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The Return of Mess O’Potamia: Time, Space, and Politics in Modern Uses of Ancient Mesopotamia[†]

SOPHUS HELLE

The 2014 insurgence of the terrorist group Da’esh (known also as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or simply Islamic State) in northern Iraq effected the sudden recirculation within Western media of a number of tropes first seen during the Gulf Wars, as the framing of the conflict was saturated with references to and concepts recycled from the 2003 Iraq War in particular. This reactivation of dormant tropes was parodied on the 12 June 2014 episode of *The Daily Show*, but the show’s take on the return of Iraqi conflict to the front pages of Western newspapers also enlisted a number of other images, whose resonances across the colonial discourse surrounding Iraq will be the topic of this essay:

Jon Stewart: I didn’t think we’d have to do this anymore. Well ... Looks like we’re gonna have to return to our old ... [Grunts as he opens a brown box] ... coverage, lemme just get this out there ... [Appears to pour out contents of the box] lemme just ... get ... There we go. [The chyron ‘MESS O’POTAMIA’ appears, covered in dust. Stewart puts away the box and blows off dust from the chyron.] Mess O’Potamia coverage is *back!*¹

The caption ‘Mess O’Potamia’ was first used on *The Daily Show* during the 2003 invasion, and marked the continuing coverage of the US’ occupation of Iraq until its last appearance on the 3 March 2009 episode. When it reappeared in 2014 it had thus gathered dust for some five years, and it is the literal undusting of the electronic image that serves as comic relief in the otherwise bleak coverage of the Da’esh insurgence. Yet for me, as one academically trained in the study of the civilizations of ancient Iraq, the image of undusting also summoned a number of other connotations that seemed suspiciously at home in a story concerning, of all places, Iraq. The unearthing of the lost caption found a tropic resonance in the unearthing of lost objects through archaeological excavation. Indeed, the storage of the unused chyron in a brown, dusty box bears a distinct similarity to the storage of museum objects not on display: part of the comical effect of the segment is the mental image it summons of a storehouse containing endless brown boxes with the many chyrons once used on *The Daily Show*—a storehouse perhaps much like the one that is to

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house the brown box containing the Ark of the Covenant in the ending of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The image of undusting, with its connotations of excavation/storage and coverage/discovery, thus frames the above-mentioned reactivation of tropes within a theme of *eternal return*. Stewart states that ‘we’re gonna *have to return* to our old coverage’, presenting the return of the same as a depersonalized necessity, a historical exigency that forces time not forwards but back to the same old, neatly resonating with Nietzsche’s famous suggestion that ‘everything unutterably small or great in your life will *have to return* to you, all in the same succession and sequence’ (emphasis added).² Much the same framing of the theme reappeared in the two spin-off shows of *The Daily Show*: on *The Colbert Report*’s 16 June episode Stephen Colbert stated that the insurgence made him ‘feel ten years younger’, while on *Last Week Tonight*’s 10 August episode John Oliver referred to it as a ‘*deja boom*’.³ Again in a distinctly Nietzschean fashion, Oliver and Colbert both depicted the reemergence of conflict in Iraq as provoking an involuntary, bodily, ‘madeleine-moment’ reliving of what was supposed to have been past. What each of these parodies perform, in short, is a self-referential repetition that claims to be also a historical repetition, as if the Iraq War and the Da’esh insurgence were somehow the same thing.

In its pun on the word ‘Mesopotamia’, *The Daily Show*’s caption further summons an antiquity and thus also a return far older than the 2003 invasion. The messiness of Mess O’Potamia is thereby figured as somehow endemic to the country, revealed as part o’ the name of the geographical region itself, from antiquity to the present moment. It is not a mess *in* ‘Potamia’, brought there by, say, external colonial interests, but a mess *of* it and thus belonging to Iraq as part of its essence, across millennia. The responsibility for conflicts both present and historical is thereby subtly shifted from colonizer to colonized, from the US to Iraq itself. But the line that it draws from the historical Mesopotamia, through its excavation and invasion and up to its present situation, appears here circular rather than linear. Intriguingly, it suggests that there is something cyclical about the very time of discovery itself, not only in the claim that the conflict in Iraq keeps repeating itself, but just as much in the temporality of archaeological discovery. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The Burden of Nineveh*, a poem composed in 1850 upon the arrival to London of the newly excavated winged bulls of the Assyrian capital Nineveh, the shock of discovery leads directly to a fantasy of future re-discovery: ‘For as that Bull-god once did stand’ in Nineveh, writes Rossetti, ‘So may he stand again; till now,/In ships of unknown sail and prow,/Some tribe of the Australian plough/Bear him afar,—a relic now/Of London, not of Nineveh!’ Rather than the linear progress of science, the discovery of Assyria is brought to signify the cyclical temporality of all discovery, and the ‘historical echo’ of empires rising and falling.⁴ If the undusting of the ‘Mess O’Potamia’ chyron suggests that what is covered has happened before, the undusting of the winged bulls in Rossetti suggests that what is discovered is bound to happen again.

Crucially, the time that separates these rediscoveries is figured as a blank time, a wasteland of forgetfulness punctuated by returning moments of remembrance. As shown by Frederick Bohrer, in nineteenth-century English literature Assyria was figured as a shapelessness ‘constructed by the breakdown of conventional

referentiality', producing a sort of 'archeological sublime'.⁵ This shapelessness extends from the spatial lack of forms attributed to the landscape of Assyria into a temporal conflation characteristic of Orientalist discourse, where the Orient is constructed as essentially timeless—this being one of the foundational insights of postcolonial criticism, as articulated in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.⁶ The *desert time*, that is, physical shapelessness combined with temporal oblivion, in turn provides the background against which discovery becomes shocking.

The interplay of forgetfulness and shock is again illustrated by Stewart, who begins his segment by claiming that he has forgotten what happened in Iraq since the American invasion: 'I don't remember what happened over there ...' On receiving the news of the insurgence, his reaction is shocked to the point of hyperbole: 'What the fuck is going on over there?' As the juxtaposition of these two quotes makes clear, the distance from the 'over there' can be invoked both to express colonial indifference and colonial terror, and indeed my point here is that one cannot exist without the other. Though certainly surprising in its successfulness, the insurgence itself can only be figured as *shocking* through ignorance of the many events leading up to it: the Syrian civil war, the Year of Terror in 2013, the clearing of Sunni protest camps in December, the fall of Fallujah in January, the parliamentary election in April, and so on. By failing to bring most of these events to public consciousness, Western media created the desert time against which the insurgence could be figured as so shockingly sudden.

However, at the very moment that the 'Mess O'Potamia' caption seems to posit an eternal cycle of shock in Iraq, it also moves to negate that very same transmillennial unity, as it literally breaks up the (as we will see, already unstable) term 'Mesopotamia'. The name of the segment where Stewart discusses the region in turn segments the word he employs to refer to it, as the single word 'Mesopotamia' is split up into the three words 'Mess', 'O', and 'Potamia', echoing the similarly threefold splits of Iraq into the ethnosectarian units of Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds, the ancient units of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian culture, and indeed the current divide into regions controlled by Da'esh, by the Kurdistan Regional Government, and directly by Baghdad. Further, the segment's segmentation of the word 'Mesopotamia' displays an interdependence with similar resonances. Once made to stand alone, the word 'Potamia' becomes nonsensical, as it derives its meaningfulness solely from its place in the term 'Mesopotamia', and even more pointedly, the apostrophe of 'of' as 'O' displays its reliance on the following word. Just at the moment where it would seem most fragile, the coherence of 'Mesopotamia' offers resistance.

The same dynamic of in(ter)dependence is at play in the division of the country into three segments *each of which defines itself as a part of a non-existent whole*. The Kurdish region, for one, refers to itself as South Kurdistan, a 'South' in a projected wholeness of national 'Kurdistan' that would include a North Kurdistan in what is currently Turkey. As such, the affective and temporal qualities of its hopefulness as a political project are built directly into its terms of self-reference. The region controlled by Da'esh is also marked by synecdochic tension, though of a somewhat different sort. Its defining moment, in the most literal sense, came on 29 June 2014 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the establishment of a Caliphate under his command, and reduced the name *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* to

merely *Islamic State*. Just as in the Mess O'Potamia caption, the 'of' acquires a troublingly central position in its very ellipsis (reduced to 'o' or deleted altogether).⁷ No longer *of* Iraq and Syria because performatively declared an independent state, the Islamic State employs an affective temporality different from the Kurdish appeal: not oriented towards a hopeful future but towards the nostalgic past of the caliphates. Yet both are definitionally marked as belonging to unities whose terms they wish to contest. In a sense it is of course the national Iraqi government in Baghdad that is most clearly invested in defining the terms of the country's unity. But just like South Kurdistan and Da'esh, the government, having lost direct control over substantial parts of the country, has become a troubled *pars pro toto* that would claim to be simply a *totus*. The contestation of the country is thus caught up in what one might call—borrowing a phrase from Judith Butler—a 'sloshy metonymy'.⁸

In short, one can trace a recurrent trope in the discourse surrounding Iraq, which crops up in various historical situations. The trope posits, on the one hand, an eternal return of conflict to Iraq, as if a line of continuity can be drawn between ancient Mesopotamia, the Iraq War, and the Da'esh insurgency. This is a circular temporality of forgetfulness and shock, messiness and necessity. On the other hand, the spatial unity of Iraq is simultaneously contested, as the country seems constantly on the brink of breaking apart, and its terms of reference become muddled. By its fragmented referentiality and its historical connotations, the 'Mess O'Potamia' caption performs both of these movements at once.

At this rather peculiar intersection of spatial disjunction and temporal recurrence, I would like to seize the opportunity to investigate what performative force is contained in the term 'Mesopotamia'. I will do so through close readings of three historians, Zainab Bahrani, Rune Rattenborg, and Sara Pursley, who have challenged the conventional geographical unities we employ to make sense of Iraq's complex history. For each of these readings, I will seek to show that the geographical and historical conventions are not only points of academic contention, but have far-reaching political implications as well.

1. Knit and Purl

What is in the name 'Mesopotamia'? On the one hand, the spatial fragmentation achieved by the Da'esh insurgency invites a re-examination of the geographical unity that is posited by the word 'Mesopotamia'. What unity does the word construct, and is its coherency homogenous or fragmentary? Further, the trope of eternal return raises a number of other questions: Which temporal connections does it summon? Are those connections linear, or are they rather cyclical? In short, which borders do we construct and which do we demolish when we employ the word 'Mesopotamia'? Attempting to answer these questions will lead me to consider a variety of historical situations, as my analysis zigzags between the pre-Islamic cultural unities that the term 'Mesopotamia' seeks to name, World War I and the subsequent British Mandate in Mesopotamia, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Gulf Wars, the 2003 Iraq War, and the Da'esh insurgency. I do so not because I hold that there is an analogical or narrowly causal relation between these historical situations, but rather to highlight the disjunctions

and connections drawn between them in nationalist, anti-nationalist, and neo-colonial discourses.

To be clear, there was no concept among the ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians to correspond to the unity that we today call 'Mesopotamia'. Whether divided into the lands of Sumer and Akkad, of Babylon and Assyria, or as was most often the case, into a myriad independent city-states and small kingdoms, the region was never conceptualized as a distinct whole, let alone a homogenous one.⁹ Even apart from the political divisions, it was populated by a large number of different ethnic and cultural groups: Sumerians and Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians, Amorrites, Kassites, Hurrians, Hittites, Elamites, and so on. Even when the predominantly Babylonian south and the predominantly Assyrian north were brought under a single rule, such as the Assyrian empire of the first millennium BCE, cultural and political differences remained prominent, as the numerous civil wars of the period reveal. Further, during the three millennia that passed between the invention of writing in Uruk (ca. 3500 BCE) and Alexander's conquest of Babylon (331 BCE), the ethnic and cultural map was continuously shifting: the demise of the Sumerian language, the sudden political prominence of the Amorrites and then of the Kassites, the influx of Aramaic and Chaldean tribes, and finally the effects of first Persian and then Hellenic hegemony, make the idea of a single 'Mesopotamian' civilization at best a gross conflation of cultural variety.

But if the word 'Mesopotamia' cannot be said to translate an ancient concept, what then is its function? How did it come about, and what role does it fulfil? To begin with, it is a colonial name in the most literal sense: it is the name of a colony, a province in the imperial administrations of the Classical period.¹⁰ But as shown by Zainab Bahrani in her essay 'Conjuring Mesopotamia', the function of the name is also colonial in a different sense, as its usage in a modern context is linked to an Orientalist need to classify territory to be administered, and historical past to be managed. Following Said, Bahrani argues that 'the development of the discipline of Mesopotamian archeology and its discursive practices during [the early 20th century] cannot be isolated from this colonialist enterprise',¹¹ meaning that the geographical nomenclature of scientific research is neither the precondition for nor the product of a given political enterprise: the two are co-extensive and simultaneous in their production of classifications. The term 'Mesopotamia' is a colonial name not only by virtue of its history, but more fundamentally by virtue of its colonial *effacement* of the internal difference between the cultures and regions of ancient Iraq, and the simultaneous *effectuation* of an external difference between a pre-Classical and an Islamic past.

Bahrani reads this effacement and effectuation of difference through an exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled 'The Royal City of Susa.' The exhibition showcased a group of Babylonian monuments plundered by the Elamites and carried to Susa in the twelfth century BCE. What is interesting about the exhibit in this context is not so much its usage of the word 'Mesopotamia' as its concomitant omission of any mention of the words 'Iran' and 'Iraq', the countries whose past the exhibition displayed. What is the effect of this omission—what does it mean for the terms 'Iran' and 'Iraq' to be replaced by the term 'Mesopotamia'? As Bahrani states, the:

deliberate omission of the names Iran and Iraq from these maps and descriptions have only added to the general conception of this area as a non-place, and further strengthened the disassociation of the past and present of a particular geographical region.¹²

As such, the performative force of 'Mesopotamia' would seem to be *also* the exact reverse of what I have argued so far, as the theme of recurrence is here replaced by a disassociation of past from present, while spatial fragmentation is here replaced by a lack of differentiation, to the point where Iran/q is thought of as a borderless and desert non-place.

This is a particular salient point given the historical timing of the exhibition. Bahrani highlights a quote from a newspaper article written after the 1993 US missile strikes against Iraq:

Before initiating his pre-inaugural raids on Iraq [Clinton] should have visited the exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art called 'The Royal City of Susa.' Had he attended the exhibit, he would have seen that, like Saddam Hussein, the kings and queens of ancient Mesopotamia lived in mortal fear of losing face before their enemies.¹³

The omissions performed by the exhibit are here shown to enable the sort of temporal recurrence with which I begun. In the context of the Gulf Wars, the slippery sameness of ancient and modern is a precondition for an Orientalist mode of knowledge, given here as the fantasy that the president would have learned something about the 'character' of Saddam Hussein by visiting an exhibition about the kings of ancient Mesopotamia. The writer further displays a confusion of Iran (Susa) and Iraq (Saddam Hussein) that is directly predicated by the exhibit's omissions of geographical labels, producing a 'confluence of Iran and Iraq as one despotic entity'.¹⁴

However, this confluence in Orientalist discourse is meaningful only within a prior history of difference and conflict. The ancient conflicts between Susa and Babylon that are the focus of the exhibition, and the modern conflict between Iraq and Iran that are its frame of relevance, make up the cultural grid against which the effacement of difference becomes performative. There can be no confluence without prior separation, meaning that the fragmentation of 'Mess O'Potamia' and the unification of 'Mesopotamia' are in fact two sides of the same coin. Similarly, the Orientalist parallel that seeks to merge Saddam Hussein with his pre-modern forerunners by an appeal to racialized vanity is likewise made possible by a prior disassociation between ancient and modern. The charge of 'primitiveness' that the comparison directs against Hussein gains performative force by aligning him with a pre-modern 'dead' civilization. It matters, in short, that he is compared not to the kings of ancient Iraq, but to the kings of ancient Mesopotamia, in that it relegates him to a sphere of vain obsolescence instead of proud lineage. Orientalist notions of transhistorical sameness (the return of Mesopotamia) and the performative claim of obsolescence (the disjunction of Mesopotamia) thus form each other's knit and purl.

To sum up, the performative force of the word 'Mesopotamia' is constructed in part through its own negation. It achieves fragmentation through confluence, and recurrence through disassociation. But before moving on, I would like to take a

closer look at the effects of temporal disassociation in particular. As Bahrani argues, a crucial effect of the substitution of 'Mesopotamia' for, 'Ancient Iraq' is the split it enables between the country's pre-Classical and its Islamic past. This split has a series of consequences, of which I will highlight three.

Firstly, it constructs a teleological linearity. Recognized as a 'cradle of civilizations', Mesopotamia is temporally circumscribed, thereby allowing for a teleological model of history where the 'torch of civilization' passes from Iraq to Greece, and through it to the West (by a further act of alignment that claims Hellenism and its legacy as 'Western'). Thus, a teleological linearity is constructed that leads directly from the origin of civilization to Western culture while bypassing the Islamic past.¹⁵

Secondly, it unties national belonging, opening the past up to appropriation. Positing a radical discontinuity between a Mesopotamian and an Islamic past can serve to render the Mesopotamian legacy mobile and thereby appropriable, as it engenders claims of universality: Babylonian culture is figured not as a specifically Iraqi legacy, but as a human legacy. It is 'our' past too, because we are connected to it through the teleological narrative of civilization noted above. An article in *Le Temps* from 1887, commenting on the excavation in Susa, is quite clear on the matter: 'It appears that archeological riches, which unlike gold or silver have no intrinsic value, can be the property of whoever finds and studies them. This is an axiom of science.'¹⁶ This axiom is thus employed to enact the structural disparity of import and export that is the linchpin of any colonial system—notice the explicitly economic tone of the expression 'archeological riches'. In this colonial context, the idea of 'world heritage' conveniently functions as a one-way street, as the purportedly global mobility of heritage is ultimately circumscribed by colonial structures (these archaeological riches could belong to anyone, hence they belong to us).¹⁷

Thirdly, the discontinuity between one kind of past and another also allows the appropriator to pick and choose. In this sense, the idea of a specifically 'Mesopotamian' past is also an ideal of cultural purity. It is prior to and therefore supposedly 'untainted' by Persian and Islamic influences (through the effectuation of external difference), but it is also a united entity despite the cultural, ethnical, and historical differences between Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Elamites, and so on (through the effacement of internal difference). As such, it allows the colonizer to ship home the Mesopotamian heritage while keeping the deck clear of unwanted stowaways: Islam, Persians, and cultural hybridity.¹⁸

2. Messy Betweenness

However, while Bahrani's analysis is crucial for understanding the present situation, the pedigree of the word 'Mesopotamia' is in fact more complex than her simple model of colonial imposition of unity among originally separate cultural entities.

I noted above that no concept corresponding to the modern 'Mesopotamia' is to be found in the ancient sources, yet one such forerunner has in fact been suggested: the Akkadian expression *māt birītīm*, 'the land of between', along with the Hebrew expression *'aram naharayim*, 'the land of the river', and its Egyptian counterpart

nhrn. Yet as argued persuasively by Jacob Joel Finkelstein, these ancient concepts referred not to a land between two rivers, but to a land *in the middle of one river*—that is, to the land that lies within the great bend of the Euphrates river.¹⁹ Rather than the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris, roughly corresponding to modern Iraq, the ancient variant of ‘Mesopotamia’ denoted an area delineated by the windings of the Euphrates and by the Khabur river. An area that, if anything, corresponds more closely to that currently controlled by Da’esh (as of October 2016).

Recently, Rune Rattenborg has gone even further in exploring the historical fluidity of this term.²⁰ According to Rattenborg, the idea that ‘Mesopotamia’ refers to the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris is a notion whose popularity dates no further back than the nineteenth century. Rattenborg shows that the region today called ‘Iraq’ has been divided, over the last two millennia, into sometimes two and sometimes three areas, with only one of these being referred to as ‘Mesopotamia’. As Rattenborg’s detailed historical account reveals, for most geographers before the nineteenth century, ‘Mesopotamia’ meant the same as *māt birītim*: the land within the bend of the Euphrates. In fact, according to Rattenborg it was only during World War I that the word ‘Mesopotamia’ congealed definitively into its present form. The term was fixed as covering all land between the Euphrates and the Tigris, and popularized as the dominant geographical concept for the region, eclipsing the previously more popular ‘Babylonia’ and ‘Assyria’.

The etymology of the name that has since been popularized, from Greek *mésos*, ‘middle, between’ and *potamós*, ‘river’, is thus incorrect: it is not the land between two rivers, but rather the land in the bend of one river. What I would like to highlight here is that, defined by either of the two etymologies as being somehow *between*, ‘Mesopotamia’ is further revealed to be a highly *messy betweenness*. It is a mess of *potamós* (of which river is being referred to), a mess of colonial enforcements and regional rearticulations. It is a distinctly mobile entity, fulfilling different roles in the shifting segmentations of Western Asia. Indeed, the very fixity of the word and of the region whose borders it now naturalizes are themselves the products of a modern colonial discourse. Today, the terms ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Iraq’ signify more or less the same area, as its ancient and modern version, respectively, yet Rattenborg shows that they only came to do so at a time when the nation of Iraq was being established: the construction of Iraq is thus historically inextricable from the construction of Mesopotamia. What is then the relation between these two terms? What do their historical mobility mean for their present fixity?

I am particularly intrigued by the notion of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia, the idea that the modern nation of Iraq is in some sense identical with the ancient region of ‘Mesopotamia’, or even that the legitimacy of Iraq as a nation is based on ancient ‘Mesopotamia’—a rather slippery foundation, as we have seen. Crucially, the messy and mobile betweenness of ‘Mesopotamia’ is a characteristic feature not only of this one term, but of colonial power and resistance in general, as postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has shown. Bhabha’s theory of *hybridity* can be used to examine how the concept ‘Mesopotamia’ is employed both in the construction of Iraqi nationalism and in the resistance to that same nationalism as articulated by Da’esh.

Hybridity, for Bhabha, is not a stable conjoining of separate elements, but an always temporary undecidability, displacing rather than synthesizing binarisms. Hybridity is both that which is produced by colonial power, as the paradoxical condition of its authority, and that which opens a space for its subversion and resistance. Now, why should this be the case? Firstly, the discriminatory effects of colonial power can become effective only through the production of *difference*, as they:

do not simply or singly refer to a 'person' [... , rather,] the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid.

Secondly, this production of difference is structured as an *excess*, allowing for the hybridity thus created to proliferate, escaping and destabilizing the power structure that created it: 'This ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention.' The messy betweenness of 'Mesopotamia' can thus be thought of as a hybridity that both reinstates and escapes its colonial history.²¹

On the one hand, the unity of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia, which as Rattenborg shows is not much older than 1914, was and continues to be instrumental in the construction of a secular Iraqi nationalism. The current colonial borders of Iraq can be justified in non- or even anti-colonial terms through reference to a Mesopotamian past, thereby creating an alternative history that downplays the country's colonial as well as its Islamic past. 'Mesopotamian' imagery was thus perfectly suited for the both secular and anti-Western political narrative of Saddam Hussein, as his famous usage of a mixture of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian artefacts in propagandistic images attests. As summarized by Michael Seymour, 'Iraqi propaganda emphasized continuity with the ancient past and not least the reputed military prowess of Assyrian kings.' Yet not only did these images allow Hussein to posit an Iraqi unity that spanned across millennia, it also allowed him to posit an Iraqi unity in the present, glossing over modern ethnosectarian divisions. Thus Benjamin Isakhan argues that 'the emphasis on Iraq's Mesopotamian heritage sought to forego such contemporary schisms in order to emphasize a common Iraqi heritage'.²²

The work of Amatzia Baram has been particularly instrumental in unpacking how ancient Mesopotamia became central to the construction of Iraqi nationalism. Baram tracks the waning and waxing of 'Mesopotamia' as an element in Iraqi identity, from the rule of King Faisal I to that of Saddam Hussein. Baram reveals a tension between the Pan-Arabist ambitions of Iraqi elites and the political use of 'Mesopotamia', which was viewed as a specifically Iraqi legacy. The fluctuating importance of 'Mesopotamia' for Iraqi identity thus depended in large part on how such an Iraqi identity was to be related to a larger Arab identity. At one end of the spectrum was the view that the Sumerian and Assyrian civilizations had long since 'died and fallen into oblivion', making way for a rising Arabism. At the other end was the view that 'modern-day Iraqis are both the sole legitimate

cultural heirs and the biological descendants of the ancient peoples of Mesopotamia, the non-Semitic Sumerians included'. Baram examines the manifold attempts to reconcile this tension between a wider-than-Iraqi-Arab and an older-than-Arab-Iraqi identity, showing that the ideological merging of Iraq and Mesopotamia finally required the combination of two shifts, which both took place during the rule of Saddam Hussein: the Arabization of the Mesopotamians, and the assertion that Iraq held a unique place in 'the Arab family'. That is, a growing affinity between Mesopotamia and Iraq, and a growing distance between Iraq and the Arab world.²³

However, it is important to stress that this equation between ancient Mesopotamia and Baathist Iraq was not restricted to Saddam Hussein's propaganda. The same non-colonial/non-Islamic narrative proved equally well-suited for Western apologists of Iraq and its history, such as those who opposed the 2003 invasion, yet wished to avoid basing their counter-narrative on either an opposition to British colonial involvement as such or on the country's Islamic identity: what Seymour calls 'Ancient Mesopotamia as antiwar device'.²⁴

On the other hand, the opposition to the project of Iraqi nationalism, particularly as it is expressed by Da'esh, ends up relying just as much on the colonial messiness that it would seek to oppose. As already described, a defining moment for the group was the shortening of its name from ISIS to IS, and thus the complete abnegation of the terms 'Syria' and 'Iraq' along with the colonial histories implicit within them. Since, Da'esh spokesmen have been avoiding the terms altogether, even as geographical designations, replacing them with the terms *ard ash-sham* ('the left land', the Levant) for Syria and *ard al-rafidayn* ('the land of two river branches', Mesopotamia) for Iraq.²⁵ In the context of Da'esh's rhetoric, figuring Iraq as 'Mesopotamia' is thus not, as for Saddam Hussein, a reclamation of an ancient unity to buttress the modern state, but just the reverse, a replacement of that modern state with the ancient unity, denying the possibility of either an identity or a causal relation between the two. The Mesopotamian past can no longer be used to smoothen the construction of Iraq, and there can be no question of Iraq existing *because* of the ancient unity of Mesopotamia. To the contrary, 'Mesopotamia' can exist only as a placeholder because Iraq no longer does.

Naturalized as a historical and geographical term, 'Mesopotamia' conceals its history as a product of colonial power and thus becomes a site of colonial resistance. Just as was the case with Saddam Hussein's nationalist discourse, one encounters also here a parallel to Western discourse. Da'esh's highly symbolic demolition of the border between Syria and Iraq, bulldozing the ground between them and replacing their names with 'neutral' designations, bears a striking resemblance to the Metropolitan's exhibition discussed above, in which the names and borders of Iran and Iraq are likewise effaced and replaced by their historical counterparts. With Bahrani, one could claim that the shared goal of these two projects is the production of Mesopotamia as a global non-place: for Da'esh, as a borderless universal caliphate, and for the exhibition, as an appropriable universal heritage.

To summarize, the colonial hybridity of the term 'Mesopotamia' is made apparent by its simultaneous function as a strategy of dominance and one of subversion. It is, in Bhabha's expression, an 'ironic compromise' between intersecting

discourses,²⁶ and it gains different performative forces in each of them. The messy betweenness of the word is thus neither an obstacle to nor a failure of hegemonic discourse, but an index of the workings of its power.

3. Empty Maps

The argument I have presented so far could be read as claiming that, as there is no secure correlation between Iraq and ancient Mesopotamia, and as the geographical divisions of the region are fluid and historically changeable, then the state of Iraq has no basis in history. In short, it could be read as claiming that Iraq is a modern, artificial construction.

Indeed, it is beyond doubt that the state of Iraq owes much of its current form to modern British interests, invasion, and influence. The three formerly separate provinces of the Ottoman empire, the *wilaya*'s of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, were brought under the single name of 'Iraq' as a result of Britain's Mesopotamian Campaign. Further, Toby Dodge and Peter Sluglett have explored in detail how the British Mandate sought, but eventually failed, to construct a modern nation state of Iraq. Their works, entitled *Inventing Iraq* and *Contriving King and Country* respectively, focus on the manifold influences the British Mandate had on how the Iraqi state came to be administered, including the elevation of a Sunni elite and rural sheikhs, the concession of oil exports to a company controlled by Britain, the conflicted organization of land tenure, and shortcomings in education policy.²⁷

However, I would draw attention to Sara Pursley's critique of the narrative of Iraq being an artificial state.²⁸ She examines the popular idea that Iraq was created through arbitrary colonial melon-carving, as European imperial forces decided on its borders in the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement without regard for native ethnosectarian divisions. Pursley argues that this narrative of European border-drawing is both historically incorrect and theoretically suspect. She examines the concrete historical ways in which the Iraqi borders were shaped, showing that these border-formations included long processes of negotiation, conflict, and protest between local and imperial powers, rather than a single moment of European arbitration. The latter image, she argues, relocates agency away from a protracted, multilateral struggle involving both Iraqi and European forces, and to a purely Western decision with instantaneous effect. The idea that the map of the Sykes-Picot Agreement created modern Iraq is especially bizarre, for merely looking at the map shows that its borders have rather little in common with the current borders of the country.

Further, Pursley argues, the narrative of Iraq as an artificial state has served not only as an anti-colonial narrative (a narrative about the wrongful impositions of the British empire), but also as a colonialist narrative, first by British and later by American commentators. During the British Mandate it was argued that as a new, artificial, and heterogeneous state, Iraq was not yet able to govern itself, but required continued British control. Likewise, during the American occupation, the narrative was used by apologists of the invasion: 'After all, what harm had been done in destroying a country that had never authentically existed in the first place?'²⁹

And while it is certainly true that the British colonial regime played a crucial role in the shaping of the nation of Iraq, this is not the same as claiming that its decisions were autocratic, unilateral, or even effective. Indeed, Sluglett notes repeatedly how British administration in Iraq was marred by short-sightedness and reluctance towards deep involvement. Dodge is even more trenchant in his critique of the British administration, showing time and again that its policies were shaped by inadequate imperialist preconceptions, a rapidly changing world order to which British aspirations had to adjust, and ill will towards the Mandate in post-war Britain. Further, Dodge frames this critique by yet another claim of historical repetition: that the US' occupation would repeat the mistakes of the British Mandate in its administration of Iraq.

In short, Pursley's critique paints a far more complex picture of how Iraq was constructed than a simple imperial invention. But if my analysis of the discourse of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia should not be understood as implying that Iraq is an invented state, what is then the relation between Pursley's critique and mine? There are three main points of convergence.

Firstly, to derive the modern unity of Iraq from the ancient unity of Mesopotamia presents us with a false choice. On the one hand, we can accept the unity of Iraq as transhistorically valid, in the model of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia, where the current shape of the country is purported to go back to the fourth millennium BCE. On the other hand, we can deny the unity of Iraq, claiming that is an artificial, modern imposition, that it has nothing in common with ancient Mesopotamia, and that any connection between the two amounts to anachronism. What this forecloses is to investigate the work and the violence that went into the creation of Iraq. If Iraq is *either* an ancient entity *or* a modern artificial construction, then what it seemingly cannot be is the result of historical transformation from one to the other. In short, like the Sykes-Picot narrative, the Iraq-as-Mesopotamia narrative places the responsibility for the creation and continued coherence of Iraq *some-where else* than modern Iraq—in modern Britain and ancient Iraq, respectively.

Secondly, it is therefore also a question of what historical change is brought to signify. In the choice between temporal disjunction and temporal coherence, historical change is somehow made impossible. Pursley examines the claim that it is anachronistic to speak of Iraq in the nineteenth century, because at that time the term Iraq denoted a different area. But as she points out, historical transformation is here sacrificed in the name of avoiding anachronism: 'After all, what historians are usually interested in is how things change from time A to time B. Usually we do not simply dismiss historical change as some kind of normative failure of something to stay the same.' Likewise, the historical transformations of the term 'Mesopotamia' shown by Rattenborg should not be employed to argue that the geographical unity we today refer to as 'Mesopotamia' is somehow fake or arbitrary. Rather, it should heighten our sensitivity to how *all* geographical unities are the products of historical transformation, and how their current legitimacy cannot be denied on the basis of such transformation.

Thirdly, Pursley delivers a strong critique of the figure of the *empty map*. For her, the empty map does not refer to the map on which the borders of Iraq were drawn, but to the vision of a future map, a vision in which each ethnosectarian group is

allotted its own, separate space. This vision relies, as Pursley shows, on the fantasy of an empty map:

a map filled with empty homogeneous space: empty of history; of claims to territory and other resources; of neighbors speaking different languages; of multiethnic villages and virtually any conceivable city; of existing provincial and international borders; of previously concluded treaties and agreements; of local and international laws; even of mountains, rivers, deserts, and oil deposits. Nothing but empty space and fixed ethnosectarian identities.

Just likewise, Iraq-as-Mesopotamia can serve as an empty map, except that it functions as a vision of a united and not a divided Iraq. But it remains an empty map: a vision of the past emptied of the cultural and historical transformations that connect and separate Sumerians and Persians, Babylonians and Chaldeans, and so on. As shown above, 'Mesopotamia' can function as a model of cultural purity, as it conflates all cultures on one side of its temporal divide. Even as it performs a conflation of ethnocultural groups, as against the separation of ethnosectarian groups discussed by Pursley, it still relies on a map filled with empty, homogenous space, the space of a 'Mesopotamia' where Sumer of the third millennium and Chaldea of the first millennium BCE can be somehow the same.³⁰

This false choice between empty maps is easily found in discussions of Iraq's future. In an episode of Al Jazeera's *Head to Head*-series, 'Will ISIL put an end to Iraq?', Mehdi Hassan interviewed Mowaffak al-Rubaie, the former National Security Advisor of Iraq. When pressed on the issue of Iraq's chances of survival, al-Rubaie's reaction is to retreat to the security of a historical past:

Mehdi Hassan: Given how fractured Iraq has become—Shia, Sunni, Kurd, Syrian, Christian, Yazidi, etcetera—there are some who say that there's no other option, inevitably, Iraq will divide into three separate states. What do you say to them?

Mowaffak al-Rubaie: Iraq is [*sic*] a united country for five thousand years, and we will prevail, and you'll see a united, secure, prosperous Iraq in a few years time from now.³¹

We see here, head to head, the two narratives discussed above. Mehdi Hassan summons the image of three separate and homogenous ethnosectarian states, while al-Rubaie retorts with the image of a single and homogenous Iraq-as-Mesopotamia, a country united in both time and space. Both of these images serve as empty maps, in Pursley's terminology, as they summon well-defined areas populated by homogenous and unchanging groups. Al-Rubaie's Iraq is emptied of history just as it is filled with time. His grammatical slip, however incidental it may be, captures well the logic of his defence. Iraq *is* a united country, and its unity extends changelessly into the past and, therefore, into the future, through what Baram refers to as 'Iraq's near-eternal people'.³² Crucially, both Hassan and al-Rubaie summon the inevitability of their scenario. Hassan's suggestion that 'there's no other option, inevitably, Iraq will divide' is met by al-Rubaie's assertion of a likewise inevitable success, 'we will prevail', recalling the inevitability of eternal return discussed in the beginning of the essay. What each of them preclude is historical *evitability*: that the coherence of Iraq is neither given in the

ancient past nor foreclosed by ‘fixed ethnosectarian identities’, but has been and must be continuously negotiated.

To move away from empty maps, in Pursley’s account, may thus require two things: living with difference, and living with history. If the fantasy of an ethnically homogenous state is a dream whose realization, in a region as heterogeneous as Iraq, would require massive population transfers and at least some form of ethnic cleansing, to let go of the empty map also implies working with difference, rather than working towards sameness. And it must be so, because present difference is a product of past transformation: to refill the map with history means refilling it with compromises, accidents, and violence, whose consequences cannot simply be wished away. Judith Butler, in her reading of Hannah Arendt’s famous statement that we cannot choose with whom to cohabit the earth, reminds us that this statement is not only an ethical, but a historical statement: a statement ‘that with whom we cohabit the world is something that is given to us, prior to choice—and even prior to any social or political contract’.³³ To empty the map of difference requires emptying it of history, simply because history is that which gives difference unto us, before us and beyond our volition.

To sum up, I begun this essay by exploring how the satirical coverage of the Da’esh insurgency in 2014 employed a Nietzschean theme of eternal return, in which conflict, coverage, and discovery were cast in a circular temporality. This cyclical time consisted of an alternation between shock and desert time, a pattern that was extended forwards as well as backwards. By further attending to the vicissitudes of the term ‘Mesopotamia’ I have shown that the historiography of Iraq in Western discourse displays patterns of spatial fragmentation as well as coherence, and of temporal recurrence as well as disjunction, arguing that each pattern formed the necessary background for the other. With Bahrani, I have argued that these patterns perform an effacement of the internal difference between the cultures of ancient Iraq, and an effectuation of external difference from the Islamic past of Iraq. With Rattenborg, I have further argued that the history of the term ‘Mesopotamia’ is one of messy betweenness, as the designation of the term is historically fluid. Messy betweenness, I further suggested, can also be seen as a product of the hybridity of colonial discourse, through which the model of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia acquires a double role as a site of oppression and of resistance. Finally, with Pursley, I have argued that the narrative of Iraq-as-Mesopotamia and that of Iraq as an artificial state present us with a false choice between modern invention and ancient unity, in which historical change is suppressed. Both narratives create empty, homogenous maps, without history or difference.

4. Postscript: The Destruction of Mesopotamia

To bring together these threads of return and messiness, I will take a brief look at two instances of the destruction of pre-Islamic antiquities in Iraq.

The first is Da’esh’ destruction of Assyrian artefacts in and near Mosul in March 2015. Claiming them to be false idols, Da’esh destroyed Assyrian statues both in the Mosul Museum and at the site of Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), posting videos of this destruction online. The ‘Bull-god’ that Rossetti imagined shipped off to Australia thus returns to our argument, not as the predicted object of re-discovery but as

an object of coverage. The reactions in Western media to these videos were prolific and often highly aggressive in their tone. One example is an opinion piece written by history popularizer Dan Carlin, 'Remains of a biblically brutal regime turned to dust by modern-day monsters':

I also watched recent video of ISIS members in a museum smashing (alleged) archaeological relics from the very ancient Mesopotamian past. I felt a certain sense of historical irony while doing so. I wondered as I watched them use sledgehammers and power drills on a 3,000 year old Assyrian statue if they realized that they were following the ancient Assyrian playbook as they tried to erase the region's past.³⁴

Return returns here in the guise of historical irony, irony in the sense that the actions of Da'esh are said to accomplish the opposite of their intent: to erase the past is to repeat the past. The title of the piece ('biblically brutal', 'modern-day monsters') is itself suggestive. Repetition of consonants seems here to index repetition of history, as if Da'esh' actions were themselves alliterative. But further, the structure of this repetition follows the pattern we have already seen, where temporal disjunction relies on recurrence which relies on disjunction ... That is, on the one hand, Carlin argues that Da'esh' attempt to distance themselves from the past and its 'false idols' brings them nearer to that same past and its violence: their disjunction functions as a form of recurrence. On the other hand, his claim that the destruction of artefacts is 'more evidence bolstering the idea that ISIS seeks to return to the values of an earlier, much more harsh historical era', relies on a previous separation of the Assyrian past from the present. For Da'esh to be presented as anachronistic, the Assyrians must first be relegated to a sphere of primitive and pre-modern brutality. Indeed, the specification '*modern-day* monsters' seems to do the opposite of what it says: Da'esh may be *in* the modern-day, but their monstrosity is not *of* it, it belongs to the past.

Through these reallocations in time, Da'esh' violence is also circumscribed in space. This violence belongs to Iraq, it comes from Iraq and returns to Iraq. By drawing the parallel between Da'esh and the Assyrian empire, Carlin carries out the same kind of shift we saw with the 'Mess O'Potamia' caption, whereby messiness is portrayed as somehow endemic to Iraq, from antiquity to today, subtly shifting blame from colonizer to colonized. This is all the more striking in Carlin's case because there is another far more obvious historical irony for him to point to, another repetition that is far more exact in its parallels: the wholesale destruction and looting of antiquities that occurred during the 2003 Iraq War, what Lawrence Rothfield has dubbed 'the rape of Mesopotamia'.³⁵

On 10 April 2003 the Iraq National Museum was looted, resulting in one of the most significant losses of cultural heritage in recent history. More than 15,000 artefacts were stolen, to be distributed on the illegal antiquities market. Meanwhile, the US forces did nothing to prevent or hinder this looting, despite having a tank unit close to the museum, despite numerous warnings from cultural heritage experts that this would most likely be the outcome of the instabilities in Baghdad, and despite the fact that they were required to do so by two international conventions.³⁶ The catastrophic failure of the US forces to prevent the looting of first the Iraq National Museum and later of archaeological sites throughout Iraq forms a striking

parallel to Da'esh' destruction of antiquities: in both cases, occupation of territory is followed directly by destruction of the past.

The crucial distinction between the two is of course that while Da'esh' was a simple, intentional and comparatively small-scale act of destruction, the US' was a complex, systemic failure resulting in widespread destruction. It was, in a word, *messy*. As Rothfield's detailed explanation shows, the story of how the museum and the archaeological sites could possibly be allowed to be looted is not a story of a singular mistake, but 'a tale of mixed motives and mixed signals; of appalling bureaucratic lassitude and individual derring-do'.³⁷ Ultimately, Rothfield argues, it stemmed from wider systemic failures within the US military and state system, such as the lack of strong cultural policy institutions and military policing forces, the disastrously hurried post-war planning, and deep divisions between state and military agencies. These problems were further mirrored in the groups working for the protection of cultural heritage, such as the likewise deep divisions between archaeologists and antiquity collectors.

Relegating responsibility for the eventual failure to such a complex mess of problems works, in Rothfield's analysis, as a poignant critique of the US invasion. However, it should be noted that messiness was also used as a defence by the apologists of that invasion, most notably Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense at the time. At a press briefing the day after the looting, Rumsfeld exclaimed:

Stuff happens! But in terms of what's going on in that country, it is a fundamental misunderstanding to see those images over, and over, and over again of some boy walking out with a vase and say, 'Oh, my goodness, you didn't have a plan.' That's nonsense. They know what they're doing, and they're doing a terrific job. And, it's untidy, and freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things, and that's what's going to happen here.³⁸

Messiness figures here as a defence for, rather than an accusation against, the US invasion: the US military forces are not at fault, because that fault belongs to the 'untidiness' of freedom itself. The crimes being committed are not an index of the occupation's failures to ensure order, because the order it seeks to ensure is to include crimes. Freedom itself is messy, and because freedom is messy, the occupation is not. In order to reasonably claim that there is a plan, and that the forces 'know what they're doing', Rumsfeld needs to also claim that this plan is a mess.³⁹ Once again, one sees how the claim that messiness is endemic, in this case endemic to freedom itself, is used to shift blame away from those that might otherwise be held responsible for that mess.

Just as the accusation of messiness is here turned into a defence, so is the theme of repetition. Far from underscoring the extent of the looting and lawlessness that the US was supposed to prevent, the images that are seen 'over, and over, and over again' somehow work to lessen their scale. Rumsfeld argues:

The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it 20 times, and you think, 'My goodness, were there that many vases?' (Laughter.) 'Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?'

Of course, the short answer to these questions is 'yes'. The actual amount of 'vases' in Iraq notwithstanding, around 15,000 artefacts were looted from the Iraq National Museum. But in Rumsfeld's argument, the repetition of the image somehow points to the singularity of the image: not 20 acts of looting, but *one* act of looting repeated 20 times. To see an image 'over, and over, and over' does not, according to Rumsfeld, heighten our sense of shock at what we are seeing, on the contrary repetition creates a sense of indifference ('some person', 'some building'): the act is flattened out by being repeated. If the Mesopotamian past returns to the present in Rumsfeld's argument, the very *iteration* of its return serves to dismiss it again.

If Da'esh' actions are a case of 'historical irony', as Carlin claims, they are far more precisely so because they repeat the outcome of the US invasion 12 years earlier. In both cases the occupation of Iraqi territory led directly to the destruction of a Mesopotamian past. Indeed, the parodic responses to the Da'esh insurgency with which this essay began make this parallelism eerily clear: Stewart's return of Mess O'Potamia, Colbert's rejuvenation, and Oliver's 'deja boom' all draw a disturbing likeness between the American military and the Islamic terrorists. Indeed, the satirists are not alone in pointing to this parallel. Rothfield's analysis of the 'rape of Mesopotamia' begins with an account of how the dome of the Al-Askari Mosque was destroyed by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. And though he is quick to point out the differences between the two destructions (Al-Qaeda's was deliberate, the US' was not), the similarities linger in his argument as an uncanny historical repetition.

But if there is indeed a parallel between the two, it may most disturbingly lie in a shared attempt to erase the past. To rid their new map of religious difference, Da'esh has to rid it of history: the establishment of a homogenous Sunni region requires not only the mass-murder and deportation of non-Sunni groups, but just as much the eradication of the region's past. To live without difference, or in Pursley's words, to construct an empty map, requires the destruction of history. Likewise, Isakhan argues that the US' occupation's attempt at a de-Baathification of Iraq required the historical memory hijacked by Saddam Hussein to be destroyed. In order to undo not only the administrative and military aspect of the Baath regime, but its symbolic dimension as well, the occupation forces needed to target cultural heritage associated with the regime. Though he stops short of claiming a purposeful attack on the ancient past by the US forces, Isakhan argues that 'the disregard for the key archaeological sites of ancient Mesopotamia and classical Islamic mosques indicate, at the very least, a high degree of indifference towards a wide spectrum of Iraq's cultural heritage'.⁴⁰

Deliberate or not, colonial indifference can also be a way of destroying the past (for example, by not caring about 'some person walking out of some building with a vase'). Indeed, one should remember the extent to which the two pasts were interwoven at the time. As predicted by Baram,

paradoxically, the Baathists' attempt to implant their version of the Mesopotamian/Iraqi connection may have damaged, rather than enhanced, its chances of becoming a meaningful component of the Iraqi national identity since, in the future, it will be difficult to separate the two in the minds of the people of Iraq.⁴¹

It may well be that one could not destroy Baathist past without destroying the Mesopotamian past as well. Again, the same impasse is reached: to rid the map of unwanted difference requires the destruction of the past.

In short, these two instances of the ancient past being destroyed through modern conflict bring together many of the tropic threads I have sought to unravel in this essay. Critical responses to these acts of destruction, in both Carlin and Rothfield's case, employed the trope of return to articulate their criticism, drawing once more a set of politically fraught parallels between the modern and the ancient past. Further, in Carlin's piece especially, this return followed a familiar pattern of disjunction and recurrence, separating past from present only to bring them together again. Ultimately, this repetition pivots on the posited identity between Iraq and Mesopotamia, a historical tautology that allows Carlin to portray violence as endemic to Iraq.

Further, the discussion surrounding the 2003 looting of the Iraq National Museum highlighted another way in which the relation between Mesopotamia and Iraq could be characterized as messy: messiness is the means through which modern colonial indifference led to the destruction of the ancient past. One way or the other, both Da'esh' smashing of antiquities and the US' failure to protect them were connected with the same goal of creating an empty map in Iraq, free of difference and therefore free of history. Free of non-Sunni history in Da'esh' case, and free of Baathist history in the US' case.

Taken together, these threads all point to the complexity of temporal and spatial divisions in Iraq. The claims that Iraq and Mesopotamia are identical or that they have nothing to do with each other, that they are spuriously artificial constructions or self-evident geographies, that they are homogenous regions or that there is a firm temporal difference between them, all those claims fail to capture the complexity of the issue, and indeed serve only to increase that complexity. To fully understand the significance of these terms, it is necessary to attend to their long, gradual, and convoluted histories. The inextricable intricacies of the past inevitably determine how we crosscut our world.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

- ¹ Jon Stewart, 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, June 12th: Christopher Walken', *Comedy Central*, 12 June 2014.
- ² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, W. Kaufmann (trans), New York: Vintage Books, 1887, 1974, p 273.
- ³ Respectively, Stephen Colbert, 'The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert, June 16th: Ta-Nehisi Coates', *Comedy Central*, 16 June 2014; John Oliver, 'Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, August 10th: Sarah Silverman', *HBO*, 10 August 2014.
- ⁴ Line 171 and 176–180, quoted in Andrew M. Stauffer, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Burdens of Nineveh', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33(2), 2005, p 379. Stauffer investigates the Victorian 'fascination with

- Assyria as a dark mirror of England', arguing that the newly excavated artefacts came to represent the violence and futility of imperial expansion, in 'a sort of archeological return of the repressed' (p 370).
- ⁵ Frederick Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp 147, 185.
- ⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- ⁷ Note that the Arabic preposition being elided, *fī*, is more precisely translated 'in' than 'of'. However, the point remains that what is at stake for Da'esh, as it is for the Kurdistan region, is a troubled sense of belonging, in this case to the belonging to a state whose legitimacy it seeks to deny. I thank Rune Rattenborg for bringing this point to my attention.
- ⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004, p 2.
- ⁹ See, for example, the summary in Piotr Michalowski, 'Mesopotamian Vistas on Axial Transformations', in J. P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and B. Wittrock (eds), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp 159–160.
- ¹⁰ Jacob Joel Finkelstein, 'Mesopotamia', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21(2), 1962, p 73 notes that the word 'Mesopotamia' in its Greek form is first attested as describing an administrative unit in Alexander's empire. In doing so, the Greeks borrowed an expression that already existed in Akkadian and Aramaic but eventually reinterpreted it, as detailed below.
- ¹¹ Zainab Bahrani, 'Conjuring Mesopotamia: Imaginative Geography and a World Past', in L. Meskell (ed.), *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, London: Routledge, 1998, p 160.
- ¹² Bahrani, 'Conjuring', p 170.
- ¹³ Kenan Makiya, quoted in Bahrani, 'Conjuring', p 171.
- ¹⁴ Bahrani, 'Conjuring', p 171.
- ¹⁵ Bahrani, 'Conjuring', pp 162–163.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Bohrer, *Orientalism*, p 231. The etymology of the word axiom is revealing in this context: it derives from *'axios*, meaning 'worthy, of value': an axiom is that which has value. An axiom of science is thus what allows science to distribute that value, particularly to that to which value is not intrinsic, and because an axiom is a 'universal' principle, it can distribute values universally.
- ¹⁷ See Bahrani, 'Conjuring', p 166; Steven W. Holloway, 'Introduction: Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible', in S. W. Holloway (ed), *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2006, p 41; Maria Theresia Starzmann, 'Cultural Imperialism and Heritage Politics in the Event of Armed Conflict: Prospects for an "Activist Archeology"', *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 4 (3), 2008, pp 371–372 with references.
- ¹⁸ See Michael Seymour, 'Ancient Mesopotamia and Modern Iraq in the British Press, 1980–2003', *Current Anthropology* 45(3), 2004, pp 351–368. Seymour describes how these three mechanisms worked together in the coverage of the Iran–Iraq war:

On the one hand, readers were asked to see the Iranian theocracy as stuck in the past [...] On the other, they were asked to believe that it was a historically illegitimate aberration of the present. To reconcile the conflict of antiquation and illegitimacy, the reader must employ the logic of Victorian progress narratives and, more specifically, of the idea that history (in the 'rise of civilization' sense) in the Middle East 'progressed' to a certain point before stopping dead, at which point the West took up the 'torch of civilization'. (p 355)

- The trope of the 'torch of civilization' is here coupled with the separability of Islamic and pre-Islamic past in order to explain how the Iranian theocracy can be both past and present, that is, to reconcile the contradiction of recurrence and disjunction.
- ¹⁹ Finkelstein, 'Mesopotamia', pp 78–82, 84–86.
- ²⁰ Rune Rattenborg, 'Configuring Mesopotamia: Regional Signifiers and the Many Locations of the "Land between the Rivers"', in S. Grunwald et al. (eds), *Mapping Ancient Identities: Kartographische Identitätskonstruktionen in den Alttertumswissenschaften*, Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming.
- ²¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 2012, pp 159–160. For an extended discussion of hybridity in connection with the 19th century excavations of Assyria, see Bohrer, *Orientalism*.
- ²² Benjamin Isakhan, 'Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq: Cultural Destruction, Historical Memory, and National Identity', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4(3), 2011, p 263.

- Isakhan further argues that the Baathist regime's symbolic use of historical imagery was carefully targeted during the US invasion, in order to undo any and all aspects of Hussein's Iraq.
- ²³ Amatzia Baram, 'A Case of Imported Identity: The Modernizing Secular Ruling Elites of Iraq and the Concept of Mesopotamian-Inspired Territorial Nationalism, 1922–1992', *Poetics Today* 15(2), 1994, pp 279–319. The quotations are from pp 288–289 and 304, respectively.
- ²⁴ Seymour, 'Ancient Mesopotamia', pp 355, 358 and 360.
- ²⁵ I thank Mikkel Ahlberg for bringing this point to my attention. See, for example, Dairieh, Medyan 'The Islamic State, Part 5', *VICE News*, 26 December 2014.
- ²⁶ Bhabha, *Location*, p 122.
- ²⁷ See Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country, 1914–1932*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- ²⁸ Sara Pursley, "'Lines Drawn on an Empty Map": Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State', *Jadaliyya*, 2 June 2015.
- ²⁹ Pursley, 'Lines Drawn', part 2.
- ³⁰ Shawn Malley, 'Layard Enterprise: Victorian Archaeology and Informal Imperialism in Mesopotamia', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40(4), 2008, pp 637–640 notes an interesting example of the convergence of these two maps. Austen Henry Layard, the famous excavator of Nineveh who in the 1850s brought ancient Assyria to worldwide fame, worked also as a spy for the Foreign Office, informally attached to the British consulate in Constantinople. Malley draws attention to two memoranda composed by Layard, both describing ludicrously ambitious plans for British engagement in what was then becoming Iraq. The first describes the complete excavation of all antiquities in Mesopotamia within two and a half years, to be divided between Constantinople and England. The second describes the forceful settlement of all nomadic Arab tribes between 'the two rivers', for the purposes of taxation and trade. That is, once history is entirely removed from the region, the resultant empty map can be freely rearranged to suit imperial interests. Unmoored from history people can be 'fixed' anew, in the phantasmagorically homogenous space of what Malley calls 'Layard's paper empire'.
- ³¹ Mehdi Hassan, 'Will ISIL Put an End to Iraq?', *Al Jazeera*, 21 November 2014.
- ³² Baram, 'Imported Identity', p 305.
- ³³ Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, p 151.
- ³⁴ Dan Carlin, 'Remains of a Biblically Brutal Regime Turned to Dust by Modern-day Monsters', *Reuters*, 9 March 2015.
- ³⁵ Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention. On the destruction of antiquities during the 2003 Iraq War see also Peter Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjalay (eds), *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008; also Lawrence Rothfield (ed), *Antiquities under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection after the Iraq War*, Lanham: Altamira Press, 2008.
- ³⁶ Rothfield, *The Rape*, p 40.
- ³⁷ Rothfield, *The Rape*, p 3.
- ³⁸ 'DoD News Briefing – Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers', U.S. Department of Defense, 11 April 2003.
- ³⁹ In the same briefing, Rumsfeld says: 'The plan is a complex set of conclusions or ideas that then have a whole series of alternative excursions that one can do, depending on what happens.'
- ⁴⁰ Isakhan, 'Targeting', p 270.
- ⁴¹ Baram, 'Imported Identity', p 316.