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**ARCHIVES
& CRIMES**

**Translated by
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I

The first stage in the process of identifying a murderer is to identify the victim. Watching a series of documentary accounts of missing persons, this is the lesson that the non-specialist viewer learns. The narratives conventionally begin with the story of someone who has vanished, with family, friends, or colleagues reporting their disappearance to the police. It unfolds: we learn about the last time they were seen in public, and the first time the police (representatives of the state whose duty is to protect its citizens and hold them accountable to the law) became aware that they are missing. Even if you already know about the crime and how it was solved from other sources, you keep watching as though you'd never heard of it at all; the journey of inquiry and investigation unfolding on the screen before you is more exciting than the end point of justice being done. We have a missing person being discussed by those who knew them, police officers whose inquiries uncover secrets about them that can come as a shock to their nearest and dearest. It is as though the investigations begin by creating a personal archive of the disappeared, some of it oral, taken from the accounts of others, and some documented, from banks and work and

telephone companies, not to mention the missing person's own social media or diaries. Then there are the lists of suspects and witnesses, each of whom has a life of their own and some connection with the witness, with motivations, that can seem momentarily plausible, either for their guilt or their innocence, or which suggest that a particular person should be accused. The investigation might eliminate them one by one, with the criminal only identified much later; the criminal might not be anyone we've heard of up to this point. The crime can be random, two strangers meeting as though by divine providence, with one of them deciding the other's fate. Sometimes the police never reach the facts of the case, be it the identity of the murderer, the body of the disappeared person, or even any firm proof that the person is dead. The years go by and the whole thing is forgotten. No one is working to solve the riddle of this crime, if there be a crime at all. In the terminology of the US police, a crime whose perpetrator remains unknown is called a "cold case"; in Egypt, it is termed "an indeterminate crime" or "a crime registered against unknown persons."

Cold cases normally sit in a cardboard or plastic box, alongside a shelf full of identical containers in the archive of criminal cases. The box has a

number and contains all the files, tests, meetings, recordings, and images generated by the investigation. It is a compendium of the fragments of a story that is yet to coalesce into its final form, where lines of inquiry have been snipped and discarded one after the other, and whose dead ends are a necessary step in the search for the truth.

II

But what if the story started differently? If the police were searching, not for a known missing person, but for someone who was completely unknown? If the citizen out on their Sunday-morning run should stumble across, not a fresh corpse with features intact, but the remnants of a skeleton lying in the woods? Or if the skull of some long-drowned body surfaces in a fisherman's net, or the snow thawing at the verge of a highway reveals a human foot wrapped in a blanket or rolled up in a carpet? An anonymous corpse then, someone of whom we know nothing. We cannot say for certain if anyone ever reported them missing. The process known as "forensic identification" seeks to define who this body belongs to: age, sex, defining features, injuries, and an approximate account of their death and its causes.

The victim's body, or what remains of it, is the archive, the reason for the investigation and, for the while, its subject. The murderer has attempted to efface the features of another person through mutilation, burning, and drowning, by leaving them unattended and in an unfrequented place so that they might be exposed to the elements for the longest time possible. Despite disintegration and decay, even complete dematerialization, forensics experts probe the harsh fact of death through the teeth and the color of the skin or its subcutaneous lipids. They can X-ray the pelvis or send bone samples for DNA analysis. The investigator pauses to obtain records of everything, augmenting his files with all the evidence, those facts that have been either discounted or confirmed. For instance: reports on the presence of toxic substances in the stomach, or the autopsy's description of the passage through the body of a bullet that remains lodged there. He works at excavating the corpse, using anthropology, chemistry, entomology, and geometry to reveal what decades ago would have been unretrievable.¹

1 Darryl Plecas & Rod Gehl, *Introduction to Criminal Investigation: Processes, Practices and Thinking* (Victoria, British Columbia: BCcampus, 2016), 148–9.

We do not read the archive of this anonymous corpse through science alone. To attempt an interpretation of the evidence obtained, to cautiously fill in the gaps that remain, the imagination must be brought to bear. Psychologists help categorize the nature of the criminal act by analyzing and interpreting the traces of criminal behavior on the corpse, imagining the pleasure and processes of this violence in order to arrive at a classification of the criminal, consulting a vast archive of data on similar crimes until they have confined the suspect within a particular cohort.² There is an artist to dress the bones in flesh, to draw the corpse a face and gift it a mouth and nose and eyes; they might even give it a name for ease of reference. The victim's silence doesn't mean that the body does not speak, nor does the fact it speaks necessarily mean that someone is paying attention. Overlooking the smallest detail might lead to the misinterpretation of what the victim has to say.

III

It is tempting to draw parallels between the investigation of a crime and the act of reading

2 For a broader treatment of criminal classification, see *ibid.*, 150.

crime in the archive, between the language of investigation and that of narrative, between cold cases and marginalized or excluded documents, between the absence of evidence and the absence of questions, between the story the body tells us and what we can find in the body of the archive. In both cases, that of the investigator and the reader in the archive, dead-ends abound: lines of inquiry that, for an instant, seem promising, then reveal themselves to be a mirage. Both encounter distraction and frustration and the serendipity that links two things which had once seemed destined never to coincide. Both are, moreover, readers of witnesses and witness statements. And they have their own ways – violent or patient – of dealing with them. The word “fascination” occurs to me: the pull towards whatever is hidden or absent, unknown or contradictory. This fascination might be the most profound thing that links the investigator and reader, for the first is looking for evidence and the second for its interpretation. But they share this fascination with many others, “amateurs,” let’s call them: those who obsess over a particular crime, who follow everything to do with it and who, in all seriousness, send letters detailing their conclusions to the investigating team. Every now and then, an

amateur detective will get so involved in a crime that they turn themselves in to the police as the criminal.³ Defeated by detection, their only remaining avenue to a solution of the impossible riddle is to offer themselves up in the offender's place.

Amateurs of the archive, on the other hand, are those whose attention fixes on passing thoughts. Drawn after stories, you see them poring over old maps, hunting down the precise location of a tiny island lost amid the waves, a piece of rock they'd never heard of moments before. They lever open dictionaries to find the etymology of a word, or examine documents in order to reach the very conclusions they have just read in a scholarly study of these same documents. These amateurs are undeniably lovers of knowledge, but how they differ from others is in their search for its credibility. To them, credibility resides in the archive, which is why, to me, their celebration of the archive outweighs their sensitivity to its shortcomings.

3 Such as the confession of Alexis Valoran Reich to the murder and sexual assault of JonBenét Ramsey (August 6, 1990–December 25/26, 1996). Arrested in Bangkok, Reich was brought to trial in the United States, where it was proved that the confessor had no involvement in the crime.

IV

Saidiya Hartman wrote, “to read the archive is to enter a mortuary,”⁴ by which she meant the death and silence she came face-to-face with during her research into the transatlantic slave trade between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. To narrativize the history of the captives on board the slave transports, she had to read the ships’ manifests, the logs and journals of the captains, priests, officers and merchants, trial proceedings, the records of torture techniques and processes, lists of the dead and the speeches of the abolitionists.

Hartman did not find the captives waiting for her, ready to tell her in their words how they’d suffered. Rather, she listened to what they did not say, especially in the documents of those who regarded these same captives as goods to be traded. She had to exercise her imagination to fill in the gaps and complete the stories that no one had thought to fill in or to notice.

But Saidiya Hartman is not the only one to go to the archive. There are those who visit the archive as a free resource from which they might extract something both valuable and entertaining; in order

4 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 17.

to confirm preconceptions, to look for proofs, to validate the existence of a political, social, or religious statement. Imagine a person who goes to the archive without any personal fixation, without questions. It's like someone who goes to a mortuary to pass the time. They might take a selfie with a corpse, might recount to us the story of a body discovered by chance while looking around, might even feel, within its walls, some conviction that they have seen death with their own eyes, and that life outside the mortuary is beautiful again.

The body of the archive is not an organic structure. Various institutions have created, arranged, and categorized it, have made it available or otherwise concealed it for reasons of their own. The form in which we encounter it is not as an idiosyncratic physical building but an identity. It contains evidence. This evidence may be distorted or incomplete or indicative of who has a voice. Asking questions in this way about the status and arrangement of this evidence and reconsidering the moment of its creation can assist in reducing this distortion. It is as though anyone going to the archive must rearrange what they find according to their question. This is the first step in negotiating with the past.

V

To enter a collective archive is to carry an anonymous corpse on your shoulders. You are not investigating how this corpse met its death so much as feeling impelled, somehow, to fill in the gaps that render it anonymous. Whether or not you are hoping to tell the story and share it with others, you might be able to give this corpse a name and lend a meaning to its life. The corpse is the researcher's question. Urgent, mysterious, distorted, or even inconsistent, it is a question which issues from the present – the here and now – but which lacks the language required to speak it. Every question has a history, and it is vital that we follow its trail and understand the previous moments in which it was on the verge of being uttered, that we comprehend the nature of the powers that blocked its path. By “following its trail” I refer to Derrida’s “trace”: not an origin or fact, but a configuration or reiteration that preserves meaning. It is not the “origin,” but an “originary trace,”⁵ a marker in the here and now of another thing, a thing that is neither here nor now whose full meaning is the reference it makes to what lies behind it.⁶ The purpose of following

5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 61.

6 *Ibid.*

the trace in the archive is not to search for the “truth” (this is the work of the dedicated police officer), nor to give a voice to the voiceless (why do we not see that such an impulse is in essence an authoritarian one, and often leads to the act of ventriloquizing the voiceless?). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that archival research can provide a language to voice every question, or that the language in which we frame these questions will necessarily be comprehensible to others.

I cannot imagine that anyone goes to the archive because it’s some kind of Aladdin’s cave, or because it holds the magical answer to their question, one which will return them happier back to reality. Well, there are certainly those that do this, but whether or not they are able to make it back again, I cannot say.

That sentence – “whether or not they are able to make it back again” – summons images of people adrift in the ocean, approaching some heavily patrolled shoreline, impelled by a desire to be saved or the quest for the chance at a life somewhere else. The emigrant has hope, and also the fear and angst that stem from the unknown; most of the time they are incapable of imagining what will happen to them “there.”

Case study:
The first Arab immigrants to America

“It is impossible to determine the exact number of Arab immigrants to North America, because US and Canadian immigration officials have at different times used different classification schemes. Until 1899 in the United States, for instance, immigration statistics lumped the Arabs with Greeks, Armenians, and Turks. For this and other reasons, only estimates can be provided.”⁷

So Michael Suleiman informs us in the introduction to his book, *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, a well-researched academic study that charts the history of successive waves of Arab immigration to America from 1870 onwards and attempts to construct a picture of Arab communities and the lives of their members using political, commercial, medical, and religious records, occasionally returning to oral histories to check its claims against these documents. Published in 1999, the book is an excellent example of the many academic works released prior to September 11, 2001. This body of scholarship informs us that the ways in

7 Michael W. Suleiman, *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 2.

which we classify current waves of immigration here and now must take into account, theoretically at least, the paucity of the archive of immigration in the past. They correct misunderstandings in the archive's classification of these earlier Arab immigrants, a taxonomical issue that rendered these communities invisible for decades, and explain that the modern concept of "the Arab" had only begun to take shape within the Ottoman Empire towards the end of the First World War alongside the evolution of modern anti-colonial nationalist discourse.⁸

There is no proof that the corrective efforts of these studies – which looked into the archive, pointed out their deficiencies, and engaged with the classificatory records – had any impact on such misapprehensions outside academia. The records of the immigration service will remain unaltered – as they should: their deficiencies and taxonomies are part of a history that needs to be told.

Following 9/11, some researchers revisited the subject of Arab immigration to America. The archive

8 See, for example: Alixa Naif, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience, M.E.R.I. Special Studies* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993). Eric J. Hooglund, *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States Before 1840*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987). Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

might remain unaltered, but their questions – even their language – had changed. Gregory Orfalea opens his preface to *Arab Americans: A History* as follows: “I once thought – hoped actually – I would never address this subject again. But history has a way of grabbing a writer – and a community – by the neck with challenges and trials no one could ever have imagined.”⁹

He writes that his guide on an hour-long excursion to Ellis Island began the tour by discussing Russian immigrants and an anecdote about Golda Meir’s father, who came to America after fleeing a pogrom in Kyiv. This moving story was followed by other, less interesting, accounts of immigrant arrivals from around the world. When Orfalea mentioned that more than 150,000 Arabs had emigrated to America from Greater Syria before 1924, the guide drew a blank:

For me, it was a disconsolate note, as I listened to the ghosts of the Syrians, nauseated as so many of them were from the seas, try to spell out their words in English, or be turned away because of trachoma, or wander wide-eyed into the cacophonous corridors filled daily with up to 15,000 ragged but hopeful immigrants from around the world. They seemed as unknown in the late 20th century as they were a century back, when they were miscalled ‘Turks’ and listed as such until 1899 – a humiliating

9 Gregory Orfalea, *Arab Americans: A History*, (Interlink Publishing, 2006), VII.

reference given that most were Christian and had sacrificed so much to get away from Ottoman Turkish rule. Perhaps it was at Ellis Island that their identity crisis in America would begin, where Yaccoub quickly became Jacob, and first names became last.¹⁰

Orfalea's necessary return to a subject he had never wanted to revisit, was shaped by a post-9/11 question over the historicity and status of the Arab presence in America. A reader might wish to criticize the sentimentality of this archival researcher or reject the centrality of identity to his analysis, but that same reader might also perceive how this insistent, unquiet question is capable of opening up space within the archive (as conventionally imagined, that is: a blend of documentary records, oral history, images, biography and autobiography), of proposing avenues of inquiry to show the archive's shortcomings and distortions (the violence of immigration does not begin with the experiences of these first immigrants in America, but in their pasts, in their former homelands, with the initial impulse to emigrate, with flight and dreams, with the Atlantic crossing and the queues of Ellis Island), and expanding approaches to the way it is read (Orfalea's review of what he himself has written about the

10 *Ibid.* p.76.

first Arab immigrants, and his tour around the Ellis Island museum are both added to the archive). More important still: language. How does the researcher avoid reproducing the language of power which is present in every archive? How do they avoid speaking on behalf of its victims? And how do they avoid defining their own impossible position, simultaneously researcher and witness?

Case study:
Arabs across the Atlantic

We cannot say that we are driven to the archive by a single question, insistent, central, and clearly articulated. This is a banal simplification. Such a question would have to be heaved back and forth like a corpse, preserved unaltered then framed so we might begin the process of defense (or debate or narrativization) against those whose readings differ from ours.

As I see it, not only is the central question in any given project frequently changed over the course of the research, there are also marginal and arbitrary questions that act as a guide during one's time in the archive. It doesn't matter whether or not they appear in what we write at the end of our journey,

because they play a vital role in helping us develop our question. They may precipitate the diversions necessary to encourage more drifting, or supply us with the metaphors that function as a generator for the narrative we are starting to construct. Indeed, they give us a tone of voice, a certain linguistic pitch which colors what we say.

I have an example from my own research: When I began work on my PhD, my proposal was provisionally titled, *America in Arabic travel writing from 1895–2006*. My attention fixed on the Atlantic crossing as experienced by these first Arab writers.¹¹ Accounts of the journey from ports in Greater Syria to Marseilles, then on through the mountainous waves and storms of the Atlantic in third-class cabins aboard giant steamers, contained shards of myth and fantasy in addition to terror and dread. In describing their crossing, these writers deployed an older language, one that seemed part of the traditions and aesthetics of medieval Arabic travel writing.

11 Their books include:
As'ad Mikhā'il Rustum, *Kitāb al-Gharīb fī-l-Gharb: ar-Rihlah 1887-1895*, from the al-Matba'ah ash-Sharqiyyah Edition (New York), Dār al-Hamrā, Beirut
'Afi'ah Karam, *Badī'ah wa Fu'ād* (A novel), from the press of the al-Hudā daily newspaper (New York, 1906)
Ameen F. Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911).

But as soon as the writer emerged from Ellis Island into what they termed “Paradise,” when they saw the towering buildings and broad avenues of New York, their descriptive language became modern, negotiating with the Arabic lexicon to develop the terms best fitted to portray phenomena that their target audience had never laid eyes on.

I didn’t have the tools required to read these narratives, so I took a step back and began to read nineteenth-century Arabic newspaper accounts of America. I was bewitched by descriptions of Paradise America and Sheikh Columbus (as he was referred to by the Lebanese *Al Jinan* magazine in its translations from Spanish and French) with his navigational miracles and his taming of the mountainous waves.¹² That wasn’t enough, however, so I took another step back: Did the medieval Arab geographers consider the possibility of an Atlantic crossing? Where in the West did their maps end?

These preliminary questions opened the door to a personal obsession with Arab geographies. Up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and despite a plethora of encyclopedic works dealing with the appearance and composition of

12 The *al-Jinān* newspaper, 1870: Part One, 54.

the universe, astronomy, longitude and latitude, and the chronicles of countries and kingdoms, the concept of the world in Arab culture remained that of the old geo-graphers. Europe and America, however, belonged to the course of a modern history which gave primacy to what we call “The West,” problematizing the process of encountering them, or re-encountering them, for Arab culture.

Arab scholars of the eighth to tenth centuries (al-Farazi in the late eighth century, al-Khawarizmi who died circa 850, and al-Hamadani, who died in 945) disagreed over the length of the earth’s circumference and the disposition of land and sea, though were in agreement that no more than half its surface area was inhabitable, with the remainder covered by the waters. While some argued over the extent of land to the south, there was no dispute that land to the west ended at the shores of the Sea of Darknesses.¹³

The possibility of a life beyond the Atlantic wasn’t even considered, in which regard they were in accord with European scholarship of the time. If we examine one of the most accurate Arab geographies of the twelfth century, we can trace how

13 ‘Aziz al-‘Uzmah, *al-‘Arab wa-l-Barābirah: al-Muslimūn wa-l-Hadarāt al-‘Ukhra*, Riyād ar-Rayyis l-l-Kutub wa-n-Nashr (London & Cyprus, 1991), 48–9.

terror at the idea of an Atlantic crossing first took shape in the culture. Al-Idrisi played a role in developing a more useful definition of Europe in his *Journey of the One Who Pines to Breach the Far Horizon's Lines*. Building on Ptolemy's geography, he divided the world into seven regions, and in his discussions of the first part of the fourth region he describes the Atlantic as follows:

No one knows what lies beyond this dark sea and no man has ever received a faithful report of it, given the difficulty of its crossing, its darkness, the great massing of its waves, the multitude of its terrors, the wildness of its creatures, and the frenzy of its winds. It contains many islands, some habitable and some submerged, and no captain sails out into it but rather cleaves to the coast and never leaves it. The waves of this sea are impelled forward, solid as mountains, and their waters never break.¹⁴

To al-Idrisi, the world ends to the west at the Sea of Darkneses. No one knows what is behind it. There are a pair of islands there he calls "The Immortals" and despite their mysterious nature he describes them as places of wonders: "On each stands an idol built of stone, a hundred arms high and supporting a bronze figure that points behind it with its hand."¹⁵ Ibn Khaldoun references al Idrisi

14 ash-Sharīf al-'Idrīsī, *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq fī Ikhtarāq al-'Āfāq*, Volume Two, 525.

15 *Ibid.*, 527.

in his Introduction and appends further reasons for why crossing the ocean would be impossible: “Ships do not enter into it because few that leave sight of the shore ever return there, not to mention the impassable fogs that gather in the skies of this ocean and on the surface of its water – which fogs, being so far from shore, are never touched and unravelled by sunlight reflected from the surface of the land. It is thus difficult to reach and hard to credit reports concerning it.”¹⁶

A continued dependence on al-Idrisi via Ibn Khaldoun and the seven-region theory delayed Arab scholarship’s encounter with America. In the early sixteenth century, Ibn Iyas said of the Atlantic, “no one has dared set out in it,”¹⁷ while Mirza Ahmad Sadeq al-Isfahani, though he died in 1680 and knew of the discovery of America, still spoke of the seven regions and relied on the information of his predecessors who in turn had relied on theirs. The seven regions are also used by Abu al-Qasim al-Zayyani (1734-1833) in his *Great Compendium of Reports of the World, Land and*

16 Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn: Tahqīq ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Wāhid Wāfi, Dār Nahdat Misr l-t-Tab’ wa-n-Nashr* (Cairo, 1979), Volume One, 335–6.

17 Ignaty Krachkovsky, *Tārikh al-‘Adab al-Jughrāfi, Lajnat at-Ta’līf wa-t-Tarjamah wa-n-Nashr, Jāmi‘at ad-Duwal al-‘Arabīyah* (Cairo, 1963), 492.

Sea. The concept of the seven regions continued to be used through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁸

The texts I have mentioned in the four paragraphs above occupied me for months during my research and led to a subsidiary fascination: following the different Arabic orthographies of the word “America” in the newspapers and books of the nineteenth century. Then came a third obsession: the notable absence of pirate narratives from Arabic literature in the late eighteenth century even as they were playing a major role in the development of the novel in America. More months went by, lost in the discovery of an important strain in American literature which revolved around narratives of the memoirs and experiences of American captives in North Africa during the 1790s.¹⁹ I wrote the first chapter of my dissertation, entitled “America’s Absence”, out of this sequence of obsessions. An entire chapter

18 See: Khālid az-Ziyādah, *Tatawwur an-Nazrah al-Islamiyyah 'ilā 'Ūrubā, Ma'had al-'Inmā' al-'Arabī* (Beirut 1983), 26.

19 See:

Susanna Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794).

Matthew Carey, *A Short Account of Algiers* (1794).

James Leach, *A New and Easy Plan to Redeem the American Captives in Algiers* (1795).

James Wilson Stevens, *An Historical and Geographical Account of Algiers* (1797).

John Foss, *A Journal of the Captivity and Sufferings of John Foss* (1798).

with no central question, filled with accounts, that seemed to me to be important, which comprised a record of terror of the Sea of Darknesses – as though, perhaps, more than one trace was helping me understand the antique registers used by these first Arab immigrants as they articulated their fear. Proudly, I took it to my supervisor who got back to me a fortnight later with the terse comment: “Excellent effort, but what does any of this have to do with portrayals of America in Arabic travel writing published since 1895?”

He was right. I myself had no idea what might link those scattered fragments to my thesis about travel writing. The truth was, I was yet to articulate my question. I needed this curiosity and these diversions – the language of the geographers, the maps, the terms used for America, the translations carried by the Arabic tabloid press – in order to reach my metaphor: crossing the Sea of Darknesses. Nor would it have been possible without having to imagine the hardship of traversing the ocean in 1895, without contemplating what it would mean to be an emigre from Zahlé or Kamshish, what they might have heard or read about the Sea of Darknesses before leaving everything behind and fleeing into the unknown.

Moments in the archive

1. Enter the archive with your right foot

“Enter with your right foot.” The old saying comes back to me at the entrance to any archive. Well, not any archive: those I’ve visited in Egypt. It’s the desire for a blessing, for luck to be your friend. Whole days can be spent lost in its maze only to emerge empty-handed. As a researcher in the third world, you will surely encounter at least one among an endless list of setbacks:

- That the entire building is closed for no apparent reason.
- That the person in charge of the file you’re after is absent.
- That the document you’ve been waiting for has been embargoed by the security services on the grounds of “confidentiality.”
- That you find the file bearing the name and number you’re looking for, but it has been misclassified. In other words, you realize that its contents have been given the wrong description, or that it doesn’t belong to the author or agency or period that you’re interested in.
- That you find a volume containing multiple issues

of the magazine you want, then turn to the page cited in the seminal work that brought you here only to find that it's been removed. (I always assume that it's been torn out by the author of the seminal work who cited it.)

- That you come prepared with the index number of the file you want to read, and after waiting are informed that this particular file has been deemed unimportant and destroyed, either because no one has requested it for several years or because no new material has been added to it, rendering it dead weight, taking up space.
- That you might find what you were hoping to find, but then the photocopier is broken, so you have to come back and wait again.
- That you might find everything where it's supposed to be, quickly and easily, only for it to become clear that your search has been based on a misunderstanding of what you're looking for.

If you haven't encountered any of the obstacles on the list above, it means you must have stepped in on your right foot.

I'd always assumed the phrase "enter with your right foot" was an Egyptian folk saying. It appears in several places on the Internet. The first time I encountered it was in Imam Nawawi's Summation:

Our friends and others of the ulema say, 'It is best to advance one's right first in all matters that concern reverence and respect, such as washing the body, either before prayer and ordinarily, putting on one's robe and shoes and slippers and under-trousers, entering the mosque, placing the tooth-stick in one's mouth, applying kohl, clipping one's nails and moustache, plucking one's armpits, shaving one's head, making greetings at prayer, leaving a wilderness, eating and drinking, shaking hands, approaching the Black Stone, giving and receiving, or anything else of the like.'

The hunt for the origin of this saying left me with multiple search tabs open simultaneously. Most of the pages turned out to be religious in nature, nothing to do with folk wisdom. About twenty-five minutes in, I found a trace of the saying on Islamweb in a story about the Prophet's wife Aisha: "The Prophet (the peace and prayers of Allah be upon him) liked to begin with his right in all matters that touched on respect or reverence, as the Mother of the Believers Aisha, may Allah be content with her, said herself: "The Prophet (the peace and prayers of Allah be upon him) preferred to use his right hand or foot when putting on his

shoes and walking and cleansing himself, and in all things.”

In the internet archive there is no state security,²⁰ no employees to jealously guard its contents, and no one is planning to create or classify material to make it an archive in the first place. There are just thousands of anonymous users free to add material, new or old, on any subject and for any number of reasons. There is no space for contemplation in the digital archive, because contemplation comes from waiting, and sitting there in front of your screen you never have to wait for a volume or document to be dredged up from some darkened room: every page is open before you simultaneously, as though thousands of people are whispering in your ears, offering you texts and pictures and videos, tugging at your shoulder or hand to draw your attention to what they're holding. I enjoy the distraction: it's a necessary step along the road to what you're looking for. But put another way: beware distraction, because the abundance of material can to a large degree resemble a dead end.

20 Of course, state security are present online, and you can be punished for what you write, but they do not possess the same absolute control over the internet archive and cannot determine what you read.

**Case study:
The Iraqi National Anthem**

In 2004 I read in an Arabic-language newspaper that the national anthem of Iraq was to be changed by order of Paul Bremer, the man appointed by President Bush to oversee the rebuilding of Iraq in 2003. On the same page as this report, the paper carried two articles decrying America and its destruction of Iraq, and mocking this neocolonialist mentality that sought to impose a national anthem on Iraqis. I thought of the report frequently, though I never managed to find out what the anthem had been under Saddam Hussein, nor the Bremer-approved replacement. Back then there was the Yahoo search engine for questions like these, but it never had the information you wanted.

Years later, I was sitting at my kitchen table preparing a lecture for my class on three Iraqi short stories whose events revolve around the fall of Saddam's rule, when the story came back to me. I'd learned by then that the students in my class were the same as anyone else: they liked to know a context for their readings, they liked stories and metaphors that linked the present with the past. I was going to tell them the story of the foundation

of the Iraqi National Museum in 1922 (including, of course, the important role played by Gertrude Bell), followed by the looting and destruction of the museum during the entry of America and their allies into Baghdad in 2003. But the story, as it was, seemed passé to me, or at least incomplete. Why not open my lecture with the story of the national anthem being changed in 2004, I thought? A trawl of the internet revealed a flood of stories and opinions about the country's anthems, from the very first (composed by an English officer in 1924 on the orders of King Faisal) through more than five subsequent changes, each of them corresponding to a change in regime and ideology.

What existed online was the product of different people, at different times, and for different reasons, adding material to my search. Some of the material was public access; some was free, but required registration to a website; some was private, accessible through your academic institution's subscription to a specialist journal. In this chaotic mess, a core of recurring facts formed a sort of skeleton story.

When Saddam took control in 1979, Iraq already had a national anthem endorsed by the Baath Party on its rise to power (through a coup) on February 8, 1963. It was in fact the same as the

Egyptian national anthem (“Oh my weapon, it has been so long!”) that we used to sing when I was at primary school, until that morning, a few weeks after the Camp David Accords were signed in 1978, when we were astonished to find ourselves with another, older, anthem to sing: “My land, O my land, you have my love and my heart.”

Saddam wanted a new anthem for his new state, and following a series of contests and judging committees, and the short-lived selection of a pair of pieces penned by two officers from the army’s Academy of Military Music, Hussein issued a presidential decree that a poem by the Iraqi poet Shafik al-Kamali, “Land of the Two Rivers,” would be the new anthem of the Republic of Iraq. In 1981, Hussein dispatched the director of the military music academy to England to compose new music for the poem’s text, which was done with the assistance of an English orchestra. Al-Kamali’s text opens as follows:

A nation has spread a wing over the horizon,
and wears the glory of civilizations as its sash.
The land of the two rivers is blessed, a nation
in resolve and tolerance, radiant with glory.

Among the hundreds of fateful decisions taken by Presidential Envoy Bremer in 2004, was the one to change this anthem to “My Homeland.”

I'd never heard of an Arab poet called Shafik al-Kamali, so I opened another tab and began to search. Shafik al-Kamali (1929–1983) studied literature at Baghdad University and was a Baathist to the bone. He opposed the monarchy and was imprisoned, only to be released with the foundation of the republic in 1958. But, falling out with the military junta which ran the government, he was removed from his post, and fled – first to Syria and then to Egypt, where he obtained a master's degree in literature from Cairo University and met his fellow Iraqi exile, Saddam Hussein. In 1968, when the third president of Iraq, Abdul Rahman Arif, was deposed, the two friends returned to Iraq. As Saddam began to climb the rungs of power, becoming de facto leader under al-Bakr before assuming the presidency himself in 1979, Shafik was appointed Minister of Youth and Sports, a position he held from 1968 to 1970 before going on to other jobs, such as Iraq's ambassador to Spain, Minister of Information, president of the Arab Writer's Union, the first head of the Arab Horizons publishing house, and then subsequently editor in

chief of its eponymous literary magazine. He also published several collections of poetry, though the only poem of his that is known was the one Saddam selected to be the national anthem.

I could talk to my students about the “semantics” of this story, of the changes to the anthem before, during, and after Saddam’s time in power; how, for instance, we might read the fact that Saddam issued a presidential decree choosing one of his Baathist friends’ poems to be the national anthem and what this lets us say about the relationship between dictatorship and literature. Maybe I could address the circumstances of the three Iraqi writers we were reading, how they were in exile because of Saddam’s regime. But the term “semantics” has a bad reputation. In the context of archival reading, it can come to resemble the way judgements and sermons and proofs are adduced in religious and ideological discourses. Moreover, the skeleton of what we might call “the story of the Iraqi national anthem” was like a medical training dummy of the body of Iraq itself, embedded with little lights: one going out here for another to light up elsewhere, indicating another story, another site of damage.

In the maze of the digital archive, I lost sight of the reason for my search and the lecture that I

had to prepare. The story of the national anthem receded into the background for the spotlight of my fascination to fall (then, and for years afterwards) on the character of the Baathist poet, Shafik al-Kamali.

VI

Fascination springs from contradiction, from a gap in our knowledge that renders the story we want to tell contradictory or incomplete, which in turn makes the attempt to deploy the incomplete story in order to highlight some meaning or significance, an abuse of this story, a corrupted exploitation of its facts. In the various testimonies and articles dealing with Iraq's past, a single, elided point kept recurring: that ever since Saddam Hussein's purge of his Baathist comrades, initiated at the infamous 1979 party meeting in the Khuld Hall (just days after he assumed the presidency), al-Kamali had lived in terror of being exterminated, not only on his own behalf, but on that of his entire family. We learn in passing that Saddam has his son, a university student, imprisoned, and that this son was forced under torture to confess that his father was against the regime; that the poet himself was imprisoned and tortured; that after he was released

he was a sick man and a pariah; that he died in mysterious circumstances in 1984.

To claim that Saddam chose this poem out of friendship would be to misunderstand the story. Did he choose it out of enmity, then? But how are we supposed to know how the tyrant's mind worked... In any case, while al-Kamali's words were being sung over martial music in every school and office and public function in the land, the poet himself was a solitary, fearful outcast, waiting day and night for horror to visit him and his family – as it eventually did. This is what we know from more than one witness, and we shall return to it shortly.

Moments in the archive

2. The aesthetics of drifting

Drifting is the step that precedes distraction. You are fascinated by some fact, a sentence, an inconsistency, and though you have no clear question in mind, you drift off on a quest after an “originary trace.” It is an arbitrary starting point: many roads lie open before you and you have no idea which will take you where you want to go. The truth is, you don't know what you want, but even so, there are causes for optimism. For instance:

- a) Not all the roads are the same. Some are clear and smooth, some impassable, and, of course, there are always those who, for various reasons, have come this way before you.
- b) In the archive, all roads intersect. Geography is the vessel of history, and history has gaps, and behind all of these gaps lie witnesses and testimony. At any point, you are free to highlight a fork in the road or return to another starting point.
- c) That last sentence is incorrect, because there is no starting point (such as the Green Sea or the Sea of Darknesses) and all the roads crisscross, so instead you must drift left and right. Anyone watching your progress from a bird-eye's view would see you trot forward a few paces then turn or turn back or pause to catch your breath.
- d) Later in your journey, you may return to something you overlooked (because you weren't then able to recognize it) along a road you've walked before. The reward (if there has to be a reward) is that you would never have noticed this single specific thing amid the chaos, if it hadn't been for drifting and distraction.

VII

In Arabic, the word shahaada has at least four meanings:

- 1) Shahaada: The “witness” of the Muslim that there is no god but Allah and that Mohammad is the messenger of Allah, which sentence contains one of the five foundational tenets of Islam, along with prayer, charity, fasting, and (for those who are able) pilgrimage to “the house.”
- 2) Shahaada: To die in the cause of Allah. Islam enjoins His believers (i.e. those who utter the sentence in the first definition) to pray to Allah, propagate His religion, and exalt His word, to which end they are called to jihaad, or to “struggle.” If they are killed in this process of struggle for Allah’s cause, the believer attains the shahaada, which is the highest rank a Muslim can reach, through which they join the prophets in paradise. Such Muslims are known as shaheed, or “martyr.” In modern usage, however, the term shaheed is not necessarily restricted to Muslims, but can be found applied to anyone who dies for a cause in which they believe. For instance: the communists, anarchists, revolutionaries, LGBT people, and others, who have

lost their lives at the hands of colonialism or modern Arab regimes. It is also used of regular citizens killed in traffic accidents (the indirect consequence of regime corruption), the civilian casualties of war, or the refugees who drown on their way to Europe in search of a life of dignity.

- 3) Shahaada: That you speak of what you have seen; that you do not keep your witness to yourself, nor augment or alter it in any way, as to do so is to lie to Allah Himself. A shahid is a witness, and an eyewitness is someone who sees something – an event, a crime – with their own eyes. Shahaada is also the testimony that the witness speaks to investigatory agencies and in a court of law.
- 4) Shahaada: When taking a qualifier to clarify its purpose, shahaada is “certification”: a certificate of seaworthiness, a certificate of deposit, a bank statement, a title certificate, an electronic certificate of authentication, and so on.

In the Arabic dictionaries, these and other meanings propagate beneath the heading sh-h-d, three-letters that form the shared linguistic root of the martyr and the eyewitness.

The dictionary is perhaps the most inspiring text available to anyone wanting to read the archive. It first gives us the primary meaning of what we are reading, then we return to it to indicate the gaps in the archive, then we grapple with it in order to find the appropriate words with which to fill these gaps.

The literary critic Robert Harvey believes the witness is a martyr who has been spared.²¹ To Harvey, the existence of the witness is a necessary condition for establishing ethical relations between human beings. Your permanent status as a witness – or as a person capable of bearing witness – is a mark of the moral capacities present in all individuals, by virtue of which they are able to feel sympathy towards their fellow man. In this sense, witness is a human capacity based on imaginative faculties that can be enhanced by the act of reading. It is the commonly held ability to feel for others which engenders responsible work. This responsible work is always and only that which is directed towards others on the basis that they are extensions of the self.²²

21 Robert Harvey, *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility*, (New York & London: Continuum, 2010), 17.

22 *Ibid.*, 2.

In every reading of the archive, the reader is looking for some forgotten testimony, but they are also looking for false witness. False witness is no less important than honest witness. This is why Saidiya Hartman worked on the documentary record of the wrongdoers, not their victims: the martyrs of the slave trade never had the time to speak.

And wherever witness is present in the archive in the sense of “testimony” or “evidence,” there is always something to oppose or contradict it.

Case study:

The Iraqi poet Shafik al-Kamali

Al-Kamali’s name recurs frequently in the stories that his contemporaries began to tell in 2003, following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The account of the national anthem is usually mentioned only in passing: al-Kamali was just one of many Baathists persecuted by the man whose past they had been witnesses of before his rise to absolute power.

Dr. Fakhri Qadduri dedicated an entire chapter of his memoirs to Shafik al-Kamali. The importance of Qadduri’s testimony is linked to his standing as a scholar and his experience with the Iraqi regime. After receiving an MA from the University of Iowa,

his doctorate from Cologne in 1964, and a diploma in marketing from Harvard in 1966, he worked as an economics professor at Baghdad University. But he was also a Baathist: first member of the Economics Committee of the Revolutionary Command Council in the early 1970s, then going on to occupy several important positions over the following decade, first the minister of economics then governor of the Central Bank. As we read, however, we begin to perceive another reason for Qadduri's importance: he was al-Kamali's brother-in-law,²³ which made him an eyewitness to the events of the poet's life, to the state of Shafik's household (his family and his collections of books and art) before, during and after Saddam's time in power.

Qadduri opens his narrative with a lament that al-Kamali had departed this life in mysterious circumstances "before he could write his memoirs" and so "there departed with him all the events he had lived through or been witness to, in politics as well as political struggle, over the course of four decades."²⁴ He is mourning the loss of al-Kamali's

23 Shafik's birth name was Shafik Abd al-Jabbar Qadduri. He changed his name to al-Kamali following his imprisonment in the 1950s, when he fled Baghdad to Syria and then Egypt.

24 Fakhri Qudūri, *Hakaza 'ariftu al-Bakr wa Saddām: Rihlat 35 'āman fī Hizb al-Ba'th*, Dār al-Hikmah (London, 2006), 253.

witness to the history he wants to be told and which he, through his memoirs, is helping to shape. On the next page, Qadduri mentions that, during their last meeting in 1983, al-Kamali advised him not to return to Iraq in order to avoid the traps being laid for him.²⁵ In other words, Qadduri is an example of the “martyr spared death” described by Harvey, and furthermore, that his testimony wouldn’t even exist if he hadn’t listened to al-Kamali’s advice, because we learn from the memoir that Qadduri went into exile in Germany that same year.

I have no intention of summarizing Qadduri’s testimony here. After all, summary is the corruption of testimony – or restated: testimony is not simply evidence. It is language, metaphor, a tone. Qadduri is not giving an account of “what happened” in the abstract, but what happened from his perspective, what remains of his memory, through the acts of remembering and imagining and forgetting – not to mention the capacity and limits of language (Qadduri’s language) to describe. Even so, it is necessary here to mention two events that Qadduri describes, the first of which concerns “testimony and witness,” and the second, the destruction

25 *Ibid.*, 254.

of al-Kamali's personal archive at the hands of Saddam's mukhabarat, as an instance of the ways in which the political regime persecuted its victims.

a) Witness and testimony

Qadduri tells the story of the arrest of Shafik al-Kamali's son, Yaroub, in the first days of July 1983. The same story recurs in a number of other accounts of the period, but fortunately for us Qadduri was a member of the family, and so his is detailed. He tells us that Yaroub was a student at the faculty of sciences at Baghdad University, and that he was picked up by a state security vehicle from outside his house. This was witnessed by neighbors who rushed to inform the family. After being tortured, Yaroub was informed that he was being charged on the basis of a recording (in the possession of the security services) of him swapping jokes about the authorities and senior government figures with fellow students. Shafik al-Kamali was powerless to help because he was in disfavor himself and under surveillance; his friends and relatives didn't dare intervene for fear of crossing what the regime called "red lines." Qadduri writes: "About a month later, the son was forced under torture to sign a confession that everything he had said on the tapes

had been quoted from his father, and at approximately 3pm on August 1, 1983, the mukhabarat went to Shafik's house in order to arrest him."²⁶

Qadduri passes no moral judgement on Yaroub for his false witness, since he knows – as do other witnesses to the regime of Saddam Hussein – that using torture to force sons to testify against fathers or to implicate the innocent, was one of the primary tools used by the regime to punish its opponents. As a witness himself, Qadduri understands that the basic precondition of any testimony is freedom, and that in these circumstances, the crime of false witness must be laid instead at the door of the regime which tortures people to make them say what never happened, which fakes evidence to construct rigged trials, which leaves in its wake the falsified documentary record that will join to what, in future, we will interact with as “the archive.”

I was deeply distracted now. Putting Qadduri aside, I started after Yaroub. What, I wondered, had happened to him after he'd left prison? How had he lived his life knowing that his testimony had been the cause of his own father's imprisonment and death as a pariah? Qadduri tells us nothing about

26 *Ibid.*, 255.

Yaroub's later life or his guilt, and nor does anyone else. It is as though Yaroub is nothing beyond the role he plays in his father's story. We might never have read his name if it wasn't for his confession; his guilt and trauma are mere marginalia: we might choose to imagine them if we find the time.

b) The destruction of the personal archive Qadduri tells us how, on leaving prison, Shafik al-Kamali went to live with friends. His own house on the banks of the Tigris in the neighborhood of Azamiya, and his other property, would remain confiscated on the orders of the regime for another four months. The house, along with his library, rare paintings, and manuscripts were seized. Only the house would be returned to him following the intervention of the King of Jordan.²⁷ Qadduri describes the poet's return to the ruins of his home:

What hurt Shafik most was the fate of his extensive library: he found the books scattered along the banks of the Tigris by his house, the wind playing with the torn pages and many of them swallowed by the river. Those that remained he laid out to dry on the rocks, overwhelmed by tears, then carried them back inside as you might carry a newborn, to set them on his shelves.²⁸

27 *Ibid.*, 256.

28 *Ibid.*, 257–8.

The passage brings to mind many other stories of how various Arab regimes treated the personal archives of their political prisoners.²⁹ Punishment is not just prison and torture, but also to leave prison, to return to the life you remember, to find that nothing is as you left it, that your world is in ruins. This in itself is enough to distract us again, to send us back to the archive to make some cliched statement about the role played by dictatorships in levelling memory to the ground.

More important is the language of Qadduri's description of al-Kamali's library: "the wind playing with the torn pages and many of them swallowed by the river." It recalls the destruction of the House of Wisdom during the Mongol assault on Baghdad in 1258. Contemporary witnesses of the Mongol siege also left their testimonies, creating a cinematic scene in which this same river swallowed books and, stained with their ink, turned blue and red. This same scene was ready to hand as a metaphor, as the national museum was being looted under the eyes of the soldiers of the US occupation in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, which is to say, three years before the publication of Qadduri's book.

29 One could cite the testimonies of the many political opponents imprisoned by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in the 1960s, or by the Assad regime in Syria.

We might consider Qadduri an inspiring witness, because he does not simply tell the story of what he remembers: his language helps us remember. By the same token, the fact that he is a witness does not mean we should accept his interpretations unquestioningly. In the midst of these heartbreaking details, he informs us that al-Kamali remained convinced that the cause of his imprisonment and the persecution of both himself and his family was, “jealousy, malice and the basic desire to humiliate.” Qadduri never thinks to ask whether there were other reasons for his treatment, nor why al-Kamali should have settled on this explanation. In fact, he produces evidence for al-Kamali’s conviction, penning a melodramatic scene to show the roots of the dictator’s hatred and malice towards the poet:

At some point, al-Kamali lay back on the couch and closed his eyes, playing in his mind an endless reel of all he had suffered since his first meeting with Saddam Hussein. The memories took him back to his exile in Cairo, where he had enrolled as a student at the university, then later, how he’d been nominated for presidency of the National Union of Iraqi Students there, and how the students had elected him by an overwhelming majority, while Saddam had received just two votes!³⁰

30 Fakhri Qudūri, *Hakaza 'ariftu al-Bakr wa Saddām: Rihlat 35 'āman fī Hizb al-Ba'th*, 257.

Qadduri advances this story to explain the how the fires of resentment were kindled in Saddam's heart during these years, then he gives us another story to reinforce the point: the dictator's jealousy of al-Kamali's beautiful home, which he visited unannounced in 1982:

Saddam walked inside and wandered around. He was taken with the Abbasid room with the oriental decor, which Shafik had designed especially for the literary soirees he loved to host for his fellow authors. Saddam's visit only ended once he had gone down into the basement, to view the canvases that Shafik himself had painted. Being an old friend of Shafik and because of the part his wife Samia had played in the Baath's historical struggle, Saddam behaved with grace and good manners throughout.³¹

But Qadduri withholds from his narrative (and from us, as readers) an awareness of an inherent contradiction. How are we supposed to picture al-Kamali's fear of Saddam, dating from the Khuld Hall purge of 1979, the moment in which the poet lost most of his old Baathist comrades and was left waiting for the same catastrophe to visit him, when we read that Saddam paid him a surprise visit in 1982? What is the truth of the inconsistency that Qadduri chooses to ignore?

31 *Ibid.*, 261.

Moments in the archive

3. The symptoms of distraction

In the physical archive, distraction manifests, psychologically, over time. Let's imagine time as a line, just as it was anciently conceived; as though time's unbroken thread passes through moments of disjuncture as we sit waiting for a book or document to come, peering about, catching the acrid scent of dust in the neon-lit room, and asking ourselves why we are here at all. We are alert to the smallest disturbance: a clerk whispering in someone's ear, a neighbor's pencil dropping to the floor. You might leave with the intention of returning the next day to get back to the point you were on the verge of pinning down, but its only days later, maybe months, that you return, and by then your priorities might have changed entirely.

When distraction strikes in the silent reading room, we are visited by physical symptoms: shifting in our chair, the overwhelming desire to sneeze, to move our muscles after long hours sitting still, and always that sudden dryness in the throat and eyes. Your distraction begins to peak: tiny, restless flakes drift down from the ceiling like snowflakes, settle on your head and melt inside it. Something

like an arrow takes shape in your mind: it is pointing to an idea on the verge of being born. Before you can cry out, "I've got it!" you return to yourself: you are still sitting there, the neon overhead, dust burning in your nostrils. Still waiting. All you need do is focus on a single task, even it be to turn back to the page open in front of you, and read it again.

The distraction of the physical archive is horizontal. You are waiting. Time passes between each visit and the next, between the return of an old magazine and the arrival of the next request, maybe another volume of that same magazine. In Cairo, if you want to go to the bathroom you have to take everything with you; you have to deposit your microfiche and request the same reel on your return. You have to remember where you were.

Distraction in the online archive is another matter. Time here is not the classical horizontal line, but more like a four-dimensional object, something we have difficulty describing, even imagining, though it is right there in front of us. Twenty tabs lie open simultaneously: some to be read, some to be listened to or watched. Only the sense of touch is superfluous; there are no frail pages we tremble to take between our fingers. You are free to get up

and make coffee or wander around your bedroom as you attempt to put the chaos in order.

Creative distraction is the open-ended moment which holds both remembering and forgetting, like the instant of waking from a dream in which you were searching for the keys to your front door. You open your eyes and know that you're at home, where you should be; that you're still inside and that the missing keys should be in here with you; that, even if you can't find them, you'll still be able to open the door and go out into the world.

VIII

The first requirement for credible testimony is freedom. Others follow: the credibility and honesty of the witness themselves, their context and connection to what they have witnessed, and their ability to deliver their testimony. The witness at trial is not asked to interpret what they have seen, nor do we expect Qadduri to provide an opinion of why Saddam Hussein persecuted his former comrades, Shafik al-Kamali among them. Up until 1982, Al-Kamali was the cultural face of Baathism. The regime was expelling, arresting, and executing other people, while the poet was president of the Union of Iraqi Writers and editor in chief of a well-

regarded magazine that published poems and painting and criticism. That is not to deny that he, like others, spent his days consumed by terror following the purge of 1979. The positions he occupied up until the end of his career, and the testimony of Qadduri himself, demonstrate that he was making concessions on a daily basis in order to avoid this fate: from writing poems in praise of Saddam to remaining quiet following his son's arrest.³² Saddam took pleasure in watching his former comrade writing him poems in a state of abject terror and, like a god, waited for the perfect moment to impose his deferred punishment.

Setting the witness aside, the researcher in the archive is required to read and interpret. Honesty or dedication are not moral qualities here, but descriptors of their reading: that they do not discount what contradicts their reading, that they do not carry their presumptions into the interpretation as though the archive were simply a crutch to support the things we want to have said according to some

32 Qadduri expresses his sorrow at the criticism faced by al-Kamali and the damage done to his reputation for writing praise poems for Saddam, stating that a man's qualities should not be erased by one small misstep over the course of a long career, and that he had been forced to praise Saddam as he was then waiting to see if his name was to be included on a new execution list. *Ibid.*, 275.

pre-existing sympathy or ideology, or due to the pressures of a political correctness. The archive is not a means to confirm our convictions: our convictions only have value when they are challenged through the act of reading.

The writings of communists and Islamists and defenders of Arab revolutions teach us as much. They celebrate struggle and sacrifice, speak on behalf of the victims, and stigmatize the dictators, killers, and jailers – as they deserve. And all this is extremely important, but it frequently glosses over the question of what is faulty, of revisionism, of error, of the shortsightedness of those revolutionaries (even the victims themselves) at a given historical moment.

IX

In the chapter of *Lose Your Mother* entitled “The Dead Book,” Saidiya Hartman focuses her attention on a set of characters on board the slave ship *Recovery* in 1791, in particular a nameless teenager who is tortured and murdered and her body thrown overboard. Working from the archive, Hartman tells us that the girl’s journey began in Old Calabar (in present-day Nigeria) as part of a human cargo that the *Recovery* was transporting

to the Caribbean island of Grenada. The girl was possessed of affecting moral qualities: she had refused to take food in protest at her imprisonment and refused to dance for the captain with the other female captives. As a result, she was subjected first to torture, then killed. The year after her death, in 1792, abolitionists drew attention to the girl's story in a speech delivered to parliament. The captain was then brought to trial but was found innocent of the charge of murder. During the trial, mention was made in passing to another girl (known to the crew as "Venus") who had been murdered aboard the same vessel. However, the abolitionist committee passed quickly over Venus in their speech. She hadn't possessed the same virtuous and virginal character ascribed to the first girl.

Two years after Hartman completed *Lose Your Mother* (where she wrote, "to read the archive is to enter the mortuary") she wrote an article entitled "mortuary metaphor, but this time in order to reconsider her previous reading: why hadn't she written about the other murdered girl, Venus? In his introduction to the text, Hartman's Arabic translator Wael Ashry writes: "Hartman returns to a character referred to in passing in her 2006 book [...] in order to examine her decisions as a researcher and raise

fundamental questions about the limits of archival research, historiography, and the possibility of ‘narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved’ – those who have been destroyed by hierarchies of power within historical reality, the records, documents, and discourses of which lend legitimacy to this destruction.”³³

“Venus in Two Acts” considers the impossibility of the question, “Who is Venus?” That this difficulty doesn’t only stem from the existence of many other women just like Venus, but because “the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, [and] transformed them into commodities and corpses...”³⁴

In Hartman’s article, “entering the mortuary” comes after the act of reading the archive. It is the moment when we ask ourselves what it is that we haven’t noticed during our reading. Why did Hartman listen to, and fall in love with, the story of the pure-hearted girl on whom (historically) the spotlight fell, and not that of the other victim, who did not possess the purity requisite to find a place

33 Wā'il 'Ashrī, *Fīnūs fī Faslayn*, Mada Masr, September 27, 2021.

34 *Ibid.*

in the abolitionists' speeches? Or, restated: To what degree are we reproducing the language of violence exported to us by the documentary record and testimonies?

Case study: Khuld Hall

If you haven't paused while reading this text to look up "Khuld Hall" or the "Massacre of the Comrades" then you can't call yourself a true amateur of the archive.

I first heard of this incident in 2003, an isolated piece of historical information that had taken place at some moment in the past, one point on the horizontal timeline that was itself composed of such points. As though it was completely unconnected to, say, the First Gulf War (1980–1988), also known as the Iraq-Iran War or Saddam's Qadissiya, in reference to the seventh-century battle between the Arab Muslim army and the forces of the Sassanid empire. At the time, the dominant discourse in Egypt characterized it as an encounter between Arab and Iranian identities, that Saddam was the Guardian of the Eastern Gate, the Indomitable Leader, a second Nebuchadnezzar or Saladin, one of those heroes whose names are etched in light in

our history. During the Second Gulf War (1990–1991), known variously as the war to liberate Kuwait, Desert Shield, and eventually, Desert Storm, students at Cairo University demonstrated against foreign intervention and Egypt’s involvement in the destruction of Iraq. Of course, Central Security troops bombarded the students with tear gas. They managed to storm the university campus and break up the demonstration, and a student, who was not taking part in the protest, was killed. I was present, but not involved. I don’t consider myself to have been a witness. I remember the sign for a laundry detergent (Rabso) on a lamppost by the university wall that had been punched through by gunfire – a baton round or a live bullet – and which hung there for months afterwards until it eventually disappeared.

Located in the Karada Maryam district in East Baghdad, Khuld Hall was originally a royal theatre that seated four hundred, before becoming a venue for celebrations, conferences, and concerts following the fall of the monarchy. In July 1979 it became one of the names, along with “the Massacre of the Comrades,” for the incident that can be (very briefly) summarized as follows.

On July 16, 1979, President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr resigned, and the presidency, leadership of the cabinet, and command of the Baath Party was transferred to his second-in-command, Saddam Hussein. Many party members opposed al-Bakr's resignation, especially because he was on the verge of establishing a political union with the Baath Party in Syria, and others were unhappy about Saddam's appointment, either because of his known propensity for violence or because he was opposed to the union as it meant that Hafez al-Assad would take his place as deputy leader of the combined state. These objectors included the secretary of the Revolutionary Command Council, Mohyi Abdel Hussein.

On July 22, six days after becoming president, Saddam Hussein convened a meeting of the Baath Party leadership and the chairmen of its branch committees and offices from every region of Iraq. They arrived at Khuld Hall that same evening. Most of them, it's claimed, were expecting a celebration of Saddam's ascension to the presidency, though some must have known what was to take place.

Saddam then shocked the attendees by announcing that a plot was being hatched against the revolution, the party, and Iraq, by traitors from within

the party, and summoned Mohyi Abdel Hussein to the stage as a witness to the plot, and to read out the names of the sixty-eight conspirators. Anyone whose name was called had to leave the hall, but some of those named were not present, as they had been arrested either days or years before. Twenty-two were sent to be executed on August 1, 1979; the remainder to prison.

The Massacre of the Comrades is often referred to as the moment at which Saddam established his grip on absolute power, and that everything which followed – the wars, the extermination of the Kurds and Shia and political opponents – was simply the daily routine of the dictator who'd been crowned that evening in Khuld Hall.

An historic event then, one which we read about the same way we engage with similar incidents: a file is formed in our minds, and whenever we encounter anything about them in a book, or a testimony, or some piece of political analysis, we add it in wholesale, or discard it, or underline what interests us. There remains that tension between opposing perspectives, the same tension we observe in all events of historic importance. There are those who compare the massacre to the Night of the Long Knives and say that Saddam was a second

Hitler. Then there are those who defend Saddam in their testimonies, who say that there can be no space for emotions when it comes to the security and future of the state; that if it hadn't been for the leader's courage on that fateful night, then Iraq would have broken apart irretrievably.

X

The archive of Iraq has had a sizeable online presence since the earliest days of the internet, maybe greater than any other archive in the region.³⁵ It is as though dictatorships usually protect the national archive, only becoming available to researchers when they fall. But it isn't quite that simple. Some believe that the accessibility of the Iraqi national archive is a crime, a plot to enable it to be read and

35 For example, "The Iraq Project" (<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/project/iraq-project>), part of George Washington University's National Security Archive, which began collecting material in early 1990s and made available important documents concerning US relations with Iraq and the 2003 Iraq War. Another example is "The Iraq Memory Foundation" (<http://www.iraqmemory.com/en>), established by Kanan Makiya, and described as follows on its website: "The Iraq Memory Foundation has no higher purpose than to place the Iraqi experience of suffering and oppression, between 1968 and 2003, in the global context of the history of pain and suffering. The MF seeks to do this by filming and archiving the individual stories of many thousands of survivors and witnesses of atrocity. The MF also seeks to digitize, index and classify the totality of the documents recovered from the outgoing regime that deal with Iraqi pain and suffering." (<http://www.iraqmemory.com/en/about>)

used for political ends. Others have brought cases to assert Iraq's legal ownership of the Baath Party archive,³⁶ which was in fact returned to the Iraqi government in 2013 after it had been acquired and digitized by Stanford University.

In any case, amid a wave of released material from the archive, in 2017 a channel was created on Youtube entitled "The archive of Iraq." It stated that it was an independent channel, based in America, and that it was working to archive Iraqi video footage from pre-1979 up until 2003, with the aim of assisting researchers. Its team of experts offered advice and guidance. Initially, the channel gained fame with its footage of the fall of Saddam Hussein and his subsequent trial. In 2019 it released the full video recording of the Massacre of the Comrades, which Saddam Hussein himself had ordered to be filmed and distributed to branches of the Baath Party nationwide at considerable expense.³⁷

36 This argument is out of the scope of this text, but for more discussion on this topic see:

Wisam H. Alshaihi, "Weaponizing Iraq's Archives", in *Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP) 291 (Summer 2019) (<https://merip.org/2019/09/weaponizing-iraqs-archives/>).

Michelle Caswell, "'Thank You Very Much, Now Give Them Back': Cultural Property and the Fight over the Iraqi Baath Party Records," *The American Archivist* 74, no. 1, Society of American Archivists (2011): 211–40.

37 In the comments under the YouTube video Iraqis discuss their memories of the footage being screened for them at elementary school.

Watching the video is like watching a tragedy, but whereas the Greek tragedies are based on (or at least inspired by) historical stories, this footage contains the author, director, protagonists, and audience all together. Following lengthy applause from those present, some of whom, we know, will be sent to their deaths during the performance, Saddam walks on stage. He makes sure that none of the invitees are missing, then delivers a short speech, to the effect that we are here to celebrate the bright aspects and noble virtues of the July Revolution. Then comes the but. Unfortunately, our meeting cannot be confined to this, but must go further, to touch on the negative aspects, the dark spots in the minds of the traitors and conspirators who call themselves Baathists and have risen to important positions within the Socialist Arab Baath Party. Saddam confirms that this must come as a shock; that the revolution must expect that those who belong to it will plot against it; that, for five months, the leadership has been watching the destruction being wreaked by the traitors and has waited patiently for the conspirators to show their hand.

From the very outset, Saddam is in control of the pace of the performance, and in the sixth minute of his speech he lets the anticipation and

terror reach its peak: “We are compelled to begin with one of the conspirators from the leadership of the party. Mohyi Abdel Hussein, who is sitting amongst you now...” For another four minutes he continues to speak with a certain heavy eloquence, full of old metaphors about the revolution and light, about treachery and betrayal and victory, and all the while those present are coughing and shifting in their seats. The chief conspirator was, until just days ago, a senior figure in the party; he is present now, among them, and in just a while he will read out the names of his accomplices.

Saddam invited Mohyi Abdel Hussein up to the stage, and a figure comes forward dressed in a suit and tie and carrying a sheaf of paper in his hands. Saddam steps back and goes to sit behind the table that is set out beside the lectern. His assistant passes him a glass of water. Turning to Mohyi, Saddam is grave and polite. Encouraging. “Take your time... ignore the paper, unless you need it to remember...”

Mohyi begins with something approximating to a pledge, affirming that his testimony is made of his own free will: “Comrades... everything I am going to mention here... is the truth. It is purely

of my own free will and free from any pressure or outside influence, in response to the urging of my conscience and to serve the party at this critical moment..." Then he starts to tell his tale. Every minute or so he mentions the name of one of the conspirators and the camera turns to the hall. We see a figure being led outside. From time to time one of those being led outside tries to speak up, to defend themselves. Saddam, smoking his pipe on stage, shouts, "Out!"

If you are still watching this historic trial, a simple question may occur to you concerning the parties involved. Mohyi Abdel Hussein, who is making his confession and sending another man to his doom with every sentence he utters, is speaking as a witness, but he is also speaking as a traitor. He is confessing his own crime, of conspiring with these accomplices over the course of many years. From the documentary record, we know that Mohyi was secretly detained and tortured for the six days leading up to this event, and that he agreed to play his part in this tragedy knowing that he would inevitably be executed as well, simply in order to save his family from the same fate. As for Saddam, sitting behind the same table and directing events

at his whim and reveling in what he is hearing, gazing out at the audience and puffing on his pipe, he is interrogator and judge – and witness, too. More than once, he corrects Mohyi's reading of a name, or mentions another conspirator, or interpolates a meeting place or a payment that Mohyi has forgotten to mention. Yet, at the same time, Mohyi is also a judge in this trial, if only fleetingly: in those moments when he is able to pronounce his comrades traitors.

What about the majority of those present in the hall? The ones who hadn't the slightest forewarning that the celebration of the new president would be turned into a trial? Every one of them must have been trembling in their seat, waiting for their name to be read out. Those leaders, with their moustaches and proud history of struggle, with their vanity and self-importance, were shaking, coughing, shifting about, laughing at the weakest quip from the leader's lips. The footage has no smell, but you can imagine the acrid reek of piss from men who'd lost control over their bladders from the horror of what they were witnessing. These men will jump to their feet to show their respect, sighing with relief and disbelief, as Mohyi concludes his testimony. They are the spared, or the spared-for-now. The

poet Shafik al-Kamali, author of the national anthem that Paul Bremer changed following the fall of Saddam and Baghdad in 2003, is among them.

Moments in the Archive

4. The Departure

Even as the researcher falls into the current, each story passing them to the next, and no matter how powerful its pull, there comes a moment when they find themselves on the verge of escaping the trap into which they walked of their own free will. They can step away from the chain of stories, leaving them for a future reading to which they might one day return—or as though their reading is simply a testimony to their relationship with the archive from within, in all its incompleteness and fragmentation, the mechanisms by which it may be read and the moments there that mark its pathways. So I felt as I submitted this text to be published. But sometimes a question forms, one that has been absent throughout your drifting, like it was waiting for you to leave and close the door behind you, to show you other doors that must be opened.

Reading over my text and coming to the section on Khuld Hall, I noticed that all the victims of Saddam Hussein had been men. I couldn't even remember seeing any women. I went back to the footage. There were women in the audience but I was unable to find their names in any archived material about the event. The fact was, that among the many witnesses who gave their testimony following the fall of the dictator in 2003, there is not a single female member of the Baath who claims to have attended Khuld Hall.

A simple question began to take shape: about Saddam's female victims, about what happened to those women whose presence in the hall or at home was a possibility I'd never even considered, simply because the list of conspirators that Mohyi Abdel Hussein read out as part of his testimony did not contain a single female name.

Just by posing the question, these women began to reveal themselves one by one. Each one encountered as someone we know only from her first name, defined entirely by her relationship to a condemned man: a wife, a daughter, a lover, a subordinate.

One of them was called Fawzia. She was the wife of Mohammad Ayish Hamad, a member of the Baath leadership and the name at the top of the

list of conspirators, who was executed a few days after the event. To summarize, we know that Fawzia was arrested at home as she was preparing supper for her young daughter, Sahar, and that she was kept in solitary confinement for ten years; that when at last she emerged from her cell, the first thing she asked was, “Why did my husband do that to me?” – at which she was informed that her husband had been executed the same night she’d been taken a decade before.

Fawzia exists in scattered scraps, the same as the other women who were imprisoned and expelled, who had their homes seized or lost their jobs, not because they were accused of conspiracy, but because their part of the goods and chattels of the conspirator to whom, by the logic of Saddam’s regime, they belonged. There were enough of them to make me wonder if I, by omitting them, had committed violence in telling the story. What is more, I’d been so swept up in the story of Khuld Hall, that I had failed to notice how the trial had made every Baathist comrade and conspirator a man. It is something, I think, that I will have to revisit.



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The Nomadic Curriculum — A Manual Series

The conceptual and practical basis of this series is the notion of the *nomadic curriculum*, developed and practiced within the *Whole Life Academy*— an experimental, collaborative research initiative that is developed within the framework of the long-term program *The Whole Life. An Archive Project*. The interdisciplinary, international *Whole Life Academy* is a network for ongoing collective research and reflection on archival positions, infrastructures and materialities.

The practice of the nomadic curriculum takes form in the movements, connections and networks between, within and around the archival contexts that continue to shape our present. The nomadic movement relates different methodologies of knowledge production with situated archival contexts. This form of activation functions as a mobilization of the archival material: By applying a specific toolbox in diverse archival environments, the objects are set in motion and their status, conditions and milieu are correlated. This is the guiding principle of the *Whole Life Academy* in

both its long-term approach and its small-scale methods. Understanding archives as central instruments for the canonization of knowledge formations and worldviews and for the establishment and continuation of power relations, this nomadic curriculum takes up the archive as the space in which the material and non-material foundations of the present are created. The methods of the Academy destabilize the fixed archival structures using an approach that is in constant development, adaptation and flux. As nomadic thought gives primacy to the spatial and temporal specificity of a research matter, the nomadic curriculum seeks to produce adjusted and localized tools that can critique inherent hegemonic relations of archival knowledge, objects and institutional structures. At the same time, it becomes possible to productively imagine and derive the possibilities of future alternative frameworks for collective research and sharing.

It is particularly in the context of this constructive rendering of future alternatives that *The Nomadic Curriculum — A Manual Series* was conceived. How can this nomadic curriculum be expanded into other existing and potential pedagogical settings? What can this series propose in terms of a how-to

for archival research? What are the common elements of collective research and practice that form the foundation of such a curriculum? Such archival pedagogy encounters three different yet interconnected spaces of knowledge production.

In the first volume, *Awkward Archives. Ethnographic Drafts for a Modular Curriculum*, Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius propose a manual for academic teaching and learning contexts. An ethnographic research approach is confronted with the demands of archival research as both disciplines challenge their inner logics and epistemologies. Through fieldwork and ethnographic tools and methods, both analogue and digital, the editors take various contemporary archival sites in Berlin as case studies to elaborate on controversial concepts in Western thought. Presenting as such a modular curriculum on archives in their *awkwardness*—in the tensions, discomfort and antagonisms they pose.

Beatrice von Bismarck unfolds her specific approach to the curatorial in dialogue with questions on the archival. Bringing together a variety of approaches and positions, the second volume, *Archives on Show. Revoicing, Shapeshifting, Displacing*—A

Curatorial Glossary, looks into curatorial practices that take up the archive in its contemporary relevance against its social and political potentialities. The book itself can be read as a curatorial exercise, forming constellations of texts, images and keywords in a printed exhibition format.

The third volume, *Howdunnit*, takes the literary as a space from which to think, practice, oppose, produce, unfold and contest archives. Within the narrative form of the “detective story,” Maha Maamoun and Ala Younis locate a site in which an archival approach can develop between documentary and fiction. Through investigative methods, *Howdunnit* offers a series of stories that bring the subjectivities of those who encounter archives to the forefront.

Together the three volumes offer a blueprint for archival thinking as a social practice inside, outside and between archives and their institutions.

Howdunnit

With one foot in archival research and the other in crime literature, this series explores how these different modes of investigation converge and diverge. One can start with a body riddled with holes, the body may be an archive or the corpse of a neighbor. Forensic investigation is underway, but some crimes can only be unlocked through language. Sometimes language is the site of the crime, its perpetrator, victim or chief investigator. *Howdunnit* summons literary and archival research to the investigation of crime and how its narratives are constructed, obfuscated or dismantled, its gaps filled or purposefully left open, its evidence gathered, its cases closed or left to stare back at us across time.

Imprint

Archives and Crimes by Iman Mersal

Commissioning Editors:
Maha Maamoun and Ala Younis

Translator:
Robin Moger

Copyeditors:
Corinne Butta and Mia Jaccarini

Design and Cover Artwork:
Anton Stuckardt and Johanna Schäfer

Image Processing:
Simon Knebl

Print and Binding:
Bianca & Volta

Published by:
Kayfa ta
www.kayfa-ta.com

Archive Books
Reinickendorfer Straße 17
13347 Berlin
www.archivebooks.org

ISBN 978-3-948212-93-3
© 2022: the editors, author, Archive Books,
Haus der Kulturen der Welt, and Kayfa ta.

The Nomadic Curriculum — A Manual Series are publications by Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW). The series is part of *The Whole Life. An Archive Project*, a collaboration between Arsenal — Institute for Film and Video Art / Archive außer sich, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Pina Bausch Foundation, and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD). It is part of HKW's project *The New Alphabet*, supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media due to a ruling of the German Bundestag.

The Nomadic Curriculum — A Manual Series:

Series Editors: Stefan Aue, Lama El Khatib

Project Manager: Jessica Páez

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Published by: Archive Books

Archive Books Editors: Chiara Figone, Sara Marcon

Haus der Kulturen der Welt is a division of Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes in Berlin GmbH.

Director: Bernd Scherer (V.i.S.d.P.)

Managing Director: Charlotte Sieben

Chairwoman of the Supervisory Board: Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth

Haus der Kulturen der Welt
John-Foster-Dulles-Allee 10
10557 Berlin
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Haus der Kulturen der Welt supported by:



Minister of State
for Culture and the Media



Federal Foreign Office

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