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Simulating Iraq: Cultural Mediation and the Effects of the Real

Claire Beckett, with an Introduction by Nuit Banaï

For more than three years, between 2007 and 2009, Boston-based photographer Claire Beckett documented army personnel and civilian workers who were readying American soldiers for deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan. With security clearance to access various military sites across the United States, most notably the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, Beckett has been privy to the simulation techniques and role-play exercises used to prepare troops for these foreign theaters of operation. The large-format color photographs in the series *Simulating Iraq* capture the artificial scenarios, fabricated personas, and imitation landscapes used by the military to transform the unfamiliar cultures, peoples, and locations of the Middle East into a representational range both knowable and coercible. Beckett's photographs critically communicate a canny elision among visual imaging systems, the field of perception, and the logic of military operations. The staging of a war, her project suggests, is intertwined with a multitude of techniques that play a formative role in constituting the self. Indeed, animating this battlefield of power relations is the construction and diffusion of representations of identity, a terrain of signifiers that may be marshaled to craft distinct differences between "us" and "them" but which inexorably escape any singular identification or localization.

Beckett's portraits of individuals and groups offer some of the strongest instances of the military's engineering of otherness. Based on descriptions provided by intelligence services, the portraits include fair-skinned, blue-eyed Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen, who by loosely donning a white *hijab* (head covering) and blue *abaya* (outer garment) is transformed into an Iraqi nurse in the questionably dubbed town of Wadi al-Sahara (2008), and Army Specialist Gary McCorkle, who is swathed from head to toe in white head scarf and

dishdasha (a long, white robe traditionally worn by men) and grasping a mock improvised explosive device (IED) in order to perform the role of the improbably named terrorist “Jibril Ihsan Hamal” (2009). In both portraits, Beckett’s representations of her protagonists resonate with Western painterly conventions and iconography. With echoes of Raphael, Vermeer, and Delacroix mediating the construction of contemporary Iraqi subjects, Beckett creates a strange complicity among viewers, sitters, and the “oriental” individuals they embody. While this uncanny visual triangulation fosters an unexpected proximity, it also revels in its own artificiality *as* a simulation. In other words, even as the prolific intertextuality of visual references cultivates a sense of intimate intersubjectivity, the collision among contradictory elements in this image circuit makes the synthetic aspects of identity formation all too apparent. As made evident in the group portrait of four African American civilians impersonating Iraqi women drinking tea (2009), this double register of familiarity and dissociation is manufactured by a play of visual codes that go hand in hand with the logistics of military perception. The elevated—almost aerial—perspective through which we observe this cultural enactment corresponds to the technological viewpoints that frame the battlefield. Just like the reconnaissance satellites that collect data, radar-bomb-scoring apparatus that guides air attacks with digital precision, and television screens that transmit combat to worldwide viewers in real time, Beckett’s image positions the spectator as an all-seeing mechanical appendage. At the same time, this omniscient viewpoint is complicated by a twofold remove: if the women wearing this blend of sartorial styles appear as “outsiders” to the cultural realities of the Middle East, the viewer is positioned as a complete interloper, hovering outside the logic of military operations while reflecting on his or her own mediated mechanisms of identification with the individuals on the ground.

Though visual technologies simulate perceptual and physical contiguity, Beckett’s photographs suggest that “presence” is always at a distance. This applies not only to our visualization of the Iraqi population but also to our attitudes and assumptions about the American servicemen and servicewomen whom we barely know but who *represent* us in uniform. For instance, in the portrait of civilian Krista Galyean playing the role of an American marine injured in an IED blast (2008), the straightforward address between sitter and photographer begs us to examine the way the media inflects our own relationship to the troops. Just as this female civilian functions as a “prop” or “stand-in” for a maimed soldier,

the media images that bring us to the war's front lines are also types of provisional substitutes. This chain of potential surrogates—one connected to the other by random analogies—expands to a perverse scale when we note that the fake blood used to authenticate the re-creation of the soldier's wound resembles the hue of the crimson "meats" displayed at the butcher shop of Medina Wasl Village (2009). By making visible such subtle correspondences, Beckett underscores the difficulty of ever having an unmediated understanding of other cultures and identities and also cultivates a space through which viewers might empathize with the material realities of deployment to such simulated topologies. In this context, we may be prompted to wonder about the quality of acculturation that occurs while navigating the fictional architecture of Medina Jabal Town, with its golden domes and minarets propped on concrete moldings and shipping containers (2009), or in occupying the lookout position above Medina Wasl Village (2008), with its infinite vista of the Mojave Desert and perfectly calibrated blue skies. Does it matter how closely these locales approximate the topography of Iraq or any other war zone? Or are all encounters with otherness—whether subjects or spaces—a product of our imagination?

Though all these vignettes may be "staged" or "simulated," Beckett's photographs reveal their constitutive power to construct and diffuse specific representations of identity. Peculiarly, the definition of *friend* or *foe* emerges from such fabricated realities and the imaging systems that serve as the contemporary interfaces for cultural mediation. Often used indistinguishably toward political objectives or entertainment purposes, communication and information technologies—such as photography, film, and video—have the capacity to create as well as transform ways of seeing and knowing. As made manifest in *Simulating Iraq*, these systems and technologies animate an extremely precarious *reality* fabricated from heterogeneous *representations* of self and other that function as so many *effects of the real*. At once mercurial and potent, identities float and shimmer through the fluid contours of this simulated space, but not without transforming into histories and narratives of a durable substance and sometimes an unendurable subjectification.



Figure 1 Above Medina Jabal Town, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2009



Figure 2 Marine Lance Corporal Nicole Camala Veen playing the role of an Iraqi nurse in the town of Wadi al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Calif., 2008



Figure 3 Army Specialist Gary McCorkle playing the role of “Jibril Ihsan Hamal,” a key member of the leading terrorist group in town, Islamic Army of Iraq, with an IED, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2009



Figure 4 American civilians playing the role of Iraqi village women drinking tea: Karen Davis as “Salihah Asad Hatim,” Verna Pouesi as “Amira Rough,” Randa Matgyo as “Kawthar Amid,” and Faye Ugapo as “Rim Duqaq Barakah,” Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2009



Figure 5 Butcher shop, Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2009



Figure 6 Jabal Village Mosque, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2008



Figure 7 Civilian Krista Galyean playing the role of an American Marine injured in an IED blast, Wadi al-Sahara, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Calif., 2008



Figure 8 Lookout above Medina Wasl Village, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., 2008