

Narrative Wayfinding: Author-izing Arab and Afghan Migration across Morphing Borderscapes

by

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To my interlocutors

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Tables	xi
A Note on Transliteration	xii
Abstract.....	xv
INTRODUCTION	1
Method: Reading Literary and “Real-Life” Migration Narratives Side by Side	6
Narrative as Autopoetic Navigation and Empathetic Entry Point	11
Terminology and ‘Author-ization’	14
Overview of Fieldwork and Sites	18
A Politics of Vulnerability	27
Chapter Breakdown	32
Works Cited	36
CHAPTER ONE ‘A <i>Ḥarrāg</i> ’s Account’: Morphing Borderscapes, Alternative Cartographies ..	39
INTRODUCTION	39
Border Li(n)es.....	42
A note on <i>ḥargah</i> and ‘stuckness’	47
BORDER MORPHING	49
Extraterritoriality and deterritorialization.....	50
The ‘humanitarian–policing nexus’	52
Hostile Mediterranean.....	55
MIGRANT SHAPESHIFTING	61

The ethics of migrant (dis)honesty	64
Uncategorizability: The performance of obscurity in ḥarrāgah literature	67
The limits of migrant performativity	69
CONCLUSION: Alternative Cartography and Migrant Morphology	73
Works Cited	80
~Interlude~	84
Stateless.....	84
بلا جنسية	85
CHAPTER TWO Affective Temporalities and Alternatives to Triumphalism in Novels of Unauthorized Migration.....	86
INTRODUCTION	86
Affective temporalities.....	87
A clash of chronotopes.....	91
<i>GALLOWS OF DARKNESS</i>	94
Temporal mode: ‘The whirlpool of the wastes’	95
Names and temporal referentiality	97
Cosmic border-crossing and uchronia	103
<i>NIGHT MAIL</i>	109
Epistolaria	111
The temporality of confession and surveillance	117
CONCLUSION.....	127
Works Cited	131
~Interlude~ Amin’s Story	134
Neyaz’s Story.....	138
Iran → Turkey.....	140
Turkey → Greece.....	142

Life in Greece	146
Applying for asylum	147
Final thoughts.....	148
Works Cited	151
CHAPTER THREE Rites of Unauthorized Passage: Young Afghan Men Coming of Age in Flight — And in Narrative Return	152
INTRODUCTION	152
OUTCAST MASCULINITIES	154
‘Our own men’	157
Ode, rite of passage, exile.....	162
DEPICTIONS OF (ATTEMPTED) DEPARTURE AS NARRATIVE RETURN.....	165
Circling / charkhīdan / ṭawāf.....	168
Exposure / dar ma‘ raž būdan / at-tajallī.....	174
(Dis)integration / halāk / fanā’	184
CONCLUSION.....	192
Works Cited	199
~Interlude~.....	202
Saif’s Story.....	202
Volunteering and Imprisonment	204
Leaving Greece	205
Coming to Malta	207
Final thoughts.....	207
Works Cited	210
CHAPTER FOUR The World of the Refugee-Translator	211
INTRODUCTION	211
THE TASKS OF REFUGEE-TRANSLATION.....	214

Translation as Veneer?.....	214
Burnout	221
Meaning as Weight, Translator as Bridge.....	223
Introducing Sheyar.....	231
Weight as Responsibility: The ‘Debt’ of the Translator?	234
The Ethics of Translation in Theory and Practice	238
MANEUVERS OF THE REFUGEE-TRANSLATOR	242
‘Networking’	242
Translator, “Trickster”?	251
CONCLUSION: In Search of ‘Good-Enough’ Translation.....	258
Works Cited	267
Epilogue	270
Appendix: Bilingual Transcript of My Interview with Saif.....	273

List of Tables

Table 1: Arabic Transliteration Chart	xiii
Table 2: Persian Transliteration Chart	xiv

A Note on Transliteration

The following tables show the transliteration systems I use to render Arabic and Persian words in Latin script. Note that when I refer to authors and prominent individuals, I use the most common renderings of their names as they appear in English-language writing, e.g., Hoda Barakat, not *Hudā Barakāt*; Bashar al-Assad, not *Bashshār al-ʿAsad*. (However, when an author is relatively obscure in English-language writing, I provide a formal transliteration of his or her name, using diacritics, in a footnote.) I avoid diacritics and strict use of these transliteration systems with words that have made their way into English, such as “Quran” and “kafala,” opting for the common English spelling. I also avoid diacritics when referring to the names of characters in literary works and the names of my interlocutors, except on the first mention of them in each chapter or interlude. I usually leave out Arabic case endings, opting for, say, *tufāḥah* over *tufāḥatun*. This allows for the definite article *al-* to be transliterated as such, and never as *ul-* or *il-*. However, I do choose to transliterate sun letters. Hence: *as-salām*, not *al-salām*.

Table 1: Arabic Transliteration Chart

f	ف
q	ق
k	ك
l	ل
m	م
n	ن
h	ه
ū / w	و
ī / y	ي
ʾ	ء
a	اَ
u	اُ
i	اِ
ah / at	ة
ā	آ
ʾā	آ
-an	انَّ
aw	اوَّ
ay	ايَّ

ā	آ
b	ب
t	ت
th	ث
j	ج
ḥ	ح
kh	خ
d	د
dh	ذ
r	ر
z	ز
s	س
sh	ش
ṣ	ص
ḍ	ض
ṭ	ط
ẓ	ظ
ʿ	ع
gh	غ

Table 2: Persian Transliteration Chart

z	ظ
‘	ع
gh	غ
f	ف
q	ق
k	ک
g	گ
l	ل
m	م
n	ن
h	ه
ū / w / -o	و
ī / y	ی
a	اَ
o	اُ
e	اِ
e-ye	ه / هی
hā-ye	های

ā, a	ا
ā	آ
b	ب
p	پ
t	ت
s	ث
j	ج
ch	چ
ḥ	ح
kh	خ
d	د
z	ذ
r	ر
z	ز
zh	ژ
s	س
sh	ش
ṣ	ص
ẓ	ظ
ṭ	ط

Abstract

Narrative Wayfinding: Author-izing Arab and Afghan Migration across Morphing Borderscapes takes a multidisciplinary approach to the study of narrative in the context of clandestine migration from the Arab world and Afghanistan to the EU. The dissertation argues that narration serves as a navigational tool for migrants as they traverse hostile locales and temporalities. Narrative craft allows migrants to captivate listeners and gain access to spaces and resources, and it also helps them process their own chaotic experiences. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, *Narrative Wayfinding* highlights migrant tales that reveal a breadth of spatiotemporal, cultural-linguistic, and psychospiritual transmutations. Each chapter addresses a specific type of morphing, from the issue of extraterritorial sovereignty to the phenomenon of passing as a member of an identity group that is not one's own to questions of translation. Using the tools of close reading and comparative analysis, the dissertation considers both recent migration literature and a collection of interviews gleaned from my 2019-20 fieldwork in which I volunteered with asylum aid organizations in Greece.

Chapter One centers on *Anthems of Salt*, a 2019 Arabic-language memoir. Algerian author Larbi Ramdani narrates his failed attempt at passing as a Syrian refugee after he migrates clandestinely to Greece. I read Ramdani's shapeshifting as a tactic (in Michel de Certeau's sense) undertaken in response to the morphing of the EU borderscape, which selectively expands and contracts to facilitate the passage of goods and wealthy travelers while excluding poor migrants with "inferior" passports.

The second chapter explores temporal disruption in two recent works of Arabic fiction: Hoda Barakat's *Night Mail* (2018) and Yousri Alghoul's *Gallows of Darkness* (2021). In this chapter, I make a literary-studies contribution to existing anthropological scholarship that demonstrates the ways migrant temporalities are stretched and squeezed by state and international actors in attempts to quell unauthorized migration. I argue that narrative revelations of these temporal manipulations, along with migrant resistance to them, constitute a challenge to the nationalist temporality of triumphalism. Fiction provides a way to represent temporal experiences that migrants themselves are typically barred from articulating.

Chapter Three centers on stories of Afghan men who come of age throughout their migrant journeys. It compares Dari short stories by Asef Soltanzadeh and Sayed Eshaq Shojai to the lived experiences of two young Afghan interlocutors whom I interviewed in Greece. Focusing on the theme of separation from and reintegration into society and on interrogations of masculinity, I liken these narratives to the structure of the classical Arabic ode (*qaṣīdah*), and particularly to brigand (*ṣu' lūk*) poetry as theorized by Suzanne Stetkevych. I argue that these coming-of-age tales demonstrate the formation of a subject (in the Althusserian sense) that cannot be neatly attached to a modern nation-state.

The final chapter tackles issues of translation from the perspective of refugees who serve as interpreters for their fellow travelers. Drawing heavily on interviews I conducted in Greece, this chapter asks to what extent scholarship on literary translation theory can borrow from the rough-and-ready practices of “good-enough” interpretation that are common among those whom I call refugee-translators.

While Walter Benjamin's essay “The Storyteller” posits that movement produces narrative, my dissertation makes an inverse assertion: that migrant narration can facilitate

increased mobility. By forging new narrative pathways through violent and ever-morphing obstacles, unauthorized migrants unearth hidden connections between supposedly divided worlds.

INTRODUCTION

In the years following the global spectacle of the so-called European migrant crisis, the novel *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid took the literary world by storm. A *New York Times* bestseller that was described in the *New Yorker* as “instantly canonical” (Tolentino), *Exit West* was the first major English-language novel of refugeehood to be published in the wake of dramatically increased awareness of rising unauthorized migration to Global North countries. It has since been assigned by numerous US universities as a “common reading experience” book for incoming freshmen (Moody). The novel was praised for its timely engagement with anxieties over migration’s perceived threat to the security and democracy of Global North countries, as anti-immigrant sentiment fueled the candidacy of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit campaign in the UK (Motion). Given that *Exit West* has come to serve as one of the most preeminent aesthetic frames of reference for 21st-century refugeehood for Anglophone readers, it is ironic, to say the least, that the novel is completely devoid of migration’s most quintessential experience: journeys.

Exit West (which I employ here only as a point of departure for my dissertation) imagines unauthorized migration without physical trajectories through time and space. Instead, migrants do something akin to teleporting. They walk through hidden portals and instantly emerge in prosperous Global North countries. The physical and temporal distance is entirely collapsed. The result is an entertaining and inventive piece of speculative fiction that imagines the fluid identities and eventual “multicultural utopia” (Bağlama 9) that could emerge in a borderless world. But because of its magical central conceit, the novel leaves out two major elements of the

real world of unauthorized migration as it has existed in recent decades: 1) the dynamic temporospatial blockages and chasms that forces of government and global capitalism have established between migrants and their desired destinations, and 2) migrants' innovative endeavors to circumvent, bridge, or break through these hazardous obstacles.

Thus, while Hamid's novel may be successful as a "parable" (Motion), it cannot, at its core, successfully represent migrants and refugees as perceiving and acting subjects existing within devastatingly violent conditions that are *defined* by temporospatial separation. In other words, the *chronotope* of real-world unauthorized migration is excised from this refugee novel. Mikhail Bakhtin defines a chronotope as the dynamic relationships between time and space that are represented in narrative. More than shaping the generic specificities of a work of literature, chronotopes are what give an utterance "flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work" (250). Chronotopes also exist in the "real world" outside the text, and they characterize the immanence of a person's experiences of the world. Inasmuch as they can be represented in an utterance by way of oratorical or writerly technique, chronotopes are what allow listeners and readers to encounter "a real person" in narrative (Bakhtin 253).

Narrative Wayfinding: Author-izing Arab and Afghan Migration across Morphing Borderscapes is a dissertation based on my 2019-20 fieldwork in Greece with asylum seekers and refugees, along with my readings of recent, published literature of displacement written in Arabic and Dari. In a way that contrasts with the thought experiment that is *Exit West*, this dissertation engages intimately with the lifeworlds and subjectivities of actual unauthorized migrants, homing in on their chronotopic border-crossing experiences as they are illustrated in living speech and polished prose. *Narrative Wayfinding* gleans from migrants' experiential

knowledge in order to air new critiques of national and international border policies and to make contributions to the interdisciplinary field of refugee and migration studies.

In *Exit West*, Hamid imagines a world whose globalization is made complete by the introduction of a kind of physical hyperlink, where the instantaneous cross-border connections that the internet has made possible in the 21st century become literal. In this sense, the novel provides an idealized image of a more inclusive neoliberal world wherein the unimpeded freedom of movement that is now allotted to goods — and carriers of elite passports — is extended to all human beings. Sercan Bağlama writes that Hamid’s characters “internalise the rhetoric of the western political establishment regarding neoliberal internationalism..., which interpellates them into western capitalism at the end of the novel” (150). Bağlama critiques the novel for depoliticizing refugee life by presenting a successful story of the characters’ incorporation into the society of the titular West by virtue of their embodiment of the image of the “good and acceptable refugee” (154). I would add that in eliminating his refugee characters’ need to cross the border physically, Hamid precludes any possibility of depicting migrants’ resistance — on individual and collective levels, by guile or by outward acts of defiance — against international border regimes. Instead, as Bağlama argues, in the novel it is the West’s ability to incorporate these refugees into its societies, due to their purported multicultural-democratic nature, that paves the way for a less unequal world. The result is that the novel “constructs the West as benevolent and consolidates its discursive hegemony and moral superiority” (Bağlama 155).

Instead of imagining an improved neoliberal capitalism that could incorporate increased numbers of migrants, *Narrative Wayfinding* identifies that globally dominant economic system as a major impetus for displacement and a force for the violent exclusion of migrants. Inspired

by Ruben Andersson’s influential monograph *Illegality, Inc.*, I explore the ways in which the profit motives of private corporations, NGOs, smugglers, scholars, and sometimes even migrants themselves contribute to the continued production of an illegality that manifests itself as violence — be it military, carceral, environmental, or psychological — against unauthorized border-crossers and their would-be peers. Considering the ways in which the workings of state, capital, and multilateral organizations are increasingly aligned, as exemplified by large-scale privatization and the prevalence of public-private partnerships, I often speak of *neoliberal and -imperial forces* as the sources of the exclusionary phenomena this dissertation examines.

While Bağlama criticizes *Exit West* for its focus on the characters’ “individualistic motivations” (150) rather than on collective political struggle, in this dissertation I do not eschew considerations of singular migrant experiences of striving toward a less precarious existence. My research aims not to reinforce “neoliberal internationalism” (150) as Bağlama accuses *Exit West* of doing, but to critically examine unauthorized migrants’ inextricable situatedness within global capitalism and to demonstrate some of the ways they operate agentively in this ethically dubious domain. In mainstream politics in Global North countries, it has been common for liberals to respond to right-wing demonization of migrants with a valorization of them as innocent victims. Such a simplistic view not only flattens the fullness of migrants’ subjectivity, but it also ironically elides another layer of their victimization: the fact that their situations tend to necessitate “morally treacherous” actions from which many settled citizens are insulated (Press 11). In the hostile milieux refugees find themselves in, a degree of craftiness is all but essential. And craft, as Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” shows, is part of the very substance of narrative. Narratives of unauthorized migration reveal underlying relationships between craftiness and craft, artifice and art, transgression and translation.

Exit West's reduction of unauthorized migration to the act of ducking through hidden portals is an especially befuddling choice when considered through the lens of Benjamin's essay. What can narrative be without movement? What can migration narrative be without journey? For Benjamin, the movement of narrative is reflective of the movement of the human being. He writes that in the Middle Ages, "traveling journeymen" would return from abroad and bring tales with them, telling them to the craftsmen with whom they worked "in the same rooms" (363). But since the journeymen would soon depart again, the stories were developed and perfected by the craftsmen, who would trade them amongst themselves, combine them with local lore, and tell ever-evolving iterations of them. Benjamin presents an equation in which travel, combined with these other ingredients, may generate narrative. My research conceives of a reversal of this equation in the case of migrants navigating the asylum process today: narration — well-crafted narration — may generate travel. A well-told, convincing personal story is often the key for asylum seekers to gain access to resources and rights, including the right to continue their journeys. "What the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own [experience]," Benjamin writes (378). Similarly, since asylum seekers' primary sources of information about ways to successfully navigate the byzantine application process are other asylum seekers, details of others' stories become embedded in their own, and other details, similar to those in the "failed" stories they have heard, are eliminated. This is one of the ways in which asylum seekers *craft* narratives. And as I learned in my work at an NGO-run asylum support office in Greece (one of several field sites which I will describe in detail later in this introduction), success in performing particular vulnerabilities through narrative decidedly does improve asylum seekers' chances at getting the attention of NGOs and state services, and therefore, obtaining life-sustaining resources.

I often write of “border regimes” in this dissertation, referring not just to the governmental systems that make immigration policy and police borders, but also the decentralized conglomeration of actors — governmental and nongovernmental, human and nonhuman — that carry out *acts* of bordering that extend beyond the physical borderline itself. The dissertation title’s reference to “borderscapes” plays on this multidimensional and dynamic understanding of the border. As I argue in depth in Chapter One, and continue to discuss throughout the dissertation, the contemporary borderscape both *morphs* itself, shrinking and disappearing to allow access to elite crossers while stretching and squeezing to violently exclude others, and also *necessitates morphing* on the part of unwanted entrants who may need to drastically adapt their stories and adopt the shapeshifting tactics of the archetypal trickster character (see Chapter Four) to make progress on their journeys. Likewise, unauthorized migrants’ understanding of themselves and resulting self-presentations can morph drastically throughout the migration process.

Method: Reading Literary and “Real-Life” Migration Narratives Side by Side

In the flurry of media attention during the early days of the so-called European migrant crisis,¹ news consumers were bombarded with dramatic images: drone shots of masses of people walking across international borders; drowned children washing up on the seashore; tents, rubber dinghies, piles of abandoned life jackets, huddled bodies wrapped in emergency blankets. Politicians, talking heads, humanitarian officials, activists, and locals all spoke loudly. The

¹ I join other scholars, writers, and organizations in referring to a “so-called” European migrant crisis both to question the media framing of unauthorized migration as a crisis for *Europe*, given that the majority of Syrian refugees are hosted by Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, and to problematize the notion of “crisis” when migration has become endemic in a world riddled with neoliberal inequality (see for example Paschou et al., Lüthi, “European Policies”).

migrants themselves, however, were largely seen and not heard. When they were heard, it was mostly in soundbites; the complexities of explanation and analysis were left to settled commentators enjoying first-world citizenship.

In this era of unprecedented unauthorized migration and asylum seeking, in which the number of displaced people around the world has surpassed 100 million (see “More Than 100 Million”), many academics have rightly called for active listening to migrant voices as a means of improving scholarly and political understanding of the phenomenon of irregular migration (see for example McKenzie and Triulzi, Andrews, and Squire et al.). *Narrative Wayfinding* is the culmination of a years-long research project whose goal has been to take these calls seriously by engaging deeply with migration narratives, embracing both literary and anthropological approaches. The dissertation also endeavors to facilitate such listening for other scholars by offering mediated access to migrant voices in two main forms. First, I translate passages of recent migration literature that has received little-to-no academic attention to date. The reader may find that I linger longer here than expected, offering protracted quotations that do not serve the mere purpose of supporting an academic argument, but allow for an extended encounter with a migrant voice. Second, I print selections from interviews that I conducted with refugees and asylum seekers whom I met while carrying out fieldwork in Greece. These appear both in “narrativized” form (see Chapter Four) in interludes that serve as waypoints between chapters, and as quotations throughout each of the dissertation’s chapters.

My main research method comprises a combination of literary and anthropological approaches. This dissertation is a study of narratives of unauthorized migration in many senses of the word *narrative*. As Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Vinh Nguyen write in their introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives* (2023), “cultural production [is] both self-

conscious and quotidian. Refugee narratives are embedded across multiple scales and forms of everyday life” (5). *Narrative Wayfinding* examines published accounts (both fictionalized and autobiographical) of irregular migration alongside interviews and material I recorded in my field notes. I have endeavored to take an anthropological approach to literature and a literary approach to ethnographic material. Taking seriously Bakhtin’s assertion that the worlds inside and outside of the text are “indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction” (254), I regularly employ examples from migration literature to support arguments I make about real-world migration phenomena and vice-versa.

Two complicating questions come into play here. First, how can fiction, and even some fiction written by authors who themselves do not have personal experience of unauthorized migration, be fairly compared to the migration narratives that migrants themselves tell? The answer is not simply the cliché that fiction can be truer than fact and fact can be stranger than fiction. (Although there is something to be said for postmodern concerns about the extent to which nonfiction is an achievable generic aim; the (in)adequacy of words to represent human experiences; and the (un)reliability of a single human perspective and memory to provide an accurate account of an event.) I need not educate the reader here on the essential craftedness of all narratives, or on the dual meaning of the French word *histoire*. The main reason I think fiction is such a powerful source of information in this context is that it can, as I put it in Chapter Two, “speak in ways that unauthorized migrants are often structurally prevented from speaking.” These individuals may be in positions in which the truth of their experiences as border crossers is suppressed by the threat — or at least the fear — of deportation. For example, the revelation that someone has lied to an asylum officer, or on an official government form, might be grounds for

that person's deportation, even years after long-term residency has been granted.² Additionally, migrant narrators who *do* want to tell their tales in writing often do not have the necessary education (for writing is ultimately a skill that requires training and/or practice), or professional connections, to publish them. Another justification for the inclusion of fictional accounts, this time specifically those that have been invented by authors who do not have firsthand experience with unauthorized migration, is simply that personal experience is not always a prerequisite for producing a great artistic depiction of a given topic. That said, the authors whose work I have explored most closely in this dissertation — Larbi Ramdani, Yousri Alghoul, Hoda Barakat, Asef Soltanzadeh, and Sayed Eshaq Shojai — all have *some* degree of personal experience of migration and refugeehood, if not directly with the post-2015 phenomenon of dramatically increased irregular migration to Europe.

The second complicating question is how I can use the disciplinary tools of literary studies to analyze real-life observations, along with recordings of interviews with refugees and asylum seekers, from my fieldwork in Greece. Listening to my interlocutors' words with a literary ear and reading my own field notes with a literary eye has been one of the methods I have applied in my effort to treat unauthorized migrants as knowledge producers. My literary approach to the real world is in part inspired by the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who writes that "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts" ("Deep Play" 86). By texts, Geertz refers to objects, places, and human behaviors of signification imbued with multiple layers of meaning in various contexts. He stresses that the meaning of these "texts" — like meaning in actual texts — is dynamic; anthropologists' attempts to decipher them are only "our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or what they think they are up to" ("Thick

² See for example the different but comparable case of Rasma Odeh in the US (Harb).

Description” 317). Thick description is an effort to identify and describe in detail not just the particulars of an object or action itself, but the variety of ways in which it is socially communicative or productive for the people for whom it is significant. I have considered migration narratives, in their many forms, not just according to their verbal content but also to their pragmatic uses, both as speech acts and as autopoiesis. I thus read migration narratives as texts both in the literal sense of the word and in the Geertzian sense.

This world-as-text formation is similar to the way I approach close reading, immersing myself in the aesthetic and semiotic content of the object of study and conducting hermeneutical syntheses between various parts and wholes. In fact, I have often thought of the way I engage analytically with the “real world” of my fieldwork as a kind of close reading. Geertz writes that “the chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force ... is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, and how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life” (“Art as a Cultural System” 1475) — or, I would add, within a historical-political context. I have likewise brought to my readings of the migration literature that I have selected for this dissertation a focus on the texts’ situatedness within the charged context of late 20th- and especially early 21st-century unauthorized migration. At the same time, I recognize that I am also further situating these texts by “placing” them against the more specific backdrop of asylum seeking in Greece — mainly in and around Athens but also on the Aegean islands — in 2019 and early 2020.

I have attempted to expand the use of the tools of literary studies beyond published texts to broaden the definition of a literary object, as means of better understanding human experiences of pressing global phenomena. My effort to expand the use of literary studies is in many ways an anthropological act driven by political and humanistic commitments. *Narrative*

Wayfinding is not activism in the sense of political protest, but it does include critique of migration policies enacted by governments, and, as we shall see, multilateral organizations like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) along with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The dissertation is not advocacy in the sense of pushing for a particular migration policy or solution, but it is an attempt at facilitating greater inclusion, if only by providing a platform upon which the experiences and knowledge of unauthorized migrants can be shared with those who study the topic academically. “The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology,” Geertz writes, “is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us the answers that others ... have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said” (“Thick Description” 323). Of course, the iterations of migrant experiences that I illustrate for scholarly readers in this dissertation are necessarily mediated rather than direct, told on what are ultimately *my* terms and not (despite my best intentions) my interlocutors’ own. The migrant voices I amplify will always be distorted to some degree by my subject position as a middle-class, European-descended US citizen, my decisions regarding contextualization, and the preference I have given to my own chosen interpretations of the “texts” in question. A final quotation from Geertz: “[T]he more deeply [cultural analysis] goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right” (“Thick Description” 322).

Narrative as Autopoietic Navigation and Empathetic Entry Point

My goal in my research methodology is not to conflate the “real” world with that of the text; Bakhtin rightly says there is a “categorical boundary line between them” (254). Rather, I aim to tap into my training as a literary scholar to bring an aesthetic and psychospiritual sensibility to

my study of contemporary issues of unauthorized migration. By the adjective *psychospiritual*, which I use throughout this dissertation, I refer to deep levels of human existence where instinctual, emotional, and mystical orientations toward the world combine. If literature can facilitate a mediated psychospiritual interaction with other human beings, then it might occasionally enable a Levinasian “face-to-face” encounter, wherein the reader is confronted with an Other along with his or her own potential complicity in the violence experienced by that Other. Emmanuel Levinas’s work suggests that such encounters are necessary for humans to transcend an existence at the expense of others (200). It is thus with an unabashed humanism that I approach my research on narratives of unauthorized migration. This humanism is not the “apolitical humanism” that Bağlama identifies in *Exit West* (155). On the contrary, I do bring a layer of political critique to my academic approach that is informed by my pre-graduate-school experience in journalism focused on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

While I have conducted my fieldwork based on what I have learned from courses and scholarly texts in the discipline of anthropology, it was my journalism experience that endeared the format of the interview to me. The journalistic quotation of an interview subject does not necessarily exist to provide new factual information, but might rather be included to demonstrate the way an individual who is directly involved in or affected by an event understands that event. As such, the *way* interview subjects speak about events — and how they understand causality — is typically as important as the “facts” of the events themselves. In this sense, the interview provides a *syuzhet* (a particular way of telling a story) to the *fabula* (raw material) of the event. An interview lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between “self-conscious” and “quotidian” “cultural production,” as formulated by Gandhi and Nguyen. The interviewee typically has some time to prepare for the interview and may rehearse some answers ahead of

time; the interview is an occasion to speak in a heightened manner to a different audience than usual. Special care may be taken to present certain information delicately, even if it is something the speaker normally converses about with candor. In other words, despite (or perhaps, informed by Bakhtin, I should say “thanks to”) their dialogical quality, interviews are venues where narratives are put on display, where *experiencers* of events recount *their versions* of the events. There may be a desired outcome: an impression made on the imagined audience of listeners or readers, a tipping of the balance in public opinion, or perhaps hope for a favor from the interviewer in exchange for speaking.

One of the overarching arguments in this dissertation is that for unauthorized migrants maneuvering in the morphing maze of the late-capitalist borderscape, narration serves as an adaptive form of navigation similar to what geographers and sociologists call wayfinding — the ability to use signs from one’s surroundings, combined with knowledge passed on from others, to determine the route(s) to a destination. In Aboriginal Australian and Polynesian traditions, the complex techniques of finding one’s way across land or sea, respectively, involve both careful five-sense observation of the environment *and* remembering oral tradition. The material from oral tradition often serves as a mnemonic device to aid in navigation at the same time as it honors ancestors or tells creation tales (see O’Connor). The recitation is both functional — it facilitates navigation — and ontologically reflective — it reminds the reciter whence and from whom he or she came. To go is to be. (As it happens, this is grammatically true in English, at least some of the time: to have gone somewhere is to have *been* there.)

Unauthorized migrants navigate with narratives in ways entirely different from those of traditional wayfinders, but narrative wayfinding does also take on a dual functional-reflective purpose. Listening to others narrate their migration experiences, people on the move make

decisions about their own courses of action and travel routes. In addition, the stories they tell to their smugglers — the amount of information they reveal or conceal — may affect their safety and even the cost of their journeys. Likewise, the ways asylum seekers narrate their experiences to state employees and NGO workers have an influence on their livelihoods and the success of their asylum applications. Finally, migrants narrate in order to make sense of their experiences and constitute themselves anew. Over time, they may tweak the way they tell their stories to others and to themselves as they discover which tellings are most effective for the purposes of facilitating their journeys, and these tellings may continue to evolve as the way they see their place in the world evolves.

Terminology and ‘Author-ization’

In late 2015, around the time I was transitioning from journalism to academia, a debate was simmering in the newsrooms of major media organizations covering the recent dramatic increase in the number of people, most of them from Syria at the time, crossing Mediterranean borders irregularly into the EU. What were the moving people to be called? For Al Jazeera, it was decided, “migrants” had become too pejorative a term. “It has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances,” an article announcing the editorial policy declared (Malone). Citing UN reports attesting that the vast majority of these border crossers were fleeing war and persecution, the article said the editorial decision to use “refugees” as an umbrella term instead of “migrants” was “a matter of accuracy.” The overarching worry on the part of those taking Al Jazeera’s side was that the term “migrants,” as a label, would delegitimize the newcomers’ reasons for coming to Europe as being driven by “merely” economic concerns, thus painting the crossers as opportunistic and morally questionable. According to this logic, news of capsized dinghies and drownings, and of deaths by suffocation in lorries after smugglers

abandoned their vehicles, would sting less for Western viewers and therefore raise less awareness if it was just “migrants” dying than it would if it were “refugees.” The article does acknowledge that some of the people entering the EU irregularly are “trying to escape the sort of poverty that drives some to desperation,” but suggests that being driven to desperation earns such individuals the right to be referred to as “refugees,” despite not meeting the legal definition of the term. Surely, the legal definition does not always map neatly onto colloquial uses of a word like “refugee.” In the everyday sense of the word, anyone who flees war is a refugee, even though this is not the case in international law. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” in his or her country of origin “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (“Convention and Protocol”). Writing this introduction in the spring of 2023, a legitimate question arises: if Ukrainian refugees from the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War can be called refugees in the media even though they usually do not receive this legal status (receiving a form of “Temporary Protection” instead), why should those fleeing severe poverty not also be included in this looser journalistic definition of the term?

There are advantages and disadvantages to every far-reaching label. Using the word “migrant” as a catchall is not any more inaccurate than using “refugee.” In fact, as a broader category, “migrant” is *more* accurate as a catchall, as long as the term is not conflated with those who migrate strictly for economic reasons. Moreover, not all legally recognized refugees like to be called “refugees” any more than “migrants.”³ Some say the term “refugee” draws unwanted attention to their (real or perceived) weakness: their inability to care for themselves and their families and the fact that they are in the unenviable position of needing to request protection

³ See for example the poem “Don’t Call Me Refugee” by 9-year-old refugee Lamiya Safarova (Bussewitz-Quarm 56)

from others. It can feel humiliating to be identified by name with something that might be understood by one's peers as a moral failure to fulfill one's responsibilities. With this in mind, I would argue using "refugee" as a catchall is not necessarily any more respectful or dignifying than using "migrant."

Choosing what to call my interlocutors was a task I struggled with at first. Ultimately, I decided to use a number of these words and phrases, not entirely interchangeably (I try to select the most accurate one for the matter at hand) but collectively. I often refer to "refugees and migrants," "refugees and asylum seekers," "displaced people and other people on the move." ("People on the move" is a construction that has been gaining traction recently, and I have adopted it as a general term. Still, morally neutral and nondescript as it is, it could be a bit misleading given that so many migrants are, in reality, stuck in one place — in detention centers, refugee camps, precarious urban living situations — for extended periods of time. They are sedentary, but still unsettled.) But the label I have used most often throughout this dissertation is "unauthorized migrants." This term is handily less specific than the other potential options. For example, "undocumented migrant" draws attention to a lack of identity papers; but many of migrants living in Greece *do* possess, or eventually obtain, documents of some kind: a passport from their country of origin, a police note declaring that they must leave the country within 30 days or risk deportation,⁴ a card identifying them as an asylum seeker, etc. "Clandestine migrant" is not quite accurate as a catchall, either. While many migrants sneak across the border, others cross in quite a conspicuous manner. Some are jetted across the Aegean in smugglers' speed boats in the middle of the day. These crossings are rarely undetected, but the speedboats tend to move too quickly for the Turkish or Greek Coast Guard to intercept them. Other migrants cross

⁴ Many migrants, as Heath Cabot has pointed out, understand such notices as short-term residence permits given that they also function to *prevent* deportation for a limited period of time (Cabot 68-69).

borders en masse, and getting across without being immediately detained is more a result of the practical problem of authorities apprehending everybody at once than it is a result of any kind of secrecy. Others turn themselves in to border police in order to claim asylum immediately upon crossing; there is nothing “clandestine” about that.

The term “unauthorized migrants,” on the other hand, draws attention to the issue of permission and legitimacy, and whether or not authorities grant them. Despite dire circumstances and/or lack of opportunity in their countries of origin, these migrants have not been authorized to cross the border and have not been authorized to reside in the EU. But they have come anyway, accepting the potential and inevitable consequences of shirking policies that function to preclude the improvement to their livelihoods that residence in the EU could provide. And even for those who are refugees in the legal sense of the term, “seeking refuge” is not the only possible orientation to take toward the process of resettlement. There is also a more defiant stance, by which migrants refuse to respect the sovereignty of a system of exclusion that, often quite arbitrarily, shuns them as potential security threats or economic liabilities. The asylum process is one way in which migrants may become authorized, but in order to arrive at that outcome, unauthorized migrants must first authorize *themselves* — granting themselves permission, perhaps on grounds of natural law, to cross the border, since governments will not provide such authorization.

Part of receiving asylum and establishing an improved existence in a new country can also involve another kind of authorization — one I have stylized as *author-izing* in the subtitle of this dissertation. Narrative wayfinding requires skills similar to those of effective authorship. As previously stated, unauthorized migrants may make progress toward their destinations and goals by telling compelling stories to gatekeepers — by becoming authors of a sort. “Author-ization”

also points to this dissertation's *modus operandi*, viz., treating unauthorized migrants as knowledge producers and as crafters of narrative, and reading their narratives with a literary eye. Still, I want to emphasize that it is ultimately not scholars who provide migrants with authorization-as-legitimacy. Instead, migrants' own narratives, both those they tell others and those they tell themselves, are a means of self-authorization.

Overview of Fieldwork and Sites

First, a brief note on anonymity: I have chosen to anonymize all of my interlocutors, and all of the organizations I worked with, by giving them pseudonyms. Some of those I interviewed asked to remain anonymous, while others said I could use their real names. However, given that in the interview material, some of my interlocutors speak about illegal actions they took, or about occasions in which they stretched the truth or lied during official asylum procedures, I have decided to err on the side of caution, and reduce any risk that they could potentially face upon being identified by authorities. Likewise, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the organizations for which I volunteered. While these organizations accepted me as a volunteer with the knowledge that I was conducting research, I did not explicitly ask permission to write about these organizations by name. Including the real name of the organizations might also provide a way to identify the interlocutors whose privacy and security I am trying to protect. Moreover, my critiques of NGO presence and practices rarely, if ever, apply to one particular aid group exclusively, but are instead indicative of larger trends. I intend to paint a broad picture of the world that many unauthorized migrants in Greece must navigate — a world in which charitable groups serve as ubiquitous throughways and sites of gatekeeping. It might not be impossible for a reader with intimate knowledge of refugee aid organizations in Greece to intuit which organizations I am referring to, but I decided against making these names readily accessible, in

order to reduce the likelihood of my interlocutors being identified and to shift the focus away from individual organizations.⁵

From June to mid-July, 2019, I flew to Greece for three months of initial fieldwork. I volunteered in a rural refugee camp, located some 50 miles from Athens, which I will call Khalía camp. Here I worked with an organization that facilitated activities and gathering spaces for young residents of the camp. The organization was divided into two teams, one for children under 12 and the other for “youth” aged 12 to approximately 30. I worked in the youth space, which consisted of two ISO boxes — shipping containers which are also called caravans, or “*karafānāt*” in Arabic. These were the same types of structures in which camp residents lived. One of the containers contained a foosball table, some barely playable guitars, a bookshelf with mostly English-language books, and a sink and refrigerator. The other caravan contained art supplies, sewing machines, and board games. Painting classes were held in this container a few times per week, and residents — usually middle-aged and older men — would occasionally come to use the sewing machines. Outside, between the two ISO boxes, were some improvised benches made of stacked wood pallets with cushions thrown on top, along with a similarly improvised ping-pong table.

There were few structured activities held in the youth space. Camp residents — mostly boys and men in their teens and early twenties — would come and sit around, drink tea, smoke cigarettes, and play cards and ping-pong. The majority of them were Arabic speakers from Syria and Iraq. However, some Kurdish users of the space, especially those from the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, did not speak much Arabic. The most popular activity was the

⁵ The one downside to this policy of anonymity is the fact that at least two of my interlocutors preferred to be identified by name. However, given their internet presence, revealing their names would also have the potential to reveal the organizations with which they were associated.

occasional volunteer-organized ping-pong tournament. Other activities included impromptu English classes, guitar lessons, sessions for “videography club” (which was very popular, especially since the volunteer who led it was an Egyptian video journalist from Cairo), playing cards, chess, and “literature club” (which I briefly attempted to lead, with little success — many of the residents struggled with literacy, even in Arabic, and there was little interest in the club). Non-resident volunteers — myself and two others: the aforementioned Egyptian volunteer and a British undergraduate student who was also conducting field research — came to the camp four days per week, and we spent most of our time socializing very casually with the residents, playing games and talking. Meanwhile, the activities at the child space, where I was not a volunteer, were much more structured, and seemed to have more educational value. Compared to the other field sites at which I worked, the concrete humanitarian benefit of the youth space for the residents is still relatively unclear to me; it was essentially a place to hang out. Regardless, this lack of structure was very beneficial for my research, as residents often shared personal narratives with me and with each other. However, the policy of the NGO in charge was not to allow researchers (in addition to me and the British student, two of the volunteers at the children’s space were also conducting research) to record interviews. Most days I typed up detailed field notes recounting notable occurrences, in particular those that included narration. It was in the youth space that I met an important interlocutor, Sheyar, a Syrian Kurd from Afrin, whom readers will meet in Chapter Four.

Later in the summer, during the last two weeks of July 2019, I worked as a volunteer with an organization on the island of Lesbos. The NGO, whose mission was to provide immediate assistance to new arrivals, was based in a village on the north shore of the island, less than ten miles away from the Turkish mainland across the Aegean Sea. There were three main tasks

carried out by the NGO there. On “spotting duty,” volunteers were stationed at one of two different sites for shifts lasting several hours, looking through a telescope at the sea, in an effort to spot any migrant vessels as they became visible. The stated goal of this activity was to ensure the safety of the border crossers in any emergency situations that arose, to alert the rest of the team ahead of time to where a landing might take place, and to document any illegal activity by authority vessels, such as pushbacks and pullbacks.⁶ “Landing duty” involved traveling immediately to the site of a boat landing, usually a short drive from the village. At the scene, volunteers would administer first aid, identify any medical cases as best we could, distribute water and emergency blankets, and help transfer migrants and their belongings to a site known as Stage 2. Dubbed a “transit camp,” this was a UN-owned facility (although it was completely operated by NGOs) consisting of a number of tents for storage of supplies and clothes, along with one large tent in which groups of new arrivals would sit and wait to be transferred to Moria refugee camp, Greece’s most notorious and Europe’s largest. On “Stage 2 duty,” volunteers distributed dry clothes, tea, and snacks, entertained children, and facilitated visits to the nurse’s tent. In the time since I have left Greece, both Stage 2 and Moria have been closed after burning down, most likely at the hands of arsonists.

In my short time on the north shore of Lesbos, the number of new arrivals skyrocketed, an occurrence that was attributed to the intensifying war in Afghanistan. To my knowledge, all of the new arrivals during that time were Persian speakers, many of them ethnic Hazaras from Afghanistan. My main role on the organization’s volunteer team was that of interpreter. Despite

⁶ Both terms are references to common forms of summary deportation. The former term refers to the Greek Coast Guard boats pushing migrant vessels back into Turkish waters, and the latter refers to Turkish Coast Guard boats crossing into Greek waters and pulling migrants back onto the Turkish side of the border. These acts both violate international law, since migrants are required to be given the opportunity to apply for asylum upon entering EU territory. See Cossé.

the serious limitations of my Persian-speaking skills, I was the only volunteer who spoke more than a few words of the language, and thus was in high demand. My main takeaway from my short time at this field site was witnessing the actual conditions of the arrival of refugees and migrants to Greece at one of the most common landing points. All in all, what surprised me most was the youth and inexperience of the staff and volunteers who ran the operation. The team of paid staff seemed to be effective and efficient at what they did, and I do not question the devotion of the volunteers to the cause they were serving, but it was shocking to see that this kind of labor — involving a highly sensitive humanitarian intervention into the lives of hundreds of individuals each year — was being carried out by a tiny staff made up of two twentysomethings and a nineteen-year-old, along with an army of volunteers, most of whom, like me, had little-to-no training in emergency response, first aid, or search and rescue work.

I traveled back to the US in August of 2019, and when I returned to Greece in October, I began to volunteer in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Athens, which I will call Finíkis camp. The camp differed from Khalía in a number of ways. Perhaps most notably, a mixture of Persian- and Arabic-speakers populated the camp, with the former slightly outnumbering the latter. Main countries of origin included Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, with smaller numbers of people from Iran. Like Khalía, there were also residents from elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, and from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Another major difference was that Finíkis residents had relatively easy access to central Athens via the metro and bus system, whereas journeys outside the rural Khalía camp could be challenging, expensive, and time-consuming for its residents.

I worked with an organization, which I will call Operation Renew, that conducted educational and recreational activities in Finíkis camp. To a larger extent than in Khalía camp,

residents there were highly involved in the organization's work, leading activities, teaching languages, and doing maintenance work. I served as a teacher's assistant in all-ages English classes and in children's Arabic and Persian classes, where I helped to teach the alphabet and basic reading and writing skills. I spent three days per week, six to eight hours per day, volunteering at Finíkis. While I was again not allowed to conduct interviews on site, I could conduct them away from the camp. I recorded two interviews with refugee interlocutors from Finíkis, and one with a Lebanese-American volunteer. Only one of these interviews (with Neyaz, whom readers will meet in the interlude between Chapters Two and Three) ended up being featured in the dissertation. Additionally, through this volunteer work I was also put in touch with Saif, a Syrian asylum seeker who was a former resident of Finíkis and volunteer at Operation Renew, and who had since moved on to Malta. I interviewed Saif there when I visited for a short vacation in February 2020, and the interview is printed in narrativized form (i.e., my interview questions are edited out) as an interlude between Chapters Three and Four.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I volunteered at an asylum support office in a neighborhood of central Athens. The office was open four days per week on a walk-in basis for those who came with questions about their asylum status or about how to access various resources and services. Clients — as we called them — would sit in a packed room and wait to meet with a volunteer caseworker. In the sessions, clients usually had a combination of questions about their asylum cases and concerns about their immediate needs. The most common issues with which clients sought assistance were homelessness, the processes of applying for asylum, family reunification, the UN cash assistance card,⁷ and medical concerns. None of these widespread problems had easy solutions. Even applying for asylum and for the cash card, which on the

⁷ The card would be loaded with 150 euros per month for an individual; families would receive larger sums, but the amount of money per individual decreased as the family's size increased ("Cash Assistance Program")

surface seemed like simple procedures, sometimes proved ludicrously challenging. Applying for asylum required contacting an official account on Skype — on a computer or smartphone — at particular time and day of the week, depending on the language of the asylum seeker. Clients regularly complained of calling at the designated time and not getting through. They would sometimes try for weeks and weeks, to no avail. Receiving an identity document associated with their asylum request was key for accessing necessary services, including the UN cash card (which asylum seekers needed to apply for via text message over the smartphone app Viber). While volunteers at the asylum support office could not speed up the processes of overloaded and heavily bureaucratic systems, we could at least provide clients with accurate information most of the time. We could also accompany clients to the offices of other NGOs or to medical clinics, where we thought the presence of a European or American volunteer might give clients a better chance of being served. After meeting with a caseworker, clients could get in contact with him or her (exclusively over WhatsApp) with further questions or requests. However, given the high number of cases the asylum support team accepted, along with the difficulties associated with the NGO's high volunteer turnover rate and organizational shortcomings, we seemed unable to fulfill the majority of the clients' requests. Just prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization was undergoing a kind of operational overhaul to address these problems, but the impending lockdown would limit the degree to which the planned changes could be implemented and fine-tuned.

In addition to volunteering as a caseworker, I often served as an ad-hoc Persian and Arabic interpreter and translator at the asylum support office. We did have a paid Arabic interpreter who was a native speaker, himself a refugee from Syria, but he only worked one day per week. Another translator who was a bilingual Persian-English speaker, a young Iranian-

British woman, ended her volunteer stint during my early days at the office. I then became the go-to Persian interpreter, a position for which I did not feel very competent, until a native speaker was finally hired months later. The lack of professionally trained interpreters employed by NGOs in Athens is a significant problem. However, being put in the position of “better-than-nothing” interpreter did give me some valuable insight on refugee translation which I discuss in detail in Chapter Four.

Finally, on two Saturdays per month, I sat in on the editorial meetings of an NGO-funded newspaper written by refugee youth (most of them in their late teens and early twenties) and a few of their Greek peers. The newspaper published an issue approximately every other month, and included translations of articles in Greek, English, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. The newspaper’s twice-monthly meetings were led in English by a Greek NGO employee, with informal simultaneous interpretation carried out depending on the English abilities of the attendees. Here I mainly observed, but I also answered occasional questions about my experience in journalism, provided writing feedback, and copy-edited. It was at this field site that I connected with one of my main interlocutors, Amīn, with whom I conducted several interviews. More on this newspaper in Chapter Four.

I have accumulated nearly seventy typed pages of field notes from the above experiences, including summaries of daily happenings in addition to recountings of stories my interlocutors told me. I also managed to record a handful of interviews, but not nearly as many as I had originally planned. The COVID-19 pandemic forced me to return to the US months earlier than scheduled. Nearly three years later, as I was beginning to work on the last chapter of this dissertation, I conducted follow-up interviews with two of my interlocutors, Amin and Sheyar. The interview with Sheyar was conducted online, but the one with Amin was done in person,

when I visited him in Germany, the country to which he and his family eventually traveled from Greece. I will provide a few more details about this visit to Germany in the dissertation's brief epilogue.

As a final note in this section, I should acknowledge that my fieldwork, and this dissertation as a whole, largely focuses on the migration experiences of men — by and large *young* men. This was first and foremost a matter of access, as Arab and Afghan women were less likely to be active as beneficiaries or volunteers of the organizations I worked with, and even less likely to feel comfortable interacting with me one-on-one outside of the context of these organizations; most of the unauthorized migrants I encountered in Greece came from relatively socially conservative Muslim backgrounds. This is not to say it would have been impossible for me to interview women. Two women — Amin's sister and a contributor to the multilingual newspaper in Athens — probably would have granted me interviews. But I typically endeavored to develop a degree of rapport with my interlocutors before interviewing them (a stipulation I followed in all but one case — viz. Saif, with whom, due to the brevity of my time in Malta, I only chatted over WhatsApp before meeting him in person and interviewing him the same day). And in addition to the issue of my limited access to women interlocutors, there was probably also a degree of instinctual gender- and age-based homophily that led to my focus on young male experiences. Throughout my time in Arab countries, where I have studied Arabic and worked as a journalist, I have subconsciously learned to navigate interactions with young men through appeals to hospitality, fraternity, and shared interests, and have developed a degree of comfort doing so. I surely brought this *modus operandi* with me on my fieldwork trips to Greece. Thus we can see that the circumstances that limited the scope of my research included both cultural

factors among interlocutors *and* my own subconscious behavior and unmarried-male subject position.

However, I do not believe that this narrowing of research focus has had an entirely negative outcome. There is much to be gained on a scholarly level from research on the gendered migration experiences of young men. For some unauthorized migrants, especially young Afghan men, undertaking long, arduous, illegal journeys over land and sea is a way of proving their manliness and maturity. At the same time, many of these migrants are fleeing masculinist contexts — war (dominated by men), torture (perpetrated mostly by men), and religious fundamentalism (which advances patriarchal violence and exclusion). Additionally, human smuggling is a violence-infused business operated largely by men. As young male migrants imagine themselves moving forward on their trajectories away from a past and present full of male aggression, opportunities to establish alternative orientations toward — and new definitions of — masculinity might present themselves (see Chapter Three). While issues of gender are not *Narrative Wayfinding*'s main focus, the dissertation joins a relatively scant collection of scholarship that touches upon what might be called refugee masculinities.⁸

A Politics of Vulnerability

One of the things I was most surprised by during my fieldwork in Greek refugee camps was how relatively few instances of cathartic storytelling I encountered. I had hypothesized that one of the major ways migrants and refugees used narrative was as a means of therapeutic release, that is, sharing their horror stories with one another to exorcize the demons they had accumulated ahead of and throughout their journeys. This is not to say that this type of storytelling does not occur,

⁸ See for example Hart on “*mukhayyamji* masculinity” in Jordan’s Palestinian refugee camps.

but rather that it is far from the most common type of narrative that people on the move exchange. Of course, my access to such intimate moments would certainly be limited due to my outsider status. But I also suspect that among my male interlocutors, a culture of steadfast masculine stoicism renders these kinds of trauma-sharing sessions rare. It is perhaps odd, then, that the heart-rending stories of refugees' narrow escapes and constant plight are some of the most common narratives procured for international audiences in documentaries and by humanitarian organizations.

Interestingly, however, where I did encounter this type of storytelling more frequently was in the asylum support office. Clients would often start from the very beginning of the story of their journey, including the details I so rarely heard in the camps. Perhaps this was because of the confidential nature of the meetings at the asylum support office. There, clients met in private with individuals who were not members of their community, and thus there was no risk of the information being spread amongst it. But it soon became apparent to me — and this was accepted as simple fact by the asylum support team — that clients regularly made an effort to elicit compassion or even guilt from volunteers, in attempts to increase the chances of their needs being addressed. Given the sheer number of refugees seeking aid from NGOs (which function alongside the state as a primary source of provision to refugees in Greece), many requests from asylum seekers simply went ungranted. This was either because the asylum support team did not have the power to grant it, or, as was often the case, because the request required action from other NGOs or state services. In communication with these other entities, requests often got stuck in a bureaucratic limbo, as other, more pressing requests were addressed. All this to say that in my observation, when a client's story made a strong impression on a volunteer and elicited sincere compassion, this client was more likely to be granted his/her request. As Heath

Cabot writes, “When called on to perform their life histories, many asylum seekers actively attempt to conform to the expectations of their audiences” (116). This could explain the disparity I witnessed between the types of stories told in the two spaces. This disparity helped lead me to the following observations:

Soon after I began volunteering at the asylum support office, I became aware of what I call a politics of vulnerability, which pervades refugee life in Greece. As I see it, the politics of vulnerability is a system of classification whereby actors (government agents, NGO workers, activists, and citizen observers) categorize asylum seekers based on a hierarchy of weaknesses and needs. Using this system, actors make judgment calls about who is most worthy of assistance, compassion, and advocacy. The politics of vulnerability pervade Greece’s asylum system in a very literal way. Asylum seekers who can prove that they have an officially recognized vulnerability, as defined by European asylum law, can bypass some of the rules, queues, and bureaucratic roadblocks to which other asylum seekers are subjected.

One very common instance of the politics of vulnerability comes into play in the case of so-called “island restrictions.” According to Greek asylum regulations, those who arrive in Greece irregularly via an island “hotspot” (Lesbos, Rhodes, Samos, Leros, Chios, or Kos) must remain on that island while their asylum claim is being processed. This is an especially difficult rule due to the terrible conditions in many of the camps on the islands. Additionally, asylum claims can take years to process, and some asylum seekers are simply determined to connect with family or friends on the mainland no matter the cost. Those who come to the mainland without express state permission will be unable to access official asylum services there, and their asylum claims may be stalled or upended. If they are apprehended by the police on the mainland, they are liable to be forcibly returned to the islands, where they may be held in a closed detention

center. But, for the reasons outlined above, asylum seekers do often make their way to the mainland, seeking resources that are unavailable on the islands or hoping to continue their journeys elsewhere in Europe.

The one way that asylum seekers can have their island restrictions lifted after they come to the mainland is by proving that they have an officially designated vulnerability. The European legal category of vulnerable people includes unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, pregnant women and new mothers, single parents with minor children, victims of torture or rape, victims of human trafficking, and victims of shipwreck (“Identification”). Obtaining such proof requires a consultation with an asylum support NGO like the one I volunteered with. The NGO guides the client through the many steps required for this process: e.g., filling out an official “rape report” or “torture report” and attending appointments with a doctor or psychologist (torture or rape reports needed to be “backed up” by “evidence” that the rape or torture has had lasting medical and psychological effects). The absurdity of this system is such that, in my time volunteering in the asylum support office, clients would more commonly seek medical or psychological services as a means of “proving a vulnerability” or strengthening their asylum case than out of any immediate health concern. The Greek state sees the paper trail created by the asylum seeker’s medical appointments and legal documents as a reliable, documented form of evidence to be referred to in the asylum case. Likewise, “proving” the age of an undocumented, unaccompanied minor involves bodily measurements and scientific testing (“Identification”). In this way, the human body becomes a supposedly legible document to be read alongside the physical paper trail. The asylum seeker’s spoken narrative in the interview is expected to correlate to his/her documents and person, rendering the crafting of a “successful” story all the more challenging. Here, as a part of their author-ization process, migrants must impose an

element of consistency onto their narrative and performative representations of themselves, even if such consistency is not necessarily an authentic part of their individual experiences or identities, which, in reality, tend to be much more complex, evolving, and full of surprises.

The charade of legally “proving” the existence of a recognized vulnerability in order to circumvent restrictions on freedom of movement within Greece is an especially illustrative example of the ways in which the politics of vulnerability pervades the Greek asylum system. But this politics also transcends the law and takes root in the daily operation of NGOs. Notwithstanding my fellow volunteers’ complaints about the absurdity of the above procedure, this asylum support NGO still inarguably operated based on the principle of vulnerability as a prioritizing factor. Given the large number of requests from asylum seekers we received, and given the often scattered nature of the NGO’s operations, caseworkers were constantly picking and choosing between tasks, making judgment calls about which was most urgent.

It is difficult to argue *against* caring for the most vulnerable first (although determining a hierarchy of vulnerability is certainly a subjective and problematic undertaking). It is not my purpose in my dissertation to suggest alternative asylum or NGO procedures. Rather, what I intend to do is to pinpoint areas in which migrants’ presentation and narration of their experience has a very real influence on their ability to break through roadblocks. Asylum seekers can learn to isolate the instances in which NGO workers choose particular cases to expend limited time and energy on, and narrate accordingly. This is an opportunity for migrant narrators to employ craft and finesse in influencing their audience. However, given the association of the word *vulnerability* with weakness — and, as we will see below, the official translation of it as such in Arabic — displaying vulnerability can be an uncomfortable, even humiliating, act.

I end this section with a brief etymological detour (such detours will be a common occurrence in this dissertation) to explore a common translation of *vulnerability* to Arabic as *duʿf* and *vulnerable* as *daʿīf*, which literally mean “weakness” and “weak,” respectively.⁹ During my fieldwork, this was the translation favored in Arabic-language UN documents and leaflets. Admitting a weakness and requesting assistance because of a personal *inability* to do something — say, to be the breadwinner for one’s family — can constitute a blow to the ego, and may be experienced as a loss of dignity, especially in the male-dominated environments I discuss above (see Turner). I am interested in the way that the performance of vulnerability, in which refugees may think of themselves as conducting a ruse, changes the dynamics of this exchange between the requester and the provider. NGO workers, for example, can still think of themselves as providing an important resource to a vulnerable person, whereas refugees can think of themselves as *winners* who have succeeded in achieving their goals through their cunning performance. Of course, this does not change the reality that the refugee actually *is* vulnerable and the NGO worker is in a position of power. But the ruse or successful performance by the male refugee — in which the NGO worker is convinced or even duped — potentially renders the exchange more palatable for him.

Chapter Breakdown

The dissertation’s first chapter, ‘A *Ḥarrāg*’s Account,’ centers on *Anthems of Salt*, a 2019 Arabic-language memoir. The Algerian author Larbi Ramdani narrates his failed attempt at passing as a Syrian refugee after he migrates clandestinely to Greece. I read Ramdani’s

⁹A more precise Arabic translation of “vulnerability” would be *qābaliyyat at-taʿarruḍ*, literally something like “susceptibility to exposure”. The Arabic interpreter at the asylum support office, himself a Syrian refugee, told me he uses the phrases *ḥāla iḍṭirāriyya* (“necessary/emergency case”) and *ḥāla ḥarija* (“critical case”) to translate the legal concept.

performative shapeshifting from one nationality to another as a tactic, in Michel de Certeau's sense, undertaken in response to the *morphing* of the EU borderscape, which selectively expands and contracts to facilitate the passage of goods and wealthy travelers while excluding poor migrants and those with "inferior" passports. The word "borderscape" is borrowed from the work of Suvendrini Perera. The term disrupts the mental image of the border as a line and suggests that borders can take various forms that spread out over vast territories. There is much theoretical material in this chapter that is referred to throughout the entirety of the dissertation — particularly de Certeau's concepts of *maneuvering* and *users*, and Jason De León's concept of the *hybrid collectif*. Likewise, the chapter's main argument, which involves the acknowledgement that in order to gain access to spaces and resources, asylum seekers are compelled to craft versions of their experiences that they think their audiences want to hear, is also one of the main arguments of the dissertation as a whole.

The second chapter, "Affective Temporalities and Alternatives to Triumphalism in Novels of Unauthorized Migration," explores temporal disruption in the narrative modes of two recent works of Arabic fiction: Hoda Barakat's *Night Mail* (2018) (translated into English as *Voices of the Lost* in 2020), an unconventional epistolary novel whose letter writers are Arab migrants living in Europe, and Yousri Alghoul's *Gallows of Darkness* (2021), whose multiple narrators tell their stories as they are being smuggled across the Aegean Sea on a rubber dinghy. In this chapter, I make a literary-studies contribution to existing anthropological scholarship that demonstrates the ways migrant temporalities are strategically stretched and squeezed by state and international actors as a means of quelling unauthorized migration. I argue that narrative revelations of these temporal manipulations, along with migrant resistance to them, constitute a challenge to the nationalist temporality of triumphalism.

The third chapter, “Rites of Unauthorized Passage,” is focused on the narratives of Afghan men who come of age throughout their migrant journeys. It compares Dari-language short stories by refugee writers Asef Soltanzadeh and Sayed Eshaq Shojai to the lived experience of two young Afghan interlocutors whom I interviewed in Greece, Amin and Neyāz. Considering the theme of separation from and reintegration into society, and interrogating issues of masculinity on individual and cultural levels, I borrow from the literary-anthropological work of Suzanne Stetkevych on rites of passage to liken these stories’ structures and thematics to those of the classical Arabic ode (*qaṣīdah*). These narratives and literary forms depict morphing psychospiritual states amid desperate searches for meaning and livelihood.

The fourth and final chapter, “The World of the Refugee-Translator,” introduces readers to a ubiquitous character in the Greek borderscape. These translators are refugees or asylum seekers who take on the work of translating between fellow migrants and NGOs, multilateral organizations, or the Greek state. Drawing heavily on interviews that I conducted with such refugee-translators, this chapter puts their understandings of, and approaches to, translation into conversation with recent translation scholarship. The chapter challenges newfound orthodoxies among translation scholars and asks how theorists and practitioners of literary translation might augment their work by learning from the rough-and-ready practices of “good-enough” translation that are common in the asylum space.

Finally, laced between the chapters are three interludes that are intended to provide the reader with short breaks from scholarly analysis and to allow refugees and migrants to simply speak, without immediate interruption by my analysis. (Of course, it is important to note from the outset that these interludes all involve some element of transcription, translation, and/or editing on my part.) The first interlude is a poem written in Arabic by a resident of one of

Greece's refugee camps. The other two are selections from interviews that I conducted during fieldwork. My hope is that these interludes provide readers with intimate textual encounters with a few of the people about whom this dissertation is written, and that beyond their role in these pages, these texts might prove useful, or simply engaging, for scholars of migration and also for general readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

‘A Ḥarrāg’s Account’: Morphing Borderscapes, Alternative Cartographies

*Young men
leaving one day
returning on another
and one day when the sun screams and the asphalt blazes,
they arrive at the port and unfold their maps which become white vapour.
The sea dries out
and the boats keel over
and there
will be
no trace
of Atlantis receding into the water . . .*

—Nouri al-Jarrah
“Syrian Boys in the Shadow of the Acropolis”¹⁰

INTRODUCTION

A young Afghan falsely claims to be a minor while requesting asylum after his squat is raided by Greek police. A Muslim family converts to Christianity with the hope of being recognized as members of a persecuted minority. A Palestinian who expects his asylum case will be rejected makes an appointment with a psychiatrist — not for the purpose of treatment, but simply to provide documentation of a medical excuse that will allow him to postpone his interview. These are examples of decisions made by asylum seekers I met while doing fieldwork in Athens in 2019-2020.

Why do some unauthorized migrants feel compelled to adopt identities and experiences

¹⁰ From *A Boat to Lesbos and Other Poems*. Translated by Camilo Gómez-Rivas and Allison Blecker, *Banipal Books*, 2018, pp. 98-99.

that are not their own? This implicit question is addressed by the 2019 memoir *'Anāshīd al-Milḥ* (*Anthems of Salt*) by Larbi Ramdani,¹¹ which chronicles the Algerian writer's day-to-day life as a clandestine migrant in Turkey and Greece. When he finally arrives on the island of Samos after several unsuccessful attempts to cross from Izmir, he presents himself to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) as Syrian, hoping to ease his traversal through the processing procedures. Later, he tells a group of Afghan smugglers he is Moroccan to avoid any tensions resulting from ongoing feuds between Afghans and Algerians. And on the Greek mainland he tries yet another nationality, Libyan, hoping it will be both believable and personally advantageous.

After ultimately being arrested for failing to produce valid documents, Ramdani accepts “voluntary”¹² deportation and finds himself back where he started in Algeria. His narrative now no longer tied to his reception in Europe, in his memoir he recounts his journey in minute detail as a kind of tell-all for an Arabic-speaking audience. Free from the genre constraints of refugee narratives that are addressed to operators of the asylum system, humanitarian aid workers, and potential Western sympathizers, Ramdani can now give a matter-of-fact account that neither emphasizes his victimhood nor hides his attempts at deception as a means of gaining access. In this chapter, through close readings of this text alongside more cursory treatments of other works of migration literature, in addition to explications of my own fieldwork with asylum seekers in Greece, I demonstrate the ways some unauthorized migrants rely upon narrative manipulation

¹¹ “Larbi Ramdani” is the author's preferred transliteration of his name, pronounced *al-'Arabī Ramaḍānī* in Modern Standard Arabic.

¹² I place “voluntary” in quotation marks throughout this chapter because the “Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration” program is often coercively presented to migrants as their only viable alternative to extended detention in Greece, or deportation to Turkey, where deportees are jailed in even worse conditions. See “The Myth of Voluntary Deportations.”

and identity performance to make progress on their journeys and circumvent sophisticated border regimes.

What factors into the calculations migrants make as they deal with the various actors that facilitate and gatekeep their navigation across borders, within national territories, and through labyrinthine bureaucracy? *Navigation* is a key word here, one that takes on a complex set of meanings involving more than mere locomotion along a given route. By navigation I refer to what Michel de Certeau calls maneuvering, that is, finding new pathways through societal space brimming with restrictions imposed by a powerful “administration” (94). Navigation includes the psychospiritual element of sorting through emotional experiences in new, hostile environments where resource scarcity and regimes of surveillance can lead to a crisis of trust. It also includes managing decision-making processes about the various religious, ethnic, national, and other groups with which one publicly identifies, which details of one’s personal history to share, and which parts to emphasize or embellish depending on the audience in question. And importantly, it involves interpreting the messages, maps, and traces of those who have come before. I liken this kind of navigation to traditional wayfinding practices, such as those employed by Polynesian canoe voyagers on days-long journeys between islands and Aboriginal Australians traveling along “songlines” to sacred sites on the land (see O’Connor). Narrative wayfinding, as I call it in this dissertation, is a highly adaptive process of continuous reorientation and progression through dynamic environments toward a desired destination, requiring practitioners to tap into ontological origin narratives to help guide the way. An important distinction between traditional wayfinding and narrative wayfinding is that the former puts memorized mythological utterances as mnemonic devices to use as navigational aids, while the latter involves the iterative crafting of *personal* mythologies and performed versions of the self in order to blaze new trails.

Border Li(n)es

These challenges of navigation are exacerbated by another important factor: the borders through which unauthorized migrants travel are constantly morphing. With the stroke of a pen, governments create “deterritorialized space[s] of indeterminate sovereignty” — zones of exception where restrictive laws may be imposed on some but not on others (Parera 207). When migrant movement is suspected, even in areas well outside the official border zone, checkpoints are set up as quickly as they are later torn down. The topographical features that make up parts of the North–South border — e.g., the Mediterranean Sea and the Sonoran Desert — serve as delightful destinations where authorized travelers can enjoy the wonders of nature on the one hand, and as nonhuman aggressors assigned the task of meting out violence against migrant trespassers on the other. A slew of 21st-century geopolitical and economic forces have brought North–South borders to a state of semi-manufactured chaos, harnessing the nonhuman agency of “actants” in the natural world such that they work in confluence with governmental strategy, in a relationship Jason De León has identified as a *hybrid collectif*.¹³ However, not every instance of morphing that occurs at the border is malign. As I will discuss in this chapter’s conclusion, a certain “morphology” also takes place in border spaces, generating unexpected cross-cultural and -territorial connections and highlighting the complexities and contradictions of human subjectivity, despite this often being flattened in the asylum process.

¹³Adapting the term from the work of Michél Callon and John Law, De León elaborates on the concept of the hybrid collectif thus: “[P]eople or objects don’t act in isolation, but instead have complex relationships at different moments across time and space that sometimes create things or make things happen. ...[The] human need to isolate (or appropriate) agency and claim sole responsibility for action typically occurs when it suits our purposes. ... We may employ nonhumans as scapegoats when unwanted forms of agency are created (e.g., ‘machine malfunction’ or ‘act of nature’)” (39-42).

This idea of border morphing joins a body of scholarship¹⁴ that challenges notions of borders as simple demarcations of sovereignty that exist with the same stability and unambiguity that their linear representation on maps suggests. The conception of nations as fundamentally distinct territories with mostly homogeneous citizenries is an ideal that, while often presented as a reflection of the natural order of things, has helped to propel such enforced ethnic purification efforts as the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey, partition plans in Palestine and India, and population transfers in the former Yugoslavia, among others. Though this outmoded understanding has been widely problematized, it is still mirrored in common cartographic depictions of borders as thin lines dividing flat shapes filled with solid colors. In contrast, the term *borderscape*, coined by Suvendrini Perera, shows that borders can take various forms spread out over a large territory. Disrupting the mental image of the border as a line, “borderscape” more accurately portrays it as being unrestricted to one fixed space. The borderscape changes depending on one’s orientation towards it, presenting itself in particular ways to people of different socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and national origins (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr ix-x).

But, I will add, it does not only *appear* to crossers in different ways; it also acts upon them differentially. It swells to intimidate unwanted entrants and shrinks to hide in plain sight and infect migrants’ most intimate experiences. It calls into question previously undoubted senses of belonging and affiliation, entangling a desperation for resources and security with a longing for the homeland. Border “morphing” in this sense builds upon and distinguishes itself from the concept of cross-border “fluidity” popularized in Iain Chambers’s seminal text *Mediterranean Crossings*. Fluidity is a state of being; morphing is an activity. Semantically,

¹⁴ See Suvendrini Perera’s article “A Pacific Zone,” which is cited frequently in this chapter, in addition to her book *Australia and the Insular Imagination*. See also Ruben Andersson’s *No Go World*.

morphing implies strategic intention where fluidity suggests a kind of lackadaisical anythingness, a propensity to fill any container. As I see them, 21st-century borders are rather more like amoebas than liquids. Neoliberal policies require borders to swing open for money, goods, and travelers with elite status, but to snap violently shut upon most of the world's poor. The concept of morphing accounts for the actions taken by both borders and (as I will establish below and throughout this dissertation) by border crossers to change themselves during *extended periods* of crossing — i.e., not just slipping across a line, but transcending the multifarious, exclusionary processes of bordering that that continue well beyond the time of arrival.

To counteract the North–South borderscape's selective mutability, in this moment in history in which neoliberal and -imperial forces are so globally pervasive, many unauthorized crossers develop a protean flexibility of their own. To do so, they craft narratives to which they hope their various audiences of state employees, lawyers, humanitarian actors, journalists, smugglers, and fellow migrants will be receptive. They may even don counterfeit identities, as Ramdani does in *Anthems of Salt*. I argue that shapeshifting and even outright lying are practically required of asylum seekers who do not happen to already fit into an established and approved category of worthy victim, however that is defined at the time and place of application. And even if their experiences do qualify them for clear-cut asylum acceptance, they still must emphasize certain elements of their stories (e.g., threats directed at them due to their identity or group affiliation) and downplay others (e.g., hopes for a better economic future).

Political discourse is rife with accusations that migrants lie about having undergone the violent and discriminatory experiences that would qualify them for asylum, in order to fulfill their ultimately economic migratory goals (as if economic deprivation is not in itself a form of violence). James Souter argues that this discourse has brought about a “culture of disbelief”

among asylum officers in which deception is assumed at the outset, thus increasing the burden of proof that asylum seekers must bear and limiting the range of individuals who qualify for refugee status. Ironically, this means that “the asylum system itself effectively produces lying. Its hierarchy of suffering, restrictive legal provisions and enforced limbo can all strongly encourage, if not compel, asylum seekers to lie to secure protection.” In turn, an asylum seeker’s suspected or confirmed dishonesty can be used as a reason for rejection, completing the circle of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Meanwhile, refugee advocates have understandably hesitated to acknowledge this ubiquitous phenomenon among asylum seekers, given the extent to which purveyors of anti-migration politics bemoan migrant claims as bogus. Indeed, a line of poetry by Somali-British writer Warsan Shire has become something of a truism among activists, a way to fight back against right-wing accusations that asylum seekers are simply trying to game the system: “no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark” (Kuo). The particular voice of the poem’s speaker is universalized to engender an overly simplistic logic wherein, given the difficulties asylum seekers face on their journeys and in their host countries, they are to be considered fundamentally trustworthy, since no one would expose themselves to the difficulties associated with unauthorized migration without being forced to do so. This well-meaning sentiment ignores asylum seekers’ complex array of experiences and motivations and assumes an essential inability that many refugee advocates translate into a call for humanitarian action on the newcomers’ behalf. Instead, I argue, unauthorized migrants’ embellishments, narrative manipulations, and even lies are a demonstration of their wherewithal to respond tactically to a repressive border regime. This potentially provocative assertion is by no means meant to impugn asylum seekers’ reputations. On the contrary, it points to an ingenuity akin to that of required of effective

authorship, by which refugees-cum-narrators captivate their audiences to achieve a set of goals.

Looking at *Anthems of Salt* alongside my own encounters with asylum seekers and their migration stories, a pronounced contrast emerges between Ramdani's unglamorized narration for an Arabic-speaking audience on the one hand and sanitized tellings of "Third World 'humanitarian narratives'" that aim to elicit Western philanthropy on the other (Bakara 290). As an unauthorized migrant who has become author-ized in the Arab World, Ramdani is able to recount his actions and motivations with frankness, problematizing idealized notions of refugeehood that tend to paint migrants as either essentially victims or villains. This is not to say the published account is any less "crafted" than an oral one told to European officials (see my discussion of Hassan Blasim's short story "The Reality and the Record" below). He certainly still crafts his narrative for the memoir, and he is able to make different kinds of claims than he could in an asylum interview. But importantly, he is not required to provide documented proof of his experiences in his memoir the way he would be in an asylum interview; nor must he prove anything moral or righteous about himself.

For my part, as one of many scholars trespassing in the world of humanitarian voluntourism, I aim for a similar frankness in casting a (self-)critical eye on the ways that the roles of aid workers are intertwined with those of border enforcers. An awareness of the inner workings of these organizations and their relationship with Greek and EU authorities provides additional perspective to the narratives of those who interact with them as beneficiaries. On their own, however, scholarly descriptions of routes, policies, and living conditions fail to fully illuminate the spatiotemporal experiences of unauthorized migrants themselves. If narratives like Ramdani's, told on their own terms, can provide alternative cartographic representations of the

worlds through which migrants forge innovative throughways, what scholarly practices of deciphering and recognition might serve as a key by which to read them?

A note on ḥargah and ‘stuckness’

One method I have applied in my attempt to answer this question is exploring the full polysemic potential of Ramdani’s unique verbiage as a migrant narrator. For example, his book’s full title, *ʿAnāshīd al-Milḥ: Sīrat Ḥarrāg (Anthems of Salt: A Ḥarrāg’s Account)*, features an untranslatable North African word for “clandestine migrant” that departs from both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and conventional orthography. The character for /g/ at the end of *ḥarrāg* is not one of the official letters of the Arabic alphabet, but it rather combines two ways of representing this “g” sound that appears in many dialects but not in MSA: گ. This combined rendering includes elements of the two more typical renderings of /g/, گ (used more in the Mashriq), and ق (used more in the Maghreb). Thus, while the word itself marks the work as North African, the unusual orthography marks it as both fundamentally foreign (because the character گ is not in use anywhere in the Arab world) and universally legible (because, insofar as it includes a combination of two more commonly used glyphs, users of both can recognize it). I read the word as a signpost for the protagonist’s multifaceted experience of lacking a sense of belonging to a particular place on the one hand, and yet being unable to shed his attachment to a place — Algeria — on the other.

The Maghrebi Arabic *ḥarrāg* (pl. *ḥarrāgah*) comes from the MSA *ḥarrāq*, literally, “one who burns.” The thing being burned is usually understood to be the identity document. But by extension, *ḥarrāgah* also “burn” the borders and regimes that prevent them from crossing in a “regular” manner. Lacking the documents that would authorize their migration, these border

crossers destroy what documents they do have in an effort to stave off deportation, at once ridding themselves of their official identities and becoming identified as *ḥarrāgah* in their act of destroying them. I will further discuss the significance of this term, along with other meaningful etymological phenomena in Ramdani's narrative, in this chapter's conclusion. But from the outset it is important to understand *ḥargah* ("burning") as an act of both symbolic self-effacement and resistance to an acute sense of "existential immobility" or "stuckness"¹⁵ (Hage 98), combined, I would emphasize, with literal geographic restriction.

Anthems of Salt begins with Ramdani's detailed reflections on these very types of existential immobility and geographic restriction:

I grew up and got caught in the trap. I didn't find the "homeland" that I was introduced to and learned about in school, and heard about on the radio and television. I didn't find security or aspirations; rather, I found myself in a vast prison called a "homeland," fenced in by lies and bombastic slogans. I found myself in a patch of geography not of my choosing, my presence in which I consider a coincidence. This geography oppressed me and threw me into its joy-free territory. How have three decades passed without my feeling a sense of belonging to it? I live in it by obligation, every day dying of alienation and sadness, looking forward to the hour of freedom when I will be far away from anxiety, cruelty, and apathy.¹⁶ (11-12)¹⁷

We see here that Ramdani's potential for movement, both physical and metaphorical, is severely limited. Despite attaining a university degree and completing national service, at age 30 he still cannot find any opportunities for upward mobility in Algeria. Psychologically, he can see no

¹⁵ Hage writes that migration is often the result of being unable to bear what he calls "stuckedness," an overwhelming sense that one is "going nowhere": "[P]eople engage in the physical form of mobility that we call migration because they are after existential mobility" (98).

¹⁶ All translations from *Anthems of Salt* are my own.

¹⁷ كبرت، ووقعت في الفخ، لم أجد "الوطن" الذي عرفته وتعرفت إليه في المدرسة، وسمعت عنه في الإذاعة والتلفزيون، لم أجد الأمان والأمان، بل وجدت نفسي في سجن واسع اسمه "وطن"، مُسجج بالأكاذيب والشعارات الفضاضة، وجدت نفسي في "رقعة جغرافية" لم أخترها، وأعد وجودي فيها صدفة. هذه الجغرافيا ظلمتني، وألقت بي في ربوعها الخالية من الفرح، كيف مرت ثلاثة عقود، ولم أشعر فيها بالانتماء؟ أعيش فيها مرغما، وأموت، كل يوم، اغترابا وحزنا، متطلعا إلى ساعة الحرية التي سأكون فيها بعيدا عن الهموم والقسوة واللامبالاة.

route by which to pursue happiness, as the territory itself is described as empty of joy. He finds no rest in a sense of belonging; alienation eats away at him, threatening to kill him. He is “fenced in,” both physically, as he is unable to access a legal avenue by which to leave, and metaphorically, by “lies” and empty nationalistic boasts. In choosing *hargah*, he undertakes “a great risk that could possibly produce a better reality” (“*Ālam al-Kutub*,” my translation). But, as he soon discovers on his journey, the repression and frustration he experiences at home will continue to dog him abroad, albeit in different, morphed, forms.

BORDER MORPHING

At the end of the memoir, when Ramdani is left with no choice but to return to Algeria after more than a year away, his personal experience demonstrates to him that the forces giving rise to pervasive clandestine migration from his homeland extend far beyond its borders:

Migration will not stop, no matter the greed of smugglers, the hypocrisy of governments, the misery of prisons, and the monstrousness of the sea that migrants encounter, because [migration’s] main causes remain and are becoming even more invigorated: a developed North supporting the tyrants of a South that is rich, but backward, and swarming with despots and dream-thieves.

The Mediterranean South, the Middle East, and East Asia are among the regions of the world whose people emigrate most, fleeing wars, corruption, and poverty. Even the countries of “crossing” that migrants pass through benefit greatly from them, especially Turkey and Greece. The Turks are using the migrants as a bargaining chip with the European Union[...]. (330-331)¹⁸

¹⁸ لن تتوقف الهجرة مهما صادف المهاجرون من جشع المهربين ونفاق الحكومات وبؤس السجون ووحشية البحر، لن تتوقف الهجرة، لأن أسبابها الرئيسية لا تزال قائمة، وتنتعش أكثر. شمال متطور، يدعم طغاة جنوب غني، لكنه متخلف، ويعج بالمستبدين ولصوص الأحمال..

جنوب المتوسط والشرق الأوسط وشرق آسيا من أكثر المناطق في العالم التي يهاجر منها الناس هرباً من الحروب والفساد والفقر. الغرب المستنير الذي تهرب إليه شعوب تلك المناطق له يد طويلة في المأساة، بدعمه لأسوأ الأنظمة المستبدية، حتى دول "العبور" التي يمر منها المهاجرون تستفيد كثيراً منهم خاصة تركيا واليونان. الأتراك يساومون الاتحاد الأوروبي بورقة المهاجرين[...].

The above quotation highlights a clear contrast between the neo-imperial powers of the North (to use Ramdani's geographical shorthand), which stretch out tentacles to feed on the South's resources, and, on the other hand, the confined denizens of the South, subjected to ubiquitous corruption and poverty, with no authorized means of achieving mobility or security. *Hargah* is thus presented as the inevitable reaction to the EU's exploitation of countries of the Global South and its extension of its sovereignty outside its recognized territory, through its relationships with various despotic rulers. This type of extraterritoriality, and its mirror image, deterritorialization, are two ways in which the border "morphs." By border morphing I mean the ways in which modern-day borders — particularly those at which the Global South and North overlap — can expand and contract, appear and disappear, and be violent or docile depending on the individual attempting to cross. Other examples of such morphing that I discuss in this section are the EU's elusive instrumentalization of both humanitarian organizations and natural forces in its border policing practices.

Extraterritoriality and deterritorialization

Early in the memoir, when Ramdani is in Turkey, he highlights the ills of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal. The latter established Turkey as a "third country" to which unauthorized migrants may be deported from the EU, arguably violating the principle of non-refoulement. It also outsourced responsibility for the EU's border policing to Turkish authorities, generating an extraterritorialized layer of partial EU sovereignty inside Turkey (see Karadağ and "Refugees at Heightened Risk of Refoulement"). Ramdani's account of his experience being smuggled there is telling. In Izmir, he and a group of fellow migrants are loaded into the back of a van and told to keep their voices down. The van passes through a checkpoint, but the passengers are not discovered. Later, after a botched attempt to cross the Aegean Sea on a dinghy, they return to

shore, and are loaded back into the van. Then there is news from the smugglers' scout that the police are on their trail, and the travelers are thrown out of the van and abandoned, cold and wet, in a thicket. They are soon discovered by Turkish police and detained. Instead of being jailed, they are dropped off at a run-down shelter (27).

Ramdani sees through this veneer of humanitarian action. First, there is the issue of the conditions in centers like this one: they "don't provide even the most minimal of services, just inhumane crowding". There are financial motives as well, he adds. The EU "rewards the Turks [monetarily] for every individual who has entered those centers." He also describes witnessing what he believes to be a racketeering scheme. The police arrange for bus drivers to offer to transport migrants back to Izmir for a hefty fee, which will later be split "between the police, the director of the center, and the owners of the buses" (27). Ramdani's perspective and commentary provide a helpful counter-narrative to any description of the EU-Turkey deal as an effective and humane way for the EU to reduce the numbers of migrants entering its territory irregularly. In the above example, no one is truly deterred from crossing; the migrants are free to return to Izmir and prepare for a second attempt. Likewise, no one is treated humanely, given the conditions of the centers. In Ramdani's view, this is simply an instance of Turkey profiting from migrants' misery. His thorough description of this experience brings the EU borderscape's extraterritorial morphing into focus.

It is not quite extraterritoriality, but rather deterritorialization, that later requires Ramdani to sneak aboard a ferry at the Samos port in order to access mainland Greece. Perera writes: "The technology of excision, by which certain parts of a state's territory are decreed by law not to be accountable to law, is one of a repertoire of technologies for producing hybrid spaces ... designed to isolate, contain, and punish asylum seekers" (203). In establishing special restrictive

laws for asylum seekers on the islands of Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros, Rhodes, and Kos, the Greek state partially excises these territories. Not only are asylum seekers (unlike travelers with tourist visas) prevented from traveling from there to the mainland using regular means of transit, but they are also forbidden from continuing their Greek asylum claims at any location besides the island “hotspot” by which they entered the country. This is due to a policy, often referred to as “island restriction,” that is designed to keep irregular migrants confined to the islands (see Guérin). The islands are in this sense deterritorialized: they are geopolitically part of Greece and yet legally distinct from the rest of Greece, in an expression of the EU’s border morphing.

However, through 2020, these policies had not noticeably succeeded in discouraging migrants from traveling to the mainland. When I volunteered at an asylum assistance office in Athens in 2019-2020, many if not most clients had traveled irregularly to the Greek capital after entering the country via one of the Aegean islands. The lack of resources and deteriorating conditions in the camps there had rendered them nearly uninhabitable (Kitsantonis). Now in Athens, these asylum seekers sought a legal exception¹⁹ that would allow them both to transfer their asylum cases there and to access the government-funded healthcare system and UN cash assistance, which were available only to those with documentation of open application status. These exceptions were rarely ever granted. Thus, the only obvious result of the island restriction policy was the further deterioration of living conditions for asylum seekers who had come to the mainland from the Aegean hotspots.

The ‘humanitarian–policing nexus’

I now turn to another insidious manifestation of border morphing: the sporadic interchangeability

¹⁹ Viz., proving the existence of a legally recognized vulnerability. See the section “A Politics of Vulnerability” in this dissertation’s introduction for more details.

of some of the roles of border policing authorities and humanitarian organizations. In the summer of 2019, I was volunteering with one such organization on Lesbos, one of the most prominent hotspots. On the island's north shore, I saw firsthand the ways in which humanitarian actors knowingly collaborated with agents of border enforcement, despite often criticizing their practices. For example, one key task was for volunteers to scan the sea with a telescopic spotting device, in shifts, throughout the day and night. Upon identifying a migrant vessel on the water, they would notify another NGO's search and rescue team, which communicated directly with the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) during all operations. The UNHCR also held biweekly meetings on cooperation between representatives of Lesbos-based NGOs, HCG, and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). The former two groups took on a mixed role, combining humanitarian assistance with border policing.²⁰ On one occasion during my time on Lesbos, a large number of migrants arrived on the same day, and HCG carried out the humanitarian act of coordinating meal delivery to a UNHCR transit camp, where the new arrivals awaited transfer to Moria. A few days later, HCG displayed its policing role with gusto, engaging a smuggler speedboat in a high-speed chase after it finished ferrying a group of migrants across the sea, prompting them to hide in the brambly hills nearby for fear of being arrested and deported. It took hours for members of the NGO — accompanied by a police officer who brandished his firearm at one point, suspecting the presence of a smuggler — to find the exhausted and frightened newcomers. The above examples demonstrate some of the ways that non-migrant

²⁰ HCG has regularly been accused of carrying out illegal “pushbacks” on migrant vessels, dragging those which have already arrived in Greek waters back into Turkish waters. The NGO I volunteered with documented these actions, while still collaborating with HCG. In the year prior to my time on Lesbos, NGO members said they had seen more “pullbacks” from Turkish coastguard than pushbacks from HCG. However, they opined that the EU was ultimately culpable, since it funded these Turkish military/policing actions. It was suggested that since Turkey is held to a lower humanitarian standard than the EU globally, the pullbacks constituted EU “dirty work” carried out by Turkey on its behalf. See “UNHCR calls on Greece to Investigate Pushbacks”

actors in the borderscape morph, carrying out one type of role and then another, mixing “reception and rejection, care and coercion,” forming a “humanitarian–policing nexus” (Andersson 72-73).

An instance in Ramdani’s memoir exemplifies another iteration of this phenomenon. He and his companions have just arrived on Samos and made their way to the island’s main refugee camp. When they claim to be Syrian but have no documents to prove it, they are subjected to interrogation not by Greek or EU authorities, but by employees of the UNHCR.²¹ Ironically, the person who facilitates this “interview,” and who is tasked with determining whether the migrants are telling the truth, is Arab and likely a refugee himself. One of the most common jobs for refugees and asylum seekers in Greece is that of interpreter, a role that sometimes puts them in the uncomfortable position of facilitating the state’s gatekeeping practices towards those who come from backgrounds and circumstances similar to their own.²² The fact that his interviewer is Arab strikes Ramdani as a betrayal of sorts: “I began to despise him after scrutinizing him for a while, observing his features and gait. I felt that he was a scoundrel” (101). After establishing that Ramdani has no passport or documents, the employee begins a series of questions that test his knowledge of Syria’s geography and the names of its high-profile politicians. Ramdani answers correctly, but the interviewer is not convinced by his demeanor or speech, and determines he must be “Moroccan” (105). The UNHCR employees eventually look through Ramdani’s cell phone and discover a photo of his Algerian passport. It is for this reason that he is registered as Algerian by Greek police, an incident that culminates in his (“voluntary”)

²¹ Similarly, the NGO I worked with on Lesbos operated a transit camp for new arrivals near the north shore. Volunteers were tasked with asking each new arrival his/her name and age. I learned after the fact that this information would be passed to HCG, sometimes via the UNHCR. To what extent this information was eventually used to corroborate information given during asylum interviews, I do not know.

²²“Refugee-translators” are the focal point of this dissertation’s final chapter.

deportation when his fingerprints appear in the system upon his arrest months later. Here we see the UNHCR participating in the “humanitarian–policing nexus” by providing shelter and basic resources to an unauthorized migrant while at the same time playing a decisive role in his exclusion.

Hostile Mediterranean

Just as the depoliticized language of philanthropy shrouds humanitarian organizations’ contributions to border enforcement, the language of tragedy shrouds government culpability for the deaths of migrants at sea. State powers avoid a degree of public scrutiny when, rather than taking more direct aggressive action, they leverage natural forces against irregular migrants as a means of excluding them. Here I draw a comparison to De León’s writing on undocumented migration across the US–Mexico border. De León shows how the Sonoran Desert has been factored into US border policy, with security beefed up in populated areas in a way that effectively routes irregular travelers through the “hostile terrain” of the desert (2015, 31–35). He points to a “Prevention through Deterrence” policy in which migrant deaths in the desert are used as a strategy to discourage would-be irregular crossers. These “tragic” deaths of migrants can be explained away as unfortunate incidents rather than acts of state violence, a classification that is usually reserved for occasions of shooting deaths perpetrated by border guards: “the Border Patrol can draw on the agency of animals and other nonhumans to do its dirty work while simultaneously absolving itself of any blame connected to migrant injuries or loss of life” (De León 2015, 43).

In the hybrid collectif (a concept I discussed in the introduction), agency becomes distinct from individual human intention, and the numerous humans and nonhumans that make up a formidable border regime begin to appear as an unwieldy conglomeration that is driven by

powerful forces but has no single master at its helm. This concept casts light on migrant drownings in what might be called the *hostile Mediterranean*. For as in the case of the US and Mexico, official EU border policies are implemented with the knowledge (if not the acknowledgment) that they have led and will continue to lead to the deaths of irregular crossers at sea.²³ This is not to say that migrant deaths are *intended* by the EU in the regular sense of the word, but as Maurizio Albahari writes, such state (in)actions “do not need intentionality: they may bank on the variable interest of unequally distributed ‘tragedies’” (2015, 22).

In *Anthem of Salt*, the actants working together to exclude unauthorized migrants take shape in the characterization of the Aegean Sea, which Ramdani depicts as a fierce, quasi-deified beast during his numerous crossing attempts. The sea’s untamability serves as a literary stand-in for that of the EU border regime, which has also spiraled out of control. The following quotations from the memoir capture the multiple forms the sea takes as it morphs in Ramdani’s mind. The Aegean is described as “sharpening its knives” (85)²⁴ as it prepares to hunt for migrant bodies, for which it is ferociously hungry. It is a “historic, gluttonous, conniving monster that makes its victims into feasts for its seaweed” (23).²⁵ He used to see the sea as glorious and inspirational, but now he has discovered its alter-ego: “a merciless bloody-faced predator detected only by *harrāgah*” (85).²⁶ Indeed, in a manifestation of what I have explained above,

²³ Since at least 2014, the EU has been confronted by continual reports demonstrating its culpability for migrant deaths at sea. For such a report from 2014, see “The Human Cost of Fortress Europe.”

²⁴ يشدذ سكاكينه

²⁵ الوحش التاريخي النهمة المخادع، الذي يجعل من ضحاياه ولائم لأعشابه

²⁶ مفترساً لا يرحم، له وجه دموي، يكتشفه فقط "الحراقة"

(Note that the character گ is only used in the book’s title; elsewhere throughout the book, the letter *qaf* is used for the “g” sound in the words *hargah*, *harrāg*, and *harrāgah*.)

Ramdani describes the sea as selectively morphing into a devilish version of itself in its interactions with its *ḥarrāgah* crossers — no one else can experience the sea as they do.

But the act of *ḥargah* is itself predicated on exposure to likely harm amid attempts at besting the obstacles set in *ḥarrāgah*'s way: the “fire” that burns the border is likely to burn the crosser as well — this is the price of admission. It costs Ramdani three harrowing failed attempts before he makes it to Samos, on a night when the sea is tranquil and cooperative, “submissive to our wish to cross” (89).²⁷ Upon arrival, Ramdani and his companions climb up a ridge and look down at the sea, and he polishes off his anthropomorphism of the Aegean by reflecting upon its potentially mixed feelings after its failure to prevent his crossing: “the Aegean Sea below me was feeling defeated, or perhaps feeling happy for us. I didn’t want to know its feelings. All that mattered was that I had beaten it this time” (90-91).²⁸ Even though Ramdani cannot quite identify the Aegean’s intentions or “feelings,” deciding that they ultimately do not matter to him, he still cannot help endowing it with a kind of agency. I highlight Ramdani’s characterizations of the sea as a living creature to emphasize my argument that the agency in these violent acts against clandestine migrants is transferred from state actors to the hostile Mediterranean itself, as in the case of the “hostile terrain” of the Sonoran Desert. This anthropomorphism is so pronounced in the memoir that the sea becomes more like a character than a setting, and Ramdani continues to visit and speak to it regularly in his imagination and memories long after he arrives on the Greek mainland.

²⁷ خاضع لرغبتنا في العبور

²⁸ بحر إيجه أسفلي يشعر بالانكسار أو ربما بالسعادة لأجلنا، لم أرغب في معرفة شعوره، كل ما في الأمر أنني هزمته هذه المرة..

In addition to morphing in the manner described above, the sea also has a transportive quality for Ramdani, serving as a bridge between spatiotemporal and emotional worlds. Although I quibble semantically with Chambers's emphasis on "fluidity" in his book *Mediterranean Crossings*, he does provide a helpful theorization of the potential linking quality of the sea: "Sedimented in the sea are histories and cultures that are held in inconclusive suspension. This provocative presence indicates both a route and bridge" (24). While the extent to which EU border policies stand in the way of a free-flowing exchange of peoples can scarcely be understated, the Mediterranean Sea nonetheless presents a shared frame of reference for the countries and cultures surrounding it. The crossing scenes from *Anthems of Salt* also endow the Sea with a connective element — a particularly dark and dire one. For Ramdani, the Aegean is not simply a link between locales and cultures, but between past and future and even life and death. In a storm during one of Ramdani's ill-fated crossing attempts on a dinghy, he imagines his impending demise along with that of the children who are his co-passengers:

[T]he Aegean Sea's persistence in hurling its voracious waves upon us horrified me and made me lose hope of survival [...]. Then came a swarm of birds, what kind I could not tell, crows or gulls, but the movement of their wide wings made them very frightening. I imagined myself lying supine on the surface of the water, my stomach bloated, and those evil birds gouging out my eyes and pecking my face, and the waves tossing me back and forth. I thought of my future, my present, my mother, and it seemed to me that the end was near. Even my skills in swimming, which I learned in the wadi at an early age from my late great uncle, Yousef, would not be of use to me. Neither could I stop imagining the rest of the passengers, especially the children, being jostled about by the viscous waves, and being pulled down into the belly of the criminal Aegean Sea, while they cried out and appealed to heaven and earth for assistance[...]. (37)²⁹

²⁹ إصرار بحر أیجة على تسليط أمواجه النهمه علينا جعلني أرعب وأفقد الأمل في النجاة [...]. ثم جاء سرب من الطيور، لم أتعرف على نوعها، غريبان أو نوارس، لكنها كانت مخيفة جدا بحركة أجنحتها العريضة. تخيلت نفسي مستلقيا على ظهري فوق سطح البحر، بطني منتفخ، وتلك الطيور الشريرة تفقا عيني، وتنفق وجهي، والأمواج تتقاذفني، فكرت في مصيري، حاضري، والدتي، خُيل إلي أن النهاية اقتربت، حتى مهاراتي في السباحة التي تعلمتها في الوادي في سن مبكرة جدا مع الراحل عمي العظيم يوسف لا يمكنها أن تنفعني. لم أتوقف أيضا عن تخيل بقية الركاب خاصة الأطفال والأمواج الشرسة تعبت بهم، وتسحبهم إلى بطن بحر أیجة المجرم، وهم يصرخون ويستغيثون السماء والأرض[...].

In the horrors of the moment, the palpable fear of the children is linked to Ramdani's own childhood vulnerability. As he flashes back from the past to the present, his uncle can no longer guarantee his safety the way he could in the wadi. Neither are the parents of the children in the boat able to protect them in the event of a shipwreck. Their collective fate is in the hands of the monstrous Aegean. This shared experience forges a connection that also extends beyond them to thousands of other clandestine migrants and refugees who have felt compelled to cross the sea, both those whose bodies are forever lost beneath the water's surface and those who arrive to the other shore alive. Thus, the sea can morph, or *be* morphed in migrants' minds, from inhabiting the role of great divider — of territory from territory, of the living from the dead — to that of great uniter. The sea may become a rite of passage into a nascent community of non-citizens who come together to cope with trauma, or even to take collective political action.³⁰

Such harrowing crossing experiences might be internalized by migrant narrators and later released in their narratives in unexpected, “morphed” ways. Note the striking resemblance between Ramdani's account and the following passage from a 2020 personal essay entitled “*Yawmiyyāt Mukta`ib Sūrī fī `Almāniyā*” (“Diary of a Syrian Depressive in Germany”) by Mohammad Diab. Diab uses dire images of death at sea to encapsulate the intense sensation of estrangement he feels in his new European locale: “I reflect upon these things, and am overwhelmed by violent, depressing emotions that feel like nostalgia. They twist around my body and legs like the arms of an octopus, pulling me down to the bottomless, dark depths, where I drown. I suffocate, and my body is filled with salt water, then floats on the surface, alone

³⁰ For an excellent account and analysis of activism carried out by asylum seekers and refugees in Greece, see Cabot pp. 194-220.

on the horizon, tossed by a roaring wave” (my translation).³¹ Diab’s anthropomorphizing of his emotions mirrors Ramdani’s quasi-deification of the Aegean. Both imagine their own bloated corpses being hurled in the air, at the mercy of the boisterous seawater. Ramdani also envisions an animal assault on his person, though by birds rather than an octopus-cum-sea monster. These vivid manifestations of dread shed light on the violence that is meted out on undocumented migrants, perpetrated by non-human actants on the state’s behalf.

Indeed, while Ramdani refers to the *sea* as “criminal,” these “crimes of peace” are structurally part of the state. Government policy designed to maintain social order by preventing the entry of *potentially* criminal actors “generates *actual* crimes,” namely, the avoidable deaths of clandestine migrants crossing violent borderscapes (Albahari 21).³² And the violence is not just enacted upon the *lives* of unauthorized travelers, but on their remains after their death. De León has described an analogous phenomenon — migrant corpses being devoured by wild animals and deteriorating into oblivion in the Sonoran Desert — as necroviolence (68-72). In the context of the sea, migrant bodies that do not wash ashore are denied the burial practices that set them apart with other deceased members of their faith, transforming the sea into a “seametry” (Abderrezak 385). Ramdani’s and Diab’s graphic elucidation of their deepest fears long after the events of their migratory journeys point to the pronounced effect that this necroviolence can have on the psyches of those who manage to escape it.

But unauthorized migrants’ narratorial responses to the morphing of the borderscape

³¹ أتأمل هذه الأشياء، فتغمرنى مشاعر كئيبة وعنيفة، تشبه الحنين إلى الماضي. وتلتفت حول جسدي وساقِي كأذرع أخطبوط. تجذبني إلى أعماق سحيقة مظلمة أغرق فيها، أختنق ويمتلئ جسدي بمياه مالحة، ثم يطفو على سطحها وحيداً في الأفق، يتقاذفه موج هادر.

³² While these deaths might not be “intentional” in the ordinary sense of the word, they are *allowed* to occur in what, in religious terms, might be called sins of omission: “Crimes of peace do not need intentionality: they may bank on the variable interest of unequally distributed ‘tragedies’” (Albahari 22).

begin long before they are delivered from its limbo, whether through “successful” arrival or (“voluntary” or enforced) deportation. From the moment of their first encounters with humanitarian actors, state employees, and police in the EU, migrants begin to craft accounts and selves whose precise presentation, they hope, will improve their chances of being considered worthy of a prolonged European existence.

MIGRANT SHAPESHIFTING

Everyone staying at the refugee reception center 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, written down in the immigration department and preserved in their private files. The real stories remain locked in the hearts of the refugees, for them to mull over in complete secrecy. (Blasim 157)

Thus opens Iraqi author Hassan Blasim’s fictional short story “The Reality and the Record.” I turn to it briefly here to illustrate the extent to which asylum seekers are under pressure to morph their stories to fit the restrictive generic mold of a “successful” a refugee narrative. Blasim’s piece begins and ends with third-person commentary like that seen in the passage above, but the bulk of it is presented as a transcript of an account given by an Iraqi refugee during his asylum interview in a European country. The man, an ambulance driver by profession, offers a grave and at times absurd testimony of being kidnapped in Iraq by a group of militants and subsequently sold to several other groups, all of them with different ideological bents. On the night he was first abducted, he says, he had been sent to the Tigris River to recover the remains of six decapitated bodies that the police discovered there. He was transferring the severed heads to a hospital in his ambulance when a faux police car pulled him over, and he and the heads were nabbed.

After he is taken to the first group’s hideout, he is seated in front of a black banner inscribed with a Quranic verse, the rotting heads lined up behind him. The militants set up a

camera and tell him to put on an army uniform and read from a script saying that he is an Iraqi officer who has committed atrocities against civilians in exchange for “large financial rewards” from US forces. His captors record a video of him delivering lines from the script, and he is such a convincing actor that the tape is broadcast on Al Jazeera TV, with government sources claiming to have confirmed its authenticity. After this, the militants begin to treat him like kidnapped royalty, feeding him well and even allowing him to bathe (163-165). But soon they sell him to another group, which also wants to exploit his acting skills. He notices that the cameraman for the first group is the same as the one for the second. Even more absurdly, these militants film their video in a cow pen, and loud mooing at the end of his speech forces them to re-record it.

After this, the ambulance driver continues to be sold from group to group where he plays various other villainous roles for the video camera — “a treacherous Kurd, an infidel Christian, a Saudi terrorist, a Syrian Baathist intelligence agent, or a Revolutionary Guard from Zoroastrian Iran” (168) — and news outlets and politicians continue to analyze these videos, each featuring the same star actor, as if they are authentic. When he is finally released from this carousel of militant groups, he flees Iraq and, in his asylum interview, he understands exactly what is required of him: reciting another kind of script (the refugee narrative) and playing a different kind of a role (the victim), all with a different kind of gun pointed at his head (deportation). He figures that if he follows the correct formula, as before, he may be granted such extravagant luxuries as food, shelter, and even a job. When he begins to veer off script, he catches himself, saying things like: “What I’m saying has nothing to do with my asylum request. What matters to you is the horror” (167). In a final section at the end of the story, the third-person narrator reveals that the ambulance driver’s “real” story, as opposed to his story “for the record,” can be summed

up in two Arabic words: “*urīd an-nawm*” (“I want to sleep”) (p. 20 in Arabic original, p. 170 in Wright’s translation).

Blasim, who himself moved to Finland as a refugee in 2004, uses fiction to demonstrate dramatically what Ramdani’s memoir reveals more subtly: viz., that many unauthorized migrants adopt a performative shapeshifting of their own as they fight to survive in what I have described as violent, morphing borderscapes that target unwanted entrants for deportation or worse. Most applicants are well aware that the asylum process is restrictive and have heard stories of success and failure from their peers. They take these stories into account when crafting their own narratives for asylum interviews and interactions with aid workers who can grant them access to resources. Some of this narrative manipulation is quite subtle — leaving out minor details here, embellishing accounts of discrimination there — but some of it might be as dramatic as claiming a religious conversion or, as in Ramdani’s case, a new nationality. In De Certeau’s (30-34) terms, savvy “users” of the asylum system understand that their acceptance is predicated on the extent to which they fit the profile of an imagined worthy refugee — a non-threatening, passive victim whose victimizers preferably align, ideologically or otherwise, with the host country’s enemies.

As newcomers squeeze themselves into these ideal categories, they participate in a process that effectively produces “an ostensibly legible subject in a hierarchical taxonomy” (Albahari 132). If migrants tactically comply with this framework, they do what I call performing categorizability — making efforts to choose experiential details to highlight, exaggerate, or invent such that they can be sorted into a sub-group whose asylum acceptance rate they believe to be high. That is, they suppress the parts of their identities and experiences that would make their categorization complicated. In playing up their ability to be pigeonholed, they

play down the complexity of their subjectivity. Why do I say “performing categorizability” rather than simply “performing a category”? Because I want to focus on the fact that this shapeshifting is not mere role-playing; it is a reduction of an individual’s personhood by a factor of dimensions — a profound process of flattening out in which migrants not only embrace a set of traits that the asylum regime considers desirable, but also efface intricacies of their character that, in a work of fiction, would be praised as true to life.

However, if unauthorized migrants are unconvinced of their aptness to successfully act categorizable, they may opt instead to perform *uncategorizability*, hoping that a highly indeterminate self-presentation will allow them to slip through the borderscape undetected, or at least without being quickly sorted into a category of people that is slated for immediate deportation. Ramdani takes both of these shapeshifting approaches throughout his journey in order to resist inhibitory policies and procedures.

The ethics of migrant (dis)honesty

In weighing his options about how to interact with the asylum system, Ramdani explains the predicament he faces as an Algerian:

I didn’t want to apply for asylum, because of the difficulty of attaining it, since we are from a “safe country,” unlike the Syrians and Iraqis. Not even everyone fleeing from war receives asylum, because of the bureaucracy of the United Nations, which doesn’t have an independent position vis-a-vis the authority of the Greek security forces. I haven’t encountered an Algerian who has attained asylum. (118-119)³³

Based on his understanding of the situation, Ramdani’s choice to tell the authorities that he is Syrian rather than Algerian is a simple one. He believes that being recognized as Algerian may

³³ لم أرغب في التقدم بطلب لجوء لصعوبة الحصول عليه، كوننا من بلد آمن عكس السوريين والعراقيين [،] حتى من هربوا من الحروب لا يحصل جميعهم على لجوء، بسبب بيروقراطية الأمم المتحدة التي لا تملك موقفا مستقلا أمام سطوة الأمن اليوناني، لم أصادف جزائريا حصل على لجوء [...]

lead, at best, to greater difficulty navigating the asylum system, and at worst, to prompt deportation. This perception is not unfounded: according to Human Rights Watch, “People of certain nationalities presumptively considered ‘economic migrants,’ such as Algerians, are treated as having manifestly unfounded claims, and are often detained on that basis” (Cossé 2018). In the thought process he expresses on the page, Ramdani displays a sophisticated awareness of the limitations of the system, and of the types of subjection to violence that the EU considers legally sufficient to warrant asylum. Fleeing from the slow and unspectacular violence of economic deprivation and corruption, which are exacerbated by if not rooted in the policies of “the asylum granting nations of the West” (Bakara 2020, 293) does not qualify one for the status of “worthy refugee.”

Recounting his questioning in Samos by UNHCR employees, when he pretends to be Syrian, Ramdani puts on display the absurdity of using human tragedy as a key by which to access a decent life in the EU:

“Do you have passports?”
“They were lost in the sea.”
[...]“Where is your family?”
“They all died in a regime airstrike.”
“Do you have identity documents?”
“They were lost in the bombing of the house.” (102-103)³⁴

In his matter-of-fact responses, Ramdani demonstrates that he also understands that “what matters to [the interviewer] is the horror” (Blasim 167). The problems he faced in Algeria are simply too complex and full of subtleties to serve as the “magic words,” or rather as a literal

34 - هل لديكم جوازات سفر؟
- ضاعت في البحر. [...]
- أين أهلك؟
- قُتلوا جميعاً بعد قصف لطيران النظام.
- هل تملك وثائق هوية؟
- ضاعت في البيت بعد القصف.

password — an “Open sesame!”— to impel the Greek gates of Europe to swing open. Thus, he endeavors to morph his story entirely, presenting a clear-cut narrative of destruction and tragedy. What are we to make of Ramdani’s unceremonious enumeration of horrific events that have not in fact befallen him, but *have* befallen countless others? Is not such an act to be considered morally reprehensible?

The answer to this question depends heavily on who is being lied to — in other words, who is the audience of Ramdani’s story, and what would be the consequences of this audience discovering the “truth”? Ramdani has already revealed to his book’s audience — who has no control over his ability to travel freely — his “real” motivations for leaving, which involve the multifaceted immobility of “stuckness” along with estrangement from his national identity. But in the case of his interactions with the asylum regime, Ramdani lies to prevent himself from harm in the form of detention and deportation. As Souter puts it, “While most of us accept the general permissibility of lying in extreme circumstances, many of us become rigid Kantians when considering the claims of asylum seekers, expecting the utmost sincerity when they knock on the door of our state.” What is more, casting moral judgement on those who give false testimony in their asylum interviews draws attention away from the more pressing question of why applicants are essentially compelled to lie in the first place. One may ask: then why are migrant lies at all a helpful topic of research and analysis? The answer is that attending to them in this way not only pushes back against dehumanizing notions of refugees as purely helpless, even naïve, victims, but it may also complicate scholars’ understandings of refugee narratives and even broader issues of literary narration, such as authorial intent and narrator reliability.³⁵

³⁵ The connections between applicants’ stretching of the truth in asylum interviews on the one hand and, on the other, the literary questions of authorial intent and narrator reliability are beyond the scope of this dissertation, but they could prove a fruitful topic for future inquiry.

That aside, what do Ramdani's lies reveal about the European asylum regime? In a way, his emotionless claims of having experienced the devastation of war *mirror* the moral coldness of the "asylum granting nations." The policies of these global powerhouses, with their histories of imperialism and continued economic exploitation and domination, are among the "main causes" of clandestine migration according to Ramdani (see above). However, when the manifestations of these policies cause large numbers of those harmed by them to seek refuge in the very countries that enact them, such grievances are not considered deserving of redress. Viewed this way, upon whom should moral judgement be placed? Ramdani's conspicuous omission of any substantial reflection upon the morality of his false testimony in his interaction with UNHCR and other officials reveals a presumed shared understanding with his readership of the ethics of clandestine migration from the Global South to the Global North. His readers do not need to be convinced of his motivation for attempting to fit neatly into the category of victim, even if it involves appropriating the tragedy of others. Again, this is not to say that Ramdani does not craft his narrative in other ways for his readers. However, in literary form his experiences need not be ironed out and oversimplified as mere tragedy. On the contrary, the more complexities and subtleties he can feature, the richer his text will become.

Uncategorizability: The performance of obscurity in ḥarrāgah literature

When it becomes clear that his claims of being Syrian are not convincing, Ramdani changes his approach from performing categorizability to performing uncategorizability. That is, he adopts the nationality of a people group without a significant presence in Greece so that his claims cannot be so easily dismissed: "Libyans are an unknown few here, and also, of course, their country suffers from war," Ramdani explains. "They aren't subjected to bothersome procedures

like us Algerians.” (248).³⁶ He hopes that claiming a North African nationality will be more believable than a Levantine one, and that presenting as Libyan will avail him of more compelling claims of victimhood than would other Maghrebi nationalities such as Moroccan, Tunisian, or Algerian. He has some success with this tactic: when he is caught as a stowaway on a cargo ship in Bari, Italy, after sneaking aboard in Patras, he tells the authorities that he is Libyan and is released immediately upon being sent back to Greece. Meanwhile, a fellow Algerian stowaway is kept in detention.

Although the specific manner in which Ramdani attempts to cloak himself in obscurity is entirely his own, he is far from alone in responding to the strictures of the border regime with an attempt at social camouflage. *Ḥarrāgah* literature³⁷ features numerous characters who feel their only recourse to the hostility of the border enforcers is to make themselves as invisible as possible, as if the incineration of their identity documents constituted an actual self-effacement. For example, in his novel *Welcome to Paradise*, Moroccan author Mahi Binebine (2012) has his *ḥarrāg* narrator give hypothetical advice to himself and other aspiring clandestine migrants about how to act when they arrive in Europe:

[L]earn how to become invisible, disappear into the crowd, hug the walls, avoid eye contact, speak only when spoken to, bury our pride and close our hearts to humiliation and insults, throw our flick-knives in the gutter, learn to keep in the background, to be a nobody: another shadow, a stray dog, a lowly earthworm, or even a cockroach. That’s it, yes, learn to be a cockroach. (66)

³⁶ الليبيون هنا قلة غير معروفة، ثم إن بلادهم تعاني من الحرب، لا يتعرضون لإجراءات مزعجة مثلنا نحن الجزائريين....

³⁷ On *ḥarrāgah* literature, see Alvarez. As he notes, *ḥarrāgah* literature has thus far mainly centered on stories of clandestine migration across the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco. Additionally, it has mostly consisted of “non-autobiographical novels by sympathetic middle-class writers” as opposed to memoirs written by those with personal experience of *ḥargah* (149). *Anthems of Salt* differs in both respects.

Of course, as this advice demonstrates, there is something dehumanizing about embracing obscurity. However, this passage from Binebine, in addition to Ramdani's explanation of his decision to present himself as Libyan, reveals that performing uncategorizability is an approach that many migrants take quite consciously. They seek to confound the state's recognition apparatus, which is built upon "expectations of how certain phenotypes, citizenships, signs of poverty, and intentions correlate" (Albahari 129). Ramdani's account of his experiences interacting with agents of the asylum regime confirms that individual migrants can and do make conscious choices about how to speak and act in the presence of power. However, it also reveals that the disadvantages of choosing categorizability or uncategorizability often dwarf their advantages, and in his case and many others', all roads to lead to exclusion.

The limits of migrant performativity

Ramdani's morphing presentation as Syrian and later Libyan throughout his time as a clandestine migrant might also be understood, in part, as a kind of self-crafting or autopoiesis, a responsive externalization of his deep-seated feelings of non-belonging and economic immobility in Algeria. But, as Judith Butler notes, subjects who craft themselves have already been crafted to a significant degree by their circumstances and surroundings (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 70). Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that while many *harrāgah* choose to embrace obscurity as a tactic, they do so with few other viable alternatives. And "slipp[ing] into the skin of a refugee," as Binebine's narrator so vividly describes it (66), is not without its risks, since it involves placing oneself at the mercy of the state. "In turning to the law, one runs the risk of becoming broken by the law," Butler writes (77). However, it may occasionally be possible "to function as subjects who can instrumentalize state power without becoming subjugated by it" (83). Some of Ramdani's companions do manage to succeed in gaming the system of categorization by acting

in a manner that is expected of them as Algerians, keeping in mind their reputation in Greece — among authorities, at least — as ruffians. These fellow travelers of Ramdani’s espouse the category imposed upon them by pretending to get into a drunken fight during their “voluntary deportation” flight back to Algeria, forcing an emergency plane landing that results in their arrest and eventual release in Italy (316).

Ramdani’s relationship with his “true” nationality, however, seems distinct from that of his trickster peers. He is particularly critical of Algerians who commit petty crime in Greece and makes an effort to distinguish himself from them in his narrative reflections. In this way, at the same time as he is leaving Algeria behind, part of him also seeks to leave his Algerian identity behind — or at least the parts of it about which he and others have negative perceptions. Meanwhile, however, he shows signs of a new fondness for parts of the Algerian identity: throughout the book, dialogue written in Algerian Arabic becomes increasingly frequent, to the extent that one reviewer has criticized it for being too opaque for most Arab readers (Abu Zaid 2020). This authorial decision by Ramdani suggests a kind of defiant insistence on presenting his conversations to his readers in all their Algerianness, in contrast to his domesticated and disguised self-presentation to Greek authorities.

That is, his self-presentation is domesticated until his Algerian nationality is finally discovered once and for all by his jailers near the end of the memoir — he is “broken by the law”; the fire with which he attempts to “burn” the state burns himself. In reaction to being exposed, Ramdani shows a side of himself that the reader has not yet witnessed. At a tipping point in his despair and frustration, Ramdani bursts forth with the very abrasiveness that is stereotypically ascribed to Algerians in Greece. When their fingerprints are scanned, his and his

companion's details appear on a computer screen. The scene of their confrontation with a guard is worth quoting at length:

“Why do you lie?”

Neither of us responded to him.

“Why didn't you tell me that you are Algerians?”

We ignored him with distinct Algerian obstinacy.

There was nothing that beardless novice could do about it.

[...] I felt a light kick on my right leg, which I hadn't expected from that smooth-faced effeminate. [...] He had caught me by surprise, away from the camera that was affixed to the top of the ceiling, so that it wouldn't spot him [...]. He wouldn't escape from us if he was thinking of flexing his soft muscles.

He backed away, and I kept looking at him with contempt, as an attempt at provoking him to come closer. But he was a coward, and didn't do it, and his assistant pushed me into the jail cell. What quasi-men! I could have persisted with him, but he took advantage of the opportunity of being with his assistants[...]. “You sons of.... You are cheaters without the slightest manliness. I just hope I am released soon, and I'll forget about [northern] Europe and devote my time to searching for you in the bars and markets and gardens of Patras. I'll piss on you with all enjoyment on behalf of every weak migrant you ever thought of assaulting.” (246-247, unbracketed ellipses in original)³⁸

Here, we witness a profound shift in Ramdani's character, which until now has exuded a measured gentleness that stood in opposition to the essentialized character of the Algerian migrant envisioned by state officials. Now, he dramatically exhibits traits he despises and for which he has all but cursed his fellow Algerian migrants. He is aggressive with the guard, hoping to fight him man-to-man. In his mind, he berates him with misogynistic, homophobic epithets and threatens to find him and urinate on him as an act of revenge for the indignities, coded here

38 - لماذا تكذب؟

لم يرد عليه أحد.

- لم تخبراني بأنكما جزائريان؟

تجاهلناه بعناد جزائري واضح. لم يكن ليفعل شيئاً ذلك الغر الأمرد [...]. شعرت برفسة خفيفة على قدمي اليمنى، لم أتوقعها من ذلك الأمرد المخنث [...]. باغتني بعيداً عن الكاميرا المثبتة أعلى السقف حتى لا ترصده. [...] لن ينجو منا، إن فكر في استعراض عضلاته الناعمة.

عاد إلى الوراء، وبقيت أنظر إليه باحتقار، كمحاولة استفزاز حتى يدنو أكثر، لكنه كان جباناً، لم يفعل، ودفعني معاونه إلى الزنزانة. يا لهم من أشباه رجال! كان يمكنني أن أتمادي معه، أغتنم فرصة تواجده مع معاونيه [...]. "يا أبناء الـ... تخدعون بلا أدنى رجولة، أتمنى فقط أن يفرج عني قريباً، وأنسى أوروبا، وأخصص وقتي، لأفتش عنكم في ملاهي وأسواق وحدائق باتراس، وأتبول عليكم بكل متعة نيابة عن كل مهاجر ضعيف، فكرتم في الاعتداء عليه."

as potentially sexual, to which he and his fellow guards have even considered subjecting other migrants. While urination-as-punishment is Ramdani's imagined threat of humiliating and taking revenge on one of his jailers, and perhaps even a fantasy of deriving sexual pleasure at his expense, it can also be understood as a psychic manifestation of profoundly internalized dehumanization, a vision of a desperate attempt at marking as his own territory that will never be formally ceded to him. All his legal avenues for gaining access to territory in Greece and the EU have now dissipated, and thus reduced to less-than-human status, Ramdani must resort to the rules of the animal kingdom for obtaining and retaining territory — aggression and marking with one's scent.

Ironically, Ramdani's aggressive demeanor might be seen by the prison guards as *proof* that their fidelity to the rules, regulations, and procedures associated with imprisoning undocumented migrants has paid off. In their mind, they have successfully prevented a brute from becoming incorporated into European society. For readers, however, Ramdani's momentary frenzy shows the extent to which the EU border regime itself *produces* human manifestations of the very archetypes it projects onto its unwanted guests. But as I have indicated above, the interplay between the morphing of the border and the shapeshifting of unauthorized migrants produces something else as well: novel conceptual and cultural links whose reverberations have not yet been fully felt. It also provides new venues for putting complex subjectivity on display: the part of Ramdani that is jerked to the surface against his will in the above scene *is* indeed a part of him, but far from the only or most significant part, as his jailers may assume. This is to say that the author-ization of unauthorized migrants gives them a chance to reveal their imperfections in a contextualized manner that asylum interviews preclude. In these author-ized migrant narratives, it becomes clear that one version of the story, or the self, is not

entirely exclusive of another. As Blasim’s narrator puts it, “it’s [not] easy to tell the two stories apart [*at-tamyīz bi-suhūla bayna hudūd al-ḥikāyatayn*, lit. to distinguish between the borders/limits of the two stories (page 11 in the Arabic original)]. They merge and it becomes impossible to distinguish between them” (157).

CONCLUSION: Alternative Cartography and Migrant Morphology

“What the map cuts up, the story cuts across,” De Certeau writes (129). Some of the most prevalent products of the encounter between unauthorized migrants and the border regime are narratives. These cross-territorial stories allow subjects to present themselves against a range of backdrops — in and apart from their homelands, and throughout all the gradient in-betweens. And as firsthand migrant accounts gain a larger audience and increased academic attention, they present readers with opportunities to reconceptualize their cartographic imaginations of inter-territorial and -societal divides. An alternative cartography of the 21st-century North-South border would both register the realities of its aggressive amorphousness and challenge widespread assumptions whose tacit acceptance has heretofore reinforced the nation-state’s normalized acts of exclusionary violence. As I conceptualize it, alternative cartography can take various forms, including some that are more explicitly aesthetic and poetic than they are cartographic. What is important is that they present depictions of spaces and cross-space activities that challenge official spatial designations.

Though she does not label them as such, two examples of these counter-maps are discussed in Amade M’charek’s article “*Harraga: Burning Borders, Navigating Colonialism.*” First, M’charek describes a rock in a southern Tunisian coastal town that is spray-painted with the words “Europe this way” (*‘urūbā min hunā*), with a hastily sprayed crown atop the word “Europe” and an arrow pointing out to sea. This graffito wryly suggests to its viewers that

crossing to “royal” Europe is a simple matter — no visa, plane tickets, or bureaucratic hoops required (420). Second, M’charek details a work by Tunisian artist Mohsen Lihidheb. Lihidheb uses shoes, lifejackets, and other items that he found washed up on the beach and arranges them in a circle around a lightbulb mounted on a buoy. A wooden sign in front of the artwork reads “BASTA HARRAGA.” In M’charek’s reading, the found objects represent the migrants who have died en route to Europe, which in turn is represented by the lightbulb. Europe is thus recast as a mere shiny object, not unlike a fishing lure, that pulls migrants down to their watery graves. Thus the “map” of the sea is redrawn as a cemetery, and the “map” of Europe is redrawn as an alluring, false enlightenment that, in reality, delivers only death. What is more, this act of alternative cartography renders present something official maps ignore. Using perhaps the very lifejackets that failed their wearers during attempted crossings, Lihidheb takes account of the lives that the sea and the border regime have swallowed up.

Meanwhile, in its narrations of movement *in* and *of* the borderscape, *Anthems of Salt* provides a vivid depiction of restless spaces, which in turn reveal the types of linkages I allude to above. Perera writes that in the borderscape, “allegiances and loyalties are remade, identities consolidated and challenged” (206). These ongoing processes of reconfiguration — these alternative cartographies — are buried like treasure in narratives of clandestine migration, and, I argue, they can sometimes be revealed by their very diction. Ramdani’s memoir, along with other works like it, can be read as a kind of text map or itinerary that depicts features of the North-South borderscape that are concealed in official maps.³⁹ If readers approach clandestine border-crossing narratives much as they would medieval itineraries, they may be “able to reconfigure the spaces ..., alter the routes, and refashion the meanings to be derived from them”

³⁹ On itineraries, see De Certeau (120-21).

(Connolly 599-600). Ramdani’s “itinerary,” albeit told in the first person rather than the second, is revelatory not only in its description of physical paths that circumvent border obstacles, but also in the very words by which he “draws” his map. Both lexical novelties (such as *ḥarrāgah*) and multivalent usages (including of the titular Arabic word *milḥ*, discussed below) help to reproduce cultural and conceptual connections that borders have long interrupted. I conclude this chapter with an exploration of some of these connections and potential links, which my reading of *Anthem of Salt* brings to the fore.

Let us begin with *ḥargah*. This term has risen to prominence in Maghrebi Arabic in the context of unauthorized migration and reflects the *lack* of agency that leaves migrants with little choice but to travel clandestinely, but also the agency by which they undertake the decisive yet self-effacing act of seeking a new life and identity abroad. Ridding themselves of their papers, *ḥarrāgah* both fully commit to building a life in a new place, free from past identity-related constraints, and accept the consequences — practical and metaphorical, physical and psychological — of this new undocumented state. To elaborate on this point, I quote from the scene of the destruction of Ramadani’s passport:

My clothes had gotten wet after I had jumped into the sea. The water had soaked my passport, and the salt had penetrated it. It had become like a featureless, tattered rag. It was missing some of its pages. To avoid any suspicion that might befall me with the Greek security forces when I told them I was Syrian, I tore what remained of the passport to pieces and threw it into the sea, so it [the sea] could celebrate my freedom from the illusion of my paper belonging to my pitiful homeland. [...]

After being freed from the document that tied me to the homeland, I took a deep breath, and gazed at the surface of the island. (94)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ تبللت ثيابي بعد القفز في البحر، جواز السفر غمرته المياه، واخترقه الملح، أصبح مثل الخرقة المثقوبة بلا ملامح، واختفت بعض صفحاته. تفاديا لأي شبهة، قد تصادفني مع الأمن اليوناني عندما أخبرهم بأنني سوري، مزقت ما تبقى من الجواز، ورميته في البحر، ليحتفل بتحرري من وهم الانتماء الورقي لوطني المسكين. [...] بعد تحرري من الوثيقة التي تربطني بالوطن، أخذت نفسا عميقا، وتأملت سطح الجزيرة.

Ramdani does not literally burn his passport; the sea defaces it with its salt water. He does, however, finish the job of destroying the passport, and in doing so carries out the quintessential act of *ḥargah*. He completes the erasure of his official selfhood while simultaneously demonstrating his *own* ability to instrumentalize the sea's non-human agency. Official "self"-destruction becomes a grave entry point by which new possibilities might be imagined or experienced: *ḥargah* (حَرْغَة), "burning," becomes *ḥarakah* (حَرَكَة), "movement" — a word that can mean both physical motion and political action.⁴¹ Likewise, for M'charek, even though *ḥargah* "literally means *burning*, it is about *crafting connections*. It is about the possibility of doing something" (424, emphasis in original). *Contra* "stuckness," *ḥargah* burns destructive iterations of the impossible and explodes reductive demarcations of both spaces and individuals, scarcely leaving them unscathed.

In addition to this monolingual neologism, I would like to draw attention to the cross-lingual relationships between several concepts central to Ramdani's work — particularly navigation, maps, the sea, identification, and narration. These relationships expose connections that have yet to be fully severed by modern borderlines. For example, the Arabic word for map is *kharīṭa*, which is phono-semantically related to the Ancient Greek *chartēs* (paper, papyrus) (Frayha 1947, 43). This lexical relationship reminds us of the linguistic ties between the concepts of "paper" and "maps" that we see in the English word "cartography." In modern Greek, *chartiá* ("papers") can be used to mean "identity documents." In *Anthems of Salt*, Ramdani uses a non-standard Arabic word, *khartiyyah*, to mean "identity document" (122, 279), borrowing from

⁴¹ In a personal correspondence, Ramdani told me that the publisher chose to render the word *ḥarrāg* in the title as حَرَاغ (rather than حَرَاق) to highlight this very wordplay, creating resonance with حَرَاك (*ḥirāk*), meaning movement or unrest. *Hirāk* is commonly used to refer the 2019-2021 protest movement in Algeria, along with other recent popular uprisings in the Arab world.

chartiá but also pulling from the same Arabic root (ط ر خ — *khā' rā' ṭā'*) as the word for map. Here we witness the connection between mapping (of geographic territory) and identification (of human beings). On top of this, the Arabic verb *kharāṭa* can be used idiomatically to mean “to lie,” “to brag,” or “to tell tall tales.” A *kharrāṭ* is a craftsman, literally one who works with a lathe, but also a bluffer or storyteller (Wehr 272). This corresponds to the aforementioned links between migrant identification and recognition, on the one hand, and routes through borderscapes on the other: migrants must perform their identities and tell their stories in certain crafted/crafty ways in order to access spaces and resources within the borderscape.

Next, consider the word “navigation.” Even in English, the nav- prefix displays its “naval” origins, related as it is to the Ancient Greek “*naūs*” (ship). The same sea–navigation connections are found in Arabic. Two words for navigation are *'ibḥar* (which shares a root with “*baḥr*,” “sea”) and “*milāḥa*,” which shares a root with *mallāḥ*, “seaman,” (“so called because constantly on the saltwater” (Lane 1863, 2733)) and thus also with *milḥ*, “salt.” Paralleling the English “navigation,” the Arabic *milāḥa* does not have to take place on the water. But Ramdani’s tale, along with those of most of his fellow migrants in Greece, *is* intimately tied to the sea, which serves as both an adversary to overcome — a potential dark and salty grave — but also a soothing, calming, enriching presence. This paradox is borne out in Ramdani’s eventual nostalgia for Samos and its seaside sights, sounds, and smells.

Serendipitously, M’charek’s article also connects salt to *ḥarrāgah* in too striking a way not to mention here. Colonial history and current free trade policies allow salt exports to be streamlined, moving from Tunisian mines to European soil at low cost and with few bureaucratic hurdles. Tunisians themselves have a much harder time crossing. Bodies of *ḥarrāgah* wash up on the shore in the town of Zarzis, and the unidentified among them are buried in a nearby hill that

was once a landfill. “And if you climb the hill right next to this cemetery-cum-landfill, you see the white salt heaps shining brightly and towering in the flat landscape” (423-424). M’charek later argues that resource extraction, brain drain, and *ḥargah* are all part of the same colonial legacy and current “sociopolitical reality” (429).

At the end of Ramdani’s memoir, salt takes on another, final valence: a sense similar to “the salt of the earth” — the people that make a place worthwhile to inhabit. Salt not only brings out the flavor in food, but also has the historical characteristic of once being highly valued, a currency in its own right (to which the English word *salary* alludes). When Ramdani recounts saying goodbye to his Algerian friends as they depart for their “voluntary” deportation, he writes:

*I will miss you, O adventurers.
Farewell, O companions.
Farewell, O salt of Algeria. (315, italics in original)⁴²*

The fact that he refers to his friends as “salt” is fascinating, because until now, the reader has understood the “salt” in the work’s title to be referring to the salt water of the Aegean Sea, the same salt that eats away at Ramdani’s passport. But this new, more positive connotation of salt adds another layer of meaning. The *milḥ* of *’Anāshīd al-Milḥ* may now take their rightful places as the singers of the *’anāshīd* (anthems),⁴³ the purveyors of their own narratives, whether they take the form of asylum interviews, memoirs, novels, or songs.

The “migration morphology” and pure wordplay that I am indulging in here demonstrate the potential for a generative counterpart to the violent, exclusionary border morphing I have detailed in this article. New words like *khartīyyah*, emerging from the borderscape, unearth

⁴² سأشتاقكم، أيها المغامرون / وداعاً، أيها الرفاق / وداعاً يا ملح الجزائر...

⁴³ In this way, *’Anāshīd al-Milḥ* might also be translated as “Anthems of the Salt,” i.e., the “salt of the earth” who have now left their homelands. The definite article *al-* in Arabic leaves room for this kind of translation ambiguity.

forgotten links between the Arab and European worlds, connections that once made possible the development and preservation of philosophies and technologies. The astrolabe, a device birthed in Hellenic society, was enhanced significantly by Muslim scientists, and could be used to orient oneself in time and space. It could also play a role in a different kind of narration — the divination performed by astrologers. Later iterations of the astrolabe helped bring about major advances in navigation, like the ability to measure a ship's latitude at sea. Here we witness once again the underlying linkage between narration and navigation. As more narratives of clandestine migration are published and studied, what new routes through borderscapes will they reveal? What challenges to neoliberal and -imperial domination will they present? And what new conceptual or political developments might be made possible?

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~Interlude~

The following is a poem written by Adnan Hassan, a resident of Ritsona Refugee Camp north of Athens. The poem was printed⁴⁴ in bilingual form in the Ritsona Kingdom Journal, an informal magazine published by an NGO in the camp. I have decided not to give Hassan a pseudonym, since this poem is publicly available online and includes its author's name. I have received permission to reprint the poem in its entirety here.

*

Stateless

I don't own an ID, or a passport,
I'm anonymous, staring at the sky,
giving speeches to the moon,
I search for my self...
I have lost it...

When the lookout cried out,
they hid, for the Patrol had come.

I am from Iraq and Syria and Egypt...
I am from Lebanon and Palestine and Kurdistan,
I reclined on a rock in the forest,
I protected myself from the rainfall under an olive tree,
I waited for a boat to take me,
I waited for a wave to carry me,
To a country without peril.

I am anonymous, searching for a sanctuary,
For a title, for a name,
For a picture chosen from thousands of pictures.
I'm a refugee, like thousands of humans.

⁴⁴<https://narratio.org/rkj-issue-9//5/stateless>

بلا جنسية

أنا لا أملك هويتي.. ولا أملك جواز سفر
أنا مجهول يراقب السماء ويحدث القمر
أبحث عن نفسي.. لقد أضعتها

عندما نادى المنادي..
اختبأوا لقد جاء الخفر

أنا من العراق وسوريا ومن مصر
أنا من لبنان وفلسطين وكردستان..
أنا اتكأت على صخرة في الغابة
واحتميت تحت شجرة زيتون من هطول المطر
انتظرت مركباً يأخذني..
انتظرت موجاً يحملني..
إلى بلاد ليس فيها خطر..

أنا مجهول يبحث عن مأوى..
عن عنوان.. عن اسم.. عن صورة يختارها
من بين آلاف الصور
أنا لاجئ.. مثل آلاف البشر

CHAPTER TWO

Affective Temporalities and Alternatives to Triumphalism in Novels of Unauthorized Migration

A life of exile moves according to a different calendar.

—Edward Said

“Reflections on Exile”

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation centers on the contention that unauthorized migrants are subject to profound temporospatial disruption. In my previous chapter, I focused on the physical borderscapes that morph to selectively ease or impede entry for those attempting to cross. In this chapter, I turn to the temporal side of this disruption.

From the moment they leave home, unauthorized migrants not only break from their daily routines but cede control over their own time. Traveling in groups, they must follow the will of the collective. Crossing borders illegally, they are at the whims of smugglers whose schedules are dependent on erratic factors. While smugglers wait for the opportune moment to ship their human cargo across to the EU, migrants taking the Aegean route wait, clustered together in dingy hotels in Izmir, Turkey. Later, when the migrants are closer to the moment of departure, their smugglers stage them in the forest for days or weeks with little food and shelter. After relentless radio silence, a smuggler finally calls and instructs the migrants to be ready to leave in an hour. This trying process will most likely be repeated at least once; it usually takes several attempts to cross successfully.

Migrants' lack of control over their own time continues with a new intensity when they submit themselves to the asylum system. Here, the external domination of their temporal experiences becomes more structured and official, while continuing to be characterized by arbitrariness and opacity. State power renders time not merely an object to be controlled (i.e., managed, spent, used) but a tool *by which* to control migrants (Tazzioli 14). While the initial moment of arrival on EU soil can be a time of exuberant celebration — the imagined finish line has been crossed — this tends to be followed immediately by the temporal sensation of limbo. This is not a mere waiting period, but a stretch of time without a clear end whose end is nonetheless painfully anticipated. In this period of limbo, many of the administrative and bureaucratic tasks expected of asylum applicants are unclear, inconsistent, contradictory, or even impossible. Deadlines may be imposed and pass without an applicant's knowledge. Policies may change when a new politician gets elected, rendering previous tasks in the asylum-seeking process worthless. Certain groups of people may be prioritized and expedited while others are pushed to the back of the line.

Affective temporalities

Border regimes and asylum procedures disrupt migrants' physical journeys, but they also frustrate and interrupt the rhythms that migrants may attempt to establish while waiting, siphoning unwitting psyches into a temporal space that is sequestered from that of the rest of society. Here, migrants can watch citizens' lives continue all around them: their routines to maintain health and wealth, their longer-term trajectories toward personal accomplishments. Due to regular disruptions to their daily lives by state and other actors, along with the bureaucratic delays of the asylum process, applicants are denied both habitual and momentum-fueled orientations toward time, instead stuck in a stretched sense of "not yet" (Drangslund) in which

they are under constant threat of being boomeranged back to their pasts. Precarity abounds in this limbo. Pasts and possible futures dance around migrants' consciousnesses. Should they not have come here? Would they have been better off enduring the hardship back home, or traveling somewhere else instead of here? Where will they ultimately end up? Do better opportunities await them? Will their family members who stayed at home be reunited with them someday? Will their children or their children's children be subjected to a life like this?

These affective temporalities — i.e., psychological and emotive orientations toward time, many of which come as natural responses to the stressors presented by the asylum regime — run contrary to chronological time. In the asylum application process, which can take years, “the present becomes the immobile norm while the mobilities of future–past drift afar as remote dreams” (Kallio et al. 4006-7). Asylum policies bind migrants to the present, and they are left to grasp at *hypothetical* futures that remain elusive for most. Despite the bleakness of their prospects, asylum seekers still feel compelled to pursue such futures, whether with attitudes of naïve optimism, reckless hope, or fanciful escapism. Meanwhile, the past also comes into play, sometimes in the form of traumatic memories, sometimes in the form of continued relationships with left-behind friends and family members who still live at the place from which the migrants departed. Maintaining communication with these people allows them to imagine alternative presents in which they had chosen to stay home. Despite their links to the past, asylum seekers have been dramatically cut off from their “iterational past,” i.e., a sense of continuity that arises when activities and actions that have been done habitually in the past continue into the present day. The truncation of being cut off from one's iterational past, especially within the context of refugeehood, can have profound psychological effects:

Without a stable iterational past[,] life is an ongoing personal crisis, or put another way, life is all about the uncertainties of a daunting future. Moreover, if the future appears as

set into unbearable scenarios only, there is nothing positive to orient towards, no reason to strive away from the present, nor the possibility to magically return to the past. Such disillusionment is not uncommon among asylum seekers who have lost hope for ever getting a refugee status or citizenship, for ever being reunited with their family, for ever getting a home and a job, or even medical help. (Kallio et al. 4010)

Refugees thus find themselves in a new temporal environment in which they feel they must combat the dreariness of the present moment by finding ways to connect with — or at least come to terms with — their amputated pasts and uncertain futures. Unrestrained longing for pasts or futures can engender acute distress, while resignation to the precarious present can bring about listlessness and depression. What internal temporalities can asylum seekers establish in this limbo?

In the breadth of recent scholarship about migrant temporality, academics have demonstrated some of the ways asylum seekers resist (actively or passively) the affective temporalities imposed by the asylum regime. Isabel Meier and Giorgia Donà write that “the temporal performance of borders is ... constantly contested, de-ordered and re-claimed through disruptions of those struggling within and against the asylum regime” (43). Kirsi Kallio et al. discuss alternative, nonlinear orientations that migrants take toward temporality. They identify one such orientation as “destituent passivity” (4015). In this orientation, asylum seekers consciously disengage from the Sisyphean asylum process and the political struggle to oppose the unjust regime, choosing instead to focus on optimizing the present moment by making themselves as comfortable as possible with the limited resources they have. Though this appeared to some activists and peers as laziness, Kallio et al. describe it as a form of political agency. They call a second orientation “radical hope,” a nonlinear approach to the future in which migrants embrace uncertainty as possibility, and shift their attention to the smallest

potentially positive moments in their present, rather than yearning for an unlikely future windfall (4008).

But even if asylum seekers find ways to be resilient to the affective temporalities of precarious waiting, they are not freed from the pressure to present their narratives to authorities in a linear and progress-oriented manner, beginning with the traumatic past and looking forward to a prosperous and productive future. These types of narratives reinforce nationalist and capitalist myths, and when they are told effectively by asylum-seeker narrators, said narrators perform their potential for future belonging within (an idealized vision of) European society. Timothy August writes: “refugees are conditioned to internalize their ‘real’ stories and tell comfortable or comforting ones in their place, as extensively detailing their experiences and expressing the variety of feelings that they may have about refugee life can compromise their ability to discreetly live in new lands” (15). I would add that refugees might also reproduce myths of progress because they themselves have truly bought into them. Indeed, as I show in the previous chapter, the self-perpetuating characterization of the Global North as advanced, prosperous, and good — a kind of promised land whose deserving residents absorb its wonderful qualities — as contrasted with a backward, poor, corrupt Global South, are very enticing to would-be migrants. The lucky few who fit the bill of “worthy refugee” — and even the many who see themselves this way and aspire to be recognized as such but still struggle to navigate the asylum system — are just as susceptible to these myths as citizens are. If asylum seekers are structurally discouraged from telling stories that disrupt nationalist and capitalist temporalities, and if the stories they do tell tend to bolster institutions and regimes that in turn contribute to the *creation* of refugees, how can we as scholars expose ourselves a wider range of migrants’ lived experiences, including those which, when expressed in narrative, are more disruptive of

established systems? One way, as the above-cited scholarship demonstrates, is through ethnographic research that involves building trust with interlocutors over time, and giving them genuine opportunities to express themselves — often anonymously. But another avenue where migrants’ complex temporal experiences are showcased — one that has thus far been given much less attention in the field of refugee and migration studies — is literature.

A clash of chronotopes

In this chapter, I take a new approach to the study of 21st-century unauthorized migration by wedding ethnographic scholarship on migrant temporalities, like that cited above, with the study of time in literature, especially as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin writes that chronotopes (the unique relationships between time and space that shape immediate human perceptions of the world) are best presented in literature through the form of the novel (84). While scholars have thoroughly analyzed issues of temporality in the context of irregular migration from the perspective of anthropology, political science, and philosophy, they have not tended to consider these issues from a literary perspective.

If we as scholars want to understand the affective temporalities that so many migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and exiles experience, we will do well to take a close look at literature written by them and their sympathetic colinguals. Migrants’ psychospiritual experiences of the time-spaces in which they find themselves — experiences that can be revealed aesthetically in literature in ways that are unlikely to appear in an ethnographic interview — demonstrate a specific mechanism of the exclusivist injustice migrants face. Authors who possess the creative and writerly skill to make these aesthetic revelations might not have direct experience with present-day unauthorized migration, but deep research on and empathy with their subject matter allows them to imagine versions of migrants’ affective temporalities and to illustrate them in

their literary works. Such works are a venue in which migration narratives that are less idealized than those that asylum seekers themselves often feel able to tell (at least while they are still undergoing the application process) can be put on display. Fully fleshed out narratives that express the psychological complexity of the affective temporalities that are imposed upon and in turn cultivated by unauthorized migrants can also, I argue, present resistant alternatives to the dominant chronotope of the nation-state and neoliberal globalization: namely, triumphalism. Informed by Walter Benjamin, I define triumphalism as an obsession with a narrowly defined *progress* that is characterized by enforced oblivion of people who are not considered to have contributed to it and active violence towards any who would dare get in its way (Benjamin 256).

In this chapter, I examine the unique temporal modes of two novels that center on contemporary issues of refugeehood. Each of these works uses unconventional narrative techniques that come to the fore of the readerly experience, sometimes taking precedence over content. These novels do not depict the asylum process specifically in any detail, but many of their migrant characters suffer from and respond to forms of temporal disruption that mimic those imposed by asylum regimes. These seemingly otherworldly time-spaces overflow beyond the logistical details of unauthorized migration into the breadth of the characters' everyday lives. The reader experiences the disruption of their temporal worlds in a visceral manner through the novels' unusual modes of narration.

In *Mashāniq al-‘Atmah* (*Gallows of Darkness*, published in 2021), Yousri Alghoul⁴⁵ writes in the voice of multiple narrators who are fellow irregular travelers on a dinghy crossing the Aegean Sea by night. One after another, characters from Syria and Palestine bring the reader back and forth through time in a seemingly random manner, revealing their backstories and

⁴⁵ This is the author's preferred spelling of his name in Roman script. A transliteration of the Arabic pronunciation of his name is Yusrī al-Ghūl.

hidden connections. In the beginning of each of the chapters, which are titled only by the name of their narrator, readers must take a moment to ascertain *when* they are. The no-place and no-when of the sea pull readers away from their grounding in linear time, orienting them instead towards a kind of mythological temporality characterized by quasi-repetition and arbitrariness. While Alghoul has not undertaken 21st-century clandestine migration the way the last chapter's central author, Larbi Ramdani, did, Alghoul does have a different kind of refugee experience, having grown up in the Palestinian refugee camp of al-Shāṭi', in the Gaza Strip, where he still lives today. I read *Gallows of Darkness* as Alghoul's attempt to bring the multigenerational Palestinian refugee experience into dialogue with the Syrian refugee crisis.

In Hoda Barakat's *Barīd al-Layl* (*Night Mail*, published in 2017, translated into English as *Voices of the Lost* in 2020), the first five chapters take the form of letters that never arrive at their intended destination. Instead, each letter is discovered by the next migrant narrator, who is in turn inspired to compose a letter of his or her own. The reader is thus struck by a disorienting, liminal sensation of always having departed but never arriving. The affective temporality that Barakat illustrates, which imitates the painful experience of unauthorized migrants awaiting either deportation or serious harm due to dire living conditions, is one of impending apocalypse. Barakat does not identify as a refugee or exile, but she chooses to reside in France rather than in her native Lebanon. She says that living in France allows her to write about Lebanon and the Arab world in a different way than she could if she had stayed (Guido).

In my analysis of these two novels, I contribute to a body of scholarship that shows the ways migrant temporalities are strategically stretched and squeezed by state and international actors as a way of making asylum and immigration procedures more challenging and exclusive, and thus discouraging future migration. As Ruben Andersson puts it, while stopping irregular

migration entirely is seen as impracticable, states manipulate and expropriate migrants' time in order to slow the flow of migration (800). Meier and Donà argue that authorities impose temporal experiences on asylum seekers to elicit affective responses that “slowly wear them out” (50), or, as Omid Tofighian and Behrouz Boochani put it, to cause them psychological pain that is tantamount to torture.

While the studies cited above detail the mechanisms by which and the reasons for which authorities weaponize time against migrants, this chapter delves into the narrative and perspectival worlds of the literary text to explore aesthetic representations of the affective temporal responses that migrants experience within asylum and border regimes. With Bakhtin, I recognize that the novel can provide strikingly immersive simulations of the human experience of time as it relates to memory, sensory perception, and longing. With their dramatic representations of alternative temporalities, these two novels present narratives counter to “comforting” refugee tales that reinforce the triumphalist supremacy and supposed moral superiority of the neoliberal Global North.

GALLOWS OF DARKNESS

Gallows of Darkness follows the journeys and backstories of five characters from Gaza and Syria when their lives intersect during a clandestine crossing from Turkey to Greece via the Aegean Sea. Since the narration takes place before any of the characters arrive in Europe, they have not yet become subject to the bureaucratic temporal regime of the asylum system; however, the affective temporalities that they experience as a result of the challenges of their clandestine journeys can still be understood as being partially state-imposed, given the lack of more humane and orderly options for most refugees to travel to European host countries. And indeed, from the very first pages of the novel, temporal disorientation plays a primary role.

Temporal mode: 'The whirlpool of the wastes'

The book begins with a brief note from the author: “There is no significance whatsoever to chronological order within this novel. Events resemble one another or repeat themselves in one way or another, and thus there is no room to interrogate the characters of the novel for more; they don’t like empty chatter”⁴⁶ (7).⁴⁷ In the context of what I have just laid out as the focus of this chapter, Alghoul’s disclaimer raises an important question: if there is no significance to the order of the events, does this mean that time and temporality themselves are not important to consider when reading it? Though this might be the initial conclusion that the reader comes to upon encountering the disclaimer, it is most certainly not the case. Instead, this single-sentence introduction functions to alert readers that this novel will be different, in terms of time, from those to which they are accustomed. In this novel, the important thing is not for readers to undertake the process of reconstructing the fabula from the syuzhet. The novel takes its readers on a more complex and multilayered temporal journey marked by connections to historical and mythical figures and windows into uchronian time-spaces of pre- and post-life.

The chapters of *Gallows of Darkness* are narrated by five different individuals, in a cycle wherein no two chapters in a row are narrated by the same character. The book begins and ends in the voice of Hājar, a Palestinian woman from Gaza, whom, for reasons that will become clear, I see as the main character. The novel opens on a group of clandestine migrants, accompanied by a smuggler, squeezing aboard a dinghy near the Turkish port city of Izmir. Hajar holds her baby, and Sarāb, a woman from Aleppo, holds hers. Soon, Sarab begins telling Hajar about the events

⁴⁶ All translations from *Gallows of Darkness* are mine.

⁴⁷ ليس هناك من أهمية للترتيب الزمني داخل هذه الرواية، فالأحداث تتشابه أو تتكرر بصورة أو أخرى، كذلك لا مجال لاستنتاج شخص الرواية بالمزيد؛ فهم لا يحبون الترتيب.

that brought her here. In the subsequent chapters, each character narrates his or her backstory and the specific events that have led up to them taking this perilous and distressing clandestine sea journey (with the exception of one of the narrators, who dies before the other characters migrate, and narrates up to the point of his untimely death). Though there are only a few instances in which characters are shown to be literally telling each other their stories on board the boat, the boat is nonetheless presented as the occasion for these stories to be told. The book is narrated by characters *as if* to one another during a tumultuous clandestine sea crossing, with narrators revealing the darkest parts of their pasts as a means of preserving these personal histories for posterity, in case they fall overboard and drown. As it happens, all of them but Hajar do end up drowning or otherwise dying over the course of the novel.

Gallows of Darkness evinces a particular chronotope — one of in-betweenness in which the past is so full of violence and despair that characters choose an uncertain and most likely violent future over an *untenably* violent past. What are we to make of the hyper-reflectiveness of the characters' narration, in which they delve deeply into certain moments in their pasts? Is it a case of life flashing before one's eyes amid a near-death experience? Present surroundings are barely seen or discussed. As Turkey's coastline fades into the distance, the present moment also becomes obscured. "[W]e swim in the whirlpool of the wastes" (*nasbah fī dawwāmat at-tīh*), Hajar says in the novel's opening line (9). Interestingly, the word *tīh* is usually used to refer to a desert, wilderness, or labyrinth, and not to bodies of water. It even conjures up images of the Exodus (centering on the story of the Israelites' fabled wandering in the wilderness of Sinai), which is sometimes referred to in Arabic as *at-tīh*. The reader is thus presented with an oxymoronic image of swimming in a whirlpool in the desert. The sea loses any of its potentially refreshing qualities. With all objects in the distance fading into formlessness, there is almost no

“present” onto which to grasp. It is as if the *now* gets sucked down into the Aegean Sea, and all that remains are memories of the past. Interestingly, characters’ intense hopes for the future mostly do not come from the present moment, but from the past.

Names and temporal referentiality

The novel’s play with its characters’ names adds another layer to its already complex temporal mode. Readers’ associations with figures of the past color their views of specific characters who share a name with these figures. Temporally speaking, these historical or mythical characters are brought into the novel’s narration, which is *already* occurring, for the most part, as a flashback. The effect is such that the fully fleshed out flashbacks feature overtones of even more distant pasts. This is again *anti*-chronological. Instead of the events taking place in a sequence from beginning to end, events all seem to be remembered at around the same time by the characters amidst their crossing. Within these remembering, the events are undergirded with further significance from past events and individuals that are connected to the novel’s plot and characters by their names.

Here I introduce the characters of *Gallows of Darkness*:

- Yūnis is a young, emotionally distraught Palestinian man living between Gaza and Saudi Arabia; he is driven out of the former by corruption, blockade, military violence, and political strife, and driven out of the latter by the kafala (patronage) system and anti-Palestinian policies.
- Sarab is a university librarian from Aleppo whose father was forcibly disappeared and killed after he was openly critical of the 1982 Hama massacre carried out by the Hafez al-Assad regime; thus, Sarab is naturally supportive of the calls for an end to the Assad era in 2011. However, her new romantic relationship with a mysterious young man who

works with the Syrian police increasingly becomes one of violent control, and she is compelled to keep her views to herself and even to begin informing on her colleagues.

- Hajar is an outspokenly anti-Hamas university student in Gaza who ironically comes to marry a high-profile Hamas member who has been released by Israel in a prisoner exchange. Sagacious and strong willed, Hajar is anything but a meek militant's wife; when a string of unimaginable injustices strikes, she refuses to simply accept them as her fate, but instead breaks with societal norms and, dramatically and assertively, starts her life anew.
- Ḥudhayfah is the unlikely husband of Hajar mentioned above. In the chapter titles he is called Ibn Rushd (after the philosopher whose name is often Latinized as "Averroës"), which is a nickname he received in prison for his heavy reading habit. His personal mission upon release is to work to unify the Palestinian political scene, but his tolerant approach (he has a prophet-like, almost otherworldly air of humble wisdom) puts him seriously at odds with his fellow party members.
- Finally, we have another character with a nickname, Yazīd, who is introduced to us as "Hitler." He is a *mukhābarāt* (secret police) agent for the Syrian regime whose relentlessly torturous interrogations of suspected dissidents, political adversaries, and objects of his sexual desire earn him his on-the-nose sobriquet.

Nicknames, code names, and names in general emerge as a motif in the novel. The fact that "Ibn Rushd" and "Hitler," are the only two characters referred to by nicknames in the titles of the chapters they narrate establishes them as dramatically contrasting foils. Both characters are introduced to the reader as working with their respective security services, but one presents as almost angelic while the other proves to be pure evil. Both characters take on their nicknames at

a turning point in their lives — Hudhayfah when he is in prison and chooses to depart from the ways of his fellow Hamas prisoners, who have a stringent ideology and strict rules, and Yazid when he develops an insatiable appetite for the complete domination he exerts over his prisoners.

Sarab, whose name means “mirage,” takes on an alias, Hind, while she is in hiding inside Syria, after her life is threatened by her maniacal husband who is revealed to be none other than “Hitler.” After airstrikes destroy the home Sarab is living in, along with many other homes in the village where she is hiding out, she decides to leave the country. In Turkey, she spots her husband, who has now become a people-smuggler, from a distance. Yazid has now taken on the name Mālik. (In Islamic tradition, Malik is the name of the chief angel guardian of Hell.) Sarab quickly hides, hoping he has not spotted her, and reflects on how much her life has changed in recent weeks — she has adopted an entirely new identity. But in Yazid’s relentlessness he has changed as well. Is he looking for her? Sarab narrates her thoughts as she is confronted with his terrifying presence:

[...] I am now Hind. Hind who came to the village and dyed her hair like the other migrants, and changed the details of her life and her name, becoming Hind, the name my grandmother suffering from Alzheimer’s calls me, which is [actually] the name of my aunt who lives in Canada. I remain Hind so no one finds me out. I am Hind to your Malik, Sarab to your Yazid, and nothing at all in the face of your hubris and betrayal, oh Hitler! (205-6)⁴⁸

This final sentence situates Sarab as the savvy but nonetheless doomed prey of a relentless predator who sees through her mirage-like disguises and chases her through space and time before annihilating her.

There are other characters in the novel who are not given nicknames, but whose names

⁴⁸[...] أنني هند، هند التي جاءت إلى الضيعة فصبغت شعرها أسوة بالنازحين، وغيرت تفاصيل حياتها واسمها، لتصير هند وجدتي المصابة بالزهايمر تناديني باسم عمتي التي تقطن في كندا، لأظل هند كي لا يكتشف أحد أمرى، هند يا مالك، وسراب يا يزيد، ولا شيء أمام صلفك وخيانتك يا هتلر.

are referential in and of themselves. Yunis is the Arabic name for the Abrahamic prophet Jonah. The Yunis of the novel tells his family's myth-like story of his own fortuitous conception: his mother says she received a revelation from heaven about his birth. While Yunis does not resemble the prophet Jonah in every way, both characters attempt to flee their fate. Yunis specifically insists on taking the sea route to Europe. And, like the prophet Jonah, he does end up falling overboard during his sea journey.

Hudhayfah and Hajar's child is named Falastīn (Arabic for Palestine). We are told that her parents were going to name her Waṭan ("Homeland") if she were a boy. This wordplay, or name-play, is used as a tool for authorial manipulation of the reader. Falastin is often mentioned without a clear previous reference, leading the reader to think, momentarily, that Palestine itself is being discussed. Sentences that refer to the baby sometimes correspond with what is happening in Gaza at that point in the novel.

Meanwhile, it is not until the end of *Gallows of Darkness* that the poignance of Hajar's name becomes fully appreciable. Two layers of meaning are more immediately recognizable to the reader, however. First, in this novel of migration, the main character's name is spelled the same as the verb *hājara*, meaning "to migrate." Second, Hajar is the Arabic name for the Abrahamic religious figure and traditional matriarch of the Arabs who is known in English as Hagar. The Islamic Hajar is the second wife⁴⁹ of 'Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and the mother of 'Ismā'īl (Ishmael). According to some Islamic traditions, after a dispute between Hajar and Ibrahim's first wife, Ibrahim takes Hajar and Ismail to the desert of Arabia and leaves them there, trusting that God will provide for them. In a desperate search for water, Hajar runs back and forth between the two hills of Safa and Marwa seven times (in an act that is memorialized by hajj

⁴⁹ In some versions of the story, she is a concubine.

pilgrims). Upon hearing a voice, she returns to Ismail and finds him in the company of an angel, and water bursts forth from the ground. This is the origin story of the Zamzam Well in Mecca, whose water is holy to Muslims. Ismail goes on to marry into an Arab tribe, thus forging a foundational link between the Arabs and traditional Abrahamic heredity (Tottoli). Hajar's journey to and survival in Arabia is a nation-founding act.

The overtones of this mythical past are both consonant and dissonant with Hajar's trajectory in *Gallows of Darkness*. Instead of being a second wife, the Hajar of the novel marries a second husband, Yunis, after the death of her first, Hudhayfah. Like her namesake, the Hajar of the novel travels to a distant land where she will face existential hardship, but ultimately survive and start a new life. However, unlike in the traditional story, the child that Hajar brings with her on this journey, Murīd, does *not* survive, but rather drowns along with the novel's other major characters when the dinghy capsizes in the Aegean Sea. In fact, devastatingly, this is her second child who has died a very early death — her first child, Falastin, dies earlier in the novel from a congenital disorder. After Hudhayfah dies, Hajar sees him in a dream, and he urges her “to found a new kingdom, an entity where no Arab foot has trod” (211). Like the traditional Hajar, this Hajar ends up in a kind of desert — “the whirlpool of the wastes.” Unlike her, she finds no fresh water in this “desert,” but merely a mirage, i.e., Sarab, a fellow migrant mother who could become a close friend, but who instead quickly drowns. And unlike the traditional Hajar, the novel's Hajar will not be a hereditary matriarch of a new nation in the distant land in which she settles. The book's brief afterword, written in the same third-person editorial voice as the disclaimer discussed earlier, suggests a different kind of conception:

One Tuesday morning, precisely a year and a half after the sinking of the boat, there arrived at the headquarters of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs a letter, in which an Arab woman thanked the Coast Guard for their significant role in saving her from the clutches of death, after she was nearly lost among the corpses of the drowned.

Furthermore, they later collaborated with her to gather all of the personal effects of her husband and child and her friend from Aleppo which were on board during the torturous journey, so they could make their debut to the world in her first art exhibition in Brussels, under the title “Clothing that Miraculously Survived. (219)⁵⁰

It is fitting that the above quotation ends the novel. We barely get a glimpse of the life that Hajar will lead in Europe. We are instead simply left to imagine what *could* be. If we take her name into account and recognize the resonances of her trajectory with that of the mythical Hajar, we are left to imagine what kind of new “nation” she will found in Europe. Again, the death of her two children and two husbands indicates that her primary role in this founding is not to give birth and begin the line of a new people, as in the case of the Hajar of the Islamic mythos. She will play a creative, rather than a procreative, role. She not only renders the absent present by putting the belongings of her fellow travelers on display in Brussels, but she also wryly critiques the Greek Coast Guard in the title of her exhibition. In some sense, the Coast Guard, and Fortress Europe, have succeeded in their policing mission — only one unauthorized migrant was able to get through the deadly sea barrier. But they failed in their supposed humanitarian mission and were only able to rescue a few articles of clothing.

What kind of new nation might *this* Hajar end up founding? All we know about her life in Europe so far is that she puts on this art exhibition and will put on others in the future. (The narrator says that it is her “first.”) If we as readers follow the pattern of mythological quasi-repetition, through the darkness we can just barely make out this one hopeful portent — viz, the possibility for a “new kingdom” to spring from Hajar’s arrival in Europe and from the humanistic artwork she creates and displays there. The novel’s non-chronological temporality is

⁵⁰ صبيحة أحد أيام الثلاثاء، وتحديدًا بعد عام ونصف من غرق القارب، وصلت رسالة إلى مقر وزارة الخارجية اليونانية، تشكر فيها سيدة عربية خفر السواحل، لدورهم العظيم بإنقاذها من براثن الموت بعد أن كادت تضيع بين جثث الغرقى، ثم ساهموا معها -لاحقاً- بإحضار جميع متعلقات زوجها وطفلها وصديقتها الحلبية على متن رحلة العذاب، لتخرج إلى العالم بأول معرض فني لها في بروكسل، بعنوان: ملابس تنجو بأعجوبة.

suggestive of an alternative orientation to time that might be adopted by real-life migrants as they face the “power chronographies” (Jacobsen) of the asylum regime. I understand power chronographies to be the process by which the state inscribes temporalities on asylum seekers’ lives and bodies as a means asserting control, by imposing long waiting periods and strict deadlines under precarious living conditions. Asylum seekers’ choice to orient themselves toward fate — or, in more Islamic terms, *kitābah* (divine “writing” of destinies) — is an alternative to being psychospiritually subject to the asylum system and its often-arbitrary outcomes.

Cosmic border-crossing and uchronia

In *Gallows of Darkness*, post-life and pre-life temporalities are brought to the fore on a few notable occasions, when the dead and the not-yet-alive seem to coexist with the living. In turn, readers are compelled to reckon with actual deaths of migrants that they hear about on the news, along with lives that were prevented from happening at all (due to the deaths of pregnant migrants and others who may have someday had children). This alternative temporality challenges the notion of time as a line that has an objective beginning and end. Instead, we are confronted with an otherworldly time-space that encompasses life before and after death, the eternal non-time of pre- and post-life: uchronia.

It is fitting that in a book whose main characters are refugees, before- and afterlife time-spaces feature so prominently. Scholars of refugee and migration studies point to religious practice as one of the main ways asylum seekers manage and resist the imposition of deteriorative temporalities while in detention (see for example Gashi et al.). The long period of waiting in refugee camps is often referred to using the religious terminology of limbo or purgatory. Likewise, *Gallows of Darkness* challenges the very notion of clean-cut beginnings

and ends, to the extent of implicitly rejecting the conflation of birth with beginning and death with end. Instead, such temporal borders are shown to be porous — a mere worldly illusion in a sea of eternity.

The story of Yunis’s conception is a demonstration of this kind of cosmic border-crossing, in which divine non-time converges with the temporal world of the physical universe. In Yunis’s first chapter, he tells of his mother’s struggle with infertility and her determination to overcome it. When there is a total lunar eclipse, she runs out to the mosque to pray *tahajjud* (voluntary prayers performed during the night).⁵¹ She is determined either to die or give birth. She fasts and takes a vow of silence.

Then, after three days, she forced my father to sleep with her under the tall palm tree in the courtyard of our house, responding to nature’s appeal and to her sudden arousal. And no sooner had they finished than the juicy-ripe *rutab* [dates] fell on their bodies in abundance, and my mother started to eat like she never had before. And no sooner had she lay down to rest in her bed than a revelation came down to her from heaven, breathing into her spirit and saying to her: “The son of the sea will be your boat by which you will cross through life.” (27)⁵²

In a moment of profound faith spurred by desperation, Yunis’s mother chooses to interpret the eclipse as a heavenly sign that a window into fertility has opened. When she tells her husband about the vision she has seen, he pledges to sacrifice a camel if indeed she does conceive. Weeks later, she gets morning sickness and the revelation is confirmed.

It is as if Yunis’s parents smuggle him across the closed temporal border from non-life to life. Refusing to accept that the time allotted for possible childbirth has finished, they keep watch

⁵¹ The novel refers to her prayers as *tahajjud*, but they might also be classified as *ṣalāt al-khusūf*, a voluntary prayer performed during a lunar eclipse.

⁵² فأرغمت أبي أن يواقعها بعد ثلاثة أيام تحت نخلتنا الشاهقة في حوش الدار، تلبية لنداء الطبيعة وإثارته المباغته، وما أن انتهيا حتى تساقط الرطب جنياً على جسديهما، فصارت أُمي تأكل كما لم تفعل من قبل، وما إن خلدت في فراشها حتى جاءها وحي من السماء، نفخ في روحها ثم قال: سيكون ابن اليم سفينتكم لتعبروا به الحياة.

for good omens. Yunis's mother chooses to interpret the lunar eclipse as possibility, and she springs into action, performing extra voluntary prayers and upping the ante by fasting and taking a vow of silence. And against all odds, Yunis is birthed into the world as if emerging from the belly of a whale. This mystical orientation to time and to outcomes is reminiscent of asylum seekers' embracing of "radical hope," as discussed in this chapter's introduction.

Let us move to another example of cosmic border-crossing in *Gallows of Darkness*. Before he dies, Hudhayfah writes a letter to his wife Hajar and arranges for it to be hidden in her room so that she happens upon it after the fact. The missive has the effect of coming from beyond the grave.

Hudhayfah dies under mysterious circumstances that I will explain briefly here. While Hajar is in Egypt to seek medical treatment for Falastin's congenital disorder, Hudhayfah gets a call from his Hamas comrades, who say that an Israeli assassination attempt on him is imminent and that he needs to get to an underground bunker immediately. Hudhayfah refuses to go into hiding, insisting that first he needs to attend to his wife's and daughter's urgent situation. But the man on the other end of the phone line tells him he has no choice but to comply. Soon, Hamas fighters enter Hudhayfah's house and take him away. They lead him to an underground facility, but while he is in the elevator, it breaks and falls down its shaft. He loses consciousness on impact.

When he wakes up, he is on an operating table and his leg is amputated. He is told it will be buried immediately, in accordance with Islamic tradition. The doctor tells Hudhayfah that if he wants to hold onto the small chance of survival that he has, he will need to seek medical treatment outside Gaza. This would require clandestine border-crossing, due to international restrictions on the travel of Hamas members, especially high-profile ones like Hudhayfah. He

decides against attempting the near-impossible, feeling certain that the time of his death has come and preferring to die in his homeland. He jokes that if he were to die abroad, he would not want his body and leg to be buried separately, such that he when he woke up on the Day of Resurrection and he would be forced to hop around on one foot. He dies a few days later. (This concern with proper burial in a scenario of death during clandestine migration calls to mind Hakim Abdurrezak's discussion of the "seametary" and Jason De León's concept of necroviolence that I introduced in Chapter One.)

Hudhayfah's letter to Hajar is rich with clear-eyed reflection and care. He instructs her to start a new life without him, to find a new beloved, and to accept that their child Falastin is beyond treatment and will soon die. In addition to this, he confirms that he, too, believes what the reader has already been suspecting: that there had not in fact been an Israeli attempt on his life, but that he was instead offed by Hamas members due to his attempts to bring about reconciliation between that political faction and others, and also due to his lax approach to religious and cultural rules.

The letter includes an overt reflection on temporality, and specifically on beginnings and endings. It is worth quoting at length:

The truth does not contradict the truth, but rather corresponds with it and bears witness to it,⁵³ and the truth demands that life continue. For the sun will not stop rising in the east after my death, and neither will the sky shed a tear for me. [...] Therefore I advise you to continue your life, to begin reviving yourself as if you were created anew, pure, without shackles. Start again as if we were never together, even for a single day, as if we never met and no conversation passed between us. And I might even laugh now while writing this letter, recalling the words of the novelist Dostoevsky, when he wrote in one of his novels, "If beginnings alone are beautiful, let us begin anew; let us begin again and again. Let us not ever finish. Let us not meddle or delve deep or get bored and stop. Let us begin and forget that we began and repeat the beginning and keep forgetting until the non-end [*'ilā al-lā-nihāya*]." That is how beauty is, and the beauty of life is that passion continues, O my companion of beautiful days. So, search for a new love and a new story, and don't

⁵³ This is a saying of the philosopher Averroës.

mention me in front of anyone; [let it be] as if I were completely and utterly forgotten, for that is how I came into this world and that is how I should die.

[...] As soon as you read this letter of mine, burn it with all the papers, and pour out the fire of your longing for a man who has departed with the wind.” [...]

[...] They say death is a cup, and everyone will eventually drink it down to the dregs, so don't hurry to drink. Go out into the world with a new face, living out the madness and the passion. [...] Goodbye, for I wasn't anything to you except a dream, so leave it and look for a new dream.

P.S. This letter is to be read once, Hajar, only once. Then it is to be burned and thrown away anyplace, so that it will become like me in its nonexistence [*li-taṣīr mithlī 'adaman*]. I trust in you to fulfil my final request. (175-8)⁵⁴

In my reading of Hudhayfah's letter from beyond the grave, I understand him to be challenging the triumphalist obsession with progress and the myth of arrival — at an ultimate solution, at an ending of perfection. Instead, he emphasizes beginning and continuous renewal unto eternity. He insists that Hajar not interpret his death as an ending, but as a new beginning. Hudhayfah came from the earth, to it he will return, and from it he will eventually be resurrected (Quran 20:55)⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ إنَّ الحق لا يضاد الحق بل يوافقه ويشهد له، وإن الحق يقتضي أن تستمر الحياة، فالشمس لن تتوقف عن الشروق بعد موتي، ولن تبكي السماء دمعاً لأجلي [...] لذا فإني أوصيك بالاستمرار في حياتك، تشرعي نهوضاً كأنك خلقت من جديد، نقية بلا أصفاد. ابدي كأننا لم نكن يوماً معاً، كأننا لم نلتق ولم يحدث بيننا أي حوار، ولعلي أضحك الآن وأنا أكتب هذه الوصية مستذكراً قول الروائي دستوفسكي حين كتب في إحدى رواياته، "إذا كانت البدايات وحدها جميلة، دعنا نبدأ مجدداً، دعنا نبدأ مراراً وتكراراً، دعنا لا ننتهي أبداً، دعنا لا نتوسط ولا نتعمق ولا نمل فننتهي، دعنا نبدأ ثم ننسى أننا بدأنا ونعيد البداية، وننسى إلى اللانهاية"، هكذا هو الجمال، وجمال الحياة أن يستمر الشغف يا رفيقة الأيام الجميلة، فابحثي عن حب جديد وحكاية جديدة، ولا تذكريني أمام أحد، كإني كنت نسياً منسياً، فهكذا جئت وهكذا يجب أن أموت.

[...] حالما تأخذين برسالتني هذه فاحرقيهيها مع الورق، واسكبي نار شوقك لرجل غادر مع الريح [...].

يقولون إن الموت كأس والكل سيرتوي منه حتى الثمالة، فلا تتعجلي الارتواء، اخرجي إلى العالم بوجه جديد يعيش الجنون والشغف [...].

وداعاً فلم أكن لك سوى حلم، فاتركيه وابحثي عن حلم جديد.

ملاحظة: تُقرأ هذه الرسالة لمرة واحدة يا هاجر، مرة واحدة فقط، ثم تحرق وتلقى في أي مكان، لتصير مثلي عدماً، وإني أثق بك وبطاعتك الأخيرة لي".

⁵⁵ "From it [i.e., the earth] We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time." —Saheeh International translation

He writes that his presence in Hajar's life was as a fleeting dream, and indeed in a dream he will visit her once more, as described earlier (when he instructs her to found "a new kingdom"). Though she will ignore his request that she not mention him to anyone (she eventually relates her dream of him to Sarab), she obeys his command to burn his letter by turning it into smoke and ash such that it disperses into the wholeness of the world and atmosphere. This final image of Hudhayfah's letter (and by extension, Hudhayfah himself) being consumed by fire is suggestive of *fanā'* or mystical ego annihilation, a kind of alternative death that challenges death's finality. Indeed, the real "end" will not come until the Day of Resurrection, which is itself a new beginning.

The emphasis on communing with pre- and post-life temporalities provides characters with an entry into a spiritual timescape that does not bend to the will of worldly forces. This perspective diminishes the importance of man-made timelines, deadlines, and waiting periods. Hudhayfah's character suggests that for Muslim migrants and asylum seekers, an orientation to the potency of the *now* — brushing aside idealized pasts and futures — will be helpful as a means of enduring the imposed temporal pain of the asylum regime. The powers of state and capital demonstrate time and again that they are not subject to the same timelines that they impose on migrants under the pretexts of security concerns or limited resources. The state has the ability to increase or decrease, at will, the rate of asylum acceptance or the number of work permits it grants, based on internal politics or the conditions of the labor market. By their nature, neoliberal and -imperial forces do not respect boundaries, not even the temporal boundaries that humans hold most sacred: birth and death. "[E]ven the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins," Benjamin writes (255). If the dead are not safe, then neither are the unborn; in the novel, Falastin develops birth defects as a fetus due to the trauma Hajar endures during the 2012 Israeli

war on Gaza. But beyond the enemy's ability to make incursions into the temporalities of pre- and post-life, there is the *even* more profound uchronia of the divine. This timescape might be seen to manifest itself in the world of the novel through the continual regeneration that Hudhayfah writes about in his letter from beyond the grave, and through the incidences of mythological quasi-repetition that are made all the more distinct after Alghoul's introductory declaration that "events resemble one another or repeat themselves in one way or another." The semi-recurrence of events in cycles of regeneration are indicative of the ultimate impermanence of human departure.

Gallows of Darkness's engagement with cosmic time and uchronia demonstrates some of the ways in which unauthorized migrants may endeavor to embrace orientations toward time that resist the tampering of the powerful. And given that the events of this novel, and that of *Night Mail* which I will discuss next, happen mostly separately from an encounter with European state actors, they provide a perspective on refugees' temporal experiences *prior* to their arrival at refugee camps and asylum aid offices like the ones where most scholars of refugee studies conduct their research. Again, the imaginative power of literature offers something different.

NIGHT MAIL

In *Night Mail*, five Arab migrants in present-day Europe write letters to loved ones who will never read them. By some curse, each letter is knocked off its intended course. It ends up in the hands of another one of the novel's main characters, who reads it and is inspired to write a new letter. Each of these nameless protagonists, whom I introduce briefly below, is profoundly wounded and, to various degrees, profoundly flawed:

- The first letter writer is a young émigré who in the past was rejected by his mother; she saw him as one mouth too many to feed. He has since become *persona non grata* in his

home country, on the grounds of his being a dissident. He writes his letter to a lover whom he has emotionally and physically abused.

- Next, a middle-class Lebanese woman writes to a Canadian man whom she has not seen for decades, and whom she has planned to meet in Paris for an adulterous tryst. She starts to write the letter after he fails to show up at the hotel at the appointed time.
- Third, a current vagrant and former *mukhābarāt* agent, who previously committed heinous acts on behalf of the state, writes to his mother to confess his grave sins, including the fact that he has just murdered a European woman who had taken him in.
- Fourth, a domestic worker writes to her brother, confessing sins of her own: she found her employer, a wealthy woman whose house she cleans, unconscious but alive in the shower. Instead of helping her or calling an ambulance, she stole her valuable items and left her to die.
- Finally, a man who, as a teenager, was kicked out of his house for his perceived effeminacy, and who is now a homeless sex worker in a European city, writes to his father to ask if he will take him back.

In what follows, I illustrate the unique literary form that this novel takes, detailing its narratological idiosyncrasies. Barakat turns the conventions of the established genre of the epistolary novel against the dominant European culture out of which it arose, and in doing so makes possible, if only in literature, the very communication that her migrant characters and their real-life counterparts are denied. This narrative form takes on the temporality of a kind of unreceived immediacy, or displaced emotional intimacy, which parallels the real-life temporal experiences of asylum seekers. I will also show that the novel's thematic content casts light on two ubiquitous aspects of asylum seeking that abound with temporal significance: confession and

surveillance.

Epistolaria

Bakhtin writes of the epistolary novel (specifically that of the 17th and 18th century) that it creates “a specific temporal zone of Sentimental pathos associated with the intimacy of one’s own room” (396). In this timespace of intimacy, letter writers become authors whose intentions are often immediately clear; the singularity of the intended audience makes this possible. Personal requests, recommendations, commands, praise, declarations, lamentations, confessions — all of these are delivered directly to the named addressee. The epistolary novel “descends to the depths of everyday life, its smallest details, to intimate relations between people and into the internal life of the individual person” (Bakhtin 396).

What makes Barakat’s epistolary novel different is the fact that the reader of each letter is *not* the one to whom it is addressed. The unmediated authorial intentions, and any direct communication to the intended reader, break down and take on new meanings. The “you” becomes the novel’s upcoming protagonist, who will write the following letter, at the same time as it becomes us, the real-life readers of the novel. We are not mere bystanders, not somehow snooping in on the drama of a letter exchange. Instead, *we* might as well have been the ones who came upon the lost letter; it was not intended for the character who ends up reading it, and neither was it intended for us. The letters are thus signifiers without firm signifieds; they can be only be interpreted based on the assumptions that their interceptors make about them, and based on the circumstances of their own lives with which the letters resonate. Real-life readers of the novel experience a similar sensation, first viewing a letter through their own experiential lens, but then augmenting their interpretation based on that of the following letter writer, who usually mentions the previous letter in their own missive. The letters’ transience makes for a unique

reading experience that is somewhat reminiscent of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Purloined Letter.” (In Jacques Lacan’s reading of the tale, the titular Letter takes on new significance each time it passes into new hands, indicating that “a letter always arrives at its destination,” even if that destination is not the intended one (72).)

The specific temporality of Barakat’s novel, in which letters never arrive at their intended destinations, offers a useful analog to a profound dilemma that multitudes of real-life asylum seekers face: in short, they cannot tell their stories on their own terms — at least not to those who have the power to help them. The people capable of doing so (representatives of the state, or the media and by extension the international community) will not listen — at least not under circumstances that would allow for complete transparency of expression. As I discussed in the previous chapter, savvy asylum seekers are aware of the kinds of narrative details that authorities and humanitarian actors want to hear, as well those that, if revealed to the wrong person, might get them into trouble. What is more, asylum seekers live in a discursive landscape fraught with what Leudar et al. call “hostility themes,” in which oversimplified narratives in opposition to and in defense of irregular migrants are constantly battling each other. Not only do asylum seekers have to contend with these diametrically opposed narratives when telling their stories to European audiences, but they also internalize some of these narratives, which may have a negative impact on their mental health and change the ways they view themselves.

With this in mind, what *Night Mail* accomplishes through its unorthodox narrative mode is all the more noteworthy. It presents intimate details of migrants’ missteps, thoughts, and desperations while capturing a quintessential tragedy that is acutely showcased by asylum seekers’ stories and that is also true on a more universal and existential scale: namely, that individuals’ experiences can never entirely be understood by those whom they need to

understand them most. In this sense, the title of the English translation of the novel, *Voices of the Lost*, is quite appropriate (though I much prefer its Arabic title overall). We readers are witness to disembodied voices calling out into the void, passing one another in the night. We do not receive messages from those we recognize personally, but along with the novel's characters, we recognize *ourselves* in the messages that have been displaced from their intended route and found their way into our hands.

The Arabic title, which I translate as *Night Mail* (more literally, "Mail of the Night") gets at two distinct elements of the novel's literary mode. The first element is relatively straightforward: that it is an epistolary novel. The second is more multidimensional. On the surface, one can understand "night" to be indicative of the darkness of the book's subject matter and thematic content; it is a work about migrants and refugees with unhappy present-day lives and with troubling and often-traumatic pasts. In this sense, the "night" can be connected to the "darkness" in the title of Alghoul's novel. But on a deeper level, the night in *Night Mail* is even darker than the darkness in *Gallows of Darkness*. Night is suggestive of things done in secret. In their letters to their loved ones, the migrant characters seem to believe this is their last chance to confess their sins — things done under cover of darkness. Coming upon these confessions in letters that were not meant for us, we as readers get a visceral glimpse of a moral ugliness that we have no business viewing. And yet, we cannot help but to sympathize with the characters.

The mysterious chain of letters is first set into motion by a man who, despite his bad behavior towards, and disappointment with, the woman he intends as his recipient, he cannot shake her from his mind. The reader comes to understand quite immediately that this is not a normal letter. Conventions are broken right from the start. For example, the letter begins only with the word "Dear," without saying who exactly the dear one is:

Dear

Since letters must always begin with Dear, then Dear it is.⁵⁶

It is not until four pages into the novel that the reader comes to understand that the intended recipient is the writer's lover. Until then, he might as well have been writing directly to *us*, the readers. The fact that the space typically reserved for the name at the beginning of the letter is left blank is appropriate, given that the person who will actually read the letter is not the nameless man's lover, but rather the middle-class woman who comes across the letter in her hotel room an indeterminate amount of time later.

By the time we have read through a few of these letters, we start to wonder whether their authors ever really believed that they would be successfully delivered at all. Indeed, in the third letter, the writer is open about the unlikelihood that his will:

At least you'll know that I am still alive if this letter reaches you. Alive, amid all the news of death that the sky rains down on us like pellets of hard-baked clay. I hope you're still alive too. I hope you got away in time, whatever route you took, by land or by sea. In the end, that's why I'm writing this letter, even though I don't even have an address to send it to! If only my luck would hold out, I would carry it with me and I would search for you. If I thought I could find you, I would put it in your hands myself. Because it is so hard to speak. To find the right words. (84)

Here we see that the multiplicity and depth of the forms of displacement that affect the lives of these characters and their loved ones also cause a rending of communicative ties. When two family members migrate, at different times, by different clandestine means, the possibilities for correspondence also break down (in this novel whose central conceit requires us to ignore the existence of cell phones and social media). This letter writer's doubt in his ability to find a way to transmit his message to his mother implies that the purpose of writing it might not actually be

⁵⁶ The Arabic original has “‘*azīzati*” or “My Dear,” in the feminine. In this chapter I will quote from the English translation by Marilyn Booth, published in 2021, unless otherwise noted. I will consult both versions when pulling quotations for this chapter in case I want to emphasize something that the Booth's translation does not.

for her to read it; instead, this could simply be a therapeutic exercise, inspired — almost compelled — by the letter that came before, and designed to bring about the possibility of emotional or spiritual relief.

As Barakat herself has said in an interview, the letters in the novel do not follow the rules of the rhetorical process in any recognizable way (“Hoda Barakat”). That is to say, the rhetorical process, which assumes a relationship between a writer and an audience, continually breaks down. The flow of communication from author to audience is repeatedly disrupted, started anew, and disrupted again. What kind of chronotope, or temporality, does this literary mode engender? Most immediately, it strikes the reader as being akin to the temporality experienced by migrants caught in the limbo of the asylum system: departing, but never seeming to arrive. Speaking, but never seeming to be heard by their intended listeners; instead, only being *overheard* by an undesired audience. It is a temporality in which one is regularly interrupted, and in which one loses track of time.

In the novel, many of the letter writers are forced to stop writing suddenly, sometimes due to an immediate danger that they find themselves facing. In addition to the abrupt ways in which the letters end, there is, uniformly, a delay for the reader in learning who the subsequent letter writer is, how and when he or she discovered the previous letter, and when the current letter is being written. Sometimes we learn that a letter was found immediately after it was abandoned (as in Ch. 3 and Ch. 4), sometimes we find out that it has been at least a couple of years (Ch. 5), and other times we never find out how much time has passed (Ch. 2). The lack of regularity in the spaces of time between chapters imposes on the reader a kind of jarring *chronotaraxis*, or distorted perception of time.

Unauthorized migrants are stuck in a similar cycle of always being oriented towards a

destination but never quite arriving there, often being repeatedly rerouted. They too face constant interruptions — new laws that change the required steps in their asylum application process, closures of centers and offices at which they had previously accessed resources, closures of refugee camps or refugee housing, police raids of squats or informal living arrangements, threats of deportation, exposure to illness in a host country that does not always guarantee them medical care, and more. And like the chronotaxis I identified above, the gruelingly slow pace of monotonous life in refugee camps can cause days, weeks, and months to begin to blend together. This monotony is not the same as that of the bureaucratic administration, which, although typically horrendously slow itself, also imposes strict timelines on asylum seekers regarding application deadlines, expiring benefits, and appointment appearances. “States articulate power through ‘stretched’ temporalities, followed by the need for immediate action,” Meier and Donà write, identifying these stupefying state actions as “fast and slow tactics” (46). They cite an example from the UK, in which “Once somebody’s asylum claim has been decided upon, they cease to receive their allowance of £37.75 per week and have to move out of their provided accommodation. They have 28 days to find a new home, apply for housing and unemployment benefits and/or find a job” (48).

Thus, we see that for asylum seekers, the passage of time can bring with it actual physical harm: increased exposure to the elements, to hunger, to illness, to crime. Meanwhile, strict consequences to missed deadlines (which often involve further delays and withholding of resources) can also effect a kind of corporal punishment. The state’s control over and disregard for migrants’ time proves to be another form of passive agency, not unlike that taken up by the “hostile Mediterranean” discussed in Chapter 1. The desperation that migrant characters express in *Night Mail* produces an aesthetic representation of damage caused by time-based violence —

be it psychological or physical — in a distorted and imbalanced rhetorical environment.

The temporality of confession and surveillance

Night Mail is replete with thematic content that evokes confession and surveillance, both of which are mainstays in the world of unauthorized migration. Although confession and surveillance may not typically be associated with one another, it is not difficult to draw connections between them. They both relate to making known and being seen. The key difference between them is that confession is usually understood as being volitional, whereas surveillance is beyond an individual's control. The obvious exception to the former is the case of a forced or coerced confession, incidents of which do occur in *Night Mail*. But real-life asylum seekers are also faced with a kind of soft coercion to confess in their asylum interviews. Many feel pressured to share personal secrets for which they have experienced shame (incidents of sexual violence, membership in a sexual minority group, etc.) in order to be considered worthy of protection. Although this pressure to confess is not usually accompanied by a direct threat of violence the way literal forced confessions often are, asylum seekers are threatened *indirectly* in the form of deportation. In this sense, asylum seekers' confessions are not as volitional as confessions in other contexts might be. However, as I have argued, their confessions might be crafted or even convincingly invented by savvy asylum seekers who understand the threshold they must cross in order to be recognized. As Dina Nayeri writes, "Stories are everything ... Every day of her new life, the refugee is asked to differentiate herself from the opportunist, the economic migrant" (qtd. in Aikins 123). Likewise, asylum seekers are also required to distinguish themselves from the bogeyman that is projected to great effect by the global Right: the criminal or extremist infiltrator. There is therefore also much to which asylum seekers *cannot* confess: namely, anything from their past that might raise suspicions of them being a threat. And

in addition to confessing, migrants must also present themselves as vulnerable and meek.

What kind of temporality does this type of confession instill? In religious contexts, confession is associated with an end followed by a new beginning. Christian sinners die to their sins and are reborn pure. In all Abrahamic religions, at the Day of Judgment all must account for their deeds in a kind of forced confession, after which a determination is made about each soul's fate. And in asylum interviews, a confession can bring about the end of one's time as an applicant. Depending on the contents of the confession, it may lead to one's transference to the "heaven" of the European host country, or the "damnation" of deportation. In *Night Mail*, in doomed last-ditch efforts for reunion, or at least communication, before what feels like an impending apocalypse, letter writers make the types of confessions that real-life asylum seekers cannot make — those that reveal the unvarnished truth of their darkest thoughts, their flaws, their fears, their crimes.

Surveillance is even more ubiquitous than confession in the lives of unauthorized migrants, who are watched at multiple stages of their journeys. Some of them must be on their guard from the time they begin preparing to leave their home countries, for fear that local authorities, or even family members who do not want them to flee, will catch wind of their plans. As they travel with often-ruthless smugglers, they must take caution to avoid being seen to be in possession of valuable items that are liable to be stolen, and to avoid being perceived as an easy target for exploitation. All the while, long before they have crossed into Europe, the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) is tracking them with imaging and sensing technologies using satellites and reconnaissance aircraft (Ajana). While traversing national boundaries illegally, the watchful eyes and radars of heavily deployed border police encourage smugglers to force migrants to cross in dangerous conditions — in darkness, in wild storms — in

order to increase their chances of passing unseen. As detailed in my previous chapter, this type of surveillance leads to migrant deaths at sea. State surveillance continues in detention centers and refugee camps, and sometimes even after asylum seekers are moved to regular housing.

Surveillance is designed to impose a physical delay — ideally, for architects and advocates of European border policies, an *indefinite* delay — in as many unauthorized migrants' journeys as possible. But surveillance can also impose upon migrants a slow affective temporality characterized by hypervigilance. The knowledge — or worse, the unconfirmed suspicion — that one is being surveilled can produce intense feelings of anxiety and concern over one's smallest behaviors (a phenomenon Michel Foucault terms panopticism). Scientific research has shown that states of hypervigilance can slow down human perception of time, particularly during exposure to threat stimuli (Bar-Haim). And these constant, well-founded worries about being watched in particular moments can lead to prolonged, generalized paranoia (see Ranjan, discussed below).

The combined thematic content of confession and surveillance in *Night Mail*, then, brings about a temporality of slow-motion finality, a stretching out of time at the end. This peculiar chronotope amplifies the intensity and depth of the emotions expressed by characters who are desperate to be heard in a domain where being heard by the wrong people is dangerous, and where being heard by one's intended audience is impossible. These imagined literary confessions offer a three-dimensional alternative to the asylum interview, where flattened, sanitized versions of applicants' personal stories are presented. In the following close readings, I highlight incidences of confession and surveillance in *Night Mail* that, although they are largely separate from the context of the asylum regime, shed light on real-life migration phenomena and in doing so reveal fiction's power to speak in ways that unauthorized migrants are structurally prevented

from speaking.

The first letter sets the tone for the remainder of the novel, showcasing the affective temporalities of confession and surveillance with vigor as the young drug-addicted émigré spews his inmost thoughts onto the page in a stream-of-consciousness style. The reader is immediately served a sample of the kind of *desperation to be heard* (yet without hope of being heard by the intended listener) that I describe above. Although the émigré is writing this letter to his estranged lover, it is clear that much of his emotional distress stems from his (non-)relationship with his mother, and that there is much he wishes to say to her that he has heretofore left unsaid. He reveals to the reader that he has long been composing a letter in his head that he had wanted to deliver someday to his mother, whom he has not seen since she sent him to live with his uncle as a boy. Three things have made the delivery of such a letter impossible, however: 1) she is illiterate; 2) she and the rest of his family have since moved away from his childhood village, and he does not know where they ended up; 3) he has just received the news that she died. Though he says that he is composing a handwritten letter to his lover because of her romantic sensibilities, his Oedipal projections indicate that the missive is more of a blend of the sentiments that he has always wished to convey to his mother. He also feels disoriented by his unshakeable romantic attachment to his lover, and attempts to sort through these thoughts on the page. He has always managed to avoid such attachments with others in the past. He despises the sorts of confessions he is now making to her, condemning them as an emotional salve for the weak:

I don't want to crack open a window for you that would let intimacy in. Intimacy is trouble [*wartah*]. Words muttered in lowered voices between two heads bowed close together, the kinds of confessions people use to break their isolation, to keep away the loneliness that crouches in the hearts of sensitive creatures who can't stand solitude, etc.... [nothing but] trouble. (8 in Booth's translation, 11 in Arabic original)⁵⁷

⁵⁷ I have lightly altered Booth's translation here. The Arabic reads:

And yet, he cannot help but confess his affection for her, and to confess that he misses her (40), all the while blaming her for staying with him despite his abuse and attempts at sabotaging the relationship (9). But he insists that his confessions to her are not like those that “people use to break their isolation.” Rather, these might be his final words to her: “I’m not writing to you now in order to bring you back. No, in fact ... it could be the last thing I have to say” (41). It is a last confession, both to his estranged lover and to his late mother. The young émigré fears he will soon meet his fate, either by being deported or arrested by the Europeans or by being offed by a *mukhābarāt* agent from his own country.

Who is that man with a mustache who keeps watching him from his window in the building across from his apartment? Is he an agent of the host country’s police, after him due to his involvement in the drug trade or the recent expiration of his visa? Or does the mustachioed man belong to the letter writer’s own country’s secret police, which may be after him due to his work with a dissident newspaper? Or is this all in his head? He half-jokingly considers the possibility that the man simply fancies him, and it is all a misunderstanding that could be cleared up by explaining that he, the émigré, is heterosexual. But even this thought is overpowered by a homophobia-infused paranoia that the man with the mustache might end up being so offended over being rejected that he becomes violent. The letter writer ultimately admits that this fear is probably irrational, and that these days, he is “afraid of [his] own shadow” (24). The surveillance and paranoia, exacerbated by cocaine use, are beginning to cloud his judgment and intensify his anxiety to the point that he withdraws from society and begins to question his own sanity:

لا أريد أن أترك لك نافذة مفتوحة إلى الحميمية. فالحميمية ورطة. الكلام بالصوت المنخفض بين رأسين متقاربين، من نوع الاعترافات لكسر العزلة وإبعاد الوحشة عن قلوب كائنات حساسة ولا تحتل الوحدة إلخ... ورطة [...]

[The man with the mustache] must have been watching as we pulled the curtain shut in his face. This isn't rational, what he is doing, and it isn't all right. The curtain blocks my one source of light, and I don't want to have to keep it permanently drawn to be rid of the sight of him. If I do that, I might as well shout out loud that I'm afraid. That I fear him and I'm hiding from him. Even when I turn off the light, keeping a surreptitious eye on him, I find him still there, looking in my direction, a wicked little smile lifting his heavy moustache. As if he can see me even when I'm hiding in here, in the dark. (16-17)

Here we see a case of surveillance slowing its subject's affective temporality down to the point of paralysis. The émigré's fear that his actions may still be able to be tracked in the dark, or that his drawing the blinds for privacy may be construed as cowardice, is reminiscent of a real-life case in the UK in 2017 in which asylum seekers were tagged with tracking devices, as a supposedly humane alternative to holding them in a detention center. The ankle bracelets were used to enforce curfews, which prevented tagged individuals from leaving their home in the evenings, even for religious duties like praying at a mosque after iftar during Ramadan. When an asylum seeker broke curfew, he or she would receive a call saying that a breach had occurred. Multiple breaches might mean detention or even deportation. One man described the lasting psychological torment that this surveillance and curfew caused him, saying that his anxiety issues remained even after his curfew was ruled unlawful and lifted (Ranjan 54). For Devika Ranjan, the hypervigilance and psychic paralysis that surveillance imposes on asylum seekers is not only intended to slow them down and hold them back, but also to cause them pain: "The electronic tagging of asylum-seekers is ... a way to punish, mark, and torture individuals who committed the 'crime' of migration" (58).

The surveillance in *Night Mail*, and that of real-life asylum-seeking, is two-pronged. Surveillance gives the state access to migrants' private information, but the potential omnipresence of its apparatus also causes migrants to change their behavior, and to limit what they say. Their knowledge that they are being surveilled makes them think twice about sharing

intimate details of their histories even with confidants, for fear of being overheard, and with devastating consequences. This motif of not knowing whether one is being listened to or seen *in confidence* or *in an act of surveillance* appears subtly in the form of a bird in the second letter of Barakat's novel. The writer notes in a couple of brief asides that she has been watching a sparrow jump around in the street below. At first, the bird doesn't seem to notice it is being watched, but later, the writer updates her reader: "Now, whenever I'm standing at the window to follow [the bird's] movements, he has begun looking in the direction of the hotel" (74). Is the bird the object of surveillance, or is it the surveillor? The bird could be suggestive of a carrier pigeon, which may be able to deliver the writer's letter to its would-be receiver — a bird like the one in Fairuz's famous song "*Ya Tayr*," which the singer calls upon to transmit messages to potential lovers. Or perhaps the sparrow is a spy, one that will share gossip as in the expression "a little bird told me... / *qālat lī al- 'usfūrah...*" For unauthorized migrants, the best way to avoid revealing unflattering details to an uninvited listener or viewer is to remain silent and inactive altogether.

And although the gaze of surveillance may be presented as objective in its reach, a tool for transparency, but it tends only to be used to migrants' disadvantage. Unauthorized migrants are conspicuous under the state's watchful eye when they attempt to cross the border, when they deviate from the enforced regulations of asylum procedure, or when they commit crimes. But they are treated as invisible when they become objects of indignity, whether such indignity is enacted by citizens of the host country, fellow migrants, smugglers, or representatives of the state. Likewise, the writer of the fourth letter in the novel seems largely to escape the consequences of surveillance, but not in a felicitous way. As a cleaner of airplanes, hotels, and houses, and as a former sex worker, she is rendered invisible. When she is beaten and raped by a

hotel guest, she shows her employers evidence of the indignity she endured: “the bruises, the red marks — the signs of my beating — and my torn clothes.” They respond coldly: ““We know you’re a whore, but *we’ve looked the other way*. It’s your life. But making up a scandal to extort money from this rich guy ... no, we won’t go along with that”” (129, my emphasis). They fire her. The surveillance that can make everything known if it is to the advantage of the state or capital will not work to hasten justice for a migrant.

While all five of the letters in *Night Mail* contain confessions, nowhere are these confessions as pronounced as they are in the third letter. As a criminal who knows he will soon be caught and imprisoned (his letter begins with “I’m writing to you from the airport before they take me away” (76)), he writes his letter as a last appeal for forgiveness from one whom he has harmed and as a last opportunity to communicate disappointments that have never before been verbalized. It is a final communiqué with unparalleled intimacy, not unlike Hudhayfah’s posthumously read letter in *Gallows of Darkness*. Here, the writer’s intended audience is his mother, who he believes is the only one on Earth who can grant him forgiveness:

If Fate rules that I have to pay the price for what I’ve done with my own hands, then you’ll be the one who decides finally whether I am pardoned or punished. It’s you who will be either my guardian angel or my executioner. Giving a pardon doesn’t mean forgetting or erasing what’s been done. Granting a pardon just means having some pity for a lost son who never understood how he could have been so battered by storm winds that he came to be what he is. (84-85)

It is not only forgiveness he seeks, but also being understood. His earnestness makes it clear that he is not shirking responsibility for his horrific actions, but he needs his mother, if no one else, to witness in detail, and to share in the pain of, the many wounds and indignities he has undergone that have paved his path to depravity. As a young man in his home country, he was arrested and tortured and forced to confess to crimes he did not commit, the details of which he was not even informed:

“Your friends confessed,” [the interrogators] said. “We’ve got lots of evidence from the boys at the club who know you.” “Fine,” I said. “[...C]an I ask what I’m accused of? What did my friends tell you about me?” They just thought I was being cheeky with them. (85-6)

When later, he succumbs to confessing despite not knowing to what, this is not sufficient for his assailants. In a disgusting display of psychological manipulation, they require him to “prove” his truthfulness and loyalty to them by operating as their informant.

“I want to confess,” I said to them. “I did lie to you, and I did all the things you’ve accused me of doing.” “You have to prove you’re telling the truth,” they said. “How do we know that you’ve really repented?” “I’ll prove it,” I said. “Work with us,” they said. “Do whatever we order you to do. We’ll be watching you, and so we’ll know.” (87)

Here we see confession intersecting with surveillance in a sinister way. We learn that the man goes from being tortured and coerced into being an informant to working as a *mukhābarāt* agent himself, and he starts to carry out this very kind of torture and to coerce confessions from others in this very way; this macabre recruiting process is self-generating.

With this dark personal history in mind, it is remarkable that the letter writer is capable of making such an earnest confession now, if only to himself (again, he knows that the chances of actually delivering his letter to his intended addressee are near nil). Perhaps it is his certainty that he will face judgment for the heinous crime he has just committed, and that therefore his life as he knows it is essentially over, that makes it possible.

If he has managed to reclaim this particular faculty of intimacy (i.e., the capacity to make a sincere confession and ask for forgiveness), another one, namely sexuality, has remained elusive. His own repeated rape during his initial torture by *mukhābarāt* agents has left him sexually traumatized. When he suspects that the European woman who has taken him in has fallen in love with him, and he pretends to return that love in order to secure his place in her home (she is, after all, breaking the law by harboring an undocumented migrant), he experiences

their sexual relationship as one of abuse and assault:

It was a terrible night. She raped me, that woman, openly and ferociously. As I tried to fend her off, detaching myself even a little from her in hopes that she would return to her senses, she just clutched me more fiercely and attacked me again, like a wild animal. She had fallen for my play-acting. She wanted to rid me of the embarrassment and shame she'd heard me express. That's what she said. She threw herself on me, and began saying how insanely she wanted me, and how long she had felt it. (104)

When the man reveals his awful experiences to his only friend, an undocumented Albanian migrant, the latter believes that the issue is simply that the middle-aged woman, who is described as having a mustache, is unattractive. The Albanian tells him just to close his eyes and use his imagination. We the reader, to whom the letter writer has revealed the darkest moments of his own past sexual torture, know that it is much more than that. But the reference to the woman's mustache suggests a connection between her and the mustachioed spy described in the first letter. The woman's appearance is not the issue; it is her desire to peer into her resistant lover's soul, which is marred by a past she cannot even begin to imagine. Perhaps she, as a European woman, is even trying to symbolically possess him, an Arab man she sees as exotic, in a subconscious act of Orientalism. On a night when he is asleep and she rubs up against him aggressively to initiate sex, he is taken off guard, completely loses control, and strangles her.

It is possible to read the relationship between the writer of the third letter and the European woman alongside that of the humanitarian liberal and the refugee. Some consumers of refugee stories seek narratives in which an utterly vulnerable victim is rescued and given a second chance at life, an opportunity for the Other to become incorporated into the Self. Other audiences look to refugee narratives to reinforce their beliefs in the moral superiority of their nations over those that would expel such poor souls. Aikins writes: "The refugee is freedom's negative image; she illustrates the story of progress that we tell ourselves" (124). The violent rejection of romanticized humanitarian pity that is displayed in the third chapter of Barakat's

novel can be read as a cautionary tale that warns against such approaches towards refugees, and against Western demands that they deliver satisfying narratives. Here, a novel of migration *writes back* against “grand geopolitical narratives that focus on the refugee’s reformation, a perspective that provides an alibi and a distraction for the continuation of imperial endeavors.”

(August 23)

The various iterations of confession and surveillance explored above imbue Barakat’s novel, and the real-life environment of asylum seekers in Europe, with a temporality that is stretched and nearly frozen in a *now* that is pregnant with possibility for a dreadful or harmonious future, one that is indefinitely locked away on one side of the border or the other. To counteract this imposed waiting, which is infused with the psychological pain of surveillance and the physical pain of exposure to precarious conditions, some migrants opt to change their orientation to the waiting itself, redirecting their focus away from the “not yet” and back toward the now. Various alternative orientations to waiting, including “distituent potential,” “waiting out,” with its emphasis on resilience (Hage), and waiting not as measuring the amount of time passing (*chronos*) but as watchfulness and wakefulness for moments of potential opening (*kairos*) (Khosravi 206), may serve as strategies of resistance for asylum seekers. Scholars should join migrants in such resistance to states’ systems of temporal manipulation by re-orienting ourselves away from the assumed “natural” logic of triumphalist progress.

CONCLUSION

Through their temporal modes and thematic content, *Gallows of Darkness* and *Night Mail* challenge the notion that there is an end in sight for migrants via the European asylum regime or membership in European society as it is currently structured. Against the classic narrative arc of rising action → climax → falling action, the novels present alternative chronotopes — *Gallows*

of Darkness with its spiral of “the whirlpool of the wastes” and, on the other hand, its emphasis on regeneration and cosmic time, and *Night Mail* with its pre-apocalyptic confessions in liminal spaces of non-arrival. While some of the novel’s individual characters do show development, all of their hopes are ultimately dashed. Along the treacherous roads that the migrant characters take, the promised progress of refuge in Europe is uniformly revealed to be a mere mirage on the horizon. Still, no matter how harrowing the road is, and despite many of its destinations being as unsparing as its points of origin, the mirage somehow remains relentlessly enticing. The powerful chronotope of the refugee narrative — disintegration → transition → integration — can be as captivating to asylum seekers as it is to European humanitarians, if not more so.

While the works are uncompromising in their repudiation of Europe’s “promise,” both offer some small degree of consolation, albeit in forms that satisfy neither migrants’ yearnings nor Western expectations. In my reading of the ending of *Gallows of Darkness*, Hajar does not arrive in a world of justice and opportunity, but rather in a barren land whose cultivation will only come in the form of a miracle, one whose creative power she will have to help produce. The ending of *Night Mail* is even less optimistic. A postman is holed up in the abandoned post office of a war-torn city. He is running out of food and spends his last days reading and sorting the letters that were never delivered to their addressees. “I might die before anyone reaches this post office,” he says (197). Perhaps the office will be hit by a bomb and the letters will all go up in flames. But even if someone else did find the letters, how could they be delivered when so many of the houses to which they were addressed have been destroyed? And even for the odd house that remains, how will it be found when the victors of the war have changed all the names of the streets? (195). But — and this is the only hint of consolation — at least the letters have been read at all, if not by their intended reader. The enemy has not yet achieved total oblivion.

This is where fictitious migrant narrators fill a gap left by real-life asylum seekers who are structurally barred from challenging the dominant temporality of triumphalism. In their asylum interviews, interactions with aid workers, and in media interviews, many of them learn that the most effective tactic is to stick with linear narratives of past victimhood, current personal development, and future potential to provide benefits to European society. Internally, however, asylum seekers may adopt mental and emotional orientations that resist gravitation towards the “not yet” in order to be resilient in the waiting game that is imposed upon them by the state, but they dare not risk their status by broadcasting disqualifying personal histories or by publicly giving the lie to the myths of progress upon which the asylum system is built.

Recent scholarship has warned that researchers of contemporary unauthorized migration may unintentionally reproduce triumphalist narratives, in what Kari Anne Drangslund calls “methodological nationalism.” To combat this tendency, the authors of the edited volume *Waiting and the Temporality of Irregular Migration* argue that scholars should change the ways we think about migrant waiting. Shahram Khosravi writes that migrants

are not waiting for a chance to belong but rather to participate. Unlike the concept of “belonging,” which has connotation to possession [...], the will to participate is the opposite. It is not a request for benevolence. Rather the contrary, it is a refusal to ‘belong,’ that is, “to be the property of” someone else. (206)

I agree that scholars should be skeptical of framings that situate national belonging⁵⁸ as the ideal end of the asylum process. And in reorienting towards the ideal of participation, we will discover that receiving asylum is not a condition of its possibility. In fact, asylum seekers may participate in many projects — political, artistic, communal — while they wait for a decision. Such participation does not eliminate deep-seated structural inequalities that work to disadvantage

⁵⁸ I am not opposed to the concept of belonging itself, however. In Chapter Three, I take up the question of the search for alternatives to national and tribal belonging in processes of refugee subject formation.

unauthorized migrants, but it does demonstrate possibilities for movement and exchange — which need not be progress- or capital-oriented. But migrants cannot participate freely while what they say and how they present themselves is restricted to the framework of refugeehood as it is most commonly understood. In engaging with refugee interlocutors and reading refugee literature, scholars must work to level the rhetorical playing field. Additionally, a change of focus from belonging to participation naturally helps to discourage reification, such that migrant subjects are not primarily seen as *types* but as *actors*.

In this chapter, I have endeavored to facilitate the participation of contemporary Arabic migration literature in scholarly discourse of migrant temporalities, a discussion to which it had yet to contribute. As more and more literary works are published by the great number of migrant authors who have personal experience with 21st-century border regimes, and as these works and authors gain in visibility, might the foundations of the dominant, linear narrative of Europe's promise to asylum seekers begin to crack? And if they were to crumble, would the rules of the game change? Would asylum seekers become freer to display the breadth of complexity in their lived experiences and ways of being in the world?

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~Interlude~

Amin's Story

The following is taken from an interview I conducted with a young Afghan asylum seeker I am calling Amīn, whom I met doing fieldwork in Greece. Amin became one of my closest interlocutors, and I write more about him and our interactions in Chapter Four. In 2022, long after we had last seen each other in person in 2020 (although we had kept in touch), I asked him over WhatsApp if he would tell me the story of his migration from Iran to Greece, since I did not have a complete account of that from our recorded interviews. I requested that he use WhatsApp's voice messaging feature to record himself telling his story. I also asked him a few specific questions that pertained to the topic of Chapter Three of my dissertation. Some of these questions are included below. Instead of recording himself telling his story, Amin decided to type out his answers and send them to me in text form. His English text has been edited for clarity.

We left Iran at the end of 2015. I was 18 at that time, dreaming about my future and working part-time in a restaurant. It was in the middle of summer, and late in my shift I received a call from the hospital and they said that my father had had a really bad injury. I ran to the hospital and found him in the bed, covered with blood and with a broken hip. He looked like a dead body, but his eyes were open and staring at his family. As an illegal refugee in Iran, with no legal rights, he needed eight surgeries and we (his family) had to spend our life savings to pay for his treatment. That was a complete governmental scam. Because we were Afghan, we were not treated equally to Iranians and other foreigners. Because of this, and because of my father's

disability, there was no future for us in Iran and no one to provide financial support for the family. There was no other choice but Europe and it was a good time to travel there.⁵⁹

My mother, my sister, and I left for Europe, leaving my father behind. The plan was for him to join us later. I basically took on the role of the man of the house — an emotional supporter of my mom and a protector of my sister. I had to carry all the weight on my shoulders by myself.

I had to lead the way as we traveled from Iran to Greece. With one hand I held my sister's and mom's hand. With the other hand I had a map and a phone to call the smuggler. As we were walking, with me as the leader of my family at just 19 years old, it felt like walking in a desert, and all our material belongings — shelter, money, water, food, warm clothes — seemed as valuable as gold. The ground was like a thirsty monster that was pulling all my weight down towards it, trying to suck us in and drown us.

We arrived to Greece via Chios island. After waiting for two days for a ferry ticket, we ended up in Athens.

Two years later, my father arrived at Leros island in the Aegean Sea. It's unbelievable — he was disabled and could not walk for more than 30 minutes at a time. But with his strong will, he tried to cross the border on foot three times, and then tried three times by boat. The sixth time was a success.

I talked to my father on the phone and asked him the island's name, then traveled there. When I got there, I had no idea how much the Greek and European policies and legal behavior had changed in just two years. He was in a prison, but it was huge enough to be called a camp. I asked the authorities to let him move to Athens, but they told me that the new policy said that

⁵⁹ In late 2015, at the height of the so-called refugee crisis amid a mass exodus of Syrians from their home country, EU borders were for a brief window essentially open to migrants (see Aikins 3-4).

everyone who arrives on an island needs to conduct his asylum application there, and either be recognized as a refugee or deported back to Turkey. We tried to register him for family reunification and it did not work.

The police guard was friendly there. I talked with him in Greek and he very bluntly told me that they don't give a shit about who you are or what solution you are looking for. He told me there would be no way to get my father out of the detention center now, even with UNHCR support. It wasn't possible. The law was forcing every single person to apply for asylum in Greece or be deported back to Turkey. Eventually, with no other choice, we all applied for asylum in Greece and after six months my father received a positive decision and was finally able to join us on the mainland.

After seeing all the responsibility I took on when we were separated, my father was shocked by who I'd become. He couldn't believe how much change is possible in a person in just two years. I had turned from an 18-year-old boy into a full-grown man with very big responsibilities.

I asked Amin what "being a man" means to him.

Being a man means being able to know what — or who — is right and wrong, and to choose what needs to be done among all the available options. It means making the changes that need to be made in order to survive in the new environment. It means accepting reality.

In late 2019-20, Amin had decided that instead of continuing his travels to northern Europe, as had been the family's plan, he preferred to stay in Greece. He had already learned a decent

amount of Greek, and he had refugee status there, along with an interpreter job. He resolved to go through the long process of obtaining Greek and therefore EU citizenship. That way he could eventually live anywhere he wanted in Europe. His family, however, had other plans. They were resolved to continue their travels and insisted Amin come with them.

With the amount that I had grown, I was shocked that I wasn't able to take a stand against my family's decision. This was the family that I had sacrificed all my energy and time for, and I was attached to them. I also started thinking that there was no promising future in Greece or a job that could keep me there. So I agreed to go with them.

Amin and his family moved on to Germany, where they have applied for refugee status. Given the Dublin Regulation, it is still an open question whether they will be able to stay there in the long term.

I asked Amin: Would you say that you see a connection between self-discovery and being a refugee?

To some extent, yes. Through my experience as a refugee I was able to discover all the abilities that I had that I was not aware of, or those that I doubted in myself. To some extent, no, because this lifestyle has determined my entire future path for me, and it is going to shape me and my attitude as I go on in life. So if I had been able to choose not to be a refugee, I don't know who I could have been or how far I could have gone.

I asked: How does your search for your own authentic self relate to your family's search for a stable home and life?

It relates a lot. My family is searching for a safe and stable life and I am searching for inner peace in order to find my true self, and to become more stable and self-assured.

*

Neyaz's Story

The following is taken from an interview I conducted with Neyāz, a young Afghan asylum seeker I met in Greece, while volunteering at Finikis camp in Athens. We met in a park on a Sunday, a day I did not come to the camp, and we recorded a 70-minuted interview (in English). The following are his responses, edited for clarity and cohesion, with my interview questions removed.

I'm Neyaz. I'm 20 years old if I'm not mistaken — because I don't really know my birth date.⁶⁰

And I came to Greece about one year ago, a little more than one year ago.

I was a refugee from the moment that I was born.

I don't really know where I was born, because at that time there was a war in the place where my family was living, between the Taliban and other forces. My family was trying to find a place to live and they were on the move. I don't really know where I was born. Maybe Afghanistan or Pakistan. I have never asked my family about it.

⁶⁰ Neyaz later told me that he did in fact miscalculate, and he was actually 21 at the time of recording. It is common for Afghans not to know their exact birth dates. See Sieff.

My family traveled to Iran from Afghanistan. They first traveled to Pakistan and then they moved to Iran after a while. And, as I said, I was a refugee. It's not something new to me. We didn't have a very good life.

We were living in Tehran. I remember we were living with my grandparents, and they have a really huge family. Twelve or 13 children. You could say my childhood among my grandparents and my uncles and my aunts — it was great. But after that we were separated. My father had a job opportunity and we had to move away from my grandparents, and I think I was five years old at that time.

Things changed, and I was alone. It was not good. After we separated I had nobody — no friends, no family, no cousins, no nothing. There were some family problems. I was forced to stay in the home for a long time, like two years. Because they were afraid of, you know, dangers, because we were new to that part of the city and they wouldn't let me go out. Maybe because at that time we didn't have papers. But after maybe one or two years, we got papers and I went to school.

I went to school when I was six and two or three months, as I remember. I was not successful in making friends and when I started school. I wasn't able to do that. I'm not trying to offend anybody, but the kids there were so fascist, and it was hard to find friends among them. They thought that we [Afghans] were different from them. And maybe that they were better. We had a different home, we had a different language — different dialect, different accents — and I don't know why they couldn't understand this. But when we got older I had a lot of Iranian friends who— we were so great together.

Being a refugee in Iran is completely different from being a refugee in Greece or in other European countries. Because you don't have an ID or any other documents in Iran. Only an

ausweis⁶¹. I don't know the English word. And we couldn't use it anywhere. I couldn't even buy a SIM card or do anything, like have a bank account.

Iran → Turkey

I decided to leave Iran for... finding myself, for having an identity. There were many reasons for leaving. The first one was that I was stateless. I didn't have any Afghan documents or Iranian ones. And it was hard to live like that. When I finished high school I was trying to go to university. The field that I wanted to study was biology, and it was kind of banned for refugees to study in that field. But I don't know anything about it now because they are changing laws.⁶²

I left Iran with a family that was trying to go to Germany. They were in contact with the smugglers, so they arranged everything for me, and we just waited for them to call us. And when they called us we went to a place — its name is Azadi Tower,⁶³ if you know it. It's in Tehran. We had to travel secretly to the border, because with that card that I had in Iran, we could only travel in the city.⁶⁴ If you wanted to travel to another city, you had to go to a police station or something. We would have had to get a permit to travel. I never tried that. I don't know how it works.

⁶¹ Neyaz is apparently referring to an “Amayesh” card, but he is using the name “ausweis,” commonly used by refugees in Greece to refer to the “white card” or “International Protection Applicant’s Card.” For more on the Iranian card, see “Announcement on Services.” For more on the Greek card, see “After the Application.”

⁶² According to a Human Rights Watch report published in 2013, Afghan refugees were, at least at that time, “required to give up their refugee status prior to entering university and are barred from a variety of degree programs” (“Unwelcome Guests”). For a more current overview of education conditions for Afghan refugees in Iran, see Seddighi et al.

⁶³ The name Burj-e Āzādi means “Tower of Freedom.”

⁶⁴ Afghan refugees in Iran must apply for a special permit in order to travel outside the province in which they are registered (“Movement Restrictions”).

At one point in the journey I was in the trunk of a car for six or seven hours. I was alone in the trunk with about 10 backpacks, and it was really small. So I couldn't move, but I could breathe because they had fixed it that way. They fixed the cars so you could breathe in the trunk because most of the time there was more than one person in the trunk. Maybe four or five people, usually, but I was lucky because we had lots of backpacks, and I was alone there. The smugglers didn't let us drink water for a long time, because if we did we would need to pee. They always advised us not to drink water. Even if you are thirsty.

It was two or three in the afternoon when we started our journey [in Tehran]. And when we reached the [Turkish] border, it was about 4:00am. We stayed there for three days, in a village whose name I don't know. It was very anonymous. After those three days the smugglers came, and we got in cars and went to the mountains near Turkey, and we were in those mountains for 10 or 12 days. We had no food, we had no water, we had no place to rest or even to charge our phones. We were just waiting for the smugglers to move us.

The smugglers had tents, but they only let families sleep there. For one or two nights, I was alone in the middle of mountains. And there were a lot of wild animals. I don't know if they were dogs or wolves, and I didn't know what to do if they attacked me. So I just decided to sleep.

The smugglers are completely different from other people. They have guns, they can beat you, they can insult you. They can do anything to you and you can't question them. They took my backpack, and I had many things in it. My clothes, all of my stuff. I even had money. I asked them several times to give it back, but they told me they had lost it.

Today I have a roommate, and he didn't have enough money to afford and to pay a smuggler. So he worked with the smugglers, and he drove a boat for them several times. That way he wouldn't have to pay them. He would drive the boat toward Greece, then the naval police

would force them back to Turkey, and they tried again and again and again. I don't know, maybe six or seven times. He was forced into that decision because he had the money at first, but one of the smugglers stole it. And he was forced to work with them because he couldn't stay in Turkey any longer. There are a lot of people who do things that are *not from their real*⁶⁵ — they don't want to do it, but they have to.

We tried to cross the border from Iran to Turkey about three or four times. We would walk a long distance and after a while we would have to come back, because the border police prevented us from crossing. They shot at us. My mother's cousin was shot in the leg, and they deported him to Afghanistan. In that moment, I was so lucky that they were ahead of us. We were in the very back, so we could escape. I don't really know whether it was the Iranian or Turkish border police who shot him, because the group he was in was so far ahead of us. They were at the top of the mountain and we were in the valley, so we just escaped back toward Iran.

Turkey → Greece

When we eventually arrived in Turkey, we went to a city named Düzce. I was with that same family that I mentioned for about 10 days, maybe less. I told them that I had to leave them, that I couldn't stay in Turkey anymore.

So I found a smuggler, and they told me to be careful, because now I was going to be alone. The smuggler I found was a drug trafficker, too. He had a room, or a house I guess, something like that for his passengers. I was in his room for three or four days. I was locked in that room, and had no food and no money. I begged the smugglers to buy me food. They told me that I had to pay first, and I told them, "I don't have any money. I have to call my family to get

⁶⁵ My emphasis. I have decided not to edit this slightly grammatically incorrect phrase because I think that, as is, it encapsulates the argument I have been making about unauthorized migrants feeling compelled to take unsavory actions and craft artful narratives as a means of survival and/or to stave off deportation.

money. So let me leave, and I will come back with money.” But they didn't let me. I had only one meal a day.

I was very sick in that moment, because as I said, we had been in the mountains between Iran and Turkey, and it was so cold there. We had no blankets, no warm clothes. I got so sick. And when I was in that room, my situation got worse, because I had no medicine and not enough food.

There were a lot of people who were coming into that house to buy and smoke drugs. And I couldn't stay in that situation. I knew that the smuggler was not actually trying to help me cross the border, because one of the guys in that room who knew my smuggler told me that he was trying to use me, and he told me that I was in danger.

So I managed to escape from that home after four days. As I said, the people there were addicts, and they were high. The smugglers would lock the door every day, and they would hide the key, but in that moment [on the fifth day] the key was right in the lock. The people there were so high, and I told them that I was going to the hospital. One of the guys said, “That’s okay, go and then come back.” And I opened the door and I just ran.

I don't know. I ran. My phone didn't have a SIM card, and I tried to find a phone to call my family. I could only remember my uncle's number in that moment. And he was not answering.

When you’re escaping, and when you’re trying to find a solution, and you can’t get hold of anyone, it’s so hard.

After he finally picked up, I explained my situation to him, and he told me to wait. After a one or two hours, he called me back. He told me to stay in that location and someone would pick me up.

My uncle called his other friends who were in Turkey, those who were in contact with smugglers. After about two hours, someone my uncle knew picked me up and took me to his house. I was still very sick, and I couldn't go to a hospital because I didn't have that Turkish document — I forget its name... Kimlik? But he managed to buy me some medicine, and he found me another smuggler. He was also working with that smuggler, but at the time I didn't know that.

I waited about two days for my family to transfer more money to Turkey for my new smuggler. The guy who I was staying with took me to the park every day, and I didn't know why. I found out later that he was using me as a cover to buy or sell drugs. To have someone there with him, so no one would suspect him. Later, when I was about to leave for Greece, I asked him, "Why were we going to the park every day?" He told me he was selling meth and other drugs, and he said it in a very casual way, like nothing had happened. I felt betrayed, because he used me, and if the police caught me with him, I don't know what would have happened to me. Maybe jail, or maybe they would have deported me to Afghanistan.

When I found out that the money had been transferred, I left that same night. We [i.e., Neyaz and other migrants] got in the car around 9:00pm. By midnight, we were in the jungles near Greece's border, near Edirne city. It's in the northwest of Turkey. And we had to stay there for a while because the Greek border police were patrolling in that area. We had to sleep on the mud, and it was raining in that moment.

After three or four hours, we moved again, and it was 4:00 or 5:00am. I don't remember exactly. We walked, and we were next to a river. I don't know exactly the name of that river. It's the river that separates Greece from Turkey, and it's kind of a border.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Neyaz seems to be referring to the river that is called Meriç in Turkish and Evros in Greek, a river that forms much of the border between Greece and Turkey.

We crossed the river with a boat, and it was about six or seven in the morning. It started to get light out, so we had to sleep in the jungle because it was too dangerous to move in the daylight. We started moving again at 11:00pm. I remember that because I asked one of the guys who had a mobile phone. We were near a village inside Greece, and the smuggler gave us a paper [a document] so that we could buy bus tickets. I was the first one he gave that paper to. And he showed me the place where I had to buy a ticket. It was a fake paper. There was a picture on it and it looked completely different from me. It was a fat guy [Neyaz laughs]. And I told him, “I can’t buy a ticket with this one.” He said, “It’s okay, just go on. There will be no problem for you.”

So I went to the bus station to buy a ticket to go to Thessaloniki. I couldn't speak — I couldn't even talk in that moment, because I was so afraid of people. The guy at the ticket booth was a Greek man, and he said something in Greek and I didn't understand. He was an old man and he was frowning at everybody, and he didn't care about my situation in that moment. He just looked at that paper, and— anyone would know that the paper was fake because everything was blurry and because of the picture. But maybe he didn't care about the paper. I just said, “Thessaloniki” and I showed him the money, and he took my money and he gave me back the change. Then he gave me the ticket and I just got out of there.

I waited for the bus, and when it came I just showed my ticket to the driver. About six hours later I was in Thessaloniki, and I bought another ticket from Thessaloniki to Athens. Another six hours later I was in Athens, and it was 6pm.

I had no documents because the police didn't arrest me in Thessaloniki. Usually, police arrest most of the immigrants in Thessaloniki and give them a police note so that they can stay, maybe for one or two months or more than that. But the police didn't give me one; I was lucky,

or, I don't know, unlucky, that the police didn't arrest me. I didn't see any police officers on the way. So I was here without documents.

Life in Greece

For the first few months in Greece I was living in a house and I had to pay rent. Then I ran out of money, and I had to figure out what to do. I had to find a new home. My situation was not very good. I was outside for two or three days without money, without food.

There were some buildings in Exarcheia. It's an area in Athens. Exarchia is anarchist territory. And they used to occupy buildings and give them to migrants.⁶⁷ They call them “squats.” I went to one of those buildings and I asked for a place to live. They said they only accepted families. The guys in front of the building were Kurdish and Turkish and they didn't understand Farsi. And I was trying to talk to one of those guys, one of the Kurdish guys, since he could speak a little Farsi because he had lived in Iraq. So he could kind of understand what I was talking about, and he was translating for the others. This Kurdish guy was not in charge — he was just trying to help with translation. I was just begging them and at the last moment I was crying. I was in such a bad situation. I was not acting. I didn't give them much information about myself, really. I just told them, “I have no money. I have nowhere to stay. I have nothing,” and finally they accepted and they just let me through.

I was living in that squat for, I don't know, five or six months. Then I was arrested, because the police are trying to close down all those squats now.

It was early in the morning, 4:00 or 5:00am. They occupied the building and they arrested all of us. And they moved us to the police station. They didn't ask me anything there. They just

⁶⁷ Greek police have been cracking down on the Exarcheia neighborhood and its squats since 2019. See Crabapple.

asked for documents, and I didn't have any documents in that moment. So they just took my information — my name, my age. And they asked about my nationality and that sort of stuff.

They moved us to a detention center, and I was there for about 24 or 25 days. I don't remember really.

Applying for asylum

I had to apply for asylum,⁶⁸ because if I didn't, I didn't know what would happen to me. I waited in the detention center for an interview.⁶⁹ That day, they took my fingerprints and they asked again for my information: my name, my nationality, my family name, and the reasons that I left my country. In that moment, I told them the truth. The only thing I lied about was my age. I wanted to tell them I was underage, so I would be freed from the detention center sooner. So I just lied about my age, nothing else.

I wish I— I had to lie, because the reasons that I had were not enough. I just told them about my situation in Iran and what I'd been through. I didn't have enough information in that moment. The reasons for getting asylum must be about danger. You must be in danger. I don't know. I was not in danger. My reasons were not enough. My reasons were economical, and it was not enough for them. And I don't know if I will be accepted with those reasons. I don't know.

⁶⁸ According to the Dublin Regulation, asylum seekers must apply for asylum in the country by which they entered the EU. If migrants are apprehended in an EU country without documents, they can be deported back to their country of entry. A common tactic is for unauthorized migrants to avoid having their fingerprints taken in Greece so that there will be no record of them in the system, thus allowing them to apply for asylum in more desirable, northern European countries. However, due to the Dublin system's dysfunctionality, and Greece's inability and/or unwillingness to bear the brunt of the migration burden, some migrants have succeeded in obtaining asylum from a "second" EU country. See "The Dublin Regulation."

⁶⁹ Neyaz is referring to the initial asylum interview, in which the applicant formally requests asylum and receives a White Card (*ausweis*).

I don't know what I will say when I go in for my second interview. I have to figure it out. I have to find some reasons. As I said, we have to lie. We have to. Because if we don't, they will deport us. It's not easy. I mean, you have to pretend. You have to. You have to say that you are someone else, even though you are not. It has not been easy for me. It's not. As I said, I am here for other reasons. They might not care about my reasons. They're different from the reasons that we have to say.

The asylum interview lasted for about 30 minutes or a little longer. There was no translator or interpreter present. The woman just called I-don't-know-where and asked for an interpreter. So I was on the phone listening to what the interpreter was saying and I had to respond in Farsi, over the phone [through the interpreter].

And after I answered all of the questions, they let me go. And, I don't know, maybe 10 days later I was free. They let me out of the detention center, and I got a police note for 10 days. So I had 10 days to get my applicant card [i.e., White Card]. For those 10 days, I had no place to stay. So I called one of my friends who was with me in the squat, and he suggested that I come to live in the refugee camp with him for a while. At first, the plan was just to stay in the camp for a few days, until I found another place. But I'm still staying with him in his room now.⁷⁰

Final thoughts

Honestly at first I wanted to reject your request to interview me, but I was thinking about it and I thought that my voice must be heard. Thank you for interviewing me.

⁷⁰ Neyaz was never given permission to live in the refugee camp where I met him. He simply lived there unofficially, staying as a permanent guest in the "ISO box" storage container housing his friend who was an official camp resident. Refugee camp housing was extremely limited, usually reserved for families who were transferred in an official capacity from the camp islands. Because Neyaz was not legally a camp resident, he had to keep a low profile, especially when there was police presence in the camp.

I just wanted to say that we are in a situation that's completely different from what European people or Americans have to deal with. I'm trying to be accepted by a European country where I can find a job. I want to go to university and continue my education.

The governments that are ruling are deciding for the refugees. I think they have to change their policy. Even though they know that refugees have to lie about their situations, they still don't change their policy. The strict policies are always the reason that the refugees lie about themselves. And I think the governments have to make a way for these people, for people like me, to find a job or to study. To make it easier for them.

When I was in that detention center, I just wanted to get out, and I asked the translator that was there, "What happens if I don't apply for asylum." He told me, "It's better for you to seek asylum here in Greece." So I was forced to apply in that moment. Now I have fingerprints here in Greece. And, I don't know, if I moved to another country, they might send me back to Greece. I think they have to change their policy.

In May 2021, Neyaz decided to continue his journey instead of continuing his asylum application in Greece. He and a few friends crossed into Albania, and then on to Bosnia and Croatia. He says they traveled without smugglers, instead "taking tips" from fellow travelers and those who "have gone the same way" in the past. I stopped hearing from Neyaz for a few weeks, but in mid-June, he sent an update over Facebook Messenger:

Hey

Sorry I didn't talk to for a long time.

We crossed the slovania border but we were arrested and the border police deported us back to bosnia.

They took our stuff, phones, clothes, etc. Left us in nowhere in jungles. We walked barefoot for a day till we found a family who helped us and showed us the way

I'm in a place called [redacted], it's near the Croatian border. I'm gonna wait for a couple of days to find a better way. I'll let you know about the rest of my plan in coming days.

Neyaz said the border police “get everything” when they steal migrants’ belongings. They “even search baby diapers to find money or phones.” Luckily, Neyaz had left most of his money in Athens with a trusted friend who could wire it to him. After taking a few days to regroup, he and his companions continued their journey. They spent four days hiking through forests and made it to Bosnia.

Soon after experiencing this awful setback, Neyaz received bad news from Iran. His mother had just died. With no way to travel there to pay his respects, and still being in dire straits on his migration journey, he felt entirely dejected. He sent me more messages:

How am I supposed to get rid of nihilistic thoughts?

Everytime I try to change this shitty life and be optimistic it sucks

My best attempt at responding to these messages with notes of sympathy and encouragement surely offered little in the way of comfort.

Eventually, Neyaz made it to Italy, and then to France, and then to Belgium, where he applied for refugee status despite the Dublin Regulation. As he goes through the lengthy asylum process, he is living in a refugee camp and studying French. Neyaz says he continues to struggle with waves of depression, for which he is seeking treatment.

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CHAPTER THREE

Rites of Unauthorized Passage: Young Afghan Men Coming of Age in Flight — And in Narrative Return

My thoughts have disappeared somewhere over the border.

—Asef Soltanzadeh

“Disappearing into Flight”

INTRODUCTION

In the interlude that precedes this chapter, a seemingly irreconcilable tension between selfhood and belonging comes to the fore. Both Neyāz and Amīn were born into refugeehood — a tell-tale sign of the decades of violent turbulence in Afghanistan that have been characterized by layers of foreign military intervention, schismatic insurgencies, and rigid religious conservatism. Neyaz and Amin’s struggle for selfhood involves separating themselves from the circumstances of their birth such that they can make autonomous ethical choices free of direct compulsion by family, society, or state. But at the same time, their struggle for belonging requires a relationship with, and responsibility to, the very families, societies, and states whose control over them they must resist in their quest for selfhood.

This complex negotiation between selfhood and belonging is difficult for any young person, but much more so for migrants traversing ever-morphing locales and obstacles and coming into a wide variety of actors and ideologies. Amid movement through the borderscape, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion have especially high stakes for young migrants. Because of the high barriers to entry into the typical social spheres of citizen youth (such as schools, extracurricular activities, part-time work, etc.), migrant youth may, through enticement or

force, be pulled into less savory circles like smuggler and drug gangs or hardline religious groups. And while coping with exclusion is difficult for youth of all backgrounds, its negative mental health effects combine with other challenging life circumstances for migrant youth, interfering with their psychosocial development.

From Neyaz's and Amin's narratives, we can see that the borderscape creates scenarios wherein the natural development of the individual young man in the coming-of-age process is disrupted by the borderscape as some elements are halted completely while others are forced prematurely into gear. For Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on the relationship between narrative and lived experience has informed much of this dissertation, a human subject can only be formed in the dialogical interplay between two distinct orientations to personal identity: *I-for-myself* (i.e., selfhood) and *I-for-others* (i.e., belonging). While societal pressures are necessary to constitute the subject, the subject must also retain the ability to make autonomous moral decisions and to express him or herself aesthetically (Bakhtin 22-27).⁷¹ In this chapter, I argue that the physical barriers that border regimes have erected between the homeland and the country of asylum manifest themselves as internalized boundaries that obstruct, sever, and repel connections between young migrants' senses of selfhood and belonging. Such connections are typically formed in the coming-of-age process and are vital for the development of ethical and aesthetic subjectivity. Building on the disjuncture between these elements of personal identity that Neyaz's and Amin's stories introduce, this chapter centers on the manifestations of the morphing borderscape in the psyches of young Afghan migrant men like them. And importantly, the chapter also illustrates the narrative efforts these migrants may take to transgress the psychic barriers that the borderscape implants between their internal conceptions of *I-for-myself* and *I-*

⁷¹ Bakhtin's conception of the subject is in turn inspired by Kant. See *Art and Answerability* 2, footnote 1.

for-others, thus forging new connections between their interrupted and damaged senses of selfhood and belonging. To put contemporary migration narratives like those of Amin and Neyaz in the broader context of Afghan youth migration over the past four decades, I place them alongside two Dari short stories by refugee authors about Afghan coming-of-age experiences amid the overlapping Soviet-Afghan War and Afghan Civil War of the 1980s and early '90s. The two stories are “*Sāl-hā-ye Barzakh wa Bād*” (“Years of Limbo and Wind”) by Sayed Eshaq Shojai⁷² and “*Qaside-ye Jost-o Jū*” (“Ode to the Search”) by Asef Soltanzadeh.⁷³ In these works, young Afghan men attempt to flee forced conscription in the Afghan army as they negotiate challenges of everyday life amid war, elusive personal needs and desires, and insurmountable barriers to belonging.

OUTCAST MASCULINITIES

Coming of age amid unauthorized migration is not an uncommon experience within the broader migration context. It was one embodied by dozens of migrant interlocutors with whom I interacted in Greece. While adolescent boys and young men in their teens and early twenties, traveling apart from their families, are prevalent across all migrant demographics, they are disproportionately represented among Afghans. In fact, Afghans make up the largest group of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Europe,⁷⁴ and almost all of these unaccompanied minors are boys (Echavez et al. 1). But the phenomenon of young Afghan men traveling without

⁷² This is the author’s preferred spelling of his name in Roman script. A transliteration of the Persian spelling of his name is *Sayyed Eshāq-e Shojā ī*.

⁷³ This is the author’s preferred spelling of his name in Roman script. A transliteration of the Persian spelling of his name is *Āsef-e Solṭānzādeh*.

⁷⁴ This has consistently been the case since at least 2008 (Lønning 317). In June 2022, 45% of all unaccompanied minor asylum applicants were Afghan (“Top Ten Citizenships”).

their families is not one that originated with the recent and ongoing large-scale migration of Afghans to Europe. Rather, the high number of young male migrants in the contemporary iteration of unauthorized Afghan migration is reminiscent of similarly high numbers in various past iterations, whose multiplicity is indicative of the depth and breadth of Afghanistan's instability over the past five decades.

During the years of the Soviet-Afghan War and the Afghan Civil War (1979-1992), the Afghan army lost up to 38,000 soldiers to desertion per year (Marshall 6). Many of these deserting soldiers — some of whom were minors as young as 15 (Meyerle et al. 26) — fled the country apart from their families. And even during periods of relative calm in some regions of Afghanistan, youth labor migration has been a common practice, with families sending teenage boys to work in neighboring Pakistan or Iran and depending on them to send money back home to support the family. This kind of migration has served as a rite of passage for Hazaras in the mountains of central Afghanistan, according to anthropologist Alessandro Monsutti. Temporarily leaving home, teenage boys prove their masculinity; when they return to Afghanistan a few years later, some are seen as being newly eligible for marriage (182). This history of youth migration has made the phenomenon more normalized in Afghan society, and this is one contributing factor among others that could help explain the higher percentage of unaccompanied Afghan migrant minors compared to, for example, unaccompanied Syrian migrant minors.

Despite the disproportionate numbers of male Afghan youth migrants entering Europe, readers may still find themselves asking the legitimate question of why this chapter should focus exclusively on male coming-of-age narratives. At the time of writing (October 2022), it is young Afghan *women* who are rightly the object of widespread international concern, especially given that the year-old Taliban government has thus far banned secondary education for girls in

Afghanistan. Studies of contemporary Afghan women's coming-of-age literature, especially in the context of the US invasion, the Taliban, and multiple waves of *family* migration that have occurred in addition to solo migration by young men, would certainly be welcome and highly fruitful.⁷⁵ I would especially be interested in reading anthropological or literary accounts of unaccompanied Afghan migrant minor girls, some of whom dress and act as boys as a means of disguise and protection on their migration journeys.⁷⁶ But these topics are beyond the scope of this dissertation, in part because of my lack of access to spaces in Greece in which I could conduct interviews with young Afghan migrant women (see my discussion in the Overview of Fieldwork and Sites section of the dissertation's introduction).

Even so, for many reasons, the coming-of-age stories and experiences of male Afghan migrants are compelling in their own right. Throughout the years-long asylum process, boys who arrive in Europe as unaccompanied minors grow into young men, at which point they are often still separated from support systems like family, education, or regularized work. Given this lack of support and prospects, some young Afghans, like migrants of other nationalities, get involved in gang or smuggler activity, which, however dangerous, may satisfy some of their needs for financial compensation and a sense of belonging. Those who are caught are in turn presented as proof that right-wing concerns about migrants are justified. This further sullies the reputation of young, single, Muslim migrant men, who already had to contend with an Orientalizing discourse that paints them as sexual aggressors and potential terrorists. Such discourse also further

⁷⁵ For recent literary studies and anthropological work on Afghan women, including young women and girls, living in Afghanistan and Iran, see *Women, War and Islamic Radicalisation in Maryam Mahboob's Afghanistan* by Faridullah Bezhani and *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* by Zuzanna Olszewska.

⁷⁶ One instance of this type of disguised traveling is described in Aikins 243. It is somewhat reminiscent of the phenomenon of *bacheh posh*, "boy-dressing," in which some girls in Afghanistan and Pakistan are raised as boys before puberty so that they may work and attend school.

decreases the likelihood that young Afghan men will find a licit means of belonging among European society. Thus, as I showed in my first chapter, there is a chance that projecting these stereotypes onto migrants may have the unintentional consequence of bringing the imagined stereotypes into actual existence. This is what is at stake in the negotiations young male Afghan migrants in Europe make regarding their personal experiences of selfhood and belonging.

Another reason I focus on young men and masculinity in this chapter is that, damaging stereotypes aside, the truth is that the overwhelming majority of violence in Afghanistan since the late 1970s, as with conflicts all around the world, has been committed by men: male US and coalition army invaders, male bomber and drone pilots, male mujahideen, male Taliban, male insurgents, male suicide bombers, male Afghan soldiers. This is not to say that women never take part in combat or carry out acts of political violence, or that women leaders are not involved with devastating policy decisions made by invading countries, or that women in society do not contribute to cultural, economic, and ideological factors that perpetuate violent conflict. It is simply to point out the perhaps obvious fact that physical acts of war violence are performed almost entirely by men — and young men in particular. In the interest of understanding the impetus for this masculinist violence and learning how it may best be quelled, both in individuals' experiences and in societies more broadly, studies like this one, which centers on young Afghan men and their personal narratives as they flee violence at home and yet encounter more violence abroad, are not only justified, but necessary.

'Our own men'

Before delving into the two main short stories that are the focus of this chapter, I will introduce some of the points of tension that emerge around the question of Afghan masculinities by treating an intriguing essay on the subject by a prominent Afghan refugee woman author, Aliyeh

Ataei.⁷⁷ As one who has borne the direct impact of violent masculinities as they relate to Afghanistan, and as one who is able to reflect on the issue from a position adjacent to, but outside of it, she makes a valuable contribution to the discussion. In her work of creative nonfiction “Bullet in Our Conversation,” Ataei, who lives in Iran, recalls a conversation with another Afghan refugee friend, Salma, who lives in Switzerland. In an online video call, the two of them discuss the health of their babies, both boys about seven months old. The conversation becomes contentious when the subject turns to the babies’ fathers and the extent to which their nationalities will manifest themselves in their children as they grow into men. Ataei’s husband is Iranian and Salma’s husband is American, and Salma makes the mistake of suggesting that Ataei’s baby’s thinness is the result of his Iranian stock. Salma’s son, by contrast, seems both brawnier and brainer to Ataei, at least through the computer screen.

Ataei is offended by Salma’s comment, and snaps back: “At least Iranians ... never rained bombs on Afghanistan, unlike some countries.” An argument ensues about who are worse: Iranian men or American men. Even though no one in Salma’s American husband’s family has fought in Afghanistan, she defends the American invasion, suggesting that Americans are heroes for fighting “for the Afghan nation.” Why won’t the Iranians “help” the Afghans the way they Americans have? she asks. Ataei cannot believe her ears: she thinks of Americans as destroyers of Afghanistan, not its heroes. Still, she wonders to herself: “Why are we searching for other people instead of our own so-called men to defend our mother country? Where are our men anyway?” The ensuing exchange between the two women is revealing:

“Have you ever wondered where our own men are?” I challenge her. “How come it isn’t they who are our heroes instead of your Americans?”

⁷⁷ This is the established spelling of the author’s name in Roman script. A transliteration of the Persian spelling of her name is *‘Aliye-ye ‘Aṭāyī*.

[Salma] doesn't miss a beat, "Because they're not even the fathers of our children. If they were men, surely, we'd be their wives. But we're not, are we?"

Interestingly, despite the fact that they are dealing mostly with negative qualities of the different groups of men they are discussing — Iranians' perceived innate weakness, Americans' perceived innate brutality — they do not blame masculinity *itself* for Afghan men's failure to be "heroes." While Western observers might point to a *hyper*-masculinity among Afghan men in Afghanistan as a source of many of Afghanistan's troubles, particularly for women in the country, Ataei and Salma instead identify *lack* of true manliness as being the problem.

Ataei continues reflecting: "For years, decades, Afghan men have not been the fathers of our children and we, the Afghan women of my generation, have been giving birth in the countries of strangers. I feel as frozen as the men of Afghanistan and as impotent." For Ataei, it seems that it is a kind of emasculation that makes Afghan men ineligible husbands for her, Salma, and other diasporic women of her generation. True manliness involves taking responsibility for the safety of one's family. The impotence of Afghan men goes beyond that of a sexual and reproductive nature; more broadly, they are impotent in the face of outside intervention into their national "family." Here, as Salma compares herself to the men of Afghanistan, the reader senses that she has a small degree of empathy for them, but this quickly dissipates or turns to mere pity. Still, the problems of Afghan men are part and parcel of the problems of Afghanistan, and thus Ataei cannot insulate herself from them: "The reality of the absence of men, our own men, sits on my mind like the wreckage of war. It's as if for centuries we've been neutered as a people." The emasculation of Afghanistan's men is an existential issue for Afghans; Ataei suggests that the inability of Afghan men to *perform* their duties has caused bloodlines to be watered down. Afghans "as a people" cannot continue to exist into the future without men.

The essay ends with the two women at an impasse, yet still sharing in a mutual concern: their lingering postpartum wounds, both physical and psychological. Their Afghan sons have already hurt them, and continue to do so now: Ataei narrates: “I gently press Rasa to my breast, and he takes my nipple with a ferocity and a hunger I’ve never seen in him before. His first teeth came in some time ago and I imagine blood mixing with my milk. The wounds of these births, they are not the kind that heal.” The fact is that even without Afghan men for husbands, the two women have given birth to boys who will become Afghan men. How can they raise them to be different from their would-be Afghan fathers — to be strong but not oppressive, responsible but not controlling? Ataei seems to doubt whether such a thing is possible, and worries, despite her better judgment, that something in their very stock will inevitably make them like other Afghan men, who, worse than being incapable of defending Afghanistan and its women, also take an active part in the wounding. Ataei’s essay calls, implicitly, not for a dismantling of Afghan masculinity, but for a reexamination and perhaps even recreation of it. Therefore, in this chapter about young Afghan men who come of age while endeavoring to flee from the violence and instability of their homeland, I will examine the ways in which their narratives both critique violent masculinity in the Afghan context and gesture towards alternative masculinities.

Such critiques and gestures are valuable for Afghan diaspora communities that are quickly growing and developing new collective identities. But they are powerless, at least in the immediate term, to overcome violent patriarchal systems like those of the current Taliban government, or, for that matter, the American regime that depended in large part on so-called strongmen to keep insurgencies at bay in the country’s provinces.⁷⁸ These authoritarian forces seem impervious to critique, especially that of literary-aesthetic variety. Can systems of

⁷⁸ For more on US brutality in Afghanistan see Risen, who notes that “the warlords of Afghanistan ... were on the CIA payroll and ... the U.S. military relied upon [them].”

masculine domination ever be dismantled by anything other than violent masculinity? And if not, what is the use in dismantling such systems if other brutal ones are bound to rise from the ashes, as has repeatedly occurred in Afghanistan since the late 1970s?

Ataei's essay gets at a tension that is at the heart of many male refugee experiences. On one hand, leaving the home country at a time of war seems inherently unmanly, at least within the conservative logic that a man who abdicates his responsibility to protect his land and people is no man at all. On the other hand, staying in the homeland could initiate a different kind of unmanliness — the transformation from man into violent brute as a necessary means of survival in an environment ruled by brutality. Moreover, as refugees, men may feel emasculated by being in a position of not being able to provide for or protect their families, but instead needing to request assistance from others; the ensuing frustration can lead refugee men to find new, sometimes aggressive, ways to assert and prove their masculinity.⁷⁹ In such a predicament, how can alternative forms of masculinity emerge? In his article on convergences between classical Arabic poetry and modern exile literature, Tarek El-Ariss writes that a similar kind of brutality (which he identifies as *tawahhush*, or becoming-wild) can emerge in exile. The exile's return, then, brings about a situation in which the violence of the outside/wilderness/exile is turned against the violence of the inside/tribe/nation. The ensuing confrontation may bring about "other possibilities of the social, the political, and the human," El-Ariss writes, but adds that the exile himself is always sacrificed in the process (90).

While I find El-Ariss's article to be a useful point of departure for thinking about refugee masculinities and exilic return in literature, my interviews with young refugee men and readings of the stories discussed in this chapter lead me to a slightly more optimistic conclusion. When

⁷⁹ This notion of masculinity crisis among refugee men has been much studied, and a scholarly debate has emerged around the extent of its legitimacy. See for example Kukreja, Inhorn and Isidoros, and Donaldson and Howson.

considering alternative refugee masculinities, Amin’s definition of manhood — knowing right from wrong, accepting realities for what they are, making responsible decisions, and being able to adapt and survive in new environments — offers a place to start. And as we will see, Soltanzadeh and Shojai’s stories add more layers to this definition. The works exemplify the difficult task of negotiating seemingly contradictory “realities” about the exile’s selfhood and belonging. The stories suggest the possibility of a kind of narrative return to the homeland in which an exile finds ways to confront the brutality of the past not with brutality, but with self-reflection.

Ode, rite of passage, exile

The title of one of the two main short stories I discuss in this chapter, “*Qaṣīde-ye Jost-o Jū*” (Ode to the Search), alongside its protagonists’ prolonged journey across rural parts of Afghanistan, calls to mind the liminal desert journeys taken by the poetic speakers of the classical Arabic ode (*qaṣīdah*) — a poetic form that gained prominence in Persian literature in the centuries following the Muslim conquest of Iran. Looking back even further to the very genesis of the *qaṣīdah*, I rely upon the extensive literary-anthropological research of Suzanne Stetkevych, who understands the classical ode as stemming from, and being a symbolic manifestation of, the male rite-of-passage rituals of tribesmen in pre- and early-Islamic Arabia. For Stetkevych, the tripartite form of the *qaṣīdah* is akin to the three classical stages of the rite of passage identified by modern anthropologists. The *nasīb* or nostalgic prelude is analogous to the point of the male initiate’s separation from the tribe; the *raḥīl* or desert journey is analogous to the initiate’s period of liminality, in which he is subjected to challenges and must fend for himself, and in which neither the rules of boyhood nor manhood apply to him; and finally, the *fakhr* (pride in the tribe) or *madīḥ* (praise of the leader) are akin to the initiate’s “re-aggregation,”

or successful completion of the trials set out for him and his return to the tribe. At this point, he is celebrated as a full-fledged adult man, with all the privileges and responsibilities thereof.

Some rites of passage, however, are not completed. Stetkevych writes that *ṣu 'lūk* (brigand) poems are representative of cases in which youths are unable to return to their tribe as reaggregate males due to being exiled. She argues that the *su 'lūk* poem has a “symmetrically inverse” relationship with the classical ode. For example, where the ode typically ends with a communal feast, drinking scene, or hunt, the *ṣu 'lūk* poem might end with a violent raid that illustrates “the slaying of the enemy and the feasting of the wolves, hyenas, and vultures on their corpses” (70). Blood vengeance is the symmetrical inversion of pride in one’s tribe (*fakhr*) or praise of one’s leader (*madīh*). The *ṣa 'ālīk* were cast out of their tribes and never allowed to return, unlike aggregate males who, as a part of their tribal initiation, were only briefly, ritually outcast in order to soon rejoin the tribe as full-fledged adults. Thus, for Stetkevych, while the pre-Islamic ode is a literary parallel of the rite of passage, the *ṣu 'lūk* poem illustrates a “rite of passage manqué” (104), i.e., an incomplete, unfulfilled passage wherein reincorporation into society never occurs. El-Ariss takes up Stetkevych’s framework, describing processes of *tawahhush* and *tagharrub* (becoming-estranged) that transform the unaggregated exile into a kind of beast (64). It is with this insight in mind that he asks whether the beastly form of exilic return is the only one possible (90).

Writing this chapter a year after the fall of Kabul and the US-backed Afghan government to Taliban forces in 2021, El-Ariss’s question takes on a troubling layer of meaning. The Taliban is a group that itself emerged from exile. Thousands of refugees of the Soviet-Afghan War and Afghan Civil War of the 1980s and early 1990s, many of them raised as “students” in Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam madrassas in Pakistan (hence the Persian name *ṭālebān*), joined Mullah

Muhammad Omar Mujahid's newly formed military-religious movement. After being exiled again following the US invasion of 2001, the Taliban reformulated itself in a second state of exile, grew, and returned 20 years later to retake control. In their initial rise to power and in their recent resurgence, it can be said within this framework that the Taliban confront the brutal violence of warlords and invaders with their own beastly (*mutawahhish*) violence. This "savage" adjective becomes even more poignant given that, as El-Ariss notes, some Islamic fundamentalist groups have begun to embrace *tawahhush* — i.e., to legitimize "beastly" violence — "as a model ... to contest the discourse of Arab [read: Afghan] modernity and nationhood" (63-64).

But even if it is true that the Taliban's beastly violence has dismantled certain forms of existing violent domination when the group took control of Afghanistan, it has merely replaced them with yet other forms of violent domination (encouragement of domestic violence, forced marriage, deployment of morality police, etc.⁸⁰). If the exile can only return as a beast, does it not follow that the violence that produces exile is self-fueling, and thus, although its perpetrators and specific structures may be dismantled by beastly counter-violence, the violence *itself* will remain as long as practices of tribal, ethnic, religious, and national belonging remain exclusionary by nature?

In this chapter, I explore creative, rather than destructive, means of confronting exile-producing violence. Rather than returning as a beast, a refugee youth may find ways of transgressing the border wall that occupies his psyche, ways of countering the morphing influence of *tagharrub* and *tawahhush*. He may do this by building alternative connections to the homeland or forging links with new communities, whether diasporic or internationalist. The

⁸⁰ See for example Salome.

means of creative transgression that I am most interested in, and the one which will serve as the discussion's primary focal point for the rest of this chapter, is narrative. Can an exile "return" through narrative, not as a beast but as one who is searching for an alternative means of aggregation and thus something that might be called refugee subjectivity?

DEPICTIONS OF (ATTEMPTED) DEPARTURE AS NARRATIVE RETURN

The main works I analyzed in the first two chapters of this dissertation were published very recently (between 2017 and 2022) and deal specifically with highly contemporary migration phenomena. Breaking that trend in this chapter, I undertake close readings of two short stories written by authors living in exile and set during the spectacularly violent and societally splintering Soviet-Afghan War and Afghan Civil War of the 1980s and '90s. The current large-scale Afghan migration to Europe (beginning in the mid-2010s and continuing in the 2020s) is likely to produce a substantial collection of Afghan literature in the future, but it appears that such a collection has not yet materialized — at least not in terms of readily available published prose.⁸¹ On the other hand, a body of work centered on experiences of violence, displacement, and mass migration, particularly to Pakistan and Iran during the wars of the '80s and '90s, has been published.⁸² While this work has only "found a limited readership in Afghanistan itself" (Green 30), it has been read to a somewhat larger degree in Iran. Many of its works receive Persian-language reviews on book-rating websites like Goodreads and are discussed on global

⁸¹ However, Olszewska has written recently about Afghan diasporic poetry posted on social media on the topic of the 2021 fall of Kabul. See "If We Do Not Write Poetry."

⁸² Two anthologies of Dari short stories on the topic, which are representative of this collection of work, are *Kāj-hā wa Sarzamīn-i Āhak* (Pine trees and the land of lime), ed. Ziya Ahmad Siddiq-Afzali (Peshawar: Sayyed Jamāl al-Dīn, 1377/1999), in which "Years of Limbo and Wind" was published, and *Mohājerān-e Fasl-e Deltangī* (The Migrants of a Season of Anguish), ed. Sayyed Ishaq Shojai (Tehran: Hawze-ye Honarī, 1375/1997).

Persian-language media, including BBC Persian. However, this work has thus far received little-to-no scholarly attention in English, and the thematics of bordering and migration are prevalent in it, making it a fruitful object of literary research for this dissertation.

In Shojai's "Years of Limbo and Wind" (1375/1997), the main character and narrator is a young unnamed Afghan man who has recently been conscripted into the Soviet-backed state army. The story that unfolds takes the form of an immersive, disjointed self-reflection as the newly trained recruit lies awake at night in a military dormitory, dreading the dawn that brings with it his first day of regular military operations. The first memory he flashes back to is one of his most recent ones: his attempt, thwarted by Iranian border guards, to desert the army and join his family in Mashhad. After he relives several other memories more distant and immediate, the dawn inevitably breaks and he reluctantly reports for duty. Cut off from family and friends and closely surveilled by desertion-wary army officers, he has no access to the kind of belonging for which he longs. And as he marches with his unit in the glaring morning sun, his sense of selfhood disintegrates as his movements become robotic and his individual will succumbs to the commander's orders.

Soltanzadeh's "Ode to the Search" (1387/2009) also features a main character attempting to evade compulsory army service. This young man, Anwar, manages to flee Kabul before he is conscripted. He goes in search of his father, who is a mujahideen commander, in a rural part of the country replete with natural wonders the likes of which Anwar has never seen before. He eventually finds his father's militia group in the mountains, but his father himself remains elusive. The fighters tell Anwar he has gone to support his fellow mujahideen at another remote base. Anwar ventures further into the wilderness to that base, led by a guide who is the same age as him and who tells him unsettling truths about life as a mujahid. When they arrive at the base,

they are told that Anwar's father has just left on a guerrilla mission with a few other fighters. Meanwhile, the base is attacked by enemy forces, and Anwar gets his first real taste of war. He takes up his father's machine gun and proves to be a natural. After a full day of fighting, the mujahideen are awed by his innate skill and ask him to take care of his father's machine gun until he gets back. But Anwar declines, asking instead to be shown the way to Pakistan. Choosing to flee the country rather than fight in its civil war, he attains a degree of individuality *at the expense* of belonging.

Both stories lay out new, "morphed" iterations of the coming-of-age process, in which young men must contend with multiple notions of selfhood and layers of belonging that are often at odds with one another. Read against the backdrop of Stetkevych's analysis, three (not necessarily sequential) elements of the soul-searching journeys upon which the main characters of these two stories embark can be identified: circling, exposure, and (dis)integration. These themes may be common in coming-of-age narratives and experiences from a variety of contexts, but as I will show, they are amplified by the violent forces of war and the borderscape. Attending to the opposite outcomes of the two characters' attempted journeys, I take up Stetkevych's notion of "symmetrical inversion" to look at the positive and negative manifestations of these themes for Anwar, whose rite of passage is at least partially completed, and for the unnamed narrator of Shojai's story, whose passage seems doomed to be permanently "manqué."

In "returning" to their homeland, the implied authors⁸³ of these stories do not confront it with beastly violence, but, rather, negotiate linkages of belonging with it both by re-membering and reanimating it in their narratives and by contending with the repercussions of *its violence*

⁸³ I use the phrase "implied author" to emphasize that my discussion of exiled authors in this essay is based on my perception of them *as they emerge from their texts*. These versions of the authors that readers imagine do not necessarily correspond with the actual living authors' intentions, emotions, or biographies.

within themselves and others — including those who were unable or unwilling to leave. And as I will argue in the conclusion of this chapter, by returning through narrative, the implied authors of these works, who left Afghanistan to retain their individual selfhood, renew their efforts to foster and nourish senses of belonging which are continuously threatened by conditions of exile. The state of belonging that the act of narration may help them achieve — within the Afghan diaspora community, among Persian-language *littérateurs*, or perhaps within the widening canon of “world literature” — in turn firms up their “re-aggregation” under the banner of refugee subjectivity.

Circling / charkhīdan / ṭawāf

“Years of Limbo and Wind” and “Ode to the Search” are full of references to various types of swirling, spinning, twisting, and cycling motions relating to travel, spirituality, and violence. When describing protracted military conflict, particularly regarding wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, international Anglophone media often speaks of a “cycle of violence.” The phrase tends to refer to repetitive, predictable, tit-for-tat attacks over a long period of time, with no clear solution in sight. While somewhat useful as a descriptive shorthand, the phrase is problematic in that it tends to be used in a manner that obfuscates power dynamics. I have argued in this dissertation that the violence that produces war refugees is in large part built into the nation-state, but as El-Ariss shows, it is also built into tribal, factional, and sectarian systems of belonging (79). In Afghanistan, starting in the late 1970s, conflict stemming from the Saur Revolution and a series of coups and assassinations grew into a proxy war as the US funded anti-communist mujahideen rebels and the Soviet Union invaded and occupied the country. At this point the conflict spun entirely out of everyday Afghans’ control.

In “Years of Limbo and Wind,” Shojai repeatedly uses the imagery of spinning (*charkhīdan*) to describe the chaos in Afghanistan in general and the main character’s experience of it in particular. However, this spinning is not so much a reference to a “cycle” of repeated tit-for-tat violence as it is to a calamitous whirlwind — whence the *bād* (wind) in the story’s title. This *gerd-bād* (whirlwind) destroys lives and livelihoods and *mixes* things up, as friends and kin are separated and even become *de facto* enemies when mujahideen groups begin to fight one another in addition to fighting the state and the Soviets. To emphasize the totalizing nature of the destruction and to steer clear of the obfuscating connotations of the phrase “cycle of violence” in this chapter, I will speak instead of a “*gerd-bād* of violence.”

Shojai establishes Afghanistan as a wasteland through which physical and metaphorical whirlwinds pass. Near the end of the story, he illustrates the environment as an expression of the main character’s loss of all hope of escaping military service, and as an indication of the bleakness of Afghanistan’s present circumstances and future prospects:

Since yesterday, a racing wind has started to blow, in the broken branches and the old trunks of trees. It blows the dry grasses, the thorns and the sticks, everything dry and flimsy. Sometimes a whirlwind comes through, pulling thorns and sticks from the ground. Alley to alley, quarter to quarter, it sets things awhirl [*mī-charkhānad*] and afterwards continues its vagabondage, wending its way on an unknown path. A pack of dogs is raging in the garden beyond the wall. It almost sounds as though the dogs have pounced upon some stranger in their midst [...] (9)⁸⁴

In the thick of war, the predictability of societal structure has been replaced by an unpredictable whirlwind that could strike anywhere at any time. Greener pastures may exist on the other side of some barrier — in Iran, perhaps, or in some rebel-held territory. But even if one were to

⁸⁴ از دیروز بادی شروع کرده است به تاختن، به شاخه های شکسته و تنه پیر درختها، به علف های خشک و خار و خاشاک، به همه چیزهای خشک و سبک. گاهی گردبادی از راه می رسد، خار و خاشاک را از زمین می کند. کوچه به کوچه و محله به محله می چرخاند و بعد با سرگردانی مسیر نا معلومی را در پیش می گیرد. گله ای از سگها پشت از دیوار، داخل آن باغ، غوغا می کند. گوئی غریبه ای را در میان گرفته اند [...] [...]

somehow sneak across the frontier, his or her fate is likely to be similar to that of the imagined stranger at the end of the quotation.

Not content with causing physical damage and disrupting societal structures, the *gerd-bād* infiltrates individual psyches and sets them awl as well. As the narrator lies awake in his military dormitory in the pre-dawn light, hours before he is set to report for duty, he recalls hearing news from an acquaintance from his village, Ruzī Bāy, that their home district (*wuleswālī* in Pashto) had been struck by war, and that his parents had fled to Iran: “The *wuleswālī* is surrounded on all sides [*atrāf*],” Ruzi Bay says. “I don’t understand what Ruzi Bay is saying. I don’t know how I am saying goodbye. Crazy, I spin and spin [*mī-charkham wa mī-charkham*] around [*atrāf-e*] myself.” (7)⁸⁵ As the day dawns, and his consciousness returns to the present moment, the narrator adds:

The room spins [*mī-charkhad*] around my head. This head that— I tell you, it feels like I have a ten-kilo stone weighing on my neck. Since the beginning of the night, I’ve been staring into the darkness and reviewing my life. I don’t know what, or whom, it was for. Perhaps for myself, perhaps for the [the army officers] around me [*atrāfam*] who are awaiting the morning [i.e., the beginning of the recruits’ participation in military operations]. (7)⁸⁶

The *gerd-bād* of violence has so disoriented the main character that he loses a secure understanding of who he is. His sense of belonging has been shattered by his forced enlistment into the state army and his inability to join his family in Iran — a separation induced by the violence of war and enforced by the Iranian border regime. Now he also questions his autonomy — that other crucial ingredient for subjectivity according to Bakhtin. Have his choices been his

⁸⁵ اطراف ولسوالی محاصره است [...] نمی فهمم روزی بای چه می گوید. نمی دانم چگونه خدا حافظی می کنم. دیوانه وار اطراف خودم می چرخم و می چرخم...

⁸⁶ ... اتاق دور سرم می چرخد. سر که بگویم گوئی یک سنگ ده کیلوئی روی گردنم است، از اول شب چشم دوخته ام به تاریکی و زندگیم را مرور کرده ام. نمی دانم برای چه و کی؟ شاید برای خودم، شاید برای کسانی که اطرافم انتظار صبح را می کشند.

own? I read the “surrounding” of the *wuleswālī* as being analogous to the narrator’s own encirclement by army officers and guards, who are walling him in and preventing him from escaping his compulsory service. As military forces encircle the edges (*aṭrāf*) of his home district, he spins “around” (*aṭrāf-e*) himself in a dizzying state of confusion, questioning his life’s meaning and purpose. The centrifugal force of the *gerd-bād* has dismantled the life he knew growing up and it is now blurring the boundaries between himself and others. The narrator’s status as an individual — as a self — is called into question.

On the other hand, rotating or circling, which may suggest soul searching or regeneration, need not always be a destructive act. In fact, the temporary separation from the ego that *circling* may provide — as in the trance-like state reached by a whirling dervish — can prove to be helpful in the coming-of-age quest to achieve synergy between self and society. This spiritual mirror image, or symmetrical inversion, of the *gerd-bād* presents itself in “Years of Limbo and Wind” in the form of a suggestion of religious circumambulation (*ṭawāf*). On a day off from military training, the main character and his fellow recruits visit the Sakhi shrine⁸⁷ in Kabul:

Some people circle the shrine and read the inscriptions on its walls, but suddenly, my heart feels strange and I get restless. I find some corner to sit down in. I don’t have the patience for prayer and pilgrimage, but I feel that in this place, my spirit can flutter freely. Here I can be honest with myself about who and where I have been and where I am now. (5)⁸⁸

Although the narrator does not physically join his companions in walking around the shrine and carrying out the rituals of pilgrimage, he nonetheless achieves some of the spiritual benefits of

⁸⁷ Sakhi is a shrine in Kabul that is predominantly visited by Hazara and other Shia Afghans.

⁸⁸ بعضی دور مرقد می زند و بعضی نوشته‌های روی دیوار را می خواند اما من ناگهانی دلم غریب می شود و حوصله‌ام سر می رود. گوشه‌های را پیدا می کنم و می نشینم، حوصله نماز و زیارت را ندارم اما احساس می کنم روحم در این جا آزادانه پرپر می زند. اینجا می توانم با خودم صادق باشم، من کی و کجا بوده‌ام و حالا کجا هستم؟

religious practice by temporarily stepping outside of himself and looking in, seeking clarity about his individual place in the world. But he only glimpses this alternative manifestation of *charkhīdan* for a brief moment, and overall in this story, the destructive spinning of the *gerd-bād* of violence overpowers the main character's autonomy, leading to what I understand to be his permanent loss of self in the ranks of the state army and his likely death at war. I will discuss this loss of self further in the section on (dis)integration.

Spinning is not only the motion of a destructive storm, but it is also that of the wheel, with all it suggests in terms of transportation (as in a vehicular wheel), and literal and metaphorical production (as in the spinning wheel upon which one weaves textiles and stories). These two positive manifestations of *charkhīdan* come to the fore in “Ode to the Search.” Comparing the usage of *charkhīdan* in “Years of Limbo and Wind” to that in “Ode to the Search,” we see that the spinning of the dust devil and the dizziness of nausea have been replaced by the spinning of wheels and the winding of paths. While *charkhīdan* in the sense of “spinning out of control” is the demise of the young recruit in “Years,” *charkhīdan* in the senses of roaming, searching, and narrative-representational production ultimately helps to facilitate Anwar's successful self-discovery. In one striking passage during Anwar's bus ride through rural Afghanistan, the spinning of a bus's wheels and the sound of its engine transform into the spinning of a film projector and a film camera:

Everything today, like a film, amazed and astonished the young man. The motion of the vehicle was like a projector in a cinema presenting a documentary film, with images of various subjects passing by and passing by without interruption. [...]

The driver turned on the headlights and light scattered the evening darkness that had ruled over the road. [The lights] were a projector, and it was as if on the film set the camera had kept rolling and rolling [*mī-charkhīd wa mī-charkhīd*]. (154)⁸⁹

⁸⁹ همه چیز امروز چون فیلمی جوان را در بهت و حیرت برده بود. حرکت موتر چون آپاراتی در سینمایی فیلم مستند را انگار پیش رویش می آورد و از روی سوژه های مختلفی لایقته می گذشت و می گذشت [...] راننده چراغ موتر ره روشن

Anwar, having escaped the immediate threat of being sucked in by the *gerd-bād* violence, is carried away by spinning wheels into a new environment from which he has much to learn. Instead of the blurred vision caused by dizziness with which the main character of “Years” must contend, Anwar is granted a clearer, more complete picture of Afghanistan and his place in it. The metaphorical wheel of the projector spins, each frame passes through the film gate, and a new world is displayed on his screen of perception.

Since Anwar’s circumstances allow him to escape conscription, spinning becomes a force that he can harness for mobility and expression, rather than one that *acts upon him* and from which he cannot flee. However, when he arrives at his father’s mujahideen base and meets the young fighters, he discovers the ways in which the *gerd-bād* of violence has twisted their existence and confused the natural order of things. They express to him that they wish they only had to fight against the Soviets, and not against other rebel Afghan forces. This is especially difficult for one of them, whose brother has taken up arms for another mujahideen group with which his group has recently been skirmishing (160). The natural order of things would have Afghans fighting solely Soviet invaders, not fellow Afghans from their hometown, much less their own family. While he listens to the youths express their ambivalent feelings about mujahideen life, the first seeds of doubt are planted in Anwar’s mind regarding his initial intention to follow in his father’s footsteps.

Considering that the conscript in “Years of Limbo and Wind,” in my reading, fails to emerge from the rite of passage, *charkhīdan* in that story is colored by his experience of

کرد و بر تاریکی شامگاه حاکم بر جاده نور پاشید. پروژکتوری بود انگار بر صحنه فیلمبرداری و دوربین که همچنان می چرخید و می چرخید.

“passage manqué.” Viewed in this way, in “Ode to the Search,” the spiritual quest for balance between self, community, and cosmos — a quest embodied in the circular motion of *tawāf*— emerges as a symmetrical inversion of the *gerd-bād* of violence. When Anwar and his newfound companion, Hadi, trek through a serene mountain landscape on the way to a remote military base, the narrator says “*mī-charkhand wa mī-charkhand*” (“they roam and roam,” lit. “they circle and circle”) (170). This metaphorical usage of “to circle” also appears in the common Persian compound verb *donbāl-e chīzī gashtan*, meaning “to look for something,” lit. “to circle after something.”

Indeed, while the *jost-o jū* (search) in the title *Qaṣīde-ye Jost-o Jū* is initially understood to be referring to Anwar’s search for his father, over time it becomes a search for answers to questions Anwar did not initially know he had: Does he truly want to become a mujahid? Is a jihad in which one fights against one’s kin, and to no clear end, truly a jihad at all? What is the significance of the many natural wonders of Afghanistan, and why are Afghan combatants defacing it with war? How is war contributing to a destruction of culture and education in Afghanistan, and what does this destruction portend for the country’s future? Is withdrawing from participation in violent conflict, and rejecting the ways of one’s father, inherently unmanly? If not, how can one retain one’s manliness while taking those actions? As Anwar trudges through rural locales alone, and then embarks on his grueling-yet-illuminating trek through mountain wilderness with Hadi, one type of search begets another. Though answers to all of the above questions are not forthcoming, a measure of self-discovery is.

Exposure / dar ma‘raḡ būdan / at-tajallī

The word “exposure” can signify revelation, but also “being made vulnerable,” whether to the unsparing elements of nature or to man-made forms of harm, along the lines of the Persian verb

phrase “*dar ma‘raḥ būdan*” (“to be subjected”). The connection between these two meanings of the word is exemplified by a news story that broke in mid-October 2022 about 92 migrants, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, who were discovered naked and were “rescued” by Greek security forces near the Turkish-Greek border. All of the migrants were male, some of them injured, and a few of them minors. Greek migration minister Notis Mitarachi took the opportunity to post a blurred picture of the naked men on Twitter, blaming Turkish authorities for allegedly forcing the migrants to strip before sending them on a boat towards the Greek border (the migrants were discovered on the Greek bank of the Evros River). The Turkish government denied the allegations, calling them “fake news” and condemning the publication of the photos of the migrants, whom they claimed Greece had “deported” (Lock). While the two governments use the incident for public saber-rattling, the migrants must live with having been exposed in multiple ways: to injury — whether by border authorities or by smugglers; to the elements — being physically stripped of their belongings and clothing in the open air and on the open river water; and to public humiliation — having their naked bodies exposed online by a Greek official without their consent.

These forced exposures *expose* something deeper about the propensity of governments to take advantage of human suffering in order to score points in a contemporary political arena in which the winner is largely decided by the 24-hour news cycle and by algorithm-fueled social media outrage. Specifically, they reveal a geopolitical blame-game between Greece and Turkey in which migrants are used as pawns. Mitarachi shows a complete lack of awareness of, or a blatant apathy regarding, the irony of exposing the migrants to further humiliation in the same message in which he claims Greece is the migrants’ protector and proclaims Greece’s moral authority over Turkey. And the incident is also a reminder of Turkey’s willingness to use

migrants as a political weapon by threatening to “unleash” them on the EU by strategically *not* carrying out the migration prevention role that it agreed to in the EU-Turkey deal of 2016,⁹⁰ and even, on at least one occasion, busing migrants to the Greek border for free (Al-Aswad). This latter move is in turn reminiscent of the recent moves by US Republican governors to ship Central American asylum seekers to Liberal northern states. But I digress.

The combination of coming-of-age and unauthorized migration puts young migrants on a knife’s edge between subjection and their own personal experiences of revelation. Both “Years of Limbo and Wind” and “Ode to the Search” demonstrate the symmetrically inverse relation between the two phenomena, and the way in which one can quickly morph into the other in the whirlwind of the borderscape. In the stories, “exposure” takes the form of both illumination, and, on the other side of the coin, subjection to physical and psychological vulnerability.

One of the most prominent literary features of “Years of Limbo and Wind” is its high degree of narrative obscurity, which the reader, being accustomed to the authorial technique of revelation and concealment, may expect to engender an environment ripe for revelation. As with some of the narrative styles I described in Chapter Three, readers are forced to wait for several pages before they can ascertain where and when exactly they are — and this is especially disorienting because these “wheres” and “whens” constantly shift throughout the story as the main character “reviews” his life (7).

This line begins the story’s second paragraph: “Who knows how many of these people pass the night with nightmares, clinging to their bitter and absurd pasts? This isn’t a homeland —

⁹⁰ See for example “Turkey’s Erdogan Threatens to Unleash Migrants on EU”

it's hell, it's a graveyard" (3).⁹¹ It is not until later that readers come to understand that "these people" refers to the narrator's fellow military recruits. Throughout the narrative, as he reflects on his past, the day gets closer and closer to dawning. Given the profound darkness that immediately characterizes the story, the optimistic reader hopes that dawn will bring about a degree of reprieve. But instead, what daylight brings when it inevitably arrives is the main character's grim fate — military service in a puppet government's⁹² army:

Now it's gotten good and bright out [...] It's military operations day [...] I stand in my rank and look around at the young men. The square is full [of soldiers]. [...] I don't know what day of the week it is. I don't know what the date is. But I know it's a fateful day. Amid the din of the warriors, I hear the commander's order:
"Move!" (9-10).⁹³

It turns out that in this "graveyard" of a country, night, however haunted it may be, is preferable to daytime. The obscurity of the night allows insomniacs and dreamers alike to project their hidden thoughts onto the darkness, be they ruminations, reminiscences, or wry imaginings. The glaring daylight only illuminates a reality that is even crueler than nightmares. In "Years of Limbo and Wind," no hope is exposed by the rising sun. Rather, human bodies are exposed to its ravenous heat, and to the relentless violence of war.

Let us return to the Persian title of the story, "*Sal-hā-ye Barzakh wa Bād.*" In Islam, *barzakh* ("limbo") is the space souls inhabit after death but before the day of judgement, where

⁹¹ کسی چه می داند که چند نفر اینها شب را مثل من با کابوس می گذرانند، چسبیده‌اند به گذشته تلخ و پوچشان. وطن که نیست، جهنم است، قبرستان است.

⁹² In 1979's Operation Storm-333, Soviet forces assassinated Hafizullah Amin, the (Stalinist) Khalqist leader of the Saur Revolution, and installed Babrak Karmal, the leader of (Islamic socialist) Parcham — Khalq's rival leftist faction.

⁹³ حالی هوا خوب روشن شده ... روز عملیات است ... روی صفا ایستاده‌ام و بچه‌ها را تماشا می‌کنم. میدان پر است ... نمی‌دانم امروز چه روزی است. نمی‌دانم تاریخ چند است. اما می‌دانم که روز سرنوشت سازی است ... از میان هیاهوی جنگجویان، فریاد قومندان را می‌شنوم:
- حرکت کنید!

they are free to reflect on the deeds of their past lives. It is a space where one awaits one's fate, be it heaven or hell. For nearly the entirety of the story, the young recruit lives in a metaphorical *barzakh*, a state akin to the extended "liminality or marginality" Stetkevych describes as the dwelling place of the *ṣu 'lūk* (89-90). But the liminality in "Years of Limbo and Wind" is not permanent the way it is for the subject of a *ṣu 'lūk* poem. Instead, though the main character's desired rite-of-passage — his attempted flight to Iran to join his family and a community of Afghan refugees — is *manqué*, he is forced against his will to complete another rite of passage: military training and eventually a kind of "aggregation" within the Afghan state army. All we see of the main character's life after his long night of *barzakh* is the very beginning of his first day with the Afghan army — his first day of being fully exposed to the fires of Afghanistan's hell.

In "Ode to the Search," the theme of exposure mostly takes a form that is "symmetrically inverted" from that of the garish brightness of the dawning day in "Years of Limbo and Wind." However, there is one moment in the story where illumination has a similar effect. When Anwar arrives at the mujahideen camp at night, he is introduced to a group of fighters and converses with them a while before seeing their faces: "The moon had come up and illuminated the faces. They were all young, the same age as this very youth [i.e., Anwar], and they all seemed a bit distressed" (159).⁹⁴ The reader has the sense that Anwar had previously associated the mujahideen with his father, imagining a group of strong, brave, heroic warriors. But the moon reveals that the rank and file are mere youths, with all the same anxieties and vulnerabilities as Anwar. However, unlike the dawning of the day in "Years," this lunar illumination lays bare a troubling reality in a more poignant than grim manner.

⁹⁴ ماه بالا آمده بود و قیافه‌ها را روشن کرده بود، همگی جوان بودند و همسن و سال خود همین جوان که اندکی کلافه می نمود.

In general, this theme of exposure takes the form of intellectual and spiritual revelation in “Ode to the Search.” I will repeat parts of an earlier passage I quoted above to demonstrate that Anwar’s filmic view out of the bus’s window, which is allowed to continue in the darkness due to the shining of the bus’s headlights, constitutes for the city-born youth an illumination of natural wonders and human–nature relationships that he has never witnessed before:

The motion of the vehicle was like a projector in a cinema presenting a documentary film, with images of various subjects [*sūzheh-hā*] uninterruptedly passing by and passing by. A donkey cart on the path, the rider on his own donkey, plodding along and getting to the side of the road, out of the way of the bus; a man with a pile of firewood on his back, with an ax sticking out of the pile, standing and watching the bus as it passed; a flock of sheep and goats and two shepherd boys who quickly got them out of the road; a woman with a tied bundle of fresh grass and a piece of yarn with which she pulled a calf behind her, who, as the bus passed, hid her face with a corner of her chador.

The driver turned on the headlights and light scattered the evening darkness that had ruled over the road. [The lights] were a projector [...]. Dozens of streams and creeks and rivers passed out of the frame, giving way to a route that curved upwards. For a while, on both sides [of the bus], there were mountains like two black walls that brought to the youth’s mind the cinema screens of the city. (154)⁹⁵

The extended metaphor and simile of the scenes from the bus’s windows as scenes from a documentary film, and the headlights as the lights of a projector at a cinema, and the mountainside as the film screen, are very rich and worth explicating. The metonymic language is flexible and dynamic like that of a classical Arabic poem, shifting between metaphor and simile. The objects that are being compared to one another are similarly unfixed. At first, the motion of

⁹⁵ همه چیز امروز چون فیلمی جوان را در بهت و حیرت برده بود. حرکت موتر چون آپاراتی در سینمایی فیلم مستند را انگار پیش رویش می آورد و از روی سوژه های مختلفی لاینتقع می گذشت و می گذشت: خرکاری در راه سوار بر خر خودش هن هن کنان از جاه کنار می کشید؛ مردی با پشتاره هیزمی که کرد بر پشتاره فرو کرده بود و می ایستاد تا گذر موتر را نظاره کند؛ رمه ای از گوسفندان و بز که دو تا چوپان بچهای تند تند از جاده بیرون شان می برد؛ زنی با یک سربسته علف تازه و ریسمان گوساله ای که از دنبال خود می کشید و تا موتر از کنارشان بگذرد زن چهره اش را با گوشه چادرش پنهان کرد. راننده چراغ موتر ره روشن کرد و بر تاریکی شامگاه حاکم بر جاده نور پاشید. پروژکتوری بود انگار بر صحنه فیلمبرداری و دوربین که همچنان می چرخید و می چرخید. ده ها جوی و جر و رودخانه را از کادر گذر داد تا رسید به راهی که رو به بالا میلان داشت. در دو طرف مدتی بود که کوه ها چون دیواری سیاه، دیوار سیاه سینماهای شهر را در یاد جوان زنه می کرد.

the vehicle — the spinning of its wheels or the rhythmic sound it makes — is compared to a film projector, and the window out of which Anwar perplexedly gazes becomes a film screen. Though the people and objects are physically passed by the bus, from Anwar’s perspective, they are passing *him* as he looks through the window. They come into the frame from one side and exit it on the other, as if the scene were recorded from a single camera angle.

Here, Anwar seems to view the rural Afghans who pass by on his “screen” from a kind of anthropological perspective. However, he does not see his subjects (*sūzheh-hā*) as simple-minded, technologically backward folk, but rather as *subjects* in the philosophical sense of the word — they have achieved harmony between nature and culture. (Stetkevych’s study describes the rite of passage that the classical Arabic *qaṣīdah* parses as being, in part, a synthesis of the struggle between culture on the one hand and nature on the other. In order to achieve re-aggregation and thus full manhood in the eyes of the tribe, the initiate male must leave “culture” and enter into a liminal state surrounded by nature, returning only after completing some ritual in which he tames nature — a process which in turn tames *him* (see Stetkevych 36).) On the other hand, the city, represented by the bus, is pure, aggressive “culture,” something threatening that these these individuals must avoid and from which they may even choose to hide. Indeed, while the woman’s motion to cover her face with the corner of her chador is in part a sign of conservatism and religiosity, it is also a sort of protective measure — as if covering her face will keep the city from encroaching upon her life.

Moving on to the next part of the quotation, it is now not the motion of the vehicle that is compared to a projector, but the headlights. Now, it is not humans that are illuminated, but bodies of water — “dozens of streams and creeks and rivers.” And finally, it is not the bus windows that are the film screen, but the sides of two mountains through which the bus passes. I

take the fact that Anwar's mind's eye "projects" the city onto these two black rock faces (he compares them to the "cinema screens of the city") as an indication that Anwar is well on his way to reconciling nature and culture and finding a degree of "re-aggregation" and subjectivity himself. His rite of passage and coming-of-age journey, albeit indelibly marked by civil war, are not entirely doomed to fail as those of the nameless recruit in "Years of Limbo and Wind" seem to be.

But inevitably, war does soon interrupt this serene moment of illumination: "They went up a little higher, and scarcely had they reached the middle of the mountain when there came an intense salvo of gunshots, from an armed cadre of men, that sprayed the foot of the bus. The view from inside was like a live news feed. The driver pounded on the break and the headlights shut off." (154)⁹⁶ "Ode to the Search" is replete with indications, like the above, that war disrupts spiritual revelation and intellectual enlightenment. Schools have been converted to military bases (165). Young Afghan men, instead of studying, are fighting and killing one another. Hadi, who becomes Anwar's guide, says he is more suited to "cultural" than military jihad (168). For this reason, he works as the writer of his mujahideen group's printed materials. However, he can't even get his hands on a typewriter, so he must typeset his work "with letters that had been taken from other publications" (167).⁹⁷ Although international actors have flooded Afghanistan with weapons and mercenaries, they have not provided any funding for education or cultural initiatives. Those who insist on pursuing these unprioritized necessities are left to improvise.

Hadi, whose name literally means "guide" in Arabic, reveals much to Anwar. In addition to bestowing upon Anwar nuggets of wilderness wisdom, Hadi illuminates for him something

⁹⁶ کمی که بالا رفتند، نرسیده به کمر کوه، رگباری از گلوله‌های آتشین در کادر وارد شدند و پیش پای موتر ریختند. دوربین انگار فید کرد، راننده پا بر برک کوبید، چراغ موتر خاموش شد.

⁹⁷ با حروفی که از نشریه‌های دیگری بریده بود حروفچینی می کرد...

that is far more important: namely, that there might not be anything inherently better, on a moral level, about fighting for the mujahideen than fighting for the Afghan state and the Soviets.

Anwar explains that he has fled Kabul to avoid being conscripted. Their exchange is worth quoting at length:

“Fighting for others [i.e., the Soviets] is distasteful for me.”

Hadi smiled: “The mujahideen aren’t dependent on others?”

“I don’t know. You know better than I do.”

Hadi smiled again, this time with his eyes: “In this world, there has never been a movement against a state that was not dependent on another country.”

Provoked, [Anwar], said: “Then what about the jihad that you all [are fighting], that isn’t pure either?”

Hadi made a serious face. “To be precise, it depends on each person. Each person and his intentions [*neyyatash*] and also his actions. These determine the purity of a thing.”

“Even to the extent of purifying the means [by which they carry out their jihad]?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. My tools are this pen and a few newspapers, so that at least I am not dependent on anyone.”

The youth said: “But within a framework that connects you to those who are dependent on an outside power... I don’t know. Perhaps if everybody kept watch over their intentions and actions as much as you do, no dependence would be formed.”

“You’re thinking correctly, Anwar-*jān*. Dependence brings about servility. Also, whatever power you are dependent on determines what you are and what you are not, and *who and where you are*,⁹⁸ and what you have to do” (172-3, my emphasis)⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Note the similarity between this and what the narrator of “Years of Limbo and Wind” says when he is at the Sakhi Shrine: “Here I can be honest with myself about *who and where I have been and where I am now*” (5, my emphasis).

⁹⁹ -عسکری برای غیر بر ایم ناخوشایند است.

هادی خندید: مجاهدا چی، آنها وابسته به غیر نیستن؟

- نمی دانم، تو بهتر این ره می دانی.

هادی همچنان چشمانش می خندید: در دنیا هیچ حرکتی بر علیه هیچ دولتی نه شده که وابسته به کشوری خارجی نباشه.

- جوان دلچرکین گفت: پس جهاد شما چی، این هم خالص نیست؟

هادی چهره جدی کرد: دقیقاً بستگی داره به هر شخصی. هر کسی را و نیتش، و همچنان عملش. اینها خلوص یک چیزی ره تعیین می کنن.

- حتی وسیله ره هم پاک می کنن؟

- نمی دانم، شاید. ابرازم همین قلم است و چند تا روزنامه که از حد خودم به هیچ قدرتی وابسته نیستم.

جوان گفت: ولی به بدنه‌ای که وصل هستی که آن به قدرتی خارجی وابسته است... نمی دانم، شاید هر کسی آگه به همین اندازه که تو آگه مراقب نیت و اعمالش می بود هیچ وابستگی ایجاد نمی شد.

- تو درست فکر کرده‌ای، انور جان! وابستگی سرسپردگی می آره. دیگه این که آن قدرتی که به آن وابسته هستی تعیین می کنه که چه کنی و چه نکنی و کی و کجا چه کار باید بکنی.

It is around this moment, when Anwar is in the wilderness with Hadi, that the object of his search begins to change from his father to something even more existential: with this insight from Hadi, he now seeks pure intention and action, independence, and answers to the questions of who and what and where he should be, and what he should do. Initially, he saw taking up residence with his father and fighting with his mujahideen group as the only alternative to being conscripted by the state army. With the help of Hadi and his own shrewd perceptive abilities, he sees that the fight of the mujahideen against the Afghan state and the Soviets is not simply a fight of good versus evil; rather, the civil war is a complex and chaotic web of antagonists, few of whose intentions and actions are pure. Hadi also whets Anwar's interest in the "cultural" work of writing. If we take Anwar's character to be a stand-in for the story's implied author, we can imagine him looking back on this revelatory hike through the wilderness as a turning point that started him on his path to exile as an alternative to life in a hellish homeland and authorship as an alternative to war-making. In Bakhtinian terms, it is through this act of authorship that the meaning of the wilderness journey is "consummated" (more on this in the chapter's conclusion).

It is on this *raḥīl* that the reader comes to appreciate the significance of Anwar's name, which means "most luminous" in Arabic. His name is only revealed twelve pages into the story, before which he is only referred to as *jawān*, "the youth." Here in the wilderness, the natural wonders that had perplexed him as he rode on the bus become a source of spiritual nourishment. Just before the young men resume their hike, they decide to pray. It is getting dark. The moon has begun to rise and will be their sole light source for the rest of their trek. Here, Anwar decides to do something provocative: "Both of them stood facing the sun for an encounter with a God who was with them in all circumstances. Anwar said: 'I am going to pray in the direction of the moon; this time for me, it is a divine revelation [*jelweh*] from God'" (173). Here, instead of

praying in the direction of the setting sun — west, toward Mecca — he prays in the direction of the rising moon — east, which happens to be towards Pakistan, his eventual destination. In Sufism, *jelweh* (Persian) or *at-tajallī* (Arabic) is “the shining of divine light on the heart of the mystic, which makes him or her ecstatic” (“*Jelveh*”). It is suggestive of an intimate revelation; in Arabic, the unveiling of the bride on her wedding day is referred to as *jilwah*. In choosing to pray in the opposite direction of the qiblah, Anwar demonstrates a desire for a direct communion with the divine, and with his own inner self, even if doing so requires taking unorthodox action.

Here, we begin to see a suggestion of the theme that I will discuss in the next section. The Arabic root *jim, lam, waw* (i.e., “j, l, w”) from which the words *jelweh* and *at-tajallī* are formed, carries meanings related to both unveiling and removal. One meaning of form VII of the verb in Arabic, *injallā*, is “to vanish.” As the divine reveals itself to the mystic, the ego of the latter begins to disappear as his or her identity becomes fused with the former amid the ecstasy of *at-tajallī*.

(Dis)integration / halāk / fanā

A final Janus-faced element of the coming-of-age experience that is put on display in these two stories is that of (dis)integration. This third theme reflects well the double nature of the word “subject.” As Louis Althusser puts it, “In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (qtd. in Slaughter 9). A subject is one whose selfhood *integrates* within various layered communities of interlocutors. The ensuing free participation may indicate some degree of sacrificed freedom, as the bestowal of rights paradoxically comes with the imposition of responsibilities. Parts of the subject’s individuality blend with that of the group as

he or she becomes a constituent part of the whole without entirely disintegrating into it. Achieving this balance is the aim of the initiate youth in the archetypal coming-of-age tale. However, for would-be refugee subjects, the authoritarian forces of nationalism, the global military–industrial complex, and border regimes threaten them with full-on subjugation and erasure of selfhood — disintegration into nothingness. Unauthorized migrants find themselves feeling forced into doing things that are, as Neyaz puts it in the interlude that precedes this chapter, “not from [their] real.” Likewise, the precarity of a rightless existence reduces some migrants to simply striving for survival as their personhood disintegrates and they are consigned to “bare life.”¹⁰⁰ Shojai’s and Soltanzadeh’s stories make the stakes of this precarious (dis)integration process vivid.

Throughout the fragmented reflection on his life that makes up most of the story, the narrator of “Years of Limbo of Wind” demonstrates that he is losing his sense of self, notwithstanding the moment at the Sakhi shrine in which he feels temporarily reconnected to it. As the centrifugal force of the *gerd-bād* of violence blurs the line between himself and others, the narrator is reduced to a mere vantage point from which a set of eyes sees. When he is reminded that these eyes are attached to a body that is his, he is taken aback. Consider for example the opening scene of the story. A group of Afghans get into a car, and the sourness of the collective mood makes it seem as if they are mourners on their way to a graveyard to bury a relative (3). In reality, they are heading to the Iranian border. The soldiers stationed there order them to get out of their vehicle. One Afghan man begs the soldiers to let them in. When he mentions “a young man,” it takes the dazed narrator a moment to distinguish himself from the rest of the group and to realize that it is he to whom the speaker is referring:

¹⁰⁰ See Agamben.

The soldiers jump up and circle the car. The middle-aged man, still with his hands raised [in supplication], gestures to me with his head:

“Have mercy on this young man [*jawān*]. The communists are conscripting him.[...]

The car starts moving and the cry of the man is lost in the wind and dust and dirt. I look at the people around me. He’s correct, I am younger than everyone. My body is trembling. I see myself in military dress. (4)¹⁰¹

It is only as the soldiers turn the careful of Afghans away from the border that the narrator fully realizes that what the middle-aged man says is true. It takes the man’s verbalized observations for the narrator to distinguish himself from his traveling companions in ways that for most would be relatively automatic: he is the youngest person in the car; he is wearing military dress. The suggestion is that wearing military clothing is not something the narrator did volitionally; there being no choice of what to wear, he simply dressed himself robotically in the required garb, in an act so routine for its lack of alternatives that it bypasses his brain’s memory storage. The way the scene is presented, it is as if the narrator has awoken in an unfamiliar world where he discovers for the first time, with an air of hopeless resignation, that he is a young military conscript for an illegitimate army.

The force of the *gerd-bād* of violence is a de-individualizing one. As the narrator becomes integrated into his army unit at the end of the story, his selfhood begins to disintegrate. Let us return at length to a passage that I have already quoted in part. We see that in the final moments of the story, as the narrator stands in a mass of recruits and prepares to begin military operations, his selfhood lets out one last gasp as he longs for his friends and family:

I stand in my rank and look around at the young men [*bachcheh-hā*, lit. children]. The square is full. Everybody with a Kalashnikov in his hand, a hammer on his back, and a

¹⁰¹ عسکرها می پرند بالا و موتر دور می زند. مرد میان سال که هنوز دستهایش بالاست با سر بع من اشاره می

کند.

- به این جوان رحم کنید، کمونیستها او را عسکری می برند. از جوانی‌تان خیر...
موتر حرکت می کند و ناله مرد در میان باد و گرد و خاک گم می شود. به مردان اطرافم نگاه می کنم. درست است، جوان‌تر از همه هستم، تنم می لرزد، خودم در لباس عسکری می بینم.

train of bullet cartridges on his waist. I look around. I want to know where Iran is. What my mother would say. At this moment, would she come wrap her arms around my neck in an embrace? Would she make me stand underneath the Quran, light incense, or splash water on my face [in efforts to ward off evil]? Like the day I left for the army, when she collected her tears in a glass and poured them on the back of my head. I want to go to the Dehdādi unit [where he was formerly stationed] — I gravely miss Gholām-Ali [his friend from the Dehdadi unit], but the mountains and hills have taken everything away from me. And so has that damn wall [of the military barracks] that has closed me in for twenty days.

[...] It's as if today, I'm being taken to the graveyard again, beside strangers. But no. Amid the din of the warriors, I hear the commander's order:

“Move!”

I fasten my boots, look left and right, and take my position in the line. (9-10)¹⁰²

With his autonomy completely restricted, the narrator sets the sights of his mind's eye, for one final time, on his only source of potential subjectivity: belonging. But no matter his imagination, too many boundaries separate him from his friends and family: the barracks wall, the mountains and hills, the Iranian border. He is far from his mother and the spiritual protection that she would provide. Here, he is all but doomed to die an anonymous death, buried in an unmarked grave beside other nameless youths. His story will end in a final *halāk* (annihilation, perdition) in the harsh daylight after the *barzakh* of night. As his attention is jolted back to the present moment when the commander gives his order, the narrator's wandering thoughts vanish. (Indeed, given the fact that he is effectively imprisoned in his situation, the only *wandering* he can do is in his imagination, and now the imminence and immediacy of war preclude even that.) The fact that he remains nameless through the end of the story is an indication that he has not achieved

¹⁰² روی صفا ایستاده‌ام و بچه‌ها را تماشا می‌کنم. میدان پر است. هر نفر یک کلاش به دست، یک پتک به پشت و قطار کارتوس به کمر. اطرافم را نگاه می‌کنم، می‌خواهم ببینم ایران کجاست، مادرم چه می‌گوید. در این لحظه می‌آید گردنم را بغل کند؟ از زیر قرآن تیرم کند، اسپند دود کند و پشت سرم آب بپاشد؟ مثل آن روز که عسکری رفتم، اشکهایش را در کاسه جمع کرده بود و پشت سرم ریخت. می‌خواهم به فرقه دهدادی بروم. دلم برای غلامعلی یک زره شده اما کوهها و تپه‌ها همه چیز را از من گرفته‌اند و این دیوار لعنتی که بیست روز است مرا در خود فشرده است.

[...] گویی باز امروز به سوی گورستان برده می‌شوم، توسط کسانی که نمی‌شناسم اما نه.

از میان هیاهوی جنگجویان، فریاد قومندان را می‌شنوم:

- حرکت کنید!

بند موزه‌هایم را محکم می‌کنم، نگاهی به اطرافم می‌اندازم و در صف قرار می‌گیرم.

subjectivity, while also suggesting that his is the story of countless Afghan youths who are sucked into the *gerd-bād* of violence against their will. Such violence steals not only the lives of its victims, but also their very selfhoods.

In this passage we witness again the contradictions that beset the coming-of-age period. Ironically, while he has been separated from his friends and family, he is not gaining individuality, but losing it. As his kinship and friendship bonds disintegrate, he becomes integrated with the mass of soldiers, whose uniformity and robotic movement at the order of the commander speaks of a lifeless collectivity (no doubt a critique by the author of the communism-tinted autocracy which threatened to overrun Afghanistan during the civil war).

There is one moment, earlier in the story, in which it seems that the bonds of belonging may be able to overcome the *gerd-bād* of violence. This is the one hint of hope that comes during the narrator's visit to the Sakhi shrine. After sitting in private and getting a glimpse of his selfhood (5), his friend tells him the news that his parents have fled to Iran. On the next page of the story, he imagines his family visiting the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, just as he had visited the Sakhi shrine. Their parallel pilgrimages (even though his is half-hearted and his family's is a figment of his imagination) connect them on a spiritual level. For a while, the optimistic reader feels convinced that the narrator will find a way to escape across the border — that his mother's tears and prayers at the Imam Reza shrine will somehow make this possible. But in fact, the force of the *gerd-bād* cannot be overpowered.

In "Ode to the Search" it is notable that, similarly to "Years of Limbo and Wind," the main character remains nameless for much of the story. Disintegration of selfhood was a very real possibility for Anwar, and it seems to be in process for many of the mujahideen he meets at his father's guerrilla base. Though he learns several mujahideen's names, he struggles to keep

them straight, for all of the fighters seem so similar to one another: all are young, all are quite melancholy, and all seem to have given up on their individual aspirations. Doing so may have been construed as a noble sacrifice at first, when the mujahideen groups were more united and focused solely on fighting the communist Afghan army along with the Soviet invaders. But now, with the groups all fighting one another, and international funding and weapons pouring into the country and soiling the mujahideen's moral high ground, they are fighting with the sole purpose of continuing to fight. The Persian word *doshmān* (enemy) takes on a more and more general meaning on a trajectory towards the frighteningly simple definition "not us." The particular disintegrates into the vague as the *gerd-bād* mixes everything up.

How then does Anwar retain autonomy as the whirlwind threatens to suck him in? It requires another kind of sacrifice, one that runs the risk of being interpreted by others as cowardice, insufficient masculinity, or even treachery. He must abandon his original search for his father along with his search for a place to fit in his homeland. He must abandon belonging as he currently conceives of it. How can he do so without becoming akin to the *ṣu' lūk* — a rogue, failed initiate, doomed to a liminal life of raiding and pillaging? He must seek a replacement for kin-based and nationalist belonging, however inadequate the replacement may be. The invitation to alternative belongings takes the form of a mystical experience in which Anwar sees the profound interconnectedness of nature and of all living things for the first time. He seeks to belong to the earth — and specifically to the awesome landscape of Afghanistan, the one that has been converted, against its will, into a battlefield. He seeks to belong to a community of knowledge seekers, a "republic of letters" of sorts, and since education has been all but banished from the land, with schools having been transformed into barracks and bases (165), he must undergo his initiation into this community elsewhere. His society-approved conception of

belonging — as an Afghan, as a man, as his father’s son — must disintegrate as Anwar integrates into what are, for him, novel ways of being-with-others (as with Bakhtin’s “I-for-others”) in the world.

I find it striking that I wrote above about the different “sacrifices” that the mujahideen and Anwar make in “Ode to the Search,” in light of what Stetkevych says on the subject in her work on classical Arabic poetry. She points out that sacrifice is a common theme in the final, *fakhr* section of the *qaṣidah*, usually taking the form of camel slaughter or a collective hunt in which the “victims” (in the ritual sense of the term), are distributed as meat for the whole tribe. In *ṣu lūk* poetry, blood vengeance replaces ritual sacrifice and feast in instances of symmetrical inversion. Such poems often end with a scene of a raid on a tribe, and may even include images of wild animals feasting on human remains. Where in the classical tripartite *qaṣidah*, culture triumphs over nature, in *ṣu lūk* poetry nature, or rather wildness, triumphs over culture.

It is in this vein of analysis, then, that these two stories’ critique of the futility of “tribal” masculinity in a modern world — whose rapid globalization is playing out dramatically before their eyes in the form of foreign military intervention — is most brightly illuminated. Instead of conducting a violent sacrifice to prove their masculinity and thus reinforce belonging in a demonstration of their newfound tribal personhood, the two main characters are willing to sacrifice their *national* belonging, and with it a culturally received notion of masculinity. They attempt to do so in order to *avoid* violence and thus to retain their aspirations to personhood, as displays of tribal masculinity no longer functionally facilitate it. The options initially imagined by Anwar in “Ode to the Search” are fighting for one “side” or the other of the civil war. The third option, fleeing the country, does not occur to him until the end of the story. It is not at all clear how or if he will pursue masculinity in exile, but it will certainly not involve perpetrating

physical violence, as it would have had he stayed in Afghanistan. All we see of his future plans is his sentence-long request for a guide to show him the way to Pakistan. In “Years of Limbo and Wind,” the narrator attempts, and longs for, an escape to Iran to join his family. But doing so is not presented as an option taken by a “re-aggregate male” in a tribal society. Instead, his musings about Iran mainly involve imaginings of his mother as a nurturer and spiritual protector. He would be fleeing to Iran not as a man, but as a *jawān* (youth), as he is described by the middle-aged man at the Iranian border while his body shakes in fear. Neither is he made a man by military training. Two days before he begins his tenure as a full-fledged soldier, the trainer barks at him: “It’s a shame we can’t depend on you” (8). The Afghan army has failed in their role of making boys into men, instead sending mere *bachcheh-hā* (children) into battle.

Looking at the conclusions of these two stories, it is clear that neither of them maps neatly onto the framework of the *qaṣidah*-as-rite-of-passage or the *ṣu‘lūk*-poem-as-rite-of-passage-manqué. The main character of “Years of Limbo and Wind” temporarily leaves his group of recruits, enters the liminal space of the borderlands, and returns to join the army as a full-fledged soldier — yet achieves nothing in the way of subject-forming “re-aggregation.” And in “Ode to the Search,” while Anwar gets a brief taste of war killing, he does not “re-aggregate” into his “tribe” by joining his father’s mujahideen group. Instead, he abandons the group and experiences something akin to what Stetkevych, in reference to the end of al-Shanfarā’s *Lāmiyyat al-‘Arab* (the *ṣu‘lūk* poem *par excellence*), describes as a “metaphorical aggregation.” The poet’s speaker achieves completeness not by communing with a tribe, but by becoming one with — almost disintegrating into — nature, which Stetkevych describes as a process of “the feralization of the human,” (157) which broadcasts “masculine domination” (156).

Anwar also unites with nature through his mystical experience of *at-tajallī*, in which he prays to God by way of the rising moon. But his departure from the “tribe” of mujahideen is understated rather than glory-basking, marked with calm resolve rather than triumphant masculinity. And his newfound appreciation for nature is not “feralizing,” but transcendental — reaching toward a state akin to the mystical *fanā’* (temporary, clarifying ego annihilation amid an experience of spiritual ecstasy). In leaving the “tribe” for good, Anwar executes a rite of passage that is not *manqué*, but semi-complete — still a work in progress with much potential for further becoming, but with a newfound and resolute sense of selfhood.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that “Ode to the Search” and “Years of Limbo and Wind” present versions of narrative return that are alternatives to the “beastliness” described by El-Ariss in his discussion of the exile’s return. I instead read these two works as examples of efforts that exiled implied authors take to transgress the psychic borders that have been erected between their senses of selfhood and belonging and to rewire connections between the two. Narrative gives them the ability to do what cannot not be done in the physical world — to float above or tunnel beneath the destruction of war and the walls of nation states. This narrative freedom to roam also allows exiled storytellers to shed light on forgotten injustices and to animate harrowing human experiences that have since been turned to stone. Shojai does this in “Years” through his intimate depiction of an internal experience of a young soldier conscripted by the Afghan state army. His story constructs an imagined version of the very real experiences of many such soldiers who either did not live to tell their own tales or do not have the artistic or educational wherewithal to do so in published literary form.

These two coming-of-age stories demonstrate the ways in which the experience of displacement and exile interrupts the process of the rite of passage, rendering the “re-aggregating” balance between selfhood and belonging that citizen-subjects achieve impossible. The exile’s act of narrating such stories represents *ex post facto* attempts to establish and retain the much more fragile balance of refugee subjectivity. Edward Said writes that common responses to exile include developing tendencies toward “narcissistic masochism,” “petulant cynicism,” and “querulous lovelessness.” But, as painful as it is, exile also provides “an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life,” and opportunities for the development of a “scrupulous ... subjectivity” (183-4, emphasis in original). As individuals located in-between two or more national communities, exiles must withstand destabilizing threats to their very personhood and find ways of being that counteract these threats without causing harm to themselves or their loved ones.

Bakhtin argues that without access to a vision of oneself via a collective of others, one’s conception of oneself lacks its transredient parts and loses definition (*Art and Answerability* 5). Individuals are only confident in their actions when they feel “possessed” by the need to undertake ethical acts within a community of individuals (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* 21). In this way it is others who “consummate” the individual. This line of thinking takes shape in Bakhtin’s theory of the relationship between the author and the character in a work of literature. The author “assembles all of the cognitive-ethical determinations and valuations of the hero and consummates them in the form of a unitary and unique whole that is a concrete, intuitable whole” (*Art and Answerability* 5). Intriguingly, Bakhtin adds: “The artist’s struggle to achieve a determinate and stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself” (6). Just as the other gives shape to the individual via dialogical intersubjectivity, so the author gives

shape to the hero. In doing so, the author carries out an act imbued with a semiconscious desire to better understand him or herself by courting the hero as a dialogical interlocutor.

I read the exilic narrative return in “Ode to the Search” as an example of this kind of Bakhtinian “struggle,” in which the implied author of the work is composing the hero’s trajectory as a means of sorting through his *own* decision to flee Afghanistan rather than participate in, or otherwise be swallowed up by, the violence of its wars — as if to justify that decision as an honorable and even manly one. Anwar, and by extension the implied author, has chosen writing as a creative alternative to the destruction of war. This is not the kind of propagandistic writing Hadi has settled on, in which he is still bound by the interests of his mujahideen group and its financial backers, but rather it is writing that, for its forthrightness about the lack of moral legitimacy of any warring group in Afghanistan, cannot be bound to any particular party in the country. But in accepting exile, Anwar has accepted a future of unstable belonging. Due to his separation from the “tribe,” which he undertakes with a mature resolve similar to that of a patient willingly submitting to amputation, his belonging to future collective “bodies” may never feel entirely complete. In this way, a new self-perpetuating cycle is formed in place of the *gerd-bād* of violence. The need to write creates a clear justification for Anwar to leave Afghanistan, and later, the need to retain a connection to Afghanistan and to tend to an ever-wounded sense of belonging reinforces the need to write — to *return* in narrative. Thus, the implied author, with his writing, continuously renegotiates and rebalances his consummation, his re-aggregation, his masculinity, his refugee subjectivity. The implied author of “Years of Limbo and Wind,” on the other hand, consummates not himself but one of those whose subjectivity has been rendered incomplete by forced conscription.

What can be said about the genre of these two stories, then? While my reading of them has been informed by Stetkevych's reading of *ṣu lūk* poetry, the thematic similarities between said stories and poetry diverge significantly when it comes to the nature of their exiled subjects' "returns" to their community of origin. But how do the stories relate to a much more recent genre, the bildungsroman? Like the prototypical bildungsroman, these stories do seem primarily concerned with subject formation — the coming-into-being of a relationship between an individual and a collective. But when we take a closer look at the "literary social work" (to use Joseph Slaughter's term) that these stories do in comparison to that of the bildungsroman, some pronounced differences come to the surface. Slaughter writes that in its classical form, the bildungsroman "narrates the story of the human personality's transition into modern citizenship and validates the constraints of the state/citizen bond as the condition of modern freedom" (134). The two Afghan short stories that I discuss in this chapter, on the other hand, call those constraints into question. While Soltanzadeh's and Shojai's two stories might serve as poignant examples of what can happen when a successful relationship is *not* formed between the citizen and the nation, they also challenge the very notions of citizenship and nationalism as they currently exist. They point to the troubled history of various states' interventions in Afghanistan as examples of the ways in which nations may mete out violence against *non*-citizens to ensure their exclusion or to otherwise promote the prosperity and supremacy of the nation above all of those on the margin or outside of it. It is significant that the stories do not illustrate any incorporation into a "nicer," more "livable" society. And both Shojai's and Soltanzadeh's other work that *is* set in countries of exile reveals an ambivalence, at best, about life in an adoptive

homeland.¹⁰³ If the bildungsroman is a narrativization of citizenship (to paraphrase Slaughter's argument), these two stories are a narrativization of *non*-citizenship. Still, the act of narration in these stories does suggest a kind of *appeal* for citizenship — perhaps for kinds of citizenship that are altogether different from those previously conceived.

What would such citizenship look like? Neither of these stories explicitly suggests alternatives, but the reader can imagine at least two major rights that their main characters would hope their future citizenship included: 1) the right not to be required to undertake military service on behalf a cause they do not believe in or that does not benefit them; and 2) the right not to have to choose between security, livelihood, and maintaining proximity to one's family. Of course, these two characters' most immediate need, and that of many of their real-life Afghan refugee counterparts, is protection from war violence. Despite the irony of many Afghan refugees fleeing to countries that have directly or indirectly participated in the war violence that has plagued their home country for the past 40 years, it must be acknowledged that their arrival in those countries often *does* meet that immediate need (even if it is also likely to introduce refugees to the other forms of borderscape violence that I have discussed in detail in this dissertation).

But even years after the Soviet-Afghan and Afghan Civil War, the kinds of citizenship to which the main characters of Shojai's and Soltanzadeh's stories seem to aspire remain elusive for most Afghan refugees. Recently, Afghans in Iran have been pressured under threat of deportation to fight with Iran-backed forces in Syria. Others have simply been conscripted against their will, and some of the recruits have been children as young as 14.¹⁰⁴ And as Amin and Neyaz's stories

¹⁰³ See Soltanzadeh's short story "*Tāksī-rān-e Odense*" ("The Taxi Driver of Odense") for example. And Afghan literary scholar Wali Ahmadi writes of Shojai's work that it is "largely characterized by the preponderance of deep despair, despondency, and disillusionment associated with life in exile" (145).

¹⁰⁴ See "Iran: Afghan Children Recruited to Fight in Syria"; "Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria."

reveal, refugees are far from being ensured the ability to retain physical proximity to their families amid their journeys. Rather, borders (in Neyaz's case, in which he is prevented from attending his mother's funeral) and territorial excision (in Amin's case, in which his father is held in detention on a Greek island due to laws that went into effect after Amin and his family arrived) have separated them from their families at crucial moments. And multiply tiered asylum systems treat individual members of families differently from one another based on age and sex. Four decades of internal strife and foreign intervention in Afghanistan have given way to multiple generations of refugees whose basic rights the international community refuses to recognize as fundamental. Instead, host countries place upon the refugees themselves the burden of "earning" those rights by risking their lives on dangerous journeys and submitting to discriminatory and often arbitrary application procedures amid conditions of economic precarity.

While this chapter has focused mainly on coming-of-age stories set in the 1980s in which young men leave Afghanistan itself, many of today's young Afghan refugees have never lived in the country, but were rather born into the condition of refugeehood. Amin and Neyaz do not discuss the prospect of their "returning" to a country they have never known. (Although Neyaz does make one mention of the idea of returning to Afghanistan in passing, describing a case in which a fellow migrant trying to cross illegally from Iran into Turkey was deported to Afghanistan — an outcome Neyaz implies is horrific.) It remains to be seen how successful Neyaz and Amin will be in formulating a balance between their own senses of selfhood and belonging. When I last heard from them, Amin was still awaiting his final asylum decision in Germany, and Neyaz is still awaiting his in Belgium. My hope is that future scholarly research attends to contemporary narratives like theirs, whether told orally or published as coming-of-age tales like Soltanzadeh's and Shojai's.

There is much more to learn about the ways in which 21st-century borderscapes disrupt unauthorized migrants' human development even more than those of the 1980s. Global neoliberalism, a force that, I have argued, intensifies borderscapes' morphing power, was less potent and widespread four decades ago than it is today. Likewise, there is much more to discover about the forms of belonging that are being developed by today's Afghan refugees, some of whom now have generations of experience with refugeehood. As the trends of economic inequality, neo-imperial military intervention, and climate-change-fueled environmental catastrophes continue to balloon the numbers of globally displaced people beyond record levels, the ideal of a state/citizen bond becomes less sustainable and the development of alternative forms of belonging becomes more crucial.

Narratives of migration across hostile borderscapes certainly contain information from which future subjects of refugeehood can learn. In my next chapter, I will focus on the great necessity and risk of translating such narratives in both humanitarian and literary settings.

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~Interlude~

Saif's Story

The following is a narrativization¹⁰⁵ of an interview I conducted with an undocumented migrant in Malta, when I was there for a short vacation in February 2020. When I informed fellow volunteers at Operation Renew in Finíkis refugee camp that I was going to Malta, they recommended I meet up with Saif. He had been a former asylum seeker in Greece, a resident of Finíkis camp, and a well-liked volunteer with the organization. We met up and walked the streets of Valletta, and soon I asked Saif if he'd be willing to be interviewed for my research project. He agreed, and after lunch at an Arab restaurant, I took out my recorder and we began the interview.

My name is Saif. I'm 25 years old. I'm from Syria, from Homs Governorate, from the town of al-Sukhnah.

My journey started when I traveled to another area in Syria, at a time when I couldn't return to my family's house. I was forced to leave. I didn't want to leave the country, but the regime came to al-Sukhnah, and after that I could no longer return to my family, because I was wanted by the regime for military service in the Syrian army. I was wanted, and everyone in the Syrian army— they all die. I was in danger from the Assad regime, and from the Kurds, and I

¹⁰⁵ As in the previous interlude, I have removed my interview questions and edited Saif's responses for clarity and cohesion. To read a transcript of this interview in full, along with its English translation, see this dissertation's Appendix.

was forced to leave for Turkey. Turkey has no work, and I wanted to come to Malta.

I knew a few particular people in al-Sukhnah, four or five people, who had lived in Malta for around 35 years [before returning to Syria].¹⁰⁶ They worked in construction in Malta.

Basically, Syrian currency was worth nothing. In Malta there was work, there was money. Back in al-Sukhnah we heard a lot about Malta: that there was work, that it was a country that is not racist. A country whose people love Arabs, and love interacting with Arabs. And the Maltese language is close to Arabic. In another country, you can't work unless you know the language of that country. Like in Germany, America, or Canada, you have to speak either English or German— it's difficult. Arabic is close to Maltese. People understand each other right away. When a Maltese person talks to an Arab, the Arab understands.

From Turkey, I came to Greece, to the island of Chios. I stayed there for eight days and then came by smuggling to Athens, so I could come to Europe¹⁰⁷ by smuggling, too, to continue on my path. From the beginning, my desire was to be in Malta.

At first, there was no possibility for me to get to Malta. Possibilities from the perspective of money, I mean. I didn't have any money. When I talked to a person who is close to the family, a friend of the family, he told me, "Come." He put up all the money [*takaffala bi-kull al-'amwāl*] I needed to make it to Malta. Now I'm in debt. Something around 9,000 euros. I want to help my family, to send them money, but first I have to work to pay off the debt.

I came to Greece and stayed there for about three years. I made 15 attempts to travel out

¹⁰⁶ There is a sizeable community of Syrians from al-Sukhnah living in Malta today. Saif says the community grew rapidly after war broke out in Syria. It is unclear exactly how many Syrians from al-Sukhnah currently live in Malta, but a Facebook group called "The Sakhnia Community in Malta الجالية السخنية في مالطا" which was launched in 2017, now has around 7,100 followers.

¹⁰⁷ Even though Greece is geographically part of Europe and a member of the EU, migrants often speak of traveling from Greece to Europe — typically meaning wealthier, northern European countries like Germany.

of Athens airport [to Malta],¹⁰⁸ but none of them were successful. I was caught every time. So I stayed in Athens for a year and a half, or more than a year and a half. I didn't have papers or anything. I couldn't leave the house.

Volunteering and Imprisonment

An organization, Operation Renew, gave me a place to stay in Finíkis refugee camp in Athens. It's one of the best organizations that I have gotten to know. Every day you see new people [volunteers] from every country — the whole world. From Europe, from Germany, from Italy. From Canada, from America, from China — from every country. This organization is familial/brotherly [*'akhawwiyya*], and it is just wonderful.

As a Syrian refugee, I volunteered for that organization as well, in order to help people. Because the way I looked at it, as a young man — I was 22 at that time — I had to help. If someone else is coming from his or her country, like an American or a Canadian, and is helping us — Syrians, Palestinians, Somalis, Afghans, Pakistanis — we young people are also obliged to help.

I got along very well with the volunteers.¹⁰⁹ Everyone that I met was great. There was no difference between us. On the contrary, I was Syrian, and their interactions with me were even better than their interactions with each other. I was really beloved among them. They all loved me, from the director down to each of the volunteers.

¹⁰⁸ Presumably with false documents.

¹⁰⁹ Note that when Saif says “volunteers” here, he means European and American volunteers. Even though there were other resident volunteers like him, the word *mutaṭawwa'īn* (“volunteers”), in the context of refugee camp NGOs, still carries the connotation of non-migrant volunteers.

[Eventually,] I went to Thessaloniki and the police caught me. I stayed with the police three months in Thessaloniki, then they transferred me to the “Allodapón” detention center¹¹⁰ in Athens and I stayed there for three months. A friend and sister, who is very precious to me, Andrea¹¹¹ from Operation Renew, helped me when I was in prison. There were things I was lacking, like, a lot of things: clothes, cigarette lighters... And she helped me with all of these things. She gave them to me when I was in prison. The reason I agreed to do this interview with you is that she put us in touch. I send her my greetings. I am so thankful to her.

So my total prison time in Greece was six months, and then they sent me back to the island of Chios. I stayed there for about eight months, maybe seven and a half. I got my *ausweis*,¹¹² papers that were only for Greece [and not the rest of Europe]. When I came back from Chios to Athens, I continued working with Operation Renew until the day that I left by land.

Leaving Greece

I had a friend who said, Let’s leave Greece by land. We walked for a period of about two months. We went from the country of Albania to Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. We went through Croatia for ten, fifteen days on foot, and we went without food for two days. We kept eating the leaves off of trees. We’d eat anything that was in front of us. Ten days walking in the cold, underneath the rain that was coming down from above us. All our clothes were completely

¹¹⁰ *Allodapón* is a Greek word meaning “foreigners.” It is used in Arabic to refer to the Attica Foreigners Division which houses the Petrou Ralli migrant detention center. Petrou Ralli is notorious for its harsh living conditions (see “Migrants Call for Freedom from Greek Detention Centres”). Larbi Ramdani writes about his experience at “Allodapón” in *Anthems of Salt* (see Chapter 1).

¹¹¹ A pseudonym

¹¹² See footnote 62 on the “ausweis”/White Card

soaked. We would walk and then sleep on completely wet ground, until we got to Slovenia. We stayed in Slovenia for a day. We didn't have any food left, and we were dead tired [*mutnā* — lit. “we died”].

We were forced to contact a smuggler. He brought us out of Slovenia towards Italy. And a car came for us, a BMW X5 — an SUV. We got in, and there were eight of us in the car. The smuggler brought along his son who was about 12 years old. We came up to Trieste, Italy.

Before we got to Trieste, he was speeding at 180, 200 [kmph]. We told him to slow down, but there was no use. Suddenly, the driver lost control of the car. When we got out of the car after we flipped on the highway. We got out of the car, five of us, with no serious injuries. I had an injury in my leg, in my foot, and in my back — light injuries. There had been three people in the trunk of the car. We asked the driver where they were. He said they got out and walked away. I asked him where they walked to. He said, They walked over there — they ran away. When we looked behind us we found them on the ground. Two of them died. One of them is in intensive care in Slovenia.¹¹³

I stayed in the hospital for two days because I lost consciousness after the accident and didn't know what was happening. I have an injury in my back that I still feel today.

Slovenia was the hardest stage of my life. I lost friends who were dear to me. I lost some of my closest friends. One of them — he and I were friends from the time I was 12 years old. From the day I came into the world, and came to know the world, and to think, and to develop my thoughts [*wa-ṣār 'indī tafkīr*], and get to know people, there hasn't been anything harder on me than the situation in Slovenia.

¹¹³ To read the Arabic-language article about the incident that Saif shared with me, see “*Slūfīniyā: Lāji'ān Sūriyān Ḥāwalā Dukhūl al-Ittiḥād al-'Urūbbī lākin al-Qadar Ḥāla dūna Dhālik*” (“Slovenia: Two Syrian Refugees Attempted to Enter the European Union but Fate Stood in their Way”).

Coming to Malta

We didn't want to be fingerprinted in Slovenia. We wanted the asylum fingerprints¹¹⁴ in Malta. But we were forced into it. After five days in prison, they fingerprinted us. They said, Either you return to Bosnia, or you get fingerprinted. So we were forced into being fingerprinted after the pain [*'anā*] of fifteen days [of travel from Croatia] and the accident. We lost our friends, and we were forced into this.

And after that I went to Italy, and from Italy I came to Malta. So now, praise God, I'm in Malta. I came for work in order to build a future, to help my family. My situation is okay, it's good. Here there is work. I am working in construction. Thank God, after three and a half years of torture, I am here. God allowed me to be successful, and I made it here.

I hope to get papers, so I can go to other countries. Sometimes I need to go to the hospital because of my back injury. I have to borrow the papers of one of my friends in order to enter the hospital, since I don't have papers in Malta. I'm afraid I'll be arrested.

I might go to the asylum office soon. Maybe they'll give me papers, maybe they'll refuse me. If they refuse me, maybe I'll put a lawyer on my case. Maybe the lawyer won't succeed. Maybe he will. But most likely I'll be sent back to Slovenia, since that is where I was forced to apply for asylum.¹¹⁵

Final thoughts

At first I didn't want to get into this topic, but when you told me that you came based on Andrea's recommendation [*lammā qult illī 'enta jīt min ʔaraf* Andrea — lit. when you told me

¹¹⁴ For more on “asylum fingerprints,” see footnote 69.

¹¹⁵ For more information on the Dublin rules, also see footnote 69.

that you came from Andrea's side], and you came wanting to do this thing, and because I enjoyed your company, and Andrea's... I wanted to participate in this project because of Andrea.

We have a saying in religion, those of us in the Muslim faith, which says: “A complaint to someone other than God is humiliation” [*Ash-shakwā li-ghayr allāh madhallah*]. *Ya nī* a person humiliates himself when he tells [his story]. I don't want to be humiliated. People don't want to humiliate themselves in front of other people. We are a people who, despite the fact that we Syrians and Iraqis and Palestinians fled and sought refuge, despite the fact that we became refugees, and grew weary, and experienced torment and a war— all this remains something we present to God, and not to other people. But I do hope that my voice reaches all around the world, so people help refugees, because the situation for refugees is awful [*wad' al-lāji 'īn ta 'bān kathīr* — lit., the situation of refugees is very tired/ill/dysfunctional]. The country where this is most true is Greece; the situation for refugees there is awful.

We refugees didn't leave our homes just to come here to Europe and be tortured on its streets [*nata 'adhab fawq ṭuruqāthā*]. We came from a war. It was the war that forced us out of our country. And I hope that more people will help, because there are people in camps, on the islands of Chios, Lesbos, Samos, and all of Greece— they're sleeping on the streets. Some don't have camps; they don't have anything — not even food. The treatment towards refugees in Greece is very bad. There is an organization in Athens, at Finíkis camp in Athens, and this is the best camp. There is good treatment from the organization Operation Renew. Three people [there] helped me in every way. To Andrea, Michalis,¹¹⁶ Cindy,¹¹⁷ I send a great deal of thanks, not a little [*'aqaddim lahum shukr kathīr wa-mish shwayy*].

¹¹⁶A pseudonym

¹¹⁷A pseudonym

Today I have been separated from my family for three and a half years. I haven't seen my family. Nobody wants to leave their country. You wouldn't want to leave your country. Your country remains your country, whether you leave for exile [*lil-ghurbah*] and stay abroad for one or two years, or for ten or twenty, you want to return to your country. You want to return to your family. Today I am a stranger in a foreign land [*al-yawm 'anā mughtarib*] who hasn't seen his mom, hasn't seen his dad, for three and a half years.

I was married. I lost my family in this *ghurbah* of mine [*faqadt 'ā'iltī fī ghurbatī hādhih*]. I can't connect with her [*'anā mish hasnān 'awsil ilhā*]. She is in Syria now. Three months ago I was forced to divorce her. *Khalaṣ*. I was forced to do this because I am in one country and she is in another. We can't see each other.

I hope to return to Syria one day, but it's difficult as long as Bashar al-Assad is there. Because if we return to Syria, we will have to go to the army, and the army— they all die. Where to go? But if I had known I would face all these troubles on the road, I would have preferred to die in Syria and not come to these troubles [*ṣu 'ūbāt*], because we've grown tired of this.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The World of the Refugee-Translator

...all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them...
—Amin Maalouf
Leo Africanus (translated by Peter Sluglett)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I introduce readers to the refugee-translator, a prominent figure in the irregular migration and asylum-seeking milieu who occupies a unique position as mediator between migrants, on one side, and NGOs or the state on the other. By refugee-translator I mean an individual who has personal experience on the application end of the asylum system and has, formally or informally, taken on the role of interpreter in which he or she facilitates communication between the parties. When I conducted fieldwork in Greece, volunteering with four different refugee aid organizations, almost all of the Arabic- and Persian-language interpreters I encountered were themselves current or former asylum applicants. These refugee-translators provide interpretation services for interactions as mundane as requests for basic logistical information and as emotionally charged as interviews wherein the migrants for whom they translate narrate traumatic events in detail. And yet, notwithstanding the ubiquity of refugee-translators, very little if any academic research has been published about them.

It may not be astonishing that most interpreter positions at refugee aid organizations and

state asylum offices in Greece seem to be filled by asylum seekers and refugees themselves.¹¹⁸ In many ways, they are ideal candidates for these jobs. After all, they are native speakers of the languages for which NGOs and the state need translators in order to carry out their work successfully. Given the abiding need for translators, the only other skill required to be hired for such a role is a decent command of English (or, less commonly, Greek). Not to mention that refugee-translators are likely to possess intimate knowledge of many of the types of experiences they will be describing in translation. But despite the unsurprising nature of the fact that many migrant “users” of the border regime become employed as translators by it (or provide unpaid translation services for it), a close look at the ways these individuals occupy their interpreter positions can provide insights that make room for significant interventions in scholarly debates about translation, subaltern agency, NGO-ization, and bordering practices. Given this substantial gap in the literature, this chapter is overall more descriptive than it is argumentative, making a breadth of observations based on my interactions and interviews with three refugee-translator interlocutors and my reading of a memoir. However, I do advance a few arguments along the way, the most significant of which I will summarize below:

This dissertation is largely focused on narration as a potential means for migrant agency that may be used in efforts towards increased physical and socioeconomic mobility. Within this context, I argue that refugee-translators have an enhanced ability to shape narrative, and thus they are key wielders of a special kind of narrative power. Tapping into their behind-the-scenes knowledge, refugee-translators can calibrate their translation decisions in ways that have a powerful influence on not only their clients’ migration trajectories, but also their own. Moreover,

¹¹⁸ This is my anecdotal assessment based on my fieldwork in Greece. I have not been able to find any authoritative data to prove this. The assessment applies to interpreters translating to and from non-European languages like Arabic, Persian, and Kurdish, and not necessarily to those translating French and Spanish.

bringing the figure of the refugee-translator into translation scholarship on situations of inequity and humanistic response complicates recent scholarly trends towards deemphasizing translation's transmissive and connective functions. I consider the recommendations that have been made in recent academic writing on interpretation in humanitarian settings and imagine what might happen should these recommendations be put into practice by refugee-translators, who are clearly not the imagined receivers of said recommendations.

Another dynamic I track in this chapter is the way in which the refugee-translator exists within the domain of neoliberal capitalism, where basic human needs are inextricably linked with economic and professional "progress." In this reality, translation is not merely a life-saving service or means of facilitating human expression, but also a business. There is not much money in this line of work, but there are other gains to be made by refugee-translators. The work experiences of the translators I interacted with during my fieldwork reveal a slippage between making progress in their professional life and making progress in their migration and asylum trajectories. In their liminal positions as mediators between carriers of elite passports of Global North countries and unauthorized migrants from the Global South, refugee-translators find themselves hopping back and forth between identities, loyalties, and statuses, carrying out acts of shapeshifting and border-crossing that are connected to the concept of the "morphing borderscape" discussed in previous chapters.

However, this chapter differs from the others in that it is not primarily centered on published works of literature, but on my interactions and interviews with interlocutors. In each of the previous chapters that analyzed literary primary source material in Arabic and Persian, I rendered into English numerous passages from previously untranslated works and lingered over close readings of these texts. Changing course in this chapter, I compose a series of vignettes

about individual refugee-translators and the multifarious roles translation plays (and purports to play) in the Greek borderscape. These vignettes are based on my field notes and interviews and are written in a less academic style (although I do connect my thoughts to academic research). I also quote extensively from transcripts of my interviews with two refugee-translator interlocutors and put their experiences and sentiments into conversation with each other and with translation scholarship. In doing so, I have endeavored to fulfill my dissertation's goal of expanding the tools of literary studies beyond the scope of literature as it is traditionally defined. My hope is that my treatment of migrants as knowledge producers has the consequence of casting new light on the existing scholarly discourse in translation studies, refugee and migration studies, and beyond.

THE TASKS OF REFUGEE-TRANSLATION

Translation as Veneer?

While attending a migration-focused film festival in Athens in the fall of 2019, I came across a thin newsprint magazine¹¹⁹ whose cover featured vibrant photography and headlines written in multiple languages and scripts. The publication billed itself as being produced by a team of refugee and Greek youth, and it was distributed on a semi-regular basis as an insert in a left-leaning Greek daily. Flipping through the issue that I held in my hand, I encountered articles in English, Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. Not every article was presented in all five languages, but most were printed in at least three. Fascinated by the project and curious about the potential insight it might provide about translation in the context of migration and asylum seeking, I soon found the magazine's website and learned that it was an initiative of a youth-focused Greek

¹¹⁹ In keeping with my approach to writing about other organizations with which I have volunteered, I have chosen not to name this magazine or the NGO by which it is operated.

NGO. I sent an email to the address provided on the NGO's website, volunteering to help with the magazine's production. A few days later, I was invited to join the young migrant journalists at their next editorial meeting.

On November 18th, 2019, I arrived about a half-hour late to the meeting. Sitting around a table were a group of about a dozen young Afghan, Arab, Pakistani, and Greek men and women, all in their teens and twenties, along with the NGO coordinator, a Greek woman who appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Because some of the attendees didn't speak English, three interpreters had taken on the role of translating to and from their respective mother tongue. Mostly, the individuals speaking made their contributions in English, pausing every few sentences to allow the interpreters to translate. In cases where individuals delivered remarks in a language other than English, a cacophonous game of multilingual telephone ensued: a few sentences of Greek, Persian, or Urdu followed by a translation into English by the respective translator, and then a second degree of translation into the remaining languages. (Amīn, from the interlude preceding the previous chapter, was one of these translators; this was how we initially met.) I was wowed by the seeming simplicity of this rough-and-ready process of translation, which reminded me of the "human microphone"¹²⁰ method famously used in the Occupy Wall Street protests and broader Occupy movement in the 2010s.

It wasn't perfect, surely. This method of translating did not work for the back-and-forth dialogues that often ensued, especially in cases of passionate disagreement or spur-of-the-moment collective brainstorming. Still, in these cases the translators summarized what was going

¹²⁰ The human microphone works as follows: A person standing in the crowd yells, "Mic check," and the people around the person repeat, "Mic check." This indicates that a speech is about to begin. The speaker then begins speaking in short phrases, each of which is repeated by the crowd surrounding the speaker, so that people further away can hear what is said, without the need for a physical microphone. In larger crowds, each phrase might be repeated again by people who could not hear the original speaker but can hear the first repetition, in order for the message to be audible to people even further away.

on to the best of their ability. The fact that English was the default language and the language of medium by which, say, Urdu was translated to Persian, might also be seen as problematic due to English's global hegemonic status. However, from another angle, English did present some degree of neutrality, not being the mother tongue of either the Greek or migrant participants. Moreover, it was truly the only practical choice given that there were far fewer participants who were proficient in Greek than ones who were proficient in English.

On the surface at least, it seemed that translation was serving as a means of operating at every level of the magazine's production, from editorial meeting down to publication. Translation was construed as a democratizing medium, a tool by which all could participate. It was this highly audible and visible translation that evidently made possible the magazine's and NGO's stated mission: namely, to promote integration between Greek and refugee youth and to advance freedom of expression by creating a platform from which migrant youth could share their views and experiences with the public. The structure of the meetings was designed to decentralize (or at least give the impression of decentralizing) editorial power and put it in the hands of the collective, however different each individual's linguistic, cultural, or legal status backgrounds might be. The multilingual publication endeavored to put translation to its most utopian uses: facilitating representation of the Other and opening new avenues for empathy. As Susan Sontag writes, translation "is preeminently an ethical task, and one that mirrors and duplicates the role of literature itself, which is to extend our sympathies, ... to secure and deepen the awareness (with all its consequences) that other people, people different from us, really do exist" (177).¹²¹ This is surely an ideal goal of translation, one that humanists everywhere should embrace. But beneath translation's transfigurative, revelatory magic, it also has a potent ability to

¹²¹ Here Sontag is referring specifically to literary translation, but we may extend this sentiment to other forms of written translation and verbal interpretation as well.

conceal. In this chapter, I investigate the less readily apparent “tasks” that translation carries out in the borderscape, and the ways the practice is instrumentalized by NGOs, the state, unauthorized migrants themselves, and academic and literary translators like me.

One must examine the lofty goals and (from every indication) sincere efforts made by the magazine and its associated NGO alongside the realities of their implementation. Most of the articles in the magazine are translated by a translation service, and the names of individual translators are not included with articles presented in additional languages. Moreover, the translations into Arabo-Persian script tend to include many typos, particularly those brought about by typesetting softwares’ perennial failure to optimize for right-to-left scripts. This raises the question of whom the translations into languages other than Greek and English are truly for. Might they ironically serve more as flashy displays for non-readers of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu — those like the majority of the audience of the film festival at which I first encountered the magazine — than for migrant youth who do not read Greek or English? These apprehensions of mine stem largely from the fact that the magazine exists within the context of the NGO model, in which project continuity is dictated by financial support from philanthropic, national, and multilateral sources. The magazine’s website lists nearly a dozen funders, current and former. Funding organizations look for particular kinds of projects that emphasize particular values. Thus, a degree of tension emerges. The magazine bills itself as an organic project, brought into existence collaboratively by young refugees and Greeks alike, and springing from real migrant youth’s urge to represent themselves on their own terms. But at the same time the project depends on the financial and administrative support of entities with their own agendas.

On the editorial side, the magazine’s website claims that all articles are produced entirely by the refugee and Greek youth who attend the magazine’s editorial meetings. The highly

democratic structure of the magazine's production meetings seems to support this claim. However, behind the scenes, it was clear to me that the coordinator and European and American volunteers had a measurably larger influence than was publicly acknowledged. We encouraged certain story ideas over others, suggested journalistic angles, and even made some executive editorial decisions when deadlines loomed. When I asked Amin about it later, he told me he was ambivalent about the degree to which the organization lived up to its stated mission. On the one hand, he felt that it was valuable that the magazine gave him a platform from which to share written reflections on his experiences. On the other hand, he did not feel that the magazine was a venue that promoted true freedom of opinion and expression for migrants, as the mission statement on its website claimed.

“Once I had an experience that I wanted to write an article [about] in the newspaper, and this article was actually related to one of their sponsors,” Amin told me in an interview. “And they denied [i.e., rejected] it. They just easily said, ‘No, we cannot write about that.’ So that’s not true ... what they have written [on the website].” I later asked Amin to elaborate on the nature of the editorial interference he faced. He told me that he had wanted to write an article that was critical of the International Organization of Migration, with a focus on the conditions in a residential section for unaccompanied minors at a refugee camp where IOM operated. The story was going to be based on the lived experience of two individuals whom Amin knew in that camp. At the same time, Amin had recently worked as a translator for IOM, but he said his contract was not renewed despite earlier assurances it would be. He wanted to write about this experience as well. He thought of the article as a way of airing critiques of one of the most ubiquitous and consequential organizations that most migrants had no choice but to interact with during their time in Greece. After initially giving him a different reason for why they could not

go ahead with the story, the magazine coordinator eventually told him that the organization “cannot let me do that because IOM is one of their sponsors,” Amin said.¹²²

Here the utopian vision of translation, which is projected on the pages of the magazine and in the spectacular format of its editorial meetings, begins to dissolve. Translation may be a pleasant mirage of diversity underneath which inequitable, exclusionary structures continue to rule the day. While the multilingual nature of the magazine gives the impression that it is presenting a multitude of migrant perspectives and experiences and is serving as an alternative to local and international media that migrant youth feel have so often misunderstood or misrepresented them, certain viewpoints are left out of the magazine. Here we see an example in which an article is rejected for presenting a challenge to one of the organizations funding the magazine, with the aim of safeguarding this funding. The decision comes with the hint of a paternalistic message: migrant writers should not be too polemical in their critiques of the bodies that provide them with aid and services; they should not bite the hand that feeds them. The irony of discouraging or preventing the airing of critiques that are discomfiting to these bodies, in the pages of a magazine whose stated mission is to be a platform for unauthorized migrants to tell their own authentic stories, is self-evident. The effect is of presenting migrants as toothless charity cases. In turn, this sentiment plays further into the hand of NGOs operating on donations and grants. All the while, the magazine’s prominent display of translation as its *modus operandi* suggests to readers that nothing of value has been left out. The spectacle of translation gives the impression of providing access to that which has previously been excluded. With this in mind, it is important to pay attention to the obscured *curatorial* quality of translation, in this context and

¹²² It is possible that Amin is slightly mistaken here, and that the sponsor was the UNHCR. Both the IOM and the UNHCR are UN agencies, so there may have been a perception on the part of the coordinator that a criticism of the IOM could put the UNHCR funding in jeopardy.

others. The idea that translation inevitably makes greater inclusion possible distracts from the fact that as it selects, it also rejects. And in the capitalism-fueled worlds of both the nonprofit sector and the publishing industry, there are always important questions to be asked about why certain texts and writers are selected and why others are rejected; what — whose — interests does a particular selection serve?

I did not get the sense that situations like the censorship episode described by Amin were a common occurrence. But there are other, more subtle ways that certain articles, and certain writers, were structurally excluded from the magazine. The publication generally presents socially liberal viewpoints and the image of refugees as potential future citizens of a cosmopolitan nation. The mere fact that writing for the magazine requires young people to attend a mixed-gender meeting at an NGO office in the city is prohibitive to some young refugee writers, particularly women and girls from socially conservative families. This is not to imply that the magazine should refrain from promoting a worldview that is accepting of difference, or to suggest that the organization should gender-segregate its meetings. Rather, I make this observation to acknowledge that despite what the magazine's image might suggest to the reader, the range of refugee youth views and experiences it presents is limited. Translation scholar M. Rosario Martín Ruano writes that "Translation, whether understood in strict or broad terms, invariably multiplies the number of speakers in a conversation, albeit sometimes perhaps only to create a false, monochordal pluralism" (355) A troubling question thus emerges: do NGO-run projects like this magazine, rather than presenting a transparent account of the experiences and opinions of migrants and refugees on their own terms, actually create migrants and refugees in the image of liberal cosmopolitanism? Behind the veneer of translation as the key to participation and self-representation, does there lurk a hidden reality of loyalties to powerful political and

economic forces? Does translation itself contribute to the obscuring of this reality?

My honest assessment is that the situation is not quite as sinister as these pointed questions suggest. By all indications, the organization under whose auspices the magazine exists does truly have the intention to help refugee youth have an opportunity to express themselves. There is an educational element (some training in journalism), an element of providing a space for integration between Greek and refugee youth, and a platform for some degree of self-expression. But the organization is accountable to its sponsors, which, by virtue of their ability to withhold funding, limit the possible range of expression. At the very least, the funding situation creates a chilling effect for the coordinator of the magazine, who does not want to put her position (as someone whose salary is ultimately paid by these funders) in jeopardy, nor the organization's ability to operate.

Burnout

During my summer of fieldwork in 2019, after volunteering for a couple of months with an NGO in Khalía camp, I took a ferry from Piraeus to Lesbos. I arrived there two days before I was to begin my work as a volunteer with the same organization, this time assisting with refugee arrivals. On the website CouchSurfing.com, I connected with Mojtabā, an Iranian man in his early twenties, and he agreed to host me in his tiny one-bedroom apartment in Mytilene. When I arrived and told him what I was doing in Greece, he said that he had worked as an interpreter for refugees in Moria camp. It was not until the second night of my stay that I learned that Mojtaba had himself received asylum in Greece. In fact, Mojtaba was my introduction to the figure of the refugee-translator employee. When I arrived, he was at first a bit despondent, just showing me where I'd be sleeping (a twin bed next to his own) and then going right back to the TV show he was watching. Eventually, a friend of his, an asylum seeker living in Moria who sometimes

stayed at the apartment, came over, and Mojtaba perked up a bit. We ate a simple dinner of lentils and tomatoes, then went for a short walk down to the beach, where Mojtaba lit a joint, and soon after became perfectly sociable.

The next day, however, he was just as despondent as he had been when I arrived — almost zombie-like. Upon waking up, he immediately pulled his laptop onto his lap and continued watching his TV show. He seemingly stayed in his room like this for most of the day; he was still there when I came back in the evening after I spent the afternoon working on my computer in a coffee shop. But that night, over a bottle of wine, Mojtaba opened up about his experience as an interpreter in and around Moria and told me that he had very recently quit his job. It began to become apparent why he was in this dejected state.

He launched into descriptions of horrible things he had seen when he had been employed as a Persian-English interpreter for the Greek state. Before Moria camp burned down in 2020, it was notorious for its inhumane living conditions. In 2019, the same year Mojtaba was working there, Pope Francis visited and called it a “concentration camp.” It was thus not only the intensity of translating people’s descriptions of their traumatic experiences that overwhelmed Mojtaba, but also the psychological and physical exposure to the violence of the camp, which tended to flare up in areas where residents and state employees interacted. He witnessed a lot of “riots,” he said.

He had also been to the sites of migrant boat landings. From my field notes:

Mojtaba said he had seen the way Frontex/police/authorities treat people when they land. Even after they have just lost family members who drowned literally minutes ago. They bark orders at them: GO HERE! DO THIS! GO! GO! GO! “How could you treat another human being like that?” Mojtaba asked. He quit his job because he couldn’t stand seeing this kind of thing all the time. And he hinted that he felt complicit — or that the people he was working with were trying to *make him* complicit — in all the “fucked up” things that were happening.

Another one of the major frustrations that Mojtaba told me about, and which drove him down the

path of abruptly quitting his job, was that he was often put in situations in which state employees asked him whether or not he thought an interviewee was lying, a seemingly common “task” of refugee-translators. “He had to push back all the time against this, saying ‘That’s none of my business,’” I wrote in my field notes. This position of being asked to determine the veracity of an asylum applicant’s claim, knowing that providing this opinion could have a profound influence on this person’s future and even his or her life itself, would be a distressing one for any empathetic person. But for someone who is likely to have a shared history of trying experiences with smugglers, state actors, and exposure to the elements on a migration journey (see Chapter One), the emotional weight of such an interaction and the associated sense of responsibility would certainly make it even more overwhelming. No wonder Mojtaba was burned out.

When I left his apartment the next morning to catch my bus to the north of the island, Mojtaba offered to sell me some marijuana. “There’s no supply in Skala,” he said, referring to the village where I was headed. I politely turned him down. At the time, I interpreted Mojtaba’s offer simply as a friendly gesture from someone who had a little extra on his hands, not someone who made a business out of it. But as I write this, I wonder whether selling drugs might have become the means of a supplemental income during his period of unemployment. With his above-board job becoming too unbearable, it is easy to understand why the black market would be appealing. The market for drugs and other illegalized goods and activities was booming. Mojtaba had spoken of refugees shooting up heroin in the street, and of widely available and affordable prostitution. Selling weed seemed comparatively tame.

Meaning as Weight, Translator as Bridge

While I did not have the opportunity to interview Mojtaba formally about his role as a refugee-interpreter, my impression of the reasons for his burnout stayed with me, and they informed the

questions I asked Amin, with whom I was able to develop a close relationship and thus achieve a level of trust conducive to detailed discussions of sensitive topics. In my interviews with Amin about his work as an interpreter for refugee aid organizations, he stressed the intensity of the responsibility he felt as he facilitated communication for the migrants whom he had been taught to call “beneficiaries.” He understood the stakes as essentially being between life and death. As an interpreter, he said, “With a very small word you could destroy their [beneficiaries’] life or in another way, in the opposite way, you could build their life.” The pressure associated with this translatorial task, he added, requires a high degree of emotional stability on the part of the translator:

“I would say it’s a difficult and challenging position, because if you are not psychologically sustainable, or ready for that, then it would easily take you down.” Amin described the act of translation using the metaphor of passing a heavy weight back and forth over a bridge between two parties.

If we imagine the interpreter as a bridge, and the conversation as a weight, the conversation is always going and coming, going and coming. It always passes from the bridge, and if that bridge breaks, that means you didn’t communicate with each other. And how this bridge is breaking is actually [that] if one side’s weight is way bigger than the pressure that the bridge can handle, then as soon as it enters the bridge, the bridge will be broken, and the whole communication will be broken. [...] I believe that not everyone can be an interpreter, because it’s a huge responsibility. It’s way heavier than you think. It will almost sometimes press you on the ground, in order just to transmit the conversation.

Extrapolating from Amin’s description, I understand the *weight* that Amin is referring to as having three aspects: 1) the demanding mental and verbal labor of back-and-forth bilingual interpretation itself; 2) the conviction that it would be the translator’s fault if the attempted communication were unsuccessful, a scenario that could have grave consequences for the beneficiary; and 3) the psychological toll of being regularly exposed to the harrowing details of

individual experiences of subjection to multiple sources and layers of violence — experiences that are likely to be similar to those of the refugee-translator him/herself.

As a strategy for getting through his emotionally taxing work as an interpreter, Amin endeavors to shut down his emotions, reducing the act of translation to sheer mechanics:

I guess I'm not ready for some of this, but I have my own strategy to handle this situation, and that is: I would just consider myself as a robot, let's say, I would just say a robot, because I would not include my emotions at all in that situation, and I would just [...] exchange the conversation and not have any judgmental perspective to any side, and that would definitely help me not be harmed or, let's say, to take care of myself.

It is easy to understand why Amin chooses to take this approach, and one sympathizes with him as he discusses it. However, readers of contemporary translation theory and ethics will notice the incongruencies — incompatibilities? — between Amin's approach and the approaches for which many translation scholars have been advocating. Upon reading recent academic articles on translation and interpretation in humanitarian and conflict settings, from which I quote below, it becomes clear that the translators these authors refer to are not imagined to be ones like Amin (i.e., former or current recipients of services who have little power, and who remain in positions of vulnerability similar to those of the clients for whom they translate).

In a book chapter focused on multiple forms of translation and interpretation within “asymmetrical power dynamics,” Ruano cautions against the translation-as-bridge metaphor. She points out that the bridge metaphor tends to be used to suggest that translation, by its very nature, creates positive connections between otherwise disconnected cultures. For Ruano, this ubiquitous metaphor also gives the impression that acts of translation automatically provide a kind of level playing field for communicators from divergent backgrounds between whom a power imbalance would otherwise emerge. Ruano writes: “[T]he unproblematised ... view which underlies the image of translation as a bridge can be seen to be institutionalised in many professional fields,

for example underpinning institutional and deontological discourses that reduce translation to a strictly vehicular and communicative operation” (344). She adds that understanding translation as mere transmission of information risks painting translation as a derivative (rather than creative) act, thus stripping translators of their agency and depoliticizing the practice.

Emphasizing the translator’s role as one of mechanical neutrality, and stressing translation itself as a fundamentally peacebuilding, diversifying, equalizing force, gives powerful entities the opportunity to use translation as a tool to perpetuate exploitation, she writes (340-341). Instead, Ruano calls for translators to remain deeply aware of the political stakes involved in each translation setting, and to conduct their work accordingly by leaning into political movements and goals rather than eschewing them in service of a principle of neutrality. She envisions a “resistant” approach to translation that contests “prevailing practices” and is “committed to the redressing of identified asymmetries” (349).

In my recent follow-up interview with Amin, with Ruano’s critiques in mind, I asked him whether he believed that translation had the power to “bridge the gap” between cultures. This is how he responded:

I used to believe that mission, but if I tell the truth, that message [...] about [...] being a bridge between two different cultures, it’s not true. Yes, it is a bridge, but it’s only a communication bridge, because the first thing and most important policy of every interpreter is that you are not allowed to add anything to the conversation or to reduce anything. So that means everything that is said or transferred, it stays the same. So this cannot be a bridge between two cultures. It’s only a bridge of two conversations [i.e., two participants in a conversation] being connected together. That’s all.

Amin’s and Ruano’s views converge in the belief that translation should not be understood as something that automatically contributes to a spanning of cultural, political, and economic fissures. But where they differ is that Ruano takes an optimistic view of translation’s *potential* ability to do, while Amin, having been embedded in the harsh realities of translator-mediated

cross-socioeconomic communication, has emerged a complete pessimist. Ruano says that certain “reflexive and self-reflexive translation practices [can] maximise on the potentialities of dialogue for the ultimate aim of enhancing ... cross-cultural intelligibility” (336). But for Amin, the required neutrality and exactness of interpretation is such that no loftier goals than communication can be accommodated within its framework.

Another striking contrast between Ruano’s commentary on translation in situations of “power asymmetry” and Amin’s approach as a refugee-translator emerges around the issue of neutrality. Citing Mona Baker and Carol Maier, Ruano warns that “the ‘ethos of neutrality’ may blind trainees and professionals to ‘the consequences of their actions.’” She goes on to call for “internalising the ethical dimension” of translation work and invokes progressive icons Desmond Tutu and Paulo Freire to stress that “neutrality is neither possible nor an option in contexts of injustice, inequality, and powerlessness” (344). What can we learn by putting these critiques into the context of Amin’s tactical approach to his translation work, in which he endeavors to carry out an exceedingly neutral, even robotic, translation?

First of all, it is clear that Amin’s neutral approach does not “blind” him to the “consequences of his actions.” On the contrary, Amin is so concerned about the potential consequences of his actions — positive or negative — that the more he thinks about it, the more unbearably anxious he becomes. This neutral translation approach is a response to a *hyper*-awareness, not a lack of awareness, of his ethical responsibility as a translator. In fact, he feels that if he were to choose *not* to be neutral, say, by bending the words of his clients in a way that he believed might help them in their asylum process (based on his behind-the-scenes knowledge of the asylum system in Greece), he might inadvertently make things worse for them, and then that would undeniably be his fault. “I don’t like to mess with that responsibility because it is

heavy,” he said. Making every effort towards neutrality was a way for Amin to feel that he was not personally responsible for any particular beneficiary’s experience of harm that might result from NGO action or inaction, in addition to being a way for him to protect himself emotionally from the traumatic content he often translated.

And contrary to Ruano’s claim that the idea of the translator’s role as a merely transmissive one leads to a reduction of translators’ agency (344), Amin’s tactics of emotional disengagement and robotic neutrality can be understood as a form of “destituent passivity” which Kallio et al. describe as an agentive form of disengagement that “very momentarily, deactivate[s] dominant power without explicitly opposing it” (4015) (see Chapter Two). The power structure of the morphing neoliberal border regime is such that it employs those who are its objects of exclusion to participate in its operation. As employees of this regime (whether such employment is direct, in the case of Mojtaba working for the state, or indirect, in the case of Amin working for NGOs and multilateral organizations), these reticent participants are further exposed to the violence of the border regime while themselves contributing to it by serving as gatekeepers. With few other employment options available to them, refugee-translators find themselves in the position of being made (to feel) complicit in the debasing violence of the border regime, and this in turn is another manifestation of said violence. Emotional detachment is an active choice by Amin, and most likely other refugee-translators as well. It is an effort to “deactivate” the power of the border regime’s violence against them, and (as we will see below) to resist attempts at manipulation by either side of the translation exchange.

Another point of friction surfaces when we weigh Amin’s real-world approach against that of current theory on translation’s orientation to conflict. Doris Bachmann-Medick writes that translation can be quite effective [...] if it does not purport to act as a bridge-builder in a harmonising way, but rather addresses conflicts, fears, misunderstandings, power

inequalities, racist assumptions; if it takes them seriously, but works towards conflict negotiation and transformation: translation thus *brings conflict and consensus-building together*, the one does not work without the other. (140, my emphasis)

This may be true, but in Amin's case, the recommendation seems entirely impracticable.

Although Amin said he would never "change" the words of the people he translated, he did try to choose his target-language words carefully, in a way that was least likely to bring about conflict:

Because if you say something wrong, then it would definitely [bring about] an aggressive situation in the place. So I'm always careful about this and I'm trying to understand both, to compare their [beneficiaries'] situation with my orders [i.e., work responsibilities], to what I have to do, and try to make the best out of this situation and make the best decision.

Amin also said that in his interpreter role he would take time to smooth over potential points of cultural misunderstanding between translation sessions in an effort to defuse conflict. Even though he felt that in his work environment at the Athens-based NGO, "the danger is less ... than what is going on in the camp or in the shelter or in the squat," he still felt he and his colleagues were vulnerable to violence:

Some of [the beneficiaries] are okay, fine. Some of them are even, we find out, pretty motivated, and there are some others, like, pretty down and aggressive and offensive in a way. I've [sometimes] experienced pretty offensive behavior, like [someone] trying to say to me, like, "You are just taking money and you don't do anything. You just get money and that's all you do. You don't help anyone." [... Another] time, someone tried to get in, and tried to be pretty aggressive. I mean, he was aggressive, and he was also trying hard to hurt some of us. Like, he had a knife with him. He tried to get in, but we didn't let him, and then the police came and took him to jail and blah, blah, blah.

Amin describes taking a pronouncedly different approach from the one suggested by Bachmann-Medick. He does not have the luxury of inviting conflict into the conversation in order that "consensus-building" might take place. His priority is his safety and psychological stability. One logical conclusion is that the structure of neoliberal inequality and humanitarianism precludes the kinds of recommendations put forth in recent scholarship. Translators alone cannot create the appropriate conditions for emergence of the type of conflict resolution advocated above. But

what are we to make of Amin's identification with the NGO staff (in his use of "we") in their ranking of migrant clients based on levels of personal "motivation," and his nonchalant description of a carceral solution to what is essentially a problem of unmet human needs? Is this a case in which Amin was a party to NGOs' unwritten role as gatekeeper? Perhaps. A major argument of this chapter is that refugee-translators are instrumentalized by the border regime at the same time as they prioritize the safety, livelihood, and well-being of themselves and their loved ones. But this instrumentalization is not unidirectional. And as we will see in a later section, refugee translators also find ways to instrumentalize *their positions* to make progress on their migration journeys.

What can we take away from these tensions between the approach that Ruano and other translation scholars recommend and the one Amin and his peers take within their highly restricted environments? One must assume Ruano and others are imagining translators who are much more removed from the situations in which they find themselves translating. But from my experience witnessing the world of refugee-interpretation, I am struck by the impression that it is far more common for translation to be carried out by people with intimate ties to their translated subjects. Even Amin and Mojtaba, who were both recognized refugees (i.e., asylum recipients) in Greece, were more removed than many other translators in this context, given that they were translating for asylum *seekers* and *undocumented* migrants. Translation was often conducted much more informally, by people whose status and situation were the exact same as those for whom they translated. At the asylum aid center where I volunteered in Athens, what would typically happen is that a group of people would enter the office together, and when no NGO-associated translator was available, the person with the best English skills of the group would translate, as best as he or she could, for the rest of them.

How can translation scholars, part of whose job is to devise notions of what translation ideally should and should not be, reconcile themselves with the fact that much of the translation happening in these high-stakes environments is being carried out by individuals whose notions of translation are far less complicated and theorized than their own? How beneficial would it be to contribute to the designing of training courses¹²³ for refugee-translators, so that the most important takeaways of contemporary translation theory could be instilled in their minds? How ironic would it be for scholars from elite academic institutions in the Global North, even those informed by the postcolonial studies, to impose beliefs about and approaches to translation on people from the Global South for whom translation is not a topic of theoretical research, but an existential necessity? Can Ruano's and others' critiques of "instrumental" and "vehicular" understandings of interpretation provide any benefit to asylum seekers in precarious situations, for whom translation is above all a means to meet their immediate needs?

In the spirit of embracing my interlocutors as knowledge producers, I suggest an alternative approach: translation scholars might instead seek to study the phenomenon of translation-by-necessity employed by refugee-translators, particularly those engaging in the practice informally (i.e., on an ad-hoc basis, when no one else is available to translate), and apply the insights to the effort of adopting "good-enough" translation approach. I will describe my attempts at good-enough translation in this chapter's conclusion. First, let us move to an exploration of the experience of refugee translators working on an informal basis in Greece.

Introducing Sheyar

¹²³ Translator training courses focused on refugee-translators do exist. The organization METAdrasi offers a seminar like this, and according to their website, they have awarded certificates to over a thousand interpreters. I contacted the organization and requested to sit in on one of these training programs, but I never heard back. I would be interested in learning more about the contents of the program; this is an avenue for potential future research. See "Training of Interpreters."

Sheyar is a 32-year-old Syrian Kurdish man from Afrin whom I met in Khalía refugee camp, when I was volunteering with an organization there in the summer of 2019. I immediately felt some kinship with Sheyar as a fellow academic and artistic type, not to mention that we are the same age. He studied English literature at Aleppo University and enjoyed discussing languages, history, and politics. I would often find myself sitting around and chatting away with Sheyar for half-hour stretches and would have to eventually force myself to cut our conversation short, so as not to neglect my duties as a volunteer.

I noticed that Sheyar was often called away from the camp to translate from Kurdish, and especially from the particular Kurmanji dialect of his hometown. This was just over a year after Turkey’s launch of “Operation Olive Branch,” the military offensive in which Turkey occupied Afrin and drove Kurdish-majority YPG/SDF forces out. Thousands of Kurds fled the city, and dozens of these Kurds were now living in the camp. Sheyar cared deeply about the political situation of Kurds in northern Syria and held firm nationalist beliefs. From my field notes:

Most of Sheyar’s energy in our talks involves him articulating his particular version of Kurdish nationalism, which he wants to be nuanced rather than reactionary. Mostly, he talks for about two or three minutes at a time, at which point I sneak in a question. He usually just *approaches* answering said question, answers it a little bit if at all, then continues along in his narrative, which includes enumerating the many ways in which Kurds have been oppressed — in Turkey and Syria in general, but specifically in Afrin. [...].

Sheyar’s words have triggered some red flags for me in the past: he had emphasized the “Indo-European” nature of the Kurds, seemingly as a means of setting them apart from the Semitic Arabs. Once when I was talking to him and a non-English-speaking Kurdish friend of his, and he translated his friend as saying that the Kurds are an “Aryan people,” and he didn’t show any outward sign of disapproving of the idea.¹²⁴ But today he said that he wanted to be clear that he didn’t believe in the “purity” of the Kurdish race, or of any race for that matter. Which was new. He’d seemed to have been hinting at the contrary before. I wonder if he was changing his tactics of narrative to try to win me over, given that I had been pushing back a bit on the “originary discourse” of Kurdish nationalism.

¹²⁴ Of course, the fact that Sheyar translated this alarming comment does not necessarily indicate anything about his personal views on the matter.

Another interesting thing about Sheyar was his religious background. He is among a group of Evangelical Kurdish Christians from northern Syria. According to his Facebook page, he converted to Christianity from Islam in March of 2019, just a few months before I met him. The thought certainly crossed my mind that this was quite a convenient time to convert to Christianity, given that in order to prove eligibility for asylum one must demonstrate a “well-founded fear of persecution” if one returns to one’s country of origin (see “What is a Refugee?”). But I do not think the matter is as simple as Sheyar putting on an act. An Evangelical Christian movement has been growing in Syrian Kurdistan over the last few decades, possibly as a reaction to Islamic fundamentalist militant groups operating in the area, and also as a result of Western missionaries conducting humanitarian work in these areas.¹²⁵ In our conversations, Sheyar displayed a genuine interest in my own religious background as an evangelical Christian by birth, an erstwhile spiritual vagabond, and current Episcopalian. He chimed in on matters of theology with the zeal of the convert, even making comments about his former faith and its adherents that struck me as Islamophobic. The rhetoric echoed that which I had heard from ex-Muslim speakers that had passed through my childhood churches on book tours. This rhetoric convinced me of the genuineness of Sheyar’s conversion, to the point where I no longer questioned his religious identity at all. Rather than an act, it seemed to me to be a case of the confluence of convenience and conviction. Sheyar said he enjoyed our discussions about politics, religion, and his backstory. It was an opportunity to practice his English in a more intellectual register than the one he usually used.

I soon gathered that Sheyar was regularly traveling to a nearby city, Orisos,¹²⁶ to

¹²⁵See Davison and “Kurds Embrace Christianity.”

¹²⁶ A pseudonym.

interpret for various camp residents' medical appointments. While the fact that he was performing this labor unpaid was not lost on me, it immediately struck me that this was in some ways an advantageous position for him. The main reason was that most Khalía residents left the camp only rarely. The camp was in the middle of nowhere, hidden amid the trees on the side of a highway, about a half-hour drive from Orisos. This was not a major problem for the volunteers and employees of organizations who worked in the camp, who could drive or carpool. But there were no public transportation options for the camp residents. The best they could do would be to walk two hours to the nearest train station, which would then take them to Orisos. But Sheyar got rides to the small seaside city on a regular basis. The monotony of the camp can wear on a person's psyche. In Orisos, one could at least smell the refreshing sea air, and have opportunities to meet new people. But translation, especially when medical cases were serious, was also an enormous responsibility that sometimes became too great a burden to bear.

Weight as Responsibility: The 'Debt' of the Translator?

Sheyar's experience of working informally and without monetary compensation is emblematic of the most common type of refugee-translator in the Mediterranean asylum borderscape. There is often no official interpreter available to facilitate interactions between aid workers and their migrant clients. When I spent a few weeks volunteering on Lesbos's north shore with an organization assisting new arrivals, we were instructed during our training that when a boat landed, one of the first tasks at hand was for us to "find the English speaker" and enlist him or her to help with translation. This translator became a kind of temporary member of the volunteer team, as he (for it was always a he) was needed for all communication between volunteers and new arrivals that could not be accomplished with hand signals or very basic English. This put the individual both in a position of relative power and tremendous pressure. Amid the often-chaotic

distribution of dry clothes, new refugee arrivals sometimes shouted their disappointment at him if they were unhappy with what they were offered by the volunteers. Their dissatisfaction seemed, at least in part, to be his fault. The fact that he was a fellow traveler, and clearly had no loyalties to the aid organization, by no means shielded him from pressures and criticisms similar to those faced by refugee-translator employees.

Sheyar felt an immense responsibility toward others in his informal work as a translator, especially given that he was translating for people who, like him, were displaced from Afrin.

I was in a place that I had no other choice, because I felt that people admired me and they loved me. They knew that I was from their hometown, and they trusted me. And the thing [is] that they trusted me so much, and they helped me sometimes, and they used to invite me to their houses, to their boxes,¹²⁷ for coffee and eating meals. And so this [put me] in a place that I have no other choice but to help because — how to say? — they were my people and I knew that everyone has had problems. We all have all been through the same difficult conditions. And when you realize that you are the only one who is able to help, you wouldn't say no. As a person, and I know how they admire me, that made me say yes, every time that they asked for help.

And even for those who are paid for their work as Amin was, refugee-translation operates to a large extent on an economy of guilt. Sheyar's feeling of responsibility is consistent with Amin's conception of translation as a "weight" (the utterance) passing over a "bridge" (the translator) that needs to be strong enough to withstand it. As I explained earlier, one of the ways I understand this metaphor of weight is as a moral responsibility. Amin feels that as an individual who is equipped with the ability to facilitate communication for beneficiaries that might "build their life," he is *obliged* to provide that service. He describes this sense of responsibility in purely empathetic terms: "Once you hear the [person's] story, you feel that you are part of that story and now you are responsible, in a way, to help them or to just join them [in] their feeling [about] what they have shared with you." Refugee-translators see themselves as essential connective

¹²⁷ I.e., "Isoboxes" — see the Fieldwork and Sites section of this dissertation's introduction.

tissue between individuals in serious need and entities (however flawed they may be) that can provide resources and services that meet that need. This idea of the translator's moral responsibility calls up Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Walter Benjamin's iconic essay "The Task of the Translator," in which Derrida reads the word *task* as a debt that can never be repaid:

The title also says, from its first word, the task (*Aufgabe*), the mission to which one is destined (always by the other): commitment, duty, debt, responsibility. Already at stake is a law, an injunction for which the translator is answerable. He must also acquit himself, and of something that implies perhaps a fault, a fall, an error, or even a crime. [...] The translator is indebted, he appears to himself as translator in a situation of debt [...]. Benjamin says of the restitution that it could very well be impossible: insolvent debt [...]. (200-201).

The moral "debt" did seem "insolvent" for Amin and Sheyar. If the act of translation is understood as a payment of debt, it is also always generating more debt. "It's always the interpreter's fault," Amin told me, imitating an angry beneficiary: "You didn't interpret right what I said!" But if they get a positive answer, then they would [say], 'Ah, thank you so much. You're such a kind person. I really like you. I really appreciate you and I really like your character, blah, blah, blah.'" But even interpretation that earns praise does not absolve the interpreter of debt. On the contrary, the better one's reputation as a translator, the more one is hounded for his or her skills.

Both Amin and Sheyar struggled with this responsibility — the weight of this task, this debt — to the point of feeling occasionally resentful. Sheyar said that his status as the "only one" both capable and trusted to translate for camp residents from Afrin put him in an anxiety-inducing situation in which he could be called upon at any time:

I was always getting disturbed. For example, during the night, we were sitting together so many times, and we were enjoying [time] with our friends, and suddenly somebody would come to me and [say], Please just help me and let us go to the hospital. My wife or my friend or my son is sick. So you have to help us. Sometimes I was annoyed or I just didn't feel comfortable that I... couldn't rest. And it would come at any moment. Yeah,

so many times I was sleeping and they [would] just wake me up. So it was a matter of disturbance and of privacy [...].

Amin and Sheyar both found themselves resisting this sense of obligation when it became more than they could bear. Amin told me that in addition to believing that strict neutrality was one of the most important principles of interpretation work, he said it also served as a means of absolving himself of responsibility for negative outcomes. He resented that beneficiaries would blame him for such outcomes, and said that in general, refugees needed to become less dependent on others and more self-reliant. I was somewhat surprised to hear Amin say this, especially given that he had himself benefited significantly from NGO programs. I interpreted this sentiment as a crystallization of the resentment he felt towards beneficiaries who took out their anger on him when their needs and desires were not met. For his part, Sheyar said he eventually brought himself to turn down requests for translation assistance on at least a few occasions. In one case, a man asked Sheyar to come with him to translate for a medical appointment for his daughter, but this was during a COVID lockdown in the early days of the pandemic. When Sheyar declined to help due to concerns of contracting the virus, the man was furious, and responded by speaking ill of him in the camp's Kurdish community.

Given the social, ethical, and economic pressures refugee-translators face, questions emerge about the extent to which they retain personal agency under these circumstances. When Sheyar says he was “in a place that [he] had no other choice,” he does not mean he was in a situation analogous to having a gun to his head. But as he learns when he does choose to decline a request to serve as an interpreter, the withholding of translation services comes at a significant cost. And though the latter part of this chapter illustrates the craft of refugee-translators' maneuverings within heavily restrictive environments, the fact that their freedom — in this case in the sense of *freedom not* to translate — is so limited differentiates them from those who are

imagined to be the receivers of translation scholarship's exhortations. Many other translators, like child language brokers in immigrant families, for example, are in similar positions. In their introduction to their 2022 edited volume *Translating Crises*, Sharon O'Brien and Federico M. Federici write that

the "profession" of translating and interpreting is not a global construct, nor is training available in all countries of the world. Therefore, there is little to be gained from imposing top-down, commercial and ethical codes of practice on an area that is typified by chaos and uncertainty. Natural translators and interpreters exist or are forced into operation by virtue of the fact that they understand and speak multiple languages. (9)

Translation studies and translation theory can learn much about their object of study through consideration of the positions and practices of such translators, and the figure of the refugee-translator is an apt place to start.

The Ethics of Translation in Theory and Practice

For example, let us consider how my refugee-translator interlocutors' comments on their interpretation work square with the following assertion by Baker:

Translators and interpreters face a basic ethical choice with every assignment: to reproduce existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text or utterance, or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies, *if necessary by refusing to translate the text or interpret in a particular context at all. Given that they are normally in a position to turn down an assignment, 'accepting the work ... implies complicity.'* (*Translation and Conflict* 105, quoting Séguinot 105, emphasis mine)

Is Baker too hasty in declaring that interpreters are "normally" able to turn down translation work? This is surely not the case for refugee-translators, as Sheyar's and Amin's examples show us — if we understand "in a position to turn down an assignment" to mean having the ability to refuse translation work without serious consequences. Baker herself notes, in a later work, that warzone translators, for example, might be pressured by their circumstances to take on translation work despite the ethical discomfort of doing so, "because it pays relatively well at a

time of intense crisis” (“Interpreters and Translators” 216). It may well be that the “norm” is actually for need-based translators to be hyper-embedded in the population for whom they are translating. How does this affect the translators’ degree of “complicity” in the fraught environments in which they work? As we can see from the experiences of Mojtaba and Amin, the “professionalization” of refugee-translation does not insulate it from the ethical “chaos and uncertainty” of the neoliberal borderscape. Here, the very people who are threatened by politico-economic policies are hard-pressed to avoid perpetuating them. Given the breadth of diffuse power structure that is the borderscape, it is unfair to speak of moral culpability for the individual translator. In a race to the bottom, if one potential employee decides not to take work based on some objection — be it financial, political, or ethical — somebody else will leap at the job opportunity. This insight may influence scholars of translation to rethink notions of translator complicity, even outside the circumstances of “crisis translation” (O’Brian and Federici). Two other vocational realms of translation, academia and publishing, have also faced a neoliberal onslaught. Acknowledging the glaring contrasts in personal stakes and standards of living, financial pressures are certainly still a factor in the decision-making process of translators in these fields. Few interpreters are in positions to refuse any translation work on ethical grounds, even if they could, where should they draw the line? What if they are in a situation in which questionable ethical circumstances reveal themselves during a translation act? In the heat of the moment, interpreters cannot be expected to predict what a person says or does before the fact, nor can they calculate the exact result of their choosing to continue or not continue translating. Not to mention that stopping mid-translation in a professional setting could be damaging to the translator’s reputation as a dependable employee. The extent to which this “ethical code of practice” — *viz.* to refuse translation in certain oppressive contexts — is practicable, even in

middle-class settings, is murky.

Let us move again to an examination of the question of neutrality and the political nature of translation. Ruano argues that within “dynamics of dominance and hierarchy maintenance” which occur in communicative interactions between NGOs/government entities and asylum seekers, “it is inevitable (and probably imperative) to take a position in relation to them” (345-346). She calls for a change of professional standards for translators working within the dynamics, from one of neutrality being always paramount to one of advocacy for the marginalized party being “rethought as a professional imperative and moral obligation under an inclusive paradigm” (348).

When considering the complex position of the refugee-translator, alongside the great need for — and lack of a sufficient number of — translators in the asylum space, it is difficult to accept, at the same time, that in addition to having the necessary linguistic skills to do their jobs (not to mention the necessary stamina and psychological stability discussed earlier), translators should also adopt a particular political approach to their translation work. Would insisting as much not amount to imposing a kind of purity test? While I agree that perfect neutrality is impossible for an interpreter working to facilitate communication in such landscapes of asymmetrical power as the asylum landscape, I can see several benefits of *striving* for neutrality. Take the example of Sheyar, whose views I understood as veering towards an ideology of exclusivist Kurdish nationalism. (Of course, the impetus for such views must always be couched in a history of decades of Arab and Turkish domination of Kurds in northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey, and I do not intend to suggest any judgment towards Sheyar for potentially holding these views.) If my assessment of Sheyar’s politics is accurate, would it truly be beneficial to encourage him to lean into politics in his translation work? In this hypothetical

scenario, how would this affect his work interpreting for Arab refugee clients, or, imagining he spoke Turkish, non-Kurdish Turkish ones? If Sheyar did not make an effort toward neutrality in a situation like this, it is easy to imagine negative outcomes. While concerns of over neutrality in cases of “power asymmetry” are justified, is it possible that in terms of practicability, neutrality is the *least bad* option?

As an alternative to the neutrality principle, and to the prospect of refugee-translators applying their political beliefs to their translation practices no matter what those beliefs are, one might suggest efforts to instill principles of social justice in refugee-interpreters when they are being trained for their work. But how would this work in reality? If Sheyar were to take a translator training course, would someone sit him down and explain that translators must not be nationalist, but rather internationalist? That it will not do for him to hold the belief that Christianity is a superior religion to Islam if he wants to be a translator between Muslim beneficiaries and Christian (or at least Christian-descended) benefactors? Such a prescriptive approach would be absurd, and even if it were feasible, it would be rather paternalistic. Given the crucial nature of translation within the framework of 21st-century irregular migration and given the shortage of translators available to carry out the task, it is unreasonable to impose such political and ideological conditions on translators. Refugee-translators hold a highly diverse range of personal convictions and motivations. Translation scholars interested in inclusivity should bear in mind that many frontline translators have not had the same opportunities for higher education at elite institutions where left-liberal politics tend to dominate.

One of the main goals of this chapter is to advocate for the demystification of translation. As a student of comparative literature, a discipline one of whose fundamental principles is that translation is a complex act, a major lesson I learned when I witnessed refugee-translators at

work in Greece was the extent to which the significance of these complexities pales in comparison to that of the necessity of facilitating basic communication in times of need. This chapter on translation thus seeks to encourage a shift of the focus of translation studies from questions of who *should* translate and how one *should* translate to dealing with the reality of who *is* translating, why, and what the effects of this reality are. Federici and O'Brien make a similar point:

Dismissing uncomfortable phenomena — use of children as language brokers, asking bilinguals to interpret in a military hospital or calling on citizen translators to complete a project in languages not available on the local or regional professional market — means accepting defeat. Researchers are bound by the integrity of their professional code of conduct to engage with phenomena, at least to understand their full impact. (11)

Contending with phenomena that exist whether we like them or not also means being open to learning from these phenomena. In view of practicing what I preach regarding treating refugees as knowledge producers who have valuable insight to share, later in this chapter I will make an effort to glean, in part, from Amin's and Sheyar's translatorial experience in my own pursuit of "good-enough translation" when it comes to my efforts to translate migrant experiences in this dissertation. But first I will endeavor to augment Federici and O'Brien's characterization of translators being "forced into operation," with the goal of pushing back against any notion that refugee translators like Amin, Sheyar, and Mojtaba do not possess a degree of agency. Again, in line with De Certeau's notion of maneuvering, I will demonstrate the ways in which refugee-translators may instrumentalize their positions even as they themselves are instrumentalized by both the border regimes and unauthorized migrants alike.

MANEUVERS OF THE REFUGEE-TRANSLATOR

'Networking'

As I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, I take inspiration from Ruben Andersson's book *Illegality, Inc.* in my exploration of the neoliberal phenomena tied up with border regimes. Due to mass privatization and NGO-ization, along with a general race to the bottom brought about by free-trade globalization, paradoxical situations are brought into existence wherein such regimes are operated in part by the very individuals the likes of which they are designed to exclude. In these scenarios, systems of economic and political domination combine to cast their victims as agents of victimization. One of the most extreme examples of this is the case of Palestinian construction workers being hired to help build the Israeli West Bank separation barrier, which contributed to an effective annexation of vast swathes of Palestinian land, and which is known to Palestinians as the Apartheid Wall (*jidār al-faṣl al- 'unṣurī*).¹²⁸ Refugee-translators sometimes find themselves in similar situations, working either for the Greek state or with the multilateral or nongovernmental organizations to which gatekeeping roles are outsourced. See for example Ramdani's account of an Arab translator (presumably himself an asylum seeker or refugee) assigned the task of weeding out those pretending to be Syrian from "actual" Syrians, based on their accents and their knowledge of Syrian history, politics, and geography (discussed in Chapter 1). Baker describes a similar situation, this time in the context of processing Kosovar refugees in Albania in 2000 (*Translation and Conflict* 120-122).

One does not have to look too closely at the phenomenon of NGO-ization (i.e., when charitable organizations take up the responsibility of the state in providing what might otherwise be provided by welfare) in the case of the so-called European migrant crisis to see the ways in which an entire economic sub-sector has grown up around it. And NGOs are not the only culprit. As Andersson writes, scholars like him and me also participate in the illegality industry by

¹²⁸ See "Israel's Security Barrier Presents Irony for Palestinian Workers"

framing the issue of clandestine migration as one of urgency in order to catch the eye of those reading our grant applications, in hopes of them providing us with funding. In true neoliberal form, gross economic inequalities are on display in broad daylight. Volunteering with refugees in Greece, young people from the Global North get to go on an exciting, exotic adventure abroad in between academic years at prestigious institutions of higher learning — and eventually come back home with a freshly updated resume and, as in my case, research materials from which they will draw in hopes of advancing their careers.

What is perhaps most interesting to me about refugee-translators are the ways in which some of them are able to leap from one side of this power imbalance to the other — though their status on either side tends to remain unstable and suspect, given the questions of loyalty that famously dog the translator. Refugee-translators are sometimes able to take advantage of their positions as mediators between two worlds — i.e., that of the refugee from the Global South and that of the volunteer from the Global North — and accomplish a degree of sociopolitical ladder-climbing themselves. In other words, if we understand the “industry” of the border regime and its humanitarianist shadow as a kind of professionalized line of work, these refugee-translators can sometimes find ways of getting themselves promoted. This can happen both literally, in the sense of interpreters building up work experience and being appointed to more lucrative positions, and figuratively, in the sense of interpreters of using their connections with Global-Northerner volunteers as a means of improving their chances at being accepted for asylum or some other protected residential status. Essentially, what is happening here is not dissimilar to the practice of professional networking.

In my interviews with both Sheyar and Amin, this element of networking came to the fore. Throughout their interpretation work, both of them connected with European employees

and volunteers who later helped them with their own asylum cases in significant ways. It also had other perks that could simply make refugee life more tolerable. Sheyar told me that being a translator “was [an] opportunity to get to know the country and the people and the facilities. And it was also a chance to go to the city.” On his frequent trips away from the refugee camp for medical interpreting tasks, he would sometimes have to stay in Orisos for long periods of time when a patient was admitted to the hospital for an extended stay. Sheyar used this as an opportunity to “get outside of the hospital and go to see, enjoy things.” Sometimes, Sheyar would come along not just on trips to Orisos, but also to Athens — typically when camp residents had to undergo more serious medical procedures. On one of these occasions in Athens, he made a connection that was enriching on a personal level and that also seems to have benefited his asylum situation. He traveled to Athens

in order to go to the hospital where some women would give birth to children [...] I remember that I had to go with friends to Athens and stay there for seven days. Yeah, it was not easy. But luckily I had a friend in Athens who was working there and, and he had an apartment, so I went to [stay with] him, so that made it easier for me. And he told me that there was a group of people that help refugees and they [were] look[ing] for translators, and they help people with their asylum cases and their papers, documents, and things like this.

Sheyar’s friend took him to a church where this group of people aided asylum seekers and other migrants. He soon developed a rapport with the church staff.

The moment they saw that I was helping the people and [that] I came from Khalía camp, they were very happy and they just trusted me so fast. And [on another] day they asked me to come to them to make a tour around Athens. So that was a very nice experience. I remember that I was in Greece for months, for nearly a year, and I wasn't able to go to the historical sites and the archeological sites, so they just took me to the Acropolis and all the ancient sites and— because I love this, and I was interested in archeology, and they just explained everything to me, and we had coffee together, we ate together... Yeah. They were quite nice people and they even invited me to their home. So I was able, for the first time, after a year [in Greece], to go to Greek houses, and have dinner together, and just chat and talk and chat about different topics, and it was very fun.

Sheyar explained that he was often invited to the home of the Greek woman who was the head of the evangelical Christian organization (which he referred to as a church) that was carrying out the aforementioned refugee ministry. She was also a lawyer. The organization gave asylum-related information to people “who were willing to discover something about Christianity and Greece and their traditions,” Sheyar said. Cultivating this relationship, he agreed to serve as a translator for the woman and her husband when they came to visit Khalía camp for their ministry work. They also brought along other volunteers from England, Germany, and the United States with whom Sheyar enjoyed interacting.

As the date of Sheyar’s asylum interview approached, his new lawyer friend began giving him extensive advice: “She gave me so [much] information about the asylum procedure and she told me how an asylum interview would go and how the questions would be. So that made it possible for me to have an idea about it and how it works.” She did not make any promises that one certain way of telling his story would bring about a surefire asylum acceptance, but rather, she gave general advice about what kinds of things to talk about and other things that would be better not to mention, such as any involvement in war. These conversations made Sheyar feel confident and prepared for his asylum interview.

So just, I was completely relaxed when I went to my interview, and I had an idea of the shapes of questions and the maneuvers they do in order to know if you are lying or just not telling the truth. So I was well equipped. But of course, this doesn’t mean that I lied to them [*laughs*]. I just told them the way they want to hear it.

Sheyar believes that the advice he received from his new friend paid off spectacularly, since he received a positive asylum decision “in a matter of days” after sitting for the interview. The decision came faster than he had thought was possible. The shortest waiting period he had heard of from acquaintances who had gone through the process before him was six months, and some decisions had taken as long as two years. Sheyar said the woman was overjoyed at the result, and

continued to give him advice about next steps, along with other important information about living in Greece, including taxes and health insurance.

In the above example, we see how Sheyar was able to enter into a mutually beneficial, business-adjacent relationship. For the lawyer, Sheyar was a useful intermediary through whom she could connect (via his language skills and social network) with beneficiaries who were also potential church members. (Hence her particular interest in Khalía camp, which housed both sub-Saharan African Christians and Kurds, some of whom, as explained above, were already evangelical Christians.) On Sheyar's side, the lawyer (whom he also referred to as a pastor) opened the door to personal relationships, and to touristic sites like the Acropolis and Acropolis Museum. These latter sites are associated with middle-class visitors to the country. The general absence of refugees there, given that other travelers from around the world would scarcely set foot in Athens without visiting these sites, is emblematic of the great divide between refugee beneficiaries and voluntourists whose interactions with one another refugee-translators mediate. I read the enthusiasm with which Sheyar talked about his trip to the Acropolis and other archeological sites, along with his entry into "Greek houses," not only as a celebration of his long-awaited opportunity to satisfy his natural intellectual curiosity, but also as an expression of pride that he had arrived at a new, higher level of societal standing and achieved a greater degree of social capital. Beyond this, of course, he also received information that would make his life in Greece easier, and most crucially, legal advice that seems to have ushered his asylum case across the finish line at record speed.

Amin also talked about the ways he instrumentalized the relationships he developed due to his interpreting skills. In fact, it was a kind of networking connection that first got him into the interpreting business. He received his first paid interpreting job when a friend of his, who was

working as an interpreter, and with whom Amin had been a fellow attendee of a skills training workshop offered by an NGO, prepared to leave for Germany. This friend contacted Amin, knowing that he spoke good English, and asked if he would be interested in taking his place in his NGO interpreting job once he left Greece. I am interested in the fact that Amin seems to have begun building his network, which he continued to cultivate as an interpreter, during his time as an NGO beneficiary. Another refugee-translator I met during my fieldwork, who was employed in an official capacity at the asylum aid office where I volunteered, had also started out as a volunteer before taking on a paid interpreter role. Thus, in addition to being a space of gatekeeping, the NGO milieu also provided an opportunity for a kind of shapeshifting, in which beneficiaries could turn volunteer and then translator-employee without ever entirely vacating any of their prior statuses. Amin gave me a few examples in which he transitioned back to his beneficiary role on a dime (and sometimes unannounced) while at the same time holding onto the advantages and connections he had gained from being an employee.

Amin told me about a time when he scheduled an appointment with his boss, the way he would if he were scheduling a meeting between his boss and a client for which he would serve as an interpreter. To his boss's surprise, Amin himself took the position of beneficiary and, translating for himself, so to speak, he asked his boss for advice related to his own asylum status and legal residency in Greece: "And he was saying, 'Okay [...]. Let's [not be] boss and beneficiary or not be legal counselor [and client right now], but actually just [let me] advise you as a big brother.' And he did, actually, because he was very kind, treating me like his son, a lovely person, and also [provided] meaningful advice, and [we had a] worthwhile conversation." Here we see the way Amin is able to use his position as an employee to get what he perceived to be a different, better kind of treatment than the other refugees who used the services of the NGO.

His role as an interpreter allows him to transcend the bureaucratic position of beneficiary and move into a space of greater intimacy, wherein he receives the privileged, unrushed, well-thought-out advice that a father would give to his son or that an older brother would give to his younger brother. The way Amin perceives it, the boss would not give advice of this quality to just any beneficiary.

Another way Amin profited from his role was by paying close attention to the inner workings of the organizations and the services that they actually provided to clients (as opposed to what they *aspired* to provide or only provided in theory). By applying what he learned from observation in these refugee-translator positions, he was able to optimize and speed his experience as a “user” of the complicated, dysfunctional, bureaucratic asylum system in Greece. “Having connections and also working in these organizations helped me really to know, if I have such-and-such a problem, where to go and who to [contact],” Amin said. His comments show the way in which, beyond their skill-specific role as intermediary between NGOs and migrant clients, refugee-translators for NGOs find themselves being not quite on the same level as European employees or volunteers but still receiving benefits that other migrant beneficiaries are unlikely to receive. Amin was able to use this in-betweenness to his advantage.

When I visited Amin in Germany to conduct a follow-up interview in December of 2022, I discovered another interesting way in which he used his previous translation experience to his advantage with regard to his asylum status. One of the funders of the multilingual newspaper project that I wrote about at the beginning of this chapter was a nonprofit foundation affiliated with a German political party. When he got to Germany, he started to volunteer with a refugee assistance organization associated with the same political party. Amin said that in his interpreting sessions for the organization, during which a member of a team of mainly lawyers and law

students offered advice to asylum seekers, he started to learn what to expect regarding his asylum case in his new country of residence: “I kind of figured out what [was] going to happen for me in the future in Germany, as I heard, like, everybody is getting the first decision as a rejection, especially for single men in Germany. So I kind of tried to use my time and my position in a way that benefited me, and I made some networks there.” Amin eventually stopped working with the organization, wanting to instead focus his time and energy on learning German. But when he received his initial asylum rejection, he returned to the organization for his own scheduled meeting (again, this time wearing his beneficiary cap) with one of the group’s lawyers. “When I got [my] rejection, I used [the] benefit that I used to be a volunteer in that organization” in order to receive better advice and service, Amin said.

He was happy to meet with the lawyer with whom he was paired, since they had worked together when he was a volunteer. He decided to ask this lawyer to go beyond giving asylum advice and to take him on fully as a client, pro bono. Amin explained that he knew she had good experiences working with Afghans in the past and had success with the cases of Afghans who, like him, had been living in Iran prior to making the journey to Europe. “Then we talked a little bit [but] she didn’t want to accept me [i.e., she did not want to take Amin on as an official client] because this was against the organization policy. They don't ‘accept’ anyone. They just give advice.” But Amin was persistent. “We talked for a long time. She asked about my case. I explained it to her and also the reason why I’m [appealing] this case, and everything, until I convinced her. And once I convinced her, she just liked me, first as an Afghan and also, the fact that I’m still young and I have the ambition to do something better and more” than other clients she had encountered.

Amin says that this former fellow volunteer is now serving as his lawyer in his asylum appeal. She has also given him advice regarding ways he can legally stay in the country even if his appeals are ultimately denied. He currently has no interest in continuing his work as an interpreter, for three reasons. Unlike in Greece, where the ability to translate to and from English (and not just Greek) is in high demand, in Germany the emphasis is squarely on translation to and from German. Amin's German skills would need to improve considerably before he could be a professional translator. And secondly, he says that he would have to do a three-year translation *ausbildung* (apprenticeship) if he wanted to get an official job as an interpreter. He has no interest in doing this, especially since he has already undergone training and has years of experience in translation. It would feel like a waste of time. Finally, he would rather do an *ausbildung* in another field to learn something new, and potentially more profitable. But something else, which Amin did not explicitly mention, strikes me as another key factor in his decision not to continue as an interpreter: he has now made all the connections to participants in the asylum space that he needs to make. He has arrived at what he hopes is his final destination and has found himself a lawyer through his connections with the organization where he used to volunteer. Indeed, Amin told me that one of his main goals in applying to volunteer as an interpreter with this organization during his early days in Germany had been to find someone to help him with his case and give him advice, just as he had received help and advice through his positions in similar organizations in Greece in the past. His interpreting role, for now, has served its purpose.

Translator, "Trickster"?¹²⁹

¹²⁹ This section heading is inspired by Natalie Davis's book about Leo Africanus, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*.

A major part of the networking that I have described above involves translators proving their loyalty at gut levels. Questions of a translator's fidelity typically revolve around the extent to which the translator provides an accurate rendering of a given utterance. But a deeper layer of proof is sometimes required, one that transcends mere reliability and enters the realm of ontology. In other words, suspicions on the part of those for whom the translator is translating move beyond concerns over "correct" translation to concerns over group membership. In order to dispel suspicions of disloyalty, a translator must do more than provide effective and precise translations; he must make his translated subjects believe he is one of them.

In the introduction to his *Description of Africa*, the 16th-century diplomat and scholar Leo Africanus (born al-Hasan Muhammad al-Wazzan), who lived between the worlds of Islam and Christianity, Arabic and Romance languages, and Europe and Africa, recounts an apt fable: an amphibious bird is able to avoid paying taxes in both the kingdom of the air and the sea by going to live in the other whenever the tax collector comes around. When the bird descends to the sea, she immediately says to the fish, "You know me. I am one of you" (Davis 606). "And so this bird," Leo writes, "to auoide yeerely exactions and tributes, woulde eftsoones change her element." An "African" by virtue of being Moroccan (though he was born in Granada before fleeing with his family to Morocco, at age four, at the end of the Reconquista in 1492), Leo anticipates his reader's suspicions: how can he be trusted to faithfully represent the "vices" of Africans when doing so might reflect poorly on himself? The moral that he takes from the fable is that multilingual travelers would be wise to act the part, based on their circumstances and locales, that will result in their being most insulated from harm and inconvenience. Therefore, Leo adds, "when I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I wil affirme my selfe to be one of

Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I professe my selfe to be an African” (189-90).

The need for a translator to prove his or her loyalty on an ontological level by “acting the part,” unsurprisingly, takes on even higher stakes in the context of war. *Always Faithful* is the title of a 2022 dual memoir by US Marine Major Tom Schueman and the Afghan Pashto-English interpreter Zainullah Zaki. The book recounts the lives of its authors before, during, and after their intersection on the battlefield. Of course, the eternal faithfulness being referred to in the title is a reference not to translation fidelity, but to the Marine motto *semper fi*. Zaki shows his loyalty to Schueman by remaining by his side even during combat, and, at least in one case, taking up Schueman’s weapon to protect him after he has lost consciousness (254).

The book nonetheless resonates with many of the issues of translator loyalty I have raised in this chapter. As Baker writes, the positions and, indeed, very lives of military translators and are generally treated as expendable. Translators are certainly not treated as equals — ones to whom loyalty is *owed* — during deployment: “By and large, the military and politicians treat locally hired interpreters as cannon fodder and refuse them basic protection” (“Interpreters and Translators” 217). Scheuman’s own account of Afghan interpreters’ experience in part confirms this dynamic: while US marines generally only stay deployed in a combat zone for limited “tours,” the translators must remain, extending their exposure to the horrors of war and risk of severe injury or death, under the supervision of multiple rounds of military personnel. But suddenly now, amid the outcry over the Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is an ostentatious display of incredulity over the injustice of the US having abandoned Afghan translators — “our” brothers who put their lives on the line for “us.” Incredibly, the

broader narrative discourse has opened a window for the translator, typically an object of suspicion (*traduttore, traditore* — “translator, traitor”), to be hyper-valorized.¹³⁰

Perhaps we can see this window as one of the proverbial ones that God opens when He closes a door, for surely these translators-cum-refugees understand it as an opportunity. Zaki is a prime example. The publication of the book coincided with his application for a Special Immigrant Visa. He was able to fly to the US with his family in August of 2021, just as Kabul was falling to the Taliban (Scheuman and Zaki 603). Although Zaki’s position as a military translator was significantly different from that of refugee-translators in Greece, his current battle for continued residency in the US links his experience with theirs. Throughout the memoir, Zaki and his coauthor hammer the point home that he is not only on the Marines’ — and again, by extension, the United States’ — side, but also that he is for all intents and purposes *one of them*. This starts from the moment he introduces himself to the reader: “My name is Zainullah Zaki. You may call me Zak” (24). He is referred to by his “American” name for the rest of the book. What cuts deeper to the ontological core than a name?

Both Schueman and Zaki make a point of illustrating the ways in which “Zak” went above and beyond his role as translator for the Marine battalion in which he was embedded. In addition to the aforementioned incident in which he took up Scheumer’s rifle to protect him, he also proves his ideological, moral, and ontological kinship (for again, it goes beyond “faithfulness”) with the Marines in other ways that put his life at risk. The fact that he willingly risks his life is presented as the greatest proof of such kinship. In one case, acting of his own accord, Zak sneaks up on a Taliban hideout and tackles a Talib who is in the midst of

¹³⁰I was inspired to explore this particular irony by a point Khaled Mattawa made in his presentation, “Mawaqif in Translation: Recurring Stations in a Mercurial Art” at a symposium at the University of Michigan: “To what extent are these [Afghan and Iraqi] military translators [working for US and coalition forces] a case in point that translation is betrayal, and if these translators were not traitors, what were they?” (“Symposium on Translation”)

coordinating an ambush over a radio, and manages to restrain him and turn him over to the Marines (218-221). In a more morbid episode, Zak joins in celebrations of the killing of a Talib near the Marine base: “[T]he fighting was fun sometimes. When the Marines killed a Talib on a motorcycle five hundred meters outside our patrol base, I ran outside and got the motorcycle and rode it back to the compound. The Marines made a racetrack inside the patrol base and we had contests to see who was the fastest” (215). What Zak does not know at the time is that when he was retrieving the motorcycle (which he did at the request of some of the Marines at the base), he was nearly killed by a US attack helicopter after surveillance balloons mistakenly identified him as Taliban. Someone yells “It’s Zak!” and the helicopter targeting is called off (216).

Near misses like this one are a testament to the fact that no matter how much it seems that the local interpreter (or, to use a more provocative phrase, the native informant¹³¹) is considered to have crossed over to “our” side, he can never completely escape suspicion, animosity, and vulnerability to violence from his newfound “brothers” (for this is how Zaki refers to the Marines). Homi Bhabha writes that underneath the “mimicry” of the interpreter class,¹³² which is the result of the imperial project, lies a “menace” that threatens that very project. This “menace” threatens not through violence, but rather by belying the notion of originary purity upon which the imperial regime is built. “For in ‘normalizing’ the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms” (86). Could it be that whatever remaining suspicions Zaki is subjected to, and whatever the extent to which refugee-translators remain excluded from northern European

¹³¹ See Spivak and Said.

¹³² Bhabha quotes 19th century British historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay as describing the necessity for the creation of a “class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern — a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (qtd in Bhabha 87).

societies, are a result not as much of security or economic concerns as they are of the fear that their full public participation and thriving could undermine the nationalist principles that are fundamental to the border regime itself? Zaki's Special Immigrant Visa was denied a few months after the book's release (Britzky). He remains in the US through "Temporary Protected Status," which is, at the time of writing, due to expire in 2023 ("TPS Designated Country: Afghanistan").

Zaki's chapters of *Always Faithful* are full of earnest declarations of his belief in the Americans' liberatory mission in Afghanistan. Take this passage for example:

I was afraid to die from an IED, but I could not refuse a mission in my own country that men from America accepted. What kind of man allows another to do his job? What kind of man expects someone from another country to die for his own? Lieutenant Schueman and his Marines *were in Afghanistan to help me and my family*. Nothing the Taliban did stopped them. I felt that I owed them everything I had. (289, my emphasis)

In another passage, Zaki takes his translatory role to a new level, dreaming up an Afghan version of the American constitution, and while doing so reinforcing the ethnonationalist, Orientalist notion that "Western" ethical and political values like civil liberties are essentially at odds with "backward" cultures of the "East":

Lieutenant Schueman knew a lot about the American Constitution and he told me about it. I was shocked when I learned that many of the Marines had not ever read it. The Lieutenant and I discussed how the ideas within it could work as part of Afghan culture. I wanted freedoms for myself and the people of Sangin. But many people in Afghanistan *had no concept of those basic freedoms* that I wanted. They were *not woven into the fabric of life* in the villages. (224, my emphasis)

As critical as my analysis of Zaki's narration of his experience in *Always Faithful* is, I do not intend it as a rebuke, nor do I desire to add my voice to the chorus shouting "Traitor!" at translators. Rather, I consider Zaki's story as an extreme example of the position of the refugee-translator using his role and connections to improve his personal lot in dire circumstances. At the

same time, Schueman and his ilk¹³³ are instrumentalizing Afghan interpreters as a political attack against the Biden administration, criticizing not only the *way* the US carried out its withdrawal from Afghanistan, but perhaps also the fact that the US withdrew at all, particularly given that withdrawal signified defeat. This latter instrumentalization is fascinating to me because, as generally right-wing as this position is on the spectrum of American politics, it seems to borrow from the left-liberal playbook of extracting sympathy for would-be refugees on the basis of their presentation as righteous victims.

Beyond facilitating basic communication, what is the refugee-translator's role amid such fraught discursive circumstances? Refugee-translators intuitively understand that they are expected to reinforce the ideological and political views of their powerful employer, and that doing so might maximize their own chances of benefiting from the “networking” connections the position affords them. As Baker writes, “Because local interpreters are themselves firmly embedded in the conflict and feature as protagonists in their own right in the unfolding narrative of the war, they inevitably reproduce and strengthen particular narrative takes on the conflict” (215-216). All the while, she adds, they “suppress personal narratives that might disrupt institutional agendas or complicate the story of the war as the military ... forces wish to narrate it” (“Interpreters and Translators” 218). To reiterate one of my main arguments in this chapter, the reproduction and suppression that Baker describes above should not be understood as an indication of the translator's lack of agency; on the contrary, these actions may represent tactical decision-making on the part of refugee-translators who aspire to transform their mediator position into a bridge between their current toils, on the one hand, and a place of lasting personal well-being on the other. That such complex negotiations amid exposure to mortal harm should be

¹³³ See a similar book, also published in 2022, *Operation Pineapple Express: The Incredible Story of a Group of Americans Who Undertook One Last Mission and Honored a Promise in Afghanistan* by Lt. Col. Scott Mann.

required as a part of so many individuals' search for a decent life is a sign of the stark neoliberal and neo-imperial conditions of inequality that haunt our 21st-century world.

Still, it may not be quite right to use the word “trickster” to describe refugee-translators and their complex forms of circumscribed agency. There is no way to know for certain the extent to which Zaki's pro-US political sentiments may be exaggerated (even ghost-written?) in the memoir. At the same time, the fact that a viewpoint is taken up strategically does not necessarily mean that it is not sincerely held. One asylum seeker I met in Greece told me that he and his family pretended to convert to Christianity as a means of improving their asylum case. But with time, this asylum seeker actually did have a few profound religious experiences at the church that he had at first only been attending to keep up appearances. He ended up getting quite involved with church activities and volunteer work and “truly” converting to Christianity for a few months, before eventually growing skeptical of religion in general and adopting agnosticism. This again brings to mind Leo Africanus/al-Hasan al-Wazzan. How much did he truly adopt the Christianity to which he was forced to convert during his time in Rome, and how veracious are claims of his reversion to Islam at the end of his life? To what extent are these convictions of convenience, or, as in my assessment of Sheyar's case in an earlier section, a confluence of conviction and convenience? The shapeshifting of the refugee translator that I describe in this chapter may well include a real shifting of personal persuasions.

CONCLUSION: In Search of ‘Good-Enough’ Translation

In this chapter, I have taken a rather broad, exploratory approach to an academic illustration of a prominent figure in the contemporary world of asylum seeking who has received very little, if any, academic attention. I would like to end the chapter by asking what may be extrapolated from the positions and approaches of refugee-translators, particularly if we make the leap from

examining the task of the refugee-translator to the task of someone who, like me, is not a refugee, but takes upon himself the role of translator, analyst, and relayer of the stories of refugees and other migrants. When I began conceptualizing this chapter, I imagined that I might discover that refugee-translators embraced certain translating techniques or philosophies that I could emulate in my own literary and academic translation work. This did not come to pass in the way that I expected, but there was one major take-away: the refugee-translators whom I got to know during my field research in Greece had a generally demystified view of the practice. For example, concerns over foreignization and domestication were rarely, if ever, considered. Instead, refugee-translators emphasized practical considerations such as audience, context, and stakes of a given translation act. The ethical issue that loomed largest was that of personal responsibility for the migrant whose utterances were being translated. I have tended toward a similar demystified translation approach in my recent translation work for this dissertation and in other creative projects involving migration-related translation, keeping in mind the real-world context in which I — in my role as translator — am contributing discourse and the ways in which this discourse could have real-world consequences in the lives of the people the likes of whose narratives I translate. This is essentially what I mean by “good-enough translation.”

My use of the compound adjective “good-enough” is inspired by Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s discussion of “good enough ethnography” as a way forward amid unending, wearying “postmodernist critiques” of anthropological practice (28). Scheper-Hughes writes that the approach of good-enough ethnography starts with the question of whether or not, despite everything, an ethnography of a disempowered community to which the anthropologist does not belong is worth it. She concludes that it is: “Seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity. Above all, they

are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away” (28). (This statement can be related to my comments at the beginning of the chapter about translation as a curatorial task of both selection and rejection.) Scheper-Hughes then proceeds to advocate for ethnographers to trust their abilities of discernment, compassion, critique, and interpretation. For my part, in this dissertation I have not shied away from problematizing my positionality with regard to the subjects of my research. I am still haunted by the experience of being told by an asylum seeker that some of my interlocutors could find my interviews with them uncomfortable given that in their everyday reality, the concept of “interview” is inseparable from the intimidating specter of the upcoming asylum interview. And yet I am inspired by my refugee-translator interlocutors’ straight-forward belief in the necessity of and great responsibility associated with their work. My efforts at good-enough translation are self-reflective and acknowledge my translatory role as a co-narrator, and I move forward based on the belief that translation can facilitate access to experiential knowledge produced by my refugee interlocutors. This knowledge is a fount of material from which scholars can draw both damning critiques of violently exclusionary border regimes and new conceptions of the complexities of human subjectivity under repressive circumstances.

One’s approach to good-enough translation cannot be universally prescribed, but rather must be highly responsive to the discursive situation in question, based on the translator’s good-faith efforts to address the numerous challenges with which he or she is presented. In what remains, I scrutinize my own endeavor to translate and present my Arabic-language interview with Saif, whose narrative is included as the interlude preceding this chapter. Taking inspiration from works like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* along with documentary storytelling podcasts like *Snap Judgement*, I have chosen the approach of

documentary narrativization for this interlude. (I took a similar approach in the previous interlude, between Chapters 2 and 3, although those interviews were originally conducted in English and thus did not need to be translated interlingually.) In the “as-told-to” genre, a “writer” (typically a journalist) conducts multiple interviews with an “author,” and the “writer” performs the curatorial task of selecting passages of interview material to commit to the page. Recent examples of this kind of work include collections of interview materials that are edited together in books whose genre is a form of oral history. Wendy Pearlman’s book *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* is a collection of passages from interviews with dozens of Syrian refugees recorded between 2013 and 2016. Pearlman sculpts these testimonials into a cohesive narrative with many constitutive parts, ranging in length from a couple sentences to several pages, and varying in modal texture from the poetic to the documentary. Another example of this type of narrativized oral history is the book series *Voice of Witness*, which publishes collections of first-person narratives on a variety of topics of social justice concern, aiming “for a novelistic level of detail and a birth-to-now chronologized scope” (lok 28). Despite one particular limitation of the latter two examples, which I will touch on briefly below, I believe that above all, these types of projects provide significant educational and humanistic value. They are a means for broad audiences to access voices — albeit co-constructed, textualized versions of these voices that are literal manifestations of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls dialogism — that they would otherwise be unable to hear. Part of the greater argument I am making in this dissertation is that the everyday narratives, if granted the same treatment as that of capital-L Literature, have much to teach audiences who are willing to listen. My hope is that the kind of translation I have demonstrated in this dissertation can make this treatment possible.

One shortcoming of *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled* and *Voice of Witness* (the particular volume I am referring to here is *Palestine Speaks: Narratives of Life under Occupation*) is the lack of access to what was said in Arabic. Neither book makes any attempt to reproduce the individual linguistic eccentricities of its numerous speakers, many of whom spoke in Arabic. Flipping through these books, I have often found myself wishing I had the ability to see how a speaker expressed in Arabic particular turns of phrase that the reader encounters only in English translation. Thus, in my own work on Saif's travel narrative, I have made an effort towards greater transparency by providing, in an appendix, a full bilingual transcript of the interview. This allows readers to judge for themselves, in Arabic and English, the extent to which my narrativization of Saif's responses to my interview questions represents a fair and authentic picture. (I have had to stop short of providing access to the actual audio file of the interview in order to preserve the anonymity of Saif along with some of the people and places he mentions.)

Now for some questions about the interlude version of my translation of the interview with Saif. In my effort to transform the Arabic-language interview into a flowing narrative in English, I have entered the murky waters of what might be called intergeneric translation (that is, translation between genres), and, in doing so — like my refugee-translator interlocutors — I subject myself to various suspicions and accusations. By imposing a degree of chronology on Saif's verbal depiction of his experiences and molding his responses to my questions into a unified story with rising action, climax, and falling action, and resolution, am I committing an act of rhetorical mutilation in order to please the Western reader at the expense of the utterance's authenticity? In narrativizing Saif's responses, am I “ventriloquizing the suffering of another” (Twitchell 624), or worse, performing “a kind of linguistic [brown]face, reconfiguring [Saif] as

consumable entertainment for a U.S. audience” (639)? These quotations are taken and adapted from an article that scrutinizes white American author Dave Eggers’s semi-fictionalized novel *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*, which is based on Eggers’s interviews with Deng, a so-called Lost Boy of Sudan. Despite Eggers’s self-conscious introduction to the novel, Deng’s approval of and active participation in the project, and the fact that Deng’s nonprofit organization receives all proceeds from the book, Eggers is not shielded from accusations of profiting from a trauma that is not his own. His translatorial act may achieve its mission of extricating Deng and his story from the clutches of anonymity, but it also — even against Eggers’s will — may amount to a form of objectification, translating Deng’s personal experiences into an item for purchase and Deng himself into a charity case.

As Anton Shammas’s essay “Torture into Affidavit, Dispossession into Poetry” suggests, such intergeneric translations often involve a paradoxical dance of (in)credibility. Shammas imagines the process of an Israeli human rights organization’s production of an English-language report that includes testimony from Palestinian victims of torture in Israeli prisons. The testimony that originated in Palestinian Arabic was most likely filtered through Hebrew, and it was eventually narrativized in an official report in English. This multi-layered translation represents a validation, in the form of a legal record, of the existence of Palestinian pain, which is otherwise constantly put in doubt. At the same time, however, Shammas points out that the translation also raises a new series of doubts. When the victim’s testimony is presented with careful specificity to meet the demands of the genre of an affidavit, the obvious constructedness of the final product detracts from its air of authenticity. Questions emerge:

Do we believe the affidavit of [the victim] Muhammad Subhi Ibrahim Ahmad Jit when he relates his story while avoiding the direct articulation of his pain? Can we trust his memory, his recollections, his torture timeline stating the exact hour of each session of

torture, or are we totally in doubt? And to cap it all up, can we trust his interlocutors who are verbalizing and translating his suffering for us to read? (121)

In endeavoring to make the utterances of their translated subjects known to broader audiences outside the immediate contexts of their articulation, and to lend them “credence,” as Shamma puts it (118), intergeneric translators inevitably expose themselves and their subjects to skepticism.

The translator here embodies a contradiction brought to light through Saif’s words towards the end of the interview. Saif insinuates that sharing his story has, at least to some extent, been “humiliating.” He recites the proverb, “A complaint to someone other than God is humiliation” [*ash-shakwā li-ghayr allāh madhallah*]. However, immediately after explaining the proverb, he adds, “But I hope that my voice reaches to all the countries of the world, so that people help refugees, because the situation for refugees is awful.” The translator of human suffering knowingly puts him or herself in the ethically dubious position of speaking for another, becoming a co-creator and dispatcher of sensitive discourse whose consequences, for both the translator and the translated subject, cannot be entirely known at the time of translation. This becomes especially fraught when the translated subject is in a greater position of vulnerability than the translator. In this case, “no matter how empathetic the translator might be” (Shamma 116), the translated subject is almost always at greater risk. Likewise, Baker writes that “as social actors, translators and interpreters are responsible for the narratives they help circulate, and for the real-life consequences of giving these narratives currency and legitimacy” (139). At the same time, I would again argue, translators are also responsible (and can be blamed) for the decision *not* to translate for a vulnerable subject (see for example Sheyar’s experience above). The translator is completely unable to pay his or her Derridian/Benjaminian debts, whether by translating or refraining from translating. My intention here is not to exonerate myself, but to

fully call into question my own loyalty to the translated subjects whose stories I have relayed throughout this dissertation. Should I not be judged by the same standards as (if not higher standards than) those with which I judge my refugee-translator interlocutors? Have I been a trickster myself, pursuing friendly relationships with asylum seekers based primarily on the ulterior motive of harvesting their stories in hopes of achieving a degree of academic or writerly prestige? To what extent is developing rapport a type of trickery?

There are many differences between, on the one hand, my (hyphenless) “refugee translator” role, in which I translate — both interlingually and intralingually — the narratives and experiences of refugees, and that of the refugee-translator that I have detailed in this chapter on the other. Most glaringly, the degree of power we possess and the breadth of rights we enjoy are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Still, at times we each operate in the same world — the one Andersson calls “the illegality industry.” Just as Amin and Sheyar benefited from the professional relationships they built with volunteers and employees at NGOs, so I benefit professionally from the relationships I have built with migrant interlocutors. As authentic and warm as our relationships are, an element of instrumentalization always dwells not too deep beneath the surface. Much as I might want to translate their stories with purely altruistic motives in mind, the fact of the matter is that I am also striving for socioeconomic advancement. My translatorial “loyalty” is thus also subject to doubt by both sides of the translation divide. I have performed my own fair share of shapeshifting, from volunteer to pal to researcher.

Despite my genuine efforts at transparency, it may not be entirely possible for me to disentangle this academic project from my own pursuit of personal well-being in a competition-ridden neoliberal reality, and this fact may well color my translation decisions. And yet, in engaging with these complications and critiques, I have pressed on rather than allowing them to

paralyze the project of translating and “interpreting” narratives of displacement and unauthorized border crossings. In my pursuit of a “good-enough” translation, I have sought full fairness in my representation of vulnerable translated subjects while embracing my role as an active participant in their production of narrative. I have done so without immunizing these subjects from critiques that are not individual judgements, but rather opportunities for revelations of complex forms of migrant agency and of deadly flaws in global migration policy.

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Epilogue

A working title of this dissertation was *Wayfinding, Worldmaking*. In my naturally optimistic mind, I had been intrigued by the idea that unauthorized migrants and refugees might be able not only to *challenge* the exclusivist nature of the modern nation-state (I still believe they do this), but also to dismantle it. I thought that, just maybe, the presence of so many thousands of non-citizens within the borders of liberal-democratic countries would eventually necessitate the creation of a new kind of citizenship, a new kind of state, and by extension, a new kind of world created in image of the pioneering refugee — hence the term “worldmaking.” However, upon visiting Amīn in Hamburg in late 2022, my optimism in this regard dwindled.

Amin has received a first rejection for his asylum application in Germany, and he has two chances to appeal. His lawyer has told him not to worry, that this is typical for single adult men. She recommended he continue in his German language training course so that he can eventually apply for an *ausbildung* (apprenticeship). According to Amin’s understanding, there is a rule in Germany that asylum seekers who are enrolled in an *ausbildung* cannot be deported, and that once one has completed an *ausbildung* and received certification for it, the country will consider him or her a skilled worker, and thus grant a long-term residence permit. Since Germany guarantees its citizens a university education, Germans are much less interested in working in trade jobs than they may have been in the past. That labor has to be taken up by someone, Amin said. He lambasted this type of national migration policy as a kind of “smart racism” in which Germany makes the best out of a “bad” situation by extracting undesirable work from its unwanted guests.

While he attends German courses, Amin is now working as a delivery driver. He plans to start an *ausbildung* in electronics once he has received the required language certification. It is not that this is an entirely terrible outcome for Amin, considering the alternatives. But as a young man who is interested in languages, journalism, and photography, he would much prefer to go to university. Considering that his *ausbildung* will take four years to complete, and that he has family responsibilities to consider, a future university degree and career that draws from his artistic sensibilities seem out of the question.

Amin may have been able to forge unforeseen pathways from Iran to Germany over the course of half a decade, but he has had to find ways to operate within exclusionary systems to do so, inscribing his place within these systems through narrative as he went. But now that he is in Germany, he remains bound within one of these very systems, and there is no clear way to transcend it (hence “narrative wayfinding,” but not “worldmaking”). Amin is now set to take on a role in a very common immigrant story, one in which he must sacrifice his own dreams in the hope that perhaps someday, his children will have opportunities he himself did not have. Time will tell whether this comes to pass. For now, Amin must continue with the daily grind of work, his nightly German classes, and the long process of appealing his asylum decision. While in the novel *Exit West*, former McKinsey & Co. employee Mohsin Hamid conceives of neoliberal capitalism as a vehicle for full migrant inclusion, here we see it confining Amin to a separate, lower tier of German society that serves the interests of the fully-included.

During the last few months of my PhD program, I was enlisted by a friend to write lyrics for a musical composition. The last verse is inspired by Amin’s struggle to come to terms with his new reality:

*Pick your way through the leftover labor
Cleanse yourself of curiosity*

*Day in, door shut, day out, denied
That which erases de-faces, but he who surrenders survives*

Appendix: Bilingual Transcript of My Interview with Saif

جراهام: شو اسمك أنت؟

Graham: What is your name?

سيف: سيف.

Saif: Saif.

ج: وقديش عمرك؟

G: And how old are you?

س: عمري خمسة وعشرين سنة.

S: I'm 25 years old.

ج: وأنت من وين؟

G: And where are you from?

س: من سوريا من حمص. من السخنة.

S: From Syria, from Homs [Governorate], from [the town of] al-Sukhnah.

ج: وممكن تحكي لي عن رحلتك؟ ممكن تحكي لي القصة الكاملة من وقت ما تركت سوريا للوقت اللي جيت هون إلى مالطا؟

G: Can you tell me about your journey? Can you tell me the entire story from the time when you left Syria to the time that you came here to Malta?

س: هي بداية رحلتي كانت لمنطقة في سوريا... وما بحسن أرجع لبيت أهلي. صار علي خطورة من نظام الأسد، ومن الأكراد، وانجبرت إنني أطلع ع تركيا. ومن تركيا، طلعت لليونان، جزيرة خيوس. رجعت إلى أثينا، طلعت أثينا، بقيت في أثينا شي ثلاث سنوات في أثينا... يعني إجا عندي صديقي قال بدنا نطلع بر، نمشي في البر. مشينا لمدة شي شهرين. صار معي حادث-- من دولة ألبانيا، كوسوفو، صربيا، البوسنة، كرواتيا، سلوفينيا... في سلوفينا يعني صار معنا حادث، توفوا اثنين من

الشباب إللي كانوا معي. وفي واحد مصاب في المشفى. وبعدها إيطاليا، ومن إيطاليا طلعت إلى مالطا. هي كانت رغبتني في مالطا من البداية. نطلع مشان شغل يكون المستقبل، منشان الأهل، أساعد أهلي... ويعني هلا حمد لله أنا في مالطا، وضعي تمام، كويس. شغل. كل شي فيه. نتمنى إنو يصير إلنا أوراق، نطلع غير بلاد.

S: The beginning of my journey was to an area in Syria, when I couldn't return to my family's house. I came to be in danger from the Assad regime, and from the Kurds, and I was forced to leave for Turkey. And from Turkey, I came to Greece, the island of Chios. I returned to— I came to Athens, and I stayed for about three years in Athens. A friend came by and said, Let's leave here by land, let's go by land. We walked for a period of about two months. [Then] I was in an accident. [We went] from the country of Albania [to] Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia... In Slovenia I was in an accident. Two of the young men who were with me died. And there is one of them who was injured and is in the hospital. And after that, Italy, and from Italy I came to Malta. And my sights were set on Malta from the beginning. I came for work, in order to build a future, for my family— to help my family. And now, praise God, I'm in Malta. My situation is okay, it's good. I have work. Everything. I hope to get papers, so I can go to other countries.

ج: حتى الآن كان ممكن إلك تبعث مصاري لأهلك في سوريا؟

G: Till now, have you been able to send money to your family in Syria?

س: الآن لا. لأن المصاري إللي اجيت فيها، كنت موخذها من شخص. وأريد أشغل أعطيه المصاري، أخلص بكل شي، وبعدين أبعث لأهلي.

S: Now, no. Because the money that I used to come here, I borrowed it from someone. I want to work and pay him back, to be finished with all that, and afterwards I'll send [money] to my family.

ج: لسه عليك دين.

G: You're still in debt.

س: لسه. عليّ دين. عليّ ما يقارب شي تسعة آلاف يورو.

S: Yes, still. I'm in debt. Something around 9,000 euros.

ج: تسعة آلاف يورو، واو. إللي ساعدك في المصاري واحد من أهلك، ولا--؟

G: Nine thousand euros, wow. Is the person who helped you by sending you money, is he or she a family member, or—?

س: لا، واحد من أصدقائي إني أعرفه. أصدقاء الأهل مو اصدقائي يعني. أصدقاء أهلي، العائلة.

S: No, one of my friends. A friend of the family.

ج: آه فهمت. وأنت لحالك سافرت، صح؟

G: Ah, I understand. And you traveled by yourself, right?

س: لحالي.

S: By myself, yes.

ج: يعني ما كان في حدا في عائلتك كان بدو يسافر كمان؟ ليش أنت قررت--؟

G: I mean no one from your family wanted to travel with you? Why did you decide—?

س: أنا أولاً متزوج... ومطلق... مطلق زوجتي. انجبرت إني أطلع. ما كان بدني أسافر. بس أنا... إجا النظام إلى مدينة السخنة، ما عاد أحسن أرجع على أهلي، لأنني أنا مطلوب للنظام ل... ك... نخدم الجيش، في الجيش السوري. وأنا مطلوب ما... الجيش السوري كله عم يموت. انجبرت إني أطلع تركيا، تركيا ما فيها شغل... ما فيها... [inaudible - قلت؟] بدني أطلع مالطا. هو رغبتنا... من قبل، كانت رغبتني في مالطا. واجاني طريق وطلعت.

S: First of all, I was married, and divorced. I am divorced from my wife. I was forced to leave. I didn't want to travel, but I... The regime came to the city of al-Sukhnah, and [after that] I could no longer return to my family, because I was wanted by the regime to do military service in the Syrian army. I was wanted, and everyone in the Syrian army—they all die. I was forced to leave for Turkey. Turkey has no work, it has no... [Inaudible — perhaps “I said”] I want to come to Malta. It was our desire. Already, my desire was to be in Malta. And a way opened up for me [lit. a way came to me] and I left.

ج: بس أول شي ما جيت إلى مالطا. كان الهدف دائما تروح على مالطا؟

G: But in the beginning you didn't come to Malta. Was the goal always to come to Malta?

س: كان الهدف دائما إني أجي مالطا بس ما كانت في إمكانية إني أطلع مالطا. إمكانيات من [inaudible - نحو؟] المال، المصري. يعني ما كان عندي مصري. لما حكيت مع شخص مقارب للعائلة، قال لي تعال أنا أطلعك على مالطا. وهو تكفل بكل الأموال لوصول إلى مالطا.

S: The goal was always to come to Malta, but there was no possibility for me to come to Malta. Possibilities from [inaudible: perhaps “the perspective of”] money. I mean, I didn’t have money. When I talked to a person who is close to the family, he told me, “Come,” and then I left for Malta. And he put up [lit. he pledged/stood guarantor for] all the money I needed to make it to Malta.

ج: بس فش عندك عائلة هون.

G: But you don’t have family here.

س: هون ما فيش عائلة.

S: No, I have no family here.

ج: العائلة بدها تيجي كمان على مالطا ولا--؟

G: Does your family want to come to Malta as well, or—?

س: لا.

S: No.

ج: فتمنى إنو في المستقبل ترجع ع سوريا؟

G: So you hope, in the future, to return to Syria?

س: بتمنى إني أرجع سوريا بس صعب ما دام في بشار الأسد، صعب. ما دام إنو في نظام أسد، صعب. لأنو إحنا، اللي رجعنا سوريا بدنا نروح الجيش... والجيش، إحنا، كله عم يموت. وين نروح؟

S: I hope to return to Syria, but it’s difficult as long as Bashar al-Assad is there. It’s difficult. As long as the Assad regime is there, it’s difficult. Because if I return to Syria, I will [have to] go to the army, and the army, I— they’re all dying/they all die. Where to go?

ج: أيوا، أيوا تعرفت على كثير ناس إللي كانوا في الجيش وهربو من الجيش.

G: Yeah, yeah, I have met many people who were in the army and then fled from the army.

س: هربوا لـ... [mumbles - ما؟] ماتوا.

S: They fled [mumbles — perhaps “so they wouldn’t”] die.

ج: Yeah, yeah. كثير خطير هاي الوضع هناك... ممكن تحكي لي عن العلاقة بين مالطا ومدينة السخنة؟ يعني كان في واحد--

G: Yeah, yeah. The situation there is so dangerous. Can you tell me about the relationship between Malta and the city of al-Sukhnah? *Ya 'nī* there was somebody—

س: هي كانت في البداية أشخاص معينين، أربع أو خمس أشخاص في هون، في... قديم... يعني ما يقارب من أربعين لثلاثين سنة، خمسة وثلاثين سنة في مالطا. كانوا يشتغلوا هون في البناء. كان الشغل يعني... شغل في المال في المصاري في كل شي، يعني، على ما يقارب العملة السورية -- العملة السورية ما فيها أي شي. هون في شغل. والحمد لله، الله وفقنا، بعد عذاب ثلاث سنوات ونص وأستنى [inaudible] مالطا، اليوم أنا صار لي مغترب عن أهلي ثلاث سنوات ونص، ماني شايف أهلي، والحمد لله، الله وفقنا وصلنا لهون.

S: In the beginning it was a few particular people, four or five people [from al-Sukhnah who came] here, for somewhere around 40, 30 years, 35 years, in Malta. They worked here in construction. The work was— there was work, there was money. Basically, Syrian currency was worth nothing [lit. didn't have anything in it]. Here there is work. Thank God, after three and a half years of torture while I was waiting [inaudible — perhaps “to come to”] Malta — today I have been separated from my family for three and a half years. I haven't seen my family. And thank God, God allowed me to be successful, and I arrived here.

ج: وقبل ما تركت سوريا، عرفت ناس اللي كانوا ساكنين في مالطا ورجعوا على سوريا وهيك؟

G: Before you left Syria, did you know people that had lived in Malta and returned to Syria and that sort of thing?

س: نعم. نعرفهم.

S: Yes, I [lit. we] know them.

ج: وهل مالطا كان جزء من، مثلا، ثقافة السخنة وهيك؟

G: And was Malta part of the, for example, the culture of al-Sukhnah and that sort of thing?

س: نعم، نعم.

S: Yes, yes.

ج: وممكن سمعت قصص عن مالطا.

G: And maybe you heard stories about Malta.

س: أيوا. سمعنا الكثير عنها أنو هو... في شغل وبلد ليس عنصري. ليس عنصري. بلد أهله يحب العرب، يحب التعامل مع العرب.

S: Yes, we heard a lot about it, that there was work, that it was a country that was not racist. Not racist. A country whose people love Arabs, who love interacting with Arabs.

ج: سمعت اللغة المالطية..؟

G: Did you hear the Maltese language—?

س: قريبة للعربي، نعم، قريبة للعربي. ونحن هذا... يعني... غير بلد، لا تحسن تشتغل إلا تكون عندك لغة نفس البلد مثل ألمانيا، أميركا، كندا، بذك تكون نحكي يا إنجليز، يا جيرمني، صعب... هاي-- قريبة للمالطي، يعني، العربي، يفهموا مباشر. لما تتكلم معه-- المالطي يتكلم مع العربي يفهم عليه. يعني [unclear - هاي دل لي؟] -- هو اللي رغبناه أكثر في الشغل كمان، نيجي لمالطا.

S: It's close to Arabic, yes, it's close to Arabic. And this, we— in another country, you can't work except if you have [i.e., know] the language of that same country, like Germany, America, Canada, you have to speak either English, German [here he says “*jirmani*”], it's difficult. This— it's close to Maltese, I mean, Arabic— they understand right away. When a Maltese person talks to an Arab, he understands. [Unclear: Perhaps “This led me”?]— This is what made me most desire to come to Malta and work.

ج: أيوا. وبدك في المستقبل تتعلم وتحكي اللغة المالطية؟

G: Yeah. And do you want to learn and speak the Maltese language in the future?

س: نعم، أريد أتعلم المالطي والإنجليز.

S: Yes, I want to learn Maltese and English.

ج: والإنجليزي، أوكي. بس تعلمت شوية إنجليزي في الرحلة.

G: And English too, okay. But you learned a little English on your journey.

س: عندي شوية الإنجليزي وشوية من اليوناني.

S: I have a little English and a little bit of Greek.

ج: ممكن تحكي لي عن الحادث إللي صار في صربيا؟

G: Can you tell me about the accident that happened in Serbia?

س: في سلوفينيا.

S: In Slovenia.

ج: سلوفينيا.

G: [Correcting.] ...Slovenia?

س: الحادث، إحنا بعد مسيرة في كرواتيا ١٥ يوم مشي، قطعنا من الأكل ليومين، ما في أكل، ضلينا أكلنا أوراق الأشجار، أكلنا، شو في قدامنا ناكله.

S: The accident, after making our way through Croatia for 15 days on foot, and we went without food for two days. We kept eating the leaves off of trees. We'd eat anything we could find [lit. anything that was in front of us].

ج: وين، في السيارة؟

G: Where [were you], in a car?

س: لا لا لا لا لا، مشي. كله مشي. ١٥ يوم مشي في البرد وتحت المطر، فوقنا مطر. وألبستنا كلها ميه. ونمشي وننام في الأرض كلها ميه حتى وصلنا سلوفينيا. بقينا في سلوفينيا يوم [unclear - عالحد / الأحد]، ما ضل معنا أكل، ما ضل معنا أي شي، ومتنا. انجبرنا نتصل على مهرب، اطلعنا من سلوفينيا لإيطاليا. واجتنا سيارة بي إم، جيب، بي إم إكس فايف. ركبنا نحن الثمانية في السيارة، كان هو وابنه. معه ولد بالعمر ما يقارب اثنا عشر سنة. لما طلعنا قبل إيطاليا، تريستا، إيطاليا... تريستا،
?You know Trieste

S: No, no, no, no. Walking. All of it walking. Ten days walking in the cold, underneath the rain, rain was coming down from above us. All our clothes completely soaked. We would walk and then sleep on completely wet ground [lit. ground that was all water], until we got to Slovenia. We stayed in Slovenia [unclear, perhaps 'a-l-hadd "on the border" or al-ahad "on Sunday)]. We didn't have any food left, we didn't have anything left. And we were dead tired [lit. we died]. We were forced to contact a smuggler. He brought us out of Slovenia towards [lit. to] Italy. And a car came for us, a BMW X5 — an SUV [he lit. says "a Jeep"]. We got in, and there were eight of us in the car. It was him [i.e., the smuggler] and his son. He had a son with him who was about 12 years old. We came up to Italy, Trieste, Italy... Trieste, [in English] You know Trieste?

ج: لا، مدينة؟

G: No, is it a city?

س: مدينة تريستا. قبل تريستا، إيطاليا. كان هو مسرع لـ... حد السرعة ١٨٠، ٢٠٠. أخبرناه إنو يخفف من السرعة لكن لا جدوة. فجأة، السائق فقد السيطرة على السيارة. لما نزلنا من السيارة بعد... قلبت فينا... تخطط الستراد اثنين، ثلاثة تخططها. نزلنا من السيارة إحنا خمسة، ما في أي شي، أنا في إصابة برجلي، في قدمي، وفي ظهري، إصابة بسيطة، يعني، إصابات، ولما نزلنا وخرجنا من السيارة عايشين ما فينا شي، في كانوا ثلاثة في البكاج، صندوق السيارة، نسأل السائق أينهم؟ قال خرجوا نزلوا لل... مشوا. قلت له وين مشوا؟ إلى أين؟ قال لي مشوا هون، هربوا. لما نظرنا إلى الخلف لقيناهم على أرض. اثنين ماتوا. واحد للآن في العناية المشددة في سلوفينيا.

S: It's a city. Trieste. Before Trieste, Italy, he was speeding at 180, 200 [kilometers per hour]. We told him to slow down but there was no use. Suddenly, the driver lost control of the car. When we got out of the car after... it flipped us [perhaps: over two or three lanes on] the highway. We got out of the car, five of us, without anything [i.e., no serious injuries]. I had an injury in my leg, in my foot, and in my back, light injuries. When we got out of the car alive with nothing on us [i.e., no serious injuries]... There were three people in the trunk of the car. We asked the driver where they were. He said they got out and went to— they walked away. I asked him where they walked to. He said they walked over here, they ran away. When we looked behind us we found them on the ground. Two of them died. One of them is in intensive care in Slovenia.

ج: الله يرحمهم.

G: May they rest in peace.

س: وانجبرنا في سلوفينيا... إحنا لا نريد البصمة في سلوفينيا، بصمة اللجوء، نريدها في مالطا. انجبرنا-- بعد السجن خمسة أيام، بصمونا. قالوا يا ترجع بوصنا، يا تبصم. انجبرنا على التبصيم بعد عناء ١٥ يوم وحادث، فقدنا أصدقائنا، انجبرنا على هذا الشيء.

S: In Slovenia we were forced to... We didn't want to be fingerprinted in Slovenia, for the asylum fingerprints, we want them in Malta. We were forced— after five days in prison, they fingerprinted us. They said, either you return to Bosnia, or you get fingerprinted. So we were forced into being fingerprinted after 15 days of pain [i.e., the journey from Croatia] and an accident. We lost our friends, and we were forced into this.

ج: ورحت أول إشي على المستشفى بعد--؟

G: And did you first go to the hospital after— ?

س: نعم. بقيت في المشفى يومين لأنني فاقد للوعي لا أعرف ماذا يحدث.

S: Yes, I stayed in the hospital for two days because I lost consciousness and didn't know what was happening.

ج: أنت فاقد الوعي؟

G: You lost consciousness?

س: نعم، فقدت الوعي بعد الحادث.

S: Yes, I lost consciousness after the accident.

ج: لسه تحس إنو في...؟

G: Do you still feel that there is—?

س: في إصابة في ظهري شوي لسه بحس فيه.

S: There's an injury in my back that I still feel.

ج: ظهرك. أوكي. بس ما بتروح على المستشفى عشان--

G: Your back. Okay. But you don't go to the hospital¹³⁴ because—

س: بروح عالمشفى... قليل يعني... كيف... واحد من أصدقائي آخذ أوراقه أدخل فيها عالمشفى لأن ليس لدي أوراق في مالطا.

S: I go to the hospital, quite rarely [*qalīl ya nī*] — how — I take the papers of one of my friends in order to enter the hospital with them, because I don't have papers in Malta.

ج: هل أنت لسه خايف إنو ممكن في مالطا ممكن الشرطة--؟

G: Are you afraid that maybe the police here in Malta will— [arrest you]?

س: نعم، نعم.

S: Yes, yes.

ج: فيعني فش عندك أوراق أو--

G: So you don't have papers or—?

س: لا ما عندي أوراق.

¹³⁴ I asked about the “hospital” because that is where asylum seekers in Greece tended to get medical care, rather than at a doctor’s office.

S: No, I don't have papers.

ج: وشو الخطة هلا، يعني كيف-- بدك تجيب أوراق أو--؟

G: And what's the plan now? How— do you want to get papers, or—?

س: محتمل قريب إني أروح مكتب لجوء. ممكن يعطوني أوراق، ممكن يرفضوني.

S: It's possible that soon, I'll go to the asylum office. Maybe they'll give me papers, maybe they'll refuse me.

ج: وإذا رفضوك؟

G: And if they refuse you?

س: بدني أنجبر... يا أحط مهامي، بدني أحط مهامي-- ممكن ما ينجح.

S: I'll be forced to... Either I'll put a lawyer [on my case]... I'll put a lawyer— maybe the lawyer won't succeed.

ج: ممكن.

G: That's possible.

س: ممكن ما ينجح. ممكن ينجح، بس هو الاحتمال أكثر يرجعوني سلوفينيا.

S: Maybe they won't succeed. Maybe they will succeed, but it's more likely I'd be sent back to Slovenia.

ج: عشان قدمت اللجوء هناك.

G: Because you applied for asylum there.

س: اللجوء هناك. أنا كنت مجبر على تقديم اللجوء.

S: [Completing my sentence] Asylum there. I was forced to apply for asylum.

ج: صح. لسه ما في جواب لهال--.

G: Yes, that's right. And you still haven't received an answer about that— [asylum application]?

س: لسه ما في جواب.

S: There is still no answer.

ج: بدى أسألك عن تجربتك في اليونان. كنت هناك ثلاث سنين، صح؟

G: I want to ask you about your experience in Greece. You were there for three years, right?

س: نعم.

S: Yes.

ج: جيت أول من تركيا لـ.

G: You first came from Turkey to—

س: جزيرة خيوس. ضليت، بقيت فيها ثمانية أيام وطلعت تهريب إلى أثينا كي أطلع على أوروبا تهريب كمان، أكمل طريقي.

S: The island of Chios. I stayed there for eight days then came by smuggling to Athens, so I could come to Europe by smuggling too, to continue my path.

ج: هاي كانت السنة.

G: This was in the year—

س: سنة الـ ٢٠١٧، ١٠/١، عشرة واحد ألفين وسبعة عشر. يعني حاولت في مطار أثينا خمسة عشر محاولة، ولم تنفع معي، كلها انمسكت. وبقيت في أثينا لمدة سنة ونص، أو أكثر من سنة ونص. لا أحسن أطلع برا البيت، لا أوراق، لا أي شيء. لما ذهبت لسالونيك مسكتنا الشرطة. بقيت عند البوليس ثلاثة أشهر في سالونيك. وحولوني لسجن أثينا، "ألودابون" ضليت فيه ثلاثة أشهر. يعني مجموع كل سجنى ستة أشهر في اليونان ورجعون لجزيرة خيوس. بقيت فيها ثمانية أشهر، ما يقارب ثمانية أشهر، سبعة ونص - ثمانية. ورجعوني لـ... أخذت الأوراق، الأوسفيس، أوراق في أثينا، في اليونان فقط، لا أكثر. ورجعت إلى أثينا. كنت أشتغل لأنو، قبل، في منظمة اسمها بروجكت إيليا [Operation Renew] لمدة ٥ أشهر قبل السجن، ضليت أشتغل فيها. لما طلعت عن السجن ورحت الجزيرة ورجعت، كملت مسيرتي وشغلي فيها. رجعت عالكمب [camp] فينيكيس، كملت شغلي فيها حتى إجا اليوم طلعت فيه بر إلى... مالطا.

S: 2017, the 10th of January. 10/1/2017. I tried 15 times [to fly to Malta] at Athens airport, and none of them worked. I was caught every time. And I stayed in Athens for a year and a half, or

more than a year and a half. I couldn't leave the house. No papers, no anything. When I went to Thessaloniki the police caught me. I stayed with the police three months in Thessaloniki, then they transferred me to Athens, Allodapon, and I stayed there for three months. So my total prison time in Greece was six months, and then they sent me back to the island of Chios. I stayed there eight months, or about eight months, seven and a half to eight. They sent me back to... I got my *ausweis* — papers in Athens, [*corrects himself*] in Greece only, nothing more [i.e., the papers were not valid in the rest of Europe]. I had been working before, at an organization called Operation Renew. I was working there for five months. When I got out of prison and went to the island of Chios and came back [to Athens], I continued working there until the day that I left [Greece] by land for Malta.

ج: وحببت الشغل في فينيكيس، شغل Operation Renew، يعني، شو إللي حببت فيه؟

G: And did you like the work in Finíkis, the work of Operation Renew, I mean, what did you like about it?

س: بالنسبة لـ Operation Renew، هي منظمة، يعني، أحلى المنظمات إللي أتعرف عليها. كل يوم تشوف ناس جدد من جميع الدول، العالم، من أوروبا، من Germany، من إيطاليا، من... جميع الدول، من كندا، من أميركا، من الصين، من كل دول من تحتها... هذه المنظمة منظمة، يعني، أخوية و... وصفها كثير حلو، بالنسبة للمنظمة.

S: As for Operation Renew, it's an organization, I mean, one of the best organizations that I have gotten to know. Every day you see new people from every country, the world, from Europe, from Germany, from Italy, from... all the countries, from Canada, from America, from China, from every country under it[s umbrella]. This organization is brotherly/familial, and just wonderful.

ج: وشو رايبك عن المتطوعين إللي جاءوا على اليونان يعني؟ في منهم مناح، في منهم مش مناح ولا--؟

G: What is your view of the volunteers who came to Greece? Are there good ones and bad ones, or—?

س: كل من صادفت كان... كلهن كانوا مناح إللي صادفتهن.

S: All the ones I encountered were good.

ج: وإذا أنت كنت في مكانهم، بتفكر إنو ممكن أنت تيجي كمتطوع في بلد ثاني؟

G: Do you think that if you were in their position, you'd come as a volunteer to another country?

س: نعم.

S: Yes.

ج: يعني بتفهم لماذا يساوا هيك.

G: So you understand why they do this.

س: نعم، نعم. أنا، سوري، لاجئ، تطوعت في هذا الشيء من أجل مساعدة الناس. لأنو رأيت حالي، لازم أنا، شاب في عمر يعني... كان عمري أيامها في الـ ٢٢، كان يعني متقبل إنني، أقبل إنني أساعد الناس، إذا هو عم يبجي من بلده كأمركي ولا كندي، عم يساعد إحنا سوري ولا فلسطيني ولا صومالي ولا من أي دولة، أفغاني، باكستاني، هو تا يبجي يساعد إحنا لازم، انفضنا إحنا الشباب لازم نساعد كمان كما همَّ عَطول يساعدوا الناس.

S: Yes, yes. I, as a Syrian refugee, volunteered for it as well, in order to help people. Because the way I looked at it, as a young man — I was 22 at that time. I mean, I accept that I [should] help people. If someone else is coming from his country, like an American or a Canadian, and is helping us — Syrians, Palestinians, Somalis, or someone from any country, Afghans, Pakistanis — if he is coming from his country, we are obliged, we young people, we must also help, just as they are always coming to help people.

ج: حسيت إنو كان في فرق بينك وبين المتطوعين [الأوروبيين والأمريكيين]؟

G: Did you feel like there was any difference between you and the [European and American] volunteers?

س: لا لا لا ما كان في فرق.

S: No, no, no, there was no difference.

ج: عشان أنت كنت متطوع كمان.

G: Because you were also a volunteer.

س: بالعكس، أنا كنت سوري، كان معاملتهن معي أحلى من المعاملة المتطوعين بين بعضهم. أنا كنت محبوب كثير عندهن يعني لدرجة همَّ كلهم يحبوني، من المدير لكل المتطوعين.

S: On the contrary, I was Syrian, and their interactions with me were nicer than their interactions with each other. I was really well liked among them, to the degree that all of them loved me, from the director to each of the volunteers.

ج: وهلا أنت اتفقت إنو تساوي هاي المقابلة معي، وليش كان بدك تشارك في هالمشروع إللي أنا بعمله؟

G: And now, you agreed to do this interview with me. Why did you want to participate in this project that I am working on?

س: أنا هذا المشروع لأنه مبعوث من قبل صديقة وأخت غالي عليّ وهي أندريا. أقدم لها التحية ويعني، كمية الشكر لإلها كبيرة. يعني هي ساعدتني لما كنت في السجن. ساعدتني لما كنت في الكمب. ساعدتني في كل المجالات، إلها، هي، أندريا، ميخاليس، سيندي. ثلاث أشخاص أقدم إلهم شكر كثير.

S: This project, because it was sent [to me] by a friend, and sister, who is very precious to me, Andrea. My greetings to her. I am so thankful to her. She helped me when I was in prison. She helped me when I was in the camp. She helped me in every area. To her, Andrea, and Mihalis, and Cindy. Three people to whom I send a great deal of thanks.

ج: كيف ساعدوك بالضبط؟

G: How exactly did they help you?

س: لما كنت في السجن يعني كانت ينقصني أغراض مثل... كثير شغلات: ثياب، شعل دخان، هاي، كلها كانت هي تساعدني، تقدم لي إياه لما كنت في السجن. وقدموا لي في الكمب، ما كان عندي مكان أسكن فيه، هم قدموا لي مكان أسكن فيه. أقدم لهم شكر كثير ومش شوي، لأندريا، وسيندي، وميخاليس.

S: When I was in prison, there were things I was lacking, like, a lot of things: clothes, cigarette lighters [or perhaps “lighters, cigarettes”]... and she helped me with all of these things. She gave them to me when I was in prison. And they gave me things in the camp. I didn’t have a place to live, they gave me a place to live. I send them a lot of thanks, and not a little — to Andrea, Cindy, and Mihalis.

ج: همم. أوكي. كيف تحس وأنت تحكي لي عن قصتك؟ عشان أنا بعرف ناس في فينيكيس ما بدهم يحكوا عن قصتهم، ما بدهم يحكوا عن رحلتهم، بدهم ينسوا كل شي عشان الأحداث إللي صارت كثير صعبة. في--

G: Mmm. Okay. How does it feel for you when you are telling me your story? Because I know people in Finikis who don’t talk about their stories. They don’t want to talk about their journeys. They want to forget everything because the events that happened are very difficult. Is there—

س: صح. أنا ما كنت بدي أفتح هذا الكلام، بس لما قلت إني أنت جيت من طرف أندريا، وجيت أنت بدك تقدم هذا الشي، لأنني فرحت لإلك، ولأندريا، مشروع إلكن، حبيت إني أعملها من شان أندريا.

S: Right. I didn't want to get into this topic, but when you told me that you came based on Andrea's recommendation [lit. that you came from Andrea's side], and you came wanting to do [lit. present] this thing, and because I enjoyed your company, and Andrea's, and your [plural] project, I wanted to do it because of Andrea.

ج: آاه، عشان هيك، well، أنا أشكرك--

G: Oh, I see. Well, I thank you—

س: وأنت [laughs] --حبيبي -- أنت كمان، أحب أشكرك لمجيتك ولطف معاملتك.

S: *Habibī* [a common response to 'Thank you']. And you as well, I want to thank you for coming and for your kind manner.

ج: آخر شي: إللي يسمعوها في أمريكا أو في بلاد ثانية، شو بدك إنهم يعرفوا عن اللاجئين؟ يعني ممكن في عندهم أفكار عن اللاجئين. مثلاً في أمريكا في كثير عنصرية. من الرئيس كمان في عنصرية ضد اللاجئين. شو بدك تحكي لهم؟ شو بدك إنهم يعرفوه، يفهموه عن اللاجئين؟

G: Last thing: For those in America or in other countries, what would you like for them to know? You know, maybe they have some ideas about refugees. For example, in America, there's a lot of racism. From the President as well, there is racism against refugees. What do you want to tell these people? What do you want them to understand about refugees?

س: بالنسبة للاجئين نحنا بدنا نوصّل إنو مو كل شخص يتعامل في العنصرية. نحن شعب، يعني-- إنا لاجئين ما-- يعني جينا من بيوتنا، ما طلعتنا من بيوتنا مشان نيجي لهون، أوروبا، يعني، نتعذب فوق طرقاتها، يعني جيني من الحرب. هي الحرب هي إللي خرجتنا من بلادنا. وأتمنى إنو تساعد، يعني أكثر ناس تساعد لأنو في ناس في المخيمات، في جزيرة خيوس، ميتاليني، اليونان، جزيرة ساموس، عم يناموا في الطرقات، ما عندهن مخيمات، ما عندهن شي، الأكل، ما في أكل، معاملات سيئة في اليونان كثير للاجئين. وفي منظمة في، بالنسبة لكعب فينيكيس، في أثينا، هذا أحلى كمب، يعني معاملة كويسة في منظمة Operation Renew.

S: With regard to refugees, I'd like to send the message that not everyone acts racist [towards them]. We're a people, I mean, we refugees didn't come out from our houses, we didn't leave our homes [just] to come here to Europe and be tormented on its streets— We came from a war. It was the war that forced us out of our country. And I hope they will help, I mean, that more people will help, because there are people in camps, on the island of Chios, Lesbos, Greece, the island of Samos, they're sleeping in the streets! They don't [even] have camps, they don't have anything — food, there is no food. The treatment towards refugees in Greece is very bad. There is an organization in, for Camp Finíkis, in Athens, this is the best camp. There is good treatment from the organization Operation Renew.

ج: أهم، آخر شيء، نسيت إشي. أنت تحكي عن قصتك، عن رحلتك مع الناس إللي تتعرف عليهم أو أنت تخلي كل شيء جوا، يعني، [Saif lights a cigarette]، عشان كلكم عندكم قصص صعبة وممكن قصص رعب يعني.

G: The most important, the last thing. I forgot something. Do you talk about your story, about your journey, with people you meet, or do you keep everything inside? [Saif lights a cigarette.] I mean, because you all have very difficult stories, and maybe horror stories.

س: نعم.

S: Yes.

ج: أنتو بتحكوا عن هاي القصص ولا تخلوا كل شيء جوا؟

G: Do you tell these stories or do you keep everything inside?

س: هي، إحنا في، في عندنا مقولة بالدين، عندنا في الدين الإسلامي: تقول «الشكوى لغير الله--» يعني أنا لما عم بحكي لك عم بشكي لك. إحنا عندنا في الدين «الشكوى لغير الله مذلة»، يعني الإنسان ببذل نفسه لما بيحكي-- وأنا ما بدني إني أذل، هم ما بيحبوا يذلوا أنفسهم للناس. إحنا شعب، رغم إني لجأنا الشعب السوري والشعب العراقي، والشعب الفلسطيني وكل-- رغم إني لجأنا، وتعبووا وعذاب وحرب، يضل الشيء تقدمه لله، ليس للأشخاص. بس أنا بتمنى يعني يوصل صوتي لجميع الدول، إني يساعدوا اللاجئين لأن وضع اللاجئين تعبان كثير. في اليونان، في اليونان، يعني أكثر بلد هي في اليونان، وضع اللاجئين تعبان.

S: It's— we have a saying in religion, those of us in the Muslim faith, which says: “A complaint to someone other than God”— When I'm telling you, I am complaining to you. In religion we have, “A complaint to someone other than God is humiliation.” It means a person humiliates himself when he tells— and I don't want to be humiliated; they don't want to humiliate themselves in front of people. We are a people, despite the fact that we fled and sought refuge — the Syrian people and the Iraqi people and the Palestinian people and all [of them] — despite the fact that they became refugees, and grew weary, and [experienced] torture and a war, all this remains something we present to God, and not to people. But I hope that my voice reaches to all the countries [around the world], so that they help refugees because the situation for refugees is awful [lit., the situation of refugees is very tired/sick/dysfunctional]. In Greece— the country where this is most true is Greece; the situation for refugees is awful.

ج: عندك أمل في المستقبل، للمستقبل عندك أمل؟

G: Do you have hope [*'amal*] for the future?¹³⁵

س: إذا في، بدي أرجع عبلدي نعم، ولا في أوروبا، عملي هو البناء بس.

S: If there is [work], I want to return to my country, yes. But in Europe, my work is only construction.

ج: أهه، سُري--

G: Ah, sorry—

س: ما في مشكلة.

S: No problem.

ج: I keep --، في كمان أسئلة بفكر.

G: [*In English*] I keep— [*In Arabic*] There are more questions, I think.

س: تمام.

S: Okay.

ج: إذا عرفت كل الصعوبات اللي كانت في الرحلة، إذا عرفت قبل ما تركت سوريا، أنت ممكن كان بدك تتركها مرة ثانية؟ فهمت عالسؤال؟

G: If you knew about all the difficulties that [you encountered] on your journey, if you knew about them before you left Syria, is it possible that you would want to leave it a second time?¹³⁶ Did you understand the question?

س: بالنسبة للصعوبات أنا، لو، أعرف إنو أتعرض لهاي الصعوبات عالطريق، بفضل إنني أموت في سوريا ولا أجي هذه الصعوبات، لأنو تعبنا.

¹³⁵ Here, Saif seems to misunderstand my question, hearing the word *'amal* (hope) as *'amal* (work). My non-native Arabic is most likely to blame.

¹³⁶ Here, my Arabic is jumbled. What I meant was: If you could go back and make your decision whether to leave Syria or not all over again, knowing what you do now about the difficulties of the journey, would you still decide to leave?

S: As for the difficulties, if I had known I would face these difficulties on the way, I would have preferred to die in Syria and not come to these difficulties, because I've [lit. we've] grown tired of this.

ج: إذا كان ممكن ترجع للماضي، يعني مش رح تترك سوريا.

G: So if you could return to the past, you wouldn't leave Syria?

س: بالنسبة لسوريا، سوريا، يعني، أي إنسان ما يحب يترك بلده. أنت ما تحب تترك بلدك. هو بلدك يضل بلدك مهما طلعت في الغربية وظليت في الغربية سنين، سنة أو سنتين أو عشرة أو عشرين، بدك ترجع لبلدك، بدك ترجع لأهلك. أنا اليوم مغترب ما شاف ماما، مش شايف بابا من مدة ثلاث سنوات ونص. يعني الإنسان-- وأنا يعني فقدت عائلتي، أنا كنت متزوج! فقدت عائلتي بغربتي هذه. أنا مش حسنان أوصل إليها. هي هسه في سوريا. انجبرت من ثلاث أشهر أطلقها. خلص. انجبرت على هذا الشيء لأن هي ببلد وأنا ببلد. ما نحسن نشوف بعض.

S: As for Syria, Syria, I mean, nobody wants to leave their country. You wouldn't want to leave your country. Your country remains your country, whether you leave for exile/abroad [*al-ghurbah*] and stay abroad for years, for one or two years, or for ten or twenty, you want to return to your country, you want to return to your family. Today I am a stranger in a foreign land who hasn't seen his mom, hasn't seen his dad, for three and a half years. *Ya 'nī* a person— and I lost my family! I was married. I've lost my family in this *ghurbah* of mine. I can't connect with her. She is in Syria now. Three months ago I was forced to divorce her. *Khalaş*. I was forced to do this because I am in one country and she is in another. We can't see each other.

ج: أنتو لسه متزوجين ولا--؟

G: Are you still married, or—¹³⁷

س: لا، طلقنا. خلص.

S: No, we got divorced. *Khalaş*.

ج: طلقتموا.

G: You got divorced.

س: خلص.

S: *Khalaş*

¹³⁷ Here it is obvious that in the moment, I missed what Saif said about being divorced, now and at the beginning of the interview.

ج: آه. ممم. أوكي. لازم أفكر إذا في شي ثاني.

G: Ohh [*sympathetically*], mmmm. Okay. [*Checking notes*] I have to think if there is anything else.

س: تمام ما في مشكلة.

S: Okay, no problem.

ج: ... هل أنت عرفت إنو الرحلة رح تكون صعبة قبل ما تركت، ولا فكرتها أسهل؟

G: Did you know the journey would be difficult before you left, or did you think it would be easier?

ص: هي، كل طريق في صعوبة. ما في طريق ما في صعوبة. كل طريق في صعوبة. إحنا واجهنا صعوبات كثير. يعني كثير لدرجة-- في يونان هي أكثر شي اليونان واجهنا صعوبة في اليونان. صعوبة يعني، بالنسبة للمعيشة في اليونان، صعبة كثير.

S: On every road there is difficulty. There is no road without difficulty. We faced many challenges. A lot, to the degree that— Greece was the place where we faced the most difficulty. Difficulty in terms of living [conditions] in Greece — so difficult.

ج: بس إللي صارت في سلوفينيا--

G: But what happened in Slovenia—

س: في سلوفينيا هي أصعب، أصعب مرحلة من حياتي، هي كانت هي سلوفينيا. فقدت أشخاص يعني كانوا عزيزين علي. أصدقائي المقربين فقدتھن. من، يعني، من... ما انخلقت عالديا، وصرت أعرف الدنيا وأفكر وصار عندي تفكير، وأعرف، وهذا، أعرف أشخاص، ما صار أصعب علي من موقف سلوفينيا.

S: Slovenia was the hardest stage of my life. I lost friends who were dear to me. I lost some of my closest friends. From the time I was born into the world and came to know the world, and think, and come to have opinions, and to get to know friends... there hasn't been anything harder on me than the situation in Slovenia.

ج: هم عرفتهم من-- هم إللي توفوا عرفتهم من سوريا؟

G: You knew them— the ones who passed away, you knew them from Syria?

س: بعرفهم من كنت-- واحد منهم-- من كان عمري ١٤ ، ١٢ سنة كنت أنا وإياه أصدقاء. من كان عمري ١٢ سنة أصدقاء أنا وإياه.

S: I knew them since the time I was— One of them, from the time I was 14, or 12 years old, he and I were friends. From the time I was 12 years old he and I were friends.

ج: كثير آسف.

G: I'm so sorry.

س: هذا أمر الله. ما نعرف.

S: This is a matter for God. We don't know.

ج: هم. Well، أنا مبسوط كثير إنك وصلت لهون وإن شاء الله الأوراق توصل لك...

G: Mmmm. [In English] Well... [In Arabic] I am very happy that you made it here and *inshallah*, you'll get papers...

س: شكرا إلك، وشكرا...

S: Thank you, and thanks to—

ج: وكل شي يكون أحسن في المستقبل. إن شاء الله أنا وإياك لسه نحكي مع بعض...

G: And [I hope] everything will get better in the future. And I hope you and I will [continue] to talk.

س: إن شاء الله، إن شاء الله.

S: *Inshallah, inshallah.*

ج: ...وبدي أشوف شو خبرك في المستقبل.

G: And I want to [hear] your news in the future.

س: إن شاء الله.

S: *Inshallah.*

ج: شكرا كثير وشكرا جزيلا.

G: Thank you very much.

ص: العفو. شكرا إلك أنت كمان وشكرا لمجيئك إلى مالطا.

S: Thank you to you as well, and thank you for coming to Malta.

ج: منيح، منيح. وخلص.

G: Great, great. *Khalas*.