The Counter-Archive: Eluding the Erasures of Iraq's Successive Wars

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ABSTRACT

Institutional archives in Southwest Asia (or the "Middle East") typically reflect the crises that have plagued the region since the advent of modernity. Documentation practices were scarce to begin with, and, if state-sponsored archives were ever established after independence, they usually remained inaccessible. This article ponders the fate of scholarship when the historical record is subjected to another degree of erasure, namely through the systematic destruction wrought by conflicts, as has been the case in Iraq over the past few decades. Using the challenge of accounting for the art-architectural movement that emerged in post–World War II Baghdad as a case study, this obliteration may provide an opportunity for redefining the role that scholars can play in writing histories of modernism in the region. Rather than dwelling on the incompleteness or loss of traditional archives, this article questions and decenters dominant archival practices, especially in places that have experienced, and continue to endure, organized violence. It adopts the notion of the "counter-archive" and demonstrates how alternative sources such as oral accounts, fieldwork, press coverage, memoirs, and private collections can shift the course of research and yield equally valuable alternative histories. Careful interpretation of these nonconventional and typically discredited sources, aided by novel digital representation methods, can not only produce more situated chronicles, defined by the agency of local protagonists, but can also demonstrate that crossing disciplinary boundaries can create richer, layered, and unexpected narratives.

KEY WORDS

Architecture, Art, Baghdad, Conflict, Counter-archive, History, Iraq, Modernism, Southwest Asia, War

> *The archive has neither status nor power without an architectural dimension, which encompasses the physical space of the site of the building, its motifs and columns, the arrangement of the rooms, the organisation of the "files," the labyrinth of corridors, and that degree of discipline, half-light and austerity that gives the place something of the nature of a temple and a cemetery: a religious space because a set of rituals is constantly taking place there . . . and a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics.*

<div align="right">—Achille Mbembe, 2002[1]</div>

Studying the art and architectural movements that thrived in mid-twentieth-century Baghdad has been a nerve-wracking endeavor. It is an ostensibly impossible project: modern repositories in Iraq were heavily compromised following the 2003 American-led invasion, and conducting research within the country became immensely dangerous in the turmoil that ensued. But my anxiety has primarily stemmed from a formal training as a scholar in the West, with stringent protocols dictating that there is simply no history without official archives or extensive fieldwork. As a historian of art and architecture, I had learned a specific definition of archives: collections of well-preserved primary materials, including original and unpublished documents, held for their cultural or research value at national collections, historical societies, and various other public or academic institutions. My options were to either abandon the project or to challenge accepted dogmas.[2]

Indeed, there is a tacit assumption that the veracity of a historian's narrative depends not only on a rigorous practice of citing and interpreting credible sources, but also on the kind and authenticity of these sources, not to mention the institutional archives out of which the evidence is drawn. Archives seem to be unconsciously equated with truthfulness—their contents are meant to inspire certainty, as the most credible, and perhaps only, body of evidence for the exacting historian. Archival research is therefore seen as a rite of passage. The primacy of the archives as the sanctioned foundation of historical scholarship has been reified by political systems invested in bolstering narratives that reflect the ideological frameworks that precipitated their national archives in the first place.[2] This valorization of archives, as the hallowed arbiters of what can be said about the past, has equally been perpetuated by independent historians, who have defined their role in direct connection to archives.[3] Fortunately, early on in my research journey, I suspended the tenets that overtly or implicitly govern historical scholarship.[4]

While I am still working on this research, I came to realize that parting ways with conventional archival definitions could enable me to share some of my findings about the unique art-architectural culture of modern Baghdad.[5] This research would not have been possible otherwise—had I expected to find records at proper, western-sanctioned archives. Even though this history has not been adequately documented to date, and no substantial evidence has been deposited at official archives, it became possible for me to outline key aspects of this culture thanks to

direct conversations with surviving pioneers of that movement, as well as access to their private archives. For example, I have argued how this shared art-architectural culture emerged in domestic spaces and not in institutional settings, as in other contexts—and that it would only be possible to account for this culture from within domestic spaces too. Indeed, traveling around the world, and speaking with exiles at their homes, while consulting what they had kept from their time in modern Iraq, gave rise to an alternative history, which I could not have possibly anticipated, thus radically transforming my scholarship. But to appreciate how I got there, I must retrace my steps.

Institutional archives in Southwest Asia (the region conventionally known as the "Middle East") reflect the crises that have plagued this part of the world, and postcolonial geographies more broadly, since the advent of modernity. Official documentation practices have been scarce to begin with, especially in formerly colonized contexts. Local histories were hardly the priority of modern colonial institutions. State-sponsored archives, when they were established before or after independence (or under some form of mandate that guaranteed the colonizers' continued influence, as happened in Iraq under the British), either remained inaccessible or did not necessarily privilege the recording of intellectual output at odds with oppressive nationalist politics.[6] Therefore, historians working on postcolonial subjects often face a dire reality: patchy archives, poorly maintained facilities, erratic documentation procedures, circuitous and murky access parameters, politicized excisions, and highly charged approaches toward collecting evidence that mostly serves to legitimize national or ruling party histories.[7] But what is the fate of scholarship when the historical record is subjected to another degree of erasure, specifically the systematic destruction wrought by conflict, as has been the case in Iraq over the past few decades? And, considering Achille Mbembe's proposition in the epigraph, what happens when both the evidence and the architecture that contains it are targeted and wrecked?

Over the past few decades, Iraq has tragically become synonymous with chronic unrest, warfare, displacement, and the general collapse of state sovereignty, with ineffectual governments that have been unable to restore even the highly compromised infrastructure and services that existed prior to the 2003 invasion.[8] Looking further back, the fledgling modern nation created by the British colonial administration in 1921 was rocked by political instability, culminating in the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in the 1958 coup d'état, known as the July 14 Revolution. More coups followed in the 1960s, eventually giving rise to the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. The protracted Iraq-Iran war (1980–1988) depleted the country, and then the regime invaded neighboring Kuwait in 1990, leading to the Gulf War and repeated American-led strikes throughout the 1990s, along with the sadistic UN-endorsed economic sanctions that starved Iraqis for thirteen years.

But it was the carnage and chaos unleashed by the American-led invasion that dealt the most devastating blow to the country's cultural and academic institutions. In pre-2003 Iraq, recordkeeping and access to information may have been colored by the political priorities of successive local governments (not unlike other contexts that experienced such drastic and rapid changes). But the modern nation of Iraq did manage to build some impressive repositories, concentrated primarily in the capital Baghdad. Soon after the invasion, however, museums, libraries, and archives were burned, looted, and vandalized—an enormous cultural catastrophe the full extent of which is still unknown.[9] The assault on Iraq was also enacted through the annihilation of its national memory, whether deliberate or simply the result of gross negligence.[10] Like Iraq's former regimes, the United States signaled its priorities when it came to recordkeeping: the occupying troops protected the Ministry of Oil and also transported millions of Ba'ath Party documents now housed in Stanford University's Hoover Institution.[11] Also gone missing in Iraq were some of the inventories that account for the holdings of local repositories—particularly the modern art collections, crucial for my research.[12] Today, several of the surviving archives remain closed or neglected, and barely any reliable information exists about their current status and whether they can be accessed by independent scholars.

In recent years, and as a sort of remedy, I have attempted to uncover whatever remnants of relevant sources might still exist around the world. With the right local connections, I also managed to access several institutions in Baghdad. I discovered that priceless materials have been irrevocably lost. Everything at the Iraqi Artists Society was destroyed in 2003, and the current "archive" consists of poor-quality images printed from anonymous sources found on the Internet. But some repositories have been rehabilitated, at least partially. This includes the Iraqi National Library and Archives, which reopened for researchers after being pillaged and set ablaze in the days following the invasion. Much of the material I consulted, with a focus on the history of art, archaeology, and heritage more broadly, was extracted from the Iraq Museum library (which miraculously survived the infamous ransacking of that institution). The Ministry of Culture, on the other hand, has suffered immense losses in the turmoil. All that remains is a small library at the Directorate of Plastic Arts, containing some Iraqi publications, which pales in comparison to the Iraqi holdings of some American libraries. The ministry attempted to rebuild its archives by purchasing the private collections of a few prominent local figures, but after one costly acquisition that remained largely uncataloged and abandoned in a dusty storage space, these efforts have been aborted (it is a lot more lucrative for the contents of surviving archives to be sold locally to collectors and dealers or smuggled abroad).

This is not to give the impression that private archives in Iraq have remained intact. At the center of my research is the home-grown modernism led by a group of local artists and architects who produced powerful work during the mid-twentieth

FIGURE 1. Current state of some uncataloged and inaccessible archival materials at one of Iraq's ministries. *Courtesy of Amin Alsaden.*

century, despite the immense difficulties they encountered. But compounding the dearth of scholarship on the subject and the destruction of official archives is the fact that many of these Baghdadi figures have already passed away, while others were forced abroad, usually leaving behind the bulk of their belongings—a few personal libraries have been entirely discarded. The best of their work, preserved for decades at museums and academic institutions in Iraq, was plundered following the invasion. Some of the buildings realized by the architects of this period, which constitute important evidence for my project, were destroyed in conflict or razed to the ground due to wild real estate speculation and the lack of governmental regulation that could have protected these structures as examples of modern heritage; other buildings were decimated by American missiles or in battles with the terrorist organization ISIS. The situation in Iraq has made my quest to narrate the history of the country's modern art and architectural movements a formidable challenge.

Outside Iraq, there are other impediments. When it comes to periodicals, original publications, or archival materials focusing on the modern artistic and cultural developments in Iraq, I came to discover how little western libraries have collected—perhaps due to the lack of interest in nonwestern modernisms, at least until fairly recently (but the holdings of some libraries, such as those at Harvard University, still possess more sources than the majority of extant libraries in Iraq). Most institutions tend to focus on ancient history, to bolster the absurd but long-held belief that Mesopotamian heritage constitutes the cradle of western civilization (a conviction that canonical surveys of western art and architecture continue to

propagate, and one that was repeated in some media coverage of the looting of the Iraq Museum).[13] Furthermore, while hardly any of these institutions have collected primary materials on Iraqi artists and architects, let alone the secondary literature about the subject produced and published in Iraq, they might have collected periodicals about the modern literary or poetry movements and mostly those about economic and political developments. The clearer the picture, the more daunting the prospects: writing a historical account without official archives or primary sources seemed like an impossible task.

It became imperative to come up with an alternative approach, one that entailed simply keeping track of everyone and everything I could find—whatever may shed light on the subject. I reached out to those who lived through the period in question and gradually established an extensive network of contacts. This translated into interviews by phone or in person, as well as traveling to meet living protagonists, their families, or associates. The majority of those I connected with were generous with their time, memories, personal collections, and contacts. My research in Baghdad and the region also proved fruitful in terms of Arabic language sources, some of which I had to purchase from various vendors, and others I digitized wherever I found them. Combined with materials I spotted at libraries and public archives in different parts of the world, which I systematically scanned or photographed for my research, I ended up compiling my own specialized, mobile, and primarily digital archives.* In other words, instead of relying on the kinds of thorough, already established, and regularly maintained public collections available to someone studying western subject matter, I found myself obliged to create my private archives. This was the most viable methodology I could devise: to build an alternative evidentiary body, the provenance of which I was confident. My archives encompasses photographs, drawings, maps, handwritten documents (such as memoirs, notes, and letters), publications, postcards, and artworks, among other materials.

Therefore, and while I did consult some traditional primary sources at official archives, such as indexed or cataloged documents accessed through carefully prepared guides and finding aids and deposited at governmental or academic institutions around the world, I also ended up encountering a wide range of informal evidence: personal papers and family collections that have barely been examined, sometimes for decades, even by their owners; diaries, correspondence, and neglected ephemera in private possession; and photographs, film clips, and scraps of publications. Through my work, I contributed to organizing collections, annotating thousands of documents, helping consolidate and preserve information with the original owners, and at times providing support with moving materials to publicly accessible archives.[14] In some cases, I relied on crowdsourced materials when I needed, for example, to locate a specific site or document, or to identify a person

*The use of the plural "archives" is a style norm for *American Archivist*, and it is used throughout this article.

in a photograph, and was often pleasantly surprised by what new things complete strangers could teach me online.

Furthermore, I was able to access numerous Iraqi and Arab publications from the period on which I focus—some in completely unexpected places, tucked inside folios, or sitting on shelves and in boxes untouched for many years—and I produced extensive translations of these materials, as well as previously unpublished documents. By digitizing whatever I could find, whenever I was given permission, for my own reference, the bits and pieces collected by individuals began to complement those held by others, and I soon ended up with what became one of the most comprehensive archives on the art and architecture of modern Iraq, larger than any publicly or privately held archives of which I am aware.[15] This makeshift archives is far from complete, however. The vagaries of time and the tumultuous events that Baghdad has experienced have taken their toll. But what I have gathered—which continues to grow as more evidence becomes available—has sharpened the outlines of an emerging narrative, supplying the cornerstones for the arguments this provisional archives enabled me to make.

Summarizing my research process in a few lines does not mean this was an easy journey. It took me several years of total immersion in this effort. It made me seek out countless individuals and visit numerous homes and organizations. It cost enormous resources, at times directly from my own savings. And, in retrospect, some of my research trips were potentially dangerous, not only because of haphazard attacks, such as suicide bombings or kidnappings that often targeted congregations and institutions, but also because of official and public suspicion of anyone conducting research, documenting objects and buildings in a volatile context. Additionally, I am not addressing here how much of the material I encountered, whether in private or public possession, was a source of ideological contestation, colored by current and past political allegiances, class and social circles, or religious and sectarian belonging, even for those who are not necessarily practicing; the power dynamics and instability within modern and contemporary Iraq, not to mention its diasporic communities, can affect access to crucial materials.[16] Moreover, I do not wish to pause here at the occasional chilling realization that some historical episodes—which may be detected based on elementary information such as the biography of an important protagonist or an influential article published in a local periodical, neither of which can be pieced together or found—are irretrievably lost.[17]

It was only by perceiving the challenges as opportunities and revisiting the definition and role that the archives is meant to play that I was able to bypass the ostensibly insurmountable obstacles that stood in the way of my research. This is important not just in the context of contemporary Iraq, but, as some scholars have argued, in the postcolonial Arab world and the non-West more broadly.[18] Rather than dwelling on the incompleteness or loss of official archives, I realized that reconciling myself to the likelihood that there are gaps we simply cannot fill and embracing alternative

sources such as those I started relying on—oral accounts, private collections, and so on—could shift the course of my research and yield equally alternative histories. This raised the question of where such alternative sources and methodologies might lead my research. I became cognizant of the fact that a careful interpretation of these nonconventional and typically discredited sources, aided by new digital representation methods that might render intelligible information entering circulation for the first time, could play a decisive role in my scholarship. This produces not only more truthful and situated chronicles grounded in the specific reality of the context as well as in the agency of local protagonists, it also crosses disciplinary boundaries and creates unexpected, layered, and dense narratives.

This has led me to the concept of the "counter-archive," which designates the alternative evidentiary body—admittedly fragmented, fluid, and ever-evolving—that might be assembled from materials that defy conventional definitions of archives, and which would in turn produce alternative histories.[19] While I stumbled on this concept organically, through the methodology I pursued in response to the challenges I was facing, I came to find out that there is an existing body of literature about community and counter-archives (mostly in the field of archival studies, that is, beyond art and architectural history, and usually outside existing scholarship on modern Iraq). For instance, Jeannette Allis Bastian proposes that in postcolonial contexts, traditional archives do not capture subaltern voices, so more egalitarian, community-based recordkeeping practices become crucial for writing more inclusive and representative histories.[20] Andrew Flinn has described anti-hegemonic archival practices, as well as nonprofessional public history creation, as a form of activism, part of a progressive and democratic social movement.[21] Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez have studied the impact of community archives and concluded that counter-archival practices not only fill a glaring gap in historical scholarship but also create a sense of belonging for communities previously overlooked or excluded from national and global narratives.[22] Numerous other scholars have explored similar ideas in different contexts, contributing to a growing body of knowledge that is ameliorating colonial archival conventions and questioning research norms, as well as challenging state-sponsored and institutional documenting powers.

But, in the specific context of contemporary Iraq, where successive wars have taken their toll, nontraditional archives assume an even more vital role. Indeed, as Mbembe suggests, the destruction of archives, not necessarily only as a result of warfare, allows them to acquire new meanings, which could very well generate new imaginaries, thus new histories.[23] For me, the transgressions of the counter-archive serve to combat deliberate erasures, slow down the corrosive effects of time, and assert the possibility of writing histories in places where documentation may appear unlikely, or impossible. The counter-archive acknowledges, rather than evades or suppresses, the geopolitics that produced hegemonic archival definitions

and practices to begin with—mired as they are in colonial entanglements—and that also led to the destruction of repositories in war-torn geographies. The concept does not compromise on rigor, and it still holds the historian accountable. Equally, the counter-archive does not obviate the need for a diligent search for materials, verification and evaluation of sources, or careful interpretation of evidence.

By bringing the haunting legacies of colonialism into sharp focus and liberating the nonwestern historian from oppressive doctrines, the counter-archive can begin to change research optics and methodologies. The resources identified and the narratives woven by the historian can be prioritized, rather than venerating the traditional archives in and of itself. This enables the counter-archive to empower the historian to tell alternative stories.[24] It also helps eschew the false pretenses of objectivity and neutrality not only in relation to the evidence found in archives, but also as that pertains to the historian's craft, emphasizing instead the agency and underlining the deeply personal motives, and biases, of the historian (in my case, the desire to retell misconstrued narratives about figures whom I knew made salient contributions and to counter the insidious erasures threatening the modern culture of my ancestral homeland).[25] Additionally, the new narratives are rooted not only in the complex reality of this part of the world, but also in the fraught nature of the counter-archive itself.[26] However, the counter-archive is not simply necessitated by the circumstances of a beleaguered context such as that of modern Iraq as the only, and impoverished, option of approaching the challenges at hand. Instead, the counter-archive must be viewed affirmatively as a place of recollection, an archives uniquely capable of capturing the memories, including the adversities, of the extraordinary time and place being studied.[27] In retrospect, and by adopting the concept of the counter-archive, I can recognize three distinct areas in which my research has changed significantly.

First, oral history has helped open my eyes to narratives that are largely absent from existing published or archival materials. I was initially skeptical about conducting interviews with surviving protagonists, mostly because my western training subscribed to the paradigm that the historian's craft lies in writing accounts based on a critical interpretation of primary materials found in official archives—that testimonies should be discredited as unreliable hearsay, even when the interviewee happens to be at the very core of the narrative. Fortunately, however, I drifted into the realm of casual conversations, unfettered by what I had learned. Not that the interviews became my main source. I hardly ever quoted any of my interviewees or relied solely on their statements; instead, I would reference them, usually in footnotes, when I thought that acknowledging an individual's viewpoint was important for illuminating specific aspects of the narrative. Listening to artists and architects describe in their own words the ambitions of their projects, their gatherings and collaborations, and the hurdles they faced, as well as provide an evaluation of their work and that of others—sometimes hearing these memories, on the verge of

disappearance, in Baghdad itself—provided me with a lucid image of that place and time, which in turn informed some of the claims I make in my scholarship.[28] Above all, these interactions humanized these figures for me, which was essential in forming a better appreciation of their circumstances, challenges, and accomplishments.

Critically, oral histories helped me refute preconceived ideas about the intentions and practices of these figures. Again, this is one of the ways in which the counter-archive operates: it elucidates absences or uncovers implausible arguments, generating alternative narratives that are more faithful to the protagonists' project and more situated in the realities of the context. The work of these artists and architects was characterized by a polemical integration of local elements, motifs, and materials into an otherwise modern framework. This has invariably been interpreted as a nationalist aesthetic, a postcolonial identity struggle, or even a nascent form of postmodernism. By listening to the protagonists, however, I came to understand that the apparently self-provincializing approach they deployed was an attempt to assert a definition of "globalism" (or *Al-ʿAlamiyah* in Arabic), the idea that each modern culture participates in making a pluralistic world that flourishes only by amplifying diversity. In other words, their artworks and buildings advocated a progressive and radical intellectual position wherein only by asserting local specificity could these artists and architects produce quintessentially global works. Listening to them, and collecting the evidence to which they guided me, transformed my approach to the subject, ultimately helping me do justice to their work. My narrative now challenges stereotypical assumptions about this and other nonwestern contexts, underlining the protagonists' agency and desire to engage with the world.

Second, I discovered through these conversations, and the evidence I collected from various private archives, that the work of the architects could not possibly be discussed without addressing fellow artists active in mid-twentieth-century Baghdad. Again, embracing the counter-archive alerted me to the fact that certain historical episodes—such as the development of artistic practices in modern Iraq—are taken for granted, as though not much remains to be contributed. To correct those misconceptions, my project evolved to become fundamentally interdisciplinary, exploring the shared artistic-architectural movement, in the singular, that emerged in this context, crossing the boundaries of art and architecture. I have been working on the first study to consider the fundamental roles of both art and architecture in shaping the distinct local intellectual agenda and aesthetic forms that emerged in modern Baghdad. I am interested in unpacking the affinities, overlaps, and common projects of disciplines that are historically intertwined and yet have become increasingly autonomous in the modern era.[29] My project goes beyond the customary focus on the Iraqi government's oil-funded development campaign, or how Baghdad brought together a stellar group of international architects, such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Walter Gropius. Instead, my emphasis is on local protagonists, from artists such as Jewad Selim, Mediha Umar, and Shakir Hasan Al Said, to architects

like Ellen Jawdat, Rifat Chadirji, and Mohamed Makiya. By tracing the lineaments of this movement, and how it was founded and flourished, the project questions the hyperspecialization of art and architecture, emphasizing instead multiplicities, intersections, and syntheses across disciplines.

And third, my alternative sources made me acutely aware of how existing historical narratives have often overlooked the fundamental role played by women as creative and intellectual interlocutors, and as true partners in the formation of the modern art-architectural movement that emerged in this context. This is especially pronounced in a conservative society such as that of early and mid-twentieth-century Iraq, where women could not enjoy the same opportunities as their male counterparts, forgotten in chronicles that focused primarily on men. An integral dimension of my ongoing project became the documentation of the role played by women in this narrative: for example, highlighting the work of pioneer architects like Ellen Jawdat, who championed the introduction of modern architecture in Baghdad and the articulation of localized intellectual agendas and formal expression. I also study artists like Mediha Umar, known as one of the first to experiment with hybridizing Arabic calligraphy with abstract painting (in fact, a trailblazer in the regional movement that came to be known as "Hurufiyyah," or letter-based modern and contemporary art).[30] My preliminary research has already shown that the shared artistic-architectural movement that emerged in this context was progressive in the interaction of the genders, something that previous scholars had disregarded, focusing instead on key figures, often men, who dominate existing narratives.

Shunning conventional archival definitions allowed me to appreciate how the modernism of these Baghdadi artists and architects was exemplary, both intellectually and aesthetically—not just considering the challenging state of affairs in Iraq, but globally too, in the context of the post–World War II period.[31] Misrepresentations of this culture, usually examined from a sterile distance, abound: judgments stem from viewing this and similar places through the instantly dismissive lens of being different, belonging to the Arab-Muslim "Orient," with all its putatively unmodern associations. But, if these reductive and pernicious judgments are suspended, then a more accurate understanding of Baghdad's post–WWII art-architectural movement can be articulated. Indeed, by looking at the written, visual, and built evidence—not only lost in translation, but largely untranslated and undocumented to date—and the sort of lives the protagonists of this story led, rather than casting the narrative in the usual myopic mold, the unique accomplishments of these protagonists can be recognized. The evidence I collected, as well as my familiarity with the culture, my fluency in the local dialect of Arabic, and the intimacy I developed with surviving protagonists, aid me in avoiding the essentialisms and myriad preconceived notions about these people, or about Baghdad, the city where they lived and worked.

Adopting the counter-archive made me realize that the most fundamental contribution my project can make lies in simply rendering the narrative as faithfully as

possible and amplifying through my scholarship the collective voices of the protag-
onists, all while capturing the nuances of local culture. Even though my research
has been concerned with the emergence of a shared artistic-architectural movement
in Baghdad and the type of aesthetics to which it gave rise, the narrative is equally
about the agency of Baghdadi artists and architects. This relatively small group,
aided by certain circumstances and impeded by others, envisioned their place in
the world, laid the foundations for their disciplines locally, institutionalized the
practice and education of art and architecture, and shaped the built environment of
their city, eventually exporting their work to the rest of the region. Indeed, my work
became about simply accounting for this movement. At times, I was more like an
ethnographer embedded within his own community, attempting a "thick descrip-
tion" that produces a richer representation of a subject—and less like a historian
working in a place that has been ravaged, and where little documentation exists.[32]

The counter-archive for me is now a metaphor, a methodology, and an ethos.
It affirms a stance of resistance, defying the cult of the archives, which by default
invalidates scholarship about places that lack the kinds of repositories housed in
the protected, templelike establishments to which Mbembe alludes. The counter-
archive questions the western epistemological monopoly and the various barriers
erected to keep "other" histories from being written. Like maps, archives are often
produced by those who possess the power to create them, and to acquire, control,
and spread knowledge. The counter-archive asks how divergent, bottom-up, and
nonhierarchical archives can be created, and what kind of narratives can be told
through a closer alignment with the protagonists and their grassroots culture. The
counter-archive points to the alternative materials I could manage to collect—and
that I continue to consolidate today—as well as novel methods of presenting and
sharing the findings to write cohesive narratives about this context. Similarly, the
counter-archive impresses on me the fact that historians' perseverance, resourceful-
ness, and identification of other ways of approaching historical scholarship are an
integral part of their labor, allowing them to address, if not overcome, debilitating
circumstances.[33]

But this redefinition should not obscure the fact that there are serious gaps in
the historical record of formerly colonized, or currently occupied, geographies.[34]
Scant or nonexistent sources result in historical lacunae, translating into lopsided
global narratives and perpetuating the violence endured by places that have been
prevented from contending with their complex past or celebrating remarkable
accomplishments that may inform their present or future. But a counter-archive can
begin to redress the harm and bypass some of the war traumas. Only by unearth-
ing and disseminating stories like those from modern Baghdad, and other places in
the non-West, with archives that are severely compromised or extremely difficult
to access and that require a specific set of cultural knowledge, language skills, and

stubborn persistence can we begin to approach what might be truly equitable global histories of modern art and architecture.

NOTES

1   This article is informed by Achille Mbembe's reflections on the archive, viewing it as a paradoxical institution: one concerned with death and debris, but from which a historian can also conjure life, reintegrating the past back into the present. But just as I am arguing for alternative forms of historical evidence, I would propose that Mbembe's privileging of the architectural container can be thought of more as a metaphor when it comes to unstable contexts. Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," trans. Judith Inggs, in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002),19–26, quotation 19.

2   Archives are integral to the work of modern historians but have also been pivotal to official recordkeeping that consolidates the power of the state. A substantial body of research investigates archives' political, social, economic, and cultural implications. One scholar proposes that "The questions of the history of archives are the questions of history, distilled. . . . [they are] crucial sites for the exercise of political power: archives are a key technology of rule." Elizabeth Yale, "The History of Archives: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 18 (2015): 332–59, quotation 333, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43956377.

3   While a historian like Marc Bloch emphasizes the infinite variety of evidence that should be used by the historian and underlines the agency of the historian in questioning and interpreting primary materials, his definition of where this evidence can be found delineates a finite set of institutions as gatekeepers of history. Bloch writes, "One of the most difficult tasks of the historian is that of assembling those documents which he considers necessary. He could hardly succeed without the help of various guides: archival or library catalogues, museum indexes, and bibliographies of every kind." Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 69.

4   I am especially grateful for Sibel Bozdoğan. Not only has she urged me to make a unique scholarly contribution to studying the modernism of Iraq—a context that many have heard about, and yet it remains barely known—she also impressed upon me the possibility of disregarding what I had learned in graduate school, instead working with what was immediately available to me.

5   Amin Alsaden, "Alternative Salons: Cultivating Art and Architecture in the Domestic Spaces of Post–World War II Baghdad," in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 165–206.

6   This is not necessarily unique to this part of the world: the state, everywhere, does not privilege dissident voices. Mbembe comments on the contradictions inherent in the state's relationship to the archives: "On the one hand, there is no state without archives—without its archives. On the other hand, the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state." The menace of the archive lies in its ability to master time, thus potentially challenging the state's power. Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 19–26, quotation 23.

7   Some of the most profound theoretical reflections on the status of archives in the Arab world come not from scholars and academics, but from artists. Examining archives' role in inflecting the realities of the present and projecting future possibilities, contemporary Arab artists have scrutinized archives as contested sites where social, political, and historical claims are negotiated. Artists make observations about how archives are implicated in conflict, help forge collective identities, or produce novel and speculative forms of knowledge. For an overview of pertinent examples, see Anthony Downey, "Contingency, Dissonance and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 13–42.

8   Although the 2003 invasion of Iraq has become a watershed moment in recent history, partly due to strong opposition from people all around the world and because of the horrific consequences on the country and region, it is worth emphasizing that the United States has been waging war on Iraq for around three decades. Writing following the invasion, Richard McCutcheon argued that the United States was engaged in a continuous conflict with Iraq since 1991 through different guises of violence: physical, economic, and cultural. Theoretically informed, his analysis also attends to the

lived experience of people on the ground. Richard McCutcheon, "Rethinking the War against Iraq," *Anthropologica* 48, no. 1 (2006): 11–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/25605294.

9   While major collections in Baghdad did not suffer total destruction in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, there are contradictory reports, and assessment is far from conclusive. It is estimated that 25 percent of the holdings of the National Library and Archives were destroyed; however, 60 percent of the holdings representing the Ottoman rule and Hashemite monarchy periods were damaged, which is a large blow to the historical record of modern Iraq. There are no clear reports on how much has been looted or retrieved, but it is known that the archives of Iraq's Jewish community, for example, have been taken over by the American transitional authority and removed to the United States. See I. M. Johnson, "The Impact on Libraries and Archives in Iraq of War and Looting in 2003—A Preliminary Assessment of the Damage and Subsequent Reconstruction Efforts," *International Information and Library Review* 37, no. 3 (2005): 209–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2005.10762682; and Nabil Al-Tikriti, "'Stuff Happens': A Brief Overview of the 2003 Destruction of Iraqi Manuscript Collections, Archives, and Libraries," *Library Trends* 55, no. 3 (2007): 730–45, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2007.0000.

10   US forces made the conscious choice not to intervene and protect Iraqi repositories, and that cannot be separated from the violence of the invasion. A scholar has argued, "Combatants often target archives and other institutions with archival missions for destruction to strike at the heart of a people's identity and to eradicate a community's memory." Richard Cox, "Archives, War, and Memory: Building a Framework," *Library & Archival Security* 25, no. 1 (2012): 21–57, quotation 28, https://doi.org/10.1080/01960075.2012.657945.

11   There is extensive literature on both of these episodes, but for an overview, see Peter Maass, "The Ministry of Oil Defense," *FP*, August 5, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/08/05/the-ministry-of-oil-defense, captured at https://perma.cc/65SX-TVDM; Antonia Juhasz, "Why the War in Iraq Was Fought for Big Oil," CNN, April 15, 2013, https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/19/opinion/iraq-war-oil-juhasz/index.html, captured at https://perma.cc/W2LQ-FB8W; and Hoover Institution Library & Archives, "Ḥizb al-Baʿth al-ʾArabī al-Ishtirākī Records (Baʿth Party Records)," https://www.hoover.org/library-archives/collections/hizb-al-bath-al-arabi-al-ishtiraki-records-bath-party-records.

12   This has also prevented the identification and retrieval of most looted artworks, believed to be traded in the black market, inside Iraq and abroad. Steven Lee Myers, "Iraq's Modern Art Collection, Waiting to Re-emerge," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/14/arts/design/14moma.html.

13   For instance, a news article described Mesopotamia as the "birthplace of Western civilization." Michel Martin, "Who's to Blame for Iraq Museum Looting?," ABC News, April 19, 2003, https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=128469&page=1, captured at https://perma.cc/T6QV-VD6D.

14   This included assisting the Aga Khan Documentation Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in acquiring the archives of Iraqi architects such as Rifat Chadirji, along with helping identify various projects and annotating his extensive photographic collection (with direct input from Chadirji and his wife, Balkis Sharara). I remain conflicted about Iraqi content deposited at western institutions, but this archives has a proven track record of honoring the architectural cultures of the Arab and Muslim worlds; also, options to care for the architect's materials during his lifetime were limited.

15   I am fully cognizant of the responsibility that comes along with possessing this kind of archives, regardless of the long and arduous personal journey that it took. However, I still do not have an answer for how my archives might be preserved in the future or made available to other researchers, especially since the oral histories include private anecdotes that various individuals entrusted me with (and that should remain confidential, as the sharing happened with the assumption that there will be discretion when such information is used). I believe this archives must end up at a public institution, ideally in Iraq, but I am yet to find a good home for it, considering the ongoing instability in the country.

16   This is one of the reasons I always had to be neutral, not only to convey that I listened and accounted for opposing viewpoints, but because I realized early in the process that some Iraqis would be reluctant to even receive me if they associated me with a particular ethnic group or political party. And indeed, some individuals refused to see me, despite repeated attempts, possibly because of assumptions

made about my background. The experiences and observations of Moses E. Ochonu, a historian of modern Nigeria, ring true. He proposes that the best way to navigate a politically charged landscape while conducting research, particularly when one is after meaningful oral histories, is by being "simultaneously empathetic to multiple contending narratives" while not partaking in the political agenda of any party. Ochonu adds, "I would argue that without showing empathy, the oral interview, the holy grail of postcolonial historical research, is reduced to a mechanical exercise in data collection, a mere transaction between the researcher and his/her subjects or informants." Moses E. Ochonu, "Elusive History: Fractured Archives, Politicized Orality, and Sensing the Postcolonial Past," *History in Africa* 42 (2015): 287–98, quotation 292–93, https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2015.7.

17 For instance, there are references to an important article written by artist Mahmoud Sabri in the early 1950s, apparently published in a magazine associated with the Iraqi Communist Party. I have not found this text, even though I have been searching for years. The violent purge of that political organization in subsequent years apparently resulted in the deliberate destruction of any incriminating evidence by the party members themselves and Iraqi authorities too.

18 Omnia El Shakry acknowledges the lack of documentation in the Arab world as a fact, but she argues this vacuum offers a reminder that archives can exist in physical or intellectual forms. She writes, "While scholarly attention must remain focused on the continued destruction of archives in the Middle East amidst political and historical paroxysms, so too must attention be paid to our archival imaginaries—the ways in which the intellectual traditions of the era of decolonization have been appropriated, remembered, or forgotten." She views the loss or inaccessibility of archives in the region as an opportunity to rethink the histories of decolonization as not only a historical period but also as a series of ongoing experiences, a reality with which the region and its historians must grapple. Omnia El Shakry, "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 920–34, quotation 934, https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.3.920.

19 It is worth remembering here that every archives is fundamentally fragmented and incomplete, regardless of how large or comprehensive it might appear. In another text, Mbembe suggests, "Every archive, being always linked to a past and having necessarily dealt with a history of memory, has a sort of slit. It is at once a breaching (frayage), an opening, and a separation, a fissure and a breaking, a crazing and a disjunction, a crevasse and a rift, or indeed a tear. But the archive is above all a fissile material, its specificity being that, at its source, it is made of cuts." Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 172.

20 Jeannette Allis Bastian, "Reading Colonial Records Through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space and Creation," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 267–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-006-9019-1.

21 Andrew Flinn, "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011), http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/D472000699.

22 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56.

23 Mbembe writes, "Material destruction has only succeeded in inscribing the memory of the archive . . . in fantasy, inasmuch as destroying or prohibiting the archive has only provided it with additional content. In this case that content is all the more unreal because it has been removed from sight and interred once and for all in the sphere of that which shall remain unknown, therefore allowing space for all manner of imaginary thoughts." Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 19–26, quotation 23–24.

24 Mbembe believes that archives extend beyond their walls, providing a reminder that liberates the historian from the shackles of conventional archives: "The final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible." Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 19–26, quotation 21.

25 I must equally address my own privilege, while underlining the fact that I did not have the same advantages as fellow western scholars, not only in terms of archival access, but also of the abundant financial backing available for research on conventional, western subjects. My privilege included having more than one passport, whereas immense travel and access obstacles continue to face most Iraqis; an affiliation with a major US institution, which opened a lot of doors; the means to spend considerable

amounts of money (even though from my own savings) on travel, acquiring materials, and digitizing equipment; and the very ability to dedicate time to act on my desire to preserve something that has deep significance for me and my community. That privilege entailed a lot of personal sacrifices, but it is still important to acknowledge a scholar's positionality and capacity.

26 Given the reality of the modern Arab world, many countries of which have experienced strife and loss, some scholars argue for alternative archival practices that address the local context—and not what the West would like to perceive. Specifically, these scholars advocate eschewing the emphasis on national identities to capture instead the inherent pluralism of Arab societies, to demonstrate how "every collection bears the imprint of many lives—lives given, gained, claimed and counter-claimed in that contention over the meaning of objects, material and/or textual," while acknowledging the conditions that lead to the production of archival repositories in the region. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz, "Introduction: Challenges and Directions in an Emerging Field of Research," in *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, ed. Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (Surrey; Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2012), 1–30, quotation 25.

27 I would argue that alternative archives in places like Iraq must be treated with a similar reverence to that accorded to traditional archives, elevated as the latter are in modern collective consciousness in ways that exceed their purely documentary function. In his seminal essay on the concept of "places of memory," Pierre Nora suggests, "Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura." Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations*, no. 26, special issue: "Memory and Counter-Memory" (Spring 1989): 7–24, quotation 19, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520.

28 Moses E. Ochonu also foregrounds the importance of capturing the sense of context. He writes, "Overcoming the limitations of archives requires a less scripted, less formal version of ethnography, a form of immersion not designed merely for participatory observation but for sensing, seeing, smelling, hearing, and tasting the world represented in archival and oral testimonies—the physical and metaphysical worlds in which the subjects and objects of our inquiries thrive(d)." There are striking similarities between the challenges faced by historians of modern Africa and other postcolonial contexts, like the Arab world, including the fragmentation of archives, the manner in which primary material is politicized, and the way that autobiographies have become so commonplace. Ochonu, "Elusive History," 287–98, quotation 289.

29 Alsaden, "Alternative Salons."

30 The only publicly available information about Ellen Jawdat is an entry in the first encyclopedia of women architects. Amin Alsaden, "Ellen Jawdat," in *The Bloomsbury Global Encyclopedia of Women in Architecture, 1960–2015*, ed. Lori A. Brown and Karen Burns (forthcoming, 2023).

31 I do not claim that what unfolded in mid-twentieth-century Baghdad was exceptional. But others, contemporaries of the generation of artists and architects I study, have suggested that. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, of Palestinian origins, moved to Baghdad in the late 1940s. An important figure in the Arab world, particularly in literature and poetry, as well as a practicing artist and critic in Baghdad, he states, "There was a kind of orchestration present by intuition, spontaneously, and there was this spiritual agitation [within art, architecture, and literature]. . . . That is why the new spread in Baghdad very rapidly, to the entire Arab world. There was a sort of readiness—even among the older generation . . . for this type of reconstruction of form, which made Baghdad an important city not only in the Arab world alone, but the entire world." Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Majid Salih Al-Samarra'i, *Al-Iktishaf wa Al-Dahshah: Hiwar fi Dawafi' Al-Ibda' ma' Jabra Ibrahim Jabra* [*Discovery and Awe: A Dialog on the Motives of Innovation with Jabra Ibrahim Jabra*] (Dimashq: Dar Al-Numayr lil-Tibaa'h wa Al-Nashr wa Al-Tawzi', 2006), 128.

32 Clifford Geertz viewed the task of an ethnographer studying a particular culture as a science of explication. Building upon Gilbert Ryle's notion of "thick description," Geertz emphasizes that anthropological writing is essentially an authored fiction, or a form of representation, involving an intellectual intervention to interpret social phenomena (and hence my own use of terms such as "narrative" or "protagonists" in this study). Geertz likewise acknowledges that the challenge is for the fiction to approximate, as much as possible, how that particular culture might have described or thought about itself. But, he asserts, "Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is." Or, the deeper a study goes, the more likely it will expose points of contention that further challenge interpretation. He argues that a "thick description" is still the only way to do some justice to the understanding of the endless complexities of a particular

culture. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30, quotation 29.

33 Historian E. H. Carr is credited with the famous metaphor of the "fish on the fishmonger's slab" when discussing the raw materials out of which historians "cook" their narratives. However, he complicates the metaphor to highlight the facts made available by circumstances and those that come through the historian's agency. He writes, "The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch." Carr adds, "By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation." E. H. Carr, *What Is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge January–March 1961*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 19–20.

34 While archives in Southwest Asia have suffered tremendously, further damage can be expected in years to come because, despite the frailty of these institutions, hardly any official plans are in place for managing or recovering from potential disasters (documentary or museum materials were often rescued thanks to the heroic efforts of resourceful individuals who took the risk to remove collections temporarily to safe, usually private, storage). Laila Hussein Moustafa, "Disaster Management Plans in Middle East Libraries and Archives in Time of War: Case Studies of Iraq and Egypt," *Library & Archival Security* 26 (2013): 15–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/01960075.2014.908689.

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