

Ink, Paper, and War

I am very pleased to take part in this year's *Diwan*. *Diwan* in Arabic has several meanings two of which are of interest to me today. *Diwan* could mean a collection of poetry and also a council where matters of the state are discussed. In a setting such as ours where we debate Arab and Arab American culture in the context of the United States, it is hard not to remember what the US actions brought upon a major historical and modern Arab capital: Baghdad. Almost 4 years ago, April 12, 2003, Iraq's National Museum was ransacked, the National Library and Archives burned, Bayt al Hikma dating back to the 8th century and to the Abbasid Empire burned, Maktabat al-Awqaf—the Bureau of Endowments, Al-Majma' al-'Ilmi al-'Iraqi - Iraqi Academy of Sciences, and Dar al-Makhtutat- The Library of Manuscripts were all burned. The damage done to the institutions of Iraqi cultures goes beyond the above mentioned and beyond Baghdad. It includes among others the museum of modern art—Dar Saddam Lil Funun—, the Public Library of Basra, the Scientific Library of the University of Basra, the Library of Nassiriyah, not to mention archeological sites, Islamic monuments, and other libraries and museums. The list has only grown in the last four

years. Above all, the U.S. invasion disrupted the social fabric by fueling sectarian war and forcing over two million Iraqis into exile. The minaret of the Malwiya mosque, which is over one thousand years old, was damaged by "insurgent explosion" because US soldiers used it as a lookout point. The bomb that ripped through the Golden Mosque of Samara, marked the start of the merciless sectarian violence. Earlier this month, a bomb exploded on al-Mutanabi Street, the famous booksellers' street in Baghdad. These are just examples of calamities the US invasion has brought upon the culture of Iraq.

In the spirit of bourgeois conventional wisdom, one ought to be rather defensive when addressing the cultural toll of violence, because, somehow, there is a need to say that human life is more valuable than art, more valuable than just books—pages with ink on them. Having been involved in a variety of artists and dissident groups, I came to understand the shallowness of what is referred to as "human life". For many, human life, human casualties—aka collateral damage—refers to people that are unknown in this country. Granted they are considered humans, but without culture, no history, nothing worth mentioning in any case! I came to believe this to be the reason why they

and their country are destroyed. This led me to reflect on the very society that I now live in. Beyond all political divides there might be between Americans— Republicans vs. Democrats, Northerners vs. Southerners, blacks vs. whites— there is such a thing as an American culture, an American way of understanding the world beyond itself, or lack thereof.

In 2004, after a traumatizing experience in one of America's most prestigious art institutions, I experienced profound doubts over my decision to live in this country. What can I possibly accomplish here as an artist? In an effort to come to terms with my living here, I gave myself the assignment to make a book that is an assemblage of quotes of American citizens: the leaders, the poets, the inspiring, the prophets who are relegated to the margins of history and the far edges of the public sphere.

The book is a reflection on American culture where a devastating war was made possible, despite the early efforts that opposed it, and such that are mounting, but not enough to put to a halt. I am well aware that some of the features of American culture I discuss, such as racism, charity, and rage are by no means solely American, so for

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those who do not identify as such, please do not leave
yourselves off the hook so easily.

Here is an image of this accordion book *Cultures Of
War: An Essay* as it was installed at Smack Mellon Gallery
in Brooklyn last fall.

It begins with a quote by the poet Meena Alexander,
who was born into Christian Indian family in the Sudan, and
is now a prominent American poet:

*Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
splinter and raze my page
That out of the bleeding part of me
I may claim
my heritage.*¹

I changed the word heritage to rage. When showing the
book to the poet she thought that rage was her word. On the
top left I added "Fallujah" in Arabic. Yes, this was around
the time that Fallujah was being leveled to the ground
following the orders of, the then newly re-elected,
president Bush.

¹ Alexander, Meena, (1996), *The Shock of Arrival: reflections on
Postcolonial experience*, South End Press Collective, page 15.

The second page is by another American poet, Ammiel Alcalay, who is of Jewish Bosnian descent. His book of poetry *From the Warring Factions* includes an interview in which he is asked about matters of translation and multilingual consciousness. His response:

I read Hebrew, what used to be called Serbo-Croatian, French, Spanish, and Italian and I struggle with Latin and Arabic, but I still don't think it's either particularly remarkable or nearly enough, given how common this is for many in the rest of the World. Most of all, a monolingual consciousness allows cultural and governmental commissars to assume and promote limited perspectives and be secure in knowing that there is little basis for deeply rooted social or cultural resistance, especially to lies and stereotypes.²

I have to say that every time I showed this book, people were most perplexed with this page. For many, being American comes with an understanding that one is more, better, bigger than the rest of world, but in no case less, nor in any way plagued by a major handicap.

I contrasted this sad state of monolingual consciousness with a page about the pleasure of language.

² Alcalay, Ammiel, (2002) *from the warring factions* (pp196) Venice, CA, Beyond Baroque Books.

Eqbal Ahmed was interviewed by David Barsamian and recounted a night when he, the exiled Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Edward Said dined in a Beirut restaurant during the Lebanese civil war. They ignored the shelling outside and Faiz was reciting poetry in Urdu. Eqbal was translating, but at some point he could not keep up, and as Said wrote: "Urdu filled the night's air..."³

For this page I used the orange color to reference a war silliness that struck me. In 2002, and after India and Pakistan threatened to nuke each other, the leaders from both countries came to their senses, and the Pakistani President decided to offer a crate of fresh Pakistani mangoes to the Indian Prime Minister. And because of another silliness, there were no direct flights between India and Pakistan. The crate of mangoes transited through Dubai to actually reach Delhi, only for the Indian farmers to feel offended by the symbolic gift. For them India produces better mangoes!

There is an element of play in war that needs to be acknowledged, and that play is an essential feature of human –and animal– behavior. For this I chose the poem by Arab American Dunya Mikhail

³ Barsamian, David (2000) *Eqbal Ahmad, Confronting Empire, Interviews with David Barsamian*, Cambridge, South End Press, page 38.

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He plays a train

She plays a whistle

They move away.

He plays a rope

She plays a tree

They swing.

He plays a dream

She plays a feather

They fly.

He plays a general

She plays people

They declare war.⁴

With war, play, and contest comes this outrageous need to be strong, not strong but stronger, not only stronger, but the strongest. The courageous Susan Sontag has addressed this issue in a short essay published in the aftermath of 9/11, for which she was mercilessly vilified.

Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness

⁴ Translation supplied by the author, this poem is part of Mikhail's collection of poetry translated by Elizabeth Winslow (2005) *The War Works Hard*, New York, New Directions.

*might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen. "Our country is strong," we are told again and again. I for one don't find this entirely consoling. Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be.*⁵

As I have stated before my involvement with the art and dissident groups that left in many instances alienated. These people, as Baldwin refers to them, are technical allies. They are against the war in Iraq, the more enlightened among them are against the war in Afghanistan, yet they do not, most sincerely do not, know how to relate to Iraqis, Afghanis, and the rest of us *wretched of the earth*, other than by pity. In an amazing essay, *No Name on the Street*, Baldwin writes about this very elite discussing McCarthyism:

*Nevertheless, this learned, civilized, intellectual-liberal debate cheerfully raged in its vacuum while every hour brought more distress and confusion—and dishonor—to the country they claimed to love.*⁶

This very vacuum in which the cultural elite sometimes operates is perhaps the key answer to the question of why

⁵ Sontag, S (2001) *The Talk Of The Town*, New Yorker Magazine Issue of 2001/09/24 posted on newyorker.com on 2001/09/17

⁶ Baldwin, J (1971) *No Name On the Street*. In James Baldwin (1985) *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, (pp 466). New York, St. Martin's Press.

dissident efforts are not effective. Such people find it easy to rage against Bushes and Clintons, but hard to acknowledge that they are products of the same culture. If people in this country have a hard time imagining that there is modern and contemporary art in Iraq, it is a failure of the imagination that we, cultural workers, bear the responsibility for. Bigotry and racism are essentially, just that, a failure to imagine of the humanity of others, which in turn makes their life, beliefs, and culture so disposable.

In 2004, after the US backed coup d'état that ousted Haiti's democratically elected president Bertrand Aristide, the renowned linguist and political analyst, Noam Chomsky, found it worthwhile to remind his readers of another Haiti President:

*Emmanuel Constant, who now lives happily in Queens, Clinton and Bush II having dismissed extradition requests—because he would reveal US ties to the murderous junta, it is widely assumed. Constant's contribution to state terror were, after all, meager, merely prime responsibility for the murder of 4-5000 poor Blacks.*⁷

The poor blacks, and by extension Iraqis, Afghanis, Palestinians, are so disposable. At best, and to boost the

⁷ Chomsky, H (2004), *US-Haiti*, ZNet, posted March 09, 2004 on <http://www.zmag.org/ZNETTOPnoanimation.html>

self-image of the privileged, they are the glad recipients of their generous charity. It is called "we need to liberate them". In my parents generation it was called "civilize them", or enlighten the benighted natives if you will. In her 1914 speech, after the Ludlow massacre, labor activist, Mother Jones said:

*Someone said to me, "You don't believe in charity work mother." No I don't believe in charity; it's a vice. We need the upbuilding of justice to mankind; we don't need your charity, all we need is an opportunity to live like men and women in this country.*⁸

To which I added this plea on the page "No Pity Please". I encountered this sense of charity in the circles of the cultural elite in New York. There is an assumption that I, the native artist, the Arab, the Muslim, the woman, the Tunisian, in short the citizen of Carthage in Rome, have a single aspiration which is to be like them, to desire what they desire. It is another manifestation of the failure of the imagination. How could it be that I desire something else! In the same essay, *No Name on the Street*, where he referenced the learned civilized and the liberal, James Baldwin points to the idea of inclusion—of the rest of us—into the elite culture. He writes:

⁸ Zinn, H (2004) *The People Speak: American Voices, Some Famous, Some Little Known*, (pp32) New York, Harper's Perennial.

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*They were all, for a while anyway, very proud of me, of course, proud that I had been able to crawl up to their level and been "accepted." What I might think of their level, how I might react to their "acceptance," or what this acceptance might have cost me, were not among the questions which racked them at the midnight hour. One wondered, indeed, if anything could ever disturb their sleep.*⁹

Needless to say, this definitely hit home, especially since I did not think much of *their* level at that school/residence of misery. Yet I had more than the desire to rack somebody at the midnight hour—please not with guilt or pity, but with wonder.

I end the book with the words of the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, translated by the American Naomi Lazard

*Someday perhaps, the poem,
murdered but still bleeding on every page,
Will be revealed to you.*¹⁰

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⁹ Baldwin, J (1971) *No Name On the Street*. In James Baldwin (1985) *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, (pp 466). New York, St. Martin's Press.

¹⁰ Faiz, F. A (1988) *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz* (Lazard, N, Trans.) Princeton, Princeton University Press.