Exhibiting the Nation: Identity and (Post)colonial Aesthetics in Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad*

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Abstract

Hannah Khalil's play *A Museum in Baghdad* and its 2019 staging by the Royal Shakespeare Company focus on the complex relationship between museum and theatre as memory institutions. This relationship was enhanced by meta-theatrical connections between the performance of the museum on stage, the accompanying displays in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre lobby and gift shop, and the spectators who entered the Swan Theatre auditorium. The exploration of the intricate exchange between performance, space, and audience reveals the paramount importance of two specific issues: the politics of display and the performative aspect of nation-making within national institutions. Using postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, my analysis probes the ways in which theatre may offer a better understanding of dramaturgies of display in museums through the exposure and critique of the complex cultural and social challenges that emerge from the interdependence between national cultural institutions and official narratives of belonging (like the lack of representation of marginalised communities, homogenised views of cultural development, or targeted financial support for institutions that adhere to state narratives). Khalil's theatrical depiction of the political intricacies of curatorial decision-making allow for a sobering examination of both the role of museums in the creation of national narratives of identity and the responsibility of the theatre to uncover the cultural mechanisms used to enforce such narratives.

Keywords: memory institutions, postcolonial nation making, national identity, museums, belonging, performance, Royal Shakespeare Company.

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Co-commissioned by the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh and the Royal Shakespeare Company, Hannah Khalil's *A Museum in Baghdad* premiered at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 11 October 2019. With no acts or scenes, and moving seamlessly between past, present, and future via the use of sound and lighting cues (in the

performance) and time-markers (Then/Now/Later in the text), the play text and the performance reflect on the position of the museum as an institution actively involved in the creation of colonial and postcolonial national narratives of identity. The play's subject matter and the rapid changes in timeline complicate the relationship between colonial and postcolonial discourses. The past (Then) is firmly grounded in the historical reality of colonial occupation, with Gertrude Bell as the representative of British imperial power in charge of setting up the first Iraqi National Museum, and Leonard Woolley on an official duty from the British Museum to gather valuable artefacts from his various digs in the region. In the present timeline (Now), characters like Layla and Mohammed reflect on the past through a postcolonial lens, also deploring the political situation in Iraq and alluding to similarities between past colonial oppression and the current occupation of the country by US forces. Both past and present have visible repercussions upon a future defined by political unrest and violence. My analysis of the text and its subsequent performance, which I saw in December 2019, investigates the ways in which Khalil's play reveals the tension between colonial and postcolonial discourses in the process of nation making. The theatrical representation of the museum as an institution of national importance offers a suitable platform for what Walter Mignolo called "the locus of enunciation created in the act not of studying or analyzing [the colonial] but of resisting it" (124). Defined by Ramón Grosfoguel as "the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks" (213), the locus of enunciation is embodied in the past, present, and future of the Iraqi Museum as a space of engagement with the colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial aspects of the country's national identity narrative. This article explores the intersections between colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial praxes in a play that demonstrates the possibilities theatre offers for a public dissection of cultural politics of identity.

By focusing on Gertrude Bell's Baghdad Archaeological Museum, Khalil invites the audience to see this institution both as a vehicle of nation-making and as an imposition and reminder of colonial power. Founded in 1926 as a mirror image of the British Museum in London, the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad was intended as the cultural foundation of the new nation of Iraq, containing selected artefacts that embodied the nation's position in the region. The play follows Bell's tenure as the director of the museum from early 1926 until her death in July of the same year, interspersed with representations on stage of figures from other times—Now (2006) and an unspecified future (Then)—emanating from both real and mythological spheres. The museum, and implicitly the theatre, become spaces where multiple tensions are explored, offering microcosms of society and nation amidst shifting and conflicting intellectual frameworks of their formation and constitution. Taken together, these elements create a comprehensive portrayal of a play and a performance that raise challenging questions about colonial, post-colonial and decolonial displays of cultural memory in a theatrical setting. In addition to postcolonial theory, decolonial practices (represented among others by scholars like Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Stef Craps, Michael Rothberg or Achille Mbembe) allow for a more profound approach to colonialism, critiquing the Cartesian dualism that places postcolonial theory in a framework marked by binary oppositions. Mbembe argues that during a decolonial process, what needs to be confronted is the complexity of the "entanglement of desire, seduction and subjugation; not only oppression, but its enigma of loss" (35). An analysis of both the RSC performance and the display strategies employed throughout the theatre space reveals a wider scope for the use of postcolonial and decolonial methodologies in elucidating the role of institutions like the Royal Shakespeare Company in defining contemporary British national identity.

This role begins before one even enters the theatre. The RSC has an active online profile offering education packs connected to current performances, interviews with cast, directors and playwrights, and insight into dramaturgical decisions. An examination of the material available for the production of *A Museum in Baghdad*, together with the marketing strategies used to advertise the performance, reveal the complex ways in which the subject matter of the play is presented to the public. It highlights the problematic depiction of Gertrude Bell as the play's heroine within the wider context of the postcolonial and decolonial aspects of display explored in the performance. The production was introduced on the Royal Shakespeare Company website and in the performance programme as part of the company's Radical Mischief season of innovative new writing that "breaks rules" (New Work at the RSC). In this context, Khalil was presented as a playwright with a "passionate desire to represent inspiring women and men of the Middle East and in so doing to forcefully counteract dangerous stereotyping" (*RSC Radical Mischief Magazine* 2). Of Palestinian-Irish descent, Khalil, whose first collection, *Plays of Arabic Heritage*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2021, has achieved national success with several of her works, including *The Scar Test* (2015) and *Scenes from 68* Years* (2016). Touching upon issues of national identity, cultural memory, and human rights in the United Kingdom and abroad, Khalil's plays present viable alternatives to the familiar stereotypes through which Arab and Middle Eastern characters and cultures are often presented on the Western stage. *The Scar Test* is a verbatim piece that probes the painful experiences of female migrants held at Yarl's Wood Detention Centre; *Scenes from 68* Years* focuses on instances of Palestinian life since the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. *A Museum in Baghdad* reinforces Khalil's interest in the depiction of Arabic characters and culture on stage and challenges many preconceived ideas about Arab women by introducing characters like Layla, Ghalia and Nasiya, whose complexity testifies to the necessity of more nuanced representation.

The importance of the cultural politics of display within a national institution like the Royal Shakespeare Company was evident upon entering the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, which I did on 28 December 2019 to attend a performance of Khalil's play. The posters adorning the entrance centred on the image of 19th century British archaeologist, writer, and politician Gertrude Bell, played by Emma Fielding in *A Museum in Baghdad* as a strong woman who had to make tough decisions in a world ruled overwhelmingly by men. The front page of the programme shows Fielding as Gertrude Bell supporting the other three female characters, all performed by actresses from racially minoritized backgrounds.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Figure 1: Cover of the play-text published as programme for the production. From left to right: Ghalia, (Rendah Heywood), Layla, (Houda Echouafni), Gertrude (Emma Fielding) and Private York (Debbie Korley). Photo courtesy of the RSC.

The cover (see Figure 1) showcases Gertrude's social and cultural position. She is a pillar of strength, certainty, and determination, holding up a group of women who seem to be emotionally weak or weakened by the passage of time. Beside Gertrude, Private York, as the representative of the re-colonising power of the US army in Iraq, is the only character looking out to meet the viewer's gaze. The two Arab characters, Ghalia (far left) and Layla (second from left), turn their eyes either down (Ghalia) or up (Layla), performatively reinforcing the cultural positions created for them, which emphasize modesty and religious fervour. Although as a woman her position was often undermined within the British colonial institutions she worked for, Gertrude still upholds the self-image of the coloniser, the pillar who supports a new but weak nation. The sense of emotional distress, displayed on the cover of the programme by Layla in particular, constructs a specific framework within which the expectations of the spectators are shaped. Gertrude's determined stance is clearly set against what appears to be Layla's religious ecstasy. Yet this is a rather misleading introduction to a performance that ultimately establishes Layla as the representative of the cultural potential of

decolonial processes through her firm belief in the power of traditional display practices of local community narratives to subvert the wider national narrative of identity. As a first encounter with the imagery of the performance, the programme cover seems like a missed opportunity to delink the performative narrative from a political and cultural matrix that Aníbal Quijano calls "the coloniality of power" (533), understood as the systematic pressures exerted on multiple aspects of life under colonial conditions, including narratives of identity. On the contrary, the cover, together with the other displays around the lobby and the gift shop, reinforces the Western narratives of identity and representation that Khalil so adamantly attempts to dismantle.

Such displays were prominent throughout the theatre complex. Before proceeding to the auditorium of the Swan Theatre audiences usually pass through the main RSC theatre lobby and the company's giftshop, browsing for memorabilia connected to the performances that are taking place in the company's two main theatre spaces: the RSC Theatre and the Swan. In the central aisle of the gift shop were Bell's 2017 biography, *Queen of the Desert*, written by Georgina Howell and previously published in 2006 under the less assertive title *Daughter of the Desert*, and a 2016 documentary about her life, *Letters from Baghdad*, directed by Sabine Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum, both available for purchase. These objects, forming part of a visually engaged marketing strategy, were encountered by viewers in a controlled environment with strict rules of engagement. The situation was further complicated by the focus on the controversial figure of Gertrude Bell, overlooked by the feminist movement in the 1970s for her anti-suffrage stance – she was a founding member of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in 1908 – but championed by Khalil as an inspirational woman who had an active role in the foundation of the state of Iraq under the rule of King Faysal I. While the play and the performance only map Gertrude's last year as director and curator of the museum, it is necessary to understand the wider historical and

political context that determined her involvement with the British imperial institutions that had a defining role in the creation of the nation of Iraq, in order to accurately interpret the complex position that Khalil's play and its subject matter occupy within the RSC as a national organisation.

Gertrude Bell, colonialism, and the founding of the Iraqi Archaeological Museum

Bell graduated from Oxford University's Lady Margaret Hall in 1888 as the first woman to achieve a first class degree in Modern History. Her knowledge of languages and her attraction to Persia and the Middle East, reinforced through her early travels with her uncle, Sir Frank Lascelles, and her later solitary travels through Palestine and Syria, were captured in her 1894 book *Safar Nameh: Persian Pictures, A Book of Travel* and in *Syria: the Desert and the Sown* (1907). In the same year she published her book on Syria, Bell started working with archaeologist William M. Ramsey on his excavations in Binbirkilise, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Their experience in finding and documenting local artefacts is detailed in their jointly authored book *A Thousand and One Churches*, published in 1909. These works established her as an authority in the history, customs, and languages of the area. In her travels through Arabia, she forged close relationships with tribes across the region and, as a woman, was allowed access to tribe leaders' wives, thus helping her shape a more informed image of tribal life and societies than had previously been available. Recognising the value of her expertise, David Hogarth, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, recommended her to the Army Intelligence Headquarters, or the Arab Bureau, charged with "stimulat[ing] directly pro-*Entente* and anti-German feeling in Egypt, Arabia, and Turkey" (National Archive). She joined the Bureau in Cairo in 1916 as the only female political officer in the British forces. While these achievements, outlined in Georgina Howell's book *Queen of the Desert*, are important for the creation of Bell's character in *A Museum in Baghdad*, her

involvement in the creation of the state of Iraq is paramount for a full understanding of Khalil's play.

Towards the end of World War I, after British troops took Baghdad in 1917, there was a concerted effort to dismantle the Ottoman Empire. In 1917 the British High Commissioner in the region, Percy Cox, asked Bell to act as Oriental Secretary and thus help draw the borders of the new state of Iraq and make decisions about the new country's government and internal laws. The formation of modern Iraq was completed during the 1921 Conference in Cairo, where the Allied Powers, including France, Britain, and Italy, decided on the boundaries of each colonial mandate, thus moving control of the region from the colonial power of the Ottoman Empire to that of various European empires. Cox was adamant that Iraq should have an Arab government under British control and Bell was asked to act as mediator between the two (Kadhim).

One of the central projects of British officials in Iraq was to create a new political and cultural identity for the country by connecting it to an ancient past (Mesopotamian, Persian, and Babylonian) that would bring its people together. The physical manifestation of this project became the Iraqi Archaeological Museum. In spring of 1926, it was renamed the Baghdad Antiquities Museum with Bell as its director, just a few months before her mysterious death by suicide from an overdose of sleeping pills. In the second half of the twentieth century, it became The Iraq Museum, and in 1983 it received its first (and so far only) female director after Bell, Bahija Khalil. The turbulent history of the museum continued into the twenty-first century, with many of its extremely valuable exhibits looted during the 2003 Iraq War because of a lack of protection from the US army.

The British High Commissioner's decision to support the creation of a museum as a catalyst for identity formation in the new nation of Iraq followed the Western tradition of national museums as custodians of objects that define national identity. In the modern

European museum "[t]he strategies of archiving and classifying lie at the very heart of Western modernity; in this context, museums were means of power and knowledge exhibiting cultural forms and the regulation of bodies and discourse" (De Angelis, Ianniciello, Orabona and Quadraro 12). This does not mean that the displayed objects belong exclusively to one specific nation whose identity the museum tries to uphold. On the contrary, the cultural and national diversity of the exhibits points towards the ability of the museum to name, to create official versions of identity narratives, to inscribe the nation within the power discourse. The new nation of Iraq, mapped out on paper by imperial powers, required such a definition, including fashioning new traditions out of the multiplicity of cultures that had inhabited the space of the current nation for centuries. However, these traditions, both in museum structuring and nation making, did not take into account the diversity of local memory and heritage. They were adopted instead because they spoke to the colonial powers who wanted to recognise themselves in the tradition of these ancient regimes. Artefacts belonging to the old Assyrian, Babylonian and Sumerian empires were used to strengthen the position of the Baghdad Museum as historically central within the colonial paradigm, creating a tension between those in power, as representatives of the colonisers, and ordinary citizens who either did not recognise themselves in the displayed objects or had traditionally different relationships with archaeological artefacts. While according to Carol Duncan the traditional Western museum has always played a civilising role in society (8), a postcolonial reading of the museum proposes that different relationships can be established between objects and viewers, including marginalised communities that might not recognise themselves in the official historical narratives. What Gertrude Bell attempted to do in Iraq, both within historical reality and in Khalil's theatrical depiction, was to impose a manufactured tradition that would ensure a shared citizenship, or so she believed. Rather than offering shared values, however, it aligned itself more with what Kevin Robins,

drawing on the work of Richard Sennett, calls "a search for purity and purified identity" (28). These identities are created through "the purification of space, through the maintenance of territorial boundaries and frontiers" (Robins 28) that aim to offer protection from the external other. In this case, though, the other was internal and ignored through the process of colonial imposition. In *A Museum in Baghdad*, the museum becomes a microcosm that reflects the nation-state as a colonial creation, with the imperial processes of imposing a new identity and creating a new community translated into the workings of the museum, its politics of display, its relationship with the local population and with the representatives of power, even its continuity through time and memory.

Mythological Time and Historical Time in *A Museum in Baghdad*

Khalil's play discusses issues of memory, community, and power by presenting the foundation of the Baghdad Museum as part of a larger project of creating an artificial national narrative, imposed from without by colonial powers. The structure of the play and the creative transitions between multiple timeframes become the defining aspects of the performance, offering spectators the opportunity to perceive the ramifications of colonial processes, impossible if the action is concentrated within one timeline. We are simultaneously in "Then" (1926), "Now" (2006), and "Later" ('*this could be in 50, 100 or 1,000 years in the future'*) (Khalil 2). These three time frames are inhabited by characters who often share the same stage space but seem unaware of each other's presence: Gertrude Bell (Emma Fielding), her Iraqi assistant Salim (Zed Josef), and Professor Leonard Woolley (David Birrell), archaeologist at the British Museum, all belong to Then, while Ghalia Hussein (Rendah Heywood), director of the Iraqi Museum, Mohammed Abdullah (Riad Richie), the museum's curator, Layla Hassan (Houda Echouafni), an Iraqi archaeologist, and Private Sam York (Debbie Korley), a female soldier in the US Army charged with protecting

the museum, are from Now. Later is inhabited by an older Mohammed and an older Layla (which makes Khalil's description of Later as 100 or 1000 years in the future rather incongruous but points towards the timelessness of the issues presented) as well as a group of kidnappers (reduced in the RSC performance to one kidnapper, played by Ali Gadema) who eventually abduct and murder Mohammed because of his position as director of the museum.

While Gertrude Bell and Leonard Wooley are the only two characters based on historical individuals, thus rendering the past the most stable timeframe, there are two characters who belong to a much more fluid mythological sphere, able to move between Then, Now and Later, and thereby inhabit all the timeframes. Abu Zaman (Rasoul Saghir) is a character who carries within him the knowledge of his people: he physically connects past, present, and future and, by tossing coins, tries to change the course of history. His endeavours, however, are unsuccessful as in each possible version of the future Mohammed is kidnapped and killed for becoming the director of the museum and thus the representative of institutional power. Nasiya (Nadi Kemp-Sayfi), who is described in Khalil's text as "*an Arab woman who is timeless*" (2), appears at crucial moments in the play and, much like Abu Zaman, belongs to a mythological time that knows no physical boundaries. However, unlike Abu Zaman, Nasiya seems unable to free herself from the stereotypical Arab womanhood that Khalil sets out to deconstruct. Wearing a full-body black cloak, or chador, her headdress is held in place by plaited black material, only partially obscuring her face. She is often silent, motionless, and framed by display boxes, as yet another exhibit in the museum. Her timelessness is not a liberating feature, and when she decides to speak out she is promptly removed from the stage by security guards. The spatial continuity is ensured by the use of a single room in the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad, occupied by all the characters, which becomes an important character itself in the discussion and illustration of the construction of Iraqi national memory narrative that underpins Khalil's work. Erica Whyman's production offers,

through Tom Piper's stage design, a visual representation of overlapping timelines. Old display cabinets and drawers occupy centre stage, while a small desk with a laptop is placed stage left (see Figures 2 and 3). Upstage, a large, empty display box is framed by a row of empty shelves fixed to the back wall. A grand marble arch, with visible rubble at its base, establishes the spatial reality of both past and present. The set allows for a view behind the scenes of a working museum, which enables the theatrical audience to scrutinise the methods of documentation and display. Because of the often changing timeline, it also offers the possibility of dialogue between Gertrude Bell's colonial methods of museum making and Layla's firmly postcolonial views on how the museum should be managed. While display in the traditional museum is supported by conservation and restoration[1], Layla proposes a shift of focus towards fragments, broken statues and the places where they were found: "[…] broken statues have their place too. A reminder. Attempting to mend them, make them look new is a form of cover-up." (Khalil 28)

<INSERT FIGURES 2 AND 3 HERE>

Figure 2: Set of the RSC production of *A Museum in Baghdad*. Photo by the author.

Figure 3: Close up of Tom Piper's set for the RSC production of *A Museum in Baghdad*. Gertrude Bell (Emma Fielding) left, Ghalia Hussein (Rendah Heywood) right. Photo courtesy of the RSC.

In *A Museum in Baghdad* Khalil contrasts two types of time, historical and mythological, in order to allow for a more profound scrutiny of historical events. Like in a museum, historical time is displayed like an exhibit to be observed and analysed. In the performance, mythological time is represented by Abu Zaman, Nasiya, and the frequent appearance of a chorus made up of Ghalia, Layla, and Nasiya; historical time is indicated through the use of increasing amounts of sand "*emanating from pockets, things being moved, being swept in on people's feet*" (Khalil 2) that will eventually fill the large display box

[1] For a discussion of the moral implications of restoration and conservation in the decolonial museum, see Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Transformations: Decolonisation and Democratization* (John Wiley and Sons, 2020).

upstage. The use of sand and Abu Zaman's coin tossing become visual cues that allow the audience to follow the temporal logic of the narrative. Like a magician conjuring historical time into existence, Abu Zaman opens the performance with the line: "It's time" (Khalil 3), followed by a scene where, in quick succession, the history of the museum is represented on stage by a flurry of officials frenetically cutting ribbons and declaring the museum open. Here, time becomes history and the space of the museum becomes that of the new nation, a place where identities are forged through displays of objects but also through relationships enabled by characters not restricted by historical timeframes.

Khalil's Gertrude Bell, whose determination was convincingly conveyed in performance by Fielding's strong physical presence, models the organisation of the museum's collections on a system she set up in France during the war "to help trace the missing and wounded" (Khalil 14). If the method she used in France was one focused on burying the dead, she translates it in Iraq to one about "digging up the past" (Khalil 14). In both contexts, she plans to bring "order where there is none" (Khalil 14), and she spends most of her time on stage labelling and arranging objects in drawers, creating cultural taxonomies.

The idea of ordering, and thus disciplining, bodies and objects has surfaced recurrently in analyses of nation-making narratives, both in European nations and in their colonial outposts. In a discussion of "the exhibitionary complex," Tony Bennett identifies ordering as a strategy used for "simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public" that inspects those objects (333). The ways in which the public accesses the displays and how they accept and uphold the rules of the space become a ritualistic performance aimed at bestowing culture upon individual bodies. Carol Duncan likewise argues that such rituals are designed "to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals

within that community" (8). Order is imposed not only on the objects in the displays and thus in the narrative of the nation but also in the ways in which entry to the space is allowed. Museal ritual reinforces the transformative power of rituals in general, as "it confers or renews identity or purifies or restores order in the self or to the world" (Duncan 13).

But this purification has a double meaning in *A Museum in Baghdad*: Gertrude wants to order the vast diversity of objects and cultures in a format palatable to the new nation, but she also wants to constrain the fluidity of time represented by Abu Zama to fit the shape of history that she is creating. While initially objects in the museum seem to be malleable and responsive to her attempts, time resists her imposed order from the very beginning. Throughout the play, there seems to be an overlap in Gertrude's mind between museum and nation: she talks about the museum as her private property while Woolley refers to the statue of the goddess, one of the objects in the museum, as "[y]our goddess" (Khalil 5). However, when asked by Woolley about the purpose of the museum, she immediately refers to a national narrative: "This isn't about me – it's about creating unity, nationhood. […] It's about galvanising an identity for the people of Iraq" (Khalil 5). Khalil writes into Gertrude's character an almost pathological compulsion to organise and preserve. This fossilisation of memory through regulation and encasement will have a devastating impact on her later in the performance, prompted by an impossible tension between mythological and historical times.

As a character, Gertrude Bell attests to the complexity of the times during which she acted as director of the Baghdad museum. She is a white, British woman officially appointed as colonial representative in Iraq who established strong connections with King Faysal I. Her previous knowledge of the region's tribes and her genuine interest in the ancient past of the new nation grant a certain authority to her character. She does not seem to embody the typical characteristics of the oppressor, and the play and production use the tense relationship between Gertrude and Woolley to present her as a long-suffering saviour. She is certainly

different from Leonard Woolley, whose mantra in the play is "what's in it for me?" (Khalil 4). As the representative of the British Museum, the play's Woolley, a more extreme version of the historical character, is the epitome of the self-assured coloniser. He strongly believes that the artefacts found during his archaeological digs must be taken to Britain to be protected from the people of Iraq. His views reflect the widely held beliefs of European museums in the 19th and early 20th centuries that they are keepers of objects from other cultures because those cultures are incapable of taking care of them (Bennett 350-356). Woolley shares his opinions with Gertrude in the first scene of the performance: "I predict it'll all be back to the BM in time for tea when civil war erupts again and they go back to their tribes" (Khalil 5).

For Woolley, the objects he unearths are extraordinary but they cannot be entrusted to the people whose ancestors have created them because they lack the knowledge to handle them and cannot offer the care that can be ensured in Britain. He even tries to convince Abu Zaman that the statue of the goddess would "be safer in Blighty" (Khalil 5) and encourages him to decide its fate "the Arab way – *maktouba* – let's toss a coin for it" (Khalil 6). Using the "Arab way" seemingly justifies and legitimises the taking of the statue. But the production deploys the coins as portals between versions of reality, and the magical moment of coin tossing becomes just a temporary solution for the placement of the statue. Woolley wins it and a desperate Gertrude calls it "my statue," to which Woolley retorts, "It's not yours – it belongs to the 'people of Iraq,' remember?" (Khalil 6). The language of possession, so typical of the colonial narrative of power, plays out in the short dialogue between Gertrude and Woolley. The statue moves in quick succession between being "theirs," "mine," and "ours," Woolley concluding with a reassurance directed at Abu Zaman: "Relax, old boy, we treat our treasures with nothing but respect" (Khalil 7). This very early exchange about the fate of the statue sets the tone for the subsequent discussions about power and representation that abound in the play. Objects are removed from the museum or from archaeological digs

through a variety of methods ("legitimately" moved to Britain, looted by local people during the Iraq war, sold to Western buyers on various Internet sites), but ultimately all these methods respond to what Kevin Robins calls "a repackag[ing] for the world bazaar" (21).[2] The contemporary globalised commodification of archaeological objects is seen as a continuation of the colonial methods of removal. Layla argues that "artefacts [are] trophies" (Khalil 25) for those in power, while Ghalia's search for the looted cylinder seals reveals a global market for stolen artefacts.

The constant movement of objects is also a major conversation point in the Now sections of the play. For much of the production, Ghalia, the current director of the museum, is seen on her laptop trying to identify stolen cylinder seals on eBay. She is confronted by Layla, the museum archaeologist, because she is more concerned with absent objects than the ones in need of sorting in the basement of the museum. Ghalia calls Layla a "purist" (Khalil 25) because she believes that objects should be left where they are found and experienced in that context. However, as a character, Layla presents a view that is much closer to the current discussions about the post-colonial museum and the need to decolonise museal politics of display. She voices her dislike of the "Western version of a museum, shaping historical narrative in the way that suits those in power" (Khalil 25) and advocates for community museums that move away from the globalised and commodified versions of Western museal narratives. She is also overtly critical of Gertrude's interventions a century earlier. While in the Then section Gertrude is portrayed as a saviour who intends to create a national museum for the new nation of Iraq in order to reinforce a community, however imagined, Layla interprets Gertrude's work as a manifestation of colonial power. She calls her "that woman" and argues that Gertrude "basically put herself in charge and shared the spoils with her

[2] For an in-depth discussion of the policies invoked in the process of removing archaeological objects from countries like Iraq in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, consult Dan Hicks' *The Brutish Museums* (Pluto Press, 2020).

mates" (Khalil 27). The artefacts become, in this version of the story, trophies that are passed between those who have the financial powers to dig: overwhelmingly Western archaeologists. The fact that Gertrude initiated her own laws regarding the treatment of antiquities and had those laws approved by the king is seen by Layla as yet another way to justify Western looting.

Layla's view of Gertrude's obsession with the "Western version of museums" (Khalil 25), and the difference between Gertrude's procedures and community museums that would truly belong to the Iraqi nation, is in line with what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "indigenous modes of display," which privilege the creation of "multisensory, multifocus events" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 57). She argues that exhibitionary modes like the festival offer an alternative to the traditional museum and enhance local and community forms of cultural representation. Such events contain both live and inanimate exhibits within the framework of the spectacular and the performative. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies two types of politics of display in dealing with ethnographic objects: in situ and in context. Both are based on the detachment of the object from its original place, but "in situ" (19) follows the proposed "indigenous" (57) approach to showing and processing the past, while a display "in context" (21) adheres to Western principles of display. The objects bring with them a foreignness of place and narrative that is either fully recreated within the display – the object is placed in a constructed context that relays a story of origins to the spectator – or the object is incorporated into a taxonomy or within a historical development that often obscures its original narrative. The latter exhibitionary style relies heavily on the cognitive control of both the objects – placing them within a narrative of development – and the viewers – assuming that most viewers have the same or very similar general knowledge about local and national history, and in the process largely excluding those who have no say in the creation of national narratives. The same problem appears to manifest itself in Khalil's play: Layla advocates a

truly “in situ” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 19) display of Iraqi history and culture by keeping the objects where they have been found through the creation of community museums. The Iraqi museum that appears in the Now and continues to exhibit objects “in context” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 21) follows not only a Western style of display, but also reaffirms a narrative of nation that had been artificially imposed on the newly formed state of Iraq when it was created. There is an insurmountable chasm between the narratives of display and the stories advocated by characters like Abu Zaman or Nasiya.

The marked separation between objects and people is reinforced in the play through the ongoing debate about glass cabinets. Both Gertrude (Then) and Ghalia (Now) express strong conviction that the sculpture of the goddess must be displayed in a reinforced glass cabinet in order to keep it safe from the common people who might come to see the exhibits. Ghalia even advocates a complete removal of the sculpture from the display to keep “her” safe, notwithstanding Mohammed’s reassurance that “I can get a better glass cabinet – reinforced – from my cousin in Najaf. Then she’ll be safer” (Khalil 28). Separating objects from viewers by placing them in sealed glass cabinets subscribes to Aleida Assmann’s argument that museums are institutions that store memory rather than produce it (Assmann 327-394) – corroborated by Mohammed when he notes that “A museum needs its public or it’s just an archive – dead” (Khalil 40).

In her seminal work, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilisation*, Assmann provides a physiological perspective on the memory institution as either alive or dead (theatre/inhabited/alive, as opposed to museum/uninhabited/dead) and of the memory object itself as either uninhabited (free from a specific carrier and exclusively in the past) or inhabited (connected to a group or individual and creating a bridge between past, present and future) (119-134). The performance of *A Museum in Baghdad* at the RSC allows for close scrutiny of the multiple layers contained within the relationship between theatre and museum.

The space itself of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre complex combines the characteristics of the museum with that of a functional theatre. The display of costumes, props, as well as photographs of sets and casts from previous productions adorn the spaces outside the auditorium. Any production that is hosted in either of its theatres automatically belongs to the long history that established the RSC as a company of national importance. While asking specific questions about the politics of display in museums, Khalil's play also invites its spectators to scrutinise displays in the extra-theatrical spaces they encounter before entering the auditorium. The production itself acquires extraordinary importance through its performance at the RSC as a site that shapes national cultural narratives. These overlapping narratives complicate Assmann's proposed methodological binary and invite a much more nuanced engagement with the position of memory institutions in the shaping of national narratives of identity. The levels of interaction and immersivity will also determine the success of the imparted national narratives. Keeping objects "under lock and key" (Khalil 40) and limiting local people's access to and interaction with them because of potential violence and looting, reinforce the colonial concept that museums are created as spaces to protect objects from people rather than allowing for a meaningful interaction with these objects. Ghalia is worried about possible looting during the opening, following the previous destruction of museum objects during the Battle of Baghdad.

This possible violence, moreover, seems to be encouraged by the historical narrative that the museum has created for itself and the nation from the time it was founded by Gertrude. The reasons for the creation of the museum and the justification of the importance and value of the objects kept in it contribute to a view of the museum as a temple of dead objects, subscribing to a national narrative that has always been imposed on the people of Iraq rather than emerging directly from the diverse communities that made up the young nation. For Layla, the violence and destruction are symptoms of a physical engagement with

the past and the present by a nation that has never been allowed to create its own story, neither during the reign of the British-backed king, Faysal I, nor during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, nor, for that matter, during the American invasion of the country: "There are bodies in the streets. It puts broken statues into perspective." (Khalil 25)

The play and the production attempt to disturb the traditional style of display and to engage with the objects at a physical level beyond the destruction that Ghalia is worried about. In both Then and Now, a box is delivered to Gertrude and Ghalia by Salim and Abu Zaman respectively. It contains a "magical" (Khalil 22)crown that Woolley dismisses as yet one of many "gold headdresses" (Khalil 51) of a kind that he keeps finding at the royal cemetery in Ur. The crown, unlike the sculpture of the goddess, invites physical interaction. It has such an impact on Gertrude that she asks Abu Zaman to lock it away in a broom cupboard, not because she wants to keep it safe but because it seems to have her under a spell and is giving her "strange thoughts" (Khalil 22). Conversely, while Gertrude distances herself from the artefact, Layla engages with it directly. She places it on her head and becomes inhabited by the story of the crown, so much so that she can smell the burning flesh of the women ceremonially sacrificed on the occasion of an ancient royal death ("I can smell burning…" [Khalil 43]). The object contains the story, its emotions and its senses. Interaction with the object ensures a ritualistic re-enactment of the past that is in uncomfortable tension with the official narrative of the museum. Myth, memory, and history are juxtaposed in a highly charged scene that connects the past and the present. Layla is possessed by the object, she becomes immersed in the story but at the same time, through the interaction, the object becomes alive. This enacted ritual is different from those imposed on the viewers' interaction with museum displays. While an exhibiition "purifies or restores order" (Duncan 13), Layla's connection with the crown is messy, emotionally charged, and transformative.

There is a moment in the production when the crown becomes the portal between past and present, with a clear connection to the mythological time that both Abu Zaman and Nasiya represent. Gertrude and Ghalia hold the crown at the same time, across timeframes, and Layla's extraordinary experience is physically felt by both women. However, becoming one with the history contained and manifested by the object is not enough to address or change the realities of the present. On the day of the museum opening (Now), Nasiya removes the crown from the display cabinet, crushes it between her hands, and throws it to the floor (Figure 4). All the present guests are horrified by the destruction of the object, but they seem detached from the reality of the problems raised by Nasiya: "People are starving while you worry about dead things – these things aren't alive, they're dust – " (Khalil 79). Nasiya's words bring into focus the huge gap between the institution and the people, between the original reasons for creating the museum and the reality of the newly created country.

<INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE>

Figure 4: Nadi Kemp-Sayfi as Nasiya in the RSC performance of *A Museum in Baghdad*. Photo courtesy of the RSC.

The museum does not belong to the people, even if Gertrude's initial motivation was to bring the tribes together by creating a shared past, because the history it has created is illusionary. The diversity of the people brought together under the new flag of the nation of Iraq was never taken into consideration, nor were the myths and beliefs of the people. The stories, the oral culture, the narratives that did not have objects to which to anchor themselves, were ignored for a vision of the past that reflected a Western view of value and ancient importance. While the majority of the objects in the museum are detached from relevant human stories, or, perhaps more precisely, have stories imposed upon them through Western taxonomies, the crown is intrinsically connected to its primordial story. It was not dug up by the British archaeologists at Ur but has a mysterious origin. It was delivered to the museum by unknown previous custodians and it is only assumed by Woolley to be from the dig at Ur; he has discovered so many similar crowns that, when one goes missing, it does not

make any difference. However, according to Abu Zaman, the crown has a much deeper connection to the people and places of what is now Iraq. He mentions *Melagit*, an ancient tradition that connects archaeological objects to the earth and place where they are found. These objects are not dug up but are revealed by the earth itself "[a]fter any heavy rain" (Khalil 20). Abu Zaman notes that "when the earth washes away from the surface of ancient mounds, exposing archaeological objects, the locals in the area surrounding these mounds pick whatever the earth has given up. […] These objects are considered to have magical powers, a good omen" (Khalil 20). They are not ripped from the earth and separated from their ancient stories by being displayed in a museum, in a sealed glass box, but rather they reveal stories from the past to those willing to listen. They are what is needed in an ideal museum, one that displays what the earth reveals rather than what archaeologists find through various digs. Khalil's text and its performance propose a discussion about the importance of objects in museums and in the theatre and about the ways in which those in charge create the stories that constitute the contexts within which these objects are displayed. Objects like the crown have mythical qualities with specific significance within the collective memory of the communities that are steeped in their stories.

In *A Museum in Baghdad* the crown proves to have transformative powers. Gertrude locks it into the broom cupboard because it gives her strange thoughts, but Layla is ready to engage with it. Instantaneously "[*s]he looks incredible, regal and beautiful, like a ghost from the past. Her whole demeanour changes—she is* transformed." (Khalil 43). Standing on a chair, her hijab is removed and her long hair allowed to flow freely on her back, the crown framing her regal features. A spotlight focuses on her face, heightening the intensity of the experience. The crown inhabits her and shares its story with her: Layla becomes witness to the crown's violent past, having a flashback to a time of human sacrifice – she can smell burning – but also of extraordinary beauty. However, when Private York wants to capture the

moment by taking a photograph, the image fractures. With the flash of the camera the link is broken and both Gertrude – who witnessed the transformation from Then – and Layla are visibly affected: Gertrude collapses to the floor and Layla looks like she is overcome by extreme tiredness. While York remarks that "we don't have things that old in the States" (Khalil 13), implicitly dismissing ancient artefacts belonging to the native peoples that lived on the territory of the United States before its alleged discovery, she also advocates for an interactive form of display for the crown: "Someone could model it. […] Almost doesn't look real, like a costume." (Khalil 40, 41). And then to Layla: "Why don't you try it on? [...] It was made to be worn." (Khalil 42). Mohammed agrees that using a live model for the crown would make the object come "alive" (Khalil 44). *A Museum in Baghdad* proposes the theatre as an answer to York's and Mohammed's request for more vivid and interactive forms of display, allowing for the dramatization of objects in multiple temporal dimensions.

The ways in which the play deals with museal objects reinforce the dichotomy of inhabited and uninhabited, as discussed by both Aleida Assmann and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. The objects in storage are entombed in glass displays while those like the crown, that are allowed to be interacted with, come alive. The museum display becomes installation and performance. However, sometimes objects are missing and stories need to be told without them. The need to dig, clearly illustrated by Woolley, is not always justified and necessary to create a national story. In her essay "A Museum Without Objects," Françoise Vergès discusses the absence of objects and the ways in which missing objects can become as important for communities as real ones, even more important than the ones that Khalil's Gertrude and Ghalia so painstakingly organise in glass display boxes. Vergès argues that we should not compensate for the absence of objects that might support our preferred version of a national story, nor should we make up a story based on what objects are available. A lack of objects to display can be as important as their presence. She observes that "[t]he history and

culture of the vanquished and the oppressed is rarely embodied in material objects. They bequeath words rather than palaces, hope rather than private property, words, texts and music rather than monuments" (Vergès 28). Heritage is embodied in the active relationship between people and objects. And this is exactly what Nasiya is voicing at the end of the production: "but I am real – flesh, blood – I'm ALIVE – HELP ME!" (Khalil 79). Still, York is more concerned with the remains of the crown rather than Nasiya's motives in shattering it: "Can we fix it?" (Khalil, 79). In her view, objects have value in themselves and not through the connections people establish with them. This reinforces Woolley's belief that these objects will only retain their value if they are taken to London, to civilisation, as the people of the new Iraq will "go back to their tribes" (Khalil 4) and civil war will erupt again.

The crux of the play's plot is the continuous effort by Abu Zaman to change the future by altering the present (both in Then and Now), but his attempts to intervene happen after the creation of the "imagined" nation of Iraq and it is too late to change anything because the stories told on stage are already taking place in a simulated reality that has little to do with the past of the region. This inalterability is recognised by Gertrude who notes that her job was extremely hard because she had to "[m]ake a country" where people had no language or tradition in common. All they had was "[i]mmovable, intractable, unchangeable history" (Khalil 18). Gertrude's calling in Iraq turns out to be very much the calling of the coloniser intent on imparting civilisation and nationhood: "I need to remind them of their past – so they carry it with them into a future where this nation regains its place as the most important in the region, if not the world…" (Khalil 19). According to her, a nation cannot exist without history and an illustrious past, but it can without tradition and language. Yet, Khalil suggests, what Gertrude seems to ignore is the importance of myth, ritual, and tradition for any new nation as elements that can truly connect people, far more than soulless objects displayed in glass boxes.

In the final scenes of *A Museum in Baghdad*, it is not the objects that become alive and vibrant. Instead, it is the people that join the displays as exhibits. The frequent tableaux that are presented on stage in the RSC production recurrently position Nasiya within an exhibition frame, either as the embodiment of the statue of the goddess or as the emblem of the people. However, this method of presenting her is, I suggest, problematic: while it aligns closely with the play's critique of the colonial museum within which people are treated as objects, it is in conflict with Khalil's mission to challenge representational stereotypes. The *"Arab woman who is timeless"* (Khalil 2) is restrained within display frames: she is exhibited as the idealised, motionless, and silent symbol of the nation and not as a person with real problems, which is the way she presents herself at the end of the play. She is forced within glass boxes all the way through the performance and when she comes to life by destroying the golden crown and asking for help, she is forcibly removed from the stage, the object becoming much more important than the person who is no longer fulfilling her pre-inscribed role. While Nasiya disappears from sight, Gertrude turns herself into an object to be discovered. She climbs inside the empty glass cabinet upstage and is slowly covered by sand flowing from above. The last image of the production presents Abu Zaman and a group of people trying to dig her out. Thus, by replacing Nasiya, Gertrude becomes the object to be unearthed and displayed, blurring the distinction between curator and curated, and showing the inseparability of artefacts from the human choices made about them. Through the interconnected timelines, Gertrude has an opportunity to contemplate not only the future of the museum but also the cycle of violence that ends with Mohammed's death. While neither the production nor the playtext make this connection obvious, there are moments when Emma Fielding's Gertrude shows performatively the potential of this link across timelines. Gertrude's death at the end of the production alludes to her suicide, discussed in Georgina Howell's biography as something that likely occurred though the causes of her death remain

uncertain. She did not leave a note, but a day before her death asked her friend Ken Cornwallis to look after her dog if anything happened to her (Howell 447). Although officially there is no explanation of her death, the production tries to elucidate the reasons behind it, allowing Gertrude a glimpse into a disturbing future.

Theatre and the museum of the future

A Museum in Baghdad and the performance I saw at the Royal Shakespeare Company engage with both imperialism and patriarchy within the institution of the museum, attempting to navigate, often successfully, the treacherous waters of theoretical and ideological awareness and practical representation. The reviews of the Stratford-upon-Avon production highlight the importance of its subject matter, particularly the focus on Britain's colonial past and issues of gender, power, and identity. However, they note the tension between its "tremendously ambitious attempt to cover big questions" and the struggle for "dramatic shape" (Brennan). The text is deemed too theoretically heavy, with one reviewer noting that at one moment Bell is even "delivering an actual lecture on why museums are so important" (Davies). While I agree that staging the important cultural questions contained in Khalil's text present dramaturgical challenges, the interspersing timelines, Tom Piper's set design, and the venue of the Swan Theatre itself create opportunities for reflection and scrutiny. Within such a politically charged text, it is unsurprising that characters are not fully developed theatrically. Clive Davis observed *in The Times* that both Bell and Ghalia's characters live in the moment, and there is not enough background provided by the text to allow the spectators a better understanding of the journeys that brought them to the circumstances of the play. The production and the text do not "focus enough attention on either woman" (Davis), thus allowing them to be only vessels of Khalil's ideological drive. Nick Curtis for the *Evening Standard* is perhaps most brutal in his assessment of the

production, arguing that "[a]nger […] is the default mood of the whole piece" and that the main characters seem to "get stuck in a rut of clench-jawed fatalism." While the characters of Bell and Hussein could have perhaps been given a more rounded characterization, Curtis mistakenly evaluates the circularity of the "twin narratives" as "confused and repetitive […] and the mood monotonous." The performance might lack "any real dramatic impetus" (Davies) at times, but through its experimental form it challenges our understanding of the connection between past, present, and future and it allows for a decolonial analysis of power relations that are manifested over time. And when topics like colonialism and how national identity is narrated are given performative presence on a stage like the RSC's Swan Theatre, there is also the potentially wider scope to discuss the current political realities that shape Britain's national narrative of identity. The museum as a theatrical space and the theatre as a museum are presented and analysed as institutions but also as inhabited places, vibrant stages where various people come together to voice their convictions. Still, the resulting model of the museum is problematic and incomplete: it demonstrates challenges, both ideologically and practically, and stops short of offering any solutions. On the contrary, the play and the production highlight the circularity of the connection between past, present and future by reinforcing a cycle of violence that traps the museum and its inhabitants regardless of continuous attempts to change the future. No matter how many times the coin is tossed, Mohammed will always be kidnapped and killed in the future, emphasising the futility of change in a lawless society that, according to Woolley, will always return to civil war. While the play itself does not propose an alternative, the discussion that is prompted by the issues presented on stage can offer at least a theoretical provocation: we must pursue arts and institutions that move us towards trans-national spaces that encourage analysis and action through active questioning of official belonging and memory, of nationhood, and of identity.

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