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Identity Politics and Digital Space: Adel Abidin's *Abidin Travels: Welcome to Baghdad*

Jenna Altomonte

Being politically correct is almost like being a hypocrite. History is all about manipulation; as Napoleon said, it's like a set of lies we all agreed upon. I always ask myself [about] how we could live without history. And how can we rely on a history which is written by the victor?¹

—Adel Abidin

Introduction

At the 2007 Venice Biennale in Italy, Iraqi-born artist Adel Abidin premiered his interactive installation, *Abidin Travels: Welcome to Baghdad*. The multifaceted exhibition space consisted of reservation kiosks, travel pamphlets, and an information center. Located at a reservation kiosk computer, participants accessed a travel booking webpage at www.abidintravels.com. Similar in design to popular travel sites like Expedia or Orbitz, abidintravels.com invited participants to explore the cultural and historical sites of Baghdad via interactive video links. Rather than show *souqs* or open-air cafés, viewers witnessed footage of burning buildings, bloated corpses, and US Coalition troops cavorting at checkpoints. The narrator warned about kidnappings and recent execution sites, using a body-count tracker to keep potential travelers informed of the most recent casualties. After viewing the travel videos, participants could reserve flights to Baghdad from the United States, Western Europe, and Scandinavia. Using violent content and imagery from the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion, the piece served to inform potential visitors about the limitations of travel to and from Iraq.

Using *Abidin Travels* as a conduit for critical inquiry, I challenge several frameworks used to understand post-invasion identities as collective congeries formed by displacement. In particular, *Abidin Travels* works as a critical device that urges viewers to consider how diasporic identities are represented via mediatized intervention. Abidin uses a “sharp palette of irony and humor” to recognize limitations imposed on Iraqis living in diasporic regions.² Using an amalgamation of both lived and collective

experiences, his work serves as a complex instrument for promoting social and political change in regions affected by war.

Three frameworks will be used to articulate the creation, premise, and effect of *Abidin Travels*. The first approach examines the events, both personal and collective, that inspired the creation of the installation. Work by fellow Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal will complement Abidin and serve to demonstrate common tropes used by Iraqi artists working to create post-invasion content in their oeuvres. Bilal's *Virtual Jihadi* will be discussed to explicate the various prejudices Iraqis encounter while residing in regions or nations outside the homeland.

The second approach examines the premise and execution of the installation, focusing primarily on the videos and website content. This section extrapolates on the affective use of humor as a critical device. The travel-agency format incorporates humor to placate the viewer before revealing violent footage and images.

The third approach contests the original intention of the installation, specifically how Abidin critiques the relationship between the Iraqi civilian and the American occupier. Supported by a discussion on the development and dissemination of digital identities, I position *Abidin Travels* as a device used to explore the limits, issues, and fallacies of online identity politics. Abidin's installation will be posited in conjunction with *Hometown Baghdad*, a post-invasion video series created by students in Baghdad from the mid-2000s.

Abidin: Reflections from the Diaspora

Abidin's artwork combines lived experience with contemporaneous commentaries on Iraq.³ Born in Baghdad in 1973, Abidin describes his childhood as "ideal," impervious to the volatile regime change affecting the political landscape of Iraq. He reflects, "Like all children, I used to think the only way to grow up is the way that I did. Iraq was an ideal place, as I did not have an alternative vision. When I traveled the world, I viewed my upbringing as conservative but still beautiful."⁴

Framed by the Iran-Iraq War and the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the "ideal place" of Iraq succumbed to the volatile political regime of Saddam Hussein. Witness to the aftereffects of American airstrikes during the Persian Gulf War, Abidin recalls the following about the 1991 bombing of the Al-Jumhuriyya Bridge in Baghdad:

On that day I heard that American air forces had bombed the Al-Jumhuriyya Bridge, one of my favorite bridges in the city. The bridge—located in the heart of downtown Baghdad—is the most important and frequently used bridge that connects the two banks of the Tigris River .... Devastated and in shock, I did not know how to react. The next day, I cycled downtown, to see if it was true. As I approached the bridge, which had been broken off completely in two places, I saw a strange scene: a dead cow on one piece of the fallen bridge. I pushed aside my sorrow for the bridge as the unexpected image occupied my mind, as it was unusual to see a cow in central Baghdad. I started imagining different scenarios about the death of this poor cow. Why was she there in the first place? Where had

she come from? Why was she alone? Lately, I have been consumed with thoughts on our human need to gather, to feel connected and be assured that we are not alone.⁵

Themes pertaining to connectivity and collaboration remain central to many of Abidin's works, specifically, the use of the digital platform. This media form encourages connectivity between users and the artist, addressing the desire to reach a diverse audience outside the stationary environment of the museum or gallery.

After the Persian Gulf War, Abidin studied industrial management at Mansour University and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. His transition to the digital platform started after graduating from the academy. In 2000, he left for Finland to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki.⁶ With regard to his graduate training in Helsinki, Abidin states, "Real education comes from being aware and perceptive of the surrounding world. It is based on the information that we constantly gain from our environment."⁷ Living as a diasporic artist, his work comments on the shifting political and social environments affecting individuals residing outside the homeland.

In *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance under the Gun*, fellow Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal reflects on the political environment of Iraq in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Born in Kufa, Iraq, in 1966, Bilal grew up in a difficult environment that paralleled the shifting political regime. While a student, Bilal denied allegiance to the Ba'athist Party and refused to "volunteer" for service. In 1991 he fled Iraq, and by the end of 1992, Bilal immigrated to the United States after spending nearly two years in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In an interview in 2008, Bilal explained:

Though my consciousness and memories are forever connected to the conflict zone and is Iraq (and so many other war-torn countries across the world), my present reality has become the same comfort zone. I have a warm bed in a comfortable apartment, a hot cup of coffee .... I live in complete comfort and security, even when I am constantly worried about my family and my people.⁸

The demarcation between these two "zones" signifies a separation of space: one based in violent and traumatic experiences, and the latter as a space for recall. Although Abidin and Bilal work from various "comfort zones," they bifurcate between their homeland of Iraq and diasporic spaces abroad. Abidin and Bilal work to negotiate the complexities of defining post-invasion identity, merging experiences from the "conflict zone" of Iraq to the "comfort zones" of Finland and the United States.

Abidin's Cold Interrogation and Bilal's Virtual Jihadi

In 2004, Abidin created *Cold Interrogation* in response to prejudicial comments received about his Iraqi identity. Originally located in the Gallery Huuto in Helsinki, *Cold Interrogation* combines humor with interactive play, encouraging participatory interaction. Against a white wall in the corner of the gallery, Abidin placed a medium-sized refrigerator. Using common tropes found in many American kitchens, he covered

the surface of the refrigerator with magnets, personal photos, pictures, and a “Support Our Troops” ribbon decal in red, white, and blue. Centered on the top portion of the refrigerator, a small eyehole provided access to the interior freezer space. Instead of seeing frozen TV dinners or leftover condiments, viewers gazed upon the visage of a man on a television screen. After several seconds, the man asked the following questions:

Where are you from?
 How did you end up in Finland?
 Do you think there will be a war on Iraq?
 Where were you during the first war?
 What do you think of Saddam Hussein?
 Did you see Baghdad burning?
 What do you think of George Bush? What about Tony Blair?
 Tell me about Bin Laden.
 What do you think of 11th of September?
 Do you drink any alcohol in Iraq?
 You don't look like one from Iraq.⁹

The actor quickly moves from one question to another, rapidly “interrogating” the viewer. The questions and comments made by the actor reflect actual conversations between Abidin and Finnish citizens. According to the artist, these types of questions are still asked in interviews and casual conversations about his art and his position as a diasporic artist. Concerning the overall intent of *Cold Interrogation*, participants learn about the invasive line of questioning affecting immigrants and refugees. Though the satirical format of the installation attempts to defuse the seriousness of ethnic and racial profiling, it fosters a critical discussion concerning Iraqi identity in the post-invasion era.¹⁰

In a similar thematic vein, Bilal's work addresses responses to post-invasion, diasporic identities. In 2008, Bilal created *Virtual Jihadi*, an online interactive gaming experience. Bilal's game uses schematics from *Quest for Saddam*, a first-person shooter game developed by Petrilla Entertainment.¹¹ In the game, the user hunts down a cyber version of Saddam Hussein and executes military avatars.¹² At the start of the game, the user enters cyber-Iraq and performs the role of an American soldier. The user maneuvers terrain designed to mimic actual military training facilities.¹³ The final objective: find cyber-Saddam and assassinate him using a cache of weapons collected throughout the game.

By the mid-2000s, the Al-Qaeda media faction known as the Global Islamic Media Front obtained a copy of *Quest for Saddam* and changed the tonal appearance, visage, and clothing of the American soldiers. The role of protagonist changed from US troops to members of Saddam's guard. The title also changed to *Quest for Bush*, reflecting the role reversal of the game's characters and objective.¹⁴ Instead of executing cyber-Saddam, the new goal centered on the assassination of cyber-President George W. Bush.¹⁵ In Bilal's version, the participant plays an avatar of the artist. Dressed in a thobe and strapped with a belt of orange explosive sticks, the user maneuvers the terrain to recruit members before assassinating President George W. Bush.¹⁶

Virtual Jihadi critiques the hypocrisy of the gaming platform. Bilal extrapolates on the intention behind the piece, stating:

Because we inhabit a comfort zone far from the trauma of the conflict zone, we Americans have become desensitized to the violence of war. We are disconnected and disengaged while many others do the suffering. The game holds up a mirror that reveals our own propensities for violence, racism and propaganda. We can close our eyes and ears and deny that it exists, but the issues won't go away.¹⁷

When the perpetrator/victim dynamic changed, the shift caused public furor. Rather than fostering a conversation about the relationship between violence and digital games, *Virtual Jihadi* was met with opposition and criticism. During the first exhibition of the game at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York, administrators censored the show and forcibly shut down the venue because of the "pro-terrorist message." Bilal, hired as an artist-in-residence at RPI, was banned from entering campus buildings and teaching courses.¹⁸ What prompted the censorship of *Virtual Jihadi*? Considering the year in which the piece was created (2008) and the proximity of the exhibition to New York City, protestors argued that *Virtual Jihadi* glorified terrorism and the killing of American troops. Interviews with local politicians echoed anti-Iraq and anti-Arab sentiments, referring to Bilal as a "terrorist" and "anti-American." When confronted, many protestors admitted they did not know the content of the exhibition or the artist's intention behind the work. Their opinions of the piece relied solely on the title of the game and Bilal's Iraqi identity.

When audiences criticized the content of *Cold Interrogation* or protested at the opening of *Virtual Jihadi*, they reinforced the marginalization and subjugation of the Iraqi. Though commentary on the relationship between "two unequal halves, the Orient (East) and the Occident (West)" was detailed in *Orientalism* by Edward Said, the legacy of the marginalized Arab body reinforces centuries-old stereotypes.¹⁹ In the visual arts, works by nineteenth-century artists like Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres captured Western ideals of the East by presenting Arab culture as "Europe's collective day-dream of the Orient."²⁰ According to Said, they "are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West."²¹ Paintings of women, in repose, surrounded by turbans and hookahs signified the "exotic East." Travel journals, literature, and historical records also added to the "day-dream" of Westerners looking East. Linda Nochlin described such scenes:

[The paintings act] as a visual document of nineteenth-century colonialist ideology, an iconic distillation of the Westerner's notion of the Oriental couched in the language of a would-be transparent naturalism.²²

Represented in these paintings, figures appear idle, consumed by sloth, sexual licentiousness, or in some artworks, forced servitude.²³

Since the Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars, the vision of Iraq no longer reflects the "exotic" imagery depicted in paintings by Delacroix or Ingres. Instead, the violent figure of the Iraqi perforates online and print sources. In many of these popular media forms, the

Iraqi body correlates with words like “terrorist” and “anti-American.”²⁴ Specifically, after the fall of the Twin Towers, equating Iraqis with terrorism grew exponentially in online spaces, furthered by the dissemination of misinformed news reports and xenophobic rhetoric from online internet trolls and Arabophobes.

In “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Arjun Appadurai critiques the dissemination of images, text, and data through digital networks like the internet.²⁵ He explicates how identities of the marginalized become part of a “digital accumulation,” lacking context and points of reference.²⁶ He states,

The Internet is the bastion of the diasporic body. Diasporic politics, as opposing, antagonising and competing with national politics, is part of the growing culture of cyberpolitics, which in turn is largely transnational and which adopts tactics of connecting offline locations (and politics) with online transnational networking activities.²⁷

Evident in artworks by Abidin and Bilal, the digital platform provides access to geographical regions suppressed and restricted by war, government censorship, and free speech regulations. Originally defined as the movement of displaced bodies, the concept of the diaspora serves to categorize exiles and refugees “scattered” from the homeland to a host land.²⁸

In “Diasporas,” James Clifford suggests that “modern technologies of transport [telephones, satellites] reduce this distance” between homeland and host land.²⁹ The digital diaspora serves as a transnational network for promoting connectivity and accessibility. Digitally constructed media, like the internet, serves to redirect connectivity of the displaced body back to the homeland. As framed by Michael Laguerre,

A digital diaspora is an immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant population that uses IT connectivity to participate in virtual networks of contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicated purposes that, for the most part, may concern the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad.³⁰

Diasporic artists harness digital spaces to reach vast audiences of connected users. Outlined by Appadurai, the propagation of information via media outlets like the internet, cable television, and radio serves to connect users from across geographical spaces. Considering the transference of information through these mediascapes, individuals of the diaspora may harness technological spaces to expound issues associated with marginalization, racism, and ethnocentrism. Suspended within cyberspace, physical bodies do not have to be removed from the homeland to exist within the digital diaspora, although many users perform outside their geographical space of origin.³¹

In “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” Kim Butler suggests that “diasporas intersect and overlap,” positing that a diaspora is not a singular experience enacted by many but a multitude of interactions, exiles, and traumas.³² Online users may find

commonality with other participants of various diasporas. For the diasporic artist working in digital media, the internet serves as a platform for resistance, providing the opportunity to subvert stereotypes, challenge hegemony, and share lived experiences. In *Abidin Travels*, the installation fosters a space for sharing the effects of marginalization, inviting participants to experience the frustration of attempting to connect between homeland and host land.

Tourism during War: *Abidin Travels: Welcome to Baghdad*

In response to the aftereffects of the 2003 invasion, Abidin debuted *Abidin Travels* at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Touted as the premier event in contemporary art, the Venice Biennale occurs every two years.³³ Select artists from around the world exhibit artworks based on a general theme developed by the Biennale curatorial staff. Nations are granted space in prestigious exhibition zones located in the Giardini and the Arsenale pavilions. Since the early twentieth century, legacy and tradition dictate the location of these national pavilions. At the 2007 iteration, Abidin exhibited in the Nordic Pavilion.³⁴ Participants entered the installation and walked through a series of rooms designed to mimic a travel agency. Above the entrance, the sign “Abidin Travels” in hot pink and blue neon welcomed visitors. Juxtaposed with the text, the silhouette of a fighter jet brightly illuminated the entryway. Once inside the installation, the space diverted into several sections. In one space, pamphlets adorned the gallery walls, offering historical information about the city of Baghdad (Figure 6.1). Inside the pamphlets, stock photos of ancient Iraqi artifacts juxtaposed military tanks and incinerated city streets. When describing the National Museum of Iraq, the text line reads, “All the beautiful places that you might have read about are either destroyed or have been looted. There really are no sights left.”³⁵

In another room of the installation, participants encountered a computer kiosk guiding visitors to “BOOK NOW” at www.abidintravels.com. Located on the site’s main page, a selection menu provided visitors the option to plan trips to the city of Baghdad.³⁶ Similar to popular travel pages, the website included a flight booking section and informational links to tourist sites (Figure 6.2). Instead of photos depicting luxurious hotels and spas, a blindfolded hostage surrounded by men in black face masks welcomes the viewer. Superimposed on the image, a blue sign touts “free-sightseeing!” (Figure 6.3).³⁷ In the upper right corner, a body counter informs viewers of recent executions. The reservation section displays departure locations and date options. Users input the number of travelers with the option of adding travel insurance for an extra 399,999 USD.³⁸ Recommended as a precaution against the occasional roadside bombing or rocket-propelled grenade attack, users are encouraged to rent a tank or armored Humvee.

To complement the pamphlets and webpage, Abidin included informative travel videos in various languages, including English, Arabic, French, and Swedish.³⁹ In one of the videos, a female narrator describes the top tourist sites of Baghdad. As she narrates, footage of mourning women, public executions, and car bombs play in the background. A transcribed excerpt announces the following:

Figure 6.1 Display wall with travel pamphlets and booking kiosk, *Abidin Travels*, 2006–7. Courtesy of Adel Abidin.

Figure 6.2 Mainpage to www.abidintravels.com, *Abidin Travels*, 2006–7. Courtesy of Adel Abidin.

Figure 6.3 Video still, *Abidin Travels*, 2006–7. Courtesy of Adel Abidin.

You can find wonderful souvenir shops and boutiques and cafés. And at the end of Nahir Street is Al-Khesa, where the old Ottoman rulers were situated. And don't forget the beautiful churches and mosques with their elaborate signs and intricate arches ... all part of the rich heritage of this city. And don't forget the museum and galleries that reflect the great history of this city.⁴⁰

The violent footage contradicts the narrator's enthusiastic description of pre-invasion Baghdad. Instead of souvenir shops, weapon venues filled with assault rifles dominate market booths and kiosks. Rather than show busy street vendors selling goods on Nahir Street, the footage displays burned-out cars and skeletal remains. When describing museums and galleries, images of broken Assyrian vessels and plunderers escaping through side doors replace footage of pristine galleries and pavilions. Represented in the videos, American soldiers laugh and frisk Iraqi civilians at checkpoints (Figures 6.4 and 6.5).

Why use the satirical venue of a travel agency? How can humor be used to confront traumatic events associated with war? The relationship between humor and trauma seeks to defuse political, religious, and social tensions.⁴¹ *Abidin Travels* confronts the violent effects produced by the Iraq War. The content—especially the merger of humorous, satirical components with serious content—provokes uncomfortable

Figure 6.4 Adel Abidin, still from *Abidin Travels* video, 2006–7. Courtesy of Adel Abidin.

Figure 6.5 Adel Abidin, stills from *Abidin Travels* video, 2006–7. Courtesy of Adel Abidin.

reactions from viewers. First referenced in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud examined how humorous anecdotes act as forms of suppression, often concealing deep, traumatic experiences. A joke or satirical reference may reveal past traumas, serving as a therapeutic device.⁴² In *Trauma Treatment Techniques: Innovative Trends*, Jacqueline Garrick uses a variety of case studies involving traumatized patients exposed to abuse, violence, or high stress environments. Humor diffuses stress and alleviates symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Even though the humor or joke may be viewed as inappropriate due to the content, it may aid in the healing process.⁴³ In *Abidin Travels*, the choice to juxtapose violent images with the narrator's commentary reflects Abidin's satirical approach to confronting trauma.

Unlike *Cold Interrogation*, which combined a humorous format (the refrigerator) and the language of interrogation, *Abidin Travels* takes a different approach to satire and violence. The installation uses actual footage of corpses, blown-up cars, and violent street footage from Baghdad. According to Giseline Kuipers, the use of violent imagery in satirical or humorous works serves as an aggressive political statement about the war in Iraq. Satirical or humorous jokes or cartoons about the Twin Towers falling or the execution of terrorist victims act as disaster jokes, or “sick jokes based on an incongruity between the gruesome and the innocuous.”⁴⁴ In this paradigm, the joke or satirical reference is linked to a real event, often gruesome or incomprehensible (9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, etc.). When the gruesome event and the harmless reference combine, it creates a humorous anecdote to an otherwise serious situation.⁴⁵ By using graphic imagery coupled with the satirical atmosphere of the travel agency, the installation provides an environment that fosters a critical dialogue about the Iraq War and the travel limitations affecting individuals returning to regions in conflict.

In critique of *Abidin Travels*, Laura Marks states,

Abidin is more intimately aware than are most of his Western interlocutors of the specific suffering of Iraqi people; and on the other, he can only describe this suffering in generalities that his audience will grasp.⁴⁶

Aware of the demographic of Venice Biennale visitors, Marks references an inherent issue with how the audience views and experiences the installation. Since most of the participants experienced the Iraq War via Western-based news outlets, the representations of pain and suffering correspond with familiar tropes. Abidin represents these common media tropes to reference the iconic symbols of the post-invasion Iraqi stereotype.

Dereck Gregory positions these representations of the Iraqi as “collections of objects not congeries of people.”⁴⁷ In *Abidin Travels*, a commodification of the Iraqi body is placed in opposition to the American occupier. How does Abidin present the American occupier in *Abidin Travels*? The bodies of the American soldiers serve as fetishized objects, presented as stereotypical icons of occupation. The edited footage shows troops blocking roadways with tanks and Humvees, laughing at the demise of Iraqi civilians, consuming alcohol near sacred mosques, and launching weapons. They become coded objects associated with occupation, rather than liberation and protection. Abidin’s attempt to subvert the bodies of the Westerner as the “barbaric occupiers” of his homeland fails to adequately succeed in fostering a dialogue centered on Middle East–West relations.

Although the appropriated media footage used in *Abidin Travels* satirizes the Iraqi as Other, the footage also reinforces mediatized constructions of the Iraqi as subordinate. In *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, Jane Iwamura considers how the media represents the Other or marginalized body in online space. Iwamura specifically examines the role of the online Other via the theory of virtual Orientalism, a contemporary approach to Said’s Orientalism. Virtual Orientalism may be defined as “cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media [that] rely heavily on new seemingly uninterrupted flows of representations and their easy

access.”⁴⁸ For example, images of the gun-wielding Iraqi male exemplify a type of stereotyping associated with virtual Orientalism. In a recent Google search from 2019 of the term “Iraqi,” the first several lines of images still display militant troops wielding assault rifles, US troops interrogating a male figure, and recommended sub-searches of associated terms linked with Humvee, AK-47, tea, special forces, and soldier.⁴⁹

Hometown Baghdad

To subvert negative visual tropes associated with virtualized Orientalism, *Hometown Baghdad* documents and archives the daily lives of three Iraqi civilians living in Baghdad (Figure 6.6).⁵⁰ Created in the mid-2000s during the onset of the Iraq War, *Hometown Baghdad* serves as a response to mediatized stereotypes of the Iraqi. Rather than focus on violent footage, the series documents hobbies, conversations, and daily activities of Saif, Ausama, and Adel.⁵¹ Using hand-held cameras and Flip devices, the participants capture pedestrian footage.

In one segment, titled “Symphony of Bullets,” Adel attempts to travel to his university to study for exams (Figure 6.7). He becomes trapped in his dorm because of the barrage of gunfire occurring outside his room. He jokes about his ability to differentiate between American and insurgent bullets.⁵² In another short film titled *Market Boom*, the men visit a local open-air market to purchase travel gear for a month-long trip (Figure 6.8). One of their friends enters the apartment, stating that a sniper has shot pedestrians and police, killing several in the process. A bomb also destroys part of al-Arabi market in downtown Baghdad. As these events unfold, the men comment on how the violence is more nuisance than threat.⁵³ Compared to footage edited by American news networks like CNN and Fox News, *Hometown Baghdad* subverts the violent and victimized body of the Iraqi civilian by showing its subjects engaged in mundane, routine activities while a war occurs around them. Abidin’s piece fractures the romanticized aura of the spice market and bazaar by displaying the markets as ruined spaces, a by-product of US raids and insurgent car bombs.

Figure 6.6 Footage from *Hometown Baghdad*, 2005–7.

Figure 6.7 Still from the "Symphony of Bullets" segment, *Hometown Baghdad*, 2005–7.

Figure 6.8 Still from the "Market Boom" segment, *Hometown Baghdad*, 2005–7.

Conclusion

The works presented throughout this chapter use satire and humor as both a means of provocation and an attempt to understand the nuances of post-invasion identity. *Abidin Travels* exemplifies a unique method of informing audiences about post-invasion politics, stereotyping, and the reality of displacement during an active war. The various approaches to Abidin's work originate from a need to examine the post-invasion marginalization and restrictions/limitations imposed on Iraqis since 2003. *Abidin Travels* exposes these issues using humor to placate the viewer. However, elements of the video and webpage components reinforce negative tropes associated with the Iraqi civilian and American occupier.

Since *Abidin Travels* debuted, US military operations have steadily declined in Iraq. However, the images produced in the years after 9/11 remain fixed as iconic constructions, by-products of the Western interpretation of the Iraqi. As Iwamura postulates, these images remain caught in digital spaces and disseminated in continuum through the internet and online networks.⁵⁴ However, projects like *Hometown Baghdad* remedy issues involving the subversion of the Iraqi as Other by capturing relatable moments in the lives of the Iraqi civilian. Each work serves to expose and problematize the representation of the Iraqi since the 2003 invasion. Once viewers bypass the veneer of humor and satire, each piece reveals the limitations and prejudices imposed on Iraqis living within the borders of Iraq and diasporic communities abroad.

Notes

- 1 Megan Miller, "'History Wipes' and Other Ambiguities: Iraqi Artist Adel Abidin at Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki," *Art Radar*, April 17, 2018, <http://artradarjournal.com/2018/04/17/history-wipes-and-other-ambiguities-iraqi-artist-adel-abidin-at-ateneum-art-museum-helsinki/>.
- 2 Adel Abidin, "Biography," <http://www.adelabidin.com/biography>.
- 3 Adel Abidin, interview by Erin Joyce, "The Beauty of Conflict: Adel Abidin," *UltraUltra*, December 7, 2012, <http://www.ultraextra.org/interviews/2012/12/7/the-beauty-of-conflicts-adel-abidin>.
- 4 Abidin, "The Beauty of Conflict," <http://www.ultraextra.org/interviews/2012/12/7/the-beauty-of-conflicts-adel-abidin>.
- 5 Adel Abidin, "Memorial," *Adel Abidin*, last modified 2016, <http://www.adelabidin.com/component/content/article/16-video-installation/14-memorial>.
- 6 Abidin, "The Beauty of Conflict," <http://www.ultraextra.org>.
- 7 Ibid., <http://www.ultraextra.org>.
- 8 Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and Resistance under the Gun* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008), 68.
- 9 "Works/Cold Interrogation," *AV-ARKKI*, http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/cold-interrogation_en/. The actor portraying the interrogator is Mika Hannula, an artist and curator and former director of the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland.
- 10 Abidin, "The Beauty of Conflict," <http://www.ultraextra.org>. After the creation of *Cold Interrogation*, Abidin sought to return to Baghdad. However, due to post-9/11

- travel sanctions imposed by the United States, Abidin could not gain permission to reenter Iraq. According to the artist, "The threat of Mr. Bush kept him in Finland."
- 11 Zach Whalen, "Quest for Bush/Quest for Saddam: Content vs. Context," *Gameology*, last modified September 26, 2006, http://www.gameology.org/reviews/quest_for_bush_quest_for_saddam_content_vs_context.
  - 12 Brian Boyko, "Interview: Wafaa Bilal Casts Himself as Terrorist in Virtual Jihadi," *Geeks Are Sexy*, last modified 2012, <http://www.geeksaresexy.net/2008/03/03/interview-wafaa-bilal-casts-himself-as-terrorist-in-virtual-jihadi/>.
  - 13 Whalen, "Quest for Bush/Quest for Saddam," <http://www.gameology.org/>.
  - 14 Ibid., <http://www.gameology.org/>.
  - 15 Boyko, "Interview," <http://www.geeksaresexy.net>. An hour before Bilal gave his talk at the opening of *Virtual Jihadi*, police shut down the exhibition for "code violations." A month later, the exhibition lasted one day before Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute closed the exhibition.
  - 16 Kate McKiernan, "Cease Fire: A Look at Virtual Jihadi," *The Escapist*, last modified August 18, 2009, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_215/6393-Cease-Fire-A-Look-at-Virtual-Jihadi.
  - 17 Ibid., <http://wafaabilal.com/virtual-jihadi/>. Typical of first-person shooter games, participants witness the perspective of the digital character they are "playing" within the space of the game.
  - 18 The Sanctuary for Independent Media, *Art ≠ Terrorism*, YouTube video, 2008.
  - 19 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 5.
  - 20 V. G. Kierman, quoted in Edward Said. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 52.
  - 21 Said, *Orientalism*, 51.
  - 22 Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper-Row, 1989), 35.
  - 23 Ottoman painter and "revisionist" of European Orientalist art Osman Hamdi Bey sought to represent Arab figures performing tasks of intellectual inquiry, devoid of lustful poses, violent interactions, or passive indolence. In two pieces by the artist, *Two Musician Girls* (1880) and *Theologian* (1907), the figures remain fully clothed, displaying expressions of concentration and focus. In *Two Musician Girls*, the figures appear in richly patterned tunics, hyper-focused on the stringed tamboura and the brass tambourine. In *Theologian*, a male figure concentrates on a Qur'anic manuscript. In these examples, Hamdi Bey favors practicality over desire, intellect over garishness. See Emine Fetvaci, "The Art of Osman Hamdi Bey," in *Osman Hamdi Bey and the Americans: Archeology, Diplomacy, Art*, eds. Renata Holod and Robert Ousterhout (Istanbul: Pera Museum Publications, 2011), 119.
  - 24 Raymond Pun, "Digital Images and Visions of Jihad: Virtual Orientalism and the Distorted Lens of Technology," *CyberOrient* 7, no. 1 (2013): www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=8391.^f
  - 25 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *The Globalization Reader*, eds. Lechner, Frank J. and John Boli (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 99.
  - 26 Pun, "Digital Images," www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=8391.
  - 27 Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 39.
  - 28 Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal, "The Immigrant Worlds' Digital Harbors: An Introduction," in *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*, eds. Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 3.

- 29 James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 304.
- 30 Michael S. Laguerre, "Digital Diaspora: Definition and Models," in *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*, eds. Andoni Alonso and Pedro J. Oiarzabal (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 50.
- 31 Aini Linjakumpu, *Political Islam in the Global World* (Reading, NY: Ithaca Press, 2007), 116–17.
- 32 Kim Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 211.
- 33 David Neustein and Grace Mortlock, "The Venice Biennale's Many Inequalities, in Map Form," *Metropolis*, 2016, <http://www.metropolismag.com/cities/the-venice-biennales-many-inequalities-in-map-form/>. Critics David Neustein and Grace Mortlock describe the division of space at public art events like the Biennale: "Marooned on its tourist island, the Biennale is an idealized world-in-miniature, free of the realities, confusions and conflicts of the world-at-large. The environment is timeless, picturesque, serene: hardly representative of the world's 'increasing complexity.'" Increasingly viewed as a space of privilege, the Biennale caters to art connoisseurs, collectors, and art enthusiasts afforded the opportunity to travel to the event.
- 34 Amanda Duhon, "Contemporary Art of Iraqis and Categorical Assumptions of Nationality: An Analysis of the Art and Narrative of Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin, and Wafaa Bilal" (thesis, Louisiana State University, 2008), 31–2. It is important to understand why Abidin exhibited at the Nordic Pavilion rather than the Iraqi. Due to political and social limitations, Iraq did not have a national presence at the Biennale until 2011. At the 2011 event, Abidin exhibited under the nation of Iraq rather than the Nordic area.
- 35 Marks, "Adel Abidin's 'Baghdad Travels,'" <http://universes-in-universe.org/content/view/print/9014>. Note: This was created after the infamous looting of the Baghdad Museum in 2003.
- 36 "Abidin Travels, 2006," <http://www.adelabidin.com/video-installation/abidin-travels>.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Women are not permitted to book flights alone on the webpage without a male chaperone, and children are prohibited.
- 39 "Abidin Travels, 2006," *Adel Abidin*. Accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.adelabidin.com/video-installation/abidin-travels>.
- 40 Marks, "Adel Abidin's 'Baghdad Travels,'" <http://universes-in-universe.org/content/view/print/9014>.
- 41 "Gargantua," *Brandeis Institutional Repository*, <http://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/3930>. In the nineteenth century, humorous undertakings in the arts were often found in print media. Honoré-Victorin Daumier dominated political satire through his etchings of Louis Philippe as Gargantua in the French weekly publication *La Caricature* in 1831. Francisco Goya also captured political and social discrepancies in his nineteenth-century etchings, depicting outrageous displays of human suffering with exaggerated, corporeal renderings. In these works, the role of humor and satire among dark political events served as a didactic tool for understanding moments of destabilization and social decline.
- 42 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 5–6.
- 43 Jacqueline Garrick, "The Humor of Trauma Survivors: Its Application in a Therapeutic Milieu," in *Trauma Treatment Techniques: Innovative Trends*, eds. Jacqueline Garrick and Mary Beth Williams (New York: Routledge, 2014), 173–4.

- 44 Giseline Kuipers, "The Functions of Laughter after 9/11," in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, eds. Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 21.
- 45 The role of community also plays a major role in *Abidin Travels*. Rather than experience the traumatic images alone, the installation provided participants a public space to view and screen the images. In this sense, the piece provides the opportunity to experience violent images with other participants, sharing in a universal experience associated with the war in Iraq.
- 46 Marks, "Adel Abidin's 'Baghdad Travels,'" <http://universes-in-universe.org/content/view/print/9014>.
- 47 Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 201.
- 48 Pun, "Digital Images," www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=8391.
- 49 Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7–8.
- 50 "Hometown Baghdad," *Chat the Planet*. Accessed April 3, 2014, <http://chattheplanet.com/index.php?page=about&cat=82>.
- 51 "Hometown Baghdad," <http://chattheplanet.com/index.php?page=about&cat=82>.
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- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism*, 7.

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