Nadje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar


At a time when Iraqi voices are silenced by the outpouring of American war literature on one hand and the rattle of IS fighters and their counterparts on the other, _We are Iraqis_ edited by Nadje Al-Ali and Deborah Al-Najjar comes as a timely and necessary corrective. It puts things in perspective first and foremost because it features texts written not on behalf of Iraqis but by Iraqis themselves. These texts bring to the fore Iraq’s rich and multilayered cultural production, exploring non-violent and everyday forms of resistance to war, occupation and sectarian violence. _We Are Iraqis_ includes essays on literature as well as art/visual culture, poetry, excerpts from diary writing, testimonies and other prose, conversations with artists in addition to reproductions of artwork and a bibliography with relevant websites, books and periodicals. With this diverse collection of texts _We Are Iraqis_ sets out to counter a process of forgetting and effacement that culminated in the Iraq war of 2003, reclaiming Iraq for Iraqis while acknowledging the traces of ruin on its body. The book takes its readers on a journey, introducing them to different faces and facets of the country and showing them that no matter how embattled and dispersed cultural production in Iraq has become, it contains beauty even in the most desperate of situations.

‘While the occupation of Iraq and its aftermath have received media and political attention, we know very little about the everyday lives of Iraqis’, reads the first sentence on the book cover. As Al-Ali and Al-Najjar elaborate in their introduction, the book aims at narratives of everyday life because it is everyday life that carries hope for the future despite the often violent and traumatic experiences it bears: ‘While everyday life is fraught with the potential of danger and trauma, it is in the everyday life itself that we find the making of hope’ (p. xxvi). It is precisely these narratives that have been overwritten by the spectacle of war, war journalism and increasingly also war literature written by ‘embedded’ Western authors (see Sinan Antoon’s and Elliott Colla’s articles on the topic in www.jadaliyya.com, 11 June 2014 and 30 June 2014). Their stories tell of armed resistance, insurgency, and counter-insurgency but shun and brush aside ‘everyday forms of resistance that do not involve arms and violence’ (p. xxvi). In contrast, _We Are Iraqis_ brings together stories about peaceful everyday resistance told by Iraqis at the intersection of cultural and political expression; hence its subtitle: _Aesthetics and Politics in a Time of War._

Sinan Antoon’s ‘A Barbarian in Rome: Excerpts from a Diary’ clearly links aesthetics and politics, describing everyday resistance not from a given place in
Iraq but from inside an elevator in New York City. A colleague’s seemingly innocent question about going home for the holidays triggers a set of flashbacks in the narrator, questioning empire, notions of barbarity and the physical space of home. Ali Bader’s ‘A Long Phantasmagorical Dream for Those Who Are Not Part of the New Capitalism or Retired Communism’ reflects on the Iraqi diaspora, dislocation, displacement and the distinctions drawn between insider and outsider, ‘an absurd game of place (...) that marginalized people by using the idea of place, temporarily dislodging them from their positions’ (p. 104). The experience of dislocation and exile is at the core of a number of other contributions, namely Evelyn Azeezah Alstany’s conversation with Ella Habibia Shohat on ‘Arab-Jews, Diasporas, and Multicultural Feminism’, Ferial J. Ghazoul’s ‘Lyricai Resistance: The Example of Saadi Youssef’, and Sama Alshaibi’s ‘A Tale of Two Exiles’ (Palestine and Iraq).

Saad N. Jawad’s ‘The Assassination of Iraqi Academic Life’ draws the reader into Iraq’s educational system that has suffered tremendously, while Maysoon Pachachi’s ‘A Film-Training Project for Young Iraqis’ shows alternative ways to empower young Iraqis through documenting their everyday lives despite all odds and limited resources. The harsh realities faced by many Iraqis are further articulated in Yara Badday’s ‘Reframing Sunni and Shi’i Discussions’, which calls to mind ‘the coexistence of [Iraq’s] historic ethnic and religious diversity’ (p. 84) in view of the growing sectarian divide and violence. Irada al-Jabbouri’s ‘Identity of the Numbers’ reclaims the human identity of the dead reduced in the media to mere numbers.

Last but not least, We Are Iraqis includes a number of visual expressions in addition to conversations with artists, modern and contemporary art and visual culture having played a central role in Iraq’s cultural production. Plates showcase reproductions of artwork by Deena Al-Adeeb Sama Alahaibi, Jananne Al-Ani, Wafaa Bilal, Maysaloun Faraj, Hana Malallah, Rashad Salim, Wafer Shayota and Hashim al-Tawil. ‘Art in Iraq today has been considered a sin by extremists’, (p. 13) states a report on Iraq’s cultural heritage quoted in Nada Shabout’s ‘Bifurcations of Iraq’s Visual Culture.’ As Shabout’s essay makes clear, this hostility is not new—even if it has reached an unimaginable scope with Islamic extremists, most recently 18—but has its background in the occupation and its aftermath. The editors ‘perceive the connections and inter-linkages between the written and the visual as central to contemporary Iraqi cultural productions’ (p. xxxix). This is reflected in the juxtaposition of verbal and visual narratives in We Are Iraqis, even if precedence is given to the word. No book can do it all, and the editors do not claim to give equal coverage to all forms of cultural production. Rather, one of the book’s outstanding features is its rhapsodic flow, change in genre and media, which makes possible unexpected