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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Food Politics in Post-2003 Iraq: A Cultural Perspective

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: ADA BARBARO (SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME), ALESSIA CARNEVALE (UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI L'ORIENTALE), FEDERICO POZZOLI (SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME)

PANEL DESCRIPTION (1500 words):

Food is essential for life. Therefore, it is central to many different political and social dynamics and a powerful lens through which to explore broader issues of power and identity. Food politics is of crucial importance to the Arab region, one of the most food-insecure regions of the world (Harrigan, 2014).

The case of Iraq is particularly relevant in this context. The weaponization of food, the extreme effects of which we are witnessing today in the politically and military-provoked mass starvation in the Gaza Strip, has been one of the most critical aspects of the multilateral UN embargo on Saddam Hussein's Iraq, from 1990 to 2003 (Woertz 2013).

Ensuring food security has also been a primary issue in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion: since then, policies of food production, consumption and distribution have been crucial for domestic political leaders' and external actors' quest for power and political stability.

While a growing body of critical literature is addressing food policies, green colonialism, and eco-activism in the Arab region, (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Woertz 2013; Zurayk and Gough 2014), the cultural aspects and implications of food insecurity, as well as the exploitation of and limited access to water and other natural resources, are hardly studied, and this is particularly true for the case of Iraq. Yet food – and access to it – plays a crucial role in shaping and reproducing cultural identities, both at the level of the dominant discourse and in the production of counter-narrations (*tārīkh muwāzin*).

The cultural dimension of food politics is indeed strictly related to the cultural nature of food itself. In the fields of cultural studies and social sciences, food has only recently become a significant and coherent area of research (Ashley et al. 2004; Zubaida and Tapper 1994; Laudan 2013). Despite the development of seminal frameworks, such as Barthes or Bourdieu's work on the relationship between food, feeding and cultural identity, no effort has yet been made to put them in dialogue with the Iraqi cultural scene.

The panel will contribute to bridging this gap by exploring the impact of different dimensions of food politics in contemporary Iraqi culture, its reflection in the work of Iraqi artists living both in their home country and in the diaspora, as well as the cultural and aesthetic aspects of political and social mobilizations for social and environmental justice. On the one hand, food (in)security is a central experience defining real and imagined bodies and subjectivities in the post-2003 conjuncture. As Christian Junge (2019: 145) argues, feeding is a fundamental site of 'somatic negotiation', bringing to the fore issues relating to embodiment, emotions, and affect in (literary) narratives. Iraq's long tradition in the representation of food and feeding (Nasrallah 2013; Gelder 2000) makes these negotiation process particularly rich when seen from a diachronic perspective (as re/inventions of traditions and cross-contamination processes). Conversely, in the diaspora and migrant communities, traditions related to the food sphere are another symbol of a multifaceted identity, and remembrances and preparation of typical dishes are means to express *ghurba* and sense of belonging. In a highly globalized interconnected world and in a time of massive migratory movements, food is also a primary signifier of cross-cultural contaminations, of the connection between the local and the global, but also of the ambivalent relation with the "other", of what we accept/consume and what we reject.

This panel aims to reflect on the cultural dimension of the processes of mobility, crossing and contamination investing the Iraqi society, understood as a community and as individual actors. Scholarly papers seeking to elucidate how contemporary Iraqi cultural actors articulate the aesthetic and cultural processes and critical nodes relating to food production and consumption, both through canonical and non-canonical media, are particularly welcome. Contributions may delve into various aspects and draw from different frameworks, including but not limited to:

- the significance of food (production, consumption, traditions...) in the reproduction of social memory and in reinforcing collective identity
- endeavours to counteract cultural aggression, and the application of perspectives aimed at countering prevailing hegemonic and neo-colonial narratives.
- the place/representation/significance of food in cultural practices and art of Iraq and in the Iraqi diaspora (in literature, popular culture etc);
- cultural aspects of social and political mobilizations; aesthetic practices related to environmental-based activism, food and foodification in the construction of diasporic spaces;
- cultural implications of and responses to food policies implemented by State and non-State actors.

The panel is part of the activities of a research project PRIN 2022 funded by Next Generation EU and the Italian Ministry of University and Research.

Short bibliography:

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ABSTRACTS (150-200 words):

CHAIR: Ada Barbaro – Associate Professor, Università di Roma La Sapienza

Environment, social criticism, and nostalgia for a lost Eden in artistic representations of Iraq

Alessia Carnevale – Postdoctoral Fellow, Università l'Orientale di Napoli

In the fiction film *Zaman: The man from the reeds* (Amer Alwan, 2003), the bucolic daily life of a man from the Iraqi marshes is upset by his wife's illness, forcing him to confront the harshness and corruption of the city. In the documentary *Back to Babylon* (Abbas Fahdel, 2002), the filmmaker returns from a long exile to his homeland, once "the cradle of civilization", which he depicts as a lost Eden. The mythology and the ancient history of the territory now constituting Iraq evoke images of fertility, watery plains and hanging gardens; and indeed, the region is historically renowned for its agricultural productivity. However, decades of wars, savage extractivism and neo-liberal policies, exacerbated by climate change, have devastated Iraqi environment, disrupted traditional subsistence systems, and rendered Iraq highly vulnerable in terms of water and food security (Tzouvala 2017). Moving from the above-mentioned films, shot on the eve of the U.S. invasion, and capturing glimpses of a disappearing ecosystem, the paper explores the articulation of environmental issues in Iraqi art, and their link with questions of justice, memory, and identity. Focusing on the evocation, through aesthetic practices, of a real or imagined idyllic past, the paper also interrogates the role of nostalgia in providing an emancipatory horizon for the future.

Hungry for a Homeland: Representations of Food in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction

Hanan Jasim Khammas - Postdoctoral Associate, Duke Islamic Studies Centre, Duke University

Food and particularly elaborate meals are a crucial part of the Iraqis' cultural self-expression both inside Iraq and in exile. It has become more so after the genocidal economic embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council on Iraq in 1990, and which continued to be effective with modifications until the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The weaponisation of food in these key events in Iraq's political and sociocultural history has a long-term impact on Iraqis' livelihood and therefore, cultural expression. Food now encodes contradictory signifieds (signifiés) in the Iraqi semiosphere: wellbeing, as it firstly means nourishment and health, and fearsome death as it has been used for two decades as an instrument to dismantle people's strength, welfare, and dignity. Through the examination of 'Āliyah Mamdūfī's *al-Tashahhī* (The Craving, 2007) and the short fiction of Hassan Blasim (The Corpse Exhibition, 2014) and Diaa Jubaili (No Windmills in Basra, 2018), this paper examines the representations and significance of food in contemporary Iraqi fiction. It applies Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of grotesque realism (1984) to show that food in contemporary Iraqi fiction is a major aesthetic recourse in the reproduction of social memory and in reinforcing collective identity, on one hand, and the depiction of crude violence and corruption on the other.

The *Tannūr* as a Literary Object in Pre- and Post-2003 Iraqi Fiction

Federico Pozzoli – *Postdoctoral Fellow, Università di Roma La Sapienza*

In 1972, the Iraqi novelist Fu'ād al-Takarlī published the innovative and influential short story 'al-Tannūr' ('The Clay Oven'). A contradictory and fragmentary monologue of a character accused of killing his sister, the story grants symbolic prominence to a traditional *tannūr* in the crime scene, as a metaphor for familiar ties and traditional social organisation (esp. women labour). In the story, the oven becomes an *unheimlich* presence pointing to the disruption of the family. Almost half a century later, Sinān Anṭūn's novel *Fihris* (2016) features a narrative fragment revolving around a *tannūr*. Set after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Anṭūn's novel situates the *tannūr* along a series of objects and living beings that have been effaced by the war and can live on only through narrative. In this context, the oven is not merely a symbol of lost (food) security but actively embodies the human-environmental relations upturned by the occupation.

Drawing from critical scholarship on the nonhuman and object-oriented ontology, esp. Francesco Orlando's (2006) definition of 'obsolete objects', the paper looks at the literary metamorphosis of the clay oven from a socially significant *tool* to a phantasmatic *thing*, a disturbing presence that tells of a lost future and resists symbolisation. To this aim, the paper will compare al-Takarlī's and Anṭūn's narratives with other literary representations of the Iraqi *tannūr* by Mufiammad Khuḍayyir and Burhān Shāwī.

'Everyone was hungry in the dream!': Manhunts, food insecurity and more-than-human justice in Ḥasan Blāsim's writings

Rita Sakr – *Assistant Professor, Maynooth University*

Ḥasan Blāsim's work engages two intertwined (neo)colonial histories: one of war, authoritarianism and sanctions on/in Iraq and another of European immunitary democracies' hunt for disposable bodies at its borders. Both his short stories and longer works explore the long duration-expansion of a pattern of zoopolitical predation, abandonment and production of food insecurity across these time-spaces. While several of the short stories embed imagery of the preparation and consumption of food within narrations of violence, more strikingly, 'hunger/hungry' is one of the most recurrent terms across his writings, occurring frequently alongside references to fears of contamination, terrors of hunting and environmental (in)justice. This paper will examine some of Blāsim's short stories and his novel-length work *God 99* to critically address the implications of his imaginative engagement with necropolitical and necroresistant frameworks of food insecurity in a more-than-human context.

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PROPONENTS

Ada Barbaro (ada.barbaro@uniroma1.it) is Associate Professor of Arabic Literature and Language at Sapienza University of Rome

Alessia Carnevale (alessia.carnevale@unior.it) is Postdoctoral Fellow in Contemporary History of Arab Countries at University of Naples L'Orientale

Federico Pozzoli (federico.pozzoli@uniroma1.it) is Postdoctoral Fellow in Arabic Literature and Language at Sapienza University of Rome