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# **Collateral Damage: the Body and the Environment in post- 2003 Iraqi fiction**

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## Abstract

This research maps an aesthetic turn/or shift in Iraqi fiction that occurred after the 2003 US-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. I class this as an experimental turn in the aesthetics of the Iraqi novel that builds on the social realism more prevalent in the pre-2003 Iraqi novel. Post-2003 fiction shares similarities with pre-2003 fiction in that it has been produced either during, or in the aftermath, of a long duration of coloniality/neocoloniality, and is oftentimes inflected, thematically, with the physical environment. Post-2003 Iraqi fiction builds on its pre-2003 forebears in its other-than-realist dislocations of pre-2003 Iraqi social realism, where narratives that are seemingly grounded within realism are punctuated with speculative tropes, as in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi, or with a fragmented narrative punctuated with moments of unreality, as in *The Corpse Washer*, by Sinan Antoon. These texts share similarities in their preoccupation with the environment and the body; "the body" in this instance signifies the corporeal body/body politic or national body/and the text as a body. In this context, the thesis reads the engagement with Iraq's natural resources—trees, water and oil—in the two texts in terms of aesthetic and formal techniques of representing violence that impacts the body and the environment in interconnected ways.

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## INTRODUCTION

The year 2003 is a pivotal time period in Iraqi history, as it marks the year that the United States led its invasion on Iraq, at the height of its ‘War on Terror’, culminating in the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime. Finally unburdened by the censorial restrictions of the authoritarian Ba’ath regime for the first time in decades, Iraqi writers – particularly those who were still publishing works within Iraq prior to the fall of Saddam’s regime – now found themselves free to write and publish without fear of repercussions from the State. In a literary and cultural landscape in which poetry had been the dominant mode of literary artistic expression, the ‘post-2003’ period marked a shift in the formal output of Iraqi writers with an “overwhelming spate of Iraqi novels” that “emerged in full vigour” in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Ba’ath regime (Alsagaaf 22). These works of Iraqi fiction can also be described as bearing a “burden of representation” (Bahooora 25) on Iraqi authors during the post-2003 period who tasked themselves with narrating the untold stories and experiences of Iraqis during decades of war, sectarian conflict and occupation. As noted by Mohammed, the task of bearing witness and narrating “the gravity of the security situation” in Iraq during the turbulent and violence that occurred after the US invasion “required a genre that had its feet on the ground more than poetry” (35). Mohammed also suggests that the novel’s propensity for depicting realism “reinforced [a] realistic trend” in the “new [Iraqi] novel writing” that occurred post-2003 (35). However, whilst there is no denying the use of realism in the Iraqi novel writing during this period, this research will examine how Iraqi writers have turned to the novel as a malleable literary form as a way of depicting realism alongside an experimental ‘other-than-realism’ in order to depict the trauma, violence, and environmental catastrophe(s) that are characteristic of Iraq’s long period of necropolitical history.

Throughout this research, the term ‘necropolitical history’ will be used as an overarching term to refer to both the configuration of life and death by state intervention under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime, as well as the 2003 US neo-colonial invasion and occupation of Iraq. Whilst not all of Iraqi history can be characterised as ‘necropolitical’, it is important to note that the last four decades of Iraqi history have been marked by successive wars, ensuing sanctions, and sectarian violence; all which have contributed to the deterioration of the country’s infrastructure, forced displacement, environmental degradation, and massive death tolls. The term ‘necropolitics’, and its associated term ‘necropower’, was coined by Achille Mbémbe in his 2003 article entitled *Necropolitics*, as a critique of Michel Foucault’s conceptualisation of *biopolitics* and *biopower*. In a series of lectures given in the 1970s, Michel Foucault outlined his notion of ‘biopower’ and ‘biopolitics’ to describe the relationship between human life and politics within the realm of modern global capitalism. Biopolitics can be defined as a “political rationality” which undertakes the regulation and management of life and populations through subjection to “ensure, sustain, and multiply life” and to “put... life in order” (Foucault 138). Following on from this, biopower can thus be described as the way in which biopolitics is enacted and enforced in society. Foucault describes this utilisation of biopower as a “profound transformation of [the] mechanisms of power” that occurred in the Western classic age and describes it as a “power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and regulations” (137). As a regulatory control over the maintenance of life, biopower also involves ‘disciplinary power’ which takes the body as the focal point of subjection and/or punishment. As Mbémbe notes: “Foucault states clearly that the sovereign right to kill (*droit de glaive*) and the mechanisms of biopower are inscribed in the way all modern states function; indeed, they can be seen as constitutive elements of state power in modernity” (17).

Mbémbe deems that the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics and biopower are “insufficient” terms to “account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” and coins the terms necropolitics and necropower to “account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*” along with “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” [emphasis author’s own] (Mbémbe 39-40). Mbémbe draws on examples from the last century to illustrate his argument that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides... in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who may die” (11) from the “repressed topographies of cruelty” of the plantation in modern American history, and “the colony” more generally (40). He cites specific examples of necropower/politics that include, but are not limited to: the Rwandan genocide of 1994; and the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestine by Israel, along with the concurrent role of the Palestinian suicide bomber, who re-utilises death as a form of resistance in the face of the necropower of the settler colony. Mbémbe also refers to the first Gulf War in Iraq in 1991 as an example of the necropower of the “war machine” that is characteristic of the “globalization era”, noting that the aim of the war machine aims to “force the enemy into submission regardless of the immediate consequences, side-effects and ‘collateral damage’ of the military actions” (31). Whilst Mbémbe is referring to the First Gulf War in this instance, it is worth noting that this description of the necropower of the war machine can also be used to describe the ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign of the 2003 invasion, the first stage in the ironically monikered ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ military campaign, in which American forces targeted and destroyed various Iraqi sites through precision airstrikes in order to destroy Iraq’s military capability and force Iraqi forces into submission. Whilst it was stated that the aim of the campaign was to minimise the loss of Iraqi lives during the initial invasion

stage, it is worth noting that Iraq Body Count, a project spearheaded by the organisation Oxford Research Group, estimate that approximately 6,616 Iraqi civilian deaths can be attributed to the first few weeks of the invasion and the Shock and Awe bombing campaign. Citing Mbémbe's concept of necropower and necropolitics, Katharina Motyl and Mahmoud Arghavan have described the 2003 invasion, and the ensuing occupation after 2003, as a form of 'neocolonial necropolitics' whereby an "onslaught on Iraqi life" is enacted by the "only remaining global superpower" and, citing Mbémbe, subjects "surviving Iraqis to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (40,129). Motyl and Arghavan also note that Iraq has a long history of "violence, hardship, and domination by foreign powers" from "colonisation by the Ottoman Empire and later the British Empire, through the establishment of the Ba'athist dictatorship in the 1970s, [and] the draconian UN sanctions imposed after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait" (133). It is for this reason that the term 'necropolitical history' will be used as an overarching term throughout this research to denote a "long history of subjugation" (Motyl and Arghavan 136) as experienced by modern-day Iraqis.

This research will explore how the use of realist and other-than-real aesthetics in this post-2003 canon of Iraqi literature signifies an aesthetic turn/or shift in contemporary Iraqi prose fiction. The term 'post-2003' has been adopted in this research as a marker of Iraqi literature produced after the US occupation of 2003. For this reason, the definition is grounded, and delineated, by a pivotal moment in the political history of Iraq that influenced the literary output of its writers, particularly those still writing from within the confines of the country. This aesthetic turn will be explored through an examination of two novels, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) by Ahmed Saadawi and *The Corpse Washer* (2010) by Sinan Antoon. These two novels have been chosen to form the basis of this research for a few reasons. Firstly, both novels exemplify the juxtaposition between the use of realist and non-realist aesthetics to

form a hybrid narrative that I describe as utilising ‘other-than-real’ aesthetics. I draw here from Michael Löwy’s term ‘critical irrealism’ whereby literary texts may contain an “impure combination between realism and irrealism” (195). Under Löwy’s conceptualisation, ‘critical irrealism’ can be applied to texts that “do not follow the rules governing the accurate representation of life as it really is” whilst also containing elements that are “critical of social reality” (196). Critical irrealist texts may therefore represent the “dream of another imaginary world” that can be “idealized or terrifying” and takes the form of “protest, disgust, anxiety or angst” through a “negative critique” of the “philistine bourgeois order” (Löwy 196). Whilst very useful in developing a mode in which to analyse the post-2003 Iraqi novels that form the basis of this research, I class the experimental turn in the aesthetics of the Iraqi novel as a turn to the ‘other-than-real’ due to a specific Iraqi context whereby there is a connection to, and a continuation of, the realist aesthetics in the social realism that had been more prevalent in the pre-2003 Iraqi novel. Both *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *The Corpse Washer* present narratives that juxtapose realist and other-than-real aesthetics that can be described as an adaptation of the social realist tradition of the pre-2003 Iraqi novel that utilises other-than-real aesthetics in order to grapple with the individual and historical trauma of Iraq’s long colonial/neocolonial and necropolitical history.

Post-2003 Iraqi fiction also shares similarities with pre-2003 Iraqi fiction in that it has been produced either during, or in the aftermath, of a long duration of coloniality/neocoloniality, and is oftentimes inflected, thematically, with the physical environment. Post-2003 Iraqi fiction builds on its pre-2003 forebearers in its radical dislocations of pre-2003 Iraqi social realism, where narratives that are seemingly grounded within realism are punctuated with speculative tropes, such as in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, or with a fragmented narrative punctuated with moments of unreality, as in *The Corpse Washer*. Motyl and Arghavan note that the “act of writing” in the post-2003 era by Iraqi writers becomes a “performative” act of



“survival” as a result of the “US empire’s necropolitical assault on Iraqi biological and social life” (138). These two novels have also therefore been chosen for this research as they present an aesthetic turn that is distinct in each text whilst also sharing similarities in their preoccupation with the environment alongside representations of the body. ‘The body’ in this research is conceptualised threefold: to signify the human corporeal body, the body politic or national body, as well as the text as a ‘body’. Addressing the environmental concerns that are present in each novel, Iraq’s natural resources – oil, water and trees - will also be read in each text as distinct aesthetic and thematic concerns.

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The proliferation of the Iraqi novel over the last two decades is a relatively recent phenomenon and it has been noted that poetry had held a predominant role within Iraqi cultural and literary circles prior to 2003 (Alsagaaf 22). In a carefully cultivated bibliography of modern Iraqi literature in translation, noted Iraqi scholar Salih J. Altona rather archly suggests that the genres “the drama, the novel, and the short story” will only be “marginally represented” within the bibliography as he deems them to be “more concerned with socio-political themes, current issues or revolutionary causes than with artistic requirements” (132). Omitting such works for these reasons does a disservice to the works of Iraqi writers and, rather unfairly, suggests that these works are not deserving of being included in a scholarly history of Iraqi literature. Whilst Altona is correct in saying that Iraqi prose fiction is pre-occupied with such concerns, I would suggest that this is not detrimental to the “artistic requirements” of a national literature. Rather, these socio-political themes have been fundamental in shaping the form of the Iraqi novel and short story over the last century. Specifically, Iraqi prose fiction writers developed the form of the novel amidst a politically turbulent century. It could thus be stated that the history of Iraqi prose fiction is intrinsically tied to the politics and history of the nation itself.

Caiani and Cobham suggest that the “early development of fiction in Iraq” has a direct correlation with “the birth of Iraq as a unified country” (1). The unification of Iraq in 1918, through the occupation of three Ottoman provinces (Baghdad, Basra and Mosul) by British forces, was met with some resistance by Iraqis and resulted in the 1920 Revolution. This revolution was an armed revolt against the occupying British forces. Whilst the revolution was quashed militarily by the British, its symbolism has subsequently been revived and gained importance for Iraqis who viewed it as “the founding myth of Iraqi nationalism”. It is regarded as an important period of history within the context of the Iraqi struggle for independence against foreign oppression. In his account of literature produced in the newly assembled Iraqi state, the historian Charles Tripp notes that this period is marked by an “increasingly lively and sometimes scurrilous press in Iraq, as well as by the flowering of poetry that engaged with the politics of the day” (Tripp 63). Poets such as Ahmad al-Safi al-Najafi (1897-1977), Ma’ruf al-Rusafi (1875-1945) and Muhammad al-Jawahiri (1899-1977) gave voice to an often “romantic” view of Iraq and, in an early literary preoccupation with the notion of land and landscape, helped to “establish the landscape and the contours” of the “newly imagined entity” of Iraq by suffusing the landscape “with features that began to gain wide currency” (Tripp 63-64). Interestingly, Tripp describes the literary output of both the press and the poets in his historical account, suggesting that the poetry produced during this period bears the preoccupation with politics and territory more commonly found in print media. A recurring theme in this flourishing style of literature is “the natural bounty of the land which lay unrealised or was going to waste because of foreign occupation and the great inequalities of wealth amongst its inhabitants” (Tripp 64). After the 1920 revolution, rather than imposing British direct rule, The British Mandate was instated giving Iraq monarchical status. The Hashemite rule was established in 1921 with the appointment of Prince Faysal ibn

Husayn al-Hashimi as King Faysal I. This rule lasted until the 1958 Revolution when it was overthrown by Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim.

Besides the radical political shifts that occurred in Iraq between 1918 and 1958, it is also worthwhile noting that Iraqi society also underwent rapid transformation during this time period. The growth of urban centres, such as Baghdad, attracted increasing numbers of the populace varying from destitute peasants from rural areas alongside “educated, middle-class males from the provinces with political and intellectual ambitions” (Caiani and Cobham 2). This urban migration contributed significantly to the establishment of an emerging middle class who played a key role in “shaping Iraqi culture and politics” (Caiani and Cobham 2). This period also saw the emergence of political opposition groups that were opposed to British rule and continuously fought for independence. Significantly, many writers and artists belonged to these opposition groups and it is from this socio-political environment that experimentations in Iraqi literature began to occur. A predominance of poetry continued to hold sway over the literary output until experimentations in prose fiction began to emerge during this time period.

A notable and re-occurring feature of Iraqi fiction over the last 100 years can be characterised in terms of the ways in which socio-political concerns are oftentimes married to literary experimentation. It has been suggested that the technically sophisticated Iraqi novel did not wholly emerge until the publication of the realist novels of the 1960s (Bahooora 247, Caiani and Cobham 73). However, it has also been noted that the genesis of the literary form of the novel, in terms of the intermingling between different aesthetic qualities and form, is generally agreed amongst some critics to have been instigated after the 1920 Revolution (Bahooora). These early developments in Iraqi prose fiction can be seen in the works of Mahumud Ahmad al-Sayyid, Dhu al-Nun Ayyub and Sulayman Faydi in works that were published between 1919 and 1939. Bahooora suggests that the classical Arabic literary

tradition of the *maqama*, a narrative in rhymed prose that is comprised of a collection of short independent stories that are interwoven with short metrical poems, was adapted and modified by Iraqi writers during the turn of the twentieth century (247). The classical prose genre of the *maqama* provided a useful vehicle for innovations in literary form and aesthetics whilst also serving as a useful method of social criticism (Bahooora 247). It has been suggested that the *maqama* produced at the turn of the twentieth century is an early forerunner to the modern prose tradition in its use of simplified language (a departure from the traditional *maqama*) that is directed towards social critique. Bahooora pinpoints this influence in literary style and structure specifically in the work of Sulayman Faydi (248) with *Al-Riwaya al-iqaziyya* (1919). This work is considered by some critics to be a “key text” in the early development of Iraqi prose fiction, whilst other critics suggest that it is “Iraq’s first prose narrative” (Caiani and Cobham 4, Bahooora 248). The didactic nature of the text, alongside its themes of social and national uplift through education, manners and good hygiene, was adopted by government schools and inspired similar texts to be produced for pedagogic purposes (Caiani and Cobham 4, Bahooora 248). The text also advocated for the “use of proper Arabic” alongside “the advocacy of love for one’s homeland” and can thus be said to also be a “political project of national recovery” in its efforts to mould “productive, modern citizens through a discourse of liberalism and social uplift” (Bahooora 248).

Similarly, the novella *Jalal Khalid* (1928) by Mahmud Ahmad al-Sayyid can also be said to provide an expression for an awakening national consciousness. However, in its use of modern, novelistic sensibilities it has been noted as “marking a formal transition” from Arabic prose narratives that had previously been produced in Iraq (249). The novella is a bildungsroman that charts the “maturation and self-awareness” of its protagonist through his journey to India and his subsequent exposure to Marxism (Bahooora 249). It is also a significant text in that it marks the “narrative emergence” in Iraqi fiction of the bourgeois

intellectual's "self-awareness and interiority" (Bahooora 252). It has been suggested that this text had a significant impact on the "ideological formation of ... Iraqi youth" in its successful depiction of the crises faced by many young Iraqi intellectuals of the time (Caiani and Cobham 4). Citing the work of the scholar Abd al-Ilah Ahmad, Cobham and Caiani suggest that al-Sayyid is the "only Iraqi writer of the time" who managed to acquire a "mature understanding of the mechanisms", technical and artistic demands of fiction (7). This is pinpointed in al-Sayyid's emulation of the "Western" model of fiction in his work, and his use of realist techniques, in order to produce an Iraqi "popular literature" that dealt with the everyday concerns of ordinary Iraqi citizens (Caiani and Cobham 7). Critics suggest that the canonization of this text is due in no small part in its possession of traits more commonly found in the "European novel" (Bahooora 253). It is a significant text in the evolution of the Iraqi prose tradition in its use of a "proto-realist aesthetic form" whereby there is a rejection of the escapism of romantic literature in favour of documenting Iraqi social 'reality' through politically "reformist thematic concerns" (Bahooora 253). Through the novella's explicit engagement with Marxist thought, the literary expression of "awakening" and social progress in Iraq would subsequently adopt a strong leftist element. This would eventually be channelled through a realist aesthetic which would become the dominant mode of narrative fiction in Iraq until the 1970s (Bahooora 253).

While these early works by Fayid and al-Sayyid are fundamental in the emergence of the prose narrative in Iraq, other overlooked early narratives have played an important role in the development of a new Iraqi "literary consciousness". These overlooked texts, in the form of the romance and historical novel, would play a significant role alongside critically lauded texts in the consolidation of a "widely disseminated, socially committed, realist literature" that would emerge in later decades (Bahooora 250). Scholars have suggested that al-Sayyid's attempt to produce literature that would instigate social change and promote political reform

was instigated by his frustration at the proliferation of contemporaneous romantic and historical Iraqi fiction that was explicitly “moralising”, escapist and “overtly sentimental” (Caiani and Cobham 8). In his study of the evolution of the Iraqi prose narrative, Bahooora pinpoints that this view on romantic and historical fiction writing has bled into recent scholarly criticism of these texts insofar as that they are generally, and somewhat unfairly, overlooked in favour of other texts that fulfil the traditional criteria of the aesthetically “mature” novel (248-249). He suggests that these novels “also contained a reformist agenda”, such as the romance novel’s advocacy for social reform as well as attempts made by the historical novel to reconstruct “seminal historical events in the nation’s history” (Bahooora 250).

By the late 1940s and 1950s, leftist and nationalist movements that opposed the Hashemite monarchy had gained “critical mass” resulting in mass protests and rebellions and leading to the censorship and imprisonment of several Iraqi writers who expressed increasingly anti-colonial and anti-monarchical sentiment (Bahooora 254). In terms of literary output during this period, the short story became the dominant mode of narrative fiction, its writers adopting increasingly complex, realist narratives in an attempt to portray the lives of the everyday Iraqi citizen. However, the novel remained marginalised during this period, owing perhaps to the accessibility to the short story and its ability to keep pace with the increasingly urgent nature of the political environment. By 1958, the Hashemite monarchy had been overthrown and an Iraqi Republic established in its place.

There is a common consensus amongst critics that suggest that the first novel by Ghaib Farman (1927-1990), *Al-Nakhla wa-l-jiran* (1965), is considered to be the first “artistically mature Iraqi novel” (Caiani and Cobham 73). The novel, and Farman’s work in general, contain a “continued expression” of the critical social realism that is characteristic of the early Iraqi novelistic tradition. The work of Farman exemplifies the “literary formation” of

his generation of writers in their exposure to the “outside influences” of Marxist thought and ideas alongside European literary realism that can be found particularly in the work of Russian writers. It is also worth noting that *Al-Nakhla wa-l-jiran* (henceforth *Nakhla*) was published while Farman was living in exile in Moscow, a result of the persecution of writers and intellectuals during the Qasim regime of the late 1950s to early 1960s. *Nakhla* is set in the urban microcosm of Baghdad and portrays the lives of the city’s poor through four characters and utilises Baghdadi dialect throughout. The novel is generally considered to be a successful and sophisticated realist novel in its portrayal of Baghdad’s poor populace. However, critics have also suggested that the novel is also influenced by both folk literature, popular cinema and crime fiction (Caiani and Cobham 76), whilst others suggest that the novel instead adopts techniques more commonly found in modernist literature (Bahoora 255). While there may be some merit to both these critical standpoints, the social critique that is present in the novel is crucial in that it represents both a continuation and maturation of the experimental literary tradition of the social realism that had been established in earlier works of Iraqi prose fiction.

With the establishment of the Ba’ath Party in the late 1960s, and subsequent political repression, the condition and threat of exile becomes an increasingly threatening fixture for many Iraqi artists and writers. Following on from his analysis of the work of Farman, Bahoora suggests that this period of artistic repression is marked by a shift to a modernist aesthetic in which the “omniscient narrator” that is more commonly found in realist narratives “gives way to multiple perspectives and voices” with a linear narrative instead replaced by “narrative fragmentation and an increasing focus on interiority through the use of stream of consciousness” (256). However, concomitantly, it should also be stated that the establishment of the Ba’athist regime in 1963 brought about the untimely end of political pluralism and the eradication of projects of social justice in Iraq. Fiction writing in the 1950s

and 1960s somehow managed to flourish in terms of aesthetic techniques, perhaps due in part to the uncontroversial themes and mostly traditional styles that were present in their work (Mustafa xiv). This rift between experimental endeavours and subdued productions increased as a result of worsening political conditions in Iraq in the 1970s, culminating in Saddam Hussein's rise to power in 1979 and the decades of war and political repression that followed. In this context, the dichotomy between literature produced within and outside Iraq became evermore pronounced. Under Saddam Hussein's dictatorial Ba'athist regime, literature produced within Iraq was subject to censorship while "crude novels", serving as propaganda for Hussein and the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, began to appear. By comparison, for the exiled Iraqi writer the novel would become a way to reimagine, or reconstruct, Iraq's political, cultural and social history in order to "make sense of the forces that had produced the modern, repressive state" (Bahooora 258). Alsagaaf maintains that this "supposed" division has now been dissolved within the novels that have emerged since the 2003 occupation by offering the reader a "purely Iraqi product" no matter where it has been produced. It is suggested that these novels transport the reader to Iraq, have distinctly "Iraqi features", and "lay a foundation for novels that address an Iraqi time and place" (Alsagaaf).

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A distinct aesthetic turn that occurred in post-2003 Iraqi fiction marks a notable shift in genre in Iraqi cultural production in comparison to Iraqi prose fiction in the pre-2003 period. Mustafa notes that "a sense of the tragic and a sense of the absurd in the past two decades have... liberated Iraqi literature and art from traditional and predominantly social themes" (xv). As well as this, Iraqi literature has also been liberated from the constraints of an "aesthetic that is tepid in its adherence to realism" (Mustafa xv). Whilst some post-2003 writers still adhere to realist techniques that are more commonly found in the Iraqi novel of the twentieth century, and the Arabic novel of the same period more generally, Iraqi writers



who have published works of prose fiction after 2003 frequently begin to produce works that blur the delineations between realism and the 'other-than-real' through the utilisation of fantastical and horror literary tropes in their fiction. Bahooora writes that the literary production by Iraqi authors after 2003 can be categorized by "frequent stylistic conventions" that give "literary recourse to the metaphysical" which narrates a terrain of unspeakable violence" through "the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural" (183). This analysis provides an insightful perspective on the predominance of violence and recourse to the supernatural that is prevalent in much of the Iraqi literary output in the last twenty years or so. However, this analysis firmly positions this form of Iraqi literature within the literary genre of postcolonial gothic fiction (Bahooora 188). Bahooora suggests that the aesthetic qualities at play within contemporary Iraqi "fictions of horror" may be categorized as postcolonial gothic due to the fact that this form of literature is concerned with "questions of history" and the "return of the repressed" that are represented in stylistic terms through "dark narratives" that portray "spectacles of horror" by "utilising the supernatural, the uncanny, and the monstrous" (Bahooora 188). Ghazoul also notes the prevalence of the use of the "fantastic" and supernatural aesthetic tropes in Iraqi fiction in a brief study that examines twelve short stories by Iraqi authors that span half a century of fiction writing (2). Ghazoul adopts a Freudian perspective in her work and suggests that the postcolonial Freudian conception of the uncanny may account for the proliferation of aesthetic representations of the supernatural or "strangely fantastic" in Iraqi fiction (3). Both analyses suggest that the prevalence and use of such tropes in Iraqi fiction, and its proliferation, in many contemporary works after 2003, can be said to stem from the violence, upheavals and war that have characterised Iraqi history in the last fifty years, events that Ghazoul astutely describes as a "historical nightmare" and likens it to a "horror serial" (2).

Post-2003 Iraqi writers have also utilised literary tropes more commonly found in science fiction and speculative fiction. These works also share similarities in their preoccupation with environmental concerns in post-2003 Iraq. Teresa Pepe notes that science fiction, in general, has “undergone a boom” in Arabic literature within the last few decades with Arab authors adopting a “dystopian sub-trend” in order to “reflect on future outcomes of the current political reality in the Arab region” (1-2). In particular, Pepe notes the proliferation of “climate fiction, or ‘cli-fi’, in recent works by Arab authors and notes that Iraqi stories that can be deemed to be ‘cli-fi’, situate their narratives within a dystopian future (Pepe 10). In her analysis of two short stories by Iraqi authors, ‘The Garden of Babylon’ by Hassan Blasim and ‘The Worker’ by Diaa Jubaili, Pepe notes that the two stories share similarities in their “focus on oil resources in Baghdad and Basra” (10). Pepe also notes that the volume that both stories come from, *Iraq +100* (2016), uses 2003 as a “starting-point” due to the year’s “rootedness in contemporary realities” (11).

However, I would argue that the reference to the year 2003 in the *Iraq +100* is not simply significant due to its association with the reality of recent Iraqi history. Rather, the specificity of the year 2003 lies in its significance as a date of remembrance and reflection for Iraqi writers, particularly within in the artistic objectives of the volume itself. *Iraq +100* is a literary project that was spearheaded by Hassan Blasim in 2013, ten years after the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. *Iraq +100* is a collection of short fiction that asks Iraqi writers to submit stories that would imagine Iraq 100 years in the future, “after the US occupation” (vi). Blasim notes the significance in the commemoration of dates in Iraqi history in his introduction to the collection when he states, “Iraq has not tasted peace, freedom or stability since the first British invasion of the country in 2014” (v) and acknowledges that the difficulty in persuading writers in the post-2003 period to write about the future when many were “already so busy writing about the cruelty, horror and shock of

the present” or reaching into the past to “reread Iraq’s former nightmares and glories” (v). Blasim notes that an exercise in writing about the future may afford Iraqi writers, who otherwise feel compelled to produce works that bear witness to Iraq’s past and present, a “space to breathe outside the narrow confines of today’s reality” (v). Blasim also states that the writers were advised that they were not necessarily required to write science fiction for this collection, but “had complete freedom to choose any genre of writing that could address the future” (vi). As with the novels that will be subject to deeper exploration within this research project, it is worth noting that some stories in *Iraq +100* are also preoccupied with notions of environmental concerns, and concurrent violence enacted on the body, as represented through works that juxtapose realism alongside ‘other-than-real’ aesthetics and thematic concerns.

One of the contributing stories from *Iraq +100* that falls within these aesthetic and thematic parameters is ‘The Worker’ by the Basra-born writer Daa Jubaili. Jubaili was born in Basra and, like the Iraqi writer Ahmed Saadawi who is based in Baghdad, currently still lives and writes from within Iraq, from Basra. His short story, ‘The Worker’, is also set in Basra and is a form of dystopic fiction that reimagines the city 100 years after the 2003 invasion and occupation. As the narrative of the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the story depicted is told in two parts; the first being from the narrative viewpoint of ‘The Governor’, the “latest in a long line of religious strongmen who had taken power in the city since the British-American occupation” of 2003 (Jubaili 62). Set in the year 2103, the story opens via the use of a memo issued to the ‘Governing Council of Basra’ that lists the “tragedies and catastrophes” that have befallen Basra “since the disastrous exhaustion” of the city’s “oil and gas” (Jubaili 61). These tragedies include, but are not limited to, “mass killings via explosions”, “famine”, “homelessness and extreme poverty” and “the spread of sickness and epidemics... especially the plague” (Jubaili 61). The reader later learns that other resources in

Basra have steadily been exhausted in the century since the 2003 US occupation, including uranium, mercury, solar power and bronze artefacts in the form of statues that populated the garden and parks of Basra (Jubaili 64). In contrast to these descriptions of environmental catastrophe and violence, the Governor of Basra is described as being surrounded and adorned by wealth through his “heavy silver watch” and “bejewelled rings of agate, ruby [and] turquoise” whilst he sits in a “luxurious chair” and checks his reflection in a “gold-framed mirror” (Jubaili 63). The narrative then takes on the form of a lengthy monologue as the Governor addresses the citizens of Basra through a televised address in which he dismisses the crises that have befallen Basra by comparing them, what he deems to be, larger historical catastrophes such as the Black Death in Europe and the Holocaust. He ends his address by stating that the “ruined idols” of the bronze statues that populate Basra will be removed and melted down “into fuel to light the future” with immediate effect.

The narrative then switches to a second viewpoint in which the Governor’s televised address is being observed in Umm al-Burum square by an unnamed narrator who narrates the rest of the story through a first-person perspective. The narrator moves through Basra and the city is described using post-apocalyptic imagery, further reinforcing the dystopic narrative of the story. The narrator describes a “stench” that sweeps through the “sidewalks and streets” of the city, whilst “beggars” who were once “artists, engineers [and] architects” barter away “their watches and their shirt buttons, their silver teeth, or bracelets of turquoise and onyx” for “pieces of barley biscuits and tiny cups of bitter tea” in order to stave off hunger (Jubaili 72). The narrator describes the starving populace of the city who gather at the “grand plaza” in their multitudes in the hopes of a “plate of rice and beans” that is distributed “once every three days” by the government in language that reduces human beings down to the bare form of their bodies: “they would drag their thin bodies over the torn-up concrete, with metal bowls and open mouths. They would gaze into the distance, wide eyes staring out from

tattered rags; skin stretched over bone” (Jubaili 73). It is imagery that invokes visceral horror alongside a literary horror trope of zombie fiction whereby human beings are transformed into a non-human ‘living dead’. Bodies in the city are also described in the form of corpses that are piled on the streets that are periodically moved onto carts by the narrator, and others, in order to be transported to a teaching hospital. Using imagery that invokes notions of waste and debris, the body in this instance is further down to its barest essence as “meat” that is to be sorted between “fresh” and “rotten” to be used by medical students in hospitals outside of Iraq. The narrator also frequently makes reference to Basra’s water resources alongside his descriptions of the human body(ies) in the city through a repeated reference to the “dried-up Shatt al-Arab”, one of the main waterways in Iraq, and describes how the “graves of the plague victims... take up wide stretches along the river” (Jubaili 76). As the story nears its end the narrative takes a fantastical turn when it transpires that the narrator is in fact a concrete statue that is taken from its plinth in Umm al-Durum square to be melted down for energy. As the statue is not bronze and therefore cannot be melted down, it is instead shipped to a foreign museum and the story concludes with the statue residing between “statues of various dictators” in an unnamed museum.

Jubaili’s ‘The Worker’ can be categorised as a work of post-2003 Iraqi dystopian prose fiction that juxtaposes the literary social realism of earlier Iraqi writers alongside fantastical and speculative literary tropes that can be categorised as ‘other-than-real’ aesthetics. Along with a reference to real historical events, Jubaili roots his story within realism through his reference to monuments and statues in Basra. ‘The Worker’, as well as being the English title of the story, refers to the animated statue that narrates the second part of the story who is a direct reference to the statue of The Worker that can be found in Umm al-Burum Square in present-day Basra (Jubaili 80). Jubaili notes in the footnotes to the story that the real statue was completed in 1970 and is intended to commemorate International Worker’s Day and is

“considered to be a key symbol” for the Communist Party in Basra. Thus, it could be inferred that the statue in the story, through both its canniness and uncanniness, is a cognizant witness to Iraqi history in the century since the 2003 invasion. The animated statue therefore becomes a fantastical, ‘other-than-real’, literary device in which to archive and encode decades of turbulent Iraqi history. Jubaili frequently refers to the environment of Basra, particularly through frequent mention of the depletion of its oil and gas reserves along with the drying up of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Unlike the humans, trees, water, and other natural resources that have been damaged or depleted in the century since the 2003 invasion through resource extractivism and its human and environmental consequences, the concrete statue is impervious to these affects due its materiality. The living statue therefore becomes an ideal fantastical literary device in which to encode and transmute a century’s worth of trauma that has been inflicted on Iraqi citizens and its physical environment within the story and to narrate the story of Basra’s slow shift from a metropolis into a necropolis.

‘The Worker’ also shares similarities with the texts that will be examined in this research due to its preoccupation with the body and the environment and how both are impacted through the long history of Iraqi necropower/politics and coloniality/neocoloniality. The reference to the real-life public space of Umm al-Burum square in Basra situates the novel within realism as Jubaili notes in the footnotes that the square historically used to be a cemetery until burial was forbidden in 1933 (80), thus suggesting a historical association with the dead. He also notes that the square become a place of refuge for its inhabitants during the plague and famine of 1875 when Hajji Muhammad Basha al-Malak, a “notable from Basra”, provided food “for the hungry and those fleeing sickness” by setting out “large cooking pots” in the square (Jubaili 80). Jubaili subverts this historical account in ‘The Worker’; whilst still a place of refuge in which the inhabitants of Basra can obtain food as aid from those in power, the ‘living dead’ inhabitants of Basra in 2103 are stripped of their humanity due to the

necropolitical instincts of those in power who are willing to sacrifice the living inhabitants of their city in order to maintain power – it is quite telling that ‘The Governor’, sequestered from the population of the city, draws a parallel with Saddam Hussein and his many palaces at the height of his power. Whilst Blasim argued that imagining Iraq 100 years into the future may give Iraqi writers an opportunity to ‘breathe’ and broaden their horizons, it could be argued that Jubaili’s ‘The Worker’ is one example of how Iraqi writers utilise ‘other-than-real’ literary tropes in order to interrogate the real realities of living through decades of war, sanctions, dictatorship, and violence that has continuously impacted the body and physical environment in Iraq. ‘The Worker’ is not a hopeful vision of the future, and thus can be classified as a post-apocalyptic piece of Iraqi dystopian fiction insofar that it can be categorised as a “subset of science fiction” that projects a pessimistic narrative “from the present into the future” and presents itself as a “counterfactual future history” (Claeys 54) that bears a remarkable resemblance to present day history. This dystopic narrative presents its ‘counterfactual future history’ in an attempt to reimagine Basra amidst a post-oil future, as presently it possesses one of the largest oil reserves in Iraq. Its post-apocalyptic setting is set amidst the aftermath of a long history of petroculturalism, foreign intervention and Iraqi and neocolonial bio/necropolitics that is characteristic of recent, contemporary Iraqi history. Whilst the two novels that will be examined in more depth during this research do not situate their narratives within a future setting, they share these preoccupations with how Iraq has been shaped by intertwined histories of resource extractivism, imperialism and necropower alongside a concurrent interest with representations of the body at sites of violence.

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While the aforementioned critical literature on Iraqi literature makes a significant contribution in exploring this aesthetic turn in Iraqi prose fiction, this research will offer a new method in which to analyse and locate the parameters of this shift in genre. Specifically,

this research will examine this ‘turn’ in genre by examining two novels: *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi and *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon by paying attention to the ways in which each text interrogates individual and historical trauma that is encoded on the body alongside aesthetics related to specific ecological and environmental concerns. The first chapter of this research will examine the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi as a work of post-2003 Iraqi fiction and adopts and adapts other-than-real speculative fiction tropes alongside a “narrative environment that is seemingly grounded in the social realism of the Iraqi novel” (Hassan 12). The narrative of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* reimagines Mary Shelley’s infamous creature in post-2003 Baghdad a few short years after the American invasion and occupation. Saadawi’s appropriation of Shelley’s unnamed created creature, given the moniker ‘the Whatitsname’ in the novel, is comprised of disparate body parts of Iraqi citizens who have been killed due to instances of explosive suicide bomb attacks that frequently occurred in Baghdad during the period of violence that erupted in the country in 2005.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* will be classified as work of petrofiction throughout this research due to the presence of oil in the text that will be examined through the novel’s aesthetics. Scholarly criticism on the relationship between oil and literature is a relatively recent phenomenon which has shifted its initial focus on the conventions of genre within works of fiction that explicitly tackle the substance itself toward new forms of environmental critical inquiry. These works have drawn attention to the larger implications of critiquing literature that has been produced within a cultural and historical era where modernity may be attributed to the burning of hydrocarbons (MacDonald 2012, Szeman 2014). In the last two and a half decades, the term ‘petrofiction’ has been adopted by scholars of literary criticism within the relatively new discipline of the energy humanities as a method of historical periodization. ‘Petrofiction’ was coined by the writer Amitav Ghosh in 1992, in his review of Abdelrahman



Munif's quintet of novels entitled *Cities of Salt*, to formally identify literary texts that represent the "Oil Encounter" (30). The term has now been broadened to classify literary texts that represent the petroleum industry or oil in their works. This literary classification is enabled by heightened environmental awareness that has shed light on the finiteness of the recent historical period of modernity, an era that owes much to extraction, commodification and burning of oil (Yaeger 2011). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is set in 2005, a few short years after the U.S. led invasion of 2003 that was driven, in no small part, by the impetus of petroimperialism that has been a characteristic of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East for the last 90 years (Watts 2003). Scholars within the field of the political sciences have extensively written on the connection between oil extraction and the violence that may be inflicted on the body at the site of this extraction. These works note that the link between the corporeal body and violence is made apparent when the "violence is made visible through" the body in geographic areas where the petroleum industry has led to conflict and war and thus can be described as petroviolece (Watts 6, Turcotte 204). Utilising Achille Mbembé's post-Foucauldian notion of necropower and necropolitics, alongside an articulation of the presence of oil in the novel through instances of petroviolece in the narrative, I will explore how the novel addresses how the Iraqi body - that is, the corporeal body; the body politic/national body/the text as a 'body' - is represented through the novel's aesthetics and thematic concerns through an examination of the petro-aesthetics of the novel. Through this analysis, the monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (the Whatitsname) becomes emblematic of violence enacted against the corporeal Iraqi body in post-2003 Iraq. This research will also explore the ways in which the fragmented body of the Whatitsname is emblematic of a long history of the de/construction of Iraqi territory, state and sovereignty enacted by colonial and neocolonial powers, whose preoccupation and presence in the region can be attributed to oil.

Whilst the subject of oil has been a source of contention raised by most critics and objectors to the 2003 US invasion, this research will note how other works of post-2003 Iraqi fiction have increasingly become preoccupied with the ways in which other natural resources have been mishandled and left to degradation due to decades of war and sanctions. The second, and slightly longer, chapter of this research will subsequently examine *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon as a work of hydrofiction and how the hydrological and the arboreal, in the form of water and trees, are read through the formal and thematic concerns of the novel through a ‘hydro-arboreal’ aesthetic. Whilst “the discovery of oil gave the Iraqi state a new and more lucrative resource base” it has been noted that water has always remained the “lifeblood” of the country (Hamid, et al. 20). The Arabic term *al-Iraq* can be translated as meaning “the shore of a great river along its length” and the “grazing land that surrounds it” (Tripp 8). It is a term that has been used from around the eighth century by geographers of Arab descent to describe the vast alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It has been noted by scholars in the field that the impact of climate change, in the form of lessening rainfall, has resulted in the levels of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to drop. In recent years, the surrounding lands are slowly becoming barren, affecting communities who depend on the rivers for their livelihood (Hamid et al. 19). Most troublingly, rivers have become substantially, and visibly, “low along their courses” with the “most dramatic evidence of... uneven flow” seen in the “marshland of the south which is said to be the location of the biblical Garden of Eden” (Hamid et al 21). In recent times, a combination of dams in Turkey and Iran, decades of war, UN sanctions, and war has led to a water infrastructure that was already in a dilapidated state before 2003 (Hamid, et al. 21). The US-led invasion in 2003 led to even more damage, with the performance of water plants dropping by “50 percent from pre-invasion levels” (Hamid, et al. 21). Violence inflicted on the Iraqi corporeal body through this environmental catastrophe is made apparent by the “great number of ‘excess deaths’

documented by the UN and independent human rights groups that can be attributed to the devastation of the country's water structure (Hamid et al. 21). The "lush landscape" of Southern Iraq in the past, once deemed the "Garden of Eden", has increasingly become salinated, along with encroaching desertification (Hamid et al. 24). Thus there is an inextricable link between water and trees, or the hydrological and the arboreal, as it relates to eco-violence in Iraq that will be explored in relation to the aesthetics and formal qualities of *The Corpse Washer*.

This chapter will therefore examine *The Corpse Washer* as a work of hydrofiction that utilises a shifting and fluid narrative in order to narrate the story of a young, Shi'ite, Iraqi man named Jawad who is born into a family of corpse washers in Baghdad. 'Hydrofiction' is a literary category and critical tool coined by Hannah Boast to denote and examine how water resources may be "read" in literature (3). Hydrofictions may represent "hydrosocial relations" in literary texts through the ways in which water is "shaped by, and shapes, social relations, structures and subjectivities" (Boast 3). The fluid narrative of the novel, as it resembles the physical characteristics of water, is reflective of Jawad's psyche and is comprised of memories juxtaposed against fantastical dream/nightmare vignettes. As with Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and Jubaili's 'The Worker', Antoon utilises an 'other-than-real' aesthetic that is juxtaposed against the stark and violent reality of post-2003 Iraq in the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation. Through Jawad's memories, a necropolitical history of Iraq is recounted through his memories of the Iraq-Iraq War, the First Gulf War and the 2003 invasion, as well as life in Baghdad under Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime. Through an examination of the novel's formal qualities and aesthetics, the chapter will explore the ways in which the novel, as a work of hydrofiction, represents and interrogates how violence is inflicted on both the human and ecological 'body' through a reading of water and trees: the 'hydro-arboreal'. An examination of the 'text as body' will

incorporate an analysis of how the hydro-arboreal affects the formal properties of the novel through an examination of the novel's fluid narrative style that mimics the fluid material properties of water. This analysis will also be predicated on the notion that the hydro-arboreal impacts on the linearity of the human narrative through a disruption of the more-than-human timespaces of water and trees. Subsequently, the effect of Iraqi necropolitics and neocolonial interventions on the Iraqi history and its concurrent eco-contexts will be explored through the lens of hydrological-arboreal aesthetics in the novel.

Through an examination of this use in aesthetics, accompanied by concurrent concerns with representations of the body and environmental crisis as sites of violence, this research uncovers how Iraqi writers in the post-2003 period utilise the pliable form of the novel through works that are classified under the umbrella-term of experimental fiction due to their experimentation in form and aesthetics. A continuation of the pre-2003 Iraqi literary tradition in prose fiction that is preoccupied with the "socio-political themes, current issues, or revolutionary causes" (Altona 132), post-2003 Iraqi fiction is categorised as literature that continues to bear this burden of representation on its authors. The political vacuum left when the Ba'athist regime was toppled in 2003 gave Iraqi fiction writers room to "breathe" (Blasim v) in their artistic endeavours for the first time in decades. This research therefore examines how post-2003 Iraqi fiction writers have experimented with the literary form of the novel in order to represent, interrogate, and document Iraq's decades-long necropolitical history of war, occupation, sanctions, and environmental crises.

## Chapter One: Oil and Petroviolence in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

The use of speculative and experimental literary fiction tropes and narrative techniques by Iraqi fiction writers after the US-led invasion and subsequent fall of the Ba’athist regime in 2003 marks a notable change in genre in Iraqi literary and cultural production. Whilst some writers still adhere to the realist techniques that are more commonly found in the Iraqi novel of the twentieth century and the Arabic novel of the same period more generally, Iraqi writers in the post-2003 period continue to push the boundaries of experimental writing by producing works that blur the boundaries between realism and the other-than-realist, fantastical and speculative. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) by Ahmed Saadawi is one key text that is emblematic of this shift, and use, of genre.

The novel is set two to three years after 2003, with the narrative situated in the Bataween district of Baghdad, which is in the grips of a violent insurgency in the wake of the 2003 invasion and occupation. ‘Frankenstein in Baghdad’, of the novel’s title, is the nickname given to ‘the Whatitsname’ by characters in the novel. It is a creature who is assembled out of the body parts of suicide bomb victims and is accidentally brought to life by the residents of the district. The figure of the Whatitsname embarks on a mission to avenge the victims whose body parts make up its supernatural body. Saadawi conjures an ensemble of disempowered voices as the narrative is focalised through a range of characters that inhabit the Bataween district including Elishva, the Assyrian Christian widow; Faraj the estate agent; Mahmoud, a journalist; and Hadi, the junk dealer. The English translation of the novel provides a list of characters in its opening pages – there are 34 characters listed in total. Their stories are intertwined around the creature who, incidentally, is not listed as a character and is first referred to as the “al-shisma” in the original Arabic text by his creator, Hadi. *Shisma* is an

Arabic word in colloquial Iraqi dialect that is used as filler in conversations. In Iraqi Arabic, *shisma* may be translated into “whats-its-name” and is referred to in Wright’s excellent English translation of the text as “the Whatitsname” – a hybridisation that is representative of the composite and stitched-together nature of the creature’s corporeal make-up.

As noted in the introductory chapter, Iraqi writers discussed in this study utilise experimental and speculative fiction literary tropes and aesthetic affects in order to address environmental concerns within the geopolitical context of Iraq during war, sanctions, and under occupation. It is Ahmed Saadawi who most explicitly deals with the relationship between oil and violence in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Through the (in)visible presence of petroleum, the body becomes a site where notions of the border, sovereignty and agency are contested. Particularly through the figure of the Whatitsname, Saadawi imbues the novel with the intertwined histories of oil, imperialism and violence and their role in the formation, consolidation and descent into violence of the Iraqi state. Historically, the creation of the state of Iraq out of separate Ottoman provinces at the turn of the century by Western imperial powers was partially driven by the presence of “Mesopotamian oil” (Gruen 93). Drawing on fantastical terminology, it could therefore be stated that the conjuring of Iraq was also accompanied by a “resource curse” that has lingered over Iraq in the century since the British Mandate established in the early twentieth century (Nixon 69). Accordingly, the tangible material of oil is transformed into a “spiritual force field” encompassing “evil powers” that eventually alienate people from the elements which may have “sustained” them both environmentally and culturally (Nixon 69). From this perspective, the intertwined histories of oil, violence and imperialism in Iraq will be charted as a framework for reading the novel. Through the body/bodies of the monster, ordinary citizens and the suicide bomber, Saadawi manages to elucidate the curses, and the improbable blessings, of the spectral and insidious nature of oil in the neocolonial petro-state of Iraq.

The theoretical framework that forms the basis of this research draws on a post-Foucauldian notion of necropolitics and necropower. The monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents the vulnerability of the Iraqi body that has been subjected to unmitigated and frequent occurrences of violence during the short years after the US invasion and into a civil war driven by sectarian division. The petro-imperialist, bio/necropolitical objective enacted by the US ultimately suggests that the war was “as much a means of achieving sovereignty” as well as a “way of exercising the right to kill” (Mbembé 12). This is relevant to the post-Foucauldian critique of biopower which argues that the primary concerns of the necropolitical are in addressing the “contemporary subjugation” of the body that occurs when life is overpowered by death in an attempt by the state to establish sovereignty and maintain power (Mbembé 39). The imperial presence of the Anglo-American forces in Iraq after the invasion was not only accompanied by the destruction of infrastructure and the dissolution of the authoritarian Ba’athist regime, but also by the deterioration and annihilation of Iraqi bodies. The Iraqi insurgency that erupted after the invasion, and reached a zenith between 2005 and 2006 during the occupation by U.S. forces, occurred amidst the sudden absence of the long-standing authoritarian presence of the state alongside the ineptitude of the US government to establish a concrete form of governance in its wake. The lives of Iraqis during this period exemplify Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the state of exception as enacted by the sovereign whereby the individual body is diminished into the concept of the “bare life” (88). In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben builds on Foucault’s conceptualisation of biopolitics whereby disciplinary power (the control and regulation of the individual body) and biopower (a focus on the maintenance of life) is enacted by the sovereign power. Agamben’s thesis moves on from Foucault’s conceptualisation and is based on the concept of sovereign power, the state of exception, and the production of what he describes as ‘bare life’. Utilising and contemporising a figure from archaic Roman law, the

*homo sacer*, or ‘sacred man’, a figure that is categorised by double exclusion from both divine law and human law (Agamben 8-9). The *homo sacer* is an individual who could not “be sacrificed” to the Gods but can be killed “without impunity” outside of ritual killings by its contemporaries because his life has no meaning (Agamben 73). Agamben contemporises the *homo sacer* by contextualising the figure for modern times, deeming it a bearer for what he deems to be “bare life” (8). The bare life emerges from what Agamben describes as the “state of exception” whereby the sovereign “suspends the law” and thus abandons “the natural life of the citizen to sovereign and political violence” (Masmoudi 3). The bare life is routinely subjected to processes of dehumanisation in which violence is regularly authorised against those who “are already not quite living” and are trying to live between the murky bio/necropolitical distinctions that create what Judith Butler identifies as a “suspension between life and death” (36). Drawing a parallel with what Mbémbe describes as the turning into the “living dead” of “vast swathes of populations” who are subjected to necropolitics, the bare life is subjected to a “living death” (Masmoudi 6) under the state of exception enacted by the sovereign. As Ikram Masmoudi notes in her analysis of the “figure of the warrior, the war deserter and the prisoner of war” in contemporary Iraqi fiction, contemporary representations of Iraqi life can be ascribed with the term ‘bare life’ to denote the lives of those “caught in the sovereign sphere” and who “emerge in the context of a totalitarian regime” or “under military occupation and a war on terror” (7). As will be noted throughout this chapter, the various characters that are represented in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* can fall under the category of ‘bare life’ due to their proximity to the violence of sectarian conflict under a neocolonial occupation by the sovereign power of the United States, and their experiences of necropolitics throughout recent Iraqi history.

The explicit representations of the horrors of “dismembering violence” that take place throughout the novel suggest that narrative fiction plays a vital role in the construction of a



“post-2003 Iraqi identity” and provides an authentically Iraqi narrative of “structural violence for which there has been no political, legal or historical accountability” (Bahooora 188).

Unlike previous fictional depictions of the Iraq War, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is notable in its centring of the Iraqi voice – as will be discussed later in this chapter, the Americans are mostly an invisible, ephemeral presence in the background. Unlike many of his Iraqi artistic contemporaries, Saadawi has never left Baghdad and notes that his decision to stay is “an internal conflict” where there is a “need to write novels and be connected to the people” constantly at war with a primal “fear of death and desire to keep living” (Arrango 2014). The need to bear witness to a process of dismembering and disintegration is also evident in the engagement with the ethno-religious and cultural backgrounds of the various characters who live in the Bataween district and the emphasis on the plurality of Iraqi society – it is a conscious representation of the diverse societal and cultural composition of an Iraqi city amidst its infrastructural de-composition at the hands of the US occupation.

In a similar vein to previous Iraqi authors in the mid-twentieth century, Saadawi’s novel is symptomatic of an Iraqi literary tradition that appropriates styles and techniques more commonly found in Western popular fiction. However, in this case there is a radical difference whereby the monster trope common in Western popular fiction is incorporated into a realism prevalent in the Iraqi novelistic tradition. It should also be stated that post-2003 Iraqi writers cannot be categorised as a hegemonic group with identical artistic preoccupations. The artistic output of some post-2003 writers share pre-occupations with political and social issues but continue to ground their work in a realist aesthetic tradition in Iraqi prose fiction, and Arabic prose fiction more generally. In her work *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, Ikram Masmoudi examines the role of sovereignty and the suicide bomber while addressing the representation of bare life in realist Iraqi novels produced after 2003. In her analysis of *al-Mintaqa al-khadra* by Shakir Nuri (*The Green*

Zone, 2009) Masmoudi follows Nuri's character construction of the protagonist Ibrahim, who initially works as a translator for the Americans during the occupation before becoming a suicide bomber. Masmoudi notes that Ibrahim is both "considered a traitor and a potential terrorist" and that while "he might be killed by the militias" he also has "no expectation of protection by the Americans" (176). Ibrahim is a character whose "death is almost decreed" and staddles the border between living and death, "in between two worlds where he is neither fully living nor full one of the deceased" (Masmoudi 176). Ibrahim thus falls into the category of the *homo sacer* as "he is a man who can be killed but not sacrificed" (Masmoudi 176). Crucially, Ibrahim claims back his agency as both "as both an individual and as a political human being" by taking his own life in "sacrifice for all the war victims" (Masmoudi 176). As Masmoudi notes, "by acting on his own life [Ibrahim] recaptures his sovereignty over his own fate and body" by taking back the "responsibility for his own life and death from both the Americans and the Islamist militias" (Masmoudi 177). Citing the work of May Jayyusi, Masmoudi notes that the suicide bomber as martyr inverts the *homo sacer*'s relation to sovereignty where he/she becomes one who can be "sacrificed but not killed" (176). Also crucially, Masmoudi outlines that the proliferation of suicide-bombing operations are not aberrant activities that can be blamed on rising Islamic fundamentalism in the wider MENA region. Rather, they can be said to be an "expression of "the political culture of death that has emerged in modern times in the Middle East" (Masmoudi 178) due to extended histories of both colonial violence and "the brutality of dictatorial regimes". Within the specific context of Iraq, the act of suicide bombing as committed by Ibrahim can be said to be the:

cumulative effect of the violence he has been subjected to as an Iraqi who has lived under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and its successive wars, and who has witnessed first-hand the violence, the contempt and the humiliation of an occupational

war with its walls, checkpoints, abuse and disregard for human rights (Masmoudi 178)

While sharing and exploring similar thematic concerns in his work, including with the phenomenon of suicide bombing, Saadawi instead eschews the prevalent realism of his literary forebears and some of his contemporaries by adopting, and adapting, speculative fiction tropes juxtaposed with a narrative environment that is seemingly grounded in the social realism of the Iraqi novel. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is therefore emblematic of the post-2003 literary aesthetic turn which has seen a significant pivot, initiated by some writers, toward the use of the “fantastic, the surrealist, the Kafkaesque, the labyrinthine” in Iraqi fiction, one that does not signal a “renunciation of the real” but is instead veered in a realistic direction due to verisimilitude (Ghazoul 89, Mustafa xiv). This aesthetic turn, which moves away from the traditionalism and classicism of twentieth century Iraqi prose fiction, is still grounded in the social, political and cultural preoccupations of its predecessors. In order to portray the chronic agony of the ongoing “Iraqi ordeal”, writers like Saadawi have embraced varied aesthetic styles and thematic concerns; with some texts employing fragmented, incoherent narrative styles, and others reviving or re-orientating the realist aesthetic of the twentieth century Iraqi novel whilst utilising darkly comedic and gothic elements.

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This utilisation of realist and non-realist aesthetics in post-2003 Iraqi fiction can be said to convey a collective historical condition of trauma that challenges the individualising trauma narrative prevalent in some post-2003 Western accounts of the Iraq invasion. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events” whereby the “response to the event occurs in the... delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). Caruth illustrates this definition of

trauma by using an example of “the soldier” who is “faced with sudden and massive death around him” and who “suffers this sight in a numbed state” (181). The soldier, in this example, “relives” this experience through “repeated nightmares” and is described by Caruth as a “central and recurring image of trauma in our century” (181). It could be argued that Caruth’s use of “the soldier” as a general example of trauma in this instance demonstrates a generalized, Eurocentric notion of trauma that takes for granted the universality of such an example in non-Western and minority cultures. The use of the Western “soldier” as a universal symbol for trauma also highlights its proliferation of use in the media and arts, often to the detriment of non-Western representations of trauma. This Eurocentric notion of trauma oftentimes focuses on individual experiences of trauma as experienced by individuals from the Western core who find themselves in the non-Western periphery during wartime.

In a work that examines American soldiers’ experiences of their time in Iraq during the 2003 invasion, Stacey Peebles notes that literary and cinematic representations of their wartime experiences date back to 1948, when Norman Mailer’s novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was published, with the novel depicting American soldiers’ experiences of World War II and their “existentialist struggle” on a “fictional Japanese island” called Anapopei (Peebles 6). Similarly, James Jones’ novel, *The Thin Red Line* (1962), is also set in the peripheral Pacific during World War II and focuses on the American soldiers’ mental state during war, with the fictional characters in the novel fighting to achieve an “emotional state” described as “combat numbness” that enables the soldier to “temporarily forget their fear and anxiety” (Peebles 6). Representations of the American soldiers’ experiences of the Vietnam War were also prevalent both during, and after, the war and oftentimes focused on both the mental and physical trauma experienced by individual American soldiers in films such as *Coming Home* (1978) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) along with autobiographies such as *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976). In an analysis of an American documentary on American military veterans of

the 2003 invasion of Iraq, entitled *Alive Day Memories: Home From Iraq* (2007), Peebles notes that “seeing and understanding [the] whole story” of the American veteran who has experienced mental and physical trauma “can help show both individuals and the nation the way out of and beyond the Iraq War, past a trauma that has cost too much” (150).

Another example of artistic depictions of the American soldier is the novel *The Yellow Birds* (2012) by Kevin Powers, an American military veteran of the 2003 invasion; it explores the “bereavement” of the “modern American soldier” in the aftermath of their experiences of Iraq (Mann 340). In a similar vein to Peeble’s account of an American “national trauma” due to the 2003 war, Joelle Mann states that the narrative of *The Yellow Birds* describes “a soldier’s individual mourning and the national mourning” of the “United States’ role in the Global War on Terror” (340). Mann describes the novel as possessing a “nonlinear narratology” whereby the trauma of the American soldier is perpetuated by “postmodern fragmentation and dislocation” (Mann 340-341). Mann also argues that the novel illustrates how “a soldier... becomes a victim not only to the violence of a seemingly endless war but also to the social and political deceit that defines the United States’ contemporary war politics” (340). These analyses both focus on the American soldier’s individual experiences of the 2003 invasion and seek to highlight how individualised trauma narratives that emanate from the metropolitan, neocolonial core often also portray an apparent collective, national trauma that critiques US policy. Caruth suggests that “reading and listening” to experiences of trauma may help “provide the very link between cultures” as “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own” and “history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s trauma” (9,11,24). Whilst Caruth’s conceptualisation of reading trauma narratives is seminal in the field of trauma studies, it has been suggested that this mode of reading trauma does not take into account trauma narratives that emanate from non-Western, or indigenous, spheres. This research examines how narratives from the non-Western neocolonial subject, and specifically

from the Iraqi context, powerfully challenges this notion of individualised Western trauma narratives as being symptomatic of a homogenised “national trauma” by conveying a collective historical condition of trauma, from the periphery, that encodes traumatic affects on to the text.

Stef Craps contends that Caruth’s conceptualisation of reading trauma narratives is Eurocentric in its assumptions that “listening to the trauma of another” may “contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the “creation of new forms of community” (Craps 2). As Craps notes, this conceptualisation of trauma fails to take into account non-Western and indigenous experiences of trauma and also suggests that there is a tendency to “take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that... developed out of the history of Western modernity” (2). From this perspective, trauma narratives that possess a “modernist aesthetic” that can be characterised by “fragmentation and aporia” are also “favoured or prescribed” as being uniquely suited to “the task of bearing witness to trauma” and there is also a tendency to “disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas” (Craps 2). Craps therefore suggests that there is a risk that these “Eurocentric biases” of trauma theory “risk assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities” rather than providing the “cross-cultural solidarity” that Caruth has suggested (Craps 2). This tendency by trauma theorists to narrowly focus their analysis on texts by “mostly” Western writers that utilise “fragmented, modernist forms” and an “anti-narrative” is an attempt to portray the “psychic experience of trauma”; it also “position[s] the reader” in a specific way whereby the “relationship between the witness [in the text] and the reader is based on that between the analysand and the analyst in [a] psychoanalytic situation” (Craps 40-41). To counter this, Craps posits that texts by non-Western authors that also can be classified as “trauma literature” utilise a “no-frills, realist aesthetic” informed by a “sense of political urgency” that

is concerned with getting “the message across and to mobilize” (Craps 42). This widening of the scope of trauma theory and trauma literature enables us to take into account “the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received” as well as enabling the reader to be “open and attentive to “diverse strategies of representation and resistance” which these specific texts “invite or necessitate” (Craps 43).

Building on this articulation of non-Western representations of trauma, that highlight the use of realism as a form of political testimony and a method of political mobilization, post-2003 Iraqi fiction utilises both realist and non-realist aesthetics as a hybrid form of narrative. This use of aesthetics is representative of the ways in which post-2003 Iraqi writers interrogate individual and historical trauma enacted on the body whilst also shedding light on the (in)visibility, and slow violence, of resource extractivism in Iraq. As noted by Justin Parks, ‘extractivism’ is most often be understood “in relation to large-scale, profit-driven operations for the removal and processing of natural resources such as hydrocarbons, minerals [and] lumber” along with other materials (353). Parks also describes extractivism as a “mindset” by which “resources serve a means-end function” by “becoming commodities to be extrapolated and turned [in]to profit” (353). It is a process whereby raw materials are extracted from “underdeveloped peripheries” and transferred to a “highly developed core”, a process which underwrites “the uneven logic of capitalist development over its long durée” (Parks 353). The “practices” of extractivism may be “situated within a long history of capitalist development” that can be said to encompass “western nations’ plundering of the globe” under the “aegis of colonialism” (Parks 354). Facundo Martín describes extractivism as “an expression of the colonisation of nature” and also suggests that natural resources, throughout this process, become “inherently political” as they are “built up by means of political relations and operations”; this is “particularly evident during periods of crisis or conflict” (Martín 24).

Arguably, extractivism accounts for the “process by which nature becomes politicized” and oftentimes leads to “violent conflict” along with “reterritorializations of space” (Parks 354). Despite this, extractivism can still be described as a hidden process which occurs “gradually and out of sight” (Nixon 19). Extractivism may therefore be categorised as a form of “slow violence” whereby the violence that occurs at the site of extraction resists becoming a spectacle, thus avoiding “sensational visibility” (Nixon 19). The slow violence that occurs due to extractivism then calls for a “need to engage” with the “representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by [its] relative invisibility (Nixon 19). In what she describes as “the great paradox of fossil fuel imaginaries”, Jennifer Wenzel states that “in literature as in life, oil in particular is at once everywhere and nowhere” and while it is “indispensable” it is also “largely unapprehended” and is also “not so much invisible as unseen” (11). However, this statement only really applies to those who live in the global north who are sequestered away from sites of resource extraction and not those who live near to sites of resource extraction where “extractivism is a highly visible reality whose effects are violent and immediate” (Parks 355). Thus, extractivism’s (in)visibility becomes a “paradoxical and deeply fraught issue” as the question of “what is visible, and to whom” has a tendency to “split the global population along the fault lines suggested by extractivism itself” (Parks 355). Parks also notes that these divisions can in turn be “mapped onto the coordinates of global capitalism’s uneven patterns of development” whereby “the sheen of contemporary (western) life is predicated on the dirty work of extraction”, a process which “eludes (western) vision” but has a tendency to become “visible at the interstices” of such divisions (Parks 355). Under these circumstances, Parks suggests that the “role of literature” is to challenge these “habits of perception” that “render such sites...invisible” due to literature’s “world-building capacities” (Parks 355).



In order to “bring to life... threats that take time to wreak their havoc”, Nixon suggests a critical mode he describes as “apprehension”, whereby the “domains of perception, emotion, and action” are utilised in order to apprehend the “imperceptible threats of slow violence” that can be found in literature (Nixon 14). This critical mode of apprehension thus requires “rendering” these threats as “apprehensible to the senses” in works of literature that can be deemed as works of “imaginative testimony” to the slow violence of extractivism (Nixon 14). Literature therefore becomes a mode of aesthetic practice in which to apprehend and represent the slow violence that occurs at sites of resource extraction. As outlined by Jacques Rancière, aesthetics is both “a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts” as well as a “mode of articulation between ways of doing and making” (10). Along with this, “reflecting” on the arts also involves articulating “corresponding forms of visibility” where aesthetic forms become “configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception” and also produce “novel forms of political subjectivity” (Rancière 10). Using this conceptualisation of aesthetics, the distinctive aesthetic effects of post-2003 Iraqi fiction, in their hybrid use of realist and non-realist aesthetics make visible the political subjectivities of Iraqi authors after decades of censorship in pre-2003 Iraq. This mode of analysis also sheds light on how representations of historical trauma and extractivism intersect in these texts and are made visible to the reader through this hybridity of realist and non-realist or other-than-realist aesthetics enabled by the use of tropes of speculative/experimental fiction.

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In order to further classify the literary styles and formal techniques under study in this chapter, the term “speculative fiction” will be used as an overarching category to in order to identify the magical, spectral, horror and science fiction tropes used in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* that fall under this umbrella-like category. As well as the use of speculative fiction literary tropes in the novel , this chapter examines a concurrent preoccupation with land and

territory alongside the exploitation of Iraq's natural resources. Missy Ryan's account of the interference of Western imperial powers in Mesopotamia imbues the construction of the Iraqi state with spectral and fantastical qualities when she describes how British "generals and statesman conjured up a country called Iraq" (65). This historical account signals that the use of the spectral and the magical inherent in speculative fiction by post-2003 writers including Saadawi, is imbricated with key aspects of the establishment of Iraq. The specific engagement of Iraqi literature with the political can be seen as early as the 1920s, after the establishment of the state of Iraq by the British Mandate. "Modern" Iraq is the manufactured construction of a country by Western imperial powers out of three separate provinces of the Ottoman Empire that were put under British and French mandate following World War I (Elden 115; Ryan 65). The provinces of Baghdad and Basra were initially brought together in 1921 as British mandates, while the French Mandate of Mosul was later added in 1925. Significantly, the role of Western imperial powers in territorial reconstitution while infringing on the continuities and resources of the land, as well as the concurrent acquisition of oil in the form of 'oil frontierism' and petro-capitalism can be identified here. For instance, in return for 'giving' Mosul to the British as an assemblage to the construction of a state, the French received "oil concessions" as well as "a share" of Syria, from which the country of Lebanon was created (Elden 116). Michael Taussig has suggested that cultural formations that consist of spectral or fantastic reactions to a "non-fantastic reality" most commonly arise from within peripheral societies as a "critique of their violent integration into capitalist modes of production" (Deckard 2015:96; Taussig 10). The output of post-2003 Iraqi writers could therefore also be categorised as a reaction to a heightened version of this scenario: an inherently violent attempt to integrate Iraq within the imperialist, neoliberal agenda of the United States. Saadawi's appropriation of arguably one of the most recognized cultural symbols within speculative fiction, and grounding the creature within a gritty, violent and –

crucially – realistic depiction of a disintegrating Baghdad in the aftermath of the US occupation can therefore be read as a reaction to this attempt at integration.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* hence figures as a key text in the framework of the post-2003 proliferation of Iraqi speculative fictions that serve as a barometer of the mounting contradictions of the neoliberal regime of capitalism and the socio-ecological violence unleashed by the continual construction/destruction of territory alongside resource extractivism and petrocapitalism in Iraq. This analysis of the integration of peripheral societies into extreme capitalist modes of production focuses directly on the representation of “oil as ‘devil’s excrement’ within countries that have been converted to petro-regimes” (Deckard 2015:96; Taussig 18). The use of the term “converted” by Sharae Deckard is significant here as it denotes a form of coercion and power inflicted on peripheral societies by the imperial core in its conversion. The term “devil’s excrement” also alludes to what has been deemed the “oil curse” on various nations as a result of petrocapitalism (Reed 18). In an analysis of petrocapitalism in Angola, Reed notes that oil has played a significant role in reinforcing the “extractive political institutions” that were established in the country under Portuguese rule (18). Following independence, Angola was subjected to “fiery contests” for control by various national parties, with oil adding “fuel” to the fray (Reed 18). Petrocapitalism can therefore be defined as the “inter-play between politics and economics in oil-dependent states” (Reed 19). With striking similarities to a political historical Iraqi context, Reed notes that “the structuring impact of oil” enabled the Angolan state’s survival through the state’s “foreign exchange and recognition in the international economy... despite government officials’ failure to execute basic state functions” (19).

Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* incorporates speculative fictional elements alongside oil imagery and can therefore be categorised as a work of petrofiction. Graeme Macdonald notes that an analysis of these “novelistic registrations of oil frontiers” are situated within the

“world energy trilemma of petromodernity” (289). Utilising the world-systems theory also used by Deckard, Macdonald outlines that “unprecedented” global demand for energy security alongside access, distribution and sustainability “are here placed in tension with a capitalist world-system heavily reliant on fossilised power” (290). Petroviolence is a facet of the resource curse of petrocapi-talism and can be classified as violence that presents itself in oil-dependent states (Reed 45). Petro-violence, in this instance, does not only describe conflicts that are “funded by oil revenues” as well as struggles over the control of oil reserves but can also be classified as encompassing “biophysical violence wrought on ecosystems at the site of extraction (Reed 45). Cultural formations that reproduce recurring “motifs, systemic connections and structures of feeling produced by oil modernity” can therefore be described as “an aesthetics of oil” (Macdonald 291). Petrocapitalism weaves its way throughout *Frankenstein in Baghdad* with initial invisibility until its presence is suddenly made visible through instances of petroviolence in the form and the threat of suicide bombers who frequently appear, and disintegrate into the ether, throughout the narrative. Thus the ‘aesthetics of oil’ that are produced in the novel will be referred to as ‘petro-aesthetics’ in this chapter.

The intersection of the use of petro-aesthetics and speculative fiction culminates in Saadawi’s appropriation of Shelley’s unnamed creature in the eponymous, science fiction ur-text, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Assembled from the disparate body parts of Iraqi citizens and suicide bombers in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion, Saadawi’s translocated “European monster” emerges in the city of Baghdad (Botting 16). However, the reference to “Frankenstein” in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* does not refer specifically to Shelley’s text. Within the novel, the monster is given the moniker, “Frankenstein in Baghdad” in a sensationalist headline by an editor in a local newspaper, accompanied by a picture of the actor Robert DeNiro in grotesque makeup playing Shelley’s creature in the

1994 movie adaptation of the novel (Saadawi 133). It is a metatextual use of the monster whereby the title of the novel is embedded in a narrative within a narrative that “formally and reflexively acknowledges and reworks Shelley’s frame narrative” (Botting 16). By drawing on the “cultural touchstone” (Murphy 275) of Shelley’s unnamed creature, and transplanting it in post-2003 Baghdad, Saadawi’s novel operates using “a combination of generic modes and moods” (Botting 16). The fantastical monstrosity of the creature is juxtaposed against the gritty realism of a city gripped by an insurgency instigated by petro-violence, signalling that any “generic continuity” (Botting 16) in the narrative is futile in the face of trauma.

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The history of petroleum extraction can generally be defined by the characteristics of “power politics, ruthless exploitation, and thuggery” in the form of a “rapacious frontier capitalism” (Watts 190). It is imperialism, however, that may perhaps be the “defining moment” in the history of oil extraction (Watts 190). At the turn of the twentieth century, worldwide attention began to turn toward the use of petroleum products in general transportation, in particular diesel fuel and gasoline (Gruen 93). Significantly, control over the “prospective oil wealth” of Mesopotamia was one of the central subjects of Anglo-French negotiations that took place during the First World War, known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Gruen 95). This early link between militarism, colonial aspiration and fossil fuels in the 20th century can be seen in the British Government’s attention to “the petroleum resources of Iraq and Iran” and their importance in “formulating Britain’s war aims” (Gruen). The fall of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, and subsequent colonial activity shaped both politics and established territories and borders in the region. As a legacy of the Sykes-Picot agreement, Iraq, as well as Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Syria all experienced colonial influence in their formation (Mabon 1783). Nearly a century later, the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 was driven, in no small part, by the same impetus of

petroimperialism that has been a characteristic of Western foreign policy in the Middle East since the turn of the twentieth century (Watts 110) with Paul Wolfowitz, the former U.S. deputy defence secretary, famously stating in June 2003 that the invasion was due to the “fact” that “the country swims in a sea of oil” (Watts 110). Under the guise of the ‘War on Terror’, the US attempted to use Iraq as a strategic placeholder in the region. In the removal of an authoritarian regime, the US instead introduced a neoliberal market economy, thus placeholdering Iraq as an example to its neighbours and consolidating an American base and ally in the region. The reality is that the invasion was poorly executed and left Iraq amidst a power vacuum, to devastating consequences.

The biopolitical impulses that, paradoxically, cumulated in the removal of a stable form of statehood in the country served to create a chiasmic reality in which Iraqi citizens were left to seriously ponder their identity for the first time in decades. Differing religious and ethnic divides were consolidated as Iraqis retreated to the relative safety of those with whom they identified, and rising tensions between long suppressed ethno-religious divides led to deepening sectarian conflict and ensuing violence. It has been stated that it is “the biopolitical cast of a sovereign exceptionalism” that led to the invasion of Iraq and its devastating aftermath (Ali 4). A US-led coalition of international military forces, Iraqi state actors and insurgent militias, all violently bid to assert claims for sovereign authority in crafting a new Iraqi state. As Perveen Ali argues, “[t]hey conflated state with society, categorised citizens according to their ethno-sectarian identities and targeted those deemed unworthy of protection with extreme violence, forced displacement and often death” (4). This aftermath of the invasion was not only accompanied by the destruction of infrastructure and the dissolution of the authoritarian Ba’athist regime, but also by the destruction and annihilation of Iraqi bodies. The monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents in this context the “bare life” of Iraqi body(ies) and body politic that have been subjected to unmitigated and frequent

occurrences of violence during the short years between the 2003 Anglo-American invasion and the sectarian civil war which began in 2005.

The Whatitsname becomes not only a representation of the bio/necropolitical aspects of the petroimperialist aspirations of Western powers but also gestures to the long history of violence in Iraq over the last several decades of its recent history. As the figure of the Whatitsname eventually attends to its mission for vengeance, and assembles a cohort of “assistants”, the monster can also be read as a parody of the preceding Ba’ath Party regime and the necropolitical presidency of Saddam Hussein and the state-sanctioned violence that was a key feature of his regime. Nixon notes that it is the appetite for fossil fuels that has primarily been responsible for “America’s strategic vulnerability” as well as its “reputation as a bully, in the Islamic world and beyond” (72). In particular, it is the appetite for oil that has fashioned a lengthy history of “unsavoury marriages of convenience with petro-despots, generalissimos, presidents for life, and fomenters of terrorism” (Nixon 72-73). Referencing the work of the Saudi-Iraqi writer, Abdelrahman Munif, and his quintet of novels entitled *Cities of Salt*, Nixon states that Munif’s work expertly engages with the “broad geography and volatile history of the petroleum encounter” in Saudi Arabia (73). In describing this encounter, Nixon uses the term “the two-headed behemoth of empire and petro-despotism” that “trampled” over the lands and lives of Bedouins in Munif’s novels (73). This monstrous terminology of a two-headed beast gestures towards an interesting parallel to the monstrosity of the figure of the Whatitsname, a being created out of the destruction and amalgamation of bodies in the aftermath of another culmination between oil and empire: the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The thirty-five-year long Ba’athist dictatorship consistently utilised “state-sanctioned violence” in order to “realise its totalitarian aspirations” (Dodge 32). The brutality of the Ba’athist regime may therefore be characterised as exercising necropower in the willingness

to “let die” large swathes of its populace in order to consolidate power. It should also be noted that the control of oil, and the utilisation of fear as a tool of necropower, were two key features of Saddam Hussein’s rise to power and the consolidation of his rule over the petro-aggressive authoritarian Baathist regime in Iraq. Between 1977 and 1978, Saddam Hussein was in command of Iraq “in all but name” (Colgan 101). In the autumn of 1977, he took two key steps to consolidate power, the first being the most important and crucial to his success: he took control over Iraq’s oil policy which gave him “exclusive access to the key resource of the state” (Colgan 101). Saddam Hussein “personally determined levels of production and controlled the disbursements of oil revenues” and he was the only person who knew the “exact levels of income and expenditure” (Colgan 101). Secondly, the party committee known as the Regional Command, which he had led since 1968, comprised members of the highest governing body in Iraq: the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) (Colgan 101). As the RCC was now made up of a majority of Saddam loyalists, along with his sole control of Iraqi oil, he now had two central elements of his regime at his disposal: “patronage and fear” (Colgan 101). In Iraq, these elements were also known by the alliterative denotations of *tarhib* and *targhib*: terror and enticement.

Once securely installed as the president of Iraq in 1979, Saddam pursued what has been deemed as one of the most aggressive foreign policies “on earth” (Colgan 108). As securing Iraq’s oil reserves was one of the key components in consolidating power, the terms “petro-aggression” or “petro-aggressive” can be used to describe the nature of Saddam’s, and Iraq’s, foreign policy. The first major conflict instigated by Saddam was the Iran-Iraq war which took place between 1980 and 1988. The name of the war, the *Qadisiyyat Saddam*, is a reference to “a seventh century Arab triumph over Persian forces” and suggests that the war was instigated to establish Iraqi military prowess with Saddam given the accolade of “a great leader in the Mesopotamian tradition” (Colgan 111). The war has been called one of the



longest conventional wars that took place in the twentieth century and, while official figures are unknown, it is estimated to have cost 600,000 casualties on both sides. Many soldiers who enlisted never came home and families were often given no choice but to bury empty coffins in the absence of a body.

In the novel, the Assyrian widow, Elishva, lives on her own and wears a black head scarf as a symbol of mourning for her son Daniel, who vanished into the abyss of the war. However, Elishva refuses to accept his death, and it is Elishva who animates the reassembled corpse of the Whatitsname by mis-recognising the creature as her son who has finally returned home from the war. Calling the creature by her son's name, Elishva gives the corpse life and tells it how an empty coffin "containing only some of Daniel's clothes and pieces of his broken guitar" were buried against her wishes (Saadawi 59) but that she knew that he would eventually "come back" (63). Elishva's belief that the Whatsitsname is her son who was lost a war that took place two decades previously gestures to the ways in which the monster does not only represent the immediate political and social context in which it was created but also encapsulates a longer period of history of violence, petroaggression and necropower in Iraq.

Whilst the events in the novel take place approximately three years after the fall of the Baathist regime, a residue of *tarhib*, or terror, associated with the petroaggressive policies enacted by Saddam, continues to haunt ordinary citizens in the narrative. The fortune-tellers and astrologers employed as spies of the Tracking and Pursuit Department recount an incident on a bridge to Brigadier Majid . The astrologers report that "ghostly figures" have been gathering on the Imam's Bridge between the "districts of Kadhimya and Adamiya" (Saadawi 105). The Brigadier is at first suspicious of the astrologers' reporting, noting that "people had been setting off from various parts of Baghdad" to travel to Kadhimiya to attend "ceremonies celebrating the anniversary of the death of the imam Musa al-Kadhim" (Saadawi 105). However, while reading the final report the Brigadier watches as the television in his

office announces that “dozens of people had been killed” on the bridge and that a “rumour” that a suicide bomber in the vicinity had instigated a “panic” with some of the pilgrims throwing themselves from the bridge in fear and others becoming “trampled to death” (Saadawi 105). Key information regarding the spectral manifestation of the ghostly figures is recounted to the brigadier in a matter-of-fact bureaucratic manner:

the figures hovering over the bridge were ghosts that lived in people’s bodies. They slept and rested in those bodies without the people being aware of them, or they could wake up and break free for a little and wander around outside people’s bodies but only when the people were frightened. According to the astrologers, these ghosts were called *tawabie al-khouf*, the ‘familiar of fear’. (Saadawi 108)

The term “wandering” in the text suggests a voluntary and peaceful separation of the incorporeal and the corporeal. In this instance, paradoxically, the spirit is violently expelled from the body in a moment of fear. Later in the novel, when asked about the incident on the bridge in a televised interview, Farid, a journalist states:

‘I’d go further and say that all the security incidents and the tragedies we’re seeing stem from one thing – fear. The people on the bridge died because they were frightened of dying. Every day we’re dying from the same fear of dying. The groups that have given shelter... It has created a death machine working in the other direction because it’s afraid of the Other’. (Saadawi 117-118)

The spirits on the bridge also embody the duality of oil as both energy-giving and capable of destruction. It is the fear of a suicide bomber, whose destructive act is a product of conflict triggered by petroimperialism, that causes the spirit to leave the body, not the explicit manifestation of petroviolence itself. It is also a residual spectral form of fear, that can be

directly linked to the terror/*tarhib* of the necropolitical ‘death machine’ of Saddam’s petro-aggressive regime that continues to haunt Iraqi citizens.

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By its very nature, oil is a material resource that encompasses the spectral and (in)visible aspects of commodification. It is a resource that is “finite” in material terms but has the spectral entity of an “ever-expanding value” placed upon it (McNally 117). This speculative (in)visibility is characteristic of the insidious invisibility of oil in contemporary petromodernity. Macdonald notes a firm critical consensus on this invisibility in terms of commodification but also states that this is in acknowledgement of oil’s propensity for “spectacular” petroviolence as well as the “huge material impositions that have accompanied its terraforming of territories” (Macdonald 293). This (in)visibility means that oil may also be made to be “unseen” by means of “privatization, securitization and military enforcement”, all of which are hallmarks of the speculative US occupation that immediately sought to protect, secure, and ultimately commodify Iraqi oil manufacturing facilities upon entering the country. The Americans themselves also become (in)visible spectres of petroviolence in the novel, with their presence noted in passing throughout amidst the unrelenting petroviolence of suicide bomb attacks. Towards the end of the novel Hadi lies awake in the courtyard in his dwelling:

he closed his eyes for a while, then opened them again and caught sight of the silhouette of an American helicopter flying past, making a thunderous whacking noise. He wanted to get up, but didn’t think he had the strength. Then suddenly his whole body convulsed at the sound of a powerful blast and the ground shaking beneath him. (Saadawi 196)

The blast is due to a “car bomb” that had detonated in the “Sadriya district, several miles from Bataween in the heart of the old capital” (Saadawi 196). In this instance, the novel’s representation of the ephemeral American presence in post-2003 Baghdad can be read as an indication of an ever-present, and yet indifferent, neocolonial power. Their (in)visibility is synonymous with the presence of oil: taking the form of earth-quaking petroviolence in sudden moments of perceptibility. In a morbid parallel to the historical past, Ryan has noted that the bodies of British soldiers who perished “in unfamiliar desert land” still lie in the British War cemetery in Iraq, where their hundred-year-old headstones lie crumbling and subjected to these “nearby bomb blasts” that now devastate the bodies of Iraqi civilians in the post-2003 era.

Whilst the presence of oil takes on destructive properties in the form of petroviolence in the novel, its (in)visible presence also signifies its ability to become a resurrectionary force of energy. The form of energy that eventually animates Hadi’s assembled corpse is the soul of a security guard named Hasib who is killed “by a Sudanese suicide bomber driving a dynamite-laden rubbish truck” at the gates of the hotel in which Hasib is working (Saadawi 33).

Hasib’s death is not explicitly described, but the annihilation of his body in the explosion is made apparent when his family are only able to bury “his burned black shoes; his shredded blood-stained clothes; and small charred parts of his body” (Saadawi 33). At his moment of death, Hasib’s soul leaves his body and retains consciousness:

Hasib was aware of himself observing the explosion, but not from his position between the wooden sentry box and the big hotel’s outer gate. He was looking at the flames, the smoke and the flying pieces of metal from high in the air. He felt a strange calm. (Saadawi 35)

Hasib's soul observes the area and, in a nod to the frequency of violent acts that have similarly taken other lives, watches "darkness engulf the city" as night falls (Saadawi 35). The soul of Hasib is then drawn to the natural and pure environment of the river where he spots a "man in a white vest and white shorts floating face-up in it" (Saadawi 35). The man in white is another soul who says to Hasib's soul: "Why are you looking at me, my son?... Go and find out what happened to your body. Don't stay here" (Saadawi 35). Hasib's soul returns to the scene of the explosion to search for his body in vain where all he can recognize are his "burned boots" that will eventually be buried with his body (Saadawi 36). He searches throughout the city and it occurs to him that the most adequate place to look for his body is the cemetery. In the Valley of Peace in Najaf, Hasib comes across the soul of a teenage boy who is sitting on his grave. The soul of the boy tells Hasib that he is only able to "get out like this" because his body has not yet decomposed (Saadawi 36). The soul of the teenage boy then states that once decomposition occurs he will be "imprisoned in the grave till the end of time" (Saadawi 36). The soul of the boy then warns Hasib that if he does not find his body things will "end badly" for him (Saadawi 36-37). Spurred on by the warning given by the soul of the teenage boy, the bodiless soul of Hasib eventually comes across the corpse that Hadi has assembled, and to Hasib it looks like "a naked man asleep", albeit a naked man who looked "strange and horrible" (Saadawi 37).

Crucially, the soul of the boy tells the soul of Hasib that "the soul is like the fuel in the car... it takes a spark to ignite it" (Saadawi 37) alluding to the energy-giving nature of combustible fossil fuels. The soul also takes on the attributes of oil when Hasib's soul is described as "primordial matter" (Saadawi 38) with petroleum also described as "primordial material of deep origin", which has migrated into the Earth's crust over time (Kutherov 1). The primordial matter of Hasib's soul lodges "inside the corpse, filling it from head to toe", a complete fit because Hasib is "a soul without a body" while the corpse is a "body without a

soul” (Saadawi 38). The dispossession of Hasib’s soul, and its possession of the body of the corpse, also speak to the fraught nature of ownership within the “resource curse”, namely how oil ownership ultimately determines who becomes “possessed or dispossessed, politically, economically, and spiritually” (Nixon 69). Hasib’s search for a whole body to belong to speaks to the consequences of having “mineral belongings” that ultimately erode a “community’s or society’s capacity to belong” (Nixon 69). Elishva’s command for the body to “get up” is the catalyst that sparks life when her words animate the “extraordinary composite” of the disparate body parts and the soul of the hotel guard who had lost his life” (Saadawi 51) thus consolidating a second chance for Hasib to ‘belong’ to the corporeal world and avoid dispossession through decomposition. The incorporeal soul that has been ejected from the corporeal body at the time of death takes on the spectral and resurrectionary force of oil as a primordial substance.

However, the “spark” of life that resurrects life is also a spark that ignites the detonation of a bomb that not only ends life but destroys the corporeal body in its wake. There is a paradoxical life-death duality present in oil whereby the substance of oil can be scientifically construed as a life-giving form of death; it is a form of biomass as a natural conversion of dead biological matter into petroleum (Khagi 451). In this respect, Nixon notes that oil is “the stratified death” which has been “compacted over millennia that technology has enabled us to resurrect as the force that drives our fleeting, internal combustion civilisation” (69). Later in the novel, the Whatitsname becomes a first-person narrator of one chapter when it records its statement to the public on a recording device. The creature is intelligent and eloquent, noting its mission and its creation, describing its body as being comprised of “unseen sinews, rusty from rare use” that “have finally stirred” (Saadawi 136-137). It is an allusion to machinery and oil, with rusty parts that need lubrication from oil in order to function. Speaking of its creation, the Whatitsname states that “the innards of the darkness moved and gave birth to

me” (Saadawi 137), gesturing to the darkness of oil as a substance comprised of dead matter, situated in the earth’s crust. It is also a statement that speaks to the combustible nature of oil as both an energy-giving substance through combustion along with its capacity for destruction.

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The body as a vehicle for necropower, or a death machine, also speaks to the role of the suicide bomber and the larger framework of petroviolence. The monster in Frankenstein in Baghdad is created out of bodies/body parts produced by the violent practice of suicide bombing. At the instant of a bombing, the bodies of suicide bombers are annihilated, along with the bodies of those who are closest to the bomber. These bodies, once “whole and autonomous vessels of subjects” become “heaps of meat” (Wilcox 67). The body is therefore rendered as “inhuman” by the act of violence through the “separation of self and body” (Wilcox 67) where only pieces of bodies are left behind. In the novel, Hadi recounts the assembly of the corpse that will eventually become the monster, the Whatitsname, to a disbelieving audience in a local café. As has already been noted, the corpse/monster is an assemblage of body parts that Hadi finds in the streets in the wake of petroviolence in the form of suicide bombers detonating vehicle bombs that routinely rip through the neighbourhood. In a particularly visceral scene, Hadi places the nose on the face of the corpse:

It was a fresh nose, still coated in congealed, dark red blood. His hand trembling, he positioned it in the black hole of the corpse’s face. It was a perfect fit, as if the corpse had its own nose back (Saadawi 25)

Hadi justifies the seemingly horrific task of putting together a corpse from the body parts of those who have been dismembered by violence by stating that he wanted to give the corpse to

“the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse” and would not be left as rubbish in the streets in the way that the disparate body parts had been (Saadawi 25). The supernatural recomposition of the monster’s body gestures also toward the petroviolent machinery of the suicide bomber: the motor vehicle. As the body of the Whatitsname begins to decompose, it uses language referring to the maintenance of such vehicles when it says: “I needed a complete overhaul. In fact – and this was a conclusion that took me by surprise – I needed new spare parts” (Saadawi 143). Through this gruesome metaphor, the body(ies) of the suicide bomber and their victims are broken down into disparate vehicular parts that are needed to reconstitute the body of the Whatitsname who becomes representative of the ‘death machine’ powered by oil.

It is possible to draw a parallel between the monstrosity of the Whatitsname and the symbolic monstrosity of the suicide bomber whose body and actions expose the instability of the notion of the body as a whole with clearly defined internal and external borders and boundaries. The execution and practice of suicide bombing along with efforts to “recover and resignify bodies reveals how power moulds and constitutes the border of the body and state simultaneously” (Wilcox 66). As Wilcox notes, “suicide bombing as a bodily practice shows bodies to be unnatural and only ever partially and impurely differentiated from one another and the political conditions of their existence” (67). Consequently, suicide bombing draws attention to the ways “sovereignty produces the body politic and political bodies” (Wilcox 67). The “explosive” body of the suicide bomber has “destabilising effects beyond the motivations of its perpetrators and exposes the political work necessary to maintain the illusion of secure, bounded bodies and states” (Wilcox 66). From this perspective, the initial reconstitution of the corpse that will become a monster can be seen to be an effort to reinstate sovereignty through the reconstruction of the bodies of suicide bombers and their victims. Wilcox notes that the “the haunting abject” of the suicide bomber renders such practices of sovereignty



incomplete (Wilcox 67). However, the subsequent animation of the assembled corpse in the novel, and the agency that the Whatitsname exhibits, challenges this notion of partial sovereignty into more ambivalent terms. Within this context of sovereignty, the monster's body is not only an amalgamation of the reconstituted body/bodies of the suicide bomber and their victims. The construction and assembly of the corpse by Hadi, an Iraqi living/surviving in post-Baathist Iraq under US occupation, reads as the subaltern enacting agency over the historical de/construction of Iraqi territory, state and sovereignty by colonial powers.

The body/bodies of the Whatitsname therefore become/s a site where notions of identity, state and sovereignty are continually tested. Sovereignty can be theorized as a “practice bound up with the production of a unified, bounded territory and simultaneously with the production of unified, bounded bodies” (Wilcox 67). Therefore, the space in which sovereignty is produced is often analogized as a body. It has been noted by scholars that one the “explicit war aim[s]” of the 2003 US invasion was “protecting the territorial integrity of Iraq” (Elden 116).

However, Elden states that there is a “profound ambiguity” relating to how this notion of territorial integrity is understood, noting that the US-led coalition is stated in terms of “preservation, the maintenance of the territorial status quo” (116). While preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq becomes an “absolute” due to “perceived dangers to stability of secession or fragmentation”, Elden also notes that the preservation of territorial extent is also contingent on preserving “the sovereignty within it” (Elden 116-117). However, Iraq could not be deemed to be sovereign within this context as sovereignty is also dependent “for humanitarian reasons, by the harbouring of terrorists, or the production of weapons of mass destruction” (Elden 117). Iraq was subsequently accused of being guilty on both counts in unsubstantiated claims by the Allied powers and thus refused sovereignty. The importance placed on the territorial integrity of Iraq can also be seen in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991, as Iraq was “not punished by loss of territory to Kuwait” nor was it “split apart

along ethnic lines in a punitive settlement” (Elden 118). Significantly, Elden notes that “dismemberment” was considered but was rejected due to the importance of maintaining territorial integrity (118).

If the Whatitsname can be read as signifying the paradoxical duality of oil as both *élan vital* and a destructive form of death, then the body of the creature also signifies the cyclical nature of violence in the re/de-constitution of the body and state. Throughout the novel, parts of the body of the creature begin to disintegrate and decompose once the monster has committed an act of vengeance against a perpetrator of violence. Speaking through a recording device, the creature addresses the public to ensure that its “mission is not misrepresented” (Saadawi 137):

‘With the help of God and of heaven, I will take revenge on all the 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’ (Saadawi 137)

As well as having terms such as “vengeance”, “revenge” and “justice” for “the innocent who have no protection other than the tremors of their souls” assigned as reasons for its actions (Saadawi 137), the Whatitsname’s mission is also driven by the origins of the composite nature of its body. As it is constructed out of the body parts (and the soul) of victims of violence, its mission is to enact vengeance against individuals responsible for the deaths of these victims:

He had killed Abu Zaidoun to avenge Daniel Tadros, and he had killed the officer in the brothel because he was responsible for the death of someone whose fingers Hadi had taken for the Whatitsname’s body. He would keep on doing his work until the end (Saadawi 127)

Once its mission is completed, the victims who make up its composite form will finally be able to “rest in peace” (Saadawi 125). Thus, once vengeance is enacted against “all the criminals who committed crimes against him”, the whole, corporeal form of the Whatitsname will “collapse” and decomposition will begin to set in (Saadawi 127). In this context, the creature recounts a moment of violence in which it kills a perpetrator and returns to its dwelling with its “whole body riddled with bullets” (Saadawi 142). It is impervious to the bullets themselves, but its body begins to decay with a “piece of flesh” on its shoulder refusing to “stay in place – it was all runny, like flesh from a several-days-old corpse” (Saadawi 142). The Magician, one of the assistants of the Whatitsname describes this decomposition succinctly when he states: “Whenever you kill someone, that account is closed... [i]n other words, the person who was seeking revenge has had his wish fulfilled, and the body part that came from him starts to melt” (Saadawi 142). The creature notes that “sticky fluids were oozing from my wounds and from the fissures where the stitches were coming apart” (Saadawi 143). This imagery alludes to decay but also to imagery of oil due to descriptions of a fluid substance that, as it leaks, drains the life-force, or *élan vital*, of the creature. The fluid leaking through fissures of the body also draws an allusion to the Babylon of “Biblical times” where “oil seepages” were “visible on the ground” amidst the combustible, “spontaneous fires in Mesopotamia” (Gruen 92) imbuing the creature with a relationship to the land and resources in an ancient ‘Iraqi’ context that supersedes recent colonial and neocolonial interventions on the boundaries of its territory(ies).

It becomes clear that the creature also embodies the notion of territory, sovereignty, and identity when it is characterised as the “first true Iraqi citizen” by one of its assistants (Saddawi 140). It is the youngest madman, the assistant deemed as the less important of the cohort, who states, as reiterated by the Whatitsname in the narrative, that he believes the creature to be the “model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce” since the “days of

King Faisal I” (Saadawi 140), the Hashemite ruler installed by imperial powers and Iraqi ministers whose rule “encompassed the British mandate period” of the early years of the consolidation of Iraq (Can 299). The young madman’s assertions are due to the composite nature of the creature, and the Whatitsname notes:

‘Because I’m made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds – ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes – I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I’m the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks... Because I’m made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds – ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes – I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past’ (Saadawi 140)

The body of the creature therefore becomes a site of a speculative Iraqi identity that is intertwined with notions of territory, state, and sovereignty. However, the Whatitsname is an unnatural and artificial construction, much like the state of Iraq itself. Elden notes that “all states are in some sense artificial” but the Iraqi context signifies the ways in which some states “fail to build on that initial framework” (116).

The “impossible mix” that the creature alludes to has contributed to an “Iraqi identity problem” as the decomposition of the creature signifies the failure of sustaining an artificially constructed sense of Iraqi national belonging. Facing decomposition and the slow annihilation of its corporeal form, the creature begins to veer away from its mission and goes rogue in order to remain vital and maintain the boundary(ies) and vitality of its composite form. At first, the re-assemblage of parts on the body of the creature is undertaken unbeknownst to it; while it sleeps to gather energy as its body continues to rot, its assistants take it upon themselves to reconstitute the creature:

‘The eldest madman cut out the rotten parts of my body, and the other two madmen – the young one and the elder one – stitched in the new parts. Then they all carried me to the bathroom on the top floor, where they washed off the blood and the sticky plasma fluids and dried me’ (Saadawi 145)

The body parts used to reconstitute the creature are taken from a young man, given the moniker “the saint” (Saadawi 145) by the Whatitsname and its assistants, who “had died bravely” at the hands of an unspecified armed group within the vicinity (Saadawi 145). The creature feels a “surge of vitality and new sensations” upon corporeal reconstitution (Saadawi 145). Its consciousness is also affected as the creature states that it has forgotten “what I had been planning to do in the morning” as “strange faces appeared around me” and, guided by the “saint’s fingers”, hunts down the group who had executed the young man (Saadawi 146). The newly assembled body of the Whatitsname becomes a visceral representation of the body as a “death machine” as it kills each member of the group. Whilst similarities have been drawn previously to the necropower fuelled by oil under Saddam Hussein, who utilised both fear (*tarhib*) and enticement (*targhib*) to consolidate power, it is important to note that the creature is not driven by an impetus to rule despite its classification as the ‘first true Iraqi citizen’. The body of the creature instead only elicits fear (*tarhib*) or terror through its acts of retributive violence:

Half an hour later there was only one member of the group left, sitting terrified in the corner. I couldn’t see his face clearly... but I could see he was crying. I moved closer and saw that he was shaking, like a frightened sheep submitting to a butcher. He was well aware that it was no normal enemy that he and his group were up against tonight. It was the wrath of God (Saadawi 146).

As the creature continues to kill from its list of targets, its body continues to decompose and is continually reconstituted by “parts from new victims” (Saadawi 146) thus perpetuating a cycle of violence linked to the re/de/constitution of the Iraqi body in relation to the triad of the state, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

There is a historical link between “Iraq’s identity problem” (Can 402), as signified through the body of the creature, and ongoing “political violence [that] lies at the heart of the vicious circle blocking the people of Iraq to thrive [toward] a common sense of belonging” (Can 402). Elden notes that the insurgency that took place after 2003 has been made possible by the reinvention of Iraq as a “failed state” “in place of a ‘rogue one’” whereby the US (136), through neocolonial invasion and intervention, “created the very thing that threatened stability in the first place” (136). The United States also grossly miscalculated when they “assumed that they would simply decapitate the Iraqi regime and graft a new regime onto the still-functioning torso of the Iraqi State” (Hurst 182). The Whatitsname, its composite figure that is symbolic of the formation of an all-encompassing speculative Iraqi identity, has its existence threatened by the retributive violence that it continuously enacts. In an inverse of the neocolonial aspirations for Iraq, the Whatitsname fights its decomposition by going ‘rogue’ in its mission. However, there is no conceivable end to this mission, with the creature stating, “I realized that under these circumstances I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end” (Saadawi 147). The body of the Whatitsname becomes a site where the constant restitching, consolidation, and maintenance of the borders of the body/state/sovereignty are made apparent. These efforts also are enacted in vain as the body of the creature is ultimately doomed to fail due to the continuous cycle of violence needed to consolidate the boundaries of the body constituted of all aspects of a speculative Iraqi identity that is paradoxically generated by disposability.

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The petroviolence depicted throughout the novel is not just a representative contribution to post-2003 Iraqi cultural production that is critical of hegemonic ideas of empire, exploitation and domination at the heart of the US neo-imperialist occupation. It also interrogates the neoliberal political and economic decentralization of post-2003 Iraq whereby human beings are rendered disposable. The “decomposing fictions” of Saadawi’s work reveal how the biopolitical impetus to invade and govern under the policies of security consolidation and “societal stabilization” instead produces an environment of pervasive insecurity and instability (Davies 1). In one scene in the novel, Hadi sits, smoking, on a pavement and grimly surmises that “a car bomb or some other explosive might go off at any moment” and decides that the pavement “would be a good place to get killed by one” in a moment of suicidal contemplation (Saadawi 100). He sits on the pavement until night falls “deep in thought about the possibility that dozens of bombs had either been exploded or defused during that day” and noting that “no day passed without at least one car bomb” going off (Saadawi 100). Becoming frustrated, he wonders why he sees “other people dying on the news and yet he was still alive?” (Saadawi 100). It is a passage that glibly and grimly highlights the proliferation and normalization of routine acts of extreme violence in an urban environment in the grip of uncontrollable and unpredictable violence. This form of violent assault is not only aimed at traditionally unprotected social conglomerates as in other societies (ie. drug addicts, prostitutes, the homeless, etc.) but is indiscriminate toward nearly all of Iraqi society. As posited by Hardt and Negri at the turn of the new millennium, the state is no longer the primary and singular imperial, political machine capable of reducing the human being to a mere disposable body. The global emergence of neoliberalism has led to the birth of legal, and illegal, economic elites capable of wielding the power necessary to transform the capital body into a redundant or excess body in a mere instant. Therefore, the

human being situated within the neo-imperial realm becomes susceptible to violence from both the state and economic powers.

Giroux states that “under the logic of modernization, neoliberalism and militarization, the category ‘waste’ includes no longer simply material goods but also human beings, particularly those rendered redundant in the new global economy” (308). The “aesthetics of waste” that are prevalent throughout the novel reveals to the reader a reality in which “people’s humanity has been erased” (Reyes-Zaga and Ortega Brena 190). The dismembered corpses that litter the streets after near-daily suicide bomb attacks are a clear example of this residual process in post-2003 Baghdad whereby the human body has “lost any value or dignity” (Reyes-Zaga and Ortega Brena 190). It has been suggested that the “biopolitical capture of human life” through “territorial conquests” that occur within the “configurations of geopolitical power” may often involve the “putting to death of populations” (Debrix 85). This conceptual framework states that the bio/necropolitical concerns over the “life/death of individual bodies” are no longer a primary concern within this context of “geopolitical violence and destruction” (Debrix 85). What is of concern, instead, is the “pulverization of the human” that occurs during these acts of violence rendering the corporeal body indistinct from “non-human matter” in its destruction (Debrix 85). This destruction of the corporeal human body is a “horroristic” characteristic of form of “contemporary geopolitical annihilation” that leave nothing but traces of human and non-human matter (Debrix 91). These contemporary modes of annihilation commonly occur in the form of drone strikes or suicide bombings, and Debrix suggests that these attacks force a suspension of the belief or hope in human survival (91).

Within the environment of pervasive violence in the novel, “dead bodies” are reduced down to “rubbish” that litters the streets (Saadawi 147). And while the Whatitsname and its cohort praise a young man for his bravery as a “martyr” in the face of death, once his body has been



decimated for spare parts that facilitate the vitality of the Whatitsname his body is “carried off and thrown atop the rubble of a house” (Saadawi 145). It is no coincidence that Hadi, the creator and ‘father’ of the Whatitsname is a “junk dealer” who specialises in antiquities by trade. Much in the same way that Hadi rescues body parts from the streets that would otherwise be reduced down to waste, he is also a buyer and seller of relics of the past. His work involves reconstituting what others may perhaps consider to be waste and/or disposable. However, Hadi also falls victim to indiscriminate violence enacted by the state when he is physically assaulted by two officers from the Tracking and Pursuit department. While they beat Hadi, they also destroy and steal the antiquities and memorabilia that Hadi has been collecting including a “a broken chandelier, a wooden wall clock... and set of plates... with pictures of King Ghazi and King Faisal II” (Saadawi 184). The theft of his work and his assault speaks to the indifference paid to the value of a human life that has been reduced to waste.

Whilst the aesthetics of waste in the novel encapsulate the bare lives of the Iraqi citizen, there is also an attempt to mourn the ungrievable body of the bare life and to surmount the horror of its passing. The assembly of the Whatitsname is instigated by the trauma that Hadi experiences after the death of his friend and business partner, Nahem, who is killed on horseback by the explosion of a suicide bomb in Karrada whilst attending a religious party. The horror in not being able to distinguish the mutilated body from the non-human is viscerally described when it is stated that “it had been hard to separate Nahem’s flesh from that of the horse” he had been riding (Saadawi 23). Hadi is traumatized by the shocking death of his friend and there is a change in his outward demeanour in which he becomes:

...[A]ggressive... [h]e swore and cursed and threw stones after the American Hummers... He got into arguments with anyone who mentioned Nahem and what happened to him... as soon as he was alone he was gloomy and despondent in a way

he hadn't been before. He also started drinking during the day and always had quarters of arak or whisky in his pocket and the smell of alcohol on his breath.

(Saadawi 23)

Within the narrative of the novel, the story of Nahem's death is recounted by an omniscient narrator directly before Hadi tells the story of assembling the corpse to listeners in the café. Hadi states his reasons for assembling the corpse: "I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like rubbish" (Saadawi 25). When the listeners object that it is technically not a complete corpse because Hadi is the person artificially assembling its form, Hadi again refers to waste when he retorts that "I made it complete so it wouldn't be treated as rubbish, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial" (Saadawi 25). Whilst gruesome as an idea, it could be suggested that the task of assembling a corpse from anonymous body parts is a "task of mourning" (Butler 19) on Hadi's part who attempts to mourn his friend in the absence of the rehabilitating public ritual of the burial of a whole corporeal body.

This human need to publicly mourn the corporeal body of the dead, and the assembly of parts, is also apparent in the chapter entitled 'A Lost Soul' in the novel, which describes the death of the security guard, Hasib, whose lost soul fits into the barren form of the Whatitsname and thus ignites the action of animation. The chapter opens with a brief biographical description about Hasib where the reader learns that he is "twenty-one years old, dark, slim and married to Dua Jabbar" with whom he has a "baby daughter" named Zahraa (Saadawi 33). This is an attempt to humanize one individual amongst the routinely dehumanized followed by the revelation that Hasib is killed in the explosion and his body is obliterated. The family attempt to give Hasib a proper burial with what little remains are left of his corporeal form. Overwhelmed by grief after his burial, each of Hasib's family members separately dream "something of Hasib" in order to make him whole (Saadawi 34). In much

the same way that Hadi constructs a corpse out of disparate body parts as a method of honouring the dead, the separate dreams from each of Hasib's family members knit together, albeit subconsciously, to form a whole:

Parts of one dream made up for parts missing in another. A little dream filled a gap in a big one, and the threads stitched together to create a dream body for Hasib, to go with his soul, which was hovering over all their heads and seeking the rest it could not find. Where was the body to which it should return in order to take its place among those who live in a state of limbo? (Saadawi 34)

There is an allusion here to the assembly of the *Whatisname* and the 'stitching' together of a 'dream body' as an act of grieving. It also signals the notion of a phantasmagorical 'dream body' of Iraq, a petrostate conjured by speculative imperial powers through the assembly of separate Ottoman provinces. Through the conjuring of the state by imperial powers, and the consolidation of its borders by means of continued neocolonial intervention, the inhabitants of Iraq are left in a similar state of limbo as they are left to straddle the borders between bio/necropolitical distinctions of life and death. The spectral presence of oil in Iraq, and its paradoxical dual nature as both a form of energy that has the capacity to power animation and destruction, suggests that its existence (though finite) will continue to fuel these hazy indistinctions.

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*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a significant text within the corpus of post-2003 Iraqi fiction that can be distinguished through its hybrid aesthetics and formal techniques. Adapting the dominant mode of social realism which was more prevalent in the Iraqi novel of the twentieth century, Saadawi's novel also incorporates an other-than-realist aesthetics and literary tropes more commonly found in Western speculative fiction through his appropriation of the

Western literary figure of the monster. Situating his version of the monster amidst the realistic depiction of violence in post-2003 Baghdad, when the city was in the grips of sectarian unrest, Saadawi juxtaposes realist and other-than-realist aesthetics in order to represent and interrogate the long history of Iraqi necropolitics and the impact of living in the long duration of war, occupation, and violence. In particular, this chapter examined *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a work of petrofiction, whereby the (in)visible presence of oil can be read through playing close attention to use of ‘petro-aesthetics’ in the text. Through this mapping of petro-aesthetics and related thematic concerns, this chapter approached *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a text that charts the interrelated histories of oil, imperialism and violence within the specific historical and political context of Iraq. Saadawi’s use of petro-aesthetics is also representative of the ways in which Iraqi writers, in the post-2003 period, utilise experimental and hybrid forms of textual representation to interrogate instances of violence enacted on the Iraqi body alongside related environmental concerns regarding Iraq’s natural resources. Whilst *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers no resolution to the cyclical nature of violence that is represented through the composite body of the Whatitsname, the text serves to act as a form of bearing witness, and a tool to interrogate the individual and historical trauma that is encoded on the Iraqi body amidst sites of necropower and petrovioleence.

## Chapter Two: Hydro-Arboreality in *The Corpse Washer*

*The Corpse Washer*, published in its English translation in 2013, is a novel written by the Iraqi novelist, poet, literary translator and scholar, Sinan Antoon. Originally published in Arabic in 2010 under the Arabic title *Wahdaha shajarat al-rumman* (“The Pomegranate Alone”), the novel is centred around the story of a young Iraqi man named Jawad, who is born into a family of Shi’ite corpse washers in Baghdad in Iraq. The fragmented narrative comprises Jawad’s memories, recollections and dream/nightmare vignettes, rendering a life story told amidst Iraq’s turbulent, and often violent history. Jawad rebels against his father’s wishes that he become a *mghassilchi*, or “corpse washer”, by attempting to forge a new vocation as an artist. However, forced by the circumstance of his father’s death and the instability that erupts in Iraq due to the 2003 US invasion, Jawad is ultimately forced to return to the family *mghaysil*, or “ritual washing house” and the practice of washing and shrouding the dead.

The novel’s Arabic title, “The Pomegranate Alone”, refers directly to the lone pomegranate tree that grows in the garden of the *mghaysil* in the novel, nourished by the water used in the ritualistic practice of washing the dead. This title also refers to a central metaphor of encroaching and eventual solitude in the novel. Through the non-linear fragmented narrative comprised of short chapters/vignettes, Jawad recalls many significant relationships in his life, from family members to lovers and friends, and how each relationship is lost to him due to death, exile and disappearance. As the novel closes in the midst of a wave of sectarian violence that erupted in Baghdad during the US occupation, Jawad is left alone in the *mghaysil*, surrounded by the corpses that he must wash, with just the pomegranate tree for company. Through a hybrid narrative structure where the boundaries of reality and unreality

are prone to blur and dissolve, Antoon portrays the eventual disintegration of an Iraqi middle class after decades of dictatorship, sanctions and three wars. This is also the story of one damaged Iraqi life that, while inflected by trauma and grief, strives toward hope through the difficult process of telling one's life story.

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The narrative structure of *The Corpse Washer* is formally associated with water. The novel can be read through the relationship between water and time, more particularly in terms of the fluid movement and characteristics of water along with the various forms it takes on. Utilising Hannah Boast's conceptualisation of 'hydrofiction', I propose that *The Corpse Washer* presents a narrative structure that can be described as possessing the material properties of the hydrological in its fluidity and shifting nature. This fluid and shifting narrative is emblematic of the experiences, perceptions and psyche of its narrator, Jawad, who recalls a tumultuous history in Iraq, from the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s to the sectarian violence of 2005 to 2006 that erupted in the aftermath of the 2003 US invasion. Unstable temporalities are at play throughout a narrative that is comprised of memory and dream/nightmare vignettes and is inflected by violent imagery and the impact of trauma. The presence of water, though not consistently overt, is significant within the novel given Jawad's occupation as a corpse washer, and his proximity to both water and the dead manifests itself throughout the narrative. As well as water, this chapter will also examine the significance of trees in the novel, through both form and thematic concerns. The term 'hydro-arboreal' will thus be used throughout to examine how the representation of water and trees, as linked through their natural eco-cycle, can be read in the novel as a 'hydro-arboreal aesthetic' and can be categorised as a narrativity that reflects a 'human time' that is disrupted by the 'more-than-human'. Utilising Boast's conceptualisation of a "hydrological imaginary" alongside the ecocritical notion of "storied matter", this research will examine how the shifting narrative of

*The Corpse Washer* can be attributed to the non-human agentic time-spaces, in the form of water and trees, that impact on the human narrative. If we presuppose that trees have longer life spans than humans, it is then worth examining how these lifespans influence the human time depicted in the novel, with Antoon's narrative voices reflecting the challenge of writing the more-than-human within the textual form of the novel. Through these more-than-human hydro-arboreal temporalities, the novel depicts the difficulties and potentials associated with representing eco-trauma alongside human trauma within the context of Iraqi necropolitical history, thus disrupting the novel's traditional anthropocentrism.

Hannah Boast's notion of "hydrofiction", a literary category whereby water resources are "read" through literary works in order to discover a "hydrological imaginary" (3-4) that may "enrich... our thinking about literature and water and our understanding of the relationships between water and power" (21-22), provides an initial framework to develop an analysis of the novel with respect to the main concerns of this study. In her work on Israeli and Palestinian literature, Boast notes that the presence of water in these texts suggests that "the most important factor in whether water is constructed as scarce or abundant is dominant forms of political power" (4). Therefore, literary works that may be construed as 'hydrofictions' highlight the ways in which "natural hydropolitical realities are socially and politically produced" (4). Using Boast's conceptualisation, *The Corpse Washer* may be read as a work of hydrofiction due to the hydrological imaginary at work throughout the novel in terms of its historical detail. Early in the novel, Jawad recounts the death of his older brother, Ammoury. This chapter is significant in that it enables the reader to situate the narrative of Jawad's life within a relatively specific time-period, despite the shifting temporalities of a narrative that oscillates between realism (in the chapters that recount Jawad's memories) and the 'other-than-real' (in the dream-nightmare chapters/vignettes). For instance, the realist style of narrative in this chapter indicates to the reader that what is being recounted is a

memory, but the details of *when* this memory is taking place are not immediate from the outset due to a lack of specific details initially provided by the narrator. These details trickle in, like water, as Jawad recounts how he learned about his brother's death and how he broke the news to his father in the *mghaysil*. Initially the reader learns that Ammoury was "killed in the al-Faw battles" (Antoon 8) but no further details on al-Faw are provided in the text. A significant connection to the hydrological is therefore drawn upon learning that Al-Faw is a strategic port town, located in the al-Faw peninsula in Iraq that is, incidentally, situated between two significant bodies of water: the Persian Gulf and the Shatt-al-Arab river. Al-Faw can be situated within various historical contexts of wartime in Iraq that stretch from the First World War up until the Anglo-American invasion of 2003. As noted by Raheem, Al-Faw was a strategic town that was captured and occupied by British forces at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Nearly a century later, in April 2003, *The Belfast News Letter* reported that the Royal Marines "moved patrol boats across the muddy flats of the Al-Faw peninsular[sic] and launched them in the Shatt-al Arab waterway". This is described in jingoistic fashion that encapsulates the neo-colonial militaristic mindset as a "piece of naval unorthodoxy that would have made Nelson proud" (*The Belfast News Letter*). In an article from 2013, Graeme Wood notes that the importance of Al-Faw, described as a "tiny teardrop of land", lies in its borders; it lies "between Iran and Kuwait" while it shares its northern border with the Shatt-al-Arab river, thus "demarcating the southernmost border of Iraq and Iran" and "stretching between" the Iraqi city of Basra and the Persian Gulf. Within an Iraqi geopolitical context, the importance of al-Faw to Iraq is due its proximity to the Persian Gulf, with Woods noting that "without al-Faw ... Iraq would have no outlet or claim to the sea" (83).

Al-Faw and the Shatt-al-Arab waterway can also be situated at the genesis of the Iran-Iraq war, when Saddam Hussein declared Iraqi sovereignty over the entire Shatt-al-Arab on 17th



September 1980, thus rescinding the 1975 treaty that had ceded territory of the Shatt-al-Arab to Iran (Tripp 224). Just a few days later, on 22nd September, the Iraqi air force engaged in strikes on Iran's military airfields while Iranian territories along the Shatt-al-Arab were invaded by Iraqi forces (Tripp 225). Believing that the Iranian regime was "insecure and enfeebled", it has been noted that Saddam Hussein believed that this demonstration of Iraqi sovereignty would be a "short, demonstrative war" against Iran (Tripp 224-225). However, this proved to be a disastrous "miscalculation" as the Iranian government viewed this attack as a "test" of their revolution and a "defence of the revolution" became a focal point of "popular mobilisation in Iran" (Tripp 224). As well as this, the Iraqi military was "considerably less competent" than Saddam Hussein had expected (Tripp 225). In 1986, the al-Faw peninsula was captured and held by Iranian forces (Tripp 232, Wood) and would not be recaptured by Iraqi forces until nearly two years later, in April 1988 (Tripp 238). In the novel, when Ammourey's body arrives, Jawad's father is at work at the *mghaysil* (the washhouse) and, as the body arrives, Jawad rushes there to break the news to him. Upon arriving, Jawad takes in the surroundings and notes that "death's traces" are "present in every inch of that place" (Antoon 11). He describes the paint on the wall that is "peeling away" due to the presence of the "humidity from the washing" (Antoon 11), a deterioration of the physical aesthetic of the interior of the building due to the routine use of water that is used to wash the dead. There is a religious aspect of the building as Jawad describes a Qur'anic verse that hangs over the door in Diwani script that says "Every soul shall taste death" and Jawad notes that his father would like to think that he is one of God's "employee[s]" in his profession as a corpse washer. However, Jawad subverts this by surmising that his father may in fact be the employee of "death" due to its presence in the room. At the end of the chapter, Jawad notes that in as little as "three and a half years after Ammourey's death, Saddam invaded Kuwait" (Antoon 13). He also notes that in order to deploy Iraqi troops to Kuwait,

Saddam also concedes to Iranian conditions in order to secure the Iranian border of the eastern front, thereby relinquishing “all the demands for which he’d waged war in the first place” (Antoon 13). Upon learning this, Jawad’s father, still stricken with grief, “punched the table and shouted: ‘Why the hell did we fight for eight years then and what in the hell did Ammoury die for?’” (Antoon 13). The presence of death in the *mghaysil*, the space of the main characters’ everyday life, hence highlights the omnipresence of death in Iraqi life due to the necropolitical actions of Saddam Hussein as he instigated successive wars that occurred from the 1980s onwards. Thus, the utilisation of Boast’s conception of hydrofiction and its ‘hydrological imaginary’ is the groundwork for reading a work of post-2003 Iraqi fiction that offers new ways of examining the relationship between water and power at certain points of Iraqi history.

This chapter will examine how *The Corpse Washer* is a post-2003 Iraqi work of hydrofiction in which the hydrological can be read through not only the thematic engagement with water but also the formal techniques and aesthetics of the novel. The fluid and shifting material properties of water are rendered in a narrative that possesses unstable temporalities and both realist and other-than-realist narrative techniques. In addition to the hydrological, this analysis of form and aesthetics will also examine the presence of the arboreal in the novel, whereby the hydrological and arboreal can be connected and integrated in what can be described as the ‘hydro-arboreal’. This analysis the hydro-arboreal addresses the ways in which *The Corpse Washer* represents and interrogates the impact of Iraqi necropolitics and history on conceptions of the ‘body’. Following on from this thesis’ previous chapter on oil in Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the body in this analysis can be construed as both the human, corporeal body(ies) of Iraqi individuals and/or citizens, as well as the national body of the state/country. This analysis is also predicated on the notion of the text itself a ‘body’ whereby the impact of the Iraqi necropolitical history is examined as affecting

the formal techniques of the novel. Accordingly, the chapter approaches the notion of the ecological ‘body’ through specific eco-contexts in the ‘body’ of Iraq, specifically the hydrological and the arboreal. These Iraqi hydrological eco-contexts include notable bodies of water in Iraq, including rivers and lakes, whilst the Iraqi arboreal eco-contexts that are examined include the date palm and the pomegranate tree. The term ‘hydro-arboreal’ is used in this chapter to denote the interconnectedness of the hydrological and the arboreal as an ‘eco-cycle’ that has been disrupted, damaged and contaminated due to the ongoing wars that have been characteristic of Iraq’s necropolitical history over the last four decades.

This analysis of the hydro-arboreal aesthetics in *The Corpse Washer* also incorporates Stef Craps’ notion of postcolonial trauma alongside material ecocriticism that examines the arboreal in literature. As noted in the previous chapter, Craps posits that there has been a tendency by trauma theorists to narrowly focus their analysis on texts by “mostly” Western writers that utilise “fragmented, modernist forms” and an “anti-narrative” in an attempt to portray the “psychic experience of trauma” (40). Craps suggests that texts by non-Western authors that utilise realist aesthetics along with a “message” to politically mobilise should also be classified as trauma literature (41). I argued that post-2003 Iraqi literature may be classified as a mode of trauma literature due to its adoption of both realist and non-realist aesthetics as a form of hybridity. *The Corpse Washer* is also therefore classified as a significant text within the corpus of post-2003 Iraqi fiction due to this hybridity in aesthetics and its formal qualities. Hybridity correlates to both aesthetics and the fact that the human narrative in the novel is disrupted by the hydro-arboreal, reflecting both the human trauma and eco-trauma wrought on Iraq as a result of decades of necropolitical violence and neglect. Notwithstanding the realist aesthetics that are present in sections of the novel, we cannot approach the narrator, Jawad, as portraying an urgent message that urges political mobilisation on the part of the reading audience, as per Craps’ conceptualisation of non-

Western trauma literature. However, the use of other-than-realist techniques also unsettles the notion that the text is merely setting up a “psychoanalytic situation” (Craps 41) between the reader and the text. Rather, it is the inflection of the hydro-arboreal on the novel’s aesthetics that enables the text to become a representation of the impact of trauma on the human corporeal body and the body of the national environment, as well as also serving as an archive for the ecological implications of Iraqi necropolitical history. Thus, paying attention to the hydro-arboreal in the narrative of *The Corpse Washer* draws attention to a vulnerable ‘circulatory system’ within the body of the Iraqi nation that has also been susceptible to violence in similar ways to the corporeal body/bodies of Iraqi citizens.

Reading hydro-arboreal aesthetics in the text also draws attention to the ways in which the eco-contexts of water and trees are ecological entities with their own sentience and agentic abilities. The disruption of the human narrative by the hydro-arboreal signifies how water and trees, rather than simply being witnesses to the human affairs and trauma in the narrative, are afforded their own agency and ontology. Through a fluid and shifting narrative that oscillates between realism and other-than-realism, the novel depicts the challenges of writing the more-than-human through the malleable form of the novel. As Bruno Latour states, in his conceptualisation of representing the earth’s ‘geo-story’, that “storytelling is not just the property of human language” but is instead “one of the many consequences of being thrown in a world that is, by itself, fully articulated and active” (13). The presence of ecological elements, such as water or trees, in literary texts can be further articulated as “storied matter” whereby the more-than-human strives to tell its own story within a predominantly human, narrative world. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue that “storied matter” is the “material phenomena” of the world, which can be described as “knots in a vast network of agencies” and can be “‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives [and] stories” (1). This material ecocritical approach proposes that the world can be “read” through the physical

matter that constitutes the makeup of the world (Oppermann 21). In this reading of the world, matter is “endowed with stories”, thus suggesting what Oppermann designates as a “new mode of description” called “storied matter” whereby all matter possesses “an agency” comprised of “signs and meanings” (21). These “stories of matter” can be construed “everywhere” from “the air we breathe” to the “things and beings of this world” that are “within and beyond the human realm” (Iovino and Oppermann 1).

This framework can be described as the study of the ways in which “material forms”, such as “bodies, things, elements... organic and inorganic matter, landscapes and biological entities”, “intra-act” both with “each other and with the human dimension” (Iovino and Oppermann 7). Crucially, the term ‘intra-action’ is used here in order to avoid anthropomorphising the natural world, whereby human beings become “separate observers” who “translate” the stories of the world into a “comprehensible narrative format” (Oppermann 26). Intra-action thus recognises the “dynamism” and agency of the world as an “ongoing process of intra-acting agencies” (Oppermann 26). These “intra-actions” can be said to produce “configurations of meanings and discourses” that can be described as “stories” (Iovino and Oppermann 7). Therefore, these “stories of matter” or “storied matter” are material forms in which the materiality of the being/thing is “punctuated over time with meanings” (Iovino and Oppermann 7). Whilst these “stories of matter” cannot be described as having a “pre-ordered plot”, they can be identified by a “narrative performance” which is a “dynamic process of material expressions” and can be seen in “bodies, things, and phenomena” that coemerge within “networks of intra-acting forces and entities” (Iovino and Oppermann 7). This conceptualisation of matter outlines how non-human matter has the ability to enact its own agency on the narrative form of a literary text whilst avoiding being anthropomorphised in its association with the human. From this perspective, the use of both realist and other-than-realist aesthetics in *The Corpse Washer*, through the inflection of the hydro-arboreal, allows a

narrative integration between the human and the non-human through the reading of water and trees as storied matter in the text. As such, this chapter argues that the narrative of *The Corpse Washer* is not entirely about the human experiences of trauma throughout Iraqi history. Rather, reading the hydro-arboreal in the novel unearths a “human [and] non-human complex of interrelated agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann 9) whereby the story of human trauma in Iraq is narrated alongside a story of eco-trauma induced by Iraq’s necropolitical and neocolonial history.

An analysis of non-human storied matter in the novel also accounts for the shifting temporalities that the narrative possesses, whereby the presence of both water and trees introduce different and unsettled time-spaces. In *The Corpse Washer*, linear narrative notions of temporality are disrupted as Antoon embeds dream and nightmare sequences in short vignettes throughout a novel that presents the past as a sort of recurring present. This experimentation in form, whereby the narrative is ruptured and the sense of reality is distorted, can also be formally associated with the fluidity that is characteristic of the material properties of water that features as a central motif in the novel while figuring as one of the key environmental, biopolitical and symbolic elements of Iraq’s political history. Much like the current of water, the narrative ebbs and flows between the perceptions of the present, the realist representation of memories, and the surreal dream/nightmares of its protagonist Jawad. Rigid notions of temporality are suspended as Jawad attempts to negotiate his place contrapuntally in both the past of contemporary Iraqi history and its present-day iteration. The related presence of trees as storied matter in the novel, in particular the pomegranate tree that is fed by the water of the *mghaysil*, are examined in relation to the novel’s shifting time-spaces. It has been noted that trees have their own experience of time that is separate to humans in that a tree’s “experience of time is non-linear” (O’Neill 15). Taking into account

this conceptualisation of “arboreal time” when reading trees as storied matter accounts for the oscillation between realism and other-than-realism in the novel’s narrative.

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In the novel, Jawad is a lucid narrator but presents his sense of reality/unreality in a non-linear fashion. A basic fact regarding narratives is that they are comprised of “essentially two time spans: that of the events or actions being reported” along with “the act(ivity) of narrating” these events or actions (Margolin 195). The “tense in which the narrative is told”, that is, whether it is told in past, present, or future tense is indicated by the “temporal relation between the time of narration and that of the narrated events” within the text (Margolin 195). Antoon utilises a mix of both past and present tense throughout the narrative, and does not use time stamps, clearly delineated chapter headings and very rarely uses change in font (eg. italics) to denote a change in narrative perspective. Instead, the subtle use of the past or present tense is the only indicator used to signpost a timeframe in which a longer chapter or an embedded shorter vignette is set. In Chapter Seven, the reader is made aware that what is being described is a memory when Jawad recounts his time apprenticing under his father as a corpse washer: “I had gotten used to seeing the dead up close...”; he also notes that “those hot days passed very slowly, at times with no washing whatsoever” (Antoon 27). The language used here implies that this is a recollection on the narrator’s part, the events are being recalled from some temporal distance. This sense of temporal distance is further reinforced when Jawad is in dialogue with another person, or recalling a conversation that has taken place during an indeterminable time in the past. For instance, in Chapter Ten, Jawad describes a conversation he had with his father about college:

I remembered how my father shook his head when he was certain that I wanted to make the Academy of Fine Arts my first choice [...]

He asked me sarcastically: “So what will you be after you finish? An arts teacher?”

I answered: “Maybe. What’s wrong with that anyway? Is teaching shameful? There are other types of work as well.”[...]

I wasn’t surprised, but the episode saddened me. He never forgave me for straying from the path [...] (Antoon 39)

In contrast, the use of the present tense sporadically throughout the narrative indicates instances of traumatic recall or cyclical repetition of the past that manifests within a dream/nightmare sequence. While their attention is drawn to the change in tense, the reader is also made aware that these vignettes differ from the other chapters due to fantastical elements and a sense of heightened unreality. For instance, in another dream/nightmare vignette, Chapter Thirty Eight, Jawad describes walking through an area in Baghdad by using the present tense: “*I’m walking* in a public garden in Baghdad” [emphasis my own] (Antoon 120). It is in the middle of the night, and Jawad notices “many white statues on the lawn: men, women, and children standing sitting, or lying on the ground” (Antoon 120). The use of the present tense and the fantastical merge when Jawad approaches one of the statues on the ground:

I approach the statue and the groans grow louder. I discover that the statue is shrouded in white. When I get closer, I hear a male voice begging me to sprinkle water on it.

“Who are you and why are you stooping like that,” I ask.

“This is how I was when I died and I cannot move. Please, take me to the water because I am suffering.”



I hold the figure by its shoulders, which are very cold, and drag it toward the fountain.

I place it at the fountain's edge so that the water will spray the statue's head. (Antoon 120)

The use of the present tense gives a sense of immediacy to the narrative here, along with a sense of unreality due to the presence of the animated statue. These changing temporalities in the novel provide a tenuous “fictional context” (Margolin 196) for the reader, with the use of language signposting whether what is being recounted is a past event being recalled through memory and grounded in reality, or a dream/nightmare sequence that presents a heightened sense of unreality through the use of the present tense. At the same time, the presence of water throughout the novel, in this instance the water in the fountain, inflects the narrative with the hydrological imaginary. This is an example of the hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative construction, whereby the narrative continuously shifts across temporalities, disrupting the linearity of the human narrative. The temporalities present both the narrator's memories and subconscious whilst being imbued by the presence and cyclical rhythm of water.

The shifting temporalities of the hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative across the novel intentionally mis-direct the reader. One of Margolin's key arguments is that an “absence... of an actual world deictic center for the discourse, as defined through its global speaker” within the fictional context of a fictional text, “provides fiction writers with the unique ability to mislead the reader with regards to temporal perspective” (Margolin 196). Margolin further outlines that writers may present “a whole complex event... for many pages as occurring at the time of narration, only to reveal in a single phrase at the end that the whole thing was a past event, being re-lived by the narrator as a dream or vivid memory” (Margolin 196).

Antoon's novel is periodically punctuated by vignettes of dream-nightmare sequences. As outlined earlier, these vignettes are key indicators of a hydro-arboreal other-than-realist

aesthetic due to an elevated sense of unreality that is often accompanied by the presence of water. This mis-direction is most readily apparent in the opening chapter of the novel, as it sets the scene for the reader whilst immediately calling into question the reliability of what is being described.

The first chapter is comprised of two passages, with the first passage describing a dream-nightmare sequence narrated by an as-yet unnamed narrator. The novel opens with arresting imagery, as the first sentence states: “she is lying naked on her back on a marble bench in an open place with no walls or ceilings” (Antoon 1). Whilst not explicit, the otherworldliness of the setting is inferred by this description of “an open place with no walls or ceilings” juxtaposed to the vulnerability of the naked body of the woman. The narrator further describes that “there is no one around and nothing in sight except sand” (Antoon 1) bringing to mind a desert-like landscape. The narrator fixates on the woman’s physical appearance, noting her “long black hair” that is “piled about her head” and how “her eyebrows are carefully plucked” and “eyelids, which end in thick eyelashes” that are “shut” (Antoon 1). The description of the woman then veers toward familiarity, suggesting that the narrator is familiar with the naked form of the woman. As he describes her breasts, he notes that “there is no trace of the surgery” thus suggesting an intimate bodily knowledge/relationship between the two. This is the first suggestion of an unstable temporality that characterises the narrative and form of the novel as it references the physical impact of the past on the body of a loved one remembered in the present. And whilst a sort of eroticism could be inferred due to the narrator’s description of the woman’s naked body (her thick eyelashes, pink lipstick and “erect nipples”), a complex affective state is evoked as he also mentions that he is “afraid” to touch her (Antoon 1).

The liminal time-space between the living and the dead is also first made apparent here when the narrator wonders whether the woman is “asleep or dead” (Antoon 1). He also notes that the pink lipstick that the woman is wearing is something that she would wear if she were “still alive” (Antoon 1), suggesting that the woman is in fact dead at the time when the narrator is recounting the story. Again, notions of time are askew here, and the reader is unable at first to get a firm grasp on the fictional context of the narrative. It soon becomes apparent that this version of the woman is not dead, as she opens her eyes and smiles when the narrator calls her by her name, “Reem”. The narrator recounts that the “blackness of her pupils smiles as well” (Antoon 1). The imagery is haunting and unsettling and it is at this point that the narrator states that they are struggling to “grasp what is going on” (Antoon 1). Jawad’s uncertainty at recounting this hauntological experience within this liminal life-death time-space is one early example that suggests an other-than-realist narration in the novel. As mentioned previously, throughout the text Jawad encounters more of the living dead, and there are many references and descriptions of related fantastical or awe-inspiring imagery and interactions. The dream/nightmare framework for these elements that emerges alongside narrative sequences where the action is grounded in reality, suggests an other-than-realist narration.

This opening vignette also establishes the thematic relationship between water and time across the novel. Reem implores the narrator to “wash” her before he embraces her (Antoon 1). The brief section of dialogue that follows is a repetition of the narrator’s surprise that Reem is not dead and her pleas for him to “wash” her:

‘What? You are still alive?’

‘Wash me so we can be together. I missed you so much.’

‘But you are not dead!’

‘Wash me darling... Wash me so we can be together’

‘With what? There is nothing here.’

‘Wash me, darling.’ (Antoon 1)

Reem will not let the narrator touch her until she is washed, suggesting that she feels dirty or impure. The reconciliation between the two is also stunted due to the aridness of the landscape around them; there is nothing except the desert-like expanse of sand and no water with which the narrator may wash her. It is in this instant, perhaps as a brief act of reprieve, that “raindrops begin to fall” (Antoon 2). In the cleansing presence of rain, Reem allows the narrator to touch her, as he “wipes a drop of rain off her nose” and begins to “caress her hair” (Antoon 2). However, the idyllic intimate setting of the dream abruptly shifts into violence as a vehicle with armed men kidnap Reem and decapitate the narrator. The second section of the first chapter immediately establishes that this first section of the chapter can be classified as having the dual nature of a dream-nightmare, with the unnamed narrator waking up “panting and sweating” to the sound of rain outside his bedroom (Antoon 3). The reader is made aware that the preceding section is indeed a “nightmare” experienced by the protagonist and we are told that this is a “recurring” nightmare that the protagonist has been experiencing for several weeks (Antoon 2). And while the basic premise of the nightmare remains the same for the protagonist, there can be “minor changes” at times (Antoon 2). He notes that in some instances, he dreams of “Reem’s severed head on the bench”, but her imploration of ““Wash me, darling”” remains the same (Antoon 2). Crucially, the protagonist also notes that the preceding section, this nightmare that he describes waking up from, is “the first time” that “rain” has been present in the context of his dreams (Antoon 3). He surmises the rain “must have slipped into my dream from outdoors” (Antoon 3). If the dream/nightmare establishes a liminal space between the living and the dead, it therefore could be argued that the presence

of water, in the form of rain, may serve as an elemental connection between reality and unreality. The narrator describes the water as “slipping in” to his dream, a common phrasal verb that also nods to the fluid and shifting nature of water. The fluidity of water, that is, the material properties of its physical nature, is intertwined with the narrative movement between reality and unreality, thus formally rendering a hydrological other-than-realist narrative.

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A striking element of Antoon’s engagement with violence in this chapter and the novel more broadly is the imagery of the Iraqi decapitated head that he attempts to dissociate from common spectacle through its proximity to the intimate and personal. Violent imagery of mutilated Iraqi bodies recorded and taken within Iraq have been ubiquitous since the beginning of US invasion in 2003, something that can be deemed as a “biopolitical [or necropolitical] reality” within the Iraqi context (Hamdar 18). Visual representations of the Iraqi severed head can be considered both “taboo for viewing” whilst also being a “spectacle for our consumption”, or what Jessica Aughter refers to as a “juxtaposition of visualities” (67-68). In another vignette later in the novel, Chapter Fifteen, Jawad describes how he is “sitting alone” and “watching TV” (Antoon 54). As he is flipping the channels, he notes that they are all blank and that there is “no sound or image” (Antoon 54). The first indicator of unreality arises when the blank channels are described as being covered in “whiteness, silent whiteness” (Antoon 54). After flipping through the channels, Jawad finally finds one that is broadcasting. What is described is a familiar image associated with the insurgency that occurred in Iraq a few years after 2003: “five hooded men stand around a sixth, who kneels and wears an orange work suit” (Antoon 54). The kneeling man’s head is shrouded by a black bag, and four of the men grasp their weapons as “their leader reads the execution verdict to the kneeling prisoner” (Antoon 54). The beheading occurs after the leader finishes reading

this verdict, but it could be argued that the violence depicted is almost mundane in description and sparse in language:

The leader holds the man's blonde hair and tilts his head to the left. He lifts the sword and beheads him with a single blow while intoning: *God is great. God is great* [emphasis author's own] (Antoon 54)

Jawad feels "nauseated" by this and switches the TV off (Antoon 54). However, unreality kicks in again as he describes "blood" flowing "from the screen, covering everything around me in red" (Antoon 54). The blood emerging from the TV is an other-than-realist representation of the psychological impact of "body horror" as theorised by Auchter, whereby televised ISIS beheadings, on non-Western victims, had "come to be taken for granted" in the media due to the "normal yet extraordinary excesses associated with war" (73). In an Iraqi context, this imagery, specifically its direct reference to public beheading videos that were common during this time, refers to the spectacularisation of violence enacted either within Iraq, or on Iraqi bodies.

A distinction can be made here between the elemental manifestation of water in the novel's first chapter, and its association with Reem and intimacy, and the manifestation of blood in this vignette. In contrast to contemporary Iraqi writers such as Hassan Blasim, Ahmed Saadawi, Burhan Shawi and Diaa Jubaili, who all reference decapitation in order to move it away from spectacle but without similar reference to a hydrological imaginary, Antoon embeds this particular form of "body horror" in an other-than-realist narrative of intimacy. This first beheading/decapitated head in the novel is described in the first dream/nightmare sequence and its violence is mitigated in its association with the intimate through the other-than-real. The other-than-realist, almost timeless representation of the severed head in a desert landscape defamiliarizes this common 'body horror' image that is repeated with a

difference. Within the chapter, the brief moment of respite shared by Jawad and Reem is suddenly interrupted, as the narrative veers from the stark and otherworldly imagery of a naked woman on a marble bench, with her lover, in the middle of the desert to the harsh, realistic description of an approaching vehicle that is “driving at an insane speed” and “leaving a trail of flying dust” as it makes its way toward the couple (Antoon 2). The car stops nearby and “masked men wearing khaki uniforms and carrying machine guns” run towards them (Antoon 2). Within an Iraqi context, the khaki uniforms and machine guns that they bring to mind the uniforms of the Iraqi army during both the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War, as well as the khaki uniform infamously worn by Saddam Hussein, the leader of the Ba’ath party. The men are also wearing masks, which may be read as a nod to the wave of insurgency, and subsequent violence, that ensued after the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. It should also be noted here that, while the first instinct of this reader would be to read the men as Arab/Iraqi, the khaki uniforms, weapons and masks may also be read as violent colonial and neo-colonial imagery associated with both the British colonial forces present in Iraq during the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as the US forces who patrolled Iraqi cities, towns and villages during, and in the aftermath, of the 2003 invasion by Allied Forces. Violence is enacted as the narrator is struck “in the face” by the “stock of [a] machine gun” and “kicked in the stomach” as he “falls to the floor” (Antoon 2). The narrator is forced to kneel, is blindfolded, and has his wrists tied with wire behind his back (Antoon 2). In a moment of lucid unreality, the narrator feels a knife penetrate his neck, and watches as his decapitated head falls “to the ground” before it “roll[s] like a ball on the sand”. The narrator also perceives his lifeless body “to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood” (Antoon 2). The narrator is dead and, though decapitated, is forced to watch helplessly as Reem is dragged by the men toward the vehicle before it drives away. Crucially, the continued rainfall, which initially signalled hope and purification when it started to fall

earlier, is perceived by the (un)dead narrator, as he watches “the rain... falling on the empty bench” (Antoon 2). Through the hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narration, the dismembered and mutilated body is imbued with consciousness in its fixation on water. This would suggest that the narrative, as it is reflective of Jawad’s notion of time, strives for healing from the trauma of a long history of violence in Iraq.

In this second passage, the narrator also notes that Reem, the woman in his dream-nightmare is still alive as far as he is aware: “I heard a few years ago that she was in Amsterdam” (4). However, the narrator is still subsumed with thoughts of death in the lingering aftermath of his nightmare. He notes his frustration with his recurring nightmare when he states that “death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep” (Antoon 3). Rather cryptically, the narrator also describes here a close relationship with death, and therefore the dead, as he describes “toil[ing] all day tending to [death’s] eternal guests, preparing them to sleep in its lap” (Antoon 3). The word “toil” implies mental and physical exertion and suggests a material proximity to the dead as a profession, as well as an embodied manifestation of the hauntological dimension. The narrator also mentions his father here, noting that he would “dismiss” and “mock” the narrator’s “silly thoughts” about death, and that his father spent a “lifetime doing his job day after day, never once complaining of death” (Antoon 3). This alludes to the personal history that is intertwined with the protagonist’s journey toward becoming a corpse washer, a journey that spans the narrative. The narrator suggests that his father never complained as the death his father experienced every day was more “timid and measured” in nature (Antoon 3). An interesting historical demarcation is therefore made here regarding the nature of violence and death in Iraq’s political history. Whilst it is later established that the narrator undertakes his role as corpse washer in his family’s *mghaysil* in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, a notoriously violent period in Iraq’s history, questions can be raised as to whether death is



ever “timid” or “measured” in the context of the long duration of necropolitics. Motyl contends that the:

*Mghaysil*, the morgue operated by Jawad’s family, where many episodes of the story are set, is an allegory of modern Iraq. The causes of death, reflected in the bodies that are being washed and shrouded, change throughout the story, from natural ones such as stroke or accidental ones such as fire before the Iran-Iraq War to exclusively war-related causes after 1980. (137)

However, the narrative, intertwining the intimate and public sites of grief and funereal rites, a non-linear recurrence of the past in the present day occurrence of death, does not imply a radical change in the narrativity of human time in its relation to the more-than-human across Iraq’s necropolitical history. Moreover, Jawad’s father’s affective settlement into the role of the corpse washer, a role that is underwritten by an assumption that water can overcome the finality of death, suggests that his father is aware of the possibilities of an embodied, and unassuming, environmentally inflected resistance through his vocation.

The fluid nature of the novel’s narrative structure also has a direct correlation with Jawad’s fragile mental state. Jawad remembers the strong religious convictions of his parents as a kind of armour; he says that they were “heavily armed with faith” (Antoon 3), which shielded and protected them from the kind of despair that Jawad is now experiencing. He compares their “hearts” to “castles” in this respect. By contrast, Jawad describes his own inner world as a haunted house; it is an “abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged” (Antoon 3). The description of shattered windows alludes to Jawad’s “shattered” faith, and also the shattering of the boundaries between living/dead and reality/unreality. The “unhinged doors” also allude to a lack of boundaries and the unhinged nature of Jawad’s own mental state. He describes how “ghosts play inside” his “heart” as “the winds wail” (Antoon

3). It is a striking inversion of the Gothic trope of the haunted house whereby an individual/group of individuals is/are subjected to spectral manifestations of the supernatural within the physical structure of a house/building. Jawad's frequent association with death and the dead means that these ghosts manifest inside him as his body becomes a site for haunting. In his work on post-2003 Iraqi fiction, Bahooora notes that "literary haunting by the uncanny, the supernatural, or the monstrous" is "symbolic of the past intervening in the present in order to confront what has been suppressed or cast aside" (192). He characterises certain works produced by Iraqi writers after 2003 as falling under the genre of "postcolonial gothic", whereby they can be classified as literatures of "horror", defined "formatively by a historical sensibility" which manifests in the "return of the repressed and the deliberately silenced histories of the colonial" (Bahooora 192). Bahooora states that this historical sensibility is particularly pertinent to the history of Iraq insofar as "competing, silenced, and suppressed histories manifest themselves through horrific and spectacular uses of violence" that serve to "call attention to the ways the victims of the past continually haunt the present" (192). Antoon's novel shows that these "competing, silenced and suppressed histories" do not always manifest in "spectacular" violence. As a character, Jawad internalises these voices and histories through his lived experience that distils fragmentation/disintegration into a private time-space that is inflected with the intimacy and recurrent rhythm of water and that appears as a counterpoint to the visual politics of the Iraqi post-2003 era. Jawad is subject to the haunting that Bahooora speaks of, and there are instances of violence that do sporadically occur throughout the dream-nightmare sequences, but rarely are they "spectacular". Instead, *The Corpse Washer* is distinctive in its focus on private spaces of death and mourning, embodied in both the material space of the *mghaysil* and the psychological space of Jawad's psyche. In this regard, it is the aftermath of violence and its repercussions, that are depicted through the other-than-realist narrative. Jose Yebra employs Esther Peeren's notion of the

“living ghost” to argue that Jawad is “haunted and vulnerable rather than haunting”, but he argues that the fact that “his voice can be heard is itself an implicit affirmation of human dignity” (785). However, a close reading of the narrative reveals instead that Jawad is subsumed within the haunting nightmare rather than actively resisting it. Whilst Jawad is able to articulate and describe the dream/nightmare scenarios he experiences, he is unable to resist their intrusion into his conscious and subconscious. Thus, while Jawad’s voice can be heard, it is often a voice that is powerless.

The hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative of Jawad’s lived experience in the *mghaysil* communicates possibilities that are outside Jawad’s consciousness, and anchored in Iraq’s necropolitical history. The material, physical space of the *mghaysil* becomes a site in which Iraqi historical trauma manifests through the presence of water, as the water is associated with death due to its use during Shi’ite funereal rites. Rather than a figure of resistance, I would instead suggest that Jawad is a cipher through which the encompassing trauma of Iraqi lived history (in Jawad’s lifetime) is communicated through Jawad’s psyche. Jawad becomes a haunted figure within the *mghaysil* due to his inherited vocation as a corpse washer, an occupation that entails unrelenting proximity to the dead. The inheritance of this vocation is crucial, as Jawad does not choose this line of work, and in fact actively resists it. After his father’s death, Jawad has no other choice but to follow in his footsteps in becoming a corpse washer and thus becomes a trapped, haunted figure within the *mghaysil*. Through his proximity to water and death, in a role that he actively resists, Jawad thus also becomes a haunting figure. The haunting/haunted aspects of the narrative therefore explore what Stef Craps has deemed “alternative conceptualizations of trauma in non-Western settings attuned to (post)colonial conditions” (4). The hydrological other-than-realist narrative “account[s] for and respond[s] to collective, ongoing, everyday forms of ongoing violence” (Craps 4). Presented through the specific context of the perspective of an individual trapped within the

space of the *mghaysil*, the narrative explores “the sufferings of non-Western and minority groups more fully, for their own sake, and on their own terms” (Craps 38). With the *mghaysil* embodying a representational space of ongoing violence, Antoon’s hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative therefore renders a human narrative that is inflected with trauma produced by political history and lived personally.

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In the novel, water is oftentimes associated with pollution, stagnancy and death and can be said to be emblematic of the fatalism that ensnares Jawad in the complexities of an exclusionary time-space. However, and somewhat paradoxically, water is also associated with cleansing and with life-giving properties. In these instances, water and time become both sources and symbols of potential freedom and revitalization for Jawad even while he is in the grips of horrifying expressions of trauma through the dream-nightmare sequences. As stated in the previous section, Jawad takes some comfort from the ‘armour of faith’ that his parents possessed in the face of continuous exposure to death, and the narrative repeatedly returns to Jawad’s attempts to wash the bodies of the dead through the other-than-realist dream-nightmare sequences. In these sequences, water is associated with purification through its role in corpse washing during Shi’ite funereal customs. Ablution using water is one of the main rituals in Islamic funereal customs where the washing of a dead body prior to burial can be described as the “ritual purification of the deceased” so that they may “meet God in a state of purity” (Dessing 145). In the novel, a young Jawad asks his father why the dead are washed, and notes that his father says that “every dead person will meet with the angels and the people of the afterlife and God Almighty and therefore must be pure and clean” (Antoon 24). Jawad also asks his father if there are “any differences between us [Shi’ites] and the Sunnis in washing” to which his father replies that any differences are very “minor indeed” and only pertain to differences in “mention of imams and the writing of supplication on the

shroud” (Antoon 24). Petras Bahadur outlines that, in the Shi’ite tradition once a person dies it is imperative that the body be prepared for funeral as soon as possible. As soon as death occurs, or as soon as a body is discovered dead, it is “customary to close the person’s eyes, bind the jaw and cover the body with a clean sheet” (Bahadur 4). The body should then be washed prior to burial. There are also certain specific rules that are to be followed: the body should be “placed on a wooden plank”, the genitals “covered by a cloth”, and the body washed an “odd number of times” such as “three [times] or, if necessary, five or seven” (Dessing 145). The water used for ablution may be “mixed with perfume, herbs, rose water lotus, or camphor”, and after the body is washed “cotton plugs” are placed in orifices of the body (Bahadur). Whilst the washing of the body can be said to occur to ensure that the dead “meet God in a state of purity”, the act of washing and the use of fresh fragrance on the body are meant to ensure that the body is prepared for its “journey into the afterlife” (Oualaalou). Oualaalou also notes that Islamic beliefs about death outline that the dead and dying are “obliged to endure... the torment of the grave” which can be described as a “purgatory between death and resurrection” (Oualaalou). During the ‘torment of the grave’, the deceased travel to the “hereafter” before returning to the grave “to await final judgement” (Oualaalou). Water is therefore a critical component in Shi’ite funereal customs through its role in purification before burial. It could thus be argued that the traumatic and reoccurring dream/nightmares that Jawad experiences, in which water appears frequently in relation to washing Iraqi bodies, is an effort to afford meaning to the countless bodies of Iraqis that lost their lives during Iraq’s necropolitical history of war, occupation and sanctions.

If the water used during corpse washing signifies purification and smooth transition into the afterlife, its absence in the other-than-real dream-nightmare sequences signifies a traumatic response to frequently bearing witness to death in post-2003 Iraq. As noted in the previous chapter, Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* utilises an ‘aesthetics of waste’ in its

depictions of disposable Iraqi corpses that litter the streets of Baghdad in the wake of sectarian violence. Antoon also utilises this notion of an aesthetics of waste in *The Corpse Washer* in the other-than-real dream/nightmare sequences in which washing with water oftentimes plays a significant role. The frequent presence of water in these other-than-realist vignettes with shifting temporalities suggests that the use of hydro-arboreal aesthetics is an attempt by the narrative to afford meaning onto the bare lives of Iraqi bodies that would otherwise be deemed to be disposable. Through Jawad's lived experience of Iraqi necropolitical history and his dream-nightmares, the Iraqi body emerges as "matter out of place", symbolically rendered as dirt or waste.

In her seminal work entitled *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas states that 'dirt' is "essentially disorder" and that the process of eliminating 'dirt' is an act of "positively re-ordering" the environment around us (2). Thus, dirt can be construed as "matter out of place" (Douglas). Accordingly, Douglas suggests that "rituals" pertaining to "purity and impurity" exist to "create unity in experience" (Douglas 2). These rituals serve to express symbolic patterns that are "publicly displayed" and "disparate experience is given meaning" (Douglas 3). In Chapter 20, a short vignette that is two paragraphs long, Jawad describes "standing next to a washing bench" in an unfamiliar room (Antoon 75). He describes how the bench is "very long" and that it "extends for tens of metres" but also notes that, unusually, the bench also has a "white conveyor belt" (Antoon 75). He notes that the conveyor belt is "stacked" with bodies, and that the belt moves "toward the right" of the room which leads to a "huge opening" (Antoon 75). Through this opening, the narrator is able to see "men in blue overalls and white gloves" who "carry the bodies and throw them into a huge truck" (Antoon 75). Jawad's dead father also uncannily appears simultaneously in different corners of the room, urging Jawad to wash the bodies with the refrain "'What are you waiting for?'" (Antoon 75). While the room contains "water faucets that protrude from the wall" and an "empty

washbasin” with a “bowl underneath it”, no water materialises as Jawad tries every faucet. As there is no water, Jawad is unable to perform the ritual washing on the bodies in order to purify them for the afterlife. The men in blue overalls with white gloves, and the truck in which the bodies are being thrown, call to mind municipal workers who collect refuse and waste in towns and cities. The horror evoked in this dream-nightmare sequence is due to the ‘aesthetics of waste’ of the other-than-real narrative whereby imagery of multiple, unnamed and unidentified bodies move through the conveyor belt before being thrown into the truck. Building on from the notion that this example of ‘aesthetics of waste’ is symptomatic of a reality in which the “humanity” of people has been “erased” (Reyes-Zaga and Ortega Brena 109), the unreality of the dream/nightmare sequence, and the presence of the hydro-arboreal, or the lack thereof, through the absence of purifying water, could be described as an attempt to counteract the real disposability of the bare life of the Iraqi body through decades of Iraqi necropolitics, war and sectarian violence.

The shifting nature of the hydro-arboreal narrative of the novel interrogates the notion of Iraqi bodies as ‘waste’ and aims to rectify this by attempting to assign another meaning to the Iraqi body through the presence, or lack thereof, of water in the dream-nightmare sequences. It could therefore be suggested the hydro-arboreal, through the enaction of its more-than-human time-spaces within the human narrative of the novel, creates a sense of other-than-reality in which to interrogate and rectify the notion of the Iraqi body as waste. Zygmunt Bauman contributes to Douglas’ conceptualisation of dirt by stating that the “world is neither orderly nor chaotic” and “neither clean nor dirty” and that it is a fundamentally “human design” that works to “conjure up disorder together with the vision of order”, and notions of dirt alongside “the project of purity” (Bauman 35). As he notes, “no objects can become waste through their inner logic... it is by being assigned to waste by human designs that material objects, whether human or [non]human, acquire “mysterious, awe-inspiring,

fearsome and repulsive qualities” (Bauman 24). Jawad’s preoccupation with the art-form of sculpture, and the works of Alberto Giacometti in particular, manifests through the other-than-realist narrative in Chapter 38 in which he dreams that he washes the bodies of living statues:

I hold the figure by its shoulders, which are very cold, and drag it toward the fountain. I place it at the fountain’s edge so that the water will spray the statue’s head. The voice sighs and asks me to push it into the fountain’s waters. I do. (Antoon 120)

Whilst not human, the living statues can be said to fall under Bauman’s categorisation of non-human “waste” that is imbued with mysterious’ or ‘awe-inspiring’ qualities. It could also be further stated that while the living statues may be described as being ‘non-human’, their close association to the human form would suggest that they are a metaphorical representation of the human body and would also suggest that the body cannot simply be construed as ‘dirt’ due to being assigned as ‘matter out of place’ in post-2003 Iraq.

Jawad’s passion for sculpture as an artform is also significant here, in particular his interest in the works of Giacometti whose work, *Walking Man* (1961), he describes as containing a “beauty [that] would simply and suddenly hit me in the gut” whilst also simply depicting a “man [who is] sad and isolated” (Antoon 41). It has been noted that Giacometti’s sculpture can be characterised by “isolated, attenuated, introspective, spectral and ghostly figures” that signify a “sense of alienation” (Carelli 37). It is also significant that much of Giacometti’s artistic output came in the aftermath of World War II, with his spare and skeletal sculpted figures calling to mind the concentration camps of that war. Giacometti’s whittled figures, whose “souls” are “carved” until they are “stripped to the bone” (Carelli 37) could thus emerge in the novel in connection with the bare life of the Iraqi body during post-2003 Iraq; this is a body that has been stripped of any rights and has suffered under the perpetual,



necropolitical notion of living to 'let die' by the state for decades under the Ba-athist regime. Bauman notes that the act of sculpting involves the "the cutting and throwing away the superfluous, the needless and the useless" in order for the "beautiful and the harmonious" to emerge, an act which he deems to be the "separation and destruction of waste" (45). The sculpted form, "previously hidden inside [a] formless slab of concrete" thus emerges fully-formed and "perfect", and stripped from the "waste" that conceals that form (Bauman 45). The hydro-arboreal aesthetic of water as a method of purification, along with conceptualisations of the body(ies) as "perfect forms" hidden within superfluous waste in the form of living statues, suggests an attempt by the other-than-realist narrative of the novel to afford meaning onto the corporeal body(ies) of Iraqis exposed to necropolitical harm.

Dirt also manifests itself through water that pollutes the healthy Iraqi body in the novel; this is a counterpoint to the notion that the Iraqi body is reduced to being 'matter out of place' in death, and requires water to purify it for the afterlife. The presence of polluted water in the novel specifically relates to the contamination of water in Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s during the first two Gulf Wars due to depleted uranium. The pollution of waterways with weaponry that was used by the Allied Forces during the 2003 invasion and occupation can also be referred to as a form of eco-violence impacting on the ecological body of Iraq. In the novel, Jawad's Uncle Sabri visits Baghdad from Germany, and tells Jawad that he is craving *masguf*, which is a "traditional Iraqi dish" comprised of "barbequed fish from the [river] Tigris" (Antoon 95). Jawad tells Sabri that he will ask his mother to make the dish if they can successfully buy some fish, but Sabri refuses and instead suggests that they go out to eat in a restaurant (Antoon 95). When Jawad queries why he does not want to eat the fish at home, Sabri tells Jawad that he has read that "fish from the river would be tainted because all the rivers were polluted with depleted uranium and untreated sewage" (Antoon 95). As von Lossow notes, by around 2008, Iraq's "water infrastructure ranked among the poorest

worldwide” (5). In March 2011, a spokesperson for UNICEF told Radio Free Iraq (RFI) that the “second-biggest killer of Iraqi children” was severe diarrhea “caused by polluted water” and that approximately “250,000 tons of sewage” were “discharged into Iraqi rivers every year” (RFE 2011). It has also been noted that during the first Gulf War in 1991, and during the 2003 invasion, “massive amounts of new weapons” along with “sophisticated manufactured nuclear weapons called depleted uranium (DU) were used during both wars in Iraq (Al-Ansari, et al. 367). DU can be described as a “by-product” from the “enrichment of natural uranium” used for “nuclear reactor-grade or nuclear weapons-grade uranium” (Al-Ansari, et al. 367). Al-Ansari, et al. note that, during the 2003 invasion, the neo-colonial U.S. and Allied forces used “more than 1100 to 2200 tons” of depleted uranium in their attacks on the country (367).

The use of DU in these weapons caused serious consequences to the Iraqi human population and the environment, with increased rates of cancer and birth defects alongside the ecological impact of “contaminated” water and soil (Al-Ansari, et al. 367). As of 2014 when this academic article was published, “140,000 cases of cancer” had been reported and were believed to have been caused by the use of “toxic weaponry” by occupying forces in the 2003 invasion (Al-Ansari, et al. 367). This research also notes that, in 2003 during ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’, the Allied Forces’ “major areas of engagement” covered “more than 300 sites across Iraq” with the soil in these areas believed to be contaminated by DU (Al-Ansari 370). The presence of DU in the soil can then lead to “an accumulation’ of DU in the food chain as it is ingested by nonhuman beings, including plants and animals” (Al Shammari 246). With the specific example of water-based organisms in the food chain, pollutants such as DU may be ingested by aquatic plants and plankton, that are then ingested by aquatic insects and crustaceans, and are then ingested by fish.

The presence of serious water pollutants is not just a vague fear in the novel when Jawad discovers that Reem, his lover, has breast cancer and is leaving Iraq. In a letter to Jawad that is recounted in full in Chapter 28, Reem asks Jawad to “forgive” her “absence and sudden departure” (Antoon 113). The letter goes on to say that Reem “felt a tiny lump” in her “left breast” that turns out to be malignant (Antoon 113). Reem tells Jawad that she has undergone a mastectomy and has lost her “long hair” due to chemotherapy (Antoon 113). As she outlines the “storms of irrational thoughts and feelings which inhabit anyone whose body is afflicted with sickness” including anger and sadness, Reem also tells Jawad that her doctor also advised her that “cancer rates [had] quadrupled in recent years” (Antoon 114). She goes on to mention that the rising cancer rates are possibly due to “the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in 1991” (Antoon 114). As of 2016, it has also been reported that Iraqi researchers located “depleted uranium concentration” in the “tissues, bones, and blood” of cancer patients in Iraq (Al Shammari 247). Other researchers “measured the concentration of uranium crystals (UC) in the urine of breast cancer patients in Baghdad” (Al Shammari 247); this concentration of UC was then compared to healthy people. The researchers found that the cancer patients “had a higher average of UC 1.6 µg/L while the average UC for healthy females was 1.03 µg/L” (Al Shammari 247). Thus, Reem’s cancer in the novel is indicative of the real human and environmental consequences of war and occupation. Jawad describes the loss of Reem in the metaphorical terms of a physical wound created by a form of the hydrological as he describes internal “tears” of sorrow that “kept falling... but deep down inside” (Antoon 115). Like a physical mass akin to a tumour, Jawad’s tears at Reem’s loss “had amassed and settled on [his] chest” and would “remind” him every “now and then that they were residing there forever” (Antoon 115). It should also be noted here that the undead body of Reem in the dream-nightmare recounted earlier in this chapter fixates on water by repeatedly imploring the narrator to “wash” her and that narrator notices that there is “no

trace of the surgery” on Reem’s breasts within the other-than-real sequence (Antoon 1).

Unscarred in this dream-nightmare sequence, Reem’s body may be read as being somewhat healed in the temporal unreality of the hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative.

Simon Schama notes that “since antiquity” rivers have been construed as “bodies of water” as the flow of river water was likened to “blood circulating through the body” (245). Schama also mentions that Plato posits that “nature” and human “bodies” are “constructed according to the same mysterious universal law of circulation that govern[s] all forms of vitality” (247).

Whilst the novel’s mention of water pollutants presents it as a threat to humans, analysing the text through its hydro-arboreal aesthetics ultimately reveals that this threat can also be revealed as an act of violence enacted against the ‘body’ of Iraq’s circulatory eco-systems. As such, the ecological also becomes collateral damage alongside the real corporeal human bodies of Iraqis.

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As previously noted, the original Arabic title of the novel, *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (2010), can be translated into English as “The Pomegranate Alone”. In this respect, it is worth noting that the English translation of the novel was not carried out by an additional translator, nor was the title changed by the publishing house. The change in the novel’s title from *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman* (“The Pomegranate Alone”) to an entirely different title, *The Corpse Washer*, was a change made by Antoon when he translated his own work from Arabic into English. This change intimates two things. Firstly, M Lynx Qualey suggests that the original title evokes a “melancholic loneliness”, speaking to the experiences of ordinary Iraqis living through a “violent” era of US occupation a few short years after 2003. Qualey also notes that the title, “The Pomegranate Alone”, mimics the language and tone of the novel in Arabic by being “slightly formal” and “poetic”, creating a sense of the “alienation” of both

of the novel's "surroundings" and the narrator from his own "memories". I also suggest that the Arabic title of the novel is significant in its relation to its English modified translation as "The Corpse Washer". While it is entirely possible that Antoon chose the phrase "The Corpse Washer" in order to appeal to a non-Arab, or Anglophone audience, he has repeatedly stated in interviews that he is "primarily interested" in how his books are received by Arab audiences and, unlike other Arab writers, does not write "specifically for an American and British audience that is receptive to [the] new orientalist narratives" emerging from the Arab world.

Drawing on this, I argue that there is a dialectic at play between the novel's title in both English and Arabic emphasising the interconnection of the ritualistic nature of the act of purifying the corpse, the affective and political dimensions of grief and mourning, and the more-than-human narrativity of the hydro-arboreal environment within a specific Iraqi context. Arboreality will be read through the examples of two types of trees that are mentioned in the novel: the pomegranate tree and the date palm. The pomegranate is a fruit that has been ascribed with various symbolic associations since ancient times. In an allusion to the Gardens of Babylon in Ancient Mesopotamia, it has been noted that the pomegranate tree is a "candidate for the Biblical 'Tree of Life'" (Wills 1). However, various religious faiths including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam endow the pomegranate fruit with symbolism that relates to a "mediation between life and death" (Wills 1). The fruit is also famously associated with both water and death in Greek mythology through the tale of Persephone who is bound to Hades after eating the seeds of the fruit and must travel to the Underworld via the river Styx every half a year. It should also be stated that the pomegranate fruit embodied a symbolic duality of meaning in Ancient times as it represented "life and fertility", and was commonly used as a "symbol of fertility in wedding rites", whilst also serving to symbolize "barrenness and death" (Wills 1).

The cyclical and paradoxical nature of the pomegranate's symbolism, as it embodies both life and death, is significant within the narrative context of *The Corpse Washer*. The pomegranate tree is situated in the garden of the *mghaysil*, which is the site where the corpse washer enacts his vocation in service of the dead. This pomegranate tree, in turn, is nourished by the dead, through the water that is used in the ritual to wash the corpses and that is then channelled towards it. The presence of the date palm in the novel speaks to the tree's importance, both symbolically and materially, within the contexts of modern day Iraq and its ancient history. The date palm in Iraq has been cultivated by farmers since "the ancient times of Mesopotamia" (Allam 1). A symbol of "resilience and bounty", its form has also been "celebrated" by artists "for centuries" in the region (Allam 1). Allam also notes that Iraqis continue to demonstrate a "tenderness" toward the date palm, whilst utilising each part of the tree from its fruit to its fibres that are used to weave rope and to make "baskets from its fronds" (1). However, the date palm has suffered in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion and occupation, as farmers were unable to tend to their trees due to presence of the US military and the threats of violence that frequently erupted during the post-2003 period. The tree also suffered from ecocide as, due to "decades of war" and the salinity of water the number of date palms dropped dramatically in the years after the war. In imagery that evokes violence enacted against the body, a farmer describes how date palms he had planted were mutilated as they were "chopped down or uprooted to clear lines for U.S. snipers and militant mortar teams" (Allam 3). The farmer describes the "destruction of the trees to be so overwhelming" that he could feel the "wounds" himself (Allam 3). In the novel, the palm tree is reconfigured in a similar way as being a metaphorical representation of the impact of war and violence on the body within a specific Iraqi context. However, in the novel the date palm is represented as being emblematic of the Iraqi exile/diaspora. On this basis, through an examination of trees in

the novel a related human-arboreal connection is drawn through a figurative-historiographical lens. Through the metaphor of Iraq as a “vast orchard” (Antoon 98), the human and the arboreal become intertwined in a brief yet highly suggestive reimagining of Iraq’s history. Particularly, a hydrological imaginary of grievability is manifested through challenging human-arboreal connections across the novel in which the tree’s agentic arboreality strives to be read against attempts to anthropomorphise it.

In the novel, the palm tree speaks to the wider context of Iraqi history and has a particular association with the Iraqi exilic diaspora embodied by Jawad’s uncle, Sabri, a secular member of the Iraqi Communist Party, or Da’wah Party, who leaves Iraq under threat of political persecution and now lives in exile in Germany. Like many Iraqis in the mid-to-late twentieth century, Jawad’s paternal uncle, Sabri, is forced to leave Iraq due to this political affiliation. Jawad recalls childhood memories of his uncle when he still lived in Iraq in the nineteen-eighties as well as his departure. He learns that his uncle is a Communist from conversations between his parents, as well as through the “nightly news” where he finds out that a “number of Communist officers in the [Iraqi] army had been executed” (82). Sabri first flees from Iraq to Beirut, then goes to Cyprus, Aden, Yemen before finally settling in Germany. Sabri is able to visit Iraq after 2003 due the fall of the Ba’athist regime post-2003, but it is a new era in Iraq marked by the US occupation. In *The Corpse Washer*, Sabri embodies the Iraqi exile/exilic writer who has managed to visit Iraq post-2003 to witness first-hand its deterioration in the years during which he has been away. He thus writes, not from a perspective of rose-tinted nostalgia, but through a sense of longing that has been coloured by grief and trauma. In a long-term study of the Iraqi diasporic community in London through fieldwork conducted between 2006 to 2019, Zainab Saleh notes that 2006 proved to be a particularly “pivotal moment” with the community. For many, the removal of Saddam Hussein promised a “return to [the] utopian past” of a pre-Saddam era (Saleh 3).

However, the summer of 2006, as depicted in the novel, was the zenith of widespread sectarian violence that slowly gathered momentum in the country in the short years following the invasion. While the fictional Sabri visits Iraq to witness the effects first-hand, the real-life Iraqis whom Saleh interviewed watched the effects, and the scale of the destruction from afar and felt “their hope and anticipation [give] way to disbelief and disappointment” as any long-held dreams of returning to Iraq, despite their long years of absence, were dashed (Saleh 3). Through listening to stories of the Iraqi diasporic community and their reasons for leaving Iraq, Saleh observes that their “narratives of displacement” along with their “life trajectories” were “deeply enmeshed in imperial interventions in Iraq that have taken place in Iraq since the earliest twentieth century” (4). Jawad recalls his uncle’s angrily succinct version of necropolitical Iraqi history: “Dictatorship and embargo had destroyed the country. Now we had entered the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all” (Antoon 85). During his week-long visit, Sabri expresses dismay at the degeneration of Baghdad, and Iraq as a whole, in the years during which he was in exile. Rather than placing the blame solely on the current US occupation, Sabri states that it is the UN-imposed embargo of the nineteen-nineties, a consequence of an aggressive Iraqi foreign policy during the preceding years, that is also to blame.

While the novel is set amidst the height of the chaotic aftermath of the 2003 US invasion when the country was in the throes of sectarian violence, at this point in its history, the Iraqi population had also suffered through the long-term devastating consequences of thirteen years of economic sanctions. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the UN Security Council (UNSC) imposed the “severest international sanctions regime ever imposed on a country” with an intent to “force” an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait (Ismael and Ismael 613). Ismael and Ismael note that “food production and availability” especially contributed to the “problem of increasing morbidity and mortality in Iraq” during this period of sanctions, with



child mortality rates nearly doubling during a nine-year period from 1990 to 1999 (614). During this time, oil revenue declined, food importation decreased, and attempts to increase agricultural production were halted due to embargoes placed on sourcing replacement parts for repairs to civil infrastructure that had been damaged due to “aerial bombardment” (Ismael and Ismael 614). As a result, “dietary energy supply had fallen from 3120 to 1093 kilocalories per capita/per day by 1994-95” with women and children most notably being affected as the “most vulnerable members of Iraqi society” (Ismael and Ismael 614). While the oil-for-food programme, a humanitarian programme initiated in Iraq in 1996, effectively curbed widespread mass starvation, vast swathes of the Iraqi population were effectively “pauperised” as a result of the sanctions (Ismael and Ismael 615). In the novel, Sabri notes that the whole country is “tired” after these years of oppression, war and sanctions as he pinpoints the “garbage, dust, barbed wires” in the neighbourhood of Karrada – imagery that suggests socio-political negligence and urban violence. Crucially, it is here that Sabri highlights the figure of the palm tree:

There aren't any women walking down the streets anymore! This is not the Baghdad I'd imagined. Not just in terms of people. Even the poor palm trees are tired and no one takes care of them. Believe me, these Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam's days. (Antoon 96)

Here, the palm tree is reconfigured into the affective realm of the human by being ascribed with the adjective of “tired” and being deprived of “care”. It is worth noting that the 2003 invasion, paradoxically entitled “Operation Iraq Freedom” by invading neo-imperial powers, further reduced the quality of life in Iraq as most public infrastructure (already compromised due to the preceding years of sanctions) was reduced to ruins and acute malnutrition amongst Iraqi children once again began to rise within a year after the invasion and occupation (Ismael and Ismael 616). Upon his return to Germany, Sabri sends an article that he has written to

Jawad entitled “‘A Lover Pauses before Iraq’s Ruins’”. Jawad describes the piece as being “long and sorrowful”, with “its most beautiful section” dealing with palm trees. It is here that Sabri uses the metaphor of a “vast orchard” to describe Iraq, with its citizens likened to palm trees when he states that “there are millions of Iraqis and as many, or perhaps somewhat fewer, palm trees” (Antoon 98). He draws further similarities:

Some have their fronds burned. Some have been beheaded. Some have had their backs broken by time, but are still trying to stand. Some have dried bunches of dates. Some have been uprooted, mutilated and exiled from their orchards. Some have allowed invaders to lean on their trunk. (Antoon 98)

Sabri is writing this letter from the perspective of an exile who has managed to visit his homeland after years abroad, and he speaks of dismemberment and mutilation through the metaphor of the tree.

In her work on Gha’ib Tu’ma Farmān’s novel *al-Murtajā wa-l-mu’ajjal* (*The Yearned for and the Postponed*, 1986), Hilla Peled-Shapira notes that Farmān uses “ecological landscapes” in order to “reflect the [Iraqi] exilic experience” (101). In her analysis of Farmān’s novel, Peled-Shapira utilises the work of George Lukács, particularly his writing on longing and form in 19th century literature. In *Soul and Form*, Lukács draws a connection between longing and form by making a brief comparison between a “typically German and a Tuscan landscape” (111). To Lukács, through an arguably subjective viewpoint, German forest landscapes can be both “melancholy and sad” while also being “homely and inviting” (Lukács 111). The German forest landscape thus evokes a feeling of nostalgia for Lukács. By contrast, the landscape of the Tuscan South is “hard and resistant” and it is the Tuscan landscape that clearly defines a sense of longing: a “feeling of both near and far” for the observer in which a “profound sense of union” is experienced alongside a feeling of “eternally a being-separate, a

standing-outside” (Lukács 112). According to Lukács, it is this duality in feeling that defines a “state of longing” (112). Peled-Shapira notes that Lukács’s definition of longing is relevant to Iraqi exilic literature though the connections drawn between a feeling of longing associated with displacement and a feeling of longing evoked by ecological landscapes. As such, the exilic writer, when writing about his/her homeland, attempts to “construct” the homeland “through dreams” and creative endeavours such as writing (Peled-Shapira 103).

In her anthropological study, Saleh also notes that the construction of “stories” by Iraqi exiles is a “means to bear witness” as well as an effort to “write themselves back into a history and a country that was erased entirely by imperial violence” (5). In Antoon’s novel, the construction of such a narrative by Sabri is a means to mitigate against the destruction of Iraq and its history through an environmentally inflected affective connectedness. Saleh notes that Iraqis in London, much like those still in Iraq, are “‘imperial subjects’ whose lives are inseparable from the histories of Britain and the United States in the region” (Saleh 4). Saleh uses the phrase “imperial debris” to describe the “spaces” occupied by the Iraqi diaspora where “practices of re/membering” through storytelling and reminiscing “reconnected Iraqis to their national community” whilst highlighting “the historical conditions that led to their exile and displacement” (Saleh 6). In Saleh’s configuration, the Iraqi London diasporic community exists as splintered fragments outside of Iraq, their categorisation as “imperial debris” suggestive of fragments created after destruction caused by a long history of imperial encounters. These pockets of diasporic exiles can also be reconfigured as appendages, or branches, that have broken off from the wider body of Iraq, both literally and in metaphorical terms. In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno speaks of the intellectual in exile as being “mutilated”(13), a word that suggests disfigurement or harm enacted on the body. Sabri’s descriptions of palm trees/Iraqis as having been “beheaded”, having burnt fronds, and having been “mutilated and exiled from their orchards” (Antoon 98) conjure metaphorical allusions

to acts of violence enacted on the corporeal human body whilst speaking to notions of exilic fragmentation and mutilation as a result of forced displacement. The splintering and fragmentation of the Iraqi population into branches of the Iraqi diaspora therefore references the necropolitical disintegration of Iraq as a nation after decades of colonial and neocolonial intervention.

When writing about exile, Adorno also states that the exile away from his/her homeland becomes stagnant intellectually as the “historical dimension that nourished his knowledge is sapped” (13). The word “sapped” is also suggestive of the arboreal as it is a term used to describe the draining of liquid/blood from a tree. While this configuration can be used to approach the individual figure of the exile abroad, it can also be used to address the near constant flow of Iraqis out of Iraq since 1958, during the country’s first military coup. It has been estimated that nearly 20 percent of Iraqis (four million) left Iraq before the US invasion of 2003 in what has been described as a “chronic brain drain” whereby many university-educated professionals have been forced to leave over the last half century. This “sapping” of the country through forced displacement, whilst vast in magnitude, can be categorised as a form of “long dying” (Nixon 2) in that it is not a sudden exodus but has long-term detrimental effect on public health and the environment. Professionals that may have worked in health or agricultural sectors in Iraq now reside in other countries, resulting in a decline in the advancement of these sectors within Iraq, affecting both the Iraqi human population and its physical environment. Violence in this instance is not immediate, shocking or sensational. Rather, it is an encroaching violence that is, as Nixon notes, “incremental and accretive” where its “calamitous repercussions” play out “across a range of temporal scales” (2). Sabri’s reference to the “dried bunches of dates” on the palm trees speak to the real effects of a “slowly unfolding environmental catastrophe” (Nixon 2) in Iraq, as well as the human and ecological ‘long dyings’ that eventually occurred in the aftermath of a long history of

necropolitical power inflicted on the Iraqi people through dictatorship and internationally imposed sanctions. As an exile returning to his homeland, Sabri is perhaps best equipped to perceive these slow moving, but no less violent, ecological changes to the environment and the populace in the vast “orchard” of Iraq that may not be readily perceptible to those who experience these surroundings on a regular basis.

Antoon’s representation of the palm tree through the imagination of Sabri, who embodies the Iraqi exile/diaspora, is a figurative link addresses the ways in which historical trauma may be manifested and expressed through the human-arboreal as it is rendered in literary form. Citing Caruth’s work on trauma, Carmen Concilio notes that trauma “‘bears witness to history’ within a double telling, both as ‘encounter with death’ and as ‘ongoing experience of having survived it’” (Concilio 22, citing Caruth 1996, 7). Concilio argues that, in literature, the act of “turning into trees” is a radical form of metamorphosis in nature” and becomes “a way to cry out one’s trauma” (340). It is especially worthwhile to note here Saleh’s use of the term “re/membering” when describing how members of the Iraqi diasporic community construct their memories, narratives and, crucially, testimony and bearing witness. The term re/membering suggests a process of remembrance as well as the re-attachment of something that has been severed. Whilst scattered as ‘debris’ across the globe as a result of decades of necropolitical power and colonial intervention, the Iraqi diaspora are willing to share their personal histories as a way of expressing their trauma as well as, crucially, a method of healing. Concomitantly, it is through processes of re/membering that these scattered branches of Iraqi exiles attempt to re-attach and connect with their homeland as a method of healing their trauma. It could therefore be suggested that Sabri’s writing is a form of catharsis by way of transmuting his grief through the arboreal using the symbolism of the palm tree. While the palm tree can be used to signify a link between the body and the environment in the novel with its symbolism rendered in terms of the triad of suffering, harm and longing that Iraqis

have suffered under decades of sanctions, violence and displacement, its symbolism can also be used to invoke processes of healing. Through the act of re/membering, Iraqi exiles and the wider Iraqi diaspora may use the act of writing, bearing witness and testimony to mend these fractured branches to their homeland.

In *The Corpse Washer*, this link between the body and the environment through a human-arboreal connection is also emblematic of processes of grief, trauma and healing faced by Iraqis still living within Iraq. The pomegranate tree, as read through the hydro-arboreal narrative, becomes not only symbolic of these processes through its association with water, death and funereal customs and ritual due its presence in the garden of the *mghaysil*. By reading the tree through its agentic arboreality, it becomes clear that the tree enacts a necroarboreality that attempts to counteract efforts by the human narrative at anthropomorphism. In Chapter 4 of the novel, Jawad recounts a memory of visiting his father in the *mghaysil*, and notes in detail the paraphernalia and rituals involved in the washing of a corpse. Describing the room, Jawad notes “copper bowls and jugs” next to a “big white basin” that is located under “right below a copper-coloured water faucet” (Antoon 15). He also notes a wooden bench placed against a wall of the room so that relatives may “watch their beloved dead be washed and shrouded” (Antoon 15). The bench on which the dead are washed is “ringed by a moat lined with white ceramic tiles” (Antoon 15). The moat is constructed to catch the water used to wash the dead, with the water funnelled “into a small stream” that directs the water into the “tiny garden” located adjacent to the building (Antoon 15). Jawad notes that the water used to wash the dead is not to be mingled with “sewage”, that is, the excess water is never to be disposed of through regular drains (Antoon 15). Within the context of Shi’ite/Islamic custom, the bodies of the dead are to be treated with reverence; thus, the water that is used to wash the dead and come into contact with the body/bodies is also to be treated as revered. The “tiny garden”, as described by the narrator, is home to a

pomegranate tree, a tree that is beloved by his father (Antoon 15). Whilst the novel does not state how old the tree is, it can be inferred that the tree is fully grown and has been in the garden of the *mghaysil* for at least two generations: Jawad's and his father's. Noting the non-linear notion of time that a tree may experience in comparison to humans as a non-human organism, and that a fully grown pomegranate tree can live for nearly 200 years, accounts for the more-than-human temporalities of the arboreal that disrupts the linearity of the human narrative. The water that has been used to wash the dead is channeled to the pomegranate tree in order to nourish it and sustain its life. For this reason, as a young child and man, Jawad is disgusted by the pomegranate tree and its association with the water from the *mghaysil*, and he continuously fails to find the same kinship with the tree that his father possessed when he was alive.

The horror that the alterity the pomegranate tree evokes in Jawad manifests itself through an other-than-realist dream/nightmare sequence which refers to the personal trauma experienced by Jawad at finding out that Reem has breast cancer. The dream/nightmare sequence occurs in Chapter 32 of the novel in which the human and the arboreal are represented as intertwined in transformative imagery that pertains to a human-arboreal connection to grieveability in the novel. Reem is described as "standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees" (Antoon 123). The trees in this sequence are anthropomorphised as the narrator describes how the branches of the pomegranate trees are moved by the wind so that the "red blossoms" of the tree appear to be "waving from afar" (Antoon 123). When the narrator approaches the figure of Reem, who is beckoning him to come closer, he notices "two pomegranates" that are sitting "on her chest instead of her breasts" (Antoon 123). In a seductive manner, Reem "cups" the pomegranates "with her hands from below" and the narrator notices that her "fingernails and lips" are also "painted pomegranate red" (Antoon 123). In reference to Reem's breast cancer in a preceding chapter, the narrator rushes toward Reem to embrace

her, “the left pomegranate” on her chest “falls to the ground” (Antoon 123). The narrative then takes an even more surrealist turn when the narrator describes picking up the pomegranate only to see “red stains bathing [his] arm” (Antoon 123). The ‘red stains’ in this instance can be attributed to the red juice from the pomegranate fruit. However, violence against the body is made apparent as the sequence ends with the narrator describing “Reem crying as she tries to stop the fountain of blood” from “gushing from the wound” (Antoon 123). Whilst the wound is not described in any further detail, the area from which the blood is pouring stems from the left side of Reem’s chest where the ‘left pomegranate’ was situated in the dream/nightmare, and where the left breast would be in reality. It could be stated that Jawad’s association of Reem and the pomegranate stems from the fruit’s ancient symbolism that associates it with marriage and fertility. Through a process of grieveability, Jawad’s psyche, through the hydro-arboreal narrative, uses the pomegranate in order to counteract the bodily trauma that Reem has experienced during her mastectomy. It could also be stated that the conjoining of the human body in illness and the body of the tree is an intertext at play by which the human metamorphoses into a tree during moments of grief.

In her work on the sixteenth-century painter Nicola Poussin alongside a reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Adele Tutter notes that stories of the Helaiades, Baucis and Philemon, Daphne, Dryope and Apollo as written by Ovid, all describe humans being transformed into trees (428). Ovid’s “catalogue of trees”, and tales of transformation into trees thus serve to “signal grief”, as they contain “unbearable, all too human realities of violence, pain, mortality and loss” (Tutter 429). The transformation into trees makes these experiences “more bearable” as they provide “an escape into alternative, non-mortal form” (Tutter 429). This calls to mind the suggestion that the tree is an “inherently pluripotent metaphorical vehicle for the affairs of man” and that the tree may resemble and may thus offer a “metaphor for the human figure itself” (Tutter 429). This reading of the dream/nightmare vignette serves to



anthropomorphise the tree through symbolism and metaphor and, while formative to a literary imagination of the more-than-human arboreal, does not recognise the tree's arboreal agency in the narrative as separate to the human story.

Rather, the revulsion that Jawad feels for the pomegranate tree is due to its agentic necroarborealism. Berthold Schoene defines the "arborealist mode" in literature as challenging the "truism that tree-writing must always depend on human mediation" and notes that texts that contain arboreality show "signs of an arboreal narrative agency" or "arboreal language"(1444). Utilising this conceptualisation of arborealism, "necroarborealism" can therefore be used to describe the narrative agency that the pomegranate tree in the novel exhibits through its association with the hydrological, death, and its resistance to anthropomorphism within the human narrative of the novel. Outside of the dream/nightmare sequence, in which the pomegranate tree is anthropomorphised and becomes conjoined with the human form through processes of human grief, the pomegranate tree in the realist sections of the novel is distinct due to its other-than-realist alterity and Jawad's discomfort at being in its presence. After his father dies, Jawad goes out into the garden and "squat[s] in front of [his] father's beloved pomegranate tree". He notes that the tree has "drunk the water of death for decades" suggesting that the tree has been polluted and defiled due to its association with the dead (Antoon 64). When Jawad is about to wash his father, he notes that the tree is now "about to drink the water flowing off his body through the tunnel around the washing bench" (Antoon 64). The imagery is unsettling and an other-than-real aesthetic imbues the tree with both a human corporeality and the supernatural as he describes how the "deep red pomegranate blooms" of the tree "were beginning to breathe" (Antoon 64). The "deep red" colour of the flowers evokes the colour of blood, and it seems almost blasphemous that the tree should sustain life through the waters of the dead. Jawad also notes that he would often eat the "fruit of the tree that [his] father would pluck and bring home" but stopped eating this

fruit once he “realised that [the tree] had drunk of the waters of death” (Antoon 65). Later in the novel, Jawad encourages Mahdi, his assistant to take some of the fruit from the tree and bring it home (Antoon 125). When Mahdi asks if Jawad does not like pomegranates, Jawad reiterates that he does in general, just “not from this tree” (Antoon 125). To Jawad, the tree is polluted by death, and his trauma and grief, both personal (the loss of his father) and political (as an Iraqi citizen trapped by necropolitics) have willed in him a reluctance to accept, or come to terms with either. Jawad thus rejects the tree’s promise of life amongst death and longs to leave Iraq and start over. It is worth stating that the necroarboreal imagery further reinforces the pomegranate tree’s agentic alterity in contrast to imagery associated with trees and vegetation in the traditional pastoral perspective, which idealises nature as exemplifying “fertility” and “beauty” by suggesting that nature can become a “sentimental escape” for humans (Schneider vii-viii). It is only towards the end of the novel that Jawad learns to accept the pomegranate tree’s necroarboreality by learning arboreal models of collaboration and cooperation.

In the closing chapter of the novel, Jawad is back working in *the mghaysil* after an unsuccessful attempt to leave the country and seeks comfort and solace from the pomegranate tree that he once despised. In this section, Jawad is “washing and shrouding” a nine-year old child who was killed with his father in an explosion and is so troubled by the death that he is overcome with a “stabbing” sensation in his ribs that “strangle” his breath (Antoon 183). As he sits by the pomegranate tree, he realises that it has become “his only companion” (Antoon 183). Jawad centres the tree in a philosophical introspection on the nature of life and death in post-2003 Iraq. He notes that the tree is “wondrous”, situated amidst “dark soil” that is “wet with the washing water it has just drunk” (Antoon 183). This acceptance of the tree despite its necroarborealism suggests that Jawad has come to terms with his own grief. In her work on grievability, Judith Butler notes that the process of mourning relies on the acceptance that the

individual will undergo a change when coming to terms with their loss (21). Therefore, the act of mourning involves “agreeing” to submit to a process of “transformation” in which the individual cannot know or predict the outcome (Butler 21). *The Corpse Washer* establishes an other-than-realist link between the fragile corporeality of the human body and the body of the tree as Jawad once again describes the tree’s “red blossoms”, but rather than being a symbol of unnatural life or the wounds on Reem’s body in the dream/nightmare sequence, they now resemble “wounds on the branches” (Antoon 183). This recognition of the autonomous body of the tree is an acceptance of the tree’s agentic necroarborealism. By recognising it as an entity that may suffer its own wounds as separate to humans, the novel acknowledges that the trauma inflicted on the hydrological and the arboreal in Iraqi eco-contexts is just as an important story to tell as the human trauma narrative. The bleeding “wounds” on Jawad’s family’s pomegranate tree evoke how trees sometimes “weep” while “others bleed” . Trees can also “lose limbs and carry scars”, and “inscribed upon”, can also bear witness and testimony. While not literally inscribed upon, the pomegranate tree of the *mghaysil* can also be said to bear witness and testimony as it has been fed on the water used to wash the various dead within Iraq’s necropolitical history. The solace that Jawad seeks from the trees could therefore be said to be a transformative, relational working through grief by recognising and accepting the necroarboreality of the tree by means of establishing a human-arboreal connection. At the foot of the tree, Jawad submits to the transformative process of mourning that he was trying to escape by leaving Iraq. In submitting to grief and mourning, Jawad is also able to view the tree as not just an organism that feeds on death, but as an organism, in possession of its own agency, that also represents both the cyclical nature of life and death as well as the connected hydro-arboreal eco-cycles of Iraq. He notes that while the tree continuously drinks “the water of death” it does not stop “budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit every spring” (Antoon 183). In his memory, Jawad also notes the significance of the

pomegranate tree in the burial ritual. As the body is lifted into the coffin, a branch of the pomegranate tree is placed with the body in the coffin:

Hammoudy went to the garden and brought back a branch from a palm tree. He handed it to my father, who broke it into two pieces. He placed one alongside the right arm between the collar bone and the hand and placed the other at the identical spot on the left side. (Later my father told me that the branches were supposed to lessen the torture of the grave. At times he would make use of branches of lotus or pomegranate). (Antoon 21)

Through this act, a relational connection is drawn between the human, Iraqi body and the arboreal body prior to the human body being committed to the ground in the act of burial. By means of the other-than-realist narration, the pomegranate tree is also imbued with the ability to re/member through its material body. By placing a branch, or appendage, from the tree with the deceased human body before it is subsumed by the earth, the materiality of the tree, itself given form and life through the hydrological in rituals of death, is imbued with an affective form of comfort or catharsis as it maintains ties to the living.

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Thus, through the hydro-arboreal other-than-realist narrative, death and decomposition are reconfigured into transformative processes. Shannon Lambert notes that material cycles such as these “sit at odds with the quasi-(Christian) religious binary of creation/destruction” (51). Through decomposition, lines between the human and vegetal are dissolved during a “process that operates across human and botanic forms” whereby “transformation replaces termination” (Lambert 51). As Lambert notes, the decomposing body becomes less distinct from its ecological environment as time passes, thus becoming a “part of the broader biotic community” of “which we are all a part” (Miller 51). The other-than-realist narrativity of *The*

*Corpse Washer* envisions a similar form of environmentally informed transformation out of necropolitical decomposition, and therefore disintegration, whereby the deceased Iraqi body is given meaning by means of its association with the arboreal through processes of re/membering. The arboreal form of the pomegranate tree, itself sustained by the hydrological, provides a form of life-giving relationality out of a space of necropolitical abandonment through its proximity to the deceased Iraqi body. The open-ended nature of the narrative construction of this novel leaves the reader with a paradoxical question: in the establishment of the human-arboreal connection with the pomegranate tree, has Jawad achieved a sense of peace, and perhaps hope, in his acceptance of his fate to never escape the seemingly never-ending, necropolitical cycle of life and death in post-2003 Iraq? And can hope ever be truly cultivated in such a cycle? Human-arboreal affective links can be drawn through various examples historically. For instance, using examples from “the evolution from Nordic tree worship through the Christian iconography of the Tree of Life”, Schama notes that humankind’s centuries-long preoccupation with trees and worship speaks to “the craving to find in nature consolation for our mortality” (15). Further, Lambert notes that “trees grieve like us, and heal like us”, noting that “humans and plants, in their coevolutionary relation, have shared a history for millions of years” and that it is this “drive” to shared “mutuality that we intend to interrogate ourselves about our common ground” (2). The other-than-realist narrative of *The Corpse Washer* reconfigures the mutuality of the human-arboreal connection by imbuing both the palm tree and the pomegranate tree with processes of grief, trauma and healing. However, it should also be stated that the trees in this instance both maintain their own agentic narratives and time-spaces that impact on the temporalities at play in the shifting narrative of the novel. In the novel, the tree also becomes symbolic of reciprocity against division in Iraq in the post-2003 era. Through the transformative processes of death, human

and other-than-human relations undergo revisioning in order to imagine common ground amidst sectarian and religious division.

## CONCLUSION

As examined through this research, post-2003 Iraqi fiction can be characterised by its use of experimental aesthetic and formal techniques. Building on an Iraqi literary tradition of the social realist novel established throughout the twentieth century, post-2003 Iraqi writers are continuing to wield the pliable textual form of the novel in order to grapple with, and represent, their lived experience within, or outside, Iraq through decades of war, sanctions and occupation. Due to this, these works are often preoccupied with representing how the Iraqi body becomes reduced to its bare life, as collateral damage, during both the long necropolitical rule of Saddam Hussein as well as the violence that occurred during the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation and the subsequent sectarian violence that ensued. Therefore, it could be stated that writers during the post-2003 period have utilised prose fiction to represent and narrate their personal, and collective, trauma as a result of living through long decades of violence. Critics of contemporary Iraqi literature have noted that post-2003 Iraqi fiction writers frequently utilise horror, magical realist, or science fiction literary tropes, in order to represent this trauma through works of fiction. Building on from this valuable work, this research has explored how these works can be classified as ‘experimental’ in their use of the established social realist techniques of pre-2003 Iraqi fiction juxtaposed against other-than-realist formal techniques, creating hybrid aesthetics. Along with examining how this hybridity in form is utilised to interrogate notions of violence enacted against the ‘body’ in post-2003 Iraqi fiction, this research was also concerned with how writers acknowledge a concurrent ecological violence enacted against the larger body of Iraq as a country or state in times of war or sectarian violence. Specifically, this study pinpointed oil (in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*) alongside water and trees (in *The Corpse Washer*) as examples of natural resources and ecological features that inflect these works of fiction with distinct narrative styles and

thematic concerns whereby violence enacted against the corporeal human body and the larger ecological body of Iraq is interrogated.

With the above framework in mind, the first chapter addresses the relationship between oil and violence, through petro-violence, in the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi. Appropriating the “cultural touchstone” (Murphy 275) of Mary Shelley’s unnamed creature in *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Saadawi reimagines and transplants his version of the literary monster in Baghdad a few short years after the post-2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation when the city was in the grip of sectarian violence and conflict. The monster in Saadawi’s novel, ‘*al-shisma*’ in colloquial Iraqi dialect or ‘the Whatitsname’, is a supernatural being whose body comprises the body parts of Iraqi suicide bomb victims and is accidentally brought to life by a junk dealer named Hadi in the novel. Imbued by the souls of each person whose body part the Whatitsname is comprised of, Saadawi’s creature embarks on a mission of vengeance by tracking down the perpetrators responsible for each death. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* exemplifies the hybridity of post-2003 Iraqi fiction by grounding the narrative in a form of social realism that is characteristic of the pre-2003 Iraqi literary tradition that is frequently punctuated by the fantastical literary trope of the monster more commonly found in speculative fiction. By identifying the petro-aesthetics of the narrative, this chapter engaged with the ways in which Iraq’s intertwined histories of oil, violence and imperialism can be charted and be attributed to the historical formation, consolidation, and disintegration of the Iraqi state. Through an identification of these aesthetics, whereby the (in)visible presence of petroleum in the novel are made apparent, the chapter examined how the body becomes a site where notions of borders, sovereignty and agency are contested.

The second novel examined in this research, *The Corpse Washer* (2010) by Sinan Antoon, is also a hybrid text that grounds its realist narrative sections in Baghdad. This longer chapter



reads the confluence of two natural resources – water and trees – as impacting on the shifting temporalities of the novel’s narrative. Centred around the story of a young Iraqi man named Jawad who is born into a family of Shi’ite corpse washers, the novel charts Jawad’s life narrative told amidst three decades of Iraqi history through a narrative that oscillates between realism and representations of the surreal. Through a non-linear and fragmented narrative, Jawad’s memories and recollections are grounded in a realist narrative that is juxtaposed alongside other-than-realist dream-nightmare vignettes through which he attempts to contend with the trauma and grief of attempting to live in post-2003 Iraq amidst violence and loss. The term ‘hydro-arboreal’ is used in this chapter to identify how water and trees are represented in the novel. The chapter approaches the shifting narrative of the novel, in which multiple temporalities are at play, in terms of a hydro-arboreal aesthetic whereby the linearity of the human narrative is punctuated by the ‘more-than-human’ timespaces of water and trees. Through these more-than-human temporalities, the novel depicts the difficulties and potentials associated with representing eco-trauma with respect to Iraqi necropolitical history. On this basis, this study has yielded a potential pathway for further research on post-2003 Iraqi fiction that would encompass a wider array of Iraqi writers, specifically Hassan Blasim and Daa’id Jubaili, who have published significant works that exemplify the aesthetic shifts in post-2003 Iraqi fiction. As mentioned in the Introduction to this research, Jubaili is a writer who is based in Basra and has previously stated in interviews that he is concerned with Basra’s continued environmental degradation due to it holding Iraq’s largest oil reserve and the pollution caused by oil rigs that are in close proximity to the city. As well as ‘The Worker’ from the anthology *Iraq +100*, Jubaili has also written eight novels and three short story collections. His short story collection entitled *No Windmills in Basra* (2022), or *La Tawahina hawa’ fi l-Basra* in Arabic, is described by its translator, Chip Rossetti, in the preface as work that includes “fantastic elements” that are comparable to the Latin American

literary tradition of magical realism (Rossetti xiv). Rossetti also notes in the preface to the collection that Jubaili pares back the form of the short story even further to what can be deemed to be ‘flash fiction’, which can be defined as fiction that comprises 1500 words or less. There is potential to examine this work as being part of the post-2003 literary tradition due its experimentation with forms that still have roots in an older Arabic literary tradition, with Moretti noting that the “very short story” (*al-qissa al-qasira jiddan*) that Jubaili uses in *No Windmill in Basra* is “closely associated” in form with the works of Syrian author Zakaria Tamer (b.1931) (Rossetti xiv). As well as experimentation in form, a preoccupation with violence and environmental concerns can be read in several of Jubaili’s stories. In ‘The Taste of Death’, Jubaili describes a soldier returning to “his hometown on the Faw Peninsula” after the Iran-Iraq War and finds that the “land had turned into brackish salt bog” (32). The significance of the al-Faw region as it relates to water and power has already been examined in the previous chapter as representative of a hydrological imaginary at work in Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*. The representation of al-Faw here as a “ruined land” that has been covered in salt is therefore significant here due to the region’s association with water, with the narrator noting that there was now “no trace of the palm trees whose leaves once shaded great expanses of the fields” (Jubaili 32). The returned soldier sets about “bring[ing] the soil back to life” by removing the salt and “purifying the soil” (Jubaili 33). However, inadvertently, and in a moment of unreality, the purification and tending of the soil causes a “platoon” of dead soldiers to rise up from beneath the earth (Jubaili 33). In an ambiguous end to the story, the narrative notes that the undead soldiers have been buried since the Iran-Iraq war, and they tell the soldier/Basran peasant that they now need to leave because the removal of salt from the earth has caused their “deaths to lose their taste” (Jubaili 34-35). A hydro-arborealist aesthetic can be read here, through the absence of water and the historical dead’s aversion to the hydrological as a purifying agent. Including Jubaili’s work in future research on this topic

has the potential to uncover a deeper analysis of this work, and others, within this specific theoretical framework.

Hassan Blasim is another Iraqi writer whose work exemplifies the experimentation that is characteristic of post-2003 Iraqi fiction. Blasim primarily utilises the form of the short story in his works and has published one novel entitled *God 99* (2020). In 2000, under the threat of political persecution, Blasim fled Iraq and undertook a four-year long journey of undocumented migration to eventually attain asylum in Finland in 2004. His story echoes those of many Iraqi citizens who, having been “traumatized and impoverished” in their home country, have fled to seek shelter in neighbouring countries, often settling in mainland Europe “and beyond” (Al-Masri 115). Like Saadawi and Antoon, Blasim oftentimes utilises narratives that “disorient the reader” alongside a “dark, fragmented aesthetic to create a terrain of horror” (Bahooora 187-188). However, Blasim’s works can also be said to heighten the horror and violence even further than Antoon and Saadawi, creating narratives that are “brutal” and yet horrifyingly “ordinary”, for violence itself has become “a mundane fixture of the national landscape that is constitutive of contemporary Iraqi identity” (Bahooora 187-188). An analysis of Blasim’s work, within the framework of this research through a bio/necropolitical and ecological lens, would uncover a new method in which to read his works. In his debut novel, *God 99*, Blasim uses the long form of the novel to depict a polyvocal narrative structure that takes the form of a series of fictitious emails, blog posts and interviews conducted by Hassan Owl who, like Blasim, is an Iraqi-born writer living in Finland. The novel’s title refers to Islamic tradition that states that God has 99 names and subverts this theological belief through Hassan Owl’s intent to interview 99 Iraqi “migrants or refugees” who represent versions of the “names of God” (Blasim 10). In a continued subversion of stereotypes related to the Islamic tradition, Hassan Owl himself is not pious or religious and can be described as a “hard-drinking and sexually dissolute atheist” (Barekat,

*The Guardian*). Through Hassan Owl's interviews, Blasim introduces a wide range of Iraqi characters who have been impacted by Iraq's long and turbulent history, in particular through sudden instances of sectarian and religious violence. Within the framework of this research, there is an opportunity to provide an in-depth analysis of the novel's petro-aesthetics, as represented by instances of petro-violence in the novel, and how these petro-aesthetics may be read in within the context of forced undocumented migration and the refugee/migrant experience of Iraqis in Europe, and beyond, in a present-day context. Blasim has also published a number of short story collections, including *The Corpse Exhibition*, *The Iraqi Christ*, and *The Madman of Freedom Square*, that provide fertile ground for analysis within a specific bio/necropolitical and ecological framework. And whilst oil is still routinely recognized as being a cause of violence within certain geographical and socio-political contexts, Iraqi writers like Blasim have started to widen their perspective on the potential violence inherent in water scarcity and eventual environmental degradation.

This preoccupation with water scarcity and violence is prominent in another story by Blasim, from his collection, *The Iraqi Christ*, entitled 'Sarsara's Tree', in a narrative that is infused with a hybrid aesthetic of realism and the 'other-than-realist that is characteristic of post-2003 Iraqi fiction. In the story, a corrupt NGO official fabricates a report on the threat of drought in a village and notes that "without water blood will flow" noting that his report on water shortages will be an intentional instigator for conflict with nearby neighbours (Blasim 101). Conducting his fieldwork in a small village located next to a fictional 'River Nabi', Blasim juxtaposes the narrative voice of the NGO official against that of a mysterious narrator who narrates the story of Sarsara, an old woman from the village. In the story, Sarsara is stricken with grief when her son drowns in the River Nabi and disappears into the desert for five years before returning to the village. She is a changed woman upon return, no longer recognising the villagers and treating them as if they were "apparitions" and develops an obsession with

the river which becomes her “only truth” (Blasim 104). In a supernatural turn in the narrative, the reappearance of Sarsara also coincides with the appearance of “death trees” in the village who are “born dead, without leaves” and “kill the ground”, causing the “sudden death of the soil” for half a mile around (Blasim 105). Sarsara is suspected of being a witch due to this “strange magic” and is put to death by the villagers as she is “abandoned” to drown in the River Nabi (Blasim 105-106). There is ample opportunity here to analyse the use of a hydro-arboreal aesthetic in this short story, in particular examining its deployment of necro-arborealism through a feminist ecocritical lens.

Whilst Blasim’s work is notable for its evocation of horror or its bleak outlook, it could also be stated that there is a use of realist and other-than-realist aesthetics in his work that depicts a form of tentative hope or optimism. ‘The Gardens of Babylon’ is a short story by Blasim included in the *Iraq +100* anthology that was commissioned by Blasim himself. As mentioned in the Introduction chapter of this research, Iraqi writers were asked to envision and write about a version of Iraq 100 years into the future. ‘The Gardens of Babylon’ is a work of short fiction that imagines a future vision of Baghdad that is now known as ‘Babylon’. ‘Babylon’ is a “paradise for digital technology developers” and a “playground for hackers, virus architects and software artists” (Blasim 11). The region’s populace live in “domes” that have been constructed to house and protect people, animals, flora and fauna against the arid physical environment. The narrator of the story is a “story game developer” that accesses the memories of a dead “classical” writer in order to construct a “story game”. This narrator is bored by references to a bloody and violent history of Iraq but cannot escape this past due to the intrusion of the writer’s voice through technological simulation. The narrative takes on a fragmented and surreal turn mid-way through the story when voices from the past and present collide resulting in clamorous changes in narrative voice. The dead writer’s memories consist of alternating flashbacks to his childhood in Iraq and the final

moments before he commits suicide in a forest in Finland. In a metafictional turn, it is also suggested that the writer from the past is Blasim himself. Blasim utilises tropes commonly found in science fiction alongside a fragmented narrative to portray a future version of Iraq that has come to grips with managing its natural resources but is still invariably haunted by the past exploitation of the country's oil reserves and the subsequent violence inflicted upon the bodies of Iraqi citizens.

It is possible to approach comparatively 'The Gardens of Babylon' and Diaa Jubaili's story from the same anthology, 'The Worker', that this research briefly outlined as an example of the post-2003 aesthetic turn in the Introduction chapter and described as a piece of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction. Whilst the humans in 'The Gardens of Babylon' are safely sequestered away in domes and protected from the degradation of the physical environment, as opposed to the 'living dead' of Basra in Jubaili's story, both pieces of short fiction are ultimately preoccupied with the wider issue of environmental degradation due to resource extractivism. Whilst Jubaili presents a severely pessimistic outlook on the future of resource extractivism and capitalism in Iraq (culminating in human body parts being sold as a resource to international parties), it could be argued that Blasim's narrative at the start seems to suggest positive futures. Rather than succumbing to a purely dystopian vision, Blasim initially presents a tentatively optimistic version of Iraq's future. The role of technology and foreign investment suggests a solution to the effects of devastating climate change and its subsequent degradation of the physical environment. This investment is spear-headed by the Chinese who "appeared on the scene and stunned the world with the domes concept, which is now seen as the ideal solution for cities that are subject to desertification and environmental degradation" (Blasim 18). The proliferation and growth of new technologies of renewable and clean energy has also seemingly led to the collapse of the "brutal and selfish capitalist system" that has resulted in the erasure of global borders and destructive nationalist

sentiment. Blasim's perspective is not just on Iraq, but a global utopia in which the climate crisis and socio-economic issues that plague the present-day are apparently tackled with presumably promising outcomes. It is a utopia in which, contrary to the current exploitation by foreign governments, Iraq's natural resources are commodified and exported much to the benefit of most of the members of its society.

However, while the narrator in 'The Gardens of Babylon' is comfortable with their existence within the domes, the decimated physical environment that exists outside alludes to a struggle between two worlds, or two versions of reality. The intrusion of the dead writer's voice in the narrative emphasizes the effects of environmental degradation that will always exist outside of the Eden-like atmosphere of the domes. The potential for violence seemingly lies dormant within the ravaged landscape of Iraq one hundred years into the future but the existence of water rebels fighting for access to water resources suggests that violence is not far from the surface. While oil no longer exists, its ephemeral presence looms over the story. And whilst the childhood of the writer is represented as relatively idyllic, the short instances of historical allusion that are embedded in his memory are notable in that they express a collective trauma that is inextricably linked with oil extraction and the subsequent violence inflicted on the bodies of Iraqi citizens. Like the physical environment that exists outside the domes, it would suggest that the past is always present. The memories of the dead writer also suggest that Blasim is underlining the importance of literature, and of the writer, in documenting Iraqi history. Despite the use of, and over-reliance, on technology in Babylon, the author's voice still pervades. As one of his characters in *God 99* states: "whenever we are overwhelmed by the strangeness and cruelty of the violence, imagination has been the spare lung by which we breathe when we are trapped in nightmares" (Blasim 99). While shifting into new aesthetic terrains, Blasim's and Jubaili's works, like Saadawi's and Antoon's are a continuation of the

legacy of earlier Iraqi prose fiction and its preoccupation, and perseverance, with representing the 'burden' of the Iraqi people.



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