CHAPTER 4

Violent Worlds
Vernacular Agency in Middle Eastern Literature

In Hany Abu-Assad's acclaimed film *Paradise Now* (2005),[1] the two male protagonists, Saeed and Khaled, find themselves at the crossroads of killing time and killing themselves. In a world choked by checkpoints, blockades, barbed wire, Makrolon shields, and the eagle eyes of satellites scanning the skies for unsuspecting prey; in a world where even drinking water is weaponized as an agent of biopolitical control – in controlling the enemy's sperm count – and in a world where life becomes a long, excruciating wait before being sent to the grave, killing oneself for a cause appears to be more seductive than killing time like a convicted prisoner. Sure enough, when the recruiter of a local resistance group delivers the edict that their time to serve God has come, our protagonists receive it as though it were a divine order, without so much as a wry grimace on their faces – nor a tinge of fear in the air.

Clean-shaven, suit-clad, bomb-strapped, they embark on a mission of explosive healing across the fence. When their first attempt is thwarted by Israeli soldiers, Saeed's girlfriend, Suha, finds out about the duo's mission, and confronts Khaled in his car racing away from the labyrinthine checkpoints of Nazareth: "Why are you doing this?"... "if you kill, there's no difference between victim and occupier." "If we had planes, we wouldn't need martyrs. That's the difference," shoots back Khaled. "The difference is that the Israeli military is still stronger," reasons Suha, as if making a plea to the weaker side of Khaled's moral constitution, and as if urging him to read the writing on the wall: his actions might end up causing more Palestinian deaths in retaliation. Khaled doesn't take the bait and dodges Suha's line of questioning by stating something to the effect that "he wouldn't really care as he would be in paradise by then." "There is no paradise. It only exists in your head!" screams out Suha with renewed vigor, as though powered by the logic of her own reasoning. Shell-shocked but recomposed, Khaled disarms Shua's argument by uttering the most famous lines of the film: "I'd rather have paradise in my head than live in this hell. In this life, we're dead anyway."[2]

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Khaled's preference for the *fiction* of living with paradise in his head rather than living in the *real life* hell that Palestine has become is coterminous with Georges Bataille's notion that the subject of self-sacrifice "voluntarily tricks himself"[3] at the moment of dying and even identifies with the weapon of sacrifice, as in Khaled's retort to Suha: "if we had planes, we wouldn't be needing this." The religious trick here may well be invested, if not mired in the ideas of the paradisical and fanatical, but it is never fully decoupled from the realms of secular reason and sacrificial redemption. When, for instance, in a moment of weakness, Khaled beseeches his companion to reconsider his choice: "we kill and are killed, and nothing changes," Saeed defends his sacrifice with the acumen of a secular sage: "our death itself may not change, but continuation of resistance will change something."[4]

The religious trick, in effect, knits the sublime and the secular – a knitting I conceptualize as the intrasecular sublime in the discussion to follow – creating a conceptual flow of death that is not necessarily the secession of life; as Achille Mbembe argues, via Bataille: "the destruction of one's own body does not affect the continuity of the being."[5] The idea of surviving one's own death, for Saeed, dissolves into the continuity of his community, without leaving so much as a trace of the self-sacrifice, as opposed to the excess of death produced by the sovereign terror. It is this very agential conditioning of death that brings Benjamin's divine violence into the sublime domain of justice: "mythical violence is bloody power over more life for its own sake, divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it."[6]

As opposed to the popular view that religious terrorists are irrational zealots, the invocation of sublime and divine forces toward secular ends in *Paradise Now* rejects the conventional distinction between religious and secular motivations of armed insurgencies. Even the so-called apolitical terrorists, who, despite their lofty objectives to bring about a religious state, have short-term earthly objectives that "are often categorized as political, not religious"[7]: to kill a political opponent, to gain a tactical advantage, to use religious affiliation to fund such secular goals, and, most importantly, to mobilize soldiers in the name of a shared cause. Such tactical deployment of the religious sublime as a vehicle, a trick, or a mere passageway to attaining secular goals is made all the more compelling through a fusion of realist and irrealist elements in Elia Suleiman's film *Divine Intervention* (2002).[8] Set in Nazareth, the film's mise-en-scène involves a man and a woman observing checkpoints between Ramallah and Jerusalem as though they were a staged theater to be consumed for entertainment. The

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checkpoints are always ominous: the soldier carefully scanning every car, the telescopic lens of the sniper's rifle from the watchtower suspiciously moving from head to head across the fence; the men in the cars revving away before they even reach the checkpoint in anticipation of the obvious: the hunt for potential suicide bombers before they cross the fence. Out of this chaos emerges a woman from the car, turning the tarmac between the fence and the watchtower into a fashion ramp, walking elegantly in her single-piece dress and designer goggles, turning the sniper and the soldiers into bystanders, who want to pull the trigger but are restrained by a divine force from doing so. As the woman walks past the checkpoint control where the soldiers are usually stationed, the watchtower crumbles and falls flat to the ground.

Although this scene has been read by film studies scholars as a masterpiece for its formal experimentation, not necessarily for its political connotations, it is entirely possible to read the falling of the watchtower at the movement of the woman's crossing as the result of a suicide bombing – the thwarting of which, after all, was the entire point of posting a checkpoint and erecting the watchtower – from which the woman reemerges onto the other side of Israel. Rather than killing and then reassembling the parts of the dead bomber from the incinerated ashes, Elia Suleiman creates a plush, high-cultured, and stylized biopolitical being who stands in stark contrast to the dismembered, dissimulated body of the suicide bomber. In other words, the woman, notwithstanding her implied self-destruction, walks to the other side of the checkpoint as though the entire spectacle was a divine intervention. In both vignettes, not only do the aspiring, and in some cases enacting, suicide bombers wade into the sublime realm of vengeance, redemption, and justice for the injustices visited upon them in this very earthly world of the real and corporal, but in doing so, their violence is anointed by a divine task of self-preservation by which the dead are figurally expiated. In effect, the afterlives of the suicide bombers assume a new identity as agents of "divine violence," to the point where they are brought back to life at the other end of reason. Unlike necropolitics where both active and passive cultivation of death worlds become the sole preoccupation of the sovereign, the return of unmarked and unnamed deaths into the realm of the living to stage a ghostly vigil for justice about their unjust disappearance – as in Homi Bhabha's provocative claim that "even the dead have human rights"[9] – is formative to the theory of thanatopolitics.

If realism and irrealism are not diametrical opposites but dialectical counterparts,[10] it is possible to read the juxtaposition of the divine, the

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sublime, and the secular in Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* as a spillover of realism, a radical realism in which reason becomes so absurd that it must be driven out of reason, through the mud-slinging corridors of unreason, to ascertain its very premise and its existence – the causes and conditions of which bring the suicide bomber to a point of explosive healing. This mode of art, especially in narrative fiction, wherein the killing, dying, resurrecting, parading, and marching of the dead, in addition to tossing life and death together as though they are Siamese twins, is at the helm of contemporary literary expressions in the Arab-speaking world. In a decisive move away from the historical trajectories of religious nationalism and pan-Arabism of pre-9/11 literature toward the local and vernacular world-making, the new generation of novelists finds irrealism their preferred mode of literary expression, one that is best equipped to "articulate the unspeakable, lost, repressed, or deliberately silenced narratives of victims of this structural violence."[11] After all, who could be more deliberately silenced, or preferably unheard, than the dead and the disappeared? And what if they were to speak? That would be a ghostly insurgency against the living to which only God and the writer are the ultimate witnesses. This is precisely what happens in Saadi Youssef's[12] masterful poem, whose verses dance to the tunes of God and the immortal, the rhymes of reason and unreason, and the songs of the sublime and the secular. The poem, deceptively titled "The Wretched of the Heavens," opens with a poignant appeal to God from the dead, that the angels have forgotten to pick up their souls from a prison cell in occupied Iraq:

> We have been waiting for you O Lord
> Our cells were open yesterday
> We were lifeless on their floor
> and you did not come O Lord
> But we are on the way to you
> We will remain on the way even if you let us down
> We are your dead sons and have declared our resurrection
> Tell your prophets to open the gates of cells and paradises!
> Tell them that we are coming!
> We have wiped our faces and hands with clean earth
> The angels know us one by one

The poem, despite its irrealist premise, despite its invocation of the sublime and the divine, is a response to the tragic events that took place in the Abu Ghraib prison in April 2004, especially those depicted in the infamous photo in which Iraqi prisoner Ali Shallal al-Qaisi, clipped to a maze of electric wires, was made to stand on a stool in a crucified pose, a

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jute hood covering his face and a poncho-like rag dangling over his torso. A female soldier, namely, Lynndie Rana England, is seen to be dragging another naked prisoner with a leash around his neck. It is these factual details that were poeticized, if not weaponized in Youssef's "The Wretched of the Heavens," and in doing so, the facts were stripped of all their traces of reality given realism's inability to contain the sheer extremity, if not the irrationality, of the acts involved:

> We will go to God
> naked
> our shroud is our blood
> our camphor
> the teeth of dogs
> turned wolves
> The closed cell suddenly swung open
> for the female soldier to come
> our swollen eyes could not make her out
> . . .
> she was dragging my brother's bloody body behind her
> like a worn-out mat
> . . .
>
> We will walk to God
> barefoot
> our feet lacerated
> our limbs wounded
> Are Americans Christians?
> We have nothing in the cell to wipe the lying body
> only our blood
> congealing
> in our blood

Because the real and factual are pushed to their limits, the divine and sublime elements – the irrealist counterparts of realism – enter the fray as the chief artifacts of Youssef's insurrection, not simply against Americans, but against God himself. The rhetorical question "Are Americans Christians?" mocks the faltered alterity, the absence of the faintest sense of differential sameness of a shared world in which one has one's own set of traditions of paying respects to the dead and the dying. It is the very metaphor of the marching army of dead souls moving toward the heavens, whom the angels know "one by one" but have chosen to abandon, that marks the defining feature of the texts discussed in this chapter.

The insurgent bonds and worlds created through violence in these two vignettes will provide an outlet into the ensuing discussion on world-making

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through violence, not least because of the Fanonian traces of worlding through violence in the title of Saadi Youssef's poem. Like Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Youssef's "The Wretched of the Heavens" charts the coordinates of an allegorical other world in which the conceptions of life and death significantly deviate from those *en vogue*, namely, the spatial and geographical coordinates of the world in contemporary debates on world literature. The sheer fact that an overwhelming number of writers from the Middle East chose to write in irrealist genres, through sublime, divine, and grotesque tropes and figures, bespeaks of the conditions of another world, a violent world, of another soil in-the-making – a soil soaked in death, destruction, and blood. Fittingly, Youssef's poem ends with the soil metaphor "We have wiped our faces and hands with clean earth." In the Shiite tradition of Islam, the dead are washed with clean earth when there is nothing else to wipe the body with.[13] But clean earth in a prison cell is a scarce commodity. Because it is only upon wiping with what was left in the prison – the blood-soaked specks of dust on the concrete prison floor – that the dead can enter heaven, the persona's rhetorical insurrection against God from a soilless cell serves as an allegory of the multiple insurrections that loomed large from the Iraqi soil after the fall of Saddam Hussein, from the Shiite, Sunni, pan-Islamic to the Salafist and even the Islamicist Levantine.

In this inward move from the world to the Iraqi soil, with the local and vernacular forces at play – most notably the internalized, sectarian, and splintered violence set in motion by the external as well as the structural violence of the occupier – the texts featured in the chapter portray myriad insurgencies of besieged and desperate people seeking a violent overhaul of the reigning political systems. In what follows, I develop a consolidating theoretical framework of various traditions of theorizing violence, with the intrasecular sublime at its helm, and divine violence and thanatopolitics as the latter's conceptual tributaries, which help make the complex underpinnings of subaltern insurgencies legible. Organized into two sections, the first section reads three texts, namely, Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack* (2007), Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd* (2014), and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), as exemplars of the intrasecular sublime laden with divine violence in which suicide bombings, rogue justice, and acts of vengeance forge the construction of vernacular worlds through violent bonds. The three texts provide the basis for a close scrutiny of the two novels in the second section: Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) and Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* (2017) as world literary texts wherein death, dead bodies, and thanatopolitics

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become the means of communal bonding through the vernacular prism of the intrasecular sublime.

Of the Sublime, Divine, Secular, and the Vernacular

Today, the violence in the Middle East is shaped not only by events such as 9/11 and the decades-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which gained recognition as major "world historical" events since World War II,[14] but also by the strategic realignment of the world along the temporal scales of affects such as fear, security, threat, and survival. Although, as Epifanio San Juan Jr. has identified, the post-9/11 responsive violence has embarked on a new era of the global sublime, with an endless supply of "shock and awe"[15] as promised by George W. Bush, the proponents of world literature have paid little or no attention to the affective scales of violence that pervade our contemporary world order.

Despite their divergent methodological orientations – as I have outlined in the opening chapter – what is worth noting in the founding scholarship on world literature is that the meaning of the term "world" is invariably reduced to a derivate, modernist conception mired in its anthropocentric, secular humanist, spatial, or scalar constellation of political "three worlds" bound by market and trade or a conglomeration of nations or national cultures.[16] As Martin Puchner puts it in a rather blunt manner, "world literature is not written but made – made by a marketplace."[17] This market-driven, utilitarian approach is perhaps best captured in the coinage of "born-translated" literatures, which gain recognition and even success by catering to metropolitan literary tastes and by anticipating "their own future in several literary geographies."[18] Although the prime examples of such born-translated literatures consists mainly of what is now a postcolonial modernist canon – J. M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Caryl Phillips – one might ask, in the spirit of vernacular solidarity of the texts featured in this chapter, what sort of worlds non-born-translated works might inhabit and what contributions they could make to an understanding of the world bound by violence?

While the recent critical turn in world literature debates toward 'highly localized' planetary constellations[19] is the way forward, a normative conception of the world remains equally constrained by what Djelal Kadir calls "our own epistemic, economic, and ideological constructs."[20] In other words, the divisive coordinates of the world of the earlier debate have merely been rehashed in the language of Empire/colonies, Self and Other, center and periphery, while reducing the "play of social forces"[21] that both

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make and make up the world and its literatures – pleasures, desires, affects, and vertical bonds based on affiliations, allegiances, collective suffering, struggles, and even vengeance – to a series of derivative, vertical, formal, inductive, and nonnormative assumptions.

In his essay "World against Globe," Pheng Cheah draws attention to what he calls the "normative force" of world in the works of Auerbach, Goethe, Marx, and Arendt. As opposed to a spatial conception of the world, both Auerbach's and Goethe's projects are built on a certain temporal assumption of the world that seeks to evaluate "an inner history of mankind . . . which created a conception of man unified in his multiplicity."[22] For Goethe, world literature is essentially a "universal spiritual commerce," not merely the economic commerce, in which "every translator is to be regarded as a middle-man."[23] In Marx, such temporality of the world's spirit is ascribed to "a higher, nonalienated sociality beyond the commodity relations of bourgeois civil society,"[24] whereas in Arendt, it is the worldliness enabled by the intersubjective human relations in the public sphere that is being systematically destroyed by totalitarianism and capitalism. [25]

If Cheah's nonutilitarian, affective, and struggle-based conception of the world rekindles the play of social forces, I suggest that violence and, more specifically, the sublime and divine aspects of violence help us grasp the normative and temporal dimensions of world-making. Frantz Fanon was among the first anticolonial critics to challenge the negative valorization of violence in the (post)colonies. If colonialism itself "is violence in its natural state," as Fanon writes, "it will only yield when confronted with greater violence."[26] "[I]n a world where oppression is maintained by violence from above," Fanon holds, "it is only possible to liquidate it with violence from below."[27] Such responsive character of violence serves the colonized to redeem the unity and the dignity that was robbed of them. The usual tendency here is to read the sheer redemptive, cathartic, and "cleansing force"[28] of violence in Fanon's defense of the Algerian national resistance. Be that as it may, apart from advocating the sort of instrumentalist, utopian, or antisovereign violence of vulgarized Marxist doctrines, Fanon also gestures toward the sublimity of violence, in all its cathartic character:

> The Algerian *fidai*, unlike the un-balanced anarchists made famous in literature, does not take dope. The *fidai* does not need to be unaware of danger, to befog his consciousness, or to forget. The "terrorist," from the moment he undertakes an assignment, allows death to enter into his soul. He has a rendezvous with death. The *fidai*, on the other hand, has a rendezvous with the life of the Revolution, and with his own life. The *fidai* is not one of the sacrificed. To be sure, he does not shrink before the

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> possibility of losing his life or the independence of his country, but at no moment does he choose death.[29]

Here, Fanon's idea of violence and sacrifice forming an enabling, life-giving force – that is, "man recreating himself"[30] – not only for the Algerian national community but for the entire "wretched of the earth," finds resonance in Moira Fradinger's concept of "binding violence." Powered by the blood of the collective enemy, namely, the Haitians, the ruling elites of the Dominican Republic attempt to build a nation on the foundations of violence. The politicization of the dead, "powered by human blood," forms the basis for solving questions of belonging and membership in a given community.[31] If blood is the greatest binding agent of communities that there is, "the production of the 'already dead enemy,' against whom the libertines direct their violence, results in a clear marking of the difference between the members and the nonmembers, and in a mechanism that ensures that no member can become a nonmember."[32] On the basis of this communal economy of inclusion by exclusion, Fradinger emphasizes the communal bonding forged through tactical deployment of enmity by both the state and nonstate actors.

Such enabling perspectives on binding, insurgent, and revolutionary violence go a long way in challenging European discourses of the sublime in the post-1789 context. Constructing violence purely as an aesthetic category, something to be banished from the civic realm except for its sublime promises of civilization or revolution, most European empires exported violence to the colonies, while reducing the colonial *subject* to the sublime's *object* – part nature, part creature, and a figure of embodied fear and terror. Yet, within the European romantic tradition, the sublime is imagined purely in a heteronomical relationship to reason: the sublime begins when rational faculties collapse. Even though for Kant, the sublime is of paramount importance for the power of reason, it remains in a subservient position to reason. Such secular distinction between the rational and the romantic assumes that the sublime is something *to be revealed* to the subject at the end of reason. But in non-European traditions, where the romantic does not necessarily precede the rational, the sublime manifests itself as a secular force that could be *invoked* or *called upon* on a whim, as opposed to being revealed (to its subject) at the limit of reason. A good example of this would be the many iterations of the Salafist doctrine, including the calls for the Caliphate, which are being merely invoked in the name of a greater cause. The very fact that Salafism originates from the various interpretations and iterations of hadith – a set of statements made by

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Prophet Mohammad – not only epitomizes the myriad vernacular formulations the edict has undergone in recent times, but is equally representative of the secular-political ambitions harbored by the various Salafi insurgent groups in Mali, Somalia, Syria, and Egypt. According to Gregor McLennon, such effacement of the religious and secular can be best described as "intrasecular secularism," one that envisions a common ground between those who reject religion or equate secularism with atheism and those who embrace both belief and secularism – and the ethics, values, and belief systems that religions lend to the organization of people's lives – in order to arrive at a secularism that is more complex than merely "hostile to religious citizens."[33]

Having said that, intrasecular sublime cannot be dismissed as something purely theistic or irrational, for it invokes a greater force in order to meet short-term, utilitarian goals: to amass popular support to topple Shia majority or the foreign forces operating in the region. It is intrasecular precisely because it does not precede but *supersedes* the secular by exposing the latter's inadequacies in capturing the modalities of sublime that are vested in a complex interplay of cultural practices, religious traditions, and the conceptions of sovereign power outside the Euro-American context. Such intrasecular sublime can be best illustrated through Achille Mbembe's rendition of the African Sublime: "what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?"[34] If we are allowed to invert Mbembe's question – how can we grasp violence by what is nothing? – there is a gory vignette from Maoist China that provides the answer: "A bonded labourer who is ill-treated by his landlord feels that the latter has no heart. So, when the peasants attack the landlord's house, the labourer says that he would like to kill his master himself and check whether he has a heart underneath his ribcage."[35]

The affective rhetoric of the peasant's remark opens a space of religiosity as well as the moral economy of the peasant, which were also central to the forging of horizontal bonds and the organization of the peasantry in the Marxist movements in India and the agrarian revolts of Southeast Asia as theorized by Ranajit Guha and James Scott.[36] In particular, the vengeful nature of the peasant's desire opens space for a Benjaminian notion of a justice-laden violence. Like a divine injunction, if it is religious traditions that set the precedents for our collective norms, including the moral foundations of the secular law, that restrain us from the temptations of killing the neighbor for our benefit, then God alone endows us with the ultimate measure of justice ("Thou shalt not kill"). In the absence of God, when oppressed people take violence into their hands in the name

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of self-preservation, they are doing the work of God, therefore enacting divine violence. Divine violence thus cannot be reduced to ideology or mythology; it simply occurs and vanishes, like God's swallowing of Korah and his followers for rebelling against Moses by opening the earth and sealing it without a trace.[37] It is divine because it is done for God when God has abandoned us, just as in Youssef's poem "The Wretched of the Heavens." In Gillian Rose's reading of Benjamin's critique, it is the temporal character of such violent explosion of resentment that "will awaken and boundlessly expiate the dead,"[38] like the Chinese peasant who releases his pent-up anger into the ribcage of his oppressor for the sake of his dismembered class. In divine violence, if the past represents a time of injustice, calling for redemption, then the present, for Benjamin, is "shot through with the chips of Messianic time."[39] It is this very redemption of suffering through divine temporality and Messianic and sublime violence that I consider to be a world-making and world-binding force, in which the dead and death are resuscitated as insurgent weapons. The readings featured in this chapter are mediated through the interrelated conceptual frames of thanatopolitics – understood here as the politics of death and the embodied resistance of the dead bodies – and divine violence as the tributaries of the intrasecular sublime, which make insurgency legible through the construction of temporal worlds.

Violence and the Vernacular

If Saadi Youssef's sublime lies with the expiation of the dead and the resurrection staged by the murdered Iraqis, then the divine violence in my next example owes its very existence to Clint Eastwood. This first ever Kurdish novel written in English – Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd* (2014) – pioneers a curiously bizarre form: a homodiegetic narrator telling his story to Clint Eastwood a.k.a. Gringo in a series of letters that are sometimes presented as monologues in separate chapters, sometimes woven into the narrative, and sometimes detached from the narrative altogether. For the young Kurdish protagonist named Marywan, it is Clint Eastwood's cowboy heroics that become not only an outlet into the world outside his village, but an escape from the political repression against his community. Marywan has a fixed goal: to go to America, meet Clint Eastwood, and make a film with him: "The last of the trilogy will tell my people's struggles for freedom against Saddam Hussein. Dear Gringo, you would make me the happiest film director if you accept the role of the Kurdish general in my film, the hero who would lead my people to crush the army of the monster."[40]

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When Saddam's regime begins to infiltrate the Kurdish rebellion, killing Marywan's friends and family one by one, the truth begins to dawn on him. He writes:

> I am most disappointed in you. You are no longer my hero, Gringo.... I should have learnt not to generalize, but your American government's constant support to Saddam's tyranny makes me believe that little good will come out of your part of the world. Your American money and weapons, given to your beloved monster, are used to spread terror in my country. I am not putting all the blame on you. My people and the Iraqi people are also the culprits in serving Saddam, the difference is that they have no choice, whereas you do it because of greed in order to steal our wealth, our oil. Perhaps I was not born to become an actor, or make films, but you were my hope.[41]

This contrapuntal relation of Marywan with the external world as the oppressor and the emancipator at the same time becomes the epicenter of a narrative that is vernacularly Kurdish but mediated through worldly symbols and metaphors. In the course of the narrative, Bahar recurrently invokes the vengeance episodes of the Western noir in Eastwood's cowboy movies. In fact, almost all characters in the novel are named after the characters in the latter's movies. After the Halabja chemical attack in 1988 by Saddam's regime and the betrayal by the Iranian forces – a combination that brutally crushed the Kurdish insurgency – Marywan loses all hope and renounces his aspiration to become a filmmaker, as he detests his insurgency leadership for not even thinking of having a filmmaker who could record the destruction of Saddam's chemical gassing for the world. True to the ethical dictum of divine violence that violence ceases to be divine once it is hijacked by a revolutionary government, Marywan also resigns from the Kurdish insurgency group Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK). But the only thing that keeps him alive is his irremissible desire to avenge the death of his friends and family, and as he takes a shot at one of his archenemies, an informer of the Al-Mukhabarat in Saddam's regime, he recounts the following:

> Norman's projector was running, showing The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. I could hear the soundtrack had reached the final scene where Gringo, my hero, the Good one nicknamed Blondie, shoots the Bad one and says to the Ugly, "You see, in this world there are two kinds of people, my friend – those with loaded guns and those who dig. You dig." I knew the film so well, and mouthed the words along with my hero.[42]

Marywan's divine violence here is made possible by his refusal to be hijacked by a collective revolutionary cause. The cinematic background against which Marywan kills the informer, especially the sense of mob

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justice enacted by the scene in play, serves as a narrative cue to read the peripheral violence in Bahar's novel in conjunction with the violence of its outer "world." This is made evident in one of Marywan's letters, in which the protagonist asks the Gringo whether the ill-treatment of the native Americans is comparable to the plight of his own people under Saddam. In the absence of any vernacular metaphors to express the enormity of Saddam's crimes against the Kurds, Marywan constructs an image of the dictator as a crossover of cinematic monsters – Cyclops, King Kong, Godzilla, and dinosaurs – who might grab a dozen of Kurds in his fist and eat them for breakfast.[43] Throughout *Letters from a Kurd*, Marywan's desire to exact vengeance from this composite monster falls short of escalating into revolutionary violence and, as a result, dissolves into divine violence, one that is weaponized as an instrument of justice against the sublime "monstrosity" of the enemy. Obsessed with the idea of God, Marywan refuses to believe that God would indeed create such a monster, and do nothing to salvage the latter's victims:

> "Why did God create such a monster to eat thousands of innocent people?" I had asked. "The devil created the monster," he answered. "But Father, you said God created everything, including the devil? That means that God created the monster." "Mary, don't say that again, that is a blasphemy." "Yes, Father."[44]

In a curious way, then, it is Marywan's denial of God's existence that makes him believe in the opposite idea, the existence of a monster – the Gothic sublime pitted against the divine sublime – thereby justifying his own divine violence in spite of God, in lieu of God, and in the name of God. "How can we ever be free from this monster? If God does not kill him, soon he will eat all of us. But, for now, it seems that God is definitely on his side, just as many countries in Europe and the world are."[45]

If God and the rest of the world belong to the "other world," then Marywan takes upon himself the divine task of dethroning the monster of his vernacular periphery without making a political virtue out of it. This separation between mythical revolutionary violence and divine violence as an ideational tributary of the intrasecular sublime – represented here as the encounter between the allegory of the monster against mob justice, as opposed to the secular parlance of tyranny and revolution – is made possible by two parallel narrative strands in the novel. In the frame story of the novel, revolutionary violence remains confined to the rivalry between Saddam, Al-Mukhabarat, and the PKK. In the secondary or nested narrative, however, this revolutionary rivalry is played out as divine violence, an exegesis of a personal feud between Abu Ali, the Al-

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Mukhabarat agent, and Marywan. Sure enough, the Kurdish youths rebel against the Al-Mukhabarat agents and lead them to a certain death trap not because they believe they would serve a revolutionary cause, but simply because they needed to save themselves from the monstrosity of Saddam's henchmen.

My next example, the female suicide bomber in Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack* (2007), makes a compelling case for the intrasecular sublime by means of a similar divine logic. Sihem, the suicide bomber in question, is the wife of Palestinian-Israeli surgeon Amin Jaafari, based in Tel Aviv. Unable to digest why his wife, who grew up in an affluent neighborhood of Tel Aviv, would join a resistance group, Dr. Jaafari embarks on a truth-hunting mission into the heartland of Bethlehem, seeking an audience with the religious leader who he thinks recruited his wife. In the process, he meets the members of Palestinian insurgent groups who question Dr. Jaafari's right to mourn for his wife[46] and accuse him of having subscribed to the "wrong school" of thought "without faith and without salvation" for being an Israeli citizen.[47] By his own admission, Sihem's quest for "faith" and "salvation" had little or nothing to do with religion, for she was not a practicing or "praying" Muslim till the moment she blew herself up.[48] In fact, Dr. Jaafari's own shocking (re)discovery of Bethlehem as "a huge collection point, where all the wretched of the earth have arranged to meet in a futile quest for absolution," or Jenin as "some forgotten reach of limbo, haunted by amorphous souls, by broken creatures, half ghosts, half damned,"[49] serves as a proxy narration to Sihem's intrasecular sublime, that is, her decision to sacrifice herself "so that others can be saved."[50] Although Sihem *does* seek the blessing of an imam from Bethlehem before her suicide, religion here serves as a mere "trick" to salvage the permanent state of injury[51] that is imposed upon occupied populations by means of secular-sovereign instruments.

Sihem's invocation of the survival of the homeless, nationless children[52] as the justification for her suicide not only rejects the notion of religious salvation, but also, in doing so, transfigures her religious trick into (non) secular action in which "the destruction of one's own body does not affect the continuity of the being."[53] Such a notion of continuity as an "excess" or "absolute expenditure"[54] produced by sacrifice is reinforced by the frame story of the novel, wherein Sihem recounts her phantom *escape* from death after blowing herself up: "in my final throes, I hear myself sob . . . 'God, if this is some horrible nightmare, let me *wake up*, and soon.'"[55] It is this very act of *waking up* from death, as it were, that sublimates Sihem's sacrifice by (re)enacting the intrasecular sublime that

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tampers with the idea of religious salvation. Moreover, in Sihem's case, the sublime is enabled by means of divine violence that ceaselessly resists the superimposition of religious or revolutionary ideologies. As the mullah from Bethlehem who endorses Sihem's suicide reassures Dr. Jafaari:

> An Islamist is a political activist. He has but one ambition: to establish a theocratic state in his country and take full advantage of its sovereignty and independence. A fundamentalist is an extremist *jihadi*. He believes neither in the sovereignty of Muslim states nor in their autonomy. In his view, these are vessel states that will be called upon to dissolve themselves and form the one, sole Caliphate. The fundamentalist dreams of single, invisible, *umma*, the great Muslim community that will extend from Indonesia to Morocco, and which, if it cannot convert the West to Islam, will subjugate or destroy it. We are not Islamists, Dr. Jaafari, and we are not fundamentalists either. We are only the children of a ravaged, despised people, fighting with whatever means we can to recover our homeland and our dignity. Nothing more, nothing less.[56]

I have quoted this passage at length not only because of its categorical distinction between jihadists, fundamentalists, and ravaged people, but for its "worldly appeal" – "from Indonesia to Morocco" – to all Muslim societies for communal bonding on the basis of objective violence, not on the basis of political ambitions guided by Caliphate or cosmopolitan visions. As in Sihem's last (and only) piece of testimony that "no child is safe if it has no country,"[57] *The Attack* could be read not only as a world literary text that sublimates the violence of the oppressed and the dispossessed, but one that boundlessly expiates the (dead) children of all nations who have no country.

My next example features a character that sets out to expiate the dead victims of the entire city of Bagdad. Set in post-invasion Iraq and inspired by a European classic – Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) is a genre-defying tale: an oddball fixer in a remote part of Baghdad collects disfigured body parts – resulting from both the invasion and the infighting– he finds in the streets. He patches them up, and a woman from the neighborhood "breathes in" life into this effigy of assorted flesh. Once the body – an allegory of the botched nation that Iraq has become – begins to regain the memory of its various parts, it embarks on a vengeance-fueled mission reminiscent of Marvel comics in the streets of Baghdad, targeting American checkpoints, hotels frequented by European guests and diplomats, the Iraqi national police, and the local insurgents. A whole host of actors – the CIA, astrologists, forensic experts, sophists, and magicians – are unleashed upon this homespun monster,

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only to learn that its appetite for violence is as insatiable as the invading force itself; once it exacts revenge that is privy to a specific body part, that part falls off the body, and a new body part can be added in its stead. In order to stay alive, the creature, which goes by the elusive name Whatsitsname, constantly needs to replace the falling body parts: "I was careful about the pieces of flesh that were used to repair my body . . . the flesh of criminals."[58] Far from the banality of evil, such self-appointed morality of the monster reaches a vexed state when it comes to its own survival. Arguably, such a "survival mode" is extendable to Iraq at large – a nation in the face of occupation – and the survival of various ethnic groups who resorted to insurgent violence to protect their respective communities against the dominant group in power (the Sunni insurgency in particular, after the fall of Saddam Hussein). In a world where life is a ghostly affair and where morality becomes extra-moral, the creature has to be attuned to the constantly changing face of violence itself: "My face changes all the time.. . . Nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going."[59] Here, not only is the violence itself unpredictable and unforeseeable, but those who carry it out against ordinary citizens are equally ineffable: "There are no innocents who are completely innocent, or criminals who are completely criminal."[60]

In the face of this disfigured state of the nation and its people, the creature itself becomes a vanguard of the vernacular world. As Saadawi remarks in an interview: "In Iraq – and many Arab and Islamic countries – there is a violent internal conflict over identity.. . . We haven't been able to create a cohesive national identity to which everyone feels they belong.. . . People cling to pure, micro-identities, but we have to accept the diversity and pluralism in ourselves, and then accept the diversity in society."[61]

Such a constellation of micro-identities and the assortment of diverse identities in itself becomes the creature's vernacular world, as opposed to the ever-expanding spatial horizons of the normative world. Given the irreconcilable hostilities of its insular world, the creature stages a ghostly conspiracy against the forces that threaten the very existence of the vernacular:

> With the help of God and heaven, I will take revenge on all criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth and there will no longer be a need to wait in agony for justice to come, in heaven or after death.. . . They have turned me into a criminal and monster, and in this way they have equated me with those I seek to exact revenge on. This is grave injustice. In fact there is a moral and humanitarian obligation to back me, to bring about justice in this world, which has been totally ravaged by greed, ambition,

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> megalomania, and insatiable bloodlust. . . . I am not asking anyone to take up arms with or to panic when you see me.[62]

Yet the creature's rhetorical claims to justice and moral rectitude, and the plot to exact vengeance by means of a ghost government – consisting of an administrative unit led by a magician, a sophist, and an enemy that resembles the structure of a sovereign state – and its call to arms do not fall prey to the "competing sovereignties" models that profess that the ultimate objective of insurgent violence is to overthrow the sovereign state. Such ideologically predisposed violence, as Benjamin holds, ceases to be divine violence by virtue of its sovereign ambitions. In the case of Whatsitsname, however, the opposite holds true: the creature denounces all sovereign ambitions by beseeching its fellow Iraqis "not to take up arms." And since the creature is the "only justice there is in this country,"[63] it also implicitly questions the possibility of "salvation being achieved at the hands of a single person":[64] "Will I fulfill the mission? I don't know, but I will at least try to set an example of vengeance."[65]

The creature's vengeance spree begins with the killing of Abu Ziadoun, who sent Daniel Tadros – the son of Elishva, who breathes life into his body when it was first assembled by the junk dealer Hadi – and many other young men off to war under the auspices of the Ba'ath Party. Though the intelligence authorities remain clueless, the killing captures the popular imagination: "Justice at some later stage wouldn't do. It had to happen now. Later there would be time for revenge, for constant torment by a just god, infinite torment, because that's how revenge should be. But justice had to be done here on earth, with witnesses present."[66]

If such imminent, responsive, and even redemptive violence is the axiom of divine violence, the vengeance that involves such violence cannot be selective or prejudiced. In other words, if the vengeance plots in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* were selectively carried out against the American soldiers or ex-Ba'athists, they would hide behind a certain ideological mask. But Whatsitsname is rather democratic in selecting its targets: American soldiers, Ba'athists, private contractors, real estate agents, insurgents, and terrorists. As the creature recounts with aplomb:

> I killed the Venezuelan mercenary in charge of the security company responsible for recruiting suicide bombers who killed many civilians. . . . I killed the al-Qaeda leader who lived in Abu Ghraib and who was responsible for the massive truck bomb in Tayaran Square that killed many people, including the person whose nose Hadi picked up off the pavement and used to fix my face.[67]

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It is not the lure of revolution, but acts of personal vengeance that forge the violent bonds, and in doing so, they remap the boundaries of vernacular worlds. The vernacular worlds here belong not only to the world of violence production but also to the world of literary production, as the act of literary translation into English in itself is entangled in the global dissemination of *dissent* and violence. Arab writers such as Sinan Antoon, who translate their own work into English, are not averse to sharing the violence thrust upon their vernacular worlds with a world readership, but they consider readers at home to be their "front row readers."[68]

If, in Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*, the intrasecular sublime manifests through the idea that death does not cease the continuity of being as the entire narrative is mediated through the eyes of the dead suicide bomber, then in *Frankenstein in Bagdad* and in *Letters from a Kurd* a curious blend of Gothic and divine sublime underpins the insurrections through, and against, the monstrous figures who embody the collective vengeance of nameless Iraqis. In the subsequent readings, namely, *The Corpse Washer* and the *The City Always Wins*, such intrasecular sublime finds a renewed expression through the dead and dead bodies that are enlivened and then pressed into the service of the insurgency.

Ennobling the Dead: Thanatopolitics in *The Corpse Washer*

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* may well have copied a page from Sihem's plea for explosive healing and Whatsitsname's obsession with collecting body parts. In the footsteps of his father, Antoon's protagonist Jawad becomes a traditional corpse washer at the *mghaysil* – the salon where corpses are ritually cleaned in the Islamic Shiite tradition. Surrounded by death, Jawad becomes one with the dead, a thanatopolitical force par excellence. Since his very being is consumed by corpses that demand his services, Jawad turns into an apparition of a being, as though he conspires with the dead to stage a ghostly insurgency against life.

Although Jawad is fully aware of the fact that his family ate and drank from "what death earned for [them],"[69] the moral burden carried over from his father's unfinished, unbridled sense of duty to the dead make him reluctantly take over the *mghaysil*. In retrospection, he sums up his experience as a corpse washer in this most caustic, if not sarcastic fashion: "I used to contribute a bit to the household expenses. The only difference now is that death is more generous, thanks to the Americans."[70]

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As Jawad begins to lose almost everyone close to his life – his father, his brother, his first love Reem, his military friend Basim, his father's assistant Hammoudy, his friend at the art school Adil, his brother-in law Sattar – at the onset of the American occupation in 2003, he decides to flee Iraq. On his flight to the Jordanian border, however, where he would be refused entry, he is grief-struck over the abandoning of not his homeland, but its corpses: "Who would wash them now?"[71]

With such unflinching preoccupation with corpses, this reading shows that the novel brings death into the realm of life as a trope of the intrasecular sublime. At the next level, the transmigration of death, or rather the enlivening of the dead, unfolds as an act of insurgency that lays bare the concealed necropolitical technologies, and the biopolitical privileges that make such death possible. This view is best illustrated through the lens of the intrasecular sublime because not only does it erase the rational distinction between life and death worlds, but, in doing so, it disrupts the secular sublime's triumph of the rational over the aesthetic, prosthetic, or even the gory. The formation of vernacular worlds in *The Corpse Washer* takes place within this thanatopolitical realm, through the very counting of, and accounting for, the dead across dying nations and sprawling necropolises. It is between life and death, between sectarian and imperial machinery, and between the Sunni and Shia rivalry that Iraq as a modern nation is being continually made and unmade.

Although I agree with Mohammad Arghavan and Katharina Motyl's reading of Antoon's work as a recuperative text that deals with the loss of life, tradition, and artistic treasures, and the necropolitical destruction of the imperial machinery,[72] I am inclined to go a step further and place the novel in the realm of thanatopolitics, which has emerged as a perennial feature of the Arabic literature of Iraq, including Hassan Blasim's *Iraqi Christ and The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories* and Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, among others. This approach goes hand-in-hand with my appreciation of Ranjana Khanna's reading of *The Corpse Washer* as a global novel in which "[t]he global is rendered as being in solidarity with the dead."[73] My reading, however, calls for a deeper probe into the interplay of eros and thanatos, and the convergence and divergence of life and death in the novel wherein, to use Khanna's words "[t]he hands that make love are also the hands that sculpt and wash the bodies of the dead on any side of the war."[74] Khanna's allusion to the novel's preoccupation with the corpses on "any side" of the war lends itself to my reading of Jawad's solidarity with the dead as vernacular bonds forged by peripheral violence. Though such vernacular bonds here do not necessarily refer to

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national unity, by exposing the imperialist disruption of sectarian bonds, they invite an affective yet elegiac solidarity with what is left of Iraq – a sophisticated nation that it once was, and the cradle of human civilization as it was known.

As if inverting Kafka's allegorical penal colony in which the punishment of the crime is written by a death machine on the body of the condemned, in *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon effectively paints Baghdad as a thanatopolis – a death colony – in which, apropos Khanna's reference to one and the same hand that sculpts life and cleanses the dead, it is a human hand, instead of a machine, that seals the fate of the dead. Antoon's injection of life into the world of corpses cultivates space for the formation of an intrasecular subject of the sublime, which may be best described in Kafka's own words:

> Anyone who cannot cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate . . . but with his other hand he can jot down what he sees among the ruins, for he sees different and more things than the others; after all, he is dead in his own lifetime and the real survivor.[75]

Almost as if heeding Kafka's words, the entire narrative of *The Corpse Washer* springs to life by "jotting down" what Jawad sees among the ruins of life and the reign of death: "Corpses begin to wash one another and others stand in line around the bench awaiting their turns. Their numbers multiply and they fill the entire *mghaysil*, leaving no place for me."[76] The allegory here could not be more forceful than the dead literally jettisoning Jawad from the realm of life by colonizing the physical space of the *mghaysil*. But such are Jawad's nightmares, replete with sensory metaphors, smells, and touches that erase the distinction between dream and reality, life and death, reason and the sublime.

Death and dead bodies come into play in the European conception of the sublime through the French Revolution and the subsequent birth of the European Enlightenment, which sought to relegate such terrors of death and dying to the aesthetic realm, as inflected in the Hegelian axiom that the subject's freedom could be attained through an absolute knowledge of death. If we were to put this notion into practice, according to Georges Bataille, the subject "would have to die, but he would have to do it while living watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become self-consciousness of itself."[77] Although Bataille's formulation of death as an absolute expenditure – as if nothing is in there, nothing to be gained, and no knowledge to be extracted from it – forms the basis for Achille Mbembe's thesis on necropolitics, that is, the sovereign's ability to control, organize, or even commission death, my reading of the intrasecular sublime places the

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possibility of a postcolonial subject "living – watching himself ceasing to be"[78] in the realm of thanatopolitics.

If classical biopower could be defined as the sovereign's right to 'take life or let live,' then modern biopower is conceived as "the power to *make* live and let die"[79] In such biopower, no one is actively killed – as in Amartya Sen's notion of violence or death by omission, not by commission[80] – but by privileging certain forms, classes, groups, or geographies of life, death is passively cultivated. Achille Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics focuses on death's side of biopolitics, namely, the sovereign tactics, technologies, and ideologies that enable "the condition for the acceptability of putting to death,"[81] with an emphasis on two supplementary concepts: the state of siege, in which entire populations are subject to technological occupation, and the state of injury, in which the besieged lives are reduced to a form of "death-in-life."[82] In contradistinction to this, my understanding of thanatopolitics begins with the very uses of death and dead bodies in political discourses.

Yet the sovereign technologies, be they biopolitics or necropolitics, offer an insufficient understanding of death, for they are preoccupied with the point of erasure between life and death, the point at which the sovereign recognizes life, or death, as something of value, and withholds that recognition.[83] For Agamben, it is through the production of corpses itself, rather than the secession of life, in Auschwitz and elsewhere, that death is hidden from view. Thanatopolitics, in this sense, is the politics of corpses that embody hidden deaths, "whose decease is debased into a matter of serial production."[84] Necropolitical technologies aid this process by transforming a "human body from a living state to a dead state without any acknowledgement of death or dying taking place."[85]

However, my reading here postulates that the concealment of death by necropolitical facilities, such as the American war machine or the ethnic rivalries unleashed by sectarianism, is challenged by Jawad's re-cognizing, touching, washing, counting, and thus *ennobling* death and the dead. In doing so, *The Corpse Washer* unconceals the production as well as the endless streaming and supply of dead bodies. In essence, the entire vocation of corpse washing is carefully plotted to unveil bare death, and even bare flesh unworthy of remembrance, by virtue of its cohabitation with life. Consider, for instance, the treatment of a nameless head that Jawad receives at the *mghaysil*:

> "We have a dead man we want to wash and shroud," he said.
> "Sure. Where is the corpse?" I asked. . .

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> The older man extended the hand holding the black bag and said in a trembling voice: "We have only the head."...
> I had washed a corpse with its severed head a few months ago, but this was the first time I got a head by itself.[86]

> I washed and scrubbed every part carefully from the forehead all the way to the neck, as Mahdi poured the water. A few clots of dried blood fell off the neck. I turned the head to the other side and repeated the scrubbing. As usual, we washed it once more with camphor and then with water alone. I dried it and put cotton in the nostrils and a lot of cotton around the neck, but it kept falling off. I decided to hold it in place later with a cloth.[87]

This passage is striking not only for its moving detail, but for the ritual significance placed in a lifeless head as though it was no less than a full corpse, and the affective power vested in the corpse washer's gesture to treat an incomplete body with a proper label: "severed head."[88] It is not merely the naming but the unconcealing of the very circumstances – the necropolitical technologies – of *its making* that enlivens the dead. A random kidnapping gang buoyed by sectarian violence abducts an engineer – the severed head – and demands ransom from the family to deliver the other part of the body. The family caves in and arranges the money that they do not have, but the kidnappers never deliver the rest of the body as if to punish their sectarian bête noire. Here, the abduction itself unfolds deep within the thanatopolitical realm, for the kidnappers in question do not leverage life in exchange of money but leverage death, or rather *a part of the dead*, in exchange for power and dominance.

As noted earlier, naming, acknowledging, and ennobling the dead is a perennial theme of *The Corpse Washer*. To achieve this, Antoon revolutionizes the form by presenting a terse alternating chapter with a focalizer, a dream sequence turning into a nightmare, or a soliloquy that remains disjointed from the narrative proper, which nonetheless conjoins the world of the dead with that of the world of the *mghaysil*. Consider, for instance, the dream sequence of the opening chapter:

> If death is a postman, then I receive his letters every day. I am the one who opens carefully the bloodied and torn envelopes. I am the one who washes them, who removes the stamps of death and dries and perfumes them, mumbling what I don't entirely believe in. Then I wrap them carefully in white so they may reach their final reader – the grave.[89]

As if delivering the corpses from an addresser to an addressee, the dead formulated in the manner of the above metalepsis not only are renamed, but their fates are unsealed by the "torn" envelopes. With their "stamp of

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death" removed, perfumed, and wrapped in new clothes, they are en*livened* for one last time before they are sent to the allegorical reader – their final destination – as though the dead were a text to be decoded and read. This figurative allusion of en*livening* the dead, and the trajectory of the liminal sublime between life and death in *The Corpse Washer*, functions more as "the slow effects of the nuclear rather than the sublime horror of the idea of immediate annihilation that characterizes the nuclear apocalyptic imaginary."[90]

Such "slow effects of the nuclear" are built into the formal structure of the novel itself, which places life and death in the same level playing field, with each alternating chapter dedicated to Jawad's ghostly discourse(s) with the dead. Perhaps the most unexpected passage that dwells on the phenomenological equation between life and death is his epiphany that his very life is made possible by the death of others: "What has really changed? Weren't things the same when my father was the provider? Didn't I eat and drink what death earned for us, one way or another?"[91] Fed by death, provided by death, and co-habited by death, Jawad's life and vocation attain meaning only in the presence of the dead. In effect, he becomes *one with* the dead when the corpses do not cease to flow into the *mghaysil*: "I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other."[92] Jawad remains faithful to this metaphor of mutual-sculpting by reaching out to his dead father:

> You said, "Have you forgotten that we are in the underworld, my son, and the sun doesn't rise here?"...
> I asked you: "Are we alive or dead, father?"
> You didn't answer and blew out your candle and mine died too.[93]

Reminiscent of the exchange between the dead underground Angels and the overground humans in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, Jawad's consolidation of life and death takes such extreme turns that it cannot be grasped by the relational gamut of the secular sublime. On more than one occasion, Jawad's efforts to escape from the visitations of the dead – be it Reem or his father – have the unintended effect of him being transported into the world of the dead in full daylight. In one of his dream sequences, Jawad recounts: "I am washing the corpse of a skinny old man with white hair and a wrinkly face and forehead. My mind wanders. The man opens his eyes, shakes his head, and tries to get up. The small bowl falls from my hand and I retreat from the bench in fear."[94] On another occasion, when working on a corpse brought in from a sectarian killing, he is taken aback

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by an ominous sense of déjà vu: "I've already seen him dead in my own arms once before."[95] Like an archeologist of thanatos, this sectarian death tugs at the memory of his dead comrade, Basim – a lookalike of the corpse in front of him – from his military days: "Here I am washing a dead man's body while my thoughts are wandering in the fissures of my memory."[96] The fissures of memory between dream and reality, now and the bygone, are laid bare when Jawad recalls a moment when Basim muses about fish from a *cold* lake while the former washes the corpse with *cold* water. Each ritualistic gesture for the dead takes him closer to the death of Basim: "I put a swab of cotton into the hole the bullet had bored in the man's forehead and another swab into his nostrils. I had already put swabs between his buttocks and inside his anus. I prepared to shroud him."[97]

In the novel, by formally distinguishing the above description of the ritualistic act from the text proper by the use of paragraph breaks, the narrator Jawad accounts for the unaccounted death of Basim through the corpse in front of him, which serves as a conduit between life and death. Here, the death of both Iraqi subjects is connected to the American invasion; Basim was killed in a carpet-bombing campaign during the first Gulf War, and the corpse before him is a victim of sectarian violence in American-occupied Iraq. Jawad's subsequent probing of the grotesque nature of the violence in occupied Iraq – in a conversation with his father's friend and a soldier, Sayyid Jamal al-Fartusi – paints a vivid picture of the necropolitical campaign of the American forces shortly after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Just as in Achille Mbembe's notion of state of siege wherein an infrastructural warfare is waged upon the weaker enemy – destroying "bridges, railroads, highways, communications"[98] – Sayyid Jamal al-Fartusi recounts his gruesome ordeal of how the Americans cut off all communications in and around Basra, and started shooting every moving object on the highway: "We ran like mad dogs for more than two hours without turning back. Musa's decision to abandon the highway saved our lives . . . I could never forget the smell or the sight of stray dogs devouring soldiers' bodies near Basra." [99]

Despite their abject fate, even the mere acknowledgment of the dog's meal of Iraqi bodies becomes charged with thanatopolitics that haunts the living and those who survived: "Weeks after I returned, the nightmares started. I would see six or seven dogs tearing apart corpses, and whenever I tried to pick up a rock to throw it at them, it turned to dust."[100] Such thanatopolitics in *The Corpse Washer* is tantamount to insurgency, not only because it resurrects and even restitutes the dead into a living presence, but also because it exposes the circumstances of their death,

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which are otherwise concealed by necropolitical technologies. This insurgent mode in Antoon's novel is sustained by the construction of a vernacular world wherein affective bonds are drawn by lamenting, documenting, archiving, and cleansing the vestiges of human destruction of a destroyed nation. Although Jawad despises the sectarian violence internal to Iraq as much as he does the American invasion, he is not fully averse to championing a national cause or invoking the mythic unity of Iraq in the face of destruction, particularly the public looting of books, libraries, and art treasures while the Americans stand by and watch. In an exchange with his uncle Sabri, Jawad expresses his disenchantment at the lack of a civic sense among his fellow Iraqis:

> I said that Europeans don't destroy museums and national libraries.
> "True," he said, "but Europeans were never subject to an embargo which starved them and took them back a hundred years. They didn't have a dictator who put his name on everything so that there was no longer any difference between public property and him."
> "Didn't they have Hitler?" I said.
> He said the Americans hadn't supported Hitler the way they had Saddam.. . .[101]

Evidently, Uncle Sabri's sense of world-making runs along traditional nationalist lines (although he, too, despises the sectarianism that has torn his country apart), and he shows no tolerance for foreign invasions and imperial ambitions:

> "We entered Iraq at dawn and it was a painful sight. The man welcoming me back to my country after all these years of wandering and exile was an American soldier who told me: 'Welcome to Iraq!' Can you imagine?" He said that the soldier had written his own name, "William," in Arabic on his helmet. "I told him: This is *my* country."[102]

In Uncle Sabri's vernacular world, inasmuch as Iraq is *his* country, the sectarianism is also the problem of *his* people; it is not up to the Americans or Europeans to endorse the dictators of his country when they like, and liberate the country when they do not, and dictate the fate of its people through sanctions that do not apply to the rest of the world. For Jawad, the sectarianism is no lesser evil than the invasion: "We'd thought the value of human life had reached rock-bottom under the dictatorship and that it would now rebound, but the opposite happened."[103] Holding sectarian violence responsible – which was reignited by the American invasion – Jawad catches himself off-guard invoking his own insurgent solution:

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> I had come to a point where I hated everyone equally, Shiites and Sunnis alike. All these words were suffocating me: Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Jew, Mandaean, Yazidi, infidel. If only I could erase them all or plant mines in language itself and detonate them. But here I was, slipping into the very same language of bombing and slaughter.[104]

In Jawad's world, then, an enchanted solidarity for Iraq and a disenchanted solidarity for sectarian killings emerge as the two counterweighting forces that culminate in his performative critique of thanatopolitics. Correspondingly, Ranjana Khanna reads *The Corpse Washer* as a global novel not only because of the travels of Jawad's uncle through Cyprus, Aden, Yemen, or Beirut (which are directly and indirectly shaped by Anglophone colonial heritage) before being granted asylum in Germany, but also because "[t]hrough touch we see a move beyond sectarian affiliation and documentary evidence to a world of dreams and shadowy figures, which nonetheless reaches beyond the particular and the local into some attempt to figure a theory of death."[105]

Indeed, although *The Corpse Washer* is replete with references to global artists and international Marxists (Trotsky, Lenin, Gramsci, Rembrandt, Miró, Picasso, and, more importantly, his hero Giacometti),[106] it is in the peripheral worlds that Jawad's imagination unfolds, as expressed in the poignant vernacular personification of the pomegranate tree, the original Arabic title of the novel: "I am like the pomegranate tree, but all my branches have been cut, broken, and buried with the dead. My heart has become a shriveled pomegranate beating with death and falling every second into a bottomless pit."[107] Like the pomegranate tree, Jawad is a rooted and a vernacular citizen of the world, who is nurtured by the bloody water streaming down from the washed corpses. This view is reinforced – albeit inversely – by the dissolving of Giacometti's statue in Jawad's dream into tiny fragments, which functions as an allegorical reminder of the failures of both the global and the worldly forces in rebuilding a fragmented nation. Consider, then, Jawad's vernacular solidarity: even as he attempts to feel Iraq, all he can think of is the piling up of the unwashed bodies in the streets of Bagdad: "Who would wash them now?"[108] In *The Corpse Washer*, it is this unflinching ethical obligation to the dead and the dismembered that becomes a passage to a liminal sublime, one that also refutes the secular sublime's arrogation of death from Hegel to Kant and beyond. By tossing life and death into one, Jawad becomes what Tom McCarthy would call a necronaut,[109] one who not only befriends death but navigates its cosmos, as though it is a lifelike world to be grasped, a

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Bataillean excess of life whose expenditure – the Iraqi corpses – should be counted and be accounted for.

Globe versus World: Necropolitics and Thanatopolitics in *The City Always Wins*

Omar Robert Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* chronicles the Egyptian revolution of 2010–2012, as witnessed through the eyes of the American Egyptian protagonist, Khalil, his girlfriend Mariam, and Hafez, a diasporic returnee from London. As advocates of revolution, they run and operate the *Chaos* magazine – a combination of website and podcast: Raina is the interview specialist, Khalil looks after the recording and editing, and Rosa creates and curates the content.[110] The lives of these characters course through three failed revolutions: the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the hijacking of the revolution by the Muslim Brotherhood and their president Mohamed Morsi, and the overthrow of Morsi by Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi in 2013. The reportage-like narration, with its plotless story and penchant for graphic accounts of violence, culminates in an arresting tale suspended "between life and death" worlds.[111] Commenting on its macabre style, Claire Chambers writes:

> Hamilton leaves us with two glimmers of sanguinity after all the horror. The first is an image of bats as the reincarnation of the fallen rebels who were martyred in the Eighteen Days and their aftermath. And second Khalil spots a small marker of their protest which is not dead but has for now vanished underground.. . . Because bats move through sound using the "sonic perfection" of echolocation (Hamilton 2017, 303), this trope makes readers think of the political reverberations still sounding from the martyrs' deaths. The revolutionists use these political echoes as a way to guide them when there appear no chinks of light. Hamilton undermines that well-worn metaphor of illumination representing moral goodness and enlightenment.[112]

Chambers's allusion to the animal symbolism, the haunting presence of death, and the critique of Enlightenment morality serves as a befitting entry point to the reading of thanatopolitics, alongside the vernacular and intra-secular sublime in the novel. Consider, for instance, another example of symbolic mediation in the novel, wherein the omniscient narrator caught in the throes of the twice-defeated revolution – first by Morsi, and then by the military leader el-Sisi – finds a sense of solace in the world of animals:

> The African wild dog has the highest kill rate of any animal. The wild dog hunts antelope in broad daylight. It is not faster or stronger than the antelope. It can't run farther. But it has a plan and doesn't question it.

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> The pack fans out – quickly – flanking the deer, forcing it left, then right, then left again, wearing it down with a deadly geometry. Soon the antelope is exhausted. Soon it is dead. The wild dog hunts mathematically. It has a plan. It doesn't question it.... If the deer could hold a straight line, it would get away. The deer is faster. But it is hard – impossible, maybe – in the thicket.[113]

If we take the African wild dogs for local predators, the domestic North African, Egyptian elite who work as a pack just as the loyalists of Mubarak, the Muslim brotherhood, the conservative exiles, and the army, then the deer stands for the Arab Spring, the twice-failed revolution, the ultimate victim of the dog hunt. Like the revolution itself, the deer did not run a straight line hence fell prey to its predators – the wild dogs of the war machine. If the deer had run in a straight line, that would have been truly revolutionary. But in doing so, it would have had to risk being attacked by the pack that stands guard, by design, in that very straight line, precisely for that moment: to sink their teeth into the running deer for the prized cut of flesh. If the deer did *not* run the straight line and decided to give up, it would of course be eaten alive, again by design: "The wild dog hunts mathematically, it hunts with a system."[114]

The City Always Wins lays bare this almost mathematical system – enacted by the necropolitical infrastructure at work, one that Boehmer and Davies term "planned violence" – hidden from the purview of the deer, the proverbial victims of the Egyptian revolution, the citizen-insurgents.[115] The novel situates itself, by virtue of its plotless, testimonial-like, journalistic fiction, as an exercise in unconcealing the necropolitical infrastructure that chokes the protestors in the street and, more importantly, counting and accounting for the victims of such technologies at work. In the process, a probing eye for the traces of the dead, a piercing attention to the identity, circumstances, and conditions of the dead and their loved ones imposes itself as a thanatopolitical discourse and, by extension, as a critique of sovereign necropolitical technologies in the novel. Although, unlike Sinan Antoon's novel, the narrative does not necessarily forge a formal diegesis between living and dead, it resonates with Antoon's ethical gesture of naming and ennobling the dead:

> Iman, whose heart slowly failed and died locked in Gaza. Haneen, Ali, Husam, Anwar, Mustafa and Islam and Khaled and Essam and Toussi more and more and more than can ever be named but you must hold them in your head and keep their faces next to you at night and hold and hold to give them some sliver, not of justice but at least of memorial.[116]

The experimental form itself allows for the presence of the dead, scattered throughout the novel, to haunt the novel's temporal plotlines deliberately

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marked to suggest a reverse chronology of what is otherwise a chronological progression of events and times: the section "Tomorrow" is followed by "Today," and then by "Yesterday," unsettling the "linear progression" of both trauma in the novel, if not blocking "its unfolding altogether."[117] The cohabitation of trauma in the guise of the phantom deaths within the formal structure of the novel opens space for a reading of the vernacular sublime. To begin with the form itself, the narrative voice, the perspective, and the focalization disrupt the secular sublime's rational pact between life, death, and reason. Consider the following musings of the narrator:

> **November 22, 2011**
> **5:21 a.m.**. . .
>
> We were too slow and now they've made their deal with the Brotherhood and all we have is rocks. The Brotherhood keeps the peace and the army keeps their bank accounts. The elections are upon us, the trap is set. They think elections can end the revolution? They think that's all it takes. Khalil is thinking about voting. How can he even think about it? What is he thinking? What are we supposed to do – pack up in the morgue and quietly file into the polling station? That's what this is for? That's what this death is for? To be forgotten with a ballot?[118]

With the use of the plural pronoun, the narrative invokes the collective resistance, then dissolves into the voices of dead subjects in the morgue, whose deaths, it seems, attain meaning only when they collectively march toward the polling station and complete the revolution. The opening of the novel itself embarks on this quest for redemptive justice through the optics of the dead, when Mariam, one of the lead protagonists, beseeches the loved ones of the dead not to bury their bodies because they are evidence of a crime, and therefore could be used as instruments of justice.[119] This is also the central tenet of thanatopolitics, which asks:

> how might those deaths – collateral damages, negative externalities, opportunity costs – productively disaffirm the regime of a neoliberal biopolitics that condemns to death? How might those deaths rise up, and haunt, the spaces of biopolitical production, to critically disaffirm the ways in which biopolitics not only occasions but also tolerates a certain threshold of death as its modus operandi?[120]

As we already glimpsed, the rising up of the dead to haunt biopolitical production is an endemic feature of *The City Always Wins*. The biopolitical threshold of certain necessary deaths returns in the form of the living-dead novel, as if harking back to all life, as voiced by the angry narrator at the

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onset of the failed revolution: "This is the miserable power you want to cling to? Your slave army to work your factories and fields on conscription, your pasta production and air-conditioning units and men's clubs and salmon-pink walls? This is what you'll go to war against your own people for?"[121] If that is not enough, the narrator's rage turns inward:

> We, the unjailed, the unkilled pass the bottle, light a joint, fuck the pain away all faces warped and animal and older, desperate, lonelier now, now *we* are the zombies, the failures, the ones who grow fat on the land and send kids to die at the front and cry tears for the cameras while we drink on their graves. We are the ones who can choose when to play and when to quit. The ones who said it could all be so easy. Us. We are the ones.[122]

It is thus by holding the living accountable, for they have the privilege to "choose when to play and when to quit," that the dead come to haunt the biopolitical sphere of the novel. This very absent presence of death in the narrative world, just as in Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, brings forth the hidden necropolitical infrastructures that produce death in the first place. This technique is echoed at the level of form, wherein life and death are interspersed throughout the novel with the same propensity and intensity, occupying significant amount of space in the text, as news items; chronological time stamps; indented and italicized text suggestive of the narrator's musings or internal voice; monologues and soliloquies suspended between the protagonists' and the narrator's perspective. Consider, for instance, the layout of the text itself:

> Confirmed one Ahly supporter has died in the dressing room
> 5:53 PM–1 Feb 2012
> News coming in of three people dead at Ahly match in Port Said.
> Tens wounded.
> 6:07 PM–1 Feb 2012[123]

Just as the recoding of the deaths is prominent in this punctuated projection, the thematic division of the novel into three disruptive parts, rather than intersecting streams, also serves a similar purpose. While the first two sections of the novel – "Tomorrow" and "Today" – consist of event-based headings such as "REVOLUTION ANNIVERSARY" followed by accounts of lived struggles, the third section, "Yesterday," takes a commemorative turn in which the calendrical subheadings are replaced exclusively by the names of the parents who have lost their children in the two failed revolutions: "ABU RAMADAN," "UMM AYAMAN," and "ABU BASSEM."[124] The consolidation of these formal divisions, that is, the account of lived events and dead children, into a single narrative

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formatively reconfigures the relationship between bios and thanatos, in which the dead will have the final say – or so Mariam believes: "I dreamt we're all dead. And we're living in hell. We just don't know it yet."[125] In a desperate yet intimate effort to compensate for the dead of the failed revolution, Khalil muses that "there is a black hole in the center of our lives . . . A thousand deaths live on television. And none of them us. And who are we, if not the ones fighting, not the ones dying? Should we have been ready to die for our enemies? Did we do this?"[126]

This sublime encounter with death as a place of cohabitation – a porous "black hole" through one's being through which one could arrive at death, is played out in the most unassuming ways. Following the brutal killing of one of their dear comrades, Hafez, the narrator launches into a ghostly dialogue with the dead in free indirect speech:

> Are you here with me or trapped in an in-between world? What do you want us to do? Everyone should make a list for if they come to this. I know I'd only want the people very closest to be allowed in. I'd want to be touched. I'd want the ventilator to be on the left-hand side so my right was where people sat, because if you could move anything it would be your right hand. I'd not want my feet touched. Or visible. I'd want my nails cut. I'd want to listen to music for two hours a day, classical music. Nothing with words. I'd like a woman's hand to press on my forehead, to stroke my hair occasionally. I'd like to not feel alone.[127]

In this sublime anticipation or, rather, invitation of death – "if they come to this" – the narrator's infusion of the first person, second person, and sensory experiences like touch, vision, and hearing that are otherwise extraneous to the dead brings life and death to an even keel. Moreover, the personification of Hafez's death by Khalil, the narrator – just like Sihem's sublime embodiment of death in *The Attack* – is taken to another level in a synesthetic description of a dream about multiple deaths where no dead bodies are to be found:

> The bullet hole is breathing, sighing, and I'm touching it and it is not cool to the touch but warm and it is not breathing but bleeding and when I pull my hand away it is dripping red and all the other bullet holes are sighing out little breaths of blood and the green paint above me is fracturing and dripping and a flood is gathering, spreading out like a thunderstorm across the mosque's vaulted sky above. This is the place. This is my name. This is the end. It has happened, at last.[128]

If blood could ooze out of a bullet hole, then every bullet has a story to tell. In an almost irrealist description of the passage cited above, the bullet holes are synthetically enlivened by virtue of anthropomorphic attribution – of

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sensory smells, touch, sign, the sonic, and so forth. In doing so, the bullet holes themselves are charged with an affective insurgency by exhuming the absent bodies through whose flesh and bones the holes were bored. Walls and barricades are perhaps the most common, yet effective infrastructural traps laid out by modern sovereign powers to unleash controlled violence upon their subjects. In what Mbembe calls a "state of siege," an arm of necropolitical technologies, the civilian populations are reduced to the status of an enemy by "bulldozing: demolishing houses and cities."[129] In the first two sections of the novel, *Chaos* magazine works exclusively to document these states of siege in Cairo. Tahrir Square is the setting for action, which traps the protestors as the army, along with doctors from the Muslim Brotherhood, gradually infiltrates the space with the ever-increasing presence of cranes and trucks trying to "push the crowd down Mohamed Mahmoud Street"[130] in order to protect the Ministry of the Interior:

> "Go back to the square. The revolution is in the square! The army has put this wall up for your own safety! Go, you can safely protest in Tahrir! Go back to the square. The revolution is in the square! The revolution is in the square!"
> Some people shuffle back toward Tahrir.
> A voice shouts out: "What do you mean, in the square? What the fuck kind of revolution happens in a square, you assholes!?" [131]

After the fall of Mubarak, the army chokes Cairo's infrastructural grid with "new walls cross-hatching the city, a cement hamster-run on a city scale to keep the constant protests away from the government's buildings."[132] By imposing what Mbembe calls "vertical sovereignty,"[133] via Eyal Weizman's "politics of verticality," necropolitics "operates through schemes of over- and underpasses, a separation of the airspace from the ground."[134] In a paradigm shift from the conventional occupation of land to airspace and radio waves, vertical occupation involves "jamming electronic communications; digging up roads; destroying electricity transformers; tearing up airport runways."[135] This holds true for el-Sisi's hijacking of Morsi's revolution, whereby necropolitical technologies take to the skies: the protestors find Tahrir Square suddenly lit by floodlights hanging from hotel balconies, accompanied by auto-zoom focus cameras. The TV anchor covering the Square announces proudly that "it is the corrective revolution to restore us to the path of January twenty-fifth. Therefore, we have floodlit it for your viewing pleasure."[136] The *Chaos* magazine crew is quick to expose that this corrective revolution under the floodlights, or

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rather the flood of lights, is no more than an elaborate trap of el-Sisi's surveillance machine. Befitting of Mbembe's and Weizman's descriptions of vertical sovereignty as occupation of the subterranean topography through the air, Khalil bears witness to a Cairo that has been turned into a necropolis par excellence:

> I walk the streets, through our city and theirs, the city of the dead and the living, the city of the living and their overlords, the city of the state that cuts through us without regard, its shadow network of prisons and dungeons and police barracks connected through the constant invisible motion of opaque vehicles and watchful patriots and radio waves.. . . The lower world has swallowed the upper. Now the honorable citizens of the city spray-paint out the eyes of our dead. We walk each day among their desecrated memorials. Our lives are a desecrated memorial.[137]

A network of "dungeons," "radio waves," and "floodlights," cameras, as it were, haunt the footsteps of the city; not to record the lives in the city but to conceal the signs of the dead, "to spray-paint out the eyes of our dead." Against this, the *Chaos* magazine crew's guerrilla flânerie through the streets of Cairo, armed with their own cameras, mobile data, and social media feeds, imposes itself more like a procession of gravediggers through the ruins of a necropolis to assemble the fragments of the dead. In walking with the dead, the live witnesses themselves become one with the dead like "desecrated memorials." For Mbembe, the ultimate aim of a state of siege is to reduce the civil population to the state of injury, in which besieged populations are conferred the status of "living dead"[138] – a condition most vividly imagined by Mariam under el-Sisi's regime:

> Snipers will start picking us off. The police will plant a bomb to turn everyone against one another. The Brotherhood will plant a bomb to scare off the next protests. The army will plant a bomb so they can restore order. The feloul [an alliance of political parties formed to defeat Morsi] will plant a bomb to force the army to intervene. The Israelis will plant a bomb to start a civil war. The police will plant a bomb for the bloodsport.. . . Can you hide under a dead body? Can you close your eyes and lie still for hours while the last life bleeds out of the stranger on top of you?[139]

The arresting imagery of taking shelter under a bleeding dead body, or being drowned by the blood of the dead in order to stay alive, not only brings life and death to the ambit of the intrasecular sublime, but also offers a unique metonymical rendition of modern necropolitics: reducing groups of populations to the status of "living dead." This unconcealing of necropolitical technologies through the elucidation of thanatopolitics unfolds deep within the intersections of global geopolitics and vernacular

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worlds. To begin with, *The City Always Wins* is among the few post-Arab Spring Anglophone novels that exclusively deals with the post-literary movement led by social media such as YouTube, Twitter (now X), or guerrilla technologies. Not only in terms of formal elements, the novel treats the Arab Spring itself as a "hashtag revolution" that is simultaneously real and one that is staged for, and to some extent staged by, global geopolitics.

If the idea of globe is a heuristic one, constituted as the negotiation of unequal forces and divisions as reflected in the existing conditions, then the meaning of the term "world" remains very much a conceptual, if not aspirational abstraction, with a capacity to carve out an ideology; be it the utopian journey or the sublime zone of politics and culture in which common shared ideas of being human could be dreamed, envisioned, and cultivated locally and, more importantly, vernacularly. The idea of insurgency, rebellion, and resistance plays a vital role in this critical yet convulsed formulation of oneness and universalism of the "world," and inequalities of the "globe."

Unlike Antoon's portrayal of Baghdad as a disappearing and dissipating dream in *The Corpse Washer*, Hamilton emphasizes the contrapuntal, at times contradictory facets of Cairo. He posits Cairo in the wake of the Arab Spring at the center of the world and elevates Tahrir Square to a metonymy of revolution: "Tahrir is everywhere, the bonds forged, the lessons learned an unstoppable floodplain of possibility."[140] In the opening chapter, Khalil proudly invokes Obama's Tweet "'WE MUST EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN TO BECOME LIKE YOUNG EGYPTIAN PEOPLE'—BARACK OBAMA,"[141] and in the last chapter a radio voice echoes Obama: "*There probably isn't a more important country – strategically – in the whole world right now. Look at us, Egypt is at the center of everything. You only have to look at a map. Look at it! Go on.*"[142] Notwithstanding the presumed geographical centrality of Egypt, besides its strategic centrality at the onset of the revolution, Khalil immediately denounces the hollow ethnocentrism of these celebrations: "Egypt has become an island floating away from reality. A madhouse, and we're all locked in together."[143] Khalil's censure of the inequalities of global geopolitics operates as a silent insurgent current within the narrative, and as such, it gestures toward not merely the Egyptian but also the global necropolitical infrastructures at work. During the early stages of the protest, for instance, Khalil recounts a man breaking out of the crowd at Tahrir, holding a tear gas canister in front of Hafez: "Photograph these, sir! It says *Made in America*, right?

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Nothing's changed!"[144] Khalil's critique of the Americans also goes to crux of global capitalism:

> [T]he army wants your land and the British want your oil and the Italians want your gas and the Americans want your airspace and your canal and your complicity and the Turks want your factories and the Australians want your gold and the Gulf wants your sweat and the Russians want your weather and the Israelis want your name so there's nothing left for you but to be gone.[145]

The use of polysyndeton in the passage above, which continues even after the quoted passage, avails itself as a chain of necropolitical technologies leaving Egypt in a state of injury. Tactical guerrilla resistance – though not always in the traditional sense of armed insurgency – through persistence and perseverance are touted as an effective antidote to these invisible necropolitical infrastructures, despite the doubly failed revolution, despite the corrective revolution, as Mariam boasts, with a tinge of irony and pride befitting an anarchist:

> They can't keep up with us, an army of Samsungs, Twitters, HTCs, emails, Facebook events, private groups, iPhones, phone calls, text messages all adjusting one another's movements millions of times each second. An army of infinite mobility – impossible to outmaneuver.. . . How can they control us when, at last, we can all see one another, talk to one another, plan together? First in Arabic and then the rest of the world in English. Empire sows the seeds of its own defeat.[146]

Sure enough, during the first phase of the revolution against Mubarak, Chaos organizers inject their own infrastructural insurgency into the protest: procuring medical supplies, masks and "protest kits" from unauthorized sources, setting up a group called "injured-for-the-revolution,"[147] and sending volunteers in the protesting crowd to treat the protestors. During el-Sisi's reign, however, their view and tactics turn more radical than infiltrating or aiding a crowd, as digital guerrilla tactics evolve into a vision of full-blown guerrilla insurgency:

> Will we go on chattering forever in our digital echo chambers as Facebook throws up algorithmic borders around us uncrossable as the Berlin Wall[?]. . . No, you need a plan and you need patience and you need to meet their violence with your own. You can overwhelm them with numbers or you can kill them with precision. One unit, maybe that's all it would have taken.[148]

It is in envisioned dreams of redemptive violence as a solution that the notion of world-making, against the hierarchies and inequalities set in motion by the "worlding" of markets, capital, and movement of goods – to

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say nothing of arms, bombs, and sanctions that enable the imposition of necropolitical technologies – finds renewed significance. In Hannah Arendt's view of *Weltentfremdung*, the global dissemination of capital, and its capacity to break down time and labor into small units of production, has been primarily responsible for the destruction of the public sphere or world-making.[149] Such destruction is aptly registered by Khalil, who sarcastically remarks that they will "bring you war" first and then peace and conflict-resolution packages, followed by "interfaith dialogue and the United Nations and credit lines."[150] Posed this way, in what is essentially an "Ununited Nations" of the *worlded* world, Khalil's sarcasm turns into an inward-gazing cynicism and pessimism, as he goes on to ruminate on the failed revolutions of the entire Global South on account of global necropolitics: "bodies dropping of planes into the sea, blunt machetes going house to house. Argentina, Chile, Algeria, Indonesia. It is our turn now.. . . It's coming for us all."[151] On the ill-fated ossification of global divisions, Khalil further goes on to reflect that

> the world is made. Countries are developed and others are not and so it shall be. A system is in place of such dominion there can be no imagining another.. . . Look around you. There is no other world. There can be no other way. Surrender. There is only the now. Whisper it to your children at night. It would be better for them to accept it.[152]

Fittingly, having invoked South-South solidarity,[153] Khalil further retreats into a vernacular world rather than turning outward to the global ensemble of nations and power structures to reconstitute a new world:

> A rotten carcass of a donkey floats down the river. Close the land, the land is radioactive, come back in a hundred years. There's no music here, not anymore, there is only noise, the whispers of conspiracy and raspings of harassment and the trumpet of fascism. All informants, watching. I remember some shadow of a time when I would walk down a street with my eyes ecstatic over every detail, every possibility for the future, but all I see now are soulless strip lights and dying animals and cracked windows in crumbling buildings and inescapable memories that make up this sulfuric city of our dead, our metrocropolis of failure.[154]

Here, if Egypt is the allegorical rotten carcass of a donkey, then extraordinary acts of world-making take place within this "metrocropolis of failure" precisely because they still allow for the postmortem of the carcass and the dissection of a global event, namely, the Egyptian revolution, from a vernacular world. These thanatopolitical meditations, as this reading has demonstrated, serve as ailments to this diagnosed disease through which new possibilities of world-making from within the Egyptian soil may

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emerge. This is indeed the conceptual genesis of Arendt's notion of natality; that is, in the face of mortality, death, and destruction, it is through the force of life with which human beings enter this world that something new may emerge. It may be useful to be reminded of Pheng Cheah's reading of world-making through Arendt as a novelty "quasi-spiritualist" notion as temporality that invites us to think against a commodified and abstracted time – a "spiritual commerce" in Goethe's words.[155] However utopic it may be, such sense of world-making envisions a stable world that outlives our mortality: "Through the activities of speech, action, memory, and the reification of real stories, we create and maintain a subjective in-between that gives our existence permanence and durability."[156]

Khalil's pronouncement of Cairo as "this sulfuric city of our dead" becomes replete with the tropes of the intrasecular sublime, wherein he warns the others to stay away from the city until it is sequestered, quarantined, and purified of its putrid disease by means of thanatopolitics: sorting, naming, cleaning, clearing, counting, and accounting for its dead. Thus, the natality of world-making in "the midst of relations with plural others" begins with the unfinished business of honoring the dead, if only by bridging life and death as the exegeses of the intrasecular sublime.[157] Fittingly, the novel ends with a promising note on a world of new possibilities, as most of the lead cast converge at Omar Makram Mosque, and get back to work to free their comrades at the Tora prison:

> *This is a special broadcast for Tora Prison. We will not stop working until you have your freedom. We are sorry that we are not strong enough to get you out yet, but we will. Coming up in this broadcast after the news of Sisi's economic and political failures we have world news, new music, and notes from the cinema. Stay tuned until they work out how to shut this transmission down.*[158]

The closing lines of the novel, in which Rosa, an active contributor to *Chaos*, defiantly walks out of the prison cage, followed by nine other women behind her, gesture toward a new mode of world-making through action and with plural others, like the 'worldly' metaphor of jazz to which Cairo is compared in the novel: "Not lounge jazz, not the commodified lobby jazz that works to blanch history, but the heat of New Orleans and gristle of Chicago: the jazz that is beauty in the destruction of the past, the jazz of an unknown future, the jazz that promises freedom from the bad old times."[159]

In the spirit of the vernacular bonds forged through, and in the face of, violence in the vignettes from Burma to Beirut, this chapter sought to offer a critique of the dominant currents in world literature from the perspective of Arab letters. The texts discussed here – Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*, Kae Bahar's *Letters from a Kurd*, Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in*

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Baghdad, Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, and Omar Hamilton's *The City Always Wins* – are exemplary cases of vernacular literature from the global periphery not least because, as Stephanides and Karayanni hold: "Rather than a romanticized space or source of arcane wisdom, vernaculars are 'willed' in a discourse with a cosmopolitanism that has informed their cultural transformations, sometimes recognized and other times obscure and unconscious."[160]

The confluence of formal-aesthetic and political worlds in the readings presented above mark a new page in the literary history of the conflicts in the Middle East: from the self-Orientalism of the early twentieth century to the pan-Arab nationalism of the Nasser era in the 1950s, and the diasporic formulations of linguistic Arab nationalism of the 1980s and 1990s, to an inward gaze toward local hierarchies and sectarian schisms, and the vernacular worlds of the post-9/11 and post-Arab Spring era. As opposed to the constructions of world in scalar and spatial terms, each reading in this chapter unfolds through the formation of temporal worlds on the basis of struggles, affects, betrayed promises, and emancipatory longings, enabled by the irrealist tropes, disruptive metaphors, and insurgent figures such as suicide bombers, Frankenstein monsters, Twitter revolutionaries, Facebook martyrs, and corpse washers.

Looming out of a liminal world at the threshold of life and death, all these figures stage insurrectional plots against their immediate oppressors, while mobilizing their militancy through the aesthetic imaginaries of the divine and the sublime. If Sihem tells the tale of her suicide bombing by waking up from the shambles of her own being, Whatsitsname emerges from the shambles of such bombings, Jawad from the world of the living dead, and Khalil from the necropolis of labyrinthine barricades, then Marywan tells the story of the Kurdish uprising against a regime headed by an allegorical monster through the lens of Hollywood noir. In each case, the world and the vernacular are inextricably bound by the intrasecular tropes of insurrection: from the sublime invocation of afterlives in heaven to the execution of divine violence through self-sacrifice to the parading of the dead to complete a revolution.

Notes

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22 Goethe qtd. in Cheah, "World against Globe," 306.
23 Ibid., 318.
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42 Ibid., 417.
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