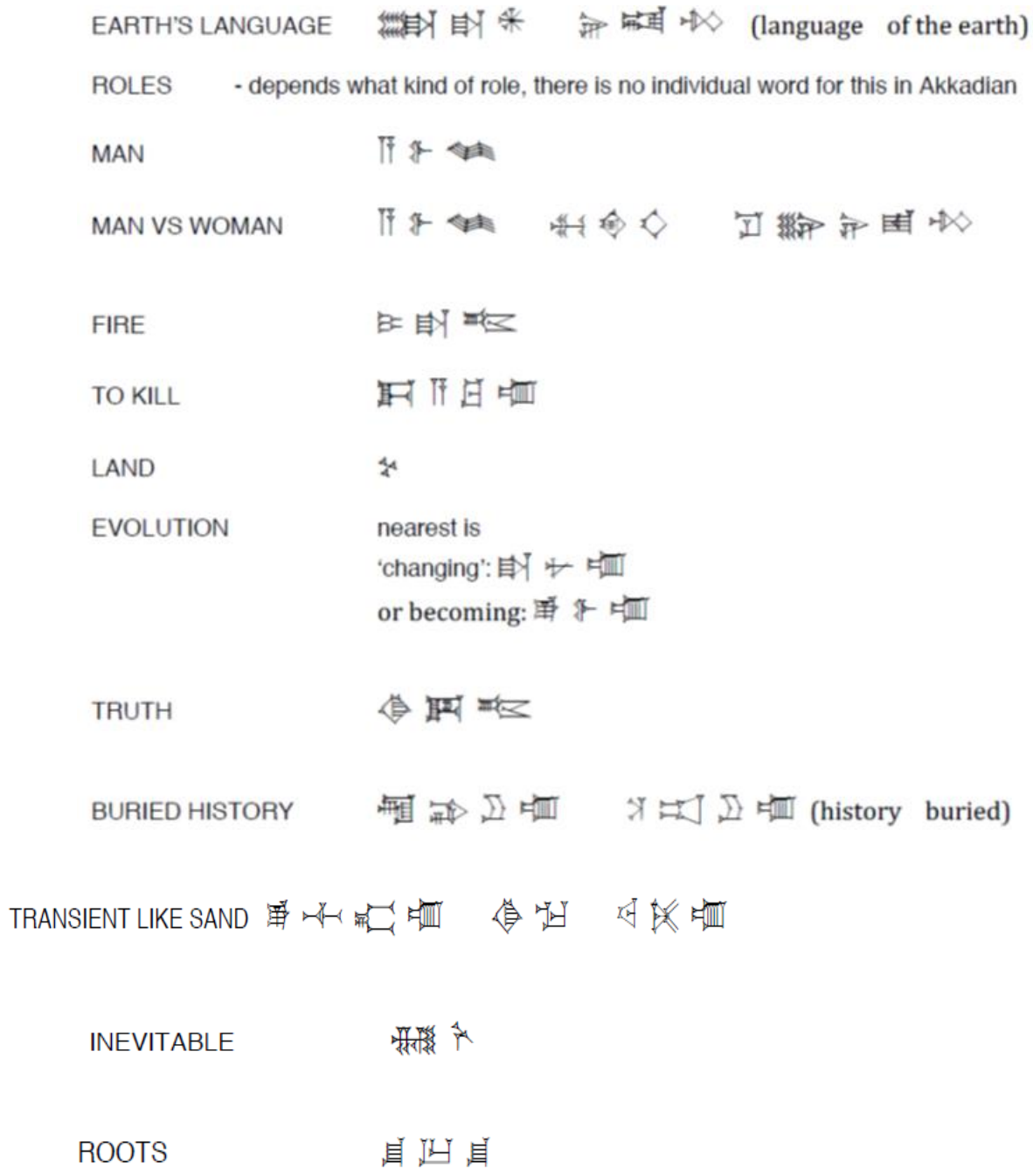
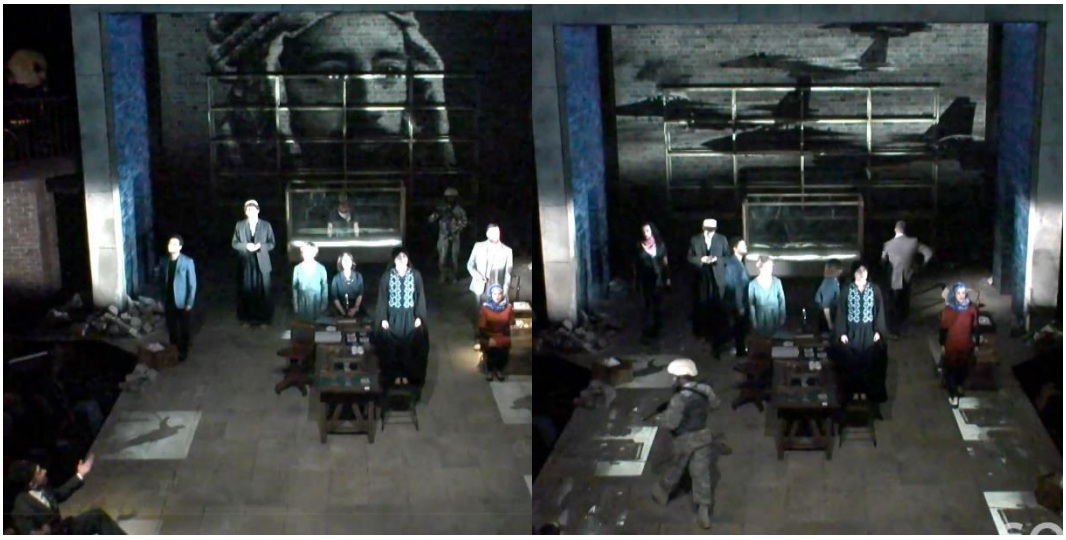


Figure 2. Courtesy of Nina Dunn.

This anecdotal account, however, does not sum up the intended associations of such a dramaturgical move. Given the context of the play (Iraq/Uruk) and its overarching thematic preoccupations (including cyclical violence/violation, war, law, and justice), in conjunction with

their striking imbrications with the principal topics of the two ancient texts of Hammurabi's code of laws or The Epic of Gilgamesh, it would not be far-fetched to interpret the Akkadian letters projected onto the floor as evocative of certain parts of these two texts – particularly Hammurabi's code of laws: the first human law in the world. (It is worth indicating that both of these ancient texts are written in Akkadian.) The historical Hammurabi code of laws were carved onto a massive, finger-shaped black stone stele or pillar which was also amongst the items looted by the invaders but finally rediscovered in 1901. Hammurabi's code of laws comprises a collection of 282 rules and is one of the earliest examples of the doctrine of "lex talionis" written in the form of if-then laws. Hammurabi's code of laws set fines and punishments to meet the requirements of justice and established standards for commercial interactions (Barmash 2020: 3-18).

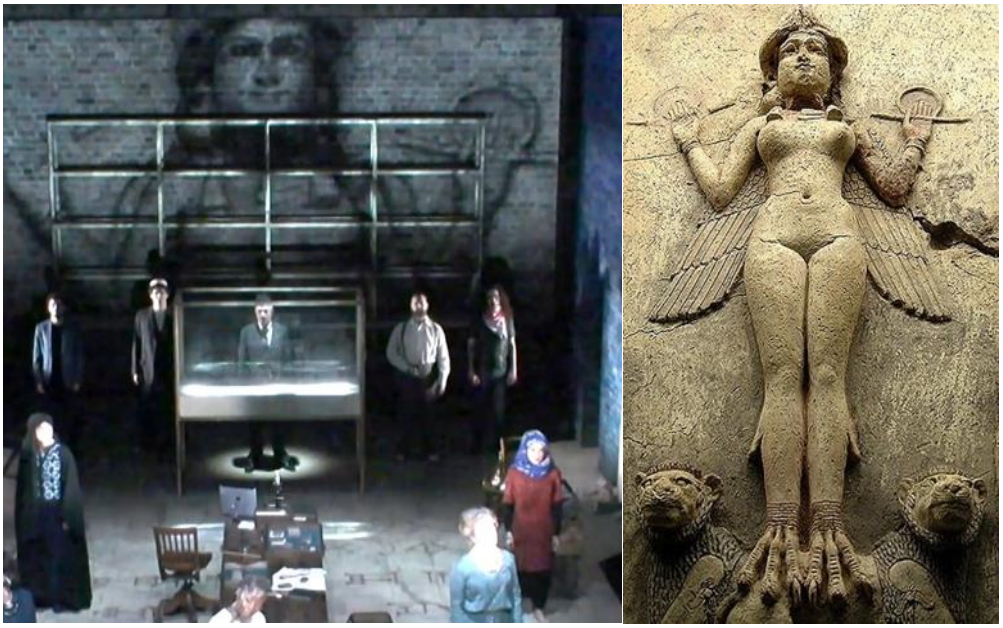


Figures 3-5. All screenshots (taken from the recorded premiere production by the RSC, 2020) are by the author, Alireza Fakhrkonandeh. Courtesy of the RSC.

The second conspicuous dramaturgical rendition of a transversal-choral moment (in the playtext appearing in Khalil 2019: 28-31) is concerned with the account of the mythic, matriarchal commune and their extirpation by marginalized men and the women's subsequent burial in a pit, the men's foundation of the first patriarchy, along with the psychosomatic (though unconscious) survival of the memory of the traumatic event (inflicted on women) in the children/survivors. Here we hear a sublimely dissonant mélange of speeches and languages which throws into relief the

sheer force and violence of this traumatic moment. The deployment of a dissonant aural dynamics for the evocation of the tragic and traumatic charge of such an event is highly apt. As Josh Epstein explains: “Dissonance offers the ability to take sounds that bear a narrative relation to each other, as they unfold in time, and re-combine them to surprising or critical effect in ‘an instant of time’”. Notably, he adds: “dissonance […] is also imagined to resonate with its surroundings (noise), and with the historical passage of time (rhythm) that it tries to compress.” (Epstein 2014: 35) Another salient dramaturgical feature of the second choral moment is the way Old Babylonian (Akkadian) words, projected on the floor, are overlaid with the map of Iraq thereby not only enhancing the historical, geopolitical, and archaeological resonances informing *Baghdad Museum*, but also establishing a link between the ancient history and law (Hammurabi’s code of laws composed c. 1755–1750 BC) and the modern history and law (metonymically represented in the text by the cartographical practice as a violent infliction of the colonial-imperial law). Such a juxtaposition also accentuates the longue durée dynamics permeating the historical vision of the play. In this scene, projected onto the backstage wall is the image of an ancient statue. Gleaning my inklings from all the references made to "the goddess" in *Baghdad Museum*, in conjunction with the geographical-historical context of the play as well as the other dramaturgical details, I would argue that the unidentified or indefinite “goddess” invoked numerous times throughout *Baghdad Museum* by various characters from across both periods is Inanna or the Goddess/Lady of Uruk whose Mask (of Warka) also occupies the center stage at thematic and scenographic levels. The tenability of my inference concerning the “goddess” is demonstrated by a scrutiny of the near-identical similarity and affinity between the image projected onto the backstage wall and the historical statue of Inanna (see my juxtaposition of the two images below; the image on the left is

my screenshot from the recording of the production and the one on the right is the photo of the historical-archaeological statue of Inanna).



Figures 6-7. Screenshot and Stock Image. Courtesy Alireza Fakhrkonandeh. Courtesy of the RSC.

Crucially, whilst the identity and historical-mythical nature of the matriarchal commune and the operative patriarchy remain indefinite and tacit in the play, the insightful dramaturgical move – counterpointing the Hammurabi code of law with the image of Inanna – renders this moment/event historically more specific and blindingly explicit. In light of the points I have elaborated above, the dramaturgical configuration is amenable to being construed along the ensuing pattern of correspondence. The image of Inanna (and later Mask of Warka) metonymically corresponds to the first female commune or matriarchy – where a communal ethics, love, freedom, and eco-friendly economics reigned. And Hammurabi code of laws - as one of the earliest, if not the first, examples of patriarchal law which relegates women to an inferior position and subordinates them to the Law of the Father - corresponds to the subsequently emerging patriarchal order.

The third example of the revealing dramaturgical rendition of a choral/transversal moment (Khalil 2019: 53-6) conjures up a kaleidoscopic and vertiginous dynamics. This transversal moment contains a farrago of numerous speeches simultaneously delivered by various characters in English and Arabic – all traversed with highly dissonant aural dynamics: screeching sounds, wailing screams, commanding summons, and elegiac and ritualistic invocations. This linguistic/verbal, aural, and scenographic complex is streaked with an equally manifold visual configuration. Apart from the characters forming the chorus, we witness a chiaroscuro-like configuration (since the dominant colors are white/grey and black) with three prevailing images. These three include: the images of blown swarms of sand; whirlwind, and mobile, macabre, and grotesque shadows projected onto the walls (anticipating the lootings and the invasions); and shattered glasses and bricks (which when projected onto the floor engender a sense of abyssal vortex or whirlpool/whir). Importantly, images of the broken glass and shards and shreds gradually dissolve into more viscous and rather black volumes that simultaneously evoke oil wells and dark floods (also indicated explicitly by the chorus).

Figure 8. Courtesy Alireza Fakhrkonandeh. Courtesy of the RSC.

The final paradigmatic case of illuminating dramaturgical rendition occurs when the chorus delivers lines about a barbaric beheading of a native Iraqi (apparently by ISIS or US forces) for

his unremitting fidelity to the land and his refusal to reveal the secrets to the violators/invaders (Khalil 2019: 70-81). In this scene, the table in the middle - on which relics, maps, and documents have been placed and removed, and at which various characters (including Gertrude, Ghalia, and Layla) have been working and which has been otherwise uncovered by any cloth or covering, is draped in a white shroud-like cloth in keeping with the macabre and death-laden ambience of the choral scene/moment. One of the most striking aspects of the scene is the projection of the Mask of Warka onto the backstage wall – as if looming and presiding over various historical periods and horizons like the Angel of History (see the 9th Thesis in Walter Benjamin's 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, 253–64). The Mask of Warka (or the Lady of Uruk), named after the modern village of Warka located close to the ancient city of Uruk, dates back to 3100 B.C. It is one of the earliest and most accurate representations of the human face unparalleled in the period. The carved marble female face is approximately 20 cm (8 inches) tall, and was probably incorporated into a larger wooden cult image. Most archaeologists and researchers believe that it is the representation of a deity (or goddess) and some argue that it is a depiction of Inanna.[iii]

In one of the final choral elegiac hymns (Khalil 2019: 80-1) – both in the text and in the dramaturgical dynamics of the performance (through the act of projection) - the three words الأرض, الأسرار, and مُتجذِرٌ are utilized in near-immediate juxtaposition recurringly thereby establishing a link among the words "secret", "earth/land", and "roots/rooted" which coalesce to reverberatingly evoke the value of "fidelity" to one's nation, history, and roots as a gesture of future-oriented "fabulation" and of resistance against both modes of violence: imperialism and phallogocentrism.

Figure 9. The author's screenshot from the premiere production. Courtesy of the RSC.

Significantly, this is vividly attested by the way in which the ensuing words are separated from the rest of the extended choral moment/recitation in the text, and are reiterated like a refrain within a poem as they are projected on the floor in numerous lines whilst the chorus delivers its speeches –

وُلدتُ فى هذهِ المدينةِ و سأموتُ فى هذه المدينة

The projection of these words upon the floor/ground establishes a deictic and indexical link between the words (and their historical reference and semantic content) and the land thereby endowing it with a sense of deep time, longue durée, and archaeological depth. This scenographic configuration, in turn, engenders manifoldness, living dynamics, and transversality thereby vividly evoking how the living buried/repressed secrets keep rumbling under the surface. As such, birth (one's arche/origin) and death (one's telos or fate) are bonded together through the "land/earth" – all three of which are amongst the vexing concerns of the play.

What pervades the dramaturgical renditions of all the choral moments in the premiere production of *Baghdad Museum* is the use of a sublime mode of "dissonance" – at visual, aural,

and verbal/linguistic levels – as an aesthetic means through which an ethics of différance, event, and anamnesis (of repressed traumatic moments) is achieved. In other words, the dramaturgical dynamics developed in the production of *Baghdad Museum* accentuates the necessity of deploying a non-mimetic style as an effective means of non-identity thinking, that is, sublime dissonance as a means of giving voice to the gaps, silences, and the voices rendered as "noises" by the dominant imperial-colonial or phallogocentric discourses – the voices of women, children, minorities, and victims. Such a conception of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics revolving around the notion of sublime dissonance finds corroboration in Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory of (late) modernist literature and arts. Dissonance, to Adorno, is the "seal" or the basic principle of modernism whereby the tension-laden dialectical relationship between the sensuous and the spiritual is thrown into relief. (Adorno 1984: 15, 161, 221) Adorno posits harmony and beauty as the principles of identity-thinking, assimilationism, and totalizing impulses (through which tensions and frictions are dissolved) – which together constitute the ethics of the neoliberal, consumer culture. Instead, Adorno valorizes "dissonance" not only as the means through which "the semblance of the human as an ideology of the inhuman" is revealed (Adorno 1984: 15), but also as a means by which "the historical emancipation from harmony as an ideal" can be achieved (Adorno 1984: 332-57). Dissonance is also a means of defying reconciliation, the reification of the mimetic and its relation to a "petrified and alienated reality" and neutralization of culture through the principles of harmony - all of which Adorno discerns as the symptoms of the commodification and commodity culture (Adorno 1984: 31, 45). To counter this, Adorno poses the three principles of abstraction, dissonance, and the new (see Adorno 1984: 50-1, 131).

One of the most visually striking moments of the play is when Gertrude – along with three other characters: Nasiya, Layla, and Salim - keeps being buried in an incrementally accumulating

pile of sand pouring down from above whilst almost lying in the glass cabinet. In this scene many of the recurring thematic and dramaturgical elements of the play - including the glass cabinet, sand, and the tension-laden relationship between the acts of burial and unearthing - coalesce to create an inconclusive and mise-en-abyme climax. Compared to the temporal-spatial economy of this moment in the text, its presentation in the performance was far more protracted and extended. Prior to this moment, we see Gertrude putting on a scarf and entering the glass cabinet. In this highly stylized and aurally-visually orchestrated moment, sand keeps pouring on the heads of Gertrude and the three other characters. In a stage detail not in the text, whilst Gertrude is trapped within the glass cabinet, the other characters stand in the open space surrounding it. After a long interval, as the lights grow increasingly dim, suddenly Abu Zaman arrives and calls others to help him save Gertrude by removing her from her potential burial mound or the amnesiac sands of history and/or non-time.

Furthermore, what this scene, and other scenes where the glass cabinet lights up and comes alive, foregrounds is the point I underscored above regarding the broken hourglass as a metaphor for *Baghdad Museum*'s deconstruction of chronological time and historicist/historiographical method. That is, what the climactic moment in particular renders visible is the image/element of the glass cabinet as a deconstructive (or evental) correlate for the hourglass (chronological time, western history). Here we witness Gertrude enter the glass cabinet only to be buried in the downpouring sand -- the imminent breaking of the cabinet by Abu Zaman saving Gertrude hovers over the horizon. As such, the glass cabinet is a metaphorical rendition of a decolonial hourglass, that is, an open hourglass, an evental hourglass, open to the forces of history and rhythms of the events. That is why it is rendered as a dynamic and fluid stage prop which keeps being filled and emptied with sand throughout the play. This further corroborates its other function: time-travel - a

medium through which characters from other periods come, go, and stand in attendance waiting behind it whilst characters from one period occupy the foreground or centerstage.

Figure 10. The author's screenshot from the premiere production. Courtesy of RSC.

Photography vs Archaeology: Dead Time of Historiography vs the Evental Time of Decolonial History

Though *Baghdad Museum* started its life with a photograph, Khalil made sure its life would not remain confined to the surface of the photograph, but rather made it delve into the invisible depths of the photograph through a decolonial process of evental anamnesis. As Khalil recounts, the gestation of the play was inspired by seeing a photograph of Gertrude Bell in the National Portrait Gallery in London; followed by Khalil's meeting with the renowned Iraqi archaeologist Lamia al-Gailani Werr (awarded the fifth Gertrude Bell Memorial Gold Medal) who spoke about the 2003 looting of the museum and endeavours to reopen it (Khalil 2021a; also Khalil "First

Person"). Correspondingly, in the play, Gertrude characterizes photography as a "conservative" art with a "preservative" function. Photography fixes and freezes time, people, and events. She says: "A hundred years ago the first photograph was taken. That was when we humans became able to capture moments. Things. Preserving them. Holding them for ever in time and space. I've always enjoyed taking photographs on my travels. As a reminder. A way of stopping time" (Khalil 2019: 70). Archaeology, on the other hand, is associated by Gertrude with mobility, transversality (see Certeau 1984), and temporal fluidity -- an evental encounter with the past recognizing its inherence in the present. She proceeds: "Until I discovered archaeology. You all know I love to travel. Especially in this part of the world. But with archaeology I discovered time travel. The ability to travel back to the distant past. Find out the truth about how things were then, in order to better understand how they function now" (Khalil 2019: 70-1). Archaeology here is defined as an attempt to apprehend and appropriate the "deep" and experiential conditions and transcendental truths of the lived past. Equally crucially, Gertrude describes archaeology as a means of restoring the wholeness of an otherwise irremediably fallen present and broken knowledge, salvaging the "warped" or "muted" truth and mending the ruptures – a dialectical task: "And with that knowledge I truly believe we can overcome divides and create nations, what was broken can be healed – united" (Khalil 2019: 71). Gertrude's approach to history is akin to that of a historical materialist in emphasizing the persistence of the past in the present as a force that determines and shapes it, which stands in stark contrast to Woolley's historicist contemplation of a past that seeks to fossilize and commodify it, to trade in its merchandise of artefacts and relics.

In the same vein, through the recurring invocation of pits and acts/moments of un-earthing and washing aground by various characters in *Baghdad Museum*, as the origin of the chronologically organized objects within the seamless space of the museum, the play subtly

endows the ostensibly surface-bound space of the museum with a sense of spatial and temporal-historical depth: the museum: pits or depths as the "ab-grund" of the museum (Heidegger 1959: 92-4). This renders the museum a space for uncanny reverberations, remembrances, and visions. In keeping with the character of a museum where artefacts from different historical periods and geographical sites are assembled, Khalil's museum is informed with a multi-temporal and spectral logic. The past keeps haunting the present and the present cannot but be permeated with the past; the future is nothing but a plane determined by the dynamics through which past and present intersect and are perceived as related to one another. Khalil takes a subtle dramatic measure to vividly depict the cyclical continuity of the colonial-imperial domination/exploitation through an extractivist-capitalist logic and approach (with different methods and dynamics) whilst throwing into relief the question of scale. This measure involves her choice of a stable and sustained setting – to wit, the Baghdad Museum – in all three historical facets of the play. In addition, Khalil exploits the highly meta-theatrical nature of the museum as a space where the ethics, aesthetics, and politics of representational and spectatorial processes/dynamics are exposed. The museum, in other words, reveals the construction of culture (by an official, unitary, homogeneous discourse) thereby the very processes of cultural and historical re-presentation along with the ethics, ideologies, cultural politics, and discursive logic underlying them are thrown into relief. In *Baghdad Museum,* Khalil foregrounds the performative dimension of the museum by which it surpasses a merely representational (of the nation or world) role/function, and rather features as "an institution for the construction, legitimization, and maintenance of cultural realities" (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 2).

The Museum as a Transversal and Performative Space

Hardly does any other place embody such a dense intertwining of lived and unlived memory, history, and culture as does a museum – at simultaneously public and private, personal and collective, national and global levels. A museum places time and space in tandem and tension with each other through its collage dynamics, foregrounding the axis of time/history in its staging, exhibiting, ordering, and labelling the artefacts primarily based on the historical period they represent. A museum also foregrounds the role of space as a disciplinary episteme and a symbolically invested ecology of culture – rather than an inert, neutral subtextual element. As such, in a museum time thickens and space is transversally extended. In terms of space, a museum is a place where history tugs at its seams due to its containing so many objects pertaining to diverse, intersecting histories and geographies. In its configuration of those historically disparate objects within the same space – which is a metonymy for the culture of the nation and beyond – based on its tacit regimes of truth(s), a museum renders the spectator-participant conscious not only of the logics and power dynamics of their extraction, placement, and ordering, but of the politics of line-drawing between and across geographies and periods. It is due to such overdetermined features that Hetherington calls museums "seeing-saying machines" that act as nodal points of emergence "in which some social relations are established and others are broken down" (Hetherington 2011: 459). A museum is also a site where the artificiality, arbitrariness, and constructed nature of ostensibly solid and trans-historical phenomena such as nation-states are thrown into sharp relief; hence the sense of anachronism and displacement that always suffuses museums in fiction and fact - take as paradigmatic examples Nigeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria, all simply "inventions" of the British Empire (see Nixon 2011).

Numerous scholars, including Alan Ingram and John MacKenzie, have drawn attention to the colonial origins of the modern museum and the formative influence of museums in forging a

concocted narrative about the national/cultural history and identity of the nation. Ingram, for one, attributes a "geopolitical power" to museums through which they "not only reflect and help to shape a sense of nation […] but also the parameters of legitimate knowledge and behaviour" (Ingram 2019: 61). As such, a museum can play an integral part in the colonial-imperial project of nation-building. At its core, a museum produces a national identity "as something that can be felt and touched" (Ingram 2019: 86), reducing nationhood to symbolic objects ready for consumption by the general public. In addition, museums can function as disguised institutions for maintaining the cultural hegemony as well as the political economy of the extractivist discourse of the empire (Ingram 2019: 59). A museum thus gains its canonical status in the politics of memory and nationhood through its imperial roots. Equally notable is the determining role of museums in the West in shaping and supporting an orientalist-racist discourse which pivots on a hierarchically-based ontological (world view) and epistemological (knowledge and means thereof) difference – embodied by the Other's culture and identity. In such a discourse – mediated by the museum and further upheld by national or imperial might in obtaining the cultural treasures of the peripheral nations of the world – western culture is depicted as progressive and superior and the non-western other as primitive and exotic (Ingram 2019: 9).

The function of the modern museum in shaping and supporting an orientalist-extractivist ideology and racist world view has also been interrogated by postcolonial and decolonial scholars. Mignolo and Walsh, for instance, point out that museums play an enormous role in "consolidating the enunciation and therefore, the coloniality of knowledge and being" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 199). Along similar lines, museums have been characterized variously as one of the "tool[s] of empire" (MacKenzie 2009: 7) and as "potent mechanisms in the construction and visualization of power relations between colonizer and colonized" (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 5). Furthermore,

MacKenzie accentuates how museums served as epistemic and epistemological tools for providing an alienating knowledge of their national, historical, and social-cultural identity, extending domination in various respects: "Museums in imperial territories were inevitably differently focused from those in Europe. In all the territories of white settlement […] they represented a western view of the world" (MacKenzie 2009: 5). MacKenzie also underscores how museums should not only be considered as mnemonic spaces through which the historical and cultural memory of a nation and the world is manipulated. Museums should also be perceived as discursive spaces where power and knowledge (at social-cultural, historical, and political levels) are indelibly intertwined: "Memory is itself a source of power, a means of supposedly understanding the present and divining the future" (MacKenzie 2009: 5). And, as we will see, it is precisely through utilizing the power underpinning the ethics and politics of memory and museum that the *Baghdad Museum*'s Abu Zaman embodies a formidable counter-hegemonic and decolonial force. Such a force is evidently reflected in his power to remember the immemorial, the repressed, and the buried: his capacity for transversal travel through various temporal layers, and his embodiment of the possibility of a future not determined by the longue durée and conjunctural cycles of imperial-colonial extraction in Iraq.

It is due to these convoluted facets and complex dynamics of the museum that *Baghdad Museum*, set in Iraq's national museum, offers a profound decolonial critique of the entanglements and complicities of imperial capitalism and cultural imperialism both governed by the extractive logic of core-periphery dynamics. In their palimpsestic assemblage of world-oriented and mnemonic objects, highly invested in histories and prehistories, museums offer semiotically, ontologically, and historically rich and rewarding sites of inquiry and intervention for theatre and drama. *Baghdad Museum* is set in the museum. It is there that the thematic crux of the actions, the

personalities of its characters, the conflicts among historical forces, and the intersection between various historical layers transpire and unfold. As a site where time is spatialized and space is temporalized, Baghdad Museum features as an overdetermined metonymy: on the one hand it represents the Iraqi nation and its diverse cultural layers; on the other, it illustrates how museums (as a synecdochic part of the imperial machinery) function as the institutional-discursive apparatus facilitating the extractive operations of imperial force and ideology.

Politics of Space, Memory, and Visibility

Whilst, as demonstrated above, museums are not politically neutral institutions, national museums set a higher standard in political functionality by playing an integral role in the legitimization of nationhood. As Craig Clunas observes, national museums function "to validate the claims to sovereignty and independence by proving through displays of archaeology and ethnography the inevitability of the existence of the actually contingent conditions that give it its very existence" (Clunas 1994: 319-20). Considering this manifold relation between museum and nation, there is a unique feature that distinguishes Iraq: "Iraq is the only country in the world in which the national museum is older than the nation" (Naiden 2007: 61). It seems counterintuitive to have a national museum for a nation that does not yet exist, because "the most common kind of knowledge claimed to derive from museums is a sense of the past" (Jordanova 2006: 25). This jarring fact accentuates the status of the Iraq Museum, founded in 1926 as the Baghdad Archaeological Museum, as a colonial-imperial project. More significantly, it throws into relief the parallel between the social-cultural and political-economic dynamics and logics of, on the one hand, the building of the Baghdad Museum and, on the other, the building of Iraq as an "invented" nation. Just as the former was built by means of a collection and collation of disparate objects and

Mesopotamian relics into a new fabricated whole, the latter, analogously, comprised a wide variety of tribes/communities which were disparate in terms of their religion, dialect, and ethnicity (as indicated in the play: "Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Jews"). In fact, this inherent and inner-domestic disparity was an engineered one and a constituent part of Britain's imperial nation-building scheme because such a disparity and all the consequent tensions and conflicts not only entailed the necessity of the presence of a neutral (non-local) mediator to settle them. It also made the bargaining with the contending forces amidst such political-economic instability far easier and more profitable.

The parallel between museum-building and nation-building within the context of Iraq – coupled with all its allegorical reverberations – constitutes the crux of Khalil's *Baghdad Museum.* The parallel is far from being a figment of Khalil's imagination. On a political and economic level, both Iraq and the Baghdad Museum were colonial-imperial projects or inventions. As such, both were historically driven by the extractivist logic of global/imperial capitalism whereby natural resources were extracted and relics and artefacts appropriated by the British Empire. Museum-making served as an effective social-cultural means for facilitating the colonial-imperial project of nation-building in Iraq by concocting and re-presenting a coherent, unified, homogeneous image and narrative of Iraq's past history notwithstanding the actual heterogeneity and religious, linguistic, and ethnic differences among the local people.

One of the most conspicuous instances where this parallelism is evoked is Gertrude's explicit indication of the function of the museum as a means of unifying the people of Iraq and consolidating the Iraqi national identity. She claims: "This isn't about me – it's about creating unity, nationhood […] it's about galvanising an identity for the people of Iraq" (Khalil 2019: 5). The choice of the word "galvanising" portrays Gertrude as wanting to be the driving force for

patriotism amongst the Iraqi people. She expects the Baghdad Museum to play an essential role in the establishment of Iraq as, in Benedict Anderson's term, an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006: 6). As Silke Arnold-de Simine observes, museums foster the illusion of national solidarity as places "in which individuals are connected by the knowledge, self-perception, rules and values they hold in common and by the memory of a shared past" (Simine 2021: 7). Although the various tribes in Iraq are far from having a shared past, Gertrude envisions the museum as a means of honoring the history of Mesopotamia and fabricating a sense of national unity for the people of the region no matter how different they are. In a conversation with Abu Zaman, Gertrude states: "I need to remind them of their past – so they carry it with them into a future where this nation regains its place as the most important in the region, if not the world" (Khalil 2019: 19). Museum-building is part of her greater ambition to build a nation evidenced later by her assertion of her contribution to the "creation" of Iraq, averring how she "crowned a king and made a country" (Khalil 2019: 75)[iv]. The manifold nature of Gertrude's role and functions in Iraq and the mode of her relation with Iraq are brought into relief in one of her conversations with Professor Woolley. *Baghdad Museum* in fact makes two explicit references to museum-building and nation-building in relation to Bell. When Woolley insidiously suggests Gertrude leave saying "Do think seriously about what you should do next, Gertie. You've lots of options – perhaps you've done your bit here" (Khalil 2019: 75), Gertrude wonders what Woolley means by his laconic and ambiguous "here". Hassled by Gertrude, Woolley elucidates: "'Here' Iraq – perhaps it's time to go home" (Khalil 2019: 75). Gertrude responds, "And where exactly is that [meaning: home]?" (Khalil 2019: 75) Whilst Woolley – expressing the typical colonial attitude – characterizes Iraq as "this ferocious, dangerous place where even the weather kills," Gertrude first reminds Woolley of her contributions to the very genesis of the nation and then counters Woolley's otherizing and vilifying stance by adding:

"Then don't talk to me of ferocious weather. This is my place" (Khalil 2019: 75). Notably, Gertrude does not use the word "home" but rather "place" -- a strategic word implying her official role and function as a British officer rather than an affectively invested native. Whilst the foregoing utterances reveal her dedication and investment in Iraq, they also adumbrate the reason underlying Gertrude's refusal to go home to Britain. Latent in her hesitation is the fact that "home" was in sheer nationwide turmoil due to the 1926 general strikes over coal as a consequence of which Bell's father lost a substantial part of his fortune, influence, and income. Hence, as Bell intimates in her letters to her sister (see Bell 1927), she barely had anything meaningful to keep herself fruitfully engaged at "home". Such shades in her character and the historical circumstances accentuate how both historically and in the play, Gertrude Bell, both as a factual and fictional character, proves an ambivalent figure appearing as at once an imperialist and an altruistic/philanthropist.

Here, Gertrude stands in stark contrast to Professor Woolley who views the museum as a colonial institution "through which agents of Empire can impose imperial ideals of the Iraq nation on the people of that geographic area" (Ingram 2019: 59). To Woolley, the Baghdad Museum is more like a shell institution for the acquisition and storage of cultural relics before their transfer to London. MacKenzie's argument concerning the colonial museum is illuminating:

> The colonial museum, in some respects, heightened the theme of the raiding of nature. It often symbolised the dispossession of land and culture by whites through the rapid acquisition of specimens and artefacts. Such colonial acquisitiveness occurred on a global scale, representing a worldwide movement brokered by imperial power. The museum's intellectual framework, its collecting habits, and so

> many of its methods were closely bound up with the nature and practices of imperialism (MacKenzie 2009: 4).

The hidden side of this colonial act of cultural resource extraction and its cultural imperialist apparatus is disclosed to be the British Museum, maintained as a spectral element throughout the play and fleetingly invoked by Woolley but always haunting the Baghdad Museum as its parasitical double sucking the lifeblood out of it. Referring to the statue of the goddess Inanna, Woolley says: “She’d look better in a nice secure display cabinet at the British Museum. I’m glad you got her back in one piece” (Khalil 2019: 26). Such references evoke the colonial genealogy of museums more generally: “It’s worth remembering that while there’s a lot of time, money, labor, and attention invested in these particular buildings – these monuments, these physical, material manifestations – such formations are always haunted by theft and death” (Copeland 2017: 261). In the play, Gertrude is uneasy about Woolley’s request to take the statue to the British Museum, telling him that she “won’t lend her [the statue] unless I have it in writing that she’ll return: I know your ‘borrowing’ and don’t forget the Iraq laws of antiquities” (Khalil 2019: 5). This immediately reveals the politicised nature of the museum-building process, particularly Britain’s influence and control over Iraq’s cultural heritage. Gertrude’s sarcastic allusion to "borrowing" and her insinuation that Woolley’s activities are latently part of the contemporaneous looting of Iraq’s cultural artefacts by the British Museum are all the more relevant in light of how in recent years the British Museum (alongside many other British, European, and American ones) has come under scrutiny for its involvement in looting from colonized countries. This issue is further explored in the play when the statue is returned to Iraq in 2006. This event, and the question of where the statue belongs, is ardently debated in the 2006 fold of the play by Ghalia, Layla, and Mohammed. Layla presents the most scathing and incisive critique of the Baghdad Museum, arguing that it is a

"globalised, commodified, Western version of a museum" that shapes Iraq's "historical narrative in the way that suits those in power" (Khalil 2019: 25). Even Layla's concession that Gertrude was "out for her own ends" and that "she basically put herself in charge and shared the spoils with her mates" (Khalil 2019: 27) fails to consider the structural implications of a museum built to reflect the national history of a country (constituted by the British Empire only five years before the inauguration of the museum). This is evidenced by her placing the blame for the colonial institution on individuals rather than on systems.

In *Baghdad Museum* Gertrude is depicted as being deeply involved with the construction of the Baghdad Museum, but her work goes beyond that -- as she states, her job is to "Make a country" (Khalil 2019: 18). The article Gertrude writes in the play lays bare her political vision and ambitions:

> The Mesopotamian lands cannot fail to expand economically with great rapidity and economic development will go hand in hand with the increase of political importance. We confidently anticipate that Baghdad, with its brilliant commercial future, will in a few decades replace Damascus as the capital city of the Arab world […] and we conceive that our task is not only to fit it for the part which it will play, but also to order our conduct of its affairs so as to establish lasting amity […] and confidence between ourselves and the Arab race, whatever modifications the future may bring to their political status (Khalil 2019: 57).

Akin to her historical counterpart, the Gertrude Bell of the play takes a sympathetic and respectful stance towards the local population even whilst serving as a staunch agent of the British Empire. This is further attested by her endorsement of the fledgling state of Iraq whilst affirming her conviction about the necessity of the British presence in the still politically-economically immature

country guiding it towards becoming a more stable country. She tells Salim: “There’d be chaos if we left now.” (Khalil 2019: 66) During the actual opening of the museum, Gertrude delivers a speech which discloses her expectations: “with that knowledge I truly believe we can overcome divides and create nations, what was broken can be healed – united. This is the true power of archaeology” (Khalil 2019: 71).

Nevertheless, she is insightful enough to be riven with doubt as to whether such an aspiration will ever be realized. She says to Salim: “I have such hope for our British mandate here. But when I raise my eyes across the border to Syria and see how the French mandate is playing out there – it’s scandalous. It can only lead to war and bloodshed” (Khalil 2019: 56). The ensuing dialogue demonstrates the flaws and limits of her political vision – particularly regarding Britain as a guardian state embodying democracy, science, and rationality:

Salim ‘Honorary Director’?

Gertrude I’m just keeping the seat warm.

Salim But who else could do that job?

Gertrude An Iraqi I would hope.

Salim Why?

Gertrude Because this is Iraq.

Salim But it is ruled by Great Britain, so an English director would be better.

Gertrude It is ruled by an Arab monarch.

Salim Under Britain’s mandate for twenty-five years.

Gertrude You don’t think that’s good for Iraq? There’d be chaos if we left now.

Salim You are right.

Gertrude After that we will give you independence.

Salim Independence is never given, it is always taken (Khalil 2019: 66-7).

As a typical imperial agent, Woolley does not share Gertrude's ambitions of building a nation; he defines Iraq as a "made-up land" (Khalil 2019: 78), a shell nation built for the enrichment of the British Empire. He also reminds Gertrude, with derisive tone, how "there was no such country till five years ago" (Khalil 2019: 5). He describes Iraq as a nation created by Britain in the colonizer's geopolitical and economic interests. As Toby Dodge writes, "British colonial officials had little choice but to strive to understand Iraq in terms that were familiar to them" (Dodge 2003: 1). It is evident that when we discuss the history of Iraq, we are discussing an imagined history, a simulacrum, or a narration[v] of what the orientalist, colonial imagination wanted Iraq to be, not necessarily what it actually was, or the whole its various tribes/peoples imagined themselves to be part of.

In the play, Gertrude is acutely cognizant of the heterogeneity of the groups that inhabited the former provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the consequent challenge – what she calls "the impossible task – an unwinnable game [...] of mak[ing] a country"; she muses: "What did they all have in common? Not language. Not tradition" (Khalil 2019: 18). Her naïveté lies in her belief that she can unite these diverse groups on the common ground of history: "Immovable, intractable, unchangeable history. A nation needs to be able to look into the eyes of the past and understand where they come from. What legacy they carry in them" (Khalil 2019: 18-9). She aims to build the museum as a reminder to the Iraqi tribes of the fact that they are the joint inheritors of the magnificent Mesopotamian civilization: "And what a legacy – one of the first civilisations. While palaces, laws and complicated administrative systems were being built here, bronze age Britain was grappling with basic pottery. Every Iraqi should know this. Feel absolute pride" (Khalil 2019:

19). Gertrude presents the collective past as an objective, identifiable *fact* of history which her museum is only reflecting, intentionally glossing over the fact that the very establishment of her museum in Baghdad is an imperial, extractivist mission and thus contingent upon a number of factors outside of her control.

In this sense, when Gertrude self-contentedly claims the fulfilment of her mission by "bringing order where there isn't one" (Khalil 2019: 14), she refers not only to the museum, but also to the entire Iraqi nation. However, Kirmanj states that "although the Iraqis have lived together for nearly a century, the people are not and never have been united […] The three provinces of the Ottoman Empire were never united politically and culturally by feelings or notions of a collective identity" (Kirmanj 2013: 11). In the play, Kirmanj's considerations find confirmation in Woolley's words: "Look around […] The tribes are twitchy – Sunnis, Shias, Kurds, Jews […] Imagine taking an Englishman, Scotsman, Welshman and a Paddy – telling them they are one family – making them share one house and locking the door on them. Go back in a week and they'll each have barricaded themselves in a room" (Khalil 2019: 37). The museum allegorically represents Iraq, foregrounding how the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of the nation are embroiled in an interminable process of making and un-making due to the inimical influence of the resource-driven, cartographical practices of (British) imperial capitalism. Indeed, what both Iraq and the museum share is "the logic of displacement" (see Bhabha 1994: 1, 109, 126, 207; Derrida 2004) in that they take a colonial-imperial act of symbolic violence and externally induced formation as their points of origin. And indeed originary displacement attests to how neither the museum nor the nation stemmed from an organic, historically evolving process of becoming self-conscious of shared values, history, territorial ties, religious or linguistic commonalities, etc. The ironic move in Gertrude's attempt to "house" Iraq neglects how "displacement" is an inherent feature of

museums. As Una Chaudhuri states: “only those things are put in museums that have no ‘organic’ place within a society, because they either belong to a different time or to a different place. The museum contains and stages difference and, in so doing, produces an artificial homogeneity in the surrounding culture” (Chaudhuri 2000: 120).

The different attitudes of Gertrude and Woolley toward the museum in particular and toward Iraq in general are thrown into relief by their disputes over artefacts and relics. There is a recurring sentence in the play, a question Woolley frequently asks Gertrude: “What’s in it for me?” (Khalil 2019: 4). This simple sentence is the perfect expression of the colonizer’s selfishness, the absolute indifference towards the local population's cultural values. Their conversation proceeds:

> **Woolley** The question is – what’s in it for me?
>
> **Gertrude** The Englishman’s mantra. What do you want?
>
> **Woolley** Well, once you are open perhaps you’d consider loaning us a few items? Your goddess for example. […]
>
> **Gertrude** I won’t lend her unless I have it in writing that she’ll return: I know your ‘borrowing’ and don’t forget the Iraq laws of antiquities (Khalil 2019: 4-5).

What Gertrude describes as “the Englishman’s mantra” metonymically betokens the extractive logic of global/imperial capitalism embodied by Woolley.

Later in the play in a reverberating evental “anamnesis” moment, Woolley mentions a recent discovery his team has made: the 4500-year-old royal cemetery in Ur, what Woolley calls “The Great Death Pit”. British archaeologists discovered the dead body of a king accompanied by “the bodies of a large number of people who must have been sacrificed in order that they might accompany the king” (Khalil 2019: 51). Upon learning that 68 of the 74 people were women,

Gertrude is mournful whilst Woolley is exalted by the discovery. She says: "All these women are laid out neatly and you presume that means a neat – a willing death. But I disagree: death is not neat or easy. They were forced to drink that poison – daggers held over them. Then they were burned. Incinerated. Out of existence. […] The point is they had no choice. That's not suicide it's murder. […] Sixty-eight nameless, forgotten, dead, burnt women, that's what" (Khalil 2019: 53). By fostering subtle resonances between King Ur's infliction of violence and objectification of women, servants, and lower classes and the imperial-colonial violence inflicted on Iraq and Iraqi people, *Baghdad Museum* asserts that this past moment in Mesopotamian history should not be treated as dead and gone but as a living, persistently present moment traversing the past, present, and a speculative future. The ethical-historical imperative of discerning the transversal resonances is cogently delivered by counterpointing Gertrude and Woolley, each of whom embodies one of these two approaches to history, that is, history as dead and a phenomenon of the past or history as a transversally present and living phenomenon informing the present.

Gertrude and Woolley's conflicting approaches to the site and the ethical, epistemological, and ideological differences it evokes, can be further illuminated by referring to two contrasting attitudes towards history as elaborated by Walter Benjamin: historical materialism and historicism. As Benjamin argues, "a historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past" (Benjamin 2003: 396). In other words, historicism is conservative precisely because it insists so strenuously on the pastness of the past. The historical materialist, however, refuses to endorse the notion that history is over or, in any sense, complete. Elsewhere, Benjamin presents historical materialism – with its concern for

the marginal, the silenced, and the evental, and its substitution of discontinuity for continuity – as the alternative to historicism:

> Historicism presents an eternal image of the past, historical materialism a specific and unique engagement with it. The substitution of the act of construction for the epic dimension proves to be the condition of this engagement. […] The task of historical materialism is to set to work an engagement with history original to every new present. It has recourse to a consciousness of the present that shatters the continuum of history. Historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an after-life of that which is understood, whose pulse can still be felt in the present (Benjamin 1979: 352).

In *Baghdad Museum*, these two approaches are represented by Gertrude's two professions/interests: photography and archaeology. To Gertrude, the former is associated with a static conception of time, the past as a finished and sealed product. The latter is associated with a fluid conception of time, the past as an open process, the past as always ajar and open to partial retrieval/revival, decolonial re-inscription, and "evental" re-experience: history/time as unmasterable and as slippery as sand.

Decolonizing the Museum and Its (Arte)Facts, Disrupting the Partition of (Neo-)Colonial Sensible in the Museum: The 2006 Fold

Two of the most salient functions of modern museums are the constitution of knowledge, historical evidence, and the coordination of aesthetic experience, by attributing artistic value to objects. Corresponding with this twofold function of the museum, modern museums appear in two

distinct forms: museums of artefact and museums of art – one informed by a scientific discourse and the other by a standard of artistic merit (see Ingram 2019: 60). Museums of art give the public a place to temporarily detach themselves from the daily personal and socio-symbolic order, refine their senses, and appreciate beauty of objects. A national museum of artefacts, on the other hand, "acts as a key site of promotion of the existence and validity of the state formation. It does so with particular force in that the discursive practices at the heart of the museum lay claim to scientific objectivity, to a transcendental mimesis of what is 'out there'" (Clunas 1994: 319). MacKenzie asserts how the mere act of organizing and exhibiting cultural artefacts – "the weird and the wonderful, exotica that seemed initially to be unknowable and unfathomable" – makes them appear as fathomable (illusion of knowledge) by bringing them "into the realm of the potentially known and understood" (MacKenzie 2009: 1). Thus the museum asserts its cultural power by validating the objects within it as somehow worthy of display, as well as imbuing the objects with a sense of meaning and symbolic importance that might not necessarily have been the case had they been left "unframed."

The epistemic-pedagogical aspect of museums, coupled with their power of attributing artistic merit to objects, creates the impression that cultural artefacts and relics truly belong in museums. These questions of value, evaluation, and belonging in relation to place/placing, location, and dislocation recur throughout Khalil's *Baghdad Museum* pervading the discussions between the characters from both historical folds (Then and Now). In the 1926 fold, the discussions regarding where the relics of Iraq belong revolve around whether the Baghdad Museum or the British Museum would be the safer home for those artefacts:

Woolley: From what I hear they don't think your laws are stringent enough.

Gertrude: Of course they are. What is found in their country belongs to them. But you lot do need an incentive to dig in the first place.

Woolley: I predict it'll all be back to the BM in time for tea when civil war erupts again and they go back to their tribes.

A beat.

Gertrude What do you think, Abu Zaman – as an Iraqi?

Woolley He's no fool – he knows she'd [the statue of the goddess] be safer in Blighty.

Abu Zaman* (*with chorus of Ghalia*) Safer?

(Khalil 2019: 5-6)

As is evident here, in a (neo-)colonial context, where the artefact belongs is determined by where it is safe, that is, where its value as a commodity can be safeguarded. And given Iraq's unstable social-political state caused by the violent derealization wrought on the local reality by the extractivist acts of colonization and/or globalization, such a safe place cannot be anywhere but within the imperial state. In the 2006 fold, however, this issue is given a more sophisticated turn in the antagonism between Ghalia and Layla. To Ghalia, whose dubious position straddles cosmopolitan and global neoliberalism, historical artefacts "belong to the world" (Khalil 2019: 45), hence their display in museums. To Layla, on the other hand, they belong in their original context, that is, on the sites where they have been found:

Ghalia But Layla is a purist – she believes artefacts should be left where they are found, experienced in that context. Taking them out of the ground is probably a step too far.

Mohammed What?

Layla Well it's too late now – they have been dug up. But they won't survive. Gradually eroding– […] Now they're above ground they should be where they belong, where they were found as part of a community museum – not this globalised, commodified, Western version of a museum, shaping historical narrative in the way that suits those in power. Artefacts as trophies. […] She [the statue of the goddess] has no business being in Baghdad. This isn't her home.

(Khalil 2019: 26)

Equally notably, the above conflict can be further illuminated by Mary Louise Pratt's argument that if imperialism does not have the power to possess, it claims the right to "evaluate the scene" (Pratt 1992: 203). It is through this evaluation that a hybrid memory is formulated. Layla argues that this hybrid memory is conceived as soon as the artefact is removed from its original location. This estimation strikingly resonates with Sheldon Annis's definition of the museum as a "cultural warehouse":

> It is a place for things taken out of their natural context to be stored, reclassified and exhibited. When objects become exhibits, they necessarily take on new meanings; they are transformed […] The object-symbols twist in meaning between two worlds, the world of their origin and the world of significance created by display (Annis 2018: 168).

This corroborates Layla's point that not only is the artefact's context reframed once it is removed from Iraq (which was Gertrude's conviction), but the context is reframed as soon as it is taken from the soil it was found in.

The thrust of Layla's argument is that museums impose a meta-narrative on an otherwise heterogeneous body of small narratives (social histories as well as cultural artefacts and relics). And whereas Ghalia considers this process necessary and beneficial for the designation of origin, Layla takes a deconstructionist position, where cultural authenticity and national identity are considered to be constructed and hybrid, at least as far as Iraq is concerned. In Layla's opinion, the Baghdad Museum cannot be considered representative of Iraqi culture or identity *as such*, but must be seen as a further expression of Orientalism in the sense that Europeans, Gertrude and the like, select and exclude artefacts based on a biased western version of Iraqi history and culture. Referring to Gertrude, she asserts: "That woman. She was obsessed with the Western version of museums. Too many artefacts were taken from their rightful places. Half of everything went to the people who organised the dig as payment. i.e. the West. […] that woman was out for her own ends" (Khalil 2019: 26-7). Layla's argument is supported by Preziosi and Farago's concept of museums as performances: "[a]ny museological collection is […] only made possible by dismembering another context and reassembling a new museological whole" (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 5). If for Gertrude the Baghdad Museum mostly performed a political function, for Layla the museum must primarily fulfil an educational (decolonial) and social-cultural function. To accomplish these tasks, Iraqis must regain their agency so that they can tell the true history of their own country. Layla suggests the relevance of creating a community museum rather than "this globalised, commodified, Western version of a museum." She wants the artefacts to function as a counter-narrative, as instruments to resist the hegemonic narrative, a lever to build an authentic national identity. Several times in the play she condemns both Gertrude and Ghalia for their practice of relocating artefacts from their rightful places to the colonial institutions called museums. If for Gertrude, the museum was a nation-oriented project which fulfilled a political

function, for Layla the museum is a community-oriented project which fulfils a social-cultural role. The ethical and political difference between the two projects is illuminated when we consider that, as a national project, the museum fulfils a homogenizing function where all the ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences are subsumed under the sublational rubric of national unity and identity. As a community project, however, the museum seeks to maintain the inner/domestic "difference" inherent in the discursively constructed unity of the nation. Considered more broadly, *Baghdad Museum* looks skeptically at naïve affirmations and phenomenological (psychosomatic) and social-political viability of cosmopolitanism and hybridity proposed respectively by Pheng Cheah (see *What Is a World?* 2015; and *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*, 2009) and Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture* 2004), among many others. A prominent example illustrating this point is Mohammed's assertion; addressing Ghalia, he says: "You need to be more Iraqi about things. You have to pick your battles here..." (Khalil 2019: 17)

There is also a cultural antagonism and tension between Ghalia and Layla, both Iraqi women, the formerly currently in charge of the museum and the latter to be in charge in near future. Ghalia is able to return to England to stay with her family who fled Saddam Hussein, whereas Layla does not have such an advantage. Layla's moral exasperation at Ghalia's noncommittal choice reveals the ontological difference between local Iraqis and the dual national Iraqi-British Ghalia who has access to another world and hence has a different perception of both worlds. Ghalia, like Gertrude, can go back to England. But Layla says "I don't have the privilege of choice. That's reserved for other people, not Iraqis. None of us will have a choice until everyone goes" (Khalil 2019: 90). Political and existential freedom, self-determination, and autonomy can emerge only after decolonization; it must be a local-national (endogynous) phenomenon, rather than being endowed from without.

The gaping gulf between Ghalia and Layla is further emphasized in the play by means of their incompatible concerns in relation to living in war-torn Iraq. The dehumanizing capitalist-imperialist forces are evidenced by Ghalia's valorizing artefacts over and above living humans, manifested in her blindness to Iraq's victims. This blindness is primarily reflected in her seeing the violence and chaos in Iraq without seeing their underlying causes. She is above all concerned with her self-preservation. In this regard, ironically she falls even short of Gertrude's devotion to Iraqi culture at the expense of her health. Ghalia's myopia is evidenced by her recounting of an incident:

> And now all the academics are being murdered. You know this morning when I came into work my driver stopped at traffic lights, a man knocked on the window and for a moment I was sure, one hundred per cent sure that I wouldn't get here, to the museum. I'd never see the Warka vase or the lady of Uruk again. Hold a seal between my fingers. Kiss my grandson. I was going to be shot in the head because I'm an academic, because I'm a woman who doesn't cover, because they think I'm pro-America or because I work here. And as the man raised his hand he had a copy of the paper – that's all he was doing selling, a month-old paper. And my life flashed before my eyes (Khalil 2019: 70).

This is also vividly reflected in a conversation between Ghalia and Layla:

> **Ghalia:** I knew what to expect here but it's still a shock. It's like a rollercoaster … Every time I see something that has been destroyed it's like a knife in my flesh. Doesn't it break your heart, Layla?
>
> *A beat.*
>
> **Layla:** There are bodies in the streets. It puts broken statues into perspective.

(Khalil 2019: 24-5)

Ghalia is concerned more about the artefacts than the impact of the western presence in Iraq. She states, further, that without western presence and Gertrude's contribution, there would not have been a museum to start with: "without Western expeditions nothing would have been safely excavated" (Khalil 2019: 27). Ghalia approves the world made by imperialism and capitalism. Layla opposes these forces, noting that broken statues ("fragments" à la Benjamin) serve as historical witnesses by contributing to forging Iraq's collective memory of the longue durée of extractive imperialism: "I'm telling you there is much much worse than the looting to come ... Besides, broken statues have their place too. A reminder. Attempting to mend them, make them look new is a form of cover-up" (Khalil 2019: 28; ellipsis in the original).

In the play, the discussion concerning where cultural artefacts belong is immediately ensued by the discussion concerning to whom museums belong. Ghalia claims the museum is for the Iraqi people, but deems Iraq an "unsafe" home for them and at the opening only select people are invited to the museum's opening. Nasiya points out that the museum was referred to as "Saddam's gift shop" (Khalil 2019: 77), underlining the superficiality of the museum as an institution created to fabricate unity and nationhood. Later, when Nasiya stands on a chair and condemns the opening, arguing that the people who the museum is for and about are not allowed in, Khalil is scathingly indicting the hypocrisy of the establishment. If the people of the nation cannot access the artefacts of their nationhood, these artefacts are false symbols. Although Ghalia claims "it belongs to you, every Iraqi. It's our heritage," Nasiya reminds her of the class-based cultural politics and economics informing such ostensibly national institutes: "We have never been welcome in this place" (Khalil 2019: 77). Flipping colonial language on its head, Nasiya declares

“They turned us into savages, the British” (Khalil 2019: 77). Through her Khalil argues that the act of creating the Iraqi nation based upon an arbitrary assumption of national-historical unity engendered a de-civilizing effect, the opposite of the imperialist's stated goal.

If as Jacques Rancière argues, “Politics is aesthetic in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field” (Rancière 2013: 226), the sudden appearance of Nasiya at the re-opening of the museum acts as a striking allegory for the dispossessed Iraqi people. Nasiya’s intervention exposes the politics of the museum by debunking its claim of representing the nation most of whom are barred from entering. As Nasiya exclaims to Ghalia: “While you are all here enjoying the culture we are howling at the gates for food like dogs” (Khalil 2019: 78). The museum is depicted as a socially-culturally insular space not meant for the Iraqi people of the present. The museum is a space where history is safely distanced, tamed, and brushstroked while the chaos of present history raging outside its walls is rendered invisible. Earlier in the play, Woolley refers to the museum as a place for “dignitaries and military personnel” (Khalil 2019: 73) lending credence to Nasiya’s point. Importantly, Nasiya establishes a contrast between the artefacts - “these things aren’t alive, they’re dust” (Khalil 2019: 79)– and the living Iraqi people suffering the consequences of the US-led oil-driven war. She shouts: “but I am real – flesh, blood – I’m ALIVE – HELP ME!” (Khalil 2019: 79). Her subversive scream is muffled because hers is a cameo appearance, a nuisance in the museum. Still, Nasiya’s moment is a fleeting but potent affirmation of how the project of discovering artefacts, regardless of whether they are dislocated into (neo-)colonial metropoles or placed and preserved locally, is intended for the privileged few. Hence, unlike Ghalia and Gertrude, Nasiya attempts to accentuate the precarity of the Iraqi people and the unremitting turmoil in the country. Nasiya’s pleas, however, do not induce any reflective pause amongst those present in the museum; they are dismissed: she is arrested and taken away. Stifling

Nasiya's voice illustrates the subaltern status and invisibility of the Iraqi people marginalized and exploited in their own country.

Preziosi and Farago posit museums not only as comprised of cultural artefacts but as demonstrating "teleological relationships" (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 4-5). They consider museums to be "performances – pedagogical and political in nature – whose practitioners are centrally invested in the activity of making the visible legible" (Preziosi and Farago 2004: 5). Such a conception of the museum certainly holds true for Ghalia. She takes the example of a carefully excavated 5000-year-old seal put in a museum to be admired, only to be "grasped by greedy hands and exchanged for cash" (Khalil 2019: 23) – implicitly referring to the looting of 2003. Ghalia's stance towards museums and their artefacts involves treating them not as commodities but as a form of past-oriented, historicist memory-building, fostering a sense of shared Iraqi identity, and presenting an expansive historical narrative. However, in the end she wishes to leave Iraq and go back home to London: "I came thinking about artefacts, I'm leaving thinking about the people" (Khalil 2019: 89). She wonders if she came to Iraq just to "prove something" (Khalil 2019: 89). Ultimately, she makes the museum "visible" but not "legible" (to herself and others) by failing to recognize the imperial genealogy of the museum as well as the underlying cultural importance of the artefacts and their heritage. Salim, in contrast to both Gertrude and Ghalia, sees value in the museum as a space that nurtures *teleological relationships* - in the sense of museum serving a dialectical historical-cultural function by giving the nation an *arché* (an imagined unifying origin, however heterogeneous at core) and a shared future. As regards his attitude towards preserving the statue of the goddess, his vision is as much past-oriented as future-oriented. This is evidenced by his calling the goddess "A legacy" (Khalil 2019: 49) and says "I will bring my daughter to see her" (Khalil 2019: 49). Salim does not reduce the artefact to an object; he views the museum as a

sustainable medium through which the narratives of the Iraqi people can be preserved and re-enacted differently across generations.

CONCLUSION

As Khalil explains, the museum is “both a symbol and a metaphor for colonialism in the Middle East and further.” (Khalil “First Person”). As such, *Baghdad Museum* renders the museum a multivalent allegorical space, an institutional-discursive means, with Bell and Ghalia as its ambiguous agents, where the complicities among culture, imperialism, and resource extraction are clearly shown. By recognizing multiple temporalities and emphasizing embeddedness in a local context, the museum offers a counter-narrative to the extractivist practices of the capitalist-imperialist system. The manifold nature of "museum" in *Baghdad Museum* reveals how Iraq has long been the object of (neo-)colonial extractivism; how "museum" has been utilized as “a thoroughly geopolitical institution” (Ingram 2019: 59), a “site of knowledge production and of memory and memorialization” (Arora 2021: 121), and a “contact zone” (Lowe 2016: 418) of nations, layers of history, genders, races, and classes. This contact, however, has been invariably driven by uneven dynamics at various levels. As such, *Baghdad Museum* contributes to the ongoing discourse about the politics and poetics of museums in the context of decolonizing institutions and knowledges. One crucial feature that distinguishes the play, is its “evental” approach reflected in its “irrealist” aesthetic. This irrealism opens up the historical materialist (or decolonial) dimension of the museum for the “fabulation” of “people to come” in the future. Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari's explication is illuminating: “Memory plays a small part in art […]. It is true that every work of art is a monument, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to

themselves and provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument's action is not memory but fabulation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 167-8). Khalil's museum refuses to remain merely a memorial and instead becomes a monumental (read: evental) memory of the past, an enactment of the present, and a vision of the future. Khalil's irrealism is an act of "creative fabulation" of the (Iraqi) people to come – not people who will repeat a traumatic past however "differently". Khalil's fabulation of the people to come in *Baghdad Museum* "has nothing to do with a memory, however exaggerated, or with a fantasy" – to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's words -- rather, it "goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived" by placing the memorial and the immemorial, the historical and the evental into a relation of resonance and forced movement whereby the possibility of a different future is opened up (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 171). The Iraqi people as "becomers" and the evental museum (a metonym for the nation) as the space of Iraq's becoming.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor W. 1984. *Aesthetic Theory.* Trans. Christian

Lenhardt. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. London:

Routledge.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London and New York: Verso.

Annis, Sheldon. 2018. "The Museum as a staging ground for symbolic action." *Museum International* 38, 3:168-171.

Arora, Anupama. 2021. “Decolonizing the museum: Leila Aboulela’s ‘The Museum’.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing.* 57, 1:121-134.

Barmash, Pamela. 2020. *The Laws of Hammurabi*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Barringer, Tim and Tom Flynn (eds.) 1998. *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum.* London and New York: Routledge.

Bell, Gertrude. 1927. *The Letters of Gertrude Bell.* Vol. II. Ed. Lady Bell D.B.E. London: Ernest Benn Limited.

Benjamin, Walter. 1979. “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian.” In *One-way Street and Other Writings,* trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, 349-86. London: NLB.

---. 2003. “On the Concept of History.” In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol 4. 1938-1940,* trans. Edmund Jephcott, et. al. ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Berdine, Michael D. 2018. *Redrawing the Middle East: Sir Mark Sykes, Imperialism and the Sykes-Picot Agreement*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1990. *Nation and Narration.* London: Routledge.

---. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Black, Jeremy and Anthony Green 1992. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*. London: British Museum Press.

Braudel, Fernand. 2012. “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée.” Trans. Immanuel Wallerstein. In *The Longue Durée and World Systems Analysis,* ed. Richard E. Lee. Albany: SUNY Press.

Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chaudhuri, Una. 2000. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama.* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Clunas, Craig. 1994 "Oriental antiquities/Far Eastern art." *Positions* 2, 2:318-55.

Cooper, Lisa. 2016. *In Search of Kings and Conquerors*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Copeland, Huey. 2017. "Red, black and blue: the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian." *Artforum* 56, 1:253-61.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2004. "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Dissemination*. London and New York: Continuum, 67-186.

Dodge, Toby. 2003. *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of National Building and a History Denied*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Epstein, John. 2014. *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gibson, McGuire. 2008. "The Acquisition of Antiquities in Iraq, 19th Century to 2003, Legal and Illegal." In *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, eds. Peter G. Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly, 31-40. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1959. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hetherington, Kevin. 2011. “Foucault, the Museum and the Diagram.” *The Sociological Review* 59, 3:457-75.

Ingram, Alan. 2019. *Geopolitics and the Event: Rethinking Britain’s Iraq War Through Art.* Oxford: Wiley.

Jameson, Fredric. 2013. *The Antinomies of Realism.* London and New York: Verso.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. 2006. “Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums.” In *The New Museology* ed. Peter Vergo, 22-40. London: Reaktion Books.

Khalil, Hannah. 2019. *A Museum in Baghdad.* London: Methuen Drama.

---. 2019. “First Person: Hannah Khalil on museum as metaphor in her new play for the RSC.” (22 October 2019) https://theartsdesk.com/theatre/first-person-hannah-khalil- museum-metaphor-her-new-play-rsc (accessed 11 March 2021).

---. 2021a. “Alireza Fakhrkonandeh’s Interview with Hannah Khalil” 12th of April 2021.

---. 2021b. “Interview with Hannah Khalil.” Royal Shakespeare Company. https://www.rsc.org.uk/support/supporters-room/get-closer/interview-with-hannah-khalil (Accessed 28 August 2021)

Kirmanj, Sherko. 2013. *Identity and Nation in Iraq.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Lieshout, Robert H. 2016. *Britain and the Arab Middle East: World War I and its Aftermath*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Lowe, Lisa. 2016. “New Worlds ‘Discover’ Asia.” *American Quarterly* 68, 2:413–27.

Lukitz, Liora. 2006. *A Quest in the Middle East: Gertrude Bell and the Making of Modern Iraq.* London: I.B. Tauris.

MacKenzie, John M. 2009. *Museums and Empire: Natural history, human cultures and colonial identities.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Melman, Billie. 1995. *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan.

Mignolo, Walter D. 2014. "Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality." In *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, eds. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, 21-52. Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag.

Mignolo, Walter D. and Catherine E. Walsh. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Naiden, Fred S. 2007. "Lines in the Sand." *The Wilson Quarterly* 31, 1:52-63.

Niblett, Michael. 2012. "World-Economy, World-Ecology, World-Literature." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 16:15-30.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Pickering, Kenneth (ed.). 2015. *Sykes-Picot: The Legacy: Five Modern Plays by Hannah Khalil, Hassan Abdulrazzak, and Joshua Hinds.* Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation.* London: Routledge.

Preziosi, Donald and Claire Farago. 2004. “What are museums for?” In *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum,* eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, 1-9. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Rancière, Jacques. 2013. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Bloomsbury.

Said, Edward. 1994. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

Shapiro, Stephen and Neil Lazarus. 2018. “Translatability, Combined Unevenness, and World Literature in Antonio Gramsci.” *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 32, 1:1-36.

Simine, Silke Arnold-de. 2021. *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trotsky, Leon. 1977. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Trans. Max Eastman. London: Pluto Press.

Wallach, Janet. 2005. *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell: Adventurer, Advisor to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia*. 2nd ed. New York: Anchor.

[i] "Irrealism" is far more appropriate and effective term than “magic realism” with regard to my analysis. Magic realism is too general and abstract for works in both Global South and North dealing with vastly different realities and issues. Scholars of world literatures theory – such as Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard - have recently proposed “irrealism” as a more effective term. (For a more detailed account of the term see my delineation of it above.)

[ii] I gathered these details about the production and set design through my conversations and correspondence with Nina Dunn and Selena Wisnom. Dunn and Wisnom also kindly provided various documents containing the details of the set design and projected words.

[iii] Inanna (or Inana or Ishtar) – etymologically meaning the "Queen of Heaven" (Nin-Ana) - is an ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, (extra-marital) sex, beauty, war, justice, and political power. She was originally worshiped in Sumer under the name "Inanna", and later by the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians under the name "Ishtar". Inanna was the patron goddess of the Eanna temple at the city of Uruk, which was her main cult center. She was associated with the planet Venus and her most prominent symbols included the lion and the eight-pointed star (see Black and Green 1992: 108-110).

[iv] Emphasis here is on creation; nation-building is not an evolutionary process.

[v] Homi K. Bhabha, in *Nation and Narration,* conceives nation as a Western historical narration. "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation — or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west" (Bhabha 1990: 1).