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ABSTRACT

Hassan Blasim's short stories, featured in his 2009 collection *The Madman of Freedom Square*, present the horrors – both spectacular and mundane – of the refugee experience. Blasim's writing, by turns surreal and grotesquely intimate, evokes familiar themes of the Gothic, and his stories are rife with haunted protagonists and monstrous entities. Focusing on three short stories – "The Reality and the Record", "The Truck to Berlin", and "Ali's Bag" – this article critically considers how Blasim utilizes a Gothic aesthetic in his writing to represent and critique the unspeakable violence that is experienced by Iraqi refugees. Working at the intersection of literary refugee studies, abject theory, and the Gothic, this article argues that Blasim's fiction closes the distance between his readers and the figure of the refugee, challenging the expectations of his largely metropolitan, European readers who may otherwise seek authenticity, look for allegory, and anticipate abject spectacle amongst his works.

Utilizing a Gothic aesthetic in his writing, Iraqi writer and film-maker Hassan Blasim presents the horrors – both spectacular and mundane – experienced by Iraqi refugees. Assessing the growing corpus of contemporary Iraqi literature that draws on the schema and style of the Gothic genre (such as Lu'ay Hamza 'Abbas's ([2008] 2013) *Closing His Eyes* and Ahmed Saadawi's ([2013] 2018) *Frankenstein in Bagdad*), Haytham Bahoora (2015) describes how "[l]iterary recourse to the metaphysical, whether through the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural" is representative of the "frequent stylistic conventions of post-2003 ... Iraqi literary production, narrating a terrain of unspeakable violence and its many afterlives" (185). The Gothic genre provides Blasim with a language for narrating the physical and psychic trauma experienced by Iraqis as a consequence of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime, the 2003 invasion by the US, sectarian violence, and forced migration. The present article focuses, in particular, on the figure of the refugee, who represents a central character in his storytelling. Analysing three short stories from *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Blasim [2009] 2016a) – "The Reality and the Record", "The Truck to Berlin", and "Ali's Bag" – it centres on Blasim's use of the Gothic as part of his narrativization of the refugee experience.

Arguing that contemporary Arabic literature of forced migration to Europe "call[s] for different modes of reading and framing", Joanna Sellman (2018) "locates literary texts as spaces of confrontation between representation and material reality" with the capacity to "respond to the theorizations of borders" (762). Blasim's fiction graphically attests to the human cost of increased border securitization in Europe. With their sensory, intimate, and banal horrors, his stories close the distance between his readers and the figure of the refugee. This act of bridging, however, is not achieved by manifesting a sense of familiarity. Rather, his use of a Gothic aesthetic in his depiction of forced migration "creates [a] means of defamiliarizing and re-imagining the borders" that set at odds "state sovereignties and rights to mobility" (Sellman 2018, 762). Framing his account of forced migration in term of the Gothic, Blasim's stories challenge the expectations of his largely metropolitan, European readers who may otherwise seek authenticity, look for allegory, and anticipate abject spectacle amongst his works.

Blasim fled Iraq in 2000, after coming under scrutiny for his film, *The Wounded Camera*, which documents the forced migration of millions of Iraqis following the entry of Hussein's army into Kurdistan after the 1991 uprising. Travelling illegally through Europe as a refugee, he eventually settled in 2004 in Finland, where he continues to reside. He has published two critically acclaimed short story collections with Comma Press, *The Madman of Freedom Square* and *The Iraqi Christ* (Blasim [2009] 2016b), both of which have been translated from Arabic into English by Jonathan Wright. Although Blasim's fiction is controversial in the Middle East and the Arabic editions of his works have been "toned-down" or even banned in some countries (see "Dear Jordan" 2012), his short stories have been generally well received by English-language readers. *The Madman of Freedom Square* was longlisted for the 2010 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, while his second collection, *The Iraqi Christ*, was awarded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014. His most recent novel, *God 99* (Blasim [2009] 2016d), further expands his literary oeuvre, blurring the boundaries between fiction and memoir as its protagonist, Hassan Owl, interviews Iraqi refugees about their experiences.

The literary and cultural capital of Blasim's works in Europe is apparent through the manifold translations of his texts; they have been translated into more than 20 languages, including Dutch, Spanish, German, Finnish, and French, besides English. Olli Löytty (2020) observes that while these translations are directly made from the original Arabic, the English language editions serve "as a bridge between the original Arabic and translations in other languages" (n.p.). Blasim's fiction, written in Arabic in Finland, translated into English and published by Manchester-based Comma Press, and then commissioned for further translation throughout Europe, therefore represents an example of how Arabic cultural production in the diaspora has undergone a change in recent years. As Sellman observes:

> Cities such as Berlin, Stockholm and Amsterdam have become important centres for Arab cultural production in Europe, displacing the primacy of London and Paris. Newer diasporas are reshaping the field of Arab and Arabic cultural production in Europe. Literary narratives themselves are shifting away from the themes and contexts of colonial and postcolonial Arabic exile literature, and exploring new aesthetics and modes of representing migration in a global context. (2018, 754)

While the English translation of Blasim's writing carries with it a certain literary capital, it is significant that it is an independent press in the north west of England whose publication of Blasim's works has facilitated his writing so that it may become "a visible part in the international literary space in Europe" (Löytty 2020, n.p.). These dispersed and decentralized routes towards the publication of Arabic literature in Europe have seen Blasim's fiction introduced to a broad spectrum of European readers, "traversing both national and linguistic borders" (n.p.). At the same time that Europe's borders are being increasingly securitized in response to irregular migration, Blasim's widely translated fiction has the potential to close the distance between the figure of the refugee and European readers, agitating hegemonic neo-liberal and right-wing political and media discourse that typically presents borders as necessary to the preservation of state sovereignty.

In both its content and its contexts of translation and circulation, Blasim's writing moves steadily away from Edward Said's (1993) influential conceptualization of exile as a source of (albeit sometimes melancholic) intellectual and creative inspiration (121). Instead, Blasim's use of Gothic motifs in his fiction presents a new literary aesthetic for exploring Arab exile within the context of globalization and forced migration in the 21st century. In tracing the popularity of Blasim's works amongst European readers, it is significant that the Gothic genre is born of European tradition. Yet Blasim's deployment of a Gothic aesthetic and, in particular, his invocation of abjection – of "a terror that dissembles" (Kristeva 1982, 4) – reorientates Europe's wooded landscapes to show the horrific consequences of its physical and ideological border-making. As Alison Rudd (2010) argues, the uncanny and the abject, employed as part of a Postcolonial Gothic framework, come to "expose the faultlines in colonial ideologues and political and economic systems" (13, 3). While acknowledging that "[a]s a European genre, Gothic cannot unbind all its historical ties to the West", Judie Newman (1994) notes that "its ability to retrace the unseen and unsaid of culture renders it peculiarly well-adapted to articulating the untold stories of colonial experience" (86). Postcolonial Gothic subverts and destabilizes a genre rooted in western Enlightenment, whose tenets of rationality and humanism were deployed as part of the so-called "civilizing" mission that accompanied colonialism (Holden 2009, 385).

Tracing a Gothic aesthetics in Blasim's literary account of the Iraq War, Ikram Masmoudi (2019–20) pushes this argument further, aligning the underpinning doctrine of 18th-century western Enlightenment with the "false narrative of progress heralded by the new age of military intervention and occupation" in Iraq (67). Blasim's adaptation of the Gothic genre, Masmoudi argues, represents a "counter-narrative" to this false narrative (90). His counter-narrative manifests via a Gothic aesthetic, which evokes – or provokes – feelings of anxiety, fear, awe, and abject horror in readers. As Newman describes it:

> The duplicity of Gothic – its propensity for crossing boundaries, violating taboos, transgressing limits, together with its sense of blockage, privation and prohibition against utterance – makes it the perfect means to dramatize the horrors of the relationship between the social group which sanctions its actions by cultural forms, and the excluded from discourse who speak by deeds. (1994, 98)

Postcolonial Gothic writing therefore has the potential to usurp hegemonic imperial and neo-liberal discourses from within – an uninvited visitor, an abjection that "does not respect borders" (Kristeva 1982, 4). The abject, "[t]he monstrous and [...] the unspeakable, seen through inarticulate and grotesque characters", Rudd argues, is an important aspect of Postcolonial Gothic" (2010, 23). It is abjection – working at the edges of liminality and excess, of the unspeakable and the monstrous – that this article centres on.

Blasim's articulation of the Gothic genre is underscored by the dissembling characteristics of abjection. Abjection, as theorized by Julia Kristeva (1982), "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, [and] rules" (4). It pushes at the border and, in so doing, simultaneously reaffirms the existence of a border between self and other. In contemporary political and media discourses in Europe, refugees are often dehumanized, viewed as degenerate, inauthentic, and even threatening. Blasim draws on this abject imagery in his short fiction – writing at the very limits of representation, his articulation of the inhuman and degenerate works to both subvert and emphasize the horrors that are intrinsic to the refugee experience. In asserting the credibility of the refugee's story to readers, "[w]hat matters", one of Blasim's narrators tells us, "is the horror" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 9). So, 34 bodies are torn apart in the back of a truck; a young man traipses through a forest carrying his mother's bones in a bag; a sack of severed heads is transported in the back of an ambulance. Or, farts, insults, and prayers ring out against the walls of a locked truck; a young man grieves the loss of his mother; an ambulance driver makes a "humble entreaty" for sleep (11). Blasim's fiction reframes readers' expectations of horror, his writing a reminder that behind the butchered bodies, the bag of bones, and the decapitated heads, there remains another, far less spectacular, but equally horrific component to the refugee experience – one composed of exhaustion, shit, and grief. If, as Blasim states, "violence is a nightmare" (quoted in Irving 2012), then his short fiction encapsulates the horrors of reality.

Distance and proximity: The horrors of border "invasions" and mass drownings

Refugees are often dehumanized in western political and media discourses. During the 2015 European Migrant Crisis, for example, refugees were described in numerous derogatory ways: then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to those crossing the Mediterranean Sea as a "swarm" ("PM Blames Calais Crisis on 'Swarm' of Migrants" 2015), while the right-wing columnist Katie Hopkins (2015) described migrants as "cockroaches" (n.p.). More recently, Nigel Farage has characterized groups of people arriving in Dover as an "invasion" (quoted in Stone 2020). The affective language used in these examples constructs a narrative where refugee populations are seen as degenerate, animalistic, and violent. This type of language facilitates feelings of distrust towards refugees, who, Peter Nyers (2003) argues, "have come to constitute a kind of 'abject class' of global migrants" (1070). Nyers writes that, as abject,

> migrants are increasingly cast as the *objects* of securitised fears and anxieties, possessing either an *unsavoury agency* (i.e. they are identity-frauds, queue jumpers, people who undermine consent in the polity) or a *dangerous agency* (i.e. they are criminals, terrorists, agents of insecurity). (1070; emphasis in original)

That which is perceived as abject is at once "opposed to I" (Kristeva 1982, 1), and yet pushes at the physical and psychic barriers put up by self and society. Refugees, cast as "abject" – described as "swarms" and "invaders" – are consequently presented as a threat to the "way of life" of everyday European citizens. Invoking dehumanizing and degenerate language to describe migrants incites fear and anxiety, distancing readers or viewers from the figure of the refugee. However, as Sara Ahmed (2000) argues,

> [n]arratives which construct "the strange culture" as their object (distance), are also contaminated by that very object (proximity). Colonial encounters do not just involve a transition from distance to proximity: they involve, at one and the same time, social and spatial relations of distance and proximity. Others become strangers (the ones who are distant) [. .] only through coming *too close to home*, that is, through the proximity of the encounter. (12; emphasis in original)

The interrelationship between distance and proximity might be best described as a continuum, composed of spatial relations which remain contingent on one another. Proximity, and the apparent threat it poses, prompts a narrative of alterity, otherness, and abjection – the conditions of distance.

This sense of alterity, that transpires when those who feel secure in their national and/or naturalized citizenship come (too) close to encountering refugees, invokes horror in two fundamental ways, which Blasim highlights in his 2015 poem "A Refugee in the Paradise that is Europe". On the one hand, horror is projected onto the figure of the refugee. As Blasim writes: "They insult you in the racist newspapers" ([2009] 2016c, 43) – a sentence which recalls descriptions such as Hopkins's dehumanizing description of migrants as "cockroaches". Alternatively, encounters with stories of migration might, instead, prompt sympathetic responses in readers, who may experience feelings of horror at the conditions faced by many refugees. A particular example of this sense of horror can be captured in the consequent widespread compassion that erupted in public discourse following the death of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on September 2, 2015. However, while the public response to this event temporarily humanized the figure of the refugee, there was no effectual change in government policy or long-term media coverage. In "A Refugee in the Paradise that is Europe", Blasim is equally, if not more, critical of those who "analyse your child's dead body on television" and who "sit on their sofas, comment wearily on your picture on Facebook, and go to sleep", as he is of racist newspapers (43). Blasim's poem implicates its readers on two fronts. The use of second-person address ("you") places readers in the role of refugee, where they are therefore implicated within the journey and experience of forced migration. However, readers may also be positioned as the ubiquitous "they", who, whether directly or not, are implicated in the (mis)treatment of refugees. Readers of Blasim's poem are therefore presented with a mirror, and witness their own actions – or, perhaps, familiar actions within their community – as though these are being done to them. Blasim asks European readers to read themselves from the perspective of the refugee as they sit on their sofas at a comfortable distance from the suffering they scroll past on their phones.

Blasim's short stories, like his poem, work to make European readers uncomfortable. The narrator of "The Truck to Berlin" states that

> as far as the public is concerned such mass drownings are an enjoyable film scene, like a new Titanic. […] [Y]ou do not read stories about what the armies of European democracies do when at night, in a vast forest, they catch a group of terrified humans, drenched in rain, hungry and cold. (Blasim [2018] 2020, 68)

Sensationalized stories – whether they invoke feelings of horror about a "swarm" of migrants crossing the English Channel, or pity for the horrific story of a Syrian boy drowned in the Mediterranean Sea – distract from other kinds of storytelling, which expose the actions of bureaucratic and armed border controls. The securitization of European borders – and the systematic immigration regimes of "interdiction, detection, detention and deportation" – ensures that forced migrants are "identified as an 'illegal' presence before they even reach Europe's borders" (Cetti 2014, 12). Borders come to represent an "extra-legal space" – a state of exception where forced migrants are subject to systematic violence by border control regimes (23).

Blasim's short fiction seeks to tell stories of what he calls the "secret migration" across these borders and to present "evidence of the depravity of the human conscience" (quoted in "A Nightmare of Violence and Terror" 2014). Described by reviewers as "Kafkaesque" (Christopher 2013) and "debased" (Prengel 2014), his writing is character-ized within the global literary marketplace as horror. But Blasim's fiction is Janus-faced, and unveils, amongst such macabre and surreal spectacles, horrors which touch readers in ways they may not have anticipated: nights in vast forests, cold and wet shivering human bodies, the chasm of hunger, and the reprehensible and unconscionable acts of border guards. Blasim's duplicity, facilitated by his use of a Gothic aesthetic, closes the distance between his readers and refugees – between those who are largely, although not exclusively, incorporated within, and even privileged by, hegemonic neo-liberal political and legal structures, and those who are systematically and violently excluded from them. In doing so, Blasim critiques neo-imperial, securitizing discourses that are levelled at refugees, unsettling entrenched ideologues endorsed by political rhetoric and mass media. This defamiliarizing strategy pushes readers closer towards recognizing the material realities of border control regimes, their unspeakable horrors articulated at the fringes of representability, realized via the dissembling language of abjection.

Narrating horror: Authentic, allegorical, and abject storytelling

The three short stories that are the focus of this article concern themselves to varying degrees with the act of storytelling. In "The Reality and the Record", a nameless ambu-lance driver from Baghdad tells his story as part of his asylum request in Malmö, Sweden. In "The Truck to Berlin", an Iraqi refugee recounts a story he hears from Ali the Afghan about the eponymous truck. In "Ali's Bag", the narrator, who resides in an Italian refugee centre, tells the story of an Iraqi refugee, Ali al-Basrawi. Even in their storytelling – where these stories are told and by whom – these narratives encapsulate the global scale of forced migration.

In "The Reality and the Record", the act of storytelling by a nameless Iraqi ambulance driver takes place in a refugee centre. Speaking to an immigration officer, he recounts the horrifying story of how, when transporting six decapitated heads in the back of his ambulance in Baghdad, he was kidnapped and held by numerous extremist groups. He describes how, during his captivity, he was forced to record propaganda videos,

impersonating, amongst others, "a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, [and] a Saudi terrorist", and, on these videotapes, he "murdered, raped, started fires, planted bombs and carried out crimes that no sane person would imagine" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 10). That this act of storytelling takes place in the context of an immigration interview is significant, insofar as "the credibility of the original asylum narrative [is] pivotal to the juridical structure of the asylum determination process" (Woolley 2014, 12). In the framing narrative to "The Reality and the Record", this question of authenticity – and the onus that is put upon refugees to appear credible – is raised from the outset:

> Everyone staying at the refugee reception centre has two stories – the real one and the one for the record. The stories for the record are the ones the new refugees tell to obtain the right to humanitarian asylum. [.. .] The real stories remain locked in the hearts of the refugees, for them to mull over in complete secrecy. (Blasim 2009[2016c], 1)

The story for the record – the story the ambulance driver tells – must contribute towards the credibility of his asylum claim. David Farrier (2011) argues that "[t]o invoke asylum articulates at once notions of sanctuary and illegitimacy" in which we must decide whether we are hearing the story of a "genuine" refugee in need of sanctuary, or the "bogus" refugee who has become popularized in news and politics (6). The authenticity of the ambulance driver's story, then, is not merely located in the particular details of his narrative, but also in the horror that is encapsulated within. The "genuine" refugee escapes horror to seek sanctuary, and so the story that the ambulance driver weaves invites readers to identify with, and be taken in by, its gratuitously violent horrors and "[t]he performativity of the story" (Atia 2019b, 325).

Blasim explicitly points to this performativity in his narrative, as the ambulance driver tells the immigration officer: "What I'm saying has nothing to do with my asylum request. What matters to you is the horror" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 9). The use of direct address ("you") implicates readers in the asylum process, which attributes value to horror within the stories of refugees to authenticate their claim. The highly performative, gratuitously violent story meets these expectations, but, as Bahoora argues, "[t]he doubts we have about whether what has happened to the ambulance driver is 'real' or not is [...] a commentary on the impossibility of imagining the horrors of experiencing such violence" (2015, 199). The true horror that causes the ambulance driver to seek asylum – the real story – is "locked" away. Blasim, via the ambulance driver's story of record, performs horror, playing into the expectations of the asylum process before calling them out: "What matters to you is the horror." In doing so, Blasim prompts his readers to face the reality of horror, and the realization that for those who have endured extreme trauma, it can be inordinately difficult to articulate these experiences coherently. And yet the ambulance driver makes every effort to be heard.

We are told that, upon being admitted to a psychiatric hospital, "the ambulance driver summed up his real story in four words: 'I want to sleep'. It was a humble entreaty" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 11). After the performance and spectacle of the story for the record, this quiet, "humble entreaty" is a jarring contrast. As Blasim's macabre horror story of decapitated heads and on-camera slaughters gives way to an entreaty for sleep, we may read this scene as just that: an appeal to listen – really listen – to the effects of those horrors which lie behind newspaper headlines. However, Khaled Al-Masri (2018) reads this scene with suspicion, arguing that labelling the ambulance driver's desire to sleep as

his real story in fact "dismiss[es] the refugee's earlier narration as madness" (279). If refugees are expected to perform their trauma – to authenticate their claim for asylum – this is, Al-Masri suggests, a difficult balance to achieve: "If a tale verges into the fantastic or exceeds the borders of believability, it is silenced through its being labelled as 'madness', invalidating the narration" (280). So, what matters is the horror – but not so much horror as to discredit the narrative's authenticity. And yet, even here, the ambulance driver is "unwilling to completely allow the sanitized version of his tale to eclipse what he perceives as its truth" (280). The ambulance driver, who directly addresses "you" – that is, the immigration officer, the reader – is concerned with "what details of my story matter to you", but he also stakes a claim for more than just his asylum request through his act of storytelling: "I find it very hard to describe those days of terror, but I want to mention also some things which matter to me" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 4). He does not tell the story just for the immigration officer, nor the reader, but for himself.

In "The Truck to Berlin", the relationship between horror and storytelling takes on a different register as an Iraqi refugee retells the story of a massacre in a truck, travelling from Istanbul to Berlin. The unnamed narrator claims that

> [f]or sure most readers would see the story as merely a fabrication by the author or maybe as a modest allegory for horror. But I see no need to swear an oath in order for you to believe in the strangeness of this world. (Blasim [2018] 2020, 67)

We can read this introduction in light of Fredric Jameson's (1986) controversial concept of national allegory, where he argues:

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*. (69; emphasis in the original)

Jameson suggests that the private, personal narrative – as allegory – serves to facilitate a political reading of the "third-world" context from which the narrative arises. Although Jameson has been criticized for his far-sweeping generalizations, Anna Bernard (2013) provides a thought-provoking defence of his argument, proposing that "Jameson's 'national allegory' is in fact a theory of metropolitan reading, albeit negatively framed" (23). She argues that Jameson's position is directed towards the "first-world" metropolitan reader, asking them to confront their "habits of perceptions and interpretation" (23). We may, therefore, suggest that Blasim's evocation of allegory in this short story pushes metropolitan, neo-liberal European readers to recognize the expectations they bring to his text. That readers might interpret the story as a "modest allegory for horror" suggests that they do not read the horror story of massacred refugees as an allegory for the horrors of the refugee experience. Rather, readers might take this account of the refugee experience, and read it allegorically as a horror story. Using direct address to suggest that "I see no need to swear an oath in order for you to believe in the strangeness of this world" ([2018] 2020, 67), the narrator challenges readers to think about what they read as fiction or reality in this story.

In "The Truck to Berlin", Blasim draws on a Gothic aesthetic to articulate an "unspeakable violence" suffered by refugees (Bahoora 2015, 185). The story is quite literally shrouded in obscurity, as, inside the truck, the 35 refugees "could see each

other only as dark shadows" (Blasim [2018] 2020, 71). Readers are presented with an aural and olfactory atmosphere that grows in intensity over the course of the narrative as, several days after it leaves Istanbul, the truck is apparently abandoned by its driver, leaving its occupants locked inside. The smell inside the truck, at first stuffy from sweaty socks and spicy food, becomes increasingly disgusting: "Some shat in food bags, and the repulsive smell built up inside the truck like strata of rock" (p. 71). The literal filth evoked here represents the indignities of forced migration, a banal and all too real horror that assaults the senses. At the same time, the barriers between human and inhuman become increasingly porous, and the short story utilizes a range of bestial and verminous analogies throughout the course of its narrative (Atia 2019a, 1070–1071). Blasim describes how, within the confines of the truck, "[t]he young men's breathing, taken together, was like that of a monster roaring in the dark" and that, later, "[e]veryone sat around whispering and speculating in low voices, like a hive of bees" ([2018] 2020, 71). The aural soundscape of the truck takes on an overwhelming and frightful bestial energy – breathing becomes a monster's roar, and whispers a vibrating hive of bees.

However, even with the sensory direction of smell and sound, and the use of bestial analogies, the true horror that occurs within the truck remains indescribable. As the story reaches its climax, the narrator states how, he is "not writing now about those sounds and smells which come and go along the paths of secret migration, but about that resounding scream" that is "neither human nor animal" (Blasim [2018] 2020, 72). What transpires in the truck after this scream sounds is not witnessed – readers see only the aftermath: 34 men reduced to "a large soggy mass of flesh, blood and shit" (73). We can read this "scream" – and the clawed and gouged bodies it leaves in its wake – in light of Kristeva's reading of abjection. The abject, "on the edges of primal repression", resists signification: it is "a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster" (Kristeva 1982, 11). The unspeakable violence that occurs within the confines of the truck is indescribable – beyond the symbolic order of human language and the human body.

When the Serbian policemen open the doors to the truck, a man covered in blood flees into the woods. Although it is claimed that he has crossed the border into Hungary, one of the officers, Jankovic, reports that "[a]s soon as the man reached the forest he started to run on all fours, then turned into a grey wolf, before he vanished" (Blasim [2018] 2020, 73). In response to this scene, Rita Sakr (2018) proposes that Jankovic represents the "alter ego of a Marlow who is troubled by the duty to bear witness to the horror of Europe's new heart of darkness" (71). Following this argument, we might therefore suggest that the horror that occurs within the truck is, in fact, eclipsed by its surroundings. Moving through clandestine routes, transported like "cattle" (Blasim [2018] 2020, 67), refugees suffer inhuman fear and indignity and, in so doing, find themselves susceptible to the confrontation of the abject – "with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (Kristeva 1982, 12, Emphasis in original). Sakr argues that "the question of responsibility (individual/collective, human/non-human) is unresolved while the dismembering impact of the violence is presented as the only certainty" (2018, 772). Underpinning the horror of this story – its indescribable violence and inhuman indignities – is, then, a question of who is responsible for this violence. Returning to the earlier discussion on national allegory, Anna Bernard (2013), in defence of Jameson's apparent dividing of "first-" and "third-world" literature, argues that

> [i]t is not that "third-world literature" needs an entirely different theory to "first-world literature"; it is rather that we need a theory of literature that can dialectically account for the world literary system as a whole, and for our own place in it. (25)

As Blasim uses a Gothic aesthetic in an attempt to articulate the unspeakable violence experienced by refugees as they cross European borders, we can also read his fiction as a tool for accountability. As refugees are "[e]ffectively denied any legal route into Europe's nation-states" (Cetti 2014, 8), violence emerges from the attempt to cross a hostile border – to assimilate to a system or structure that rejects that which is conceived as other, or even inhuman.

Finally, I want to consider how the act of narrating horror can *affect* not just readers, but also the storyteller. "Ali's Bag" begins in a refugee centre in Italy. The narrator opens the story by recounting the details of a brawl, which breaks out when the statue of Saddam Hussein is toppled: "Six young Sudanese had a fight with a group of Iraqis", while "[t]he Afghans and some young Nigerians tried to break up the brawl", and "the Iranians […] watch through the windows" (Blasim 2009[2016a], 59). The refugee centre represents a heterotopic space, a microcosm that delineates the global scale of forced migration. By the end of 2003, when this scene takes place, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (2004) reported that "the global number of refugees reached an estimated 9.7 million persons" (2). Of this number, Afghan and Sudanese refugees represented the highest figures of forced displacement, while other main sources of forced migration included Palestine, Iraq, and Somalia (3).

Angela Naimou (2016) argues that "[r]efugees are evidence of the need for flight from the very war zones that the United States and Europe have helped establish" (228), following, for instance, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 by the US and its allies in Europe. These wars take place far from home – waged "at a distance" – and the citizens of the invading, neo-imperial force therefore continue to live in a relative "space-time of peace" (228). However, as Naimou argues, "the distance refugees are traveling to reach Europe […] makes palpable the partial collapse of the distance between war and what is taken for peace" (228). Here, we are reminded of the dichotomy between distance and proximity discussed earlier, where refugees who come "*too close to home*" as part of a colonial encounter (Ahmed 2000, 12; emphasis in original), represent a possible threat to the so-called "way of life" of those safely ensconced in their homes, far from any real conflict. Part of the threat posed here, however, is that when the illusion of distance collapses, people will have to recognize their own complicity – or, at the very least, their country's – in the sanctions and conflicts that have resulted in the violence and forced displacement experienced by refugees. If voyeuristic, sensationalized news stories prompt pity and compassion without readers or viewers having to take on any real level of responsibility, how *close* must they be to actually take on accountability for what they witness?

In "Ali's Bag", the unnamed narrator describes how he feels as though he will spend his life writing about his experiences as an undocumented migrant. "It's my cancer", he says, "and I do not know how it can be cured" (Blasim 2009[2016a], 60). His drive to write is akin to a disease – an invasion of the body. Later he describes how the eponymous Ali's story "seeped into my blood" (61). We might, therefore, equate writing and story-telling in Blasim's short story with abjection. As Kristeva puts it, "the abject

simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject" (1982, 5). He is, at once, compelled to write about his experience, to turn it "into material for literary fiction" and, at the same time, "overwhelmed by a bitter sense of shame" (Blasim 2009[2016a], 60–61). The narrator describes his sense of shame as being like that of a man who has his arm amputated in an accident and covers it with a handkerchief "in an attempt to hide it from the gaze of [...] onlookers" (61). The gratuitous image of the amputated arm bodily represents the pulverized subject, but what is particularly significant here is the inadequate attempt to hide the gory spectacle from the onlooking crowd. The abject inserts itself into the narrator's storytelling not just analogously – as a cancer, as something that seeps into the blood – but also in the spectacle the story creates. Here, we can read the spectacle in light of abjection – "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter" (Kristeva 1982, 4). The stories of refugee suffering are, quite literally, "bartered". The spectacle (a "smile") is one that simultaneously fascinates and frightens its readers, prompting both ineffectual, neo-liberal compassion and pity, and "terror" and "hatred", as that which has been distant comes (too) close to home.

The narrator recounts the story of Ali al-Basrawi, describing his closeness to his mother and how, after her death, he exhumes her buried bones, and carries them with him as he flees Iraq. Ali's extensive journey takes him first from Iraq to Iran, then on to Turkey, before crossing the border into Greece, and finally travelling across the sea to Italy. Crossing the Greek–Turkish border, Ali and a group of other refugees enter a forest where they are ambushed by border guards. The forest is a key site in both this story and in "The Truck to Berlin", representing, as Sakr argues, "Europe's new heart of darkness" (2018, 771). Drawing on work by Sellman (2014), Sakr outlines various derivatives for the Arabic word *ghaba* (forest):

> The *Qutr al-Muheet, Aqrab al-Ma'arif* and *Munjid* dictionaries define the verb phrase *ghaba 'an biladihi* as travelled, *ghayyabahu* as exiled or buried someone, and *ightabahu* as having committed an act of slander. Condensing these various implications of the term in the Arabic text, the forest hence becomes the most conceptually dense geographical anchor for the exploration of the perilous dynamics of forced and clandestine migration as well as their related geopolitical and representational parameters. (Sakr 2018, 769)

The forest, located at a border-site, represents a familiar Gothic trope, which is encapsulated by the root of the Arabic (*ghaba*) – a transient, liminal, and haunted space. It is also significant that this "geographical anchor" for the narrativization of migration, as it appears in the two stories discussed here, is located *at the border* between European countries.

In "Ali's Bag", the skull of his dead mother is quite literally buried in the forest, lost when Ali runs from the smugglers and crashes into a tree. As he falls to the ground "his mother's bones flew in all directions in the darkness of the forest" (Blasim 2009[2016a], 64). The Gothic overture of this forest scenery is signalled, in part, by the frightful fleeing of a young man and the scattering of his mother's bones. However, the monster in this particular story is not the metamorphized, primal wolf that disappears into the forest at the close of "The Truck to Berlin". Instead, readers witness Ali and the other refugees being chased by border guards. Blasim utilizes a Gothic aesthetic to mould the forest into a liminal, "extra-legal space" (Cetti 2014, 23), representing the horrors of securitization. Significantly, at the close of the story, we learn that while "the group escaped the ambush set by the border guards [...] a young Iranian

and a Kurd lost their way and may have been caught" (Blasim 2009[2016a], 65). It is not just the skull of Ali's mother that is lost in the forest. The disappearance of the Iranian and the Kurd in the depths of the forest demonstrates in literal terms how the act of border-crossing – into a state of exclusion – can result in a form of violence that spectacle cannot touch: the violence of erasure.

Conclusion: A horror that dissembles

Blasim utilizes a Gothic aesthetic in his writing to elucidate the horrors of the refugee experience – the surreal, bureaucratic nightmare of applying for asylum and the unreported stories of people being hunted and beaten by border guards in deep dark forests. Inasmuch as Blasim's work belongs to a growing corpus of contemporary Iraqi literature that draws on the Gothic, we can equally – and perhaps more urgently – read his literary oeuvre as making an important and necessary contribution to burgeoning Arab literary and intellectual move- ments in Europe which speak to the experience of Arab exile in the context of forced migration in the 21st century. Blasim's account of forced migration speaks not only to the sanctions, persecution, and violence that refugees flee from, but also the horrors awaiting them in exile in an increasingly securitized Europe.

This article has argued that by weaving horror into his narratives on refugees, Blasim duplicitously critiques the expectations of metropolitan, European readers who seek authenticity, look for allegory, and anticipate abject spectacle. With their sensory, intimate, and banal horrors, Blasim's stories close the distance between his readers and the figure of the refugee. This proximity – so often the cause of disgust and fear in colonial encounters – has the potential to prompt European readers to recognize their own complicity in the wars and political structures that have resulted in the violence and displacement experienced by refugees. Writing at the limits of representation, Blasim's evocation of the abject serves to effectively dissemble – or "defamiliarize[e] and re-imagin[e]" – readers' perceptions of European borders, as apparatuses of state sovereignty and political exclusion (Sellman 2018, 762). If "what matters [...] is the horror" (Blasim 2009[2016c], 9), then this is what Blasim delivers. And yet, the monsters in Blasim's short fiction are not quite what, or who, readers expect. Amongst his horrific tales of gore, wolves, and dark forests, Blasim's narrativization of the abject dissembles (in Kristeva's terms [1982, 4]) readers' confidences in the legitimacy of the borders and protections that keep them "safe" from – and, most importantly, at the expense of – others.

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