swalef bibi: storying the everyday in Iraq

by

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Abstract

In this project I trace a silhouette of Iraqi storytelling practice by using my grandmothers’ storytelling methodology as guidance. I invite William Benjamin’s “Storyteller” as a companion throughout this journey. I look at Iraqi oral history interviews, literature, published memoirs, journalistic anthologies, cartographic stories, and video. I argue that personal memory and life narrative storytelling have become an important register of knowledge in a country whose cultural wealth has been ravaged through decades of colonial violence, dictatorship, sanctions, and multiple wars. The life story in its capacity to hold the affect and everydayness of experience lives on as a, breathing, resilient tradition that is able to respond to systematic violence in liberatory and enduring ways.

Keywords: life story; Iraq; storied self; oral history; narrative; discourse
This thesis is dedicated to Salma, Suhaila and Saida, our grandmothers who have known all along that our source of power lies in nurturing our attention to storytelling.
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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCLB</td>
<td>California State University in Long Beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCOHR</td>
<td>Columbia Centre for Oral History Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDR</td>
<td>German Democratic Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFU</td>
<td>Simon Fraser University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICP</td>
<td>Iraqi Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>Iraqi Memory Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INP</td>
<td>Iraqi Narratives Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSO</td>
<td>Iraqi Special Security Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: gathering at the family house in Harithiya neighbourhood in Baghdad, 1976
1 Introduction

Bibi turned on the local news channel. White-clad worshippers floated around the Kaaba in the thousands on the TV screen and my grandmother spirled Turkish coffee in the same motion, sitting on her turquoise couch. Wet air blew in from the open window and the scent of Dettol evaporated off the freshly mopped ceramic tiles. My aunt’s cigarettes lay on the glass table amongst tiny trinkets that had survived a lifetime of collecting and displacements many times over and yet had become only mundane objects filling the landscape of our everyday. I took your dad to the Black Stone when he was a baby, she began. Bibi’s stories were infinite; she always had a story, old and new, repeated with new information, repeated with retracted information, like a bottomless well. He was in my arms the whole tawaf, I gave him to your grandfather, he raised him to the Black Stone. Bibi kissed her ornamented coffee cup and took a loud sip. He was blessed, she said. In a single, short anecdote Bibi foretold my father’s life story, how this moment had insinuated an endowed future for him, and her own life story of faith and courage, of pushing in circles through thousands of worshippers seven times and handing your youngest over to be raised above the stampeding crowd.

I learned from my grandmother and other Iraqi women in the small but growing diaspora community in the mid-1990’s in the Emirates, that the telling and retelling of a collected repertoire of life events is a significant process. I learned that a life story can be found in singular moments, in trinkets and mundane rituals. I also learned that it is a process essentially both personal and social and always profound. The significance of the act of remembering people and their journeys itself that was the lesson learned. Telling life stories in Iraqi women’s diaspora gatherings enlisted a sacred attention in me that was simultaneously unimposing and unwavering. Enshrined between the syntax of words and storylines I found the power of memory, recitation, performance, and curation in the reproduction of life through stories.

On March 20th, 2003 I woke up before daybreak to a dry, tense feeling all over my body. I walked barefoot towards a hazy source of light in my parents' bedroom; their small grey suspended television was screening black and orange images of a city with a river whose banks were lined with small glowing lights. I knew it was Baghdad from my mother’s horrified face. They did not notice me watching them that morning, or for the
rest of the day. The volume was low but the sounds ear-piercing eerie: a repetitive rhythmic siren leading up to thuds. In keeping with previous generations, mine would also live to see Iraq devastated by war: the 2003 U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation. Slowly the phone started to ring more often in our house: a cousin kidnapped, two lost in an airstrike, a whole family fleeing across the border to Syria. Sometimes strangers, whose life stories I might have heard years before embellished with adventure and laughter, would show up yellow faced and exhausted to sleep a few nights in our house on their journeys to here and there: Sweden and Jordan and Detroit.

The sharing of life stories after the invasion became much grimmer, hushed among adults shielding us from the horrors and perhaps shielding themselves from having to explain what they could barely grapple with themselves. Even Bibi’s infinite limit stories reached zero. We no longer drove the hour to Jebel Ali’s humid and smoggy port, waiting with the smell of fish and excited families to receive Bibi from her two-day ferry journey from Basra. There was silence after 2003. I found myself disconnecting from Jayne Eyre and the Swiss Family Robinson sections of the bookshelves in search for literature that could restore the life stories I missed from the days before the war. It took a long time for these books to emerge: Sinan Antoon’s \textit{i’jaam} published in 2004, but that I did not find until 2006, was the first Iraqi novella I read. Soon after that, I found Anthony Shadid’s \textit{Night Draws Near}. With the absence and search for stories, I began to understand the power of life stories not only as memories retold in social gatherings, but narratives to witness wholeheartedly, attentively in the myriad of cultural forms in which they began to appear.

1.1 Arriving at this project

My entanglement with storytelling as a documentary process began with listening to the matriarchs in my community. Later, I began working on projects that engaged storytelling in writing and photography through mentorship and workshops for youth. I co-founded an oral history project, the \textit{Iraqi Narratives Project} (INP) in 2015. The INP has been a growing exploration of the historical materials that can be found in life stories of Iraqis in the diaspora. The project archives the narratives of urban, rural, diasporic and exiled Iraqis as they have lived through different time periods, places, migration waves and more. I also organized the \textit{Capturing Our Stories} project (2016) which was a summer program at Simon Fraser University (SFU) for Syrian children who had recently
arrived in Vancouver. The concept behind the project was to create a storytelling space that was critical to the performance and reproduction of Syrian refugee stories in mainstream media.

In both of these projects the narratives were treated not just as documents of the past, but also as material to shape the language we use to understand our experience of the past and future through the act of narration. The personal narrative form in particular, which was utilized in both projects, generates language, space and time allowing for new relationships with history; reclaiming broken parts of it and negotiating more claim over a complex collective historical record of the community. My work on the Iraqi Narratives Project, and the Capturing Our Stories project, and more importantly, my training at the hands of Iraqis grandmothers who taught me about the power of storytelling, are my points of departure for this research.

As the amalgamation of my life endeavours develop into an interest in story, I am compelled to investigate further the storytelling modality that is emerging against the discourse documenting the recent history of Iraq’s political strife, occupation, war, sanctions and dictatorial rule. This thesis comes as the natural next step in my dedication to the storytelling of life narratives.

1.2 “From Mouth to Mouth”, Walter Benjamin’s Storyteller

Walter Benjamin laments the impending loss of true storytellers from our world in his reflection on Nikolai Leskov’s writing. He begins his essay “The Storyteller” with a discussion on the connection between storytelling and sociopolitical conditions. “Was it not noticeable,” he asks, “at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent - not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? ¹” For Benjamin, the effect of violence, specifically war violence, is to undo storytelling, to revoke our access from “the securest among our possessions”². I begin my exploration of the idea of storytelling as a practice that offers liberation from hegemonic narratives and knowledge production with what seems initially to be Benjamin’s opposite conclusion. Whereas Benjamin seems to suggest a disconnect between story and violence, in this project I am

² Ibid.
writing about the ways that Iraqi storytelling about the everyday has had a long history of being an inherited, subversive practice occurring specifically in times of turmoil and widespread violence and violation.

The first resemblance in Benjamin’s essay to my grandmother’s storytelling practice is in his definition and insistence on the connection between storytelling and orality. “From mouth to mouth” he repeats, multiple times throughout the paper; not mouth-to-ear, not mouth-to-paper, not even mouth-to-(ear or paper)-and-then-again-to-mouth, but mouth-to-mouth - with a clear emphasis on the orality of both the source and the dissemination. Moreover, in “mouth to mouth” the directness between the source and dissemination is intentionally placed at the forefront of what counts as true storytelling. Benjamin later describes this immediacy in experience, this absence of a middle-man, so to speak, by talking about the “corporeality” of storytelling. In his subsequent discussions of how movement and journeys create a storyteller, the experience of the body in the production of true stories becomes clearer. This embodiment of storytelling practice, via the mouth and the traveling body, might help explain Benjamin’s introductory remarks about the depletion of true story from our world, particularly in connection to the “bodily experience by mechanical warfare”. The logic of Benjamin’s initial claims can thus be explained by understanding the magnitude of physical destruction in modern warfare as an interruption in the harmonious relationship between the body and the story.

For my exploration in this project, I invert Benjamin’s argument to ask: if embodied knowledge is the locus of storytelling, what power does storytelling hold particularly in times of war violence? In other words, how does the enmeshing of corporeal reality with true storytelling produce a liberatory potential - one that is discursive, temporal or linguistic. To reiterate once more how I hope to engage with Walter Benjamin’s storyteller, I am asking in this project about how we can imagine the relationship Benjamin draws between experience and story not as unidirectional - as in, a relationship in which only experience can affect storytelling - but as bidirectional, in which storytelling practice is not undone by violence and warfare, but that it lives on as

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
a, breathing, resilient tradition that is able to respond to the conditions of war experience in liberatory and enduring ways.

1.3 The call for producing better stories

Life stories have become a popular storytelling mode utilized by Iraqi fiction and nonfiction documentations because it is able to portray the nuanced details in which people have survived all this violence. A life story is able to illustrate the small cracks in a tapestry of horror in which beams of light might reflect an image of how people survive that can inform the “the ethics of living in responsive and responsible ways”\(^6\). Huber and Clandinin emphasize that “engaging with one another narratively shifts us from questions of responsibility understood in terms of rights and regulations to thinking about living and life”\(^7\). In the *Journal of Ethnography Theory*, an article beautifully subtitled “the overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq”, Hayder Al-Mohammad urges the importance of writing “more complex and nuanced stories [...] of how life was still possible in Iraq after the invasion”\(^8\). In Al-Mohammed search for an ethics informed by the everyday kindness of people living in Iraq under the horrors of wars and occupation, the centrality of the human life story becomes clearer as a clue to how we might approach unpacking what Shakir Mustafa calls “particular well-suitedness”\(^9\) of narrative. I suggest in this thesis that the life story is a narrative form in Iraqi literature which allows for the “turn to the everyday”\(^10\) [and to] the entanglements [...] of lives with other lives\(^11\) that Al-Mohammed calls for in order to move past a flat documentation of carnage to a literary landscape propelled by life.

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\(^6\) Clandinin, D. Jean. "Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience." Page 52
\(^7\) Huber, Janice, and D. Jean Clandinin. "Ethical dilemmas in relational narrative inquiry with children." Page 797
\(^8\) Al-Mohammad, Hayder, and Daniela Peluso. "Ethics and the "rough ground" of the everyday: the overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq." Page 48
\(^9\) Mustafa, Shakir, ed. *Contemporary Iraqi fiction: an anthology*. Page xiii
\(^10\) Al-Mohammad, Hayder, and Daniela Peluso. "Ethics and the “rough ground” of the everyday: the overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq." Page 45
\(^11\) Al-Mohammad, Hayder, and Daniela Peluso. "Ethics and the “rough ground” of the everyday: the overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq." Page 44
1.4 Purpose

In this thesis I argue that the form of the life story is a tool for liberation from colonial knowledge production where personal memory becomes an important register of knowledge in Iraq whose cultural and heritage wealth has been ravaged through decades of colonial violence, dictatorship, sanctions, and multiple wars. When museums, libraries, universities, bookselling markets and research institutions are levelled to the ground, such as is the case in Iraq, life stories become an essential repository where categories of meaning and historical sense-making can be negotiated. I argue that the everyday intimacy and affective engagement made possible by the life story form allows for knowledge production that moves beyond seeing Iraq as an image reflected in a colonial mirror. This research project aims at offering a map of the possibility of life stories to engage personal and collective human memory in the literary and historical production of communities who experience violence of colonialism, war and displacement.

This thesis asks: First, what are the various forms and concerns of Iraqi life stories? What temporal and discursive liberations emerge from the juxtaposition of Iraqi life stories with historical and political moments in Iraq and in diaspora? What is the place of life memory in informing collective historical narratives in the aftermath of political and imperial violence? What liberatory politics emerge from the everydayness found in the life story form? What categories and languages do life stories produce against colonial and hegemonic narratives?

1.5 Method

To answer the aforementioned questions, I apply a qualitative discourse analysis to two main collections of secondary material consisting of various forms of Iraqi life story documentations: an audio collection consisting of formally and informally collected oral history interviews; and a textual collection consisting of excerpts from novels, memoirs, StoryMaps, blogs.

For the texts, I look at selected excerpts from ten Iraqi publications that center life stories in their narrative, written inside the country and in diaspora from 1972 until 2018: Cell Block Five by Fadhil Azzawi (novel, 1972), Dream of the Red Anemones by Warid
Badr Al-Salim (short story, 1982), The Bottle of Musk by Ghazi Al-Abadi (short story, 1982), Tashari by Inaam Kachachi (novel, 2013), and the non-fiction book Night Draws Near by Anthony Shadid (2006). The book was published as a result of Shadid’s experience as a journalist for the New York Times stationed in Iraq from 1999 until the onset of the war in 2003. The book consists of short essays each describing the life story of one person or one family as they grapple with the tension and onset of the war in different provinces in Iraq. Access to materials was facilitated through the SFU library, Vancouver Public Library and my personal and family’s collection of Iraqi literature.

The oral history interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2019 by the Iraqi Narratives Project archive (formerly, The Iraqi Oral History Project) housed at the Oral History Program at California State University in Long Beach (UCLB). The life stories of three Iraqis in diaspora from different migration waves are: Mustafa is an Iraqi refugee in Vancouver, Canada in his early 20s who was born and raised during the sanctions and lived in Iraq during the 2003 invasion; Saida is a first generation Jewish Iraqi woman who was born in Baghdad in the 1930s and was displaced during a period of hostility towards Jews in Iraq in 1958; R. K. is a woman in her 30’s who lived through the Iran-Iraq war, the 1991 Gulf War, the sanctions and left just before the 2003 invasion moving to a nearby Arab country for many years before landing in Canada on a skilled worker immigration visa.

I also translate and discuss blog entries by Shalash Al-Iraqi, which will be explained in an extended “Notes on Translation” that follows this introduction. I also look at a StoryMap webpage entitled “Out of Iraq: A Case Study” by Samy Raby (2015). The two latter oral history resources are available online on the audio platform SoundCloud and mapping platform ESRI, and available publicly.

The approach of the (INP) interviews are casual and open-ended. The leading question of all the interviews was to ask the person to “tell me your life story starting from childhood”; “tell me about your life in Iraq”; “where and when were you born?”. One of the most important methods of the INP is to allow silence to happen; an approach which requires patience. The interviews were recorded on various devices including an iPhone recorder and H4N1 Zoom Recorder. A time stamp was placed at the beginning of each interview and a quiet place was chosen when it was possible. All applicants were guided through a consent process in their preferred language between the Arabic
and English forms provided. Consent was established verbally on an ongoing basis throughout the interview.

1.6 Limitations

One of the main challenges I faced in undertaking this project is the scarcity of research on Iraq. Not just in the limited scope of the topic of life stories, in which there is an evident research gap, but in Iraqi literary studies that can be found in an English database. Concurrently, access to the plentiful academic work from dissertations to research papers housed at Iraqi universities was near impossible to attain because they are not archived digitally. All theses and dissertations in Iraq are archived in hardcopy at the university library rather than in digital form. During my visits to Iraq in February until March 2018, and September 2019 until February 2020, I tried to access these research materials but found that due to the dangerous security situation all universities in Baghdad have permanent checkpoints at all entrance gates. Non-students and non-faculty are stopped and refused entry unless they have a permit, which is very difficult to obtain. In other attempts, I visited the main intellectual hub, Al Mutanabbi Street, as well as The Union of Iraqi Writers where I was able to find some recently published novels as well as some useful academic resources on translation methodology studies specifically about translating Iraqi literature to English. However, these sources are limited in scope and contributed only marginally to the overall project presented here.

1.7 Interdisciplinarity

The research design and theory are grounded in an interdisciplinary approach owing to the fact that I study a range of texts from literature to oral history and apply a range of analytic approaches to their study. The theories and frameworks I lean on throughout this research come from scholarship in psychology, linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and from scholarship which itself is considered interdisciplinary in nature such as postcolonial studies, translation studies, oral history, folklore and narrative studies. To name a few examples: I use the work of Charlotte Linde, an anthropologist and linguist who uses a Labovian, sociolinguistic approach and Audre Lorde, a poet, feminist and civil rights activist, to define the concept of a “life story”. My understanding of a key concept in this research, “trauma”, stems
from the research of Dina Georgis, a scholar of postcolonial and sexuality studies. Postcolonial literary studies and literary history occupies a large sum of the research that foregrounds my project. Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology by Shakir Mustafa is an essential postcolonial and historical book I relied on to orient myself in the history of Iraqi literary production.

Another way this research is interdisciplinary in approach is through the centering of the artistic work in the theoretical discussion. In other words, the life stories themselves, through the questions they provoke and through their emerging literary elements, inform the theoretical approach. “Story” itself, the Iraqi life story in specific, is as Clandinin describes “both the methodology and the phenomenon being studied”. I adopt Macarena Gómez-Barris’s emphasis of the “politics of citation” in the way artists and their poetics inform her research in work. In a panel held by Verso books, entitled “Climate Change, Decolonization, and Ways of Seeing”, Gómez-Barris describes that pushing the politics of citation to a greater extent involves citing “informants as theory-makers, citing artists as theory-makers […] you’re moving art not as the secondary order, but central to the process of theory-making”. I hold her sentiments close to the heart of this thesis.

The interdisciplinarity of this work is a significant part of it, and one that is necessary in order to realize the richness and complexity of what a life story entails, especially as it is viewed as a document of history, of collective knowledge, and a discursive tool against a colonial and imperial discourse facilitated through the systematic erasure of cultural and informational wealth in a war-torn society. Another way that this research is at its core crossing the border of categories is in the combining and juxtaposition of fiction and non-fiction as source materials. I will describe my choice to combine the two in a later chapter.

13 Gómez-Barris, Macarena. The extractive zone: Social ecologies and decolonial perspectives. Page 8
1.8 The interest in Iraqi life stories

Amongst the first academic projects that names oral histories as such, comes from the field of research in women and gender studies. The work of Nadje Al-Ali in “Iraqi women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the present” and with Nicola Christine Pratt in “What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the occupation of Iraq” are texts that turn to personal histories to inform a larger historical narrative of women’s and feminist organizing and the conditions of women’s lives in Iraq. The work of Zahra Ali, one of the most grounded academics writing about Iraq today, also relies on oral history interviews with Iraqi women to inform her understanding of feminist political and social organizing in Iraq. Iraqi artists too have reached out to our life-storytelling grandmothers to borrow this form of knowledge production. In 2013 Tara Jaffer organized a series of open workshops titled “Stories My Mother Told Me” in London in which she used storytelling as methodology to build community in diaspora. Research in psychology has also used the idea of the life story, such as in the 2007 paper in the International Journal of Social Psychiatry where Marwa Shoeb uses 60 Iraqi life stories to produce an Iraqi-specific mental health assessment.

At conferences and film screenings and in congregations of Iraqis scholars, especially those occurring outside of Iraq, it is uncanny that there seems to be a body of research emerging with an interest in the storied lives of Iraqis. In this project I hope to engage directly with this interest and scholarship. In this thesis, I hope to tell one story about the oral storytelling I grew up with as a process of collaborative autobiography of a place called Iraq.

Notes on translation, transliteration and transcription

Although most of the texts selected for this project are available in English, either as published translations or original texts, some excerpts required my translation. The oral history interviews obtained from the INP archive are predominantly multi-linguistic interviews where narrators pepper the mainly English discussion with Arabic words, phrases and place names. I transcribed and translated the INP audio recordings of the interviews. In each instance I used the footnotes to clarify some translation choices where I found necessary.

I thought about translation choices very carefully. My aim was to reproduce a critical artistic substance of the original text. The logic behind the choices stem from an expansion of a previous research project in which I explored translation of the Iraqi novel Tashari by Inaam Kachachi using Walter Benjamin’s paper “The Task of the Translator”, probing the idea that “translation must be one with the original”\(^\text{20}\). A key notion that informs the translation or transliteration choices I made in that essay and in this project is the distinction between the semantic and acoustic dimensions of language. A consequence of selecting life stories as research materials is that in both the literary and in the oral history interviews there is a large presence of colloquial vocabulary. Translating dialect requires explaining and taking into consideration the social connotation and sometimes the value in the phonetic expression to maintain both a creative essence of the original text and a meaningful English mirror.

For the scope of this thesis project, I use the most simplified presentation method by using only footnotes to comment on any notable or exceptional translation and transcription choices. Transliterated words within an excerpt or in the discussions are italicized.

For example:

- رعادي راح وما رجع. دورنا عليه بكل مكان وماكو جارة.

بحثت سهيلة عنه في مراكز الشرطة والمستشفيات و مشرحة الطب العلني بّلا "جارة". ما معناها يا عمة؟ يعني بلا جدوى.

-Raudi was gone and never returned. We looked for him everywhere, and mako chara\(^{21}\).

Suhaila looked for him in police stations and hospitals and morgues without a “chara”. What does it mean, aunty? It means to no avail\(^{22}\).

As the example above shows, I utilize a mixed approach that incorporates both semantic and acoustic considerations, giving equal weight to the importance of literal meaning and the poetic elements of a text. In the example above, the word “chara” is the subject of the discussion between two characters in the story: the immigrant aunty, Wardiya, who lived her whole life in Iraq and speaks Baghdadi-Arabic fluently, and her French-born nephew Iskander, who is trying to uncover the meanings of more obscure, perhaps older generation Iraqi words he has not learned in his mixed, French-Iraqi upbringing. The two words that are transliterated are “mako” and “chara”, which together are translated as “to no avail” at the end of the quote. I chose to keep the first line without a direct translation because the sense of confusion generated by using the colloquial is part of the original text. The reader is meant to go on a journey with Iskander as he learns these new meanings. It is left up to the reader to work towards understanding that “mako” is a negation that can be translated as “without” and “no”, both which appear in the second line to demonstrate slightly more complexity to the ways in which “mako” can be translated.

By transliterating dialect, I intentionally place value on the sound and music of pronunciation. Mustapha Ettobi describes this approach as that of “non-assimilation\(^{23}\),” whereby the phonetic experience of a word is preserved, and the meaning is essentially obscured. Ettobi’s critique of this “mystifying” method is based on the colonial history in which literary translations from Arabic to English are embedded. He says: “the only aspect that may be interesting, given the translation’s semantic opacity to readers who do not know Arabic, is the phonetic representation of the rhyme. Non-assimilation [...] has the effect of mystifying the source culture.\(^{24}\) I agree with Ettobi on the significance of uncovering and working against colonial tendencies, however I prefer the methodology

\(^{21}\) mako is a negation, and chara means solution. In this context it implies that there was no end to their search for the missing son.

\(^{22}\) Kachachi, Inaam. Tashari. Page 169. (my translation)


of writers like Junot Diaz. Junot Diaz’s mixed-language novels are clearly best and fully received by bilingual and bicultural people whose lives are products of neoliberal age of brown economic migration and war-forced migrations. Effectively, Diaz is privileging a certain category of readers, and I cannot ignore the normative political tone underlying this choice. Language is a powerful tool capable of hiding and presenting different meanings to different readers within one single line. The voice in this novel is a resistant voice to the totalizing hegemony that inserts colonized people in front of the colonizer to be seen and heard in their own words. This is a deliberate choice to comment about the ways in which languages of new homes become part of the landscape of home dialects.

Similarly, for this thesis project, I write about and for people in the Iraqi diaspora. A novel dealing with the subject matter of Iraqi migration and exile will be intentionally translated for an audience of exilic, first and second-generation Iraqis. For many Iraqis born in exile or immigrated at a young age, English was acquired as their first language. Their diasporic realities and experiences come as a result of colonialism, war, and displacement. If the translation of the literary work is meant to work against colonialism and to open up space within it to consider the exchanges between self and homeland through language, then an intentional transliteration would provide that powerful opening between the world of English-speaking diasporic Iraqis and the world of their ancestral origins.

Moreover, the vastness of linguistic varieties of Arabic in Iraq is something which is palpable in a book like, Tashari; it is even perhaps overwhelming and anxiety-producing. This anxiety is a reflection of Wardiya’s political experience as a person living through the changed landscape in the modern Iraqi state. Especially after the sanctions ended and the invasion began in 2003, which is the time period this novel is most emotionally invested in, Iraqis were forced to experience life outside of their familiar cities, neighborhoods and relatively limited social surroundings, because of migration. Kachachi uses dialect as a device to arouse the affective and the sense of abrupt disruption in what is familiar. And the key to this device is the illumination of the musical abundance, which is ubiquitous and forces the reader to confront the experience of migration. Similarly, as in the example shown above, when it comes to life stories and use of colloquial words and expression, the negotiations between individuals or communities that have different linguistic or phonetic expressions is part of the narrative. Even the “aloneness” of modern exilic realities can be experienced recreated through
dialect, such as in the communication between Wardiya and Iskander. Words provide meaning not just through their literal and literary dictionary definitions but through the memories and emotions they carry. They conjure up the personal weight of the cultural heritage and the collective nostalgia attached to it. For all these reasons I chose to transliterate many colloquial words in the excerpts I provide.
Figure 2: Oral history art installation concept titled "swalef bibi"
2 Hegemonic narratives: what we are up against

Before I discuss life stories as liberatory narratives, in this chapter I lay out a brief of what I am naming “hegemonic narratives”. Before we can understand how the life story works against imperial and colonial discourses on Iraq, we must first understand those discourses: who produce(d/s) them? at what historical moments? to what political end?

2.1 Rupture, rift and ripple

The three metropolises of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra existed long before the concept of a modern national state, Iraq, had its borders outlined by imperial force. I am careful here not to dehistoricize the identity of “Iraq” as a merely colonial imposition, whilst attempting to acknowledge the violent shifts that colonialism did inflict on the land and its people. While the idea of Iraq as geographical and political entity is one far older than British visions, the drawing up of political borders is nevertheless an act of violence, both on the physical land and on the historical narrative that grounds collective experience.

The violence that colonial borders create appears in the way these lines entrench the otherness of neighbours, naturalizing a modern story of disconnection that erases the past. Mosul is a northern city which has a long history of close ties to Turkey and Syria. Basra is the main port city, being the only connection of the mainland through the disputed Persian/Arab gulf to India and the East Asian continent. Baghdad, midway between the two, had been the capital of Islamic empires and one of the earliest cosmopolitan junctures in the region. Although the peaks of economic and cultural significance of all these cities is in the distant past, the textures of life in them remained flowing from all these particular histories: it resonates in the various cultural and social norms, dialectics, and cultures of resistance, political affiliations, etc. They are diversely unique in their complexities. Some of these old connections between communities is evident in folklore music, mixed family heritages and stories of origin and descent.

The hegemonic narratives produced by colonial and imperial conquest and modern nation state building erased these peculiarities and the local stories and impressions into a homogenizing narrative of not only a single nation state separate
politically and culturally from the “other”, but also often drawing up adversarial relationships hinged on battles for economic resources like freshwater and crude oil (such as with Turkey and Iran). Colonialism was a moment of rupture in the fabric of stories. This new “history” overrides people’s memories, lived experiences, and inherited narratives. Pierre Nora in his essay “Between Memory and History” places memory and history at odds: the former eclipsed by the modern obsession with constructing the latter. Nora says that we have lost the “real environments of memory” and the “historical continuity” of “real […] social and unviolated” memory in pursuit of “sifted and sorted historical trace”. In Nora’s view, the self-consciousness in studying the past is a violation of memory by virtue of the way it fixes and extracts narratives. The stories and temporalities of memory that are connected to “undifferentiated time” become, in history, things of “trace, of mediation, of distance.”

2.2 Discourse and its reproduction

I do not suggest Iraqis are telling stories in the ruins of colonialism, but rather adjacent to the conditions it has and continues to create. For the purpose of this thesis, my conception of “liberation” is entirely a political one: a liberatory narrative is one that serves the people whose daily lives, bodies, futures, and past are woven into the place called Iraq. A hegemonic discourse is one that subjugates the people, while a liberatory narrative is one places their interests above this subjugation.

I use the definition of Foucault’s “discourse” by Zachary Lockman in his examination of Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. He says: “A discourse[…] is not a misrepresentation, a false or distorted perception of reality, because no truth, no “accurate” representation of what really exists was possible in the Enlightenment sense of objective knowledge of reality,” and that Foucault “insisted that [discourses] emergence and dissemination were always bound up with, indeed produced by,

28 Ibid.
29 Lockman, Zachary. Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism. Page 185
power. To add to my initial engagement with Walter Benjamin’s intertwining of the body and the story, the concept of “a discourse” allows me to place the production of reality and its representation as simultaneous events mediated by power dynamics.

Orientalism, in particular, an example of a discourse par excellence is perhaps the larger discourse within which the hegemonic narratives about Iraq fall into. Lockman explains that “for Said, Orientalism was very much a discourse in the sense Foucault used that term: a specific form of knowledge, with its own object of study (“the Orient”) [...] produced by [...] the power which Western states and authoritative individuals exercised (or sought to exercise) over the Orient and what makes this discourse “hegemonic” for Said is the construction of a hierarchy of dominion in which there is “European superiority over Oriental backwardness.”

In the post-invasion landscape, the ubiquitous discourse on Iraq has been that of the U.S military and its warmongers. When the occupying U.S. military landed on sovereign Iraqi soil in 2003, journalists rushed into the country to document the devastating moment that was about to occur. There was an intention by the U.S. administration to sell the war to the public who were funding it: "Our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment." Hundreds of journalists embedded with the U.S. army to produce a war-justifying story.

Sixteen years later, a search of the word "Iraq" still summons colossal registers of stories, photographs, and films of occupation military, their traumas and journeys of departure and return. From Dan P. McAdams’ investigation of the psychological themes in the life-narrative of George W. Bush to Jacqueline H. Hinckley’s discussion of the effects of time on the publication of U.S. soldiers’ life narratives in books and blogs.

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30 Lockman, Zachary. Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism. Page 187
31 Lockman, Zachary. Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism. Page 187, 188
32 Said's, Edward. Orientalism. Page 7
33 Kahn, Jeffery. “Postmortem: Iraq war media coverage dazzled but it also obscured.” https://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/03/18_iraqmedia.shtml
35 Hinckley, Jacqueline H. Narrative-based practice in speech-language pathology: Stories of a clinical life. Page 81, 82
U.S veterans are depicted as victims and Iraqis are disproportionately left out of the narrative of their own homeland. Ikram Masmoudi states that:

the world’s relationship to Iraq has been dominated by the West’s own military, political and academic discourses on Iraq; there remains a significant gap in this knowledge that can be filled by the testimony of Iraqi writers, told in their own voices, and, to date, only in their own language, offering their own perspectives on the events that have shaped their history and changed their lives.

Lockman points to the critique of Orientalism by the Marxist literary scholar Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad problematizes Said’s concept by pointing out that it does not address how an orientalist discourse was (or is) “received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries: not as an undifferentiated mass but as situated social agents impelled by our own conflicts, contradictions, distinct social and political locations of class, gender, religious affiliations.” In a way, this absence seems like a reproduction of the same power structures out of which orientalism is produced.

I would like to also briefly shed light on the national narratives in Iraq, both pre- and post-2003, and their work to dominate, erase and co-opt collective memory and the collective autobiography of the time and place called Iraq.

2.3 State sponsored silence and national narrative projects

In 1956, my grandmother was 12 and in her last year of elementary school. On a cold winter day, she snuck out of her classroom and stood in the school demonstration quad, under the flag, cupped her bottom lip with thumb and index finger and blew out a whistle that brought out a huge mass of riled-up schoolmates. She wasn’t scared of getting in trouble. She was idealistic and made untouchable by the sheer size of the student congregation. They marched out of the gates and in the streets, holding banners made by the better-organized high school students. Some kids wore cuttings of Black Cat Cigarette logos pinned on their chests to show allegiance to the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party. Although fighting together against British colonialism and the Iraqi

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36 Masmoudi, Ikram. *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*. Page 1
37 Lockman, Zachary. *Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism*. Page 199
monarchy, the Communist kids who would later become their sworn enemies, wore handmade doves of peace pins on their chests instead.

My grandmother told me this story on the first days of spring in 2016 in Vancouver, over tea and pastries. I had just started to collect oral histories for the Iraqi Narratives Project, and I asked her if I could record the rest of our conversation. She agreed. When I pulled out the H4N Zoom recorder, a giant, bulky thing with protruding stereo mics, my grandmother looked suspiciously at it for a while. She asked me why and “for who” we were documenting conversations. Her stories dwindled into short comments as she looked at the recorder. Within ten minutes, I understood that if I wanted to hear more about her childhood, I had better put the recorder away. My friends and colleagues of the Iraqi Narratives Project and I would get this reaction from many other Iraqis. We are often suspiciously asked “who” the INP is associated with and why we are documenting life stories. To my grandmother and many others, the act of recording conjures up the disturbing past living in the shadows of a dictatorship’s surveillance, interrogation, and censorship.

History and story do not begin and end via the Western intervention in Iraq. In his essay titled “Bending History”, Sinan Antoon describes the Ba’athist (or Saddamist) project to construct a war-narrative and to situate Saddam as the hero of the nation via these wars. Antoon merges both the construction of massive public monuments during the Iran-Iraq war era, eight years which were oppressive in the most literal meaning of the word, with the collapse of “cultural production to a single end”\(^{38}\), namely: the upholding of Baathist rhetoric. Ikram Masmoudi points to the same historical moment, the Iran-Iraq war, as the moment when “intellectuals and fiction writers were collectively co-opted and silenced and were condemned either to glorify the regime and its senseless wars or to say nothing in print or in public”\(^{39}\). Sinan describes this exiling and killing campaign as the “cleansing the cultural establishment [...]” where “dissent was no longer cast as merely anti-Baathist, but [...] downright treasonous”\(^{40}\). This campaign was enshrined into the Iraqi Penal Law and the other laws that pertain to publishing and publication.

\(^{38}\) Antoon, Sinan. "Bending history." Page 29

\(^{39}\) Masmoudi, Ikram. War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction. Page 2

\(^{40}\) Antoon, Sinan. "Bending history." Page 30
However, this silencing had infiltrated the intimacy of Iraqi lives well before the war of the 1980s. Joseph Sassoon lays out the history of the Stasi and Iraqi intelligence training, stating that, “soon after the Ba'ath coup d'état of 1968, the new regime requested aid from the GDR on intelligence matters.” While much of this training and exchange according to Sassoon was concerned with high profile politicians, treason and espionage and larger geopolitical events, Iraqi intelligence was anything but absent from the lives of regular people. Sassoon describes that bugging devices were embedded in people’s homes, that students who were members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) were under a watchful eye, that Saddam became more and more “obsessed” with persecuting members of the ICP. Slowly but surely the *jihaz al-amn al-khas* or the Special Security Organization (SSO), entered into the lives of Iraqis, past walls and homes, entrenching everyone in a in a deep sense of distrust and suspiciousness. Of course, the relationship between censorship and memory or narrative is not not to be taken for granted.

I remember, as a child who grew up in the sanctions of the 1990s, that I was taught to recite cartoon songs and TV commercials only “in my heart”. My grandmother and mother would tell me to only sing the songs I heard on television “inside” myself. I was warned that if the neighbours heard my singing, they might report on us for having a satellite dish. The satellite dishes that broadcasted the foreign cartoons I watched were illegal in Iraq. I carried a heavy burden as a four and five and six-year-old knowing that my dad would be taken away and imprisoned if I sang a song by mistake, if it came out from inside of me. Even as a child, the fear of surveillance infiltrated into the most quotidian detail of my life. Repression and silencing of the dictatorship era manifested in ways that altered the stories and narratives people could share or speak about. Violence awaited those who told the wrong story.

Dunya Mikhael, an Iraqi poet say: “Censorship in America is implicit, and it precedes speech, as opposed to in Iraq, where censorship is explicit and it follows speech.” Explicit censorship does not erase, it simply creates communicative, meaningful silence. I will expand on this in a future chapter.

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42 Ibid.
43 Qualey, Marcia Lynx. “Censorship in Iraq: Q&A with Award-Winning Poet Dunya Mikhail” https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=7098
2.4 Co-opted memory post-2003

So where do we and our stories now stand? As if this magnitude of an orientalist lens mediated through colonial and imperial dominion, a dictatorship that appropriated the historical narrative for its own self-aggrandizement, and a silencing institution that crept into every detail of people’s lives - the political landscape in postinvasion Iraq has not been all that different. I have already described the hegemonic warmongering story of the U.S. military and its allies, but Sinan Antoon also reminds us that “if Saddam was obsessed with inscribing his name [...] onto Iraq's history and intent on eclipsing, if not erasing, the legacy of his immediate predecessors, those who replaced him share at least some of his obsessions”.

Joseph Sassoon, whose work I previously quoted, had used as source material the “Ba’th Regional Command Collection”, a stolen collection of documents that was illegally extracted by the Iraq Memory Foundation from Iraq and now housed at the Hoover Institute in Stanford. The work of Rebecca Abby Whiting has been to trace and question the ways that these stolen documents are used. In a talk at Columbia University titled “Iraqi Archives in Exile” Whiting problematizes the ways that these documents have been constructed into an archive outside of their original context as administrative daily logs. In other words, a narrative and a story that attempts to have coherence and a particular political end, has been constructed and inserted into these documents. The Iraq Memory Foundation has been notorious over the years of placing itself as an authority on cultural and collective memory, and specifically Iraq’s memory of violence. Their website states that:

Citizens of a new and free Iraq have whole new identities to forge. And identity is memory. People whose identities are cobbled together from half-truths, or from distorted memories of who is to blame and who is blameless, are prone to commit new transgressions. 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.

44 Antoon, Sinan. "Bending history." Page 30
45 Whiting, Rebecca Abby. Iraqi Archives in Exile, [link]
46 Iraq Memory Foundation [link]
Words that describe Iraq as now “new and free” and Iraqis themselves as having a re“new”ed identity is a direct product of the invasion’s discourse of newly-found freedom. The narrative produced by the Iraqi Memory Foundation is not a liberatory one, as it is one that cuts collective memory off so that it begins and ends “between 1968 and 2003”, annihilating the continuity of trauma and devastation that Iraqis experience and speak of. The politics produced by such a narrative only serves the justification of the war waged in 2003. As an Iraqi I am left wondering how this project is able to sanitize memory in such a way, to co-opt voices and produce only a narrative of oppression that compartmentalizes our many nightmares which have merged into one. Antoon’s critique is that these projects “exclude Iraqi citizens from the debate”, and I would extend that to say that the IMF appropriates Iraqi voices for ends that do not liberate us from subjugation. Worse than exclusion, is the artificial inclusion in which “people’s voices” are edited, spliced, and reproduced under the guise of freedom and liberation.

2.5 Stories on the street

My final reflection on the hegemonic narratives in Iraq will be in the form of a series of photos I took in Baghdad in February and March, 2018. During my visit to Baghdad, I was struck by omnipresence of the war story in all public spaces. Photos of young men marked with the word “shaheed”, martyr, were plastered on the street signage, walls, inside tunnels, raised on steel-framed posters in the middle of major intersections and roundabouts. This large meta narrative of heroic wars suffocates the story of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have lost their loved one and whose families have been deeply affected by these losses. I will not reproduce these images here out of her respect for the people whose faces appear, and whose death is appropriated by a state narrative that renders their loss justifiable.

The first image in the series is one I took on an early morning walk along Abu Nawas street. It is of a large, framed poster that reads, “kol el sha’ab jaysh”. It can only be accurately translated in its context, amongst all the other posters of martyrs who died for The Nation. The sign literally says: “All of the People are an army” but what it implies is that: all of the People are [soldiers] in the state’s army.

47 Antoon, Sinan. "Bending history." Page 31
Ali Riyadh, an Iraqi writer, reflected on his encounter with this poster in a short article published in 2006. He begins the story with his heartbreak about saying goodbye to a friend, a poet, who is leaving Iraq. They decide to have their final meeting in Abu Nawas street, which is named after the Abbasid poet and runs along the banks of the Tigris river. He says:

“After the final goodbye, I will carry myself as he who returns from war carrying the heaviness of himself […], we are the People/army, our streets are trenches, our happy thoughts that orbit above our heads every now and then are nothing but green, steel helmets. […] Goodbye my friend, maybe we will meet soon, from today begins the journey in search for demobilisation from the military service.”

48 Riyadh, Ali. “kol el sha’ab jaysh”, Jeel Shabab A’rabi. September 2016. https://www.alaraby.co.uk/jeel/opinion/2016/10/31/%D9%83%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-1

49 The above translation is my own. The original Arabic text reads:

وبعد اللقاء الأخير، سأحمل نفسي كما يحمل العاند من الحرب بقليل نفسه [...] نحن الشعب / الجيش، شوارعاً خانقاً، وأفكارنا السعيدة التي تطوف فوق رؤوسنا بين حين وآخر، ليست سوى خوذة حديدية خضراء [...] الوداع يا صديقي، ربما سنتلفي قريبًا، من اليوم ستدأ رحلة البحث عن تسريح من الخدمة العسكرية.
It is difficult not to see how these hegemonic narratives are oppressive in their everyday reproductions; how they suffocate Iraqis most intimate stories.

The next two images were taken moments apart in a moving taxi on a bright, beautiful morning in Baghdad. I had seen Nasb al Hurriya, “The Freedom Monument” many times already, but always from afar. On this day, I was with a group of women who were preparing to hold a protest against the corruption of the Iraqi government and the subjugation of Iraqi women by the state. We asked the taxi to drive as close as possible to the square so that we could see (and assess) what groups were already there, and what banners they were carrying.

Nasb al Hurriya is a stunning work of art, created between 1958 and 1961 by the Iraqi artist and sculptor Jawad Selim. It is a narrative, contained within one verse of poetry, of the 14th of July Revolution (1958), which saw the abolishment of the monarchy and the creation of the Iraqi Republic.

On the left flank of the two travertine walls carrying the stunning monument, I saw a simple red graffiti that read: “al Thawra al Iraqiya”, The Iraqi Revolution. You could easily miss the phrase. Under the blazing sun, amongst the commotion of a protest-Friday, the small red script looked so unlike the gigantic national monument with its naturalized, and loved presence. The difference in the scale of the two narratives struck me. The simple script revolution at eye-level, a small story placed anonymously into the rock of a large, symbolic structure asks us to find the many small stories of liberation and protest placed into the mundane and the everyday. I think this is what my (our) grandmother/s have been doing for centuries: placing small stories into the cracks of the everyday to save us.
Figure 4: Nasb al Hurriya, Liberation Square, (Baghdad, 2018)

Figure 5: “The Iraqi Revolution” on the left travertine wall carrying Nasb al Hurriya
“tongues laced in
stories move
in and out of everything
nothing
is inanimate

tongues tied in
sacred words
transcend ceremony
into every
day”

katherena vermette, river woman

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50 vermette, katherena. river woman. page 15
3 Power lies in storying the everyday

From what locus of power can life stories be our liberation? How does storying the everyday create power? subvert power? empower us? What is the relationship between power and life narratives? This chapter attempts to answer these questions.

On March 1st 2019 a panel was held at Columbia University to reflect on the historic Black Nations/Queer Nations? Conference, which was held at The City University of New York (CUNY) in 1995. Chandan Reddy spoke about a “politics of difference” as being “the work that liberates” communities. This politics of difference and of queerness asserts that “we don’t own the vision.” The vision is malleable and belongs to the collective because it is meant to produce the liberation of the collective rather than the freedom of the individual. Cathy J. Cohen spoke about the “co-production of our work and our liberation”. What both Cohen and Reddy called for is to utilize our creative forces to imagine liberation for the collective. Cohen stated: “we believe we have inherited the dominant, but we have a large imagination.” The imagination and its creative production are a force that can be used to rewrite and subvert dominant narratives, and therefore can shift the locus of power. It is as if the imagination is a toolbox that contains the tools to empower communities.

Storytelling is one tool in our toolbox. It is a tool that allows us to place what we already know and understand about the world in conjunction with new meanings and ideas. For historically and continually subjugated communities and nations, storytelling the everyday, especially in the form of retelling life stories, allows us to give new features to the world we live in. It is in this capacity of storytelling to shift and mend meaning in the world that it finds its relationship to power. The matriarchs and women of Iraqi communities have known this for a long time. They have passed it on as a resilient weapon in the face of erasure. Storytelling was their methodology to survive a world that otherwise wanted to subjugate and erase their power.

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51 [https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/events-1/queer-disruptions-iii](https://www.socialdifference.columbia.edu/events-1/queer-disruptions-iii)

52 All the quoted speech by Chandan Reddy and Cathy J. Cohen in this paragraph comes from my notes and transcriptions while attending the event. There is no recording of the event to cite.
3.1 Inheriting storytelling

My grandmothers and I have lived very divergent lives. While my grandmothers have remained for seventy years deeply rooted in their community, I was born in the beginning of the downfall of Iraq in 1991 and into a life of constant movement, diasporic and third-culture identity, immigration and lack of grounding in a geographic place, language or culture. Both women have always insisted that their grandchildren, especially the girls, inherit the art of storytelling. Our first lessons in the artform consisted of many years of listening where young girls sit within the space where stories are shared. We do this for the many years of our childhood before we are invited to participate and share in the storytelling. Figure 6 is a digital collage made from a single still image taken from a home video filmed in 1999. In the video my grandmother’s voice is inaudible but it seems from her gestures that she is asking me to do something. In this collage I imagine that my grandmother is asking me to come sit beside her and “story.” My grandmothers often verb the noun “to story.”

Figure 6: “Come sit beside bibi, come story for me”
3.2 What are “life stories”? 

Although I never get to interview my grandmothers for this project, I attempt to trace their storytelling ways in the various literatures, oral history projects, and other cultural productions which make up the discussion material of the next chapters. By doing this I try to find my grandmother’s voice and presence and methodology through the storytelling that makes it to the surface of popular cultural production in Iraq. In this project I do not limit my research to oral storytelling alone. I include written stories, performances, maps, gestures and silence as storytelling methods and appropriate places to search for ways of communicating life-stories that are similar to my grandmother’s oral stories. Charlotte Linde says that “indeed, the notion of a "life story" itself is not universal but is the product of a particular culture.”

Because I am using multiple forms of storytelling, I will lean on narrative scholarship to establish a guideline of what I define a “life story” to be for this project. Charlotte Linde defines life stories as “social unit[s] […] exchanged between people”, “oral unit[s]” as opposed to written texts, and “discontinuous unit[s] […] and long-term unit[s]”, which take a life-time of retelling that is “subject to revision[s] [of] old and new meanings”. For my purposes and perspective of seeing the storytelling Iraqi lives as a collective phenomenon, oral and written forms of documentation will both be considered. As Linde herself perhaps agrees that “indeed, the notion of a "life story" itself is not universal, but is the product of a particular culture.” What I will retain from Linde’s characterization of a life-story is that it is revised, retold and reformulated over the course of a lifetime of processes and interactions and events. It cannot be taken for granted that a person simply “has” a life story, rather it is a narrative form that has become dominant in Iraqi literary work as the cultural destruction of a whole country has scaled down public knowledge to the confines of individual memory registers.

I will explain why I chose the term “life-story” over biography, autobiography or personal narrative. All these terms in the most general sense describe a re-telling of a series of an individual’s connected life events. I don’t use biography and autobiography because they are tinged with a sense of documentary “realness” – and while the

53 Linde, Charlotte. Life stories: The creation of coherence. Page 4
54 Ibid.
questions of “realness” is outside the scope of this thesis, in this project I often celebrate imagination, memory, hallucinations, dreams and nightmares, and even silence as productive methods of processing and retelling life-stories. For this reason, I find these two terms at a significant distant from what I am describing here as a “life narrative”.

The problem with using the term “personal narrative” is that it is also restricting for the work here because often it is the sharing and exchange between community members that creates a story. I find there is something illusive in the idea of what is “personal” and spoken from a single perspective. I look at life stories in all their forms as amorphous beings created by and for a collective repertoire of the larger Iraqi community. This is not to say that there isn’t a personal element in these narratives. On the contrary, life stories are often projects of personal research, especially in the diaspora, where one often feels destabilized at the loss of community and homeland. This can even go further to produce a sense of isolation and inward storytelling, namely: nightmare storytelling. I will talk about nightmares in a future section. However, I would not place the element of “personal” as a highlighted focus, more so than the communal, historical, documentation and archival importance of these life narratives. Therefore, I will rarely use the term “personal narrative” to describe the stories I present here.

Finally, Audre Lorde’s “biomythography” embodies the curious lingering in the borderland between what at first glance can be taken for granted as oppositional terms - “fiction” and “non-fiction.” In Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name, Lorde not only makes a cosmos out of the magic of women’s historymaking, she also shows how writing one’s personal story is about inserting new meanings (even perhaps fiction) into the storylines. I keep the spirit of Lorde’s biomythography close to me as I write about the life story here. I still prefer the term “life story” and the openness it allows to move forward with the questions of how the life element documents the reality of Iraq, without necessarily establishing the qualms between fact and fiction at the forefront of what characterizes narratives recalled from memory.

The main elements I am looking for to identify a “life narrative” or “life story” for this project are:

• Although the life story follows the trajectory of one individual’s life it must still exist in connection to the community. The intermingling of lives must come through the narration. The life narrative must contain significant connections to the collective imaginary and personal characterizations in them.

• Memory, whether appropriated or one’s own, and future foreshadowing, are all resources from which a storyteller may be inspired to tell a life narrative. There is no importance given to a traditional categorization of “fiction” or “non-fiction” in this project.

• I understand being “Iraqi” as, mediated through birth, citizenship, dwelling, ancestry, or cultural investment in Iraq, but this does not mean that the narrative itself must be constantly concerned with these topics or with Iraq as a place.

3.3 The Iraqi Narratives Project (INP)

The Iraqi Narratives Project began as an action group initiated by five members of the Iraqi Transnational Collective (ITC) in 2015. The ITC was a network of diasporic Iraqis who were invested in developing various artistic and political projects to bring forth Iraqi voices, truths and realities to a wide public audience. The first meeting of the oral history project happened in February 2015. Since then we have collected over 60 hours of audio and video interviews with 15 individuals in Long Beach, Los Angeles, Baghdad, New York, Toronto, and other cities. The name has changed from “The Iraqi Oral History Project” to “The Iraqi Narratives Project.”

Doing this work has become an integral part of my life and my academic interests. The interviews collected and the theoretical discussions with my colleagues have enriched this thesis project in many ways. In the remainder of this chapter I will share three life histories that I collected as interviews for the INP. I will show how storytelling is a powerful tool for liberation from hegemonic and colonial narratives.
3.4 Saida

Saida and I did not know each other when she invited me for dinner in her apartment in the East Side of Manhattan, but this is how Iraqis are, always welcoming and generous. It was the final week of my short stay in New York as a visiting student at Columbia University’s Centre for Oral History Research (CCOHR) in March 2019. My friend Sam arranged an INP interview for me with his great aunt, Saida. I met him at the intersection two blocks away and we walked together on the cold March night. Saida welcomed us to her apartment that was filled with striking artwork. We talked over the delicious dinner that she cooked for us and recorded for two hours afterwards. Saida beat Sam and I at a few rounds of Hand and she sang in Arabic before hugging us both and saying goodnight. We left enwrapped by the glisten of her singing voice, her courage to share so much with us and her love.

Saida passed away in October of that year. I received news about Saida’s passing while I was at a militia checkpoint driving from Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan back to the capital Baghdad. It was a five-hour trip driving on pothole-and-wheel rut-filled, unkempt highways, lined with unregulated militia checkpoints, through towns destroyed by ISIS where one can see miles of homes leveled to the ground, and passing nearby mountain ranges where ISIS members were still hiding out. I thought about Saida’s Iraq and my own; how this place conjures up nightmares, how it sits on the threshold of hell. I realized how lucky Sam and I were to have witnessed Saida’s life story as she retold it, and her singing voice. In the next few pages I discuss the stories that she shared with us on the night we did the interview.

3.5 Engaging affect

Saida began her interview like this: “Hi, hello. I am Saida. I was born in Iraq. Baghdad. Left Baghdad in 1958... [pause]... I was very, very, very, very sad leaving the country and I was sad that my government did not protect me as an Iraqi.” Saida spoke of Iraq as both a distant dream, “a simpler life” where she had a beautiful childhood on the Tigris river, and also a nightmare where she and her family experienced violence, persecution and exodus. “When I want to relax and go to sleep [here], all I think about is sleeping on the roof and seeing the moon and the stars and talking with them and then I fall asleep. It was quiet and peaceful,” she tells me when I ask her about her earliest
memories as a child. Visualizing her childhood in Baghdad puts her in a dreamlike state that helps her to fall asleep, however, she follows up by saying that “sadly, it did not last very long”. There is always a darker shadow lurking in the corner when Saida talks about the dream of Iraq.

Iraqi life stories are often conjunct with pain from political grief of wars, sanctions and dictatorship, social and cultural destruction, communal loss in diaspora and migration, comprehensive disenfranchisement and intergenerational inheritance of colonial trauma. Story as a process can become the method of entanglement of these pained experiences with some form of resolution or re-imagination of meaning poured into the gaps of knowledge. In this way stories are born out of necessity as “a demand to engage with the affect of experience”\(^{56}\). As Dina Georgis eloquently describes, stories facilitate for us to “enter the wound”\(^{57}\) and become ethically implicated in it. Georgis description of trauma as “a crisis of knowledge”\(^{58}\) can also help us to infer the capacity and power of retelling life narratives to refigure lost information into these wounds. Thus, while hegemonic stories erase the knowledge of our most difficult experiences, storytelling becomes our means of survival by allowing us to place our deepest worries, losses and pains into the ethical space of intersubjective narration.

Placing the wound in an intersubjective space provides it with a medium for movement between different subjectivities. My nightmares and Saida’s poured into each other on her dining table and we suddenly found ourselves entwined into each other’s past and future through story. Saida and I found solace in each other’s presence; although we were born about seventy years apart and although the particular circumstances of our forced departures were different, her and I shared a similar troubled relationship to Iraq. “We did it before you”, she told me after I had answered some of her questions about how I felt being Iraqi and having left as a child. I had let the interview become more of a conversation because Saida told me that I was one of the first non-Jewish Iraqis she had spoken to since leaving Baghdad almost fifty years ago. The anti-Semitism and the violence that was inflicted on Iraqi Jews during the 1940’s and 1950’s has truly ruptured the fabric of what used to be a tightknit heterogenous Iraqi

\(^{56}\) Georgis, Dina. *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East*. Page 6

\(^{57}\) Georgis, Dina. *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East*. Page 12

\(^{58}\) Georgis, Dina. *The better story: Queer affects from the Middle East*. Page 10
community and cut off the Iraq Jewish community from the rest of Iraq even in diaspora. I knew this interview was just as important to her as it was to me. We shared our stories like my grandmother had taught me to do. The sharing of stories produced a rhythm modulating coherence, continuum, ruptures and diversity of meaning that allowed us both to feel our dreams and nightmares in renewed ways.

3.6 A brief history of nightmares

“I was pursuing an endless journey between sleep and wakefulness”

In the wake of these nightmarish times, a genre of surrealist fiction storytelling has come to maturity in the Iraqi literary scene since 2003. In Banipal’s Autumn Issue in 2003, the year of the American invasion and occupation, six authors wrote opinion testimonies in a section entitled “Life and Culture in Baghdad”. Taha Hamid Shabeeb begins his testimony by stating that “the regime [...] was a nightmare and to live under such a regime was unbearable. [...] I only managed to live with it in the way two antagonists manage to live. It was the time of losses.” As Iraqi novelists have tried to grapple with this time of losses, nightmares became a recurring theme in the over 600 novels written since the 2003 American war began. The magnitude of violence and suffering in post invasion Iraq, accumulated on top of over 30 years of military coups, political unrest, multiple wars, detrimental sanctions and dictatorship, cultivated a niche of surrealist, long and short form, narrative, literary writing whereby authors are making sense of political grief through imagining characters in endless distorted nightmares. Shabeeb’s placement of the nightmare as a characteristic of Iraqi storytelling means that the nightmare is not merely the background setting, but a character in and of itself, rivaling our life stories for oxygen. Perhaps it is the potential within narrative to intertwine human experiences so deliberately into nightmares and dreams that makes storytelling an important medium for our community today.

Masmoudi comments on the titles of recently published Iraqi fiction noting the dominant presence of morbid and grotesque references “– for example, Amwāt Baghdad (The dead of Baghdad), Mashra’at Baghdad (The morgue of Baghdad), Frānkinshtāyn fī Baghdad (Frankenstein in Baghdad), Majānīn Būkā (The madmen of Camp Bucca), [...]”

59 Al-Azzawi, Fadhil. Cell Block Five. Page 62
Qatala (Killers)\textsuperscript{60}. He writes: “from these titles, Iraq and especially Baghdad appear to be a death world where thanatopolitics, war and killing are omnipresent\textsuperscript{61}.” Masmoudi then goes on to connect the ending of dreams to the beginning of nightmares by discussing Sinan Antoon’s \textit{The Corpse Washer} (2012), in which the American war and its resultant civil war have “[cut] short the dreams of life\textsuperscript{62}” for Antoon’s character. The breaking of dreams to pave way for nightmares showed up in literature written before 2003. At the Union of Iraqi Writers, I found an anthology containing short stories from the 1980s. There was one story that struck my attention: The Dream of Red Anemones by Warid Badr Al-Salim (1983). In this tale we see the unnamed protagonist a few moments before, during and after death. The writing is filled with imagery that blurs the distinction between life and death. The descriptions of the world around him when he is alive are sobering but at the moment of his death his universe becomes a beautiful dream.

“He saw tin cans, crisscrossed timbers, and carefully arranged sandbags. He became more aware that something would choke in his throat and that a mine would explode inside him.

Things seemed to have become enshrouded in mist and surrounded by mirage, except for a moment [that] managed to cheat death.

At that moment he remembered the roar of the explosion and the mountain of the dust while he was ascending to heaven.

He felt that he was then outside the limits of the universe and its huge gravity, he suffered under its heavy load. A cool evening covered him and a wide lake of red anemones stretched under him. Millions of butterflies flew over his head, up and down, like an umbrella of coloured flowers\textsuperscript{63}.”

The translator of the story, Mohammed Darweesh, comments that Al-Salim had gone outside the “the constraints of ‘normal’ language” to use “idiosyncratic […] imagery\textsuperscript{64}.” This idiosyncratic style contains a hint of the absurd and totally surrealist literature that

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\textsuperscript{60} Masmoudi, Ikram. \textit{War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction}. Page 2
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Masmoudi, Ikram. \textit{War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction}. Page 17
\textsuperscript{63} Darweesh, Mohammed. \textit{How To Translate Literature}. Page 32
\textsuperscript{64} Darweesh, Mohammed. \textit{How To Translate Literature}. Page 72
appears after three decades with new generations of Iraqi writers anchoring their work in much more hellish and nightmarish forms. The breaking of life and dream is a magical power contained within storytelling. This story from 1983 renders death as a beautiful dream, while nightmare is a strange visitor that shows up lurking in the corner. In the 2000’s, the nightmare becomes a permanent resident in Iraqi narratives. They often unfold without any more dreams; rather with the surreal, magnificent horrors of nightmares of war and post-war destruction. However, the nightmare does something new to the story; it isolates it into the psyche. It becomes a method of storytelling that removes story from the shared collective imaginary and restricts its horrors within the self.

3.7 Horrors of the Self

“I wondered what nightmares were pursuing this nocturnal waker. I didn’t know. All I really knew were my nightmares, because they never talked about theirs. They were right, or so I assumed, since a person must always have some secrets of his own. Dreams were shared with everyone, but they kept their nightmares to themselves.”

Storying the events of her forced migration, horror showed up as measurements of distance along a spectrum of departures. Saida went back and forth talking about New York and Baghdad, her arrivals and departures to these and other places along her life journey. Her attachment to the land is something she roots in her family’s past. Her father had gone to Palestine in the late 1920’s during the Great Depression looking for new work opportunities, and he found it to be a desolate land. When he returned to Iraq, he decided that he would never leave his homeland. After the creation of Israel in 1948 he refused to go back to the place that he had already visited and disliked. Saida too, stubbornly refused to leave Iraq even as the political environment was getting more and more dangerous for Jews.

Saida’s husband was educated in America and that meant that he could return and find work in the United States. As events were getting increasingly violent towards Jews in Iraq, Saida’s husband tried to convince her to leave and go to America but she

65 Al-Azzawi, Fadhil. *Cell Block Five*. Page 104
refused. She recalls a day in 1958 during the revolution, just after the revolutionaries had killed King Faisal and effectively toppled the monarchy, finally her husband came down the stairs and said “Saida, I am leaving”. She understood then that he was going to leave, whether she went with him or not, and so it meant that she was going to have to leave; “it was the saddest day of my life.” The horrors of the world become personal horrors in moments like the one Saida remembers. She speaks of how difficult it is for a person to leave their country. “You don’t know who you are” she says. “We had a passport for three months and then we lost our nationality, you lose your nationality you are no body.”

Often these traumatic moments inflict a wound on the most vulnerable of our possessions: identity and the sense of self. This is because everything you had aligned yourself with is suddenly gone or about to be taken away from you. With over six million Iraqis in diaspora today, one can imagine how many stories contain traumas like the one Saida shared. Forced migration and exodus are nightmares that create traces in the psyche that a person will spend their whole life reliving. My grandmother’s storytelling methodology where stories are removed from quarantine and placed into a shared space are able to mend some of those wounds. When Saida and I shared our pains, she reassured me by saying, “we did it before you.”

3.8 Time travel

“I was born in Karrada,” Saida told me. “It was very beautiful, on the Tigris”. Saida and I tried to align each of our geographic maps with the other person’s memories. Sitting across from each other, we began building together an imaginary map across time in the empty space between her body and mine. The Baghdad landscape that she remembered from the 1930’s, 1940’s and 1950’s was so drastically different from the Baghdad I had known. “We lived in a Muslim neighbourhood, and we were Jewish”, she said “We had no problem. Sadly, it did not last that long”.

I pulled out my phone and showed her some photos of Karada that I took in 2018. She looked at the photos like I was showing her a completely strange place. She told me how in the 1930’s Karrada was a remote neighbourhood where their dad had moved them away from a busy and densely populated Al Rasheed Street. The horse and carriage ride between the two neighbourhoods was long. They had to cross the
Tigris river by rowboat to get to school. I told her how Karadda has now expanded into three distinct neighbourhoods and all of them are very highly populated, full of cafes and bustling burger joints and that the streets are wide awake well after midnight every night of the week. Saida described Al Rasheed Street as a lively place where most Jewish Baghdadis lived. I told her how it is now a long street with abandoned and expropriated two-story apartment buildings covered in dust and a glimpse into Baghdad in its greater days; a relic of the past.

Saida and I exchanged time. She gave me the past and I gave her the present. Our stories converged and diverged and weaved into each other creating a storytelling time machine. Through the work of storytelling we subverted linear time and linear temporality as a hegemonic structure. Elias Khoury writes in Gate of the Sun: “He doesn’t remember how his story began, because he doesn’t know. He saw himself in the middle of the story and didn’t ask how it began”66. Benjamin’s storyteller too “was at home in distant places as well as distant times.”67 Storytelling presents the storyteller with the ability to bend time, and this is the energetic source of storytelling. When Saida began speaking about accepting her life in America, she said: “if I want to show them [Americans] what an Iraqi is, not the stereotype that they think.. […] I told them what a country of long history, Mesopotamia, all civilizations started there”. Saida connected herself to a distant past of the land. This tool is described by Walter Benjamin as the storyteller’s ability to call on “the lore of the past”68.

Figure 2: Abandoned home in Al Rasheed Street

66 Khoury, Elias, and Ilyās Khūrī. Gate of the Sun. Page 3
3.9 Mustafa T.

I interviewed Mustafa T. in a cold classroom in Vancouver in September 2016, hundreds of miles and memories away from our hometown, Baghdad. Mustafa, like Saida, also time traveled in his narrative. When I asked him to tell me about his life, Mustafa began by speaking about his mother’s feelings before he was born. “We were happy then,” he said about his family’s life before the early 1990’s. Mustafa spoke about a “we” in a time where he did not yet exist in flesh. Not only was his own life’s story a continuation of someone else’s, namely: his mother’s and his family’s, but he again subverts linear time by existing in the “we” before the early 1990’s.

“that period of time was a very rough period of time for Iraqis [...] there was the sanctions and umm, people were having a really hard time making money, and barely finding food [...] When my mom tells me the stories of [...] how they had to walk to the river to get water on some days, they had no power. [...] I was alive then, but obviously I can’t remember it. [...] or the way they had to cook or the kind of food they would get, but I don’t remember any of that and I don’t think I ever felt it because I was protected by my family”

Life narrative storytelling and oral history might be an analytical exercise, but it provides a malleability in restructuring time that makes storytelling powerful for changing how we remember and therefore how we live now and in the future. Throughout the three hours of interviewing, Mustafa goes back into the past often identifying particular memories as crucial and meaningful to his life at present. The process of Mustafa creating this tangled timeline narrative was not just about filling a string of moments with events, but about making sense of the past and present in order to think about the future.

He talked about “happiness” extensively. It is the most common theme throughout his story. He marks a day in his life as the single pivotal moment after which happiness ceases to exist: the day in which his father and older brother were killed in a car bombing at the neighbourhood entry checkpoint. Much like Saida, the way that Mustafa measures time and distance were not linear time or geographic space, but rather a measurement of a connection to a redemptive and hopeful “happiness” of the past. Mustafa recounts their, his and his family’s, lives during the sanctions as being difficult on his father who had to work two jobs but insists that they were nevertheless happy in those days. Mustafa was born in 1993, yet he tells me a story about his father’s hardship saying “I think it was 1990, 1991, I am not sure, it was terrible for him. He had
to walk all the way from Basra to Baghdad on foot.” Mustafa’s dad was serving the compulsory military service. “He got home, and his feet were very swollen,” explaining that he has abandoned by his group and that he could not hitch hike because the war was ongoing.

In August 1990, Saddam invaded Kuwait, annexed and occupied the country leading to thousands of Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaiti residents of the country fleeing their homes. As a response the disastrous Gulf War ensued, and sanctions were imposed that destroyed Iraq for decades to come. One of the most notorious incidents of this war occurred in a place known as the “Highway of Death” where hundreds of retreating soldiers and other military personnel were killed by coalition forces (American, British, French and Canadian) by aerial bombardment. Many of the retreating soldiers and other military personnel escaped by running on foot away from the highway and leaving their tanks, cars and trucks behind. The carnage stretched for miles ahead in that haunted highway between Kuwait and Basra.

Mustafa’s father was the hero and the protector from certain stories; Mustafa’s happiness was contingent upon his father using storytelling to create a reality of that happiness. Talking about the Basra incident, he said: “it’s a terrible experience he went through and we never really got to feel it, he protected us from it.” Mustafa’s father and his older brother passed away when he was just starting his first year of middle school. He spends an hour or so recounting the events of that horrific day: his father wanted one of the boys to lend him a hand at work, it was supposed to be Mustafa, but his older brother went instead. The two did not return at the usual hour and the family began to worry. They tried calling their cellphones, calling the assistant at the office, calling their grandmother to see if anyone had seen them or knew where they went. One of the neighbours knew about the nearby car bombing and went with Mustafa’s mother to the bomb site to try to identify the car but they could not find it. Mustafa watched his mother crying at the curb after trying to call every contact she knew, including a cousin who was an interpreter for the Americans hoping that they might have some information. “then she came back, holding black keys from the ashes, [..], from the fire, and she put it in my hand, I can’t remember if she put it in my or my brother’s hand, I think she put it in my hand, and she said, they are dead. [long pause]”. The narrative of happiness ends with this incident; “my life was very sad because of that, for a very long time, and I was angry.”
Their garden became the place of condolences and sharing the news. “I stopped crying eventually and I went out on the street again, because there were people out, sitting out on the garden, […] that’s a thing in Iraq. [...]” Mustafa’s neighbours, cousins, family and everyone from the general area came to their garden. In Iraq, this tightknit social fabric carries people through their most difficult times. On that day Mustafa remembers sleeping and crying on the lap of an uncle and telling a neighbour about his father’s death, but it was not many years later in 2013 that he was able to share the story with a group of people. “I was in a youth camp in the North of Iraq, [...] and we had a circle, everybody was sharing whatever they wanted to share, and I went in the circle and I shared my story, […] but I shared it as an example of hope and I was saying if any of you have gone through this, because you know a lot of Iraqis have gone through this and unfortunately, because of the bombings and so many bad things are happening there, if anybody has gone through this, there is hope at the end.” Although the happiness of his childhood does not return in the same shape, the redemptive hopefulness does return through the process of retelling his story to a group of other community members. Mustafa anchors his story into a bigger narrative of the whole struggling country and marks the moment he shares his story in an oral storytelling circle as a redemptive one. This kind of storytelling practice has been something that our ancestors have always used and known.

3.10 “The web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled”

One of the sharp edges of our storytelling tool is its capacity to engage in the “co-production” that Cathy J. Cohen talked about during the Queer Disruptions III conference. Iraqi women’s storytelling and retelling of life stories is a social practice. This kind of storytelling occurs in communal gatherings and occupies a space of intersubjective negotiations. The life story as an analytic provides a possibility for movement between the sovereign subjectivity (the individual) and as Nick Crossley described “on a participation in a common intersubjective space69”. This fluid space of communication between subjects/subjectivities then becomes the space where “ethical meanings [that are] strictly irreducible to either participant [lies]70”. Corinne Squire describes narrative research as that which “let[s] us combine the ‘modern’ interests in

describing, interpreting and improving individual human experience [...] with the ‘postmodern’ concerns about representation and agency that drove [...] the ‘turn to language,’ and [...] subjectivity.

Story occupies that space as a form of intersubjective negotiations.

I return again to Charlotte Linde’s life story as a “social unit [...] exchanged between people.” I interpret “social” to mean multiple things in the context of my grandmother’s storytelling practice. First: social as in communal and told in communal spaces. And second: social as in holding the information sacred and necessary for the community. The connection between the characterization of a life-story as a “social unit” and Linde’s descriptions of the life story as revised, retold and reformulated over the course of a lifetime of processes and interactions and events can be understood in what Benjamin describes as “the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled.” Benjamin notes that true stories depend as much on the storyteller as they do on the “gift for listening.” Storytelling, he tells us, “is always the art of repeating stories.”

This intersubjective social practice is created intentionally in Iraqi women’s storytelling space. My first awareness of this intentionality came as a girl witnessing the reoccurring rituals and objects that triggered a storytelling practice to take place. Lipstick-stained cigarettes burning out in crystal ashtrays, the sound of spindly teaspoons crackling against the rims of delicate glass teacups, sunflower seeds splitting between teeth and the low hum and light of the television screening of an old Egyptian black-and-white film. These were staples of women’s daily gatherings in my grandmother’s living room. My grandmother always invited the girls to join and we were encouraged to speak and participate and hold and disseminate tales. Storytelling was communal and included all the generations of women in the house.

The following images: Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10 are my visual interpretations of the idea of the “social unit” and the intentional creation of a storytelling and story-listening space. I use old family photos of women’s gatherings and digitally edit them to play with

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71 Squire, Corinne. "Reading narratives." Page 92
72 Linde, Charlotte. Life stories: The creation of coherence. Page 4
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
the idea of the movement between individual (storyteller and listener) and storytelling space (Benjamin’s web).

The first interpretation of a “social unit” has to do with communal spaces; in the next four image these spaces include gardens, living rooms, and open fields at an orchard. I use contrast and colour to differentiate the women from the space. In Figure 7 this is done by colorizing the women’s dresses. In Figure 7 the four women have created a smaller gathering within a larger family gathering. Although they are still present as part of the larger group, they brought some chairs to close off a storytelling semi-circle. The practice of storytelling the everyday is the protected heart of the community. In Figure 8 contrast is created by applying a two-tone colour gradient that separates the textures of the sky, trees and grass visually from the smooth skin and clothes of the women. There is an outward movement of the shadows and the trees makes the gathering a focal point of the image. Figure 7 and 8 illustrate how the practice of storytelling the everyday depends upon a spatial configuration that triggers a state of telling and listening to take place.

In Figure 9 I overlay an image of coffee grounds over the row of seated women. I chose coffee grounds because they are traditionally used in women’s gathering to tell stories and fortunes. A staple of any women’s gathering includes turned-over cups of Turkish coffee left to drain. The shapes, smudges and empty spaces are interpreted by one of the women who is thought to have a special ability, skill or knowledge in this form of storytelling. Benjamin describes the state of listening and storytelling almost like a transcendental state. He says that a deep relaxation is necessary for stories to become part of the listener. Stories are not meant to only be engaged at a cognitive level. True storytelling occurs when the “storyteller forgoes psychological shading”\(^7\). In Figure 9 the coffee grounds symbolize the bringing about of the state of relaxation intentionally created for storytelling.

\(^7\) Benjamin, Walter. "The storyteller." Page 93
Figure 7: Gathering in the garden of the family house in Harithiya neighbourhood in Baghdad, 1976.

Figure 8: Gathering in the family orchard in Samarra, 1986.
Figure 9: Collage of coffee grounds and gathering in the garden of the family house in Hay Aljam’a neighbourhood in Baghdad, 1996.

Figure 10: Imagined gathering in my grandmother’s living room in Vancouver, 2016.
The final image in the series, Figure 10, is a depiction of the unraveling of Benjamin’s web. There are no more listeners and storytellers, not because the art of storytelling has been abandoned, but because war and displacement have physically and geographically separated the community. In Figure 10, I draw imagined women into a photo of my grandmother’s empty living room in Vancouver. The contrast is created by the imagined elements and the real elements within the image itself, as well as between the stark emptiness of life in Figure 10 in comparison to all the previous photos in the series. Displacement has taken away a necessary component of the practice of Iraqi women’s storytelling: shared space.

3.11 Swalef bibi: a concept for a participatory oral history art installation

In 2018 I attended the Oral History Annual Meeting at Concordia University. There were various workshops and events to attend. The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling was showcasing an oral history-based participatory installation titled “Being Heard Might Prove Fatal” supervised by Luis C. Sotelo, Canada Research Chair in Oral History Performance. Participants were invited to enter into a room and sit together at a table. The listening apparatus is initiated with a discussion of people's favourite fruit in childhood, which quickly became a discussion of home, belonging, memory, nostalgia, loss. After a few minutes, the participants are guided to the next room. The second room is dark and there is a large structure made up of walls in the middle. The participants must sit or stand within the walls. There are no chairs. An audio story is played, and the participants must listen in silence for the duration of the event. All sensory stimulation other than “listening” is minimized by the darkness and emptiness of the room. This amplifies the effect and gravity of the audio story. The sound was powerful in the absence of the visual or tactile. The audio story is a reinacted version of multiple interviews with Columbian refugees retelling violent life events that had occurred to them when they lived in Columbia.

To extend the four images I have created above (Figure 7 to 10) in their explorations of communal storytelling space and the small details and items that signal storytelling as a state of being, I created a concept and visual map of a proposed participatory art installation entitled “swalef bibi” or My Grandmother's Tales inspired by Sotelo’s vision and execution of “listening”.
There is one room where 5-7 participants at a time are invited to enter. The room is well lit. A recreation of a traditional looking living room will be staged. This includes various sized couches. A coffee table in the middle will have crystal ashtrays, cigarettes, coffee cups, tea cups, sweets, candy and sunflower seeds. Figure 11. shows a visual map of the room layout and design, including fabric patterns and colours.

Sounds actors will recreate a conversation between four women about the events of their day. The women’s conversation will be set in 1984 during the Iran-Iraq war. It is the one-year commemoration of one woman’s husband’s death while fighting at the frontlines. She is the youngest of the women and is asking for help on what to prepare for the customary gathering, which is taking place in two days. The women avoid explicitly talking about the reason why the man was killed because it would be considered national disloyalty to object to the death of a soldier during one of Saddam’s wars. The women begin to list different kinds of food to cook for the event in honour of the fallen soldier. They discuss the slaughter of a sacrificial lamb.

The recorded conversation lasts five minutes and then the room is in silence for one minute. One of the members of the participant group is part of the art installation. She is meant to instigate conversation amongst the participants after they hear the audio recording. She initiates a conversation by asking the participants if they had tried one of the dishes mentioned by the women. The group will have a conversation for ten minutes, recreating their own version of a storytelling space after having just witnessed and sat in on one.
Figure 11: Visual concept of participatory installation
3.12 “Words soaked in silence”

Mustafa and I share a similar memory about being told to withhold information as children during Saddam’s era out of fear of disclosing our family’s position against the government. “During Saddam’s time my parents were very open with us about what was happening, they told us, I mean even though we were little kids, families are always afraid of their kids, you know, kids are honest they say everything, they don’t really realize what they’re saying, if it’s wrong or not, so umm our parents told us about Saddam and they said he’s a bad guy in front of us and they explained [...] you should never say that in school or never mention that because he’s a dictator and we can’t say that”, he told me. “We actually never had any problems with that, we always kept the secret, I think that is quite amazing, being so young and being able to hold that.”

There are ten-year gaps between each of the photos in Figure 7. to 10. starting with the year 1976, 1986, 1996 and 2016. The absence of the year 2006 is intentional, illuminating the year when the war was at its peak of violence. This absence is meant to symbolize the silence of that period, which I mentioned the briefly in the introduction and first chapter. Silence is an important part of Iraqi women’s storytelling practice. Storytelling is a way for the community to pass important information necessary for the care they provided to one another. In my childhood in Iraq, before the war, often times there was a woman whose husband or son or brother disappeared into one of Saddam’s prisons or returned in a coffin with no explanation. These stories were disseminated without words and not by the woman herself, who risked more danger of “reports” if she protested, but her sisters and her neighbours and family. Many of these gatherings would begin with the question “Did you hear what happened to so and so?” Men would describe these gatherings and conversations as mere “qishba”, gossip, essentially bad and malicious. It always seemed to me contradictory to the empathy and problem-solving found in these conversations. Women would retell the events and then proceed to make plans to visit her, to cook for her, brainstorm a list of people they knew who had some capacity to help, etc. The power to disseminate and create stories in a shared space meant that silences were accounted for, and that the women were able to care for one another.

When I came to oral history in 2015 with the Iraqi Narratives project (INP), I was already well primed in paying attention to life narrative, and to silence and rituals as
meaningful parts of the narrative. Early on in the creation of the INP when our questions so often failed to produce words, we realized that to do this work in the Iraqi community, we had to listen as intently to silence as we do to words; that silence ought to be archived as intently as words. We had to return to the methodology of listening and storytelling which we learned from our grandmothers: the kind of storytelling that holds instructions for community survival rather than exposes vulnerabilities. There are many important questions that come out of this work that have been the project of the INP to try to respond to: 1. What do we do with the silence produced when we asked for words? 2. How can we archive the memory of this silence in an oral history interview? 3. What methodology of listening can open a window into the deeply rooted silence to become a meaningful part of the narrative?

In 2018 I worked on a short video project entitled *alerhab wal ward*, “Terrorism and Flowers: A story told between exile flowers about a generation that grew up in the era of terrorism.” It is an unscripted short video that follows a group of friends, myself and two others, walking in a street lined with flowers. The camera’s eye is on one of the friends who is riding a bike at a slow pace, while the other one appears very minimally. The bike rider is telling a story about the antics of their mischievous schoolmate who once got the whole school into an emergency evacuation by creating a fake bomb out of plastic bottles and a wristwatch. The two friends who went to the same school laugh about the way that their generation dealt with growing up in the era of terrorism, war and occupation. The second friend then stands in front of a patio decked out in flowers while the bike rider takes a photo of him, “your mother will be very happy” he says sarcastically to him.

The short video is meant to juxtapose their masculinity, the delicate flowers, the innocence of their childhood pranks in which they had to deal with a gruesome and dark reality. The humour and sarcasm in the video makes it clear that these young men are now in exile, they are far away from the horrors present in their reflections. The leisurely pace of movement and the touristic photography in front of the flowers adds to the clarity that there is no serious danger anymore. The bike rider continues to tell the story of what happened to their schoolmate. He says that the schoolmate grew up to be a serious student in high school, he had ambitions to do something important with his life.

77 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEtY7W2D7pg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEtY7W2D7pg)
Unfortunately, one day during his high school senior year, the Iraqi Army took him and imprisoned him for two years. I ask him from behind the camera, “why?”, and the bike rider says: “I will tell you, this can’t be shown on camera.” In the editing of this video, I chose to keep the video intact while muting the audio. The scene of the bike rider slowly pedaling continues uninterrupted, except for the awkward muted audio that goes on for about fifteen seconds. I wanted to emphasize that the story exists, it just has to be silenced for the safety of this schoolmate. This kind of editing is meant to recreate that estranged feeling of storytelling silencing.

![Bike rider](image)

**Figure 12: Still image from the video “alherhab wal ward”**

The work of Alia Mosallam, an Egyptian scholar who worked on creating an archival project through oral history workshops for the builders of the Aswan Dam in Egypt, has been particularly useful to the question of “listening” intently. Mosallam writes that the Aswan Dam history workshops “sought to provide a forum in which the participants could learn to excavate events that have been buried in silence [...] whether by absence or censorship or violence and so one could interrogate the politics that had rendered them invisible.”

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78 Mosallam, Alia. "History Workshops in Egypt: an Experiment in History Telling." Page 242
“practising the art of speaking and writing with ‘words soaked in silence.’ Mosallam proposes a methodology of listening that suggests that silence not only contains information but is also a marker of what is actually important information. It requires a skilled ear to hear silence, and to understand it. This sort of methodology acknowledges the depth of non-linear traditions of knowledge production, such as storytelling. Listening, even to silence, is contained within the artform of storytelling as my grandmother passed down to us.

In the introduction to this project I described the culture of censorship imposed on Iraq during Saddam dictatorship; Libya and the Dominican Republic too lived under similar conditions under the reigns of Gaddafi and Trujillo, respectively. I found that same familiar, eerie silence in novels by two authors who write from/to/about those locales: Hisham Matar’s In The Country of Men (2006) which is a story set in Tripoli, Libya and Junot Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007) which is set in both the Dominican Republic and New Jersey. “I don’t remember a time when words were not dangerous,” Matar writes in an interview;

“I was a young schoolboy in Tripoli, […] there were things I knew my brother and I shouldn’t say unless we were alone with our parents. […] It was as though a listening, bad-intentioned ghost was now present at every gathering. It brought with it a new silence – wary and suspicious – that was to remain in our lives for many years. Even when I was writing my first novel in a shed in Bedfordshire, beside the River Great Ouse, I could feel the disapproving hot breath of the dictator at my neck. It did not matter that I was writing in English and yet to have a publisher; I was nonetheless writing into and against that silence. But back when I was still a boy, when I only lived in one language, that silence, like black smoke from a new fire, was still growing.81•

In Matar’s novel, In The Country of Men, silence is “Silence” with a capital S. It is a character that intervenes between the young boy Suleiman and his mother, taking up the mother’s words and turning them into an obscurity and a puzzle that the young boy learns to put together. In Junot Díaz’s poignant and heartbreaking story about Oscar Wao, silence is an atmosphere. “It was widely believed that at any one time between

89 Ibid.
81 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/25/hisham-matar-i-dont-remember-a-time-when-words-were-not-dangerous
forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police's payroll. Your own fucking neighbors could acabar con you just because you had something they coveted or because you cut in front of them at the colmado. Both authors struggle with the silence just as much as their characters do. When Diaz writes the downfall of Oscar's grandfather, Abelard Cabral, he brings about a curse and turns the man into a ghost who blends into the dark abyss that is Trujillo's prisons. He writes: "On all matters related to Abelard's imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction." 83

3.13 R. K.

R. K. sent me an email saying that she had gotten emotional reading the story, "The Birthday." She said that reading her own story written through someone else's words made it register in a different way for her. She told me that I could go ahead and publish it. I had written "The Birthday" based on the INP oral history interview I did with R. K. in May of 2016. The story was published in August 2018 in Issue 3. "SOURCE" Khebar Keslan Magazine (Figure 13.). There was nothing fictional that I had added to R. K. retelling of her own story. I did not change the conversations that she had with her mother, nor did I change the details of the birthday. The event of her birthday, on January 17th, 1991, during the American aerial bombardment of Baghdad at the start of the Gulf War took up only about ten minutes of the hour long interview. However, when R. K. was describing the event, I could visualize the colour of the sky, the texture of her mother's hair, the glare of the car's window. I was inspired to write down R. K.'s words into a prose-poem. So, even though I did not add any new information to the story that she had told me, the collaboration occurred at the level of spirit. And, although my grandmother's storytelling practice was explicitly an oral one, it was always one that drew its vigour from shared spirit, and inspired writing can capture that spirit of storytelling. Throughout this discussion I have used many examples from literary works and applied a similar analysis to them. In the next few sections I will discuss how I understand the relationship between oral history and the written word and why I am able to place fiction, nonfiction, written and oral storytelling within one pool of research.

82 Diaz, Junot. The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao. Page 224, 225
83 Diaz, Junot. The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao. Page 243
material. The full published text of R. K.’s rewritten story, “The Birthday” can be found in the Appendix.

3.14 “From mouth to mouth”, interrupted: words that mediate storytelling

“Among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers”

While oral histories are in their first iteration articulated vocally, works of fiction in Iraq are written with the intention to be read out loud. Mohammed Darweesh, a professor of Linguistics and Translation in Baghdad says about Iraqi fiction writing that “it goes without saying that the mode of discourse may be considered as being written to be read and to be spoken. Public readings and discussions are a prominent feature of current Iraqi literary life. By grounding the life story form in this particular context of public reading literature, I will spend this section explaining my reasoning for combining fiction, non-fiction, written and spoken narratives in one body of research materials.

First, the life story in an oral history interview is an edited text: story events are repeated many times, even within a single interview, especially if they are important. Important stories are also repeated many times over a person’s lifetime (in different interviews or settings) and each time they are edited and refreshed and renewed, sometimes intentionally. Narrators in oral history interviews check for facts and coherence as they are speaking, making new additions, deletions, corrections as the interview goes on. This editing is done both with and without interjection by the interviewer.

The reliance of memory is an editorial process of combing through stored information to arrive at a present iteration of a story or event. Editing is also incorporated systematically in the process of a collaborative oral history interview. The Iraqi Narratives Project interview, for example, process include a collaborative editing period

84 Benjamin, Walter. "The storyteller." Page 89
85 Darweesh, Mohammed. How To Translate Literature. Page 13
after the initial audio is recorded. In this period the interviewers transcribe the audio materials and send back the transcript to the narrators. The interviewees are then given the chance to look over the transcript and add or comment or correct the information narrated in the interview. The narrator can also choose to retrieve certain sections of the interview that they no longer want to share and these sections are sliced out of the audio and discarded.

While the editing process in a literary or fiction work is extensive and invisible to the majority of readers of the work, the editing of a narrated life story, whether it be an oral narrative or a written one, contains a lifetime's worth of editing and rethinking and rewriting. I see two differences between the editing of a life story and a literary work: 1). this process of editing is perhaps more visible in a life story, especially an oral history interview in which a transcript is created out of the interview contents, and comments are added and incorporated in a visibly documented way, and 2). that the editing of a life story is more overtly a collaborative effort, where one person’s memory is in constant exchange with the memories of family members, friends, the interviewee and even strangers who witnessed the event being discussed. Through this effort, the life story is arranged and rearranged, told and retold to arrive at its most current form. Life stories, like works of fiction, are trying to convey a meaning. Story is a process, not an item. Linde says that “a life story does not consist simply of a collection of facts or incidents. It also requires sequence, since from sequence causality can be inferred; and notions like causality, accident, and reasons are crucial in shaping the meaning of a life story.”

Second, storytelling in a personal narrative is an iterative process with attention on semantics: alteration of meanings, metaphors, metonyms. The creation, curation, and dissemination of a person’s life story is a creative process. The archive of the INP is filled with figurative speech and poetic language; life story storytelling is a practice that combines both research and unmediated creative production. The life story is a literary mode which already creates this fusion so that personal research and a personal creative expression are already at work in harmony. Literary language and aesthetics are not taken for granted from the people who are interviewed for the INP archive. They

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speak with intent for beauty, rhythm and capturing the important information held within the story in a beautiful vessel.

Third, oral history stories are also in conversation with one another, not just in the sense of the editing but as cultural productions. Life narratives are filled with intertextuality and references to other new and old cultural texts as anchors for situating these lives in various kinds of time and place. Mossallam speaks of this intertextuality as “forms of intimate language such as idioms, sayings and poetry that emanate from a communal experience at a particular point in time.” During the interview with Saida, I asked her if she wanted to speak in Arabic. For a few minutes she spoke in a mixed-tongue, combing English and Arabic to tell me that Jewish-Iraqi Arabic dialect would be difficult for me to understand. I assured her that my Maslawi-Iraqi Arabic was a very close relative. After one particular long pause, Saida began to sing in Arabic: “aman, al asfooriya, al asfooriya, [humming in replacement of words], ma han alaya, alaya.” Sam, who doesn’t speak Arabic, asked her: “does that mean birds? asfooriya?” Sam recognized the word “asfoor”, which does mean bird in Arabic. I also did not know what “asfooriya” meant but I thought that it might refer to a place where birds nested. Saida surprised us both by saying: “actually, [she laughs] asfooriya is a place for mental illness.” We laugh and I ask her why there is a song about this place. “I don’t know” she tells me. In Mustafa T.’s interview, I mentioned previously the way he plays with time, where he begins telling his own life story by describing a time before he was born, by inserting his mother notes into the body of his own story. His narrative exists in conversation with his mother’s and other people’s narratives. The interaction is sometimes one of extension and continuity, while at other times it is one of contrast. People are authors. Life story narratives are creative works of art with intertextuality and references to other stories and songs and lives.

Moreover, while people are creative authors of their own life stories, authors of fiction write through and out of the lives of real people. Fiction literature is born from amalgamations of real-life stories and real events that inspire the mind of the author and emerge in new forms, mixed with a literary aesthetic and the magic of imagination. In comparison, memory plays a pivotal role in the oral history and life story narratives

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87 Mossallam, Alia. “‘We are the ones who made this dam ‘High’!” A builders’ history of the Aswan High Dam.” Page 298
whether in interview or even in “non-fiction” memoirs. Memory itself is the imaginative apparatus in non-fiction works. What we are left with is a body of works that lingers in the borderland of what is imagined, remembered, chosen, absented, and eventually what meanings are negotiated by what a life story storyteller might chose to keep and discard in both cases. In other words: a life story storyteller’s memory draws upon the imagination to construct life stories and a literary writer’s imagination draws upon life stories to construct literary narratives. Fiction and nonfiction are closer to each other than the strict opposition of their names and categories might suggest. The line that attempts to distinguish between works of fiction and works of non-fiction becomes more obscured, especially in the case of Iraq, where written fiction works are written with the intent to be read in public, and where, for example in the INP interview process where transcripts versions of oral history interviews play an important part in the editing process.

3.15 The Ordinary

Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” places oral storytelling and the modern novel at odds. He tells us that we have reached a crossroads: to hold on to storytelling in its truest forms or to turn to information and the printed medium. He tells us that we have unwisely chosen the latter. For Benjamin the novel “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it.”88 Novels are also represented in the essay as void of the timeless nature of the counsel and wisdom that must be present in storytelling. “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual”89, Benjamin writes, as opposed to the stories born out of an oral storytelling practice, which are communal in creation and in usefulness. In the introduction to his edited anthology, Contemporary Iraqi Fiction, Shakir Mustafa pushes this idea of the meaning of historical documentation by not only saying that Iraqi fiction is roused by the political reality of the country but furthermore that it “has been particularly well suited to keeping pace with troubling realities.”90 I ask the reader to recognize this particular “well-suitedness” of the Iraqi novel to hold information for the community as described by Mustafa while reading the next few sections. If the Iraqi novelist is the

89 Ibid.
90 Mustafa, Shakir, ed. Contemporary Iraqi fiction: an anthology. Page xiii
historyteller of the community as Iraq experiences multitude volumes of violence, then
the storyteller of the everyday lives of Iraqis is her predecessor.

In her study of the postcolonial Iraqi novel Shayma Hamedawi says that it
“stand[s] as the literary record of the modern political history of Iraq”\textsuperscript{91}. Similarly, in his
book in which he uses Agamben’s \textit{homo sacer} to read the lives of men at the frontline
and in the battlefield in Iraqi Fiction, Ikram Masmoudi says “there is a consensus among
critics and writers that from its beginnings Iraqi fiction, whether the novel or short story,
has been closely connected to the history of Iraq and its violent political developments
over the years\textsuperscript{92}, referencing author and critic Salam Ibrahim’s work on the Iraqi novel.
Most scholars who look at Iraqi literature discuss the ways in which Iraqi literary works
are documentations of the catastrophes the country has experienced. In this regard,
scholars ask interesting questions on the themes and voices that represent the
sociopolitical in these stories. Masmoudi asks: “from what perspectives do Iraqi authors
choose to record the [country’s] historical content?\textsuperscript{93} I return once again to Hayder Al-
Mohammad’s attention to the locale of the ordinary and the ethics of kindness, so
divergent from the common narrative of a corrupt and even nefarious Iraqi society. The
mundane and the gestures of the everyday, which is the bread and butter of the modern
Iraqi novel as it deals with the history of violence, is the shared concern of both the
storyteller and the historyteller. Perhaps this why Hussain Alsgaaf notes that even the
most deeply rooted poetry tradition in Iraq has been unable to match the "overwhelming
spate of Iraqi novels."\textsuperscript{94}

Shakir Mustafa dedicates his edited anthology entitled \textit{Contemporary Iraqi Fiction}
to “Iraqi Writers at home and abroad”, and as most scholars of Iraqi literature categorize
or subcategorize the Iraqi novel into an exile novel and a novel written from within, it
becomes clear to see how much the case of migration, immigration, the exodus, the
diaspora, and diasporic experiences have been formative in the blossoming of the

\textsuperscript{92} Masmoudi, Ikram. \textit{War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction}. Page 8
\textsuperscript{93} Masmoudi, Ikram. \textit{War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction}. Page 1
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature} 61, Spring (2018). Page 6

After the toppling of the monarchy in the 14th of July Revolution in 1958, Iraq’s political authority was seized by the struggle for power mainly between the Iraqi Communist Party and the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party. When Abdelkareem Qasim was assassinated in 1963, and the Ba’ath Party took hold of the country, a bloodbath ensued in which communists were punished for their political affiliations. The years that followed, and well into the tail end of the 80’s, large numbers of Iraqis who were involved with the ICP made up this wave of migration leaving Iraq for destinations like London and Sweden and sometimes to America. Many of them were writers and poets and academics who expressed these journeys of exile in their literature and music and in family storytelling and gatherings.

The mass departure of communists from Iraq was preceded by the exodus of Iraqi Jews. The exodus occurred slowly since the occupation of Palestine in 1948 (Al-Nakba, the catastrophe) and very explicitly after the war of 1967 (Al-Naksa, the setback). While it falls just outside the historical timeframe of this thesis, I chose to include one story of a journey of exile of Jewish Iraqi family to New York in 1967 told by their grandson through a cartographic renarrating of an oral history interview conducted on March 14th, 2015. “Out of Iraq: A Case Study by Sam Raby” tells the story of the Raby family’s escape through the Iranian border.

The StoryMap is hosted on a website called ArcGIS. The narrator, Sam Raby, uses photos, copies of official documents and an interview conducted in 2015 with his father to reconstruct the story. The page is set up so that there are two parallel panels where an interactive map on the left side of the screen automatically moves you to the different locations described in the story on the right side of the screen while you scroll down to read. The spatial retelling of the story is visually based on the familiar Google Maps interface. As you read the full story and reach the “Acknowledgements” section, the map panel zooms out to show an satellite overview of the entire world’s continents.

95 Masmoudi, Ikram. War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction. Page 11
96 Raby, Sam. “Out Of Iraq II: A Case Study.” https://arcg.is/D48qv
with red drop pins placed across the screen in Montreal, New York, Geneva, Beirut, Tehran and Baghdad to show all the places where the storylines were anchored.

This method of storytelling utilizes a visual language that emphasizes movement more so than history or time in the way that the audio oral history interviews did. It speaks a language that would have been so unfamiliar to the people whose story it is representing. Using satellite technology and seeing the journey from this omnipotent bird’s eye view gives the storytelling practice a strong representational power over hegemonic narratives.

3.16 Blogging the occupation

The extraction of Saddam and his 35-year dictatorship uncovered the possibility for Iraqis to access and participate in written media production on the internet which had always been prohibited in Iraq. Iraqis and our anti-war allies began documenting the everydayness of war to subvert the war-justifying narrative perpetuated by the occupying forces. The popularity of personal blogging sites across the entire Arab world coincided with the time of the invasion in 2003. The newly found availability of the internet in Iraq brought on the appearance of various everyday people blogging the occupation: Salam Pax, Riverbend, HNK and Shalash Al-Iraqi, to name only the most popular.

Most of those who followed the news of the 2003 invasion from their homes in Europe, North America and the English-speaking world might recognize the first three names, while the last one, Shalash Al-Iraqi (a pseudonym) wrote in Iraqi-Arabic dialect for an Iraqi audience. Shalash’s stories were disseminated through email chains. Shalash told stories in colloquial and referenced the occupation in a style of sarcastic humour familiar to Iraqis. The characters of her/his stories were not heroes but regular people living under the occupation.

As a twelve-year-old, I tried to follow the news and public trial of Saddam Hussein, which was always on our television screen. As a child I felt lost amongst the legal jargon, the historical references which were alien to me, and generally felt claustrophobic and sad watching my parents glued to the television and not having any information about what was actually happening. I had to live with my parents’ silence and absence, their shock and confusion, their frustration and pain, their loss, which
might have been an illusion when we all escaped during the sanctions in 1997, but that solidified after the occupation in 2003 - their departure was without a return. One day I found a stack of printed sheets of paper held together by a fold-over clip on the computer desk in our living room. The text was printed off from my father’s email inbox and titled “The Journals of Shalash Al-Iraqi.” I read a few pages without permission. Shalash Al-Iraqi (a pseudonym) was an online blogger and storyteller whose dark humour struck me. The winding dialogues and symbolic, sarcastic, wise and strange life stories resembled a familiarity of storytelling that was serious, held important information but still joyful to read.

I found my solace. I also found a way to understand the major events that were shifting and changing everything in our lives. This is the power of stories. Shalash’s retellings were negotiations of the matters of life, not only remembrances but bodies of knowledge that witness communities, their traumas, struggles and silence. These stories were entry ways into life itself by engaging affect, creating visions and explaining the past. One of her/his early blog posts in December 2005 tells the story of hajya na’na’a, or “Old Lady Mint”, who found a wounded American soldier at her doorstep in the impoverished neighbourhood of Al Thawra. hajya na’na’a adopts the soldier, Martin, and loves him as she did her son, Abdelrida, who passed away in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. Martin receives from hajya na’na’a the love and tenderness that has been absent from his life.

Martin, or Abdelrida as the hajya calls him, became more precious to her than her soul. She thought of him as a divine gift, a reparation from God for her son Radi, who was lost in the Iraq-Iran war and left her by herself after the death of her husband Daway.

Martin, or Abdelrida, accustomed himself to a somewhat harsh life in exchange for compassion and great motherhood. Amongst the harshness was losing his most favourite breakfast meal which consists of Corn Flakes,
and replacing it with *gemar* and *syah*\(^{97}\) in the beginning of the month when *habooba*\(^{98}\) receives her retirement income, and meager meals throughout the month, too difficult for him to digest at first but that he eventually became used to. In addition to difficulties in using the squatting-toilet, and sleeping on the floor, and the electricity outages in the blazing summer\(^{99}\).

Everything in the story is simple and yet holds nuance and depth in showing the war’s impact on everyday life for an American soldier and an Iraqi woman. *hajya na’na’a*’s loses are catastrophic, while Martin grieves the luxuries of a privileged life. *hajya na’na’a* is under the delusion that Martin is going to save her from the loss she has experienced, while Martin is really there seeking to fill an empty void from the emotional absence of his life in America. The result nevertheless is a depiction of a strange, dark, twisted and doomed relationship that is still witty and funny to read.

Professional journalists also turned towards stories of the everyday to speak explicitly against the occupation and war. There are two noteworthy reporters who covered the everyday living conditions of the occupation in Iraq: Anthony Shadid and Dahr Jamail. Anthony authored *Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War*, while Dahr Jamail authored *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unbedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*, and both books were efforts at collecting the stories of "the people" in an admitted desire to create an alternative body of information against the story coming out of mainstream and establishment media, and the orchestrated US propaganda campaign of the war, invasion, and occupation. Jamail and Shadid’s attempts to story the everyday manifests in the form of collections of written anecdotes of their interactions with Iraqis, usually in Baghdad, at the start of the war. Although this form is not as similar to my grandmother’s stories as, for example, Shalash Al-Iraqi’s blog, the acknowledgement of the power to invert hegemonic stories with stories of day-to-day life is evident. Jamail writes: “We are defined by story. Our history,

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\(^{97}\) *gemar* is the fatty cream that rises to the top of milk. It is a traditional breakfast food in Iraq and is considered a high quality delicacy if it comes from sheep’s milk. Syah is a traditional, thin, crêpe-like pancake made from a mixture of ground rice grains and water. It has a beautiful aroma when made with Iraqi *anbar* rice.  

\(^{98}\) *habooba* is an Iraqi term used to describe an old woman who has a crude disposition.  

our memory, our perceptions of the future, are all built and held within stories\textsuperscript{100}. In this statement Jamail points to the power of stories, that they are living beings, never relics of the past, and always traveling through in circles rather than straight lines to bring the past into the future, just as my bibi does.

\textsuperscript{100} Jamail, Dahr. \textit{Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq}. Page 3
What this thesis has aimed to offer is a look into how storytelling can produce grassroots histories. Sinan Antoon says about Iraq that "in this time of systematic erasure of collective memory by divisive parties and entities, the remembrance of certain time periods is very important, because there is a loss of collective memory, an erasure of a national history." Storytelling and life narratives are forms of remembrances that stand not only in testimony to the past, but also to allow new ways of engaging with the future. It is in this protentional that storytelling provides liberatory spaces.

There are six ways that I mention in this project of how storying the everyday is "is always a potential site of power [and] always political."

- Storying the everyday engages affect.
- Storying the everyday is rooted in intersubjectivity, multiplying the authors of a single narrative, building on an ethics of intersubjectivity that can hold the world for communities.
- Storying the everyday subverts linear time, slows it down, reverses it, twists it around into circles.
- Storying the everyday traverses transcendental realms, such as dreams, nightmare, ancient mythology, and more.
- Storying the everyday naturalizes silence, in its various forms, as meaningful part of narrative.
- Storying the everyday makes story into a fundamental part of the ordinary landscape of life, thereby ensuring its inheritance and inheritance of a wealth of knowledge needed for the community.

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101 [www.shorturl.at/bjJT5](http://www.shorturl.at/bjJT5)
The intention for writing this thesis has always been rooted in community. It is work that was meant to illuminate, for us, a way to imagine the future, a thesis about possibilities and about the creation of what we are always left out of: time, history, sense, space and self. I wanted to play with hierarchies of knowledge production, challenge them, and unbind from their dynamics.

The thesis begins with the title “swalef bibi,” which means my grandmother’s tales. I start with my grandmother and with women’s gatherings because these are my earliest memories of the practice. This project is not meant to say that storytelling is practice particular to women or the private sphere, I only begin my inquiry from that place and ground the research in my grandmother’s storytelling because it captures an important component of the type of story I am talking about: that is the intimate story about life matter. This thesis is not about women, it is about collective memory, and the curation and performance of memory as an inheritance. It is about ways that we create time and space, generate language, reclaim and negotiate complex collective historical record and ultimately shift power through narrative of life stories and of the every day.

I write about life stories as a tool for liberation. Life stories are a place where categories of meaning and historical sense-making can be created, stored, passed down. The historical record and future vision are made to be composed of peoples’ lives. What we generate by doing this work is a politics of difference, a grassroots history, a history that is simultaneously about the future and the past. Memory is the most important element in this project. Memory is seen here as a living being, an aqueous creature that can transmit, dissipate, melt and perform many other transformations and reactions. Memory is the method and the subject.

In this project I ask the reader to follow me on a bit of a winding path with many elements. There’s art and narrative, images, poetry and theoretical discussions. I include oral, written, fiction, nonfiction types of storytelling. With these various forms, I ask the reader to join me in different ways of engaging with the topic. This kind of structure is a choice meant to reflect of how these ideas truly look like to me. The inclusion of art as part of the thesis is a way of bringing breath into the work. Each reader will bring their own breath with their interpretations of the collages, videos and prose.
This project has left me with more questions and curiosity about storytelling. The work of Alia Mossallam, for example, and how she insists on paying attention to silence, can be the focus of a new elaborated project on storytelling. What does silence hold? What does listening to silence actually look like? Even the ethics of “listening to silence” can be a greatly productive place for future inquiry. Her work also inspires a question about a transnational vision of this grassroots history.

An important continuation of this work will be to document the wide range of forms in which storying the everyday has become an important tool in building narrative for Iraqis. Some of the forms mentioned here include digital storytelling using satellite imagery, personal blogging, digital audio-visual artwork, published texts and oral history interviews. With all the creativity in these forms and the ever-expanding possibilities for expression, I imagine that these will be many new concepts for storying forms to look at in the future. Moreover, as a result of so many waves of migration and displacement, and as many communities in diaspora have built extensions of Iraq (through story) in new locations, with new languages and hybrid identities the vastness of the forms of expression through storytelling will only become more expansive.

I will end this thesis with a short story. In his essay, Walter Benjamin tells us that there two tribes of storytellers: the “resident tiller of the soil” and the “trading seamen”; “the resident master craftsman” and the “travelling journeyman.” I reimagine Benjamin’s two storytelling tribes as the older generation of Iraqi women storytellers, the resident tillers of the soil, and the new generation of diasporic Iraqi creatives, writers, migratory-makers-of-things, the travelling journeywomen. The story is about inheritance of storytelling.

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103 Benjamin, Walter. "The storyteller." Page 89
Two TRIBES of Storytellers

On October 25th in a year that will always be in the future, a commemoration service walked from the old harbour across to the Western Plains where an orange spherical bus terminus used to be. There were seven hundred women dressed in white cotton, linen and silk. Water from the harbour dragged on behind them for two and a half miles. It screamed with the voice of the ancient Mediterranean and smelled of its capsized rubber boats. The women carried above their heads large spools of thread in dazzling colours and branches of bougainvillea wetted by a solemn drizzle. To the right of them, Athens was covered in smog. A shadow figure sat upon Strefi Hill, looking out to the assembly. Her arms were raised above her head in prayer. In front of them, the sky was filled with tobacco leaf kites flying on thick ropes that bound hell and a primal psychic force at either of their ends. The kites recited Sumerian hymns. The women listened intently to the screams and kite songs, two tribes waking side by side, slowing down the rhythm of time as they moved their feet.

They arrived and returned countless times over. Wild spelt had dimmed the bright orange building into a matte ochre. A carnage of detonated bombs was buried in the depths of the mud. Memory-foam was oozing out of the cracks in the dry topmost layer of the earth. On each woman’s tongue there was an engraved tale. The first tribe of women were standing on the right. All at once, they began raising their right arms towards Athens, then above their heads to reach for the spools of thread. Each woman pulled the end of her thread and fed it into the dark, wet confines of her mouth. The women chewed the thread until it slithered out of their lips and into the soil below them. The women tilled the soil with their vibrant spools of thread. The earth roared and produced all its seeds. All of the past emerged, all of the earth’s memory, until it had no more wars to commemorate. No more refugees to name. No more droplets of white phosphorus leached out of the skeletons of babies.

The word overflowed with memory-water. The second tribe of women, raised their left arms towards the hereafter, then above their heads to their spools of thread. They chewed the stories on their tongues into the fibres of the thread and spat it out to dock the bus-boats onto the abandoned spherical building. Magnificent colours of thread built a web in which the entire world was cradled. Magenta flowers stood witness to the flood.
The tribe of journeywomen and the tribe of earth-whisperers sewed together all of their white cotton and linen and silk dresses with the colorful thread. As the ends of the universe expanded pulling left away from right, the thread stretched for eternity.
Figure 13: Journey with Sister by Hanin F., photographed at the Capturing Our Stories (2016) photo exhibit
Figure 14: Story and structure (Baghdad, 2018)
Appendix


*This story is based on an oral history interview with R. K., from the archives of the Iraqi Narratives Project. The interview was recorded on May 2nd, 2016 in Hamilton, Ontario in the first year this project was founded.*

The blue sky blew up with American aerial bombardment to celebrate my birthday on the night of the 17th of January 1991. My brother’s face yellowed up, my mother held him and cooed. We did not remember to celebrate until my uncle’s family showed up three moons later from out of the sunrise-red smog encompassing Baghdad from the distance. Two cans of Pepsi were distributed into nine glass cups raised to the life I breathed eleven years ago, and more accurately to the life of the five perplexed, ghostly faces that came to tell us the rest of our family was alive. Iraq’s electricity grid was bombed to nihility. My mother made a cake on the choola: a rusty, dusty portable propane gas cooker. She poured the creamy cake mixture into a deep tray and covered it with a shallow, dented one, masterfully flipped it over like dolma and put it down to cook slowly on the small stove. It looked like a contraption you might see in black and white Egyptian movies, or like the kerosene cooker my grandmother insisted on making rice on because of its really low, prudent heat. Even the Pepsi cans were the last that we would see before the sanctions ended all foreign import into the country.

In the construction of memory exact dates become indecipherable, but I think it all started in August 1990. I was passed out, wedged between the warm limbs and torsos of my also sleeping brothers on my parent’s white linen sheets. A long silky strand of jet black dyed hair slipped across my itchy cheek as my mother’s closest friend crawled out to the calling of my mother’s voice. We had all slept huddled together that night in my parents’ bed under the safety of the stars. My mom opened the bedroom door and the two women’s bodies morphed into a singled creature attached by the ear and the mouth. “Saddam has invaded Kuwait”, the anxious whispers flowing in the air between them mixed with the sound of the humming birds and the morning breeze.
My little brothers whimpered weakly as the buzz of confusion and questions woke us up one by one. The television broadcast stated that Kuwait, the 19th province of Iraq, would be “liberated”. That morning felt far more suffocated than liberated. My dad got stuck abroad because of the travel ban and I could only communicate with him by closing my eyes at night and imagining that he was safe under the same stars. Our neighbours talked of evacuating Baghdad, and my mother finally put us all in the Toyota Corona and drove to her sister-in-law in Tikrit. I imagined the streets of Baghdad empty and quiet; no school kids chasing soccer balls in alleyways, no passengers waiting to get on red double-decker buses, no mother cats fending to feed their kittens under a jasmine bush in somebody’s front yard. I wondered how this huge city could be evacuated and if there were enough airplanes to carry all the people, buildings, houses, trees and the giant sun. My mother stared straight ahead as she drove the interstate highways by herself for the first time. The sun was glowing through the right side windows and she said: “What do you think we should do?” She might have been talking to the three of us sitting upright in the backseat, or to a reflection of my dad that she caught in the afternoon stars, or maybe interrogating the miserable fate that seemed to haunt this land we were cutting across.

We stayed in Tikrit for a while but eventually the intimate disruption of displacement bore its weight on us. My father had finally reached Jordan and crossed the land borders back into Iraq. He was a mechanical engineer who specialized in helicopters. He was posted by the government at a military compound in Al-Suwaira, in Kut. It’s a small city in the South, on the west bank of the Tigris River. My mother refused to abandon him, and so we all left Baghdad together. My aunt and her kids came with us in the beginning. Her husband worked at the Ministry of Oil in Baghdad and could not leave his job. In retrospect, that was the beginning of the breaking apart of families, neighbours, and all established social networks we had known all our lives.

Luscious palm orchards surrounded the compound, and a busy pool always filled with children was at the center of the forty or so identical mobile homes. It was winter by then; but the sun was always out, and always warm. It did not look like a regular January. It was beautiful and serene and felt like a vacation. Then it happened: the night of the 17th. I woke up to my father’s heartbeat pounding in sync with the areal bombardment and the backdrop of airplanes soaring in a terrified, purple sky. We escaped to a cold, concrete-laden shelter made for airplanes, but now housing families
with sleeping children underground. We stayed there for two nights before being carried under the safety of the afternoon stars to a house in the city - outside the military compound, which was targeted by the assault. My mother was comforting my timid, sensitive brother with her right hands as her left arm held on to her own brother in disbelief. Her body tensed as she held both and could not shed a healing tear at the sight of her brother and his family alive. That’s when we celebrated my birthday; the beginning of my life, and the beginning of my awareness of it.
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