Introduction

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The term “Gulf War” never achieved an equivalent level of media saturation and buzzword ubiquity when employed to refer to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent events as it had a decade prior, when it referred to Operation Desert Storm and irrevocably conjured a certain set of wartime “documentary” images (Apache gun camera footage, Tomahawk missile launches) that Jean Baudrillard famously called an “atrocity masquerading as a war,” war’s simulacra.¹ What the terminology of the 2003 war did achieve, however, was the anointing of the 1990–1991 war as “First Gulf War,” a title hitherto held by the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988.²

This first First Gulf War did not lose its salience in governmental and media narratives as it lost its name, however: it was instrumentalized as precursor, lesson, counterpoint, cautionary tale by various agendas. Military analysts used it as a textbook on Iraq’s defensive capability,³ war opponents bearing images of Donald Rumsfeld and Saddam Hussein smiling and shaking hands pointed to it as an example of foreign policy hypocrisy,⁴ war advocates used the conflict as evidence of Iraqi aggression and war crimes.⁵ Not long after, the Iranian regime, which had long referred to its conflict with Iraq as a “holy defense” and an “imposed war,” found its own “victim” narrative of the war echoed in unlikely places. In the interests of defusing hostilities between the United States and Iran and preventing yet another war in the regime, various permutations of the supposed truism that “Iran has not attacked a neighboring country in 200 years” were spread by antiwar advocates,⁶ uncritical of Iran’s own culpability for the war, particularly after the state unilaterally rejected an Iraqi peace accord in 1982. In keeping with this narrative, efforts to portray the war as a by-product of malicious
foreign intervention tended to emphasize Western support for Iraq and its criminal chemical weapons program while deemphasizing Iran’s own foreign support (a reversal of the situation decades prior, in the days of the Iran Contra scandal), Iran’s war crimes, and the fact that Henry Kissinger’s famous statement most accurately summed up the cynicism of many of the backers and suppliers of both Iran and Iraq: “It’s a pity they both can’t lose.”

The facts of the war have remained, nonetheless. One million or more soldiers and civilians dead, millions more permanently displaced, countless disabled, a generation of prosthetic implants and teenage martyrs. The facts have remained—to be instrumentalized by agendas foreign and domestic, but also to be aestheticized, defamiliarized, readdressed, and reconciled by artists, writers, and filmmakers, speakers of Arabic, Persian, Kurdish—Shiite, Sunni, atheist—Iranian, Iraqi, internationalist.

Following their particular agendas, official discourses naturally have tried to dominate the process of production and distribution of war narratives. In doing so, they have attempted to ignore and silence voices that transcend borders further demarcated by war. In order to hear these voices, then, one should be alert to the fact that in the context of this general background of discursive confrontation, there are more subtle elements that generate multiple narratives, each of which attempts to authenticate and legitimize itself and its discourse. The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), with the multifaceted efforts of the dominant discourses to control the narratives of that war, provides one of the best cases for a study of the formation of these narratives. Dealing primarily with the literary and artistic expressions based on the Iran-Iraq War developed in these two societies, these expressions allow for a better understanding of the complexities of underrepresented narratives that go beyond those produced by official and conventional discourses. The material in this collection attempts to identify systems of meanings that are behind the multiple narratives of war. They explore the genre of war literature as reflected in Iran’s and Iraq’s contemporary writings by situating them in their historical contexts, while demonstrating how official efforts to appropriate the narratives of war have created the problem of authenticity for these narratives. Indeed, the more efforts have been made to
authenticate these narratives, the more spurious they have become. This even includes works that have tried to dissociate themselves from the official discourse. The material in this collection underlines the fact that the above-mentioned problem has indeed contributed to the creation of a literary and artistic phenomenon in which the most successful war discourses are those in which war stories are placed in the background or are deliberately absent. In particular, this latter has led to the emergence of “sites of silence” which effortlessly contribute to the formation of the most expressive accounts of war experience. The collection therefore includes theoretical studies based on the idea that “silence is full of unexpressed words” as significant elements in reading war literature. They identify these moments of silence as one of the major sites of intraregional and global conversations.

The subtitle of this volume, and the conference that preceded it, may be read as an implication that these narratives—those narratives of governmental and partisan agenda—are, unequivocally, the authentic ones, but the reality is rather more complex. The literary and artistic narratives that are gathered and studied here were brought together not because they naively represent an authenticity lacking in the—official, hegemonic—discourses of the war, but precisely because they call into question the notion of authenticity—within their own narrating act, within that of a regime or party bulletin, within any such act—itself.

A common thread that emerges in this material is the notion that the facts of the war, even when agreed upon, do not translate to simple truths. Donna Pasternak notes the sense of futility Tim O’Brien describes when discussing his attempt to create a “true war story” out of the past—when, in his words, that past is “so intertwined with the present and the future that the truth is only created, represented by, the constant entanglement and expression of all the perceptions that occurred, are occurring, will occur.” When O’Brien writes, then, that he “wants you to know why story-truth is truer than happening-truth,” it is less a validation of literature’s place as a “realer” reality, a revisionist account of the “dark areas” of history, but rather an assertion that the never-complete process of getting at the truth, and the revision, skepticism, and subjectivity that come along with it, has an actual, honest existence.
that challenges the idea of a non-mediated truth to which we all have access. The fault in the official discourse, then, lies as much in its cynicism as in its denial of its own narrated and mediated nature.

Is this a “secret history,” then, of the kind that Peter McInerney believes Vietnam War literature played a unique role in narrating? He writes, “Vietnam is as much a state of mind as a place or event. It is a kind of mystery which cannot be represented or even adequately named by straight or exterior history.” If so, this secret history’s greatest claim to authenticity is the fact that, unlike “straight” history, which creates truth by erasing deviation, it is self-conscious in its pursuit of truth and in its representation of this pursuit as unending, ambiguous, often self-contradictory. Finding, deciding upon, creating a language that can convey any sort of truth at all—collective, national, private—is a major preoccupation of the texts and critiques in this collection.

The conference “Moments of Silence: The Authentic Literary and Artistic Narratives of the Iran-Iraq War” was conceived as a space where this language and its diverse dialects could be explored by a group of scholars and artists working in equally diverse dialects: linguistic (Persian, Arabic, Kurdish, Khuzi, Gilaki) and disciplinary (from social history to the political history of cinema to literary criticism). Held from March 15 to 17, 2011 at NYU Abu Dhabi, the conference represented the first comparative, interdisciplinary symposium dedicated to studying the cultural production of the Iran-Iraq War as a multifaceted and transnational phenomenon. In this respect, the emphasis of the symposium was to give priority to voices that represent intraregional conversations beyond nationally contained ones. Although it is undeniable that in the current globalized world vehicles of knowledge and research are so fluid that it is practically impossible to identify them within particular geographies, it is also a known fact that, for various historical reasons, including Orientalism and Colonialism, many of these vehicles carry the mark of literary and historical traditions which are not necessarily informed by literary, linguistic, and, in general, analytical characteristics of Southern (i.e., regional) traditions. Therefore, one of the premises of this conference was drawn based on the argument that different disciplines in different geographies have traversed various paths; thus, concepts formed in fields such as history and historiography, literary criticism, aesthetics, and philosophy have particular genealogies,
which then necessitates mindfulness when one attempts to create the appropriate ground for the cross-cultural and transnational dialogues.

The chapters gathered here are presented in four parts, representing the major methodological preoccupations and thematic considerations of the conference: (1) transnationality as a phenomenon of war, (2) new theoretical paradigms for studying wartime cultural production, (3) visual culture, and (4) literary culture. They are accompanied by an appendix representing some of the literary texts that were read and discussed at the conference’s conclusion. There is also a short bibliography, prepared by Amir Moosavi, which includes only those primary and secondary sources that we believe to be indispensable for those who are interested in working on this extremely underexplored topic.

The chapters in part I, “Transnational Contexts: Interconnected Histories, Geographies, and Languages,” are an effort to defy traditional nation-oriented approaches to war and its cultural production. Ella Shohat’s chapter considers language and geography as two dimensions of an “exilic mode” of writing and examines their interaction in memoirs involving the war. The very possibility of an “Iraqi” or “Iranian” response to the war is complicated by the nature of these works, written in French and narrating a life in Iran (Marjane Satrapi), written in Hebrew and narrating the life of an Iraqi Jew (Shimon Ballas), or written in English and narrating the life of an Iranian Jew during and after the Revolution (Roya Hakakian). Shouleh Vatanabadi’s chapter discusses works that challenge the notion that the only (or most relevant) wartime border was that between the nation-states of Iran and Iraq. Films like Bashu: The Little Stranger and The Night Bus are shown to use language to create spaces and tensions that defy nationalist fictions: the former envisioning a heteroglossic Iran with mutually unintelligible dialects and languages, including the Arabic of the “enemy,” and the latter creating a multilingual microcosm within a bus, whose passengers bear transnational linguistic and cultural subjectivities—the Kurdish, the Iranian Arab, the Arab Iranian—which defy the war’s attempt at assimilation.

The chapters in part II, “Theorizing Cultural Expressions of War,” involve an intervention in the methodological framework for studying the war and its cultural products. Each makes a powerful argument for the inclusion of such material in any broader study of the Iran-Iraq War,
and each draws upon various disciplinary frameworks (trauma studies, social history) while acknowledging their limitations when applied to a still understudied and undertheorized event. Kamran Rastegar’s chapter involves a theorization of the “sacred defense field” in Iran and the ways in which its cultural production has interacted with distinct paradigms of memory discourse and trauma production. A comparison with Lebanese postwar cultural production provides an opportunity to examine narratives that fall outside the paradigmatic boundaries of this field. In the first chapter to focus directly on works produced by combat veterans, M. R. Ghanonparvar examines how these stories, novels, and films have grappled with official discourses and government propaganda in their interpretation of the very character of the war itself—its material reality, its inception and motivation, and the characterization of its combatants.

Dina Khoury’s chapter is a potent reminder that constructing a binary opposition between official discourses of the war and the “authentic” narratives of victims and veterans is as tenuous an endeavor as uncritically accepting the truth claims within those discourses. The prisoner-of-war narratives that she examines do not readily accept themes like victimhood, resistance, or “truth to power” any more than they do nationalism, patriotism, or battlefield heroism. POWs who “converted” (or indeed were made to convert through coercion, torture), emblemize the complexities of a situation in which a victim’s victimization is inseparable from his own victimization of others. Amir Moosavi’s chapter introduces a comparative framework between Persian and Arabic war narratives as well as a shift of focus from the battlefield to the “home front,” examining the ways in which authors working in both languages complicated the “war cultures” that were created by both state and non-state institutions within their societies. Finally, Michael Beard’s chapter completes this section with a meditation on language and violence, presenting an argument that language, and possibly all aesthetic representation, fails to represent violence with any accuracy or neutrality and yet acquires a persuasive capacity through the deployment of such aestheticized violence that is unquestionably powerful as an exhortation to fight, to defend, to act.

The two chapters in part III, “War through Visual Representations,” focus on the visual and cinematic, two elements of Iran-Iraq War
cultural production that are particularly salient considering the visual spectacle of one of the most massive wars in recent memory, which anticipated the spectacle that accompanied the two Gulf Wars to follow. Peter Chelkowski’s chapter examines the role of graphic arts during the war—posters, murals, commemorative art, patriotic ephemera—as a continuation and development of the themes of self-sacrifice and righteous revolution that accompanied their deployment during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Marjan Riahi’s chapter is a thorough history of the development of Iranian war cinema as a political and cultural phenomenon from the outbreak to the conclusion of the war, analyzing the role of the state in fostering war film as a component of wartime morale-building, and the limits of the filmmaker’s agency in operating within the established framework of patriotic cinema.

In part IV, “Literary Narratives of War,” each chapter considers new paradigms for studying the literary production of the war, be it original prose, poetry, or translation. Mardin Aminpour’s is the first chapter to focus exclusively on literary representations of the Kurdish experience of the war, and the myriad ways in which the narration of this experience rejects nationalist, statist, and patriotic tropes and places an emphasis on civilians, rather than combatants, as the perennial victims of military conflict. Farzaneh Farahzad’s chapter, meanwhile, focuses on the politics of editing and linguistic nationalism: a phenomenon that, in the Iranian context, is mostly associated with pre-Revolutionary politics, but in Farahzad’s analysis, played a significant role in the editing of translated texts in Iran during the war, and was part of the discourse of nationalist opposition to the Enemy—in this case, conceived of as the linguistic Other. Finally, Mehdi Khorrami’s chapter finds in certain works of modernist Persian fiction a response to the war that, while rejecting the staging and simulacra of state-endorsed war “memoirs” and documentaries, does not supplant an “anti-discourse” of truth and authenticity in their stead, but rather deploys silence as both a strategic and an aesthetic device to open a new space, home to neither hero nor victim, neither combatant nor “home front” civilian.

This volume ends with a selection of translated literary texts—poetry and prose by Sinan Antoon, short stories by Habib Ahmadzadeh and Marjan Riahi—that were among the works read at the writers’ roundtable of the Moments of Silence conference. It is the hope of this volume’s
editors that these texts, as well as myriad other heretofore unstudied
texts of the Iran-Iraq War, can be read in concert with new methodolo-
gies and comparative frameworks that can bring us closer, if not to a
singular, secret truth, then to a secret history of the war and to moments
of silence brought about not by state-mandated rituals of remembrance,
nor by the elision of time's passing, but by the act of criticism itself.

NOTES
1 Jean Baudrillard, The Gulf War Did Not Take Place. Bloomington: Indiana Univer-
2 See for example: "From Gulf War to a Gulf Peace?" Sydney Morning Herald (Aus-
17, 2013.
3 See for example: Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson, Lessons Learned:
The Iran-Iraq War. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army
6 See Juan Cole, “Bush Sets Preconditions for Iran Syria.” Juancole.com (December
7 Donna Pasternak, “Keeping the Dead Alive: Revising the Past in Tim O’Brien’s
8 Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried. Quoted by Pasternak, ibid., p. 49.
10 Peter McInerney, “‘Straight’ and ‘Secret’ History in Vietnam War Literature.” Con-