

# Necropolitics in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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## Abstract

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) constitutes an account of post-war Iraq narrated by an Iraqi youth and authored by an Iraqi émigré. It is thus a valuable alternative to American fiction on the conflict and its aftermath. From this premise, this article explores how the myth of the trauma hero, which has whitewashed the American invasion in redemptive terms, is here replaced by a more nuanced discourse. Mbembe's necropolitics—i.e. the “subjugation of life to the power of death” (2003: 39)—helps explain the story of Jawad, the corpse washer of the title, and of Iraq as one of dehumanization, wounding and spatialization inflicted by Western supremacy and alleged ‘rationality.’ The novel challenges Western necropolitics in two main ways: Iraqi stereotypes are questioned, especially their identification with terrorism and martyrdom. On the other hand, surrealism and gothic elements help the protagonist and his country to sublimate the trauma derived from American neocolonial politics.

Keywords: Necropolitics; spatialization; trauma; surrealism; gothic; martyrdom

## 1. Introduction

Drawing on Ikram Masmoudi's (2015) use of Foucault's ‘subjugated knowledge’ as that knowledge misrecognized or unrecognized by hegemonic epistemic models, this article explores how subjugated knowledge, in this case of Iraq as a wounded country, is conveyed in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013). Reading this novel is an ethical demand to repair the invisibilization of other, non-Western paradigms. Antoon is part of a diaspora of Iraqi writers who lay claim to their roots from abroad. *The Corpse Washer*, published in Arabic and English by the same author, recounts the recent history of Iraq from a hybrid standpoint, Antoon having been born to an Iraqi and an American and having lived and studied in both countries. As Katharina Motyl and Mahmoud Arghavan argue: ‘By originally penning [his] work in Arabic, Sinan Antoon [...] speak[s], both literally and discursively, to a non-Western, non-Anglophone interlocutor’ (2018: 138). In this way, *The*

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*Corpse Washer* contributes to the 'survival of Iraqi intellectual traditions' (138) and delves into the misrepresented viewpoint of war victims first in Arabic and (only later) in English. Language is thus a testimony of Iraqi culture and a political statement as long as the implied reader speaks primarily Arabic. Antoon, like other of his fellow citizens abroad, offers a brand new account of post-war Iraq. As Mark Firmani (2018: n. pag.) argues: 'In contrast to most American cultural representations of the war—which, [...] predominately feature the "myth of the trauma hero"—the fiction of Iraqi writers tends to have a darker cast.' In Roy Scranton's view, American fiction on Iraq and other 21<sup>st</sup>-century conflicts relishes the myth of the trauma hero to come to terms with other national traumata. That is, after the logic of Freudian replacement, 'the trauma hero myth also serves a scapegoat function, discharging national bloodguilt by substituting the victim of trauma, the soldier, for the victim of violence, the enemy' (Scranton 2015: n. pag.). Authors like Antoon discard the myth of the trauma hero and address instead the wounded subject from a complex position which is rendered, as Firmani (2018) points out, in absurdist, surrealist and gothic terms. This is not superfluous on the part of the novel, but responds to an ethical demand to contest American war literature (on Iraq) and its trauma myth. This ethical demand is grounded on how life is devalued under the spatialization of traumatic (mis)experience and (drawing on Motyl and Arghavan 2018) neocolonial necropolitics. Jawad, the protagonist of Antoon's novel, is the youngest member of an Iraqi family who has been washing corpses for generations. Although Jawad dreams of being an artist just before the Gulf War of 1991, he ends up taking up his father's trade after the 2003 War. Iraq is under occupation and therefore no longer a country for a would-be young artist. Instead he continues his ancestors' profession and grants it new meaning: his artistic aspirations are re-spatialized and sublimated when he honors the piles of corpses left by the war.

Motyl and Arghavan analyse the role of literature when dealing with 'the devastation caused by the "War on Terror"' (2018: 129). This role is problematic, related to the 'age-old dilemma of how to produce art in the face of man-made destruction, which Theodor Adorno so poignantly captures in his statement "Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"' (129). It is in this context of life and death that Giorgio Agamben's 'distinction between *zoe* (biological life) and *bios* (social life)' and

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics are relevant to understand works like *The Corpse Washer* (129). Unlike most American fiction on Iraq, which reworks the hero trauma myth for America to feel redeemed and life affirmed, in Antoon's novel, there are no heroes or heroic actions. *The Corpse Washer* rebuffs hegemonic discourses that suggest Iraqis' consensus with pernicious regimes. All this is achieved, this article contends, through a dual discourse which merges a realistic chronological life story with absurdist and gothic chapters to contest mainstream narratives and account for the discourse of the wounded.

## 2. *Necropolitics in The Corpse Washer*

After Foucault's biopower (1998), Mbembe coined the term necropolitics to address the 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death [that] profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror' (2003: 39). That is, necropolitics refines the authority of biopower to kill or grant the right to live (16–17). In exploring necropolitics, Mbembe mainly probes how Western modernity and late modernity have reified or disposed of life on behalf of 'rationality'. In this sense, Mbembe argues: 'Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere' (13). Imperialism and colonization are based on this principle which excludes the Other, the enemy, the conquered, the slave. Thus, the late-modern tenet whereby 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty is the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women' (13) only applies to Western citizens and states. Politics and sovereignty are quite different issues in non-Western territories. Politics is 'the work of death' and sovereignty is, drawing on biopower, 'expressed predominantly as the right to kill' (16); both of them being Western prerogatives. Hence, necropolitics has fundamentally resulted from the 'conflation of war and politics (and racism, homicide, and suicide)' (18). The ultimate manifestation of Western necropolitics is terror and extreme violence, which are addressed to the non-Western Other fundamentally because they 'behave as part of nature' (24). Identified with savage animal life, the Other is not ruled by 'rationality' and the law (*ab legibus solutus*) (23) as Western citizens are. In Antoon's novel, Iraqis are hunted 'as if they were insects' and run 'like mad dogs' when shot at by the Americans (117). *The*

*Corpse Washer* and other Iraqi war novels address and denounce how Agamben's *zoe* or bare life is a persistent symptom of necropolitics.

Blassim's *The Corpse Exhibition*, Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* and Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* convey life and death in terms that challenge Western grand narratives of democracy, reason and truth. In other words, these novels question the coercive police state (or state of exception) and value-systems that Western necropolitics has enforced. Indeed, in post-war Iraq, Western discourses can no longer be regarded as proper and legitimate but necropolitical. This is especially obvious in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Saadawi's surrealistic novel recasts Shelley's classic to portray the horror of war (Arango 2014: n. pag.). Hadi al-Attag, a junk-dealer, collects body parts of bomb victims stitching them all into a single body which he calls 'Whatsitsname' after Shelley's nameless 'Creature.' Yet, while unattended by al-Attag, Whatsitsname comes to life as a revenge machine. This alternative worldview, beyond the Western conceptions of 'reason' and democracy, is complex in Saadawi's Iraq, a country under permanent war and/or invasion. In this light, Firmani argues, drawing on Masmoudi (2015), 'in content and form, the novel insists that the 2003 Iraq War and its (ongoing) aftermath rejects any stable understanding of truth' (2018: n. pag.). The parts of Whatsitsname—no matter how surrealistic its story may be—convey not only the effects of necropolitics but also the impossibility of coherent narratives about the self, society, truth or of narrativity itself in occupied Iraq.

The sense of indictment and fragmentedness of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is rather subtle in *The Corpse Washer*. Although Iraq is no country for politics, Antoon's novel is political because the life/death management by Saddam Hussein and foreign forces alike is put to the test through alternative literary discourses and elements. This management draws on Agamben's 'bare life', particularly as concerns the role of literature and national trauma. For Firmani, 'the Iraqi novel has become a representation of the manifestation of sovereign power, examining how the individual Iraqi has coped with and withstood the subjugation of life to the power of death and killing' (2018: n. pag.). Life is defined in relation to a continuum of death, terror and lack of sovereignty. As Jawad ponders, bare life has been persistent in Iraq, from Saddam's regime to foreign neocolonialism: 'We'd thought the value of human life had reached rock-bottom under the dictatorship and that it

would now rebound, but the opposite happened' (Antoon 2013: 108). Thus, US neocolonial violence (America being 'the only remaining global superpower's onslaught on Iraqi life as neocolonial necropolitics' (Motyl and Arghavan 2018: 129)) is addressed in different forms. Spatialization, the logic of martyrdom in late-modern massacres and gothic and surreal aesthetics are some of them.

### *2.1. Spatialization of the wounded body*

Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Mbembe is concerned with the spatialization of colonial processes: 'Colonial occupation entails first and foremost a division of space into compartments' (2003: 26). Power is thus imposed by territorializing experiences, lives and deaths. Of the occupied territories in Palestine, Mbembe points out, they are 'divided into a web of intricate internal borders and various isolated cells' (28). Art blurs these boundaries that late-modern necropolitics articulates to control life. That is why art is as priceless as unfeasible in Jawad's world. In recalling everyday life in occupied Iraq, he transmits this feeling of networked borders and isolated cells. The invasion of the country provokes a sense of otherness of Iraqis in Iraq, as Jawad points out: 'I felt [...] what a stranger I'd become in my hometown' (Antoon 2013: 174). Jawad is not an exceptional case; on the contrary, his is a voice that expresses a general feeling of dispossession and non-belongness (175). The process of neocolonial necropolitics in Iraq (for instance the US 'shock and awe' tactics in Iraq (Motyl and Arghavan 2018: 129) is paradigmatic of late-modern insidious massacring. Territories are re-mapped according to Western designs to control life and death. Thus, the embryonic biopolitics in Saddam Hussein's rule has been perfected into violent demarcation under foreign forces: 'I always used to say that Baghdad in Saddam's time was a prison of mythic dimensions. Now the prison had fragmented into many cells' (Antoon 2013: 175). Mbembe's words on foreign spatialization policy in the occupied territories resemble what Jawad witnesses and experiences in Baghdad and Iraq. Spaces are redistributed and split according to the allegedly 'rational' and necropolitical discourse of foreign forces. Thus, the transgressive potential of politics and art is problematized not only due to the foreign control of space(s) but also for purely material reasons derived from the embargo. Indeed, as mentioned above, the protagonist's wish to become an artist is frustrated as a consequence of the invasion. Although he is

appointed as 'an arts teacher' after his military service, he soon makes out the futility of his desire (79). However, in denouncing Jawad's frustrated career, *The Corpse Washer* proves to be transgressive and vindicatory of art. Although Antoon is an expatriate, his novel argues for the need and potential of art from the Iraqi diaspora.

The country is partitioned by foreign forces to organize life and death after the Western rationale of the terror of war. In the 1991 war, Jawad recalls, the Americans imposed a no-fly zone. According to these forces, spatialization was justified to neutralize Saddam's oppressive politics, 'but these fighter jets would kill innocent civilians' (59). Even symbolic places are occupied, especially those devoted to the dead (95). Iraq and Baghdad function almost as organic beings in the novel: they are personified as if they were characters in the flesh. The country and the city are compartmentalized and fragmented and they suffer like human bodies do when severed by war. Like territories, (dead) bodies are crippled, as Mbembe points out, to 'keep before the eyes of the victim—and of the people around him or her—the morbid spectacle of severing' (2003: 35). The space subjugated is thus geographic and corporeal, the wounded territory and the body being its two metaphors. Spatialization is under control when the Other is exposed not so much to restrictions as to their own vulnerability to necropolitics. Therefore, exposure to terror is as important a weapon as terror itself. In this light, as Mbembe argues, the 'technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial' (2003: 34) in late modernity. Jawad's sensorial recollection of terror connects the events, the space where they take place and the senses involved in their processing: 'I could never forget the smell or sight of stray dogs devouring soldiers' bodies' (Antoon 2013: 117). *The Corpse Washer* intersperses 'realistic' accounts of the protagonist and his family's everyday life with short episodes recalling his dreams and fantasies in rather poetic terms. Thus, the text also becomes a cartography of life and survival. Everyday life is not ordinary as long as the country is spatialized and governed as if in a state of exception. That is why the dislocated narration of the novel is meaningful. It tells how Jawad's story subverts Western allegedly 'rational' narratives of time and space.

As mentioned above, American fiction on Iraq mostly responds to the 'myth of the trauma hero.' By contrast, Antoon's novel intends to address the traumatized and the wounded. In other words, most

American fiction displaces the trauma twice, from the actual victim (the Iraqi civilian) to the American soldier who, as trauma survivor, assumes and encapsulates national guilt (Scranton 2015: n. pag.) after the logic of Christian redemption. *The Corpse Washer* reveals the other side of the coin. The wound(ed) is devoid of romantic undertones as a result of necropolitics. In fact, bare life is what Iraqis are left with when they are allegedly granted Western values, which must be cancelled because of the state of exception those same liberating forces impose. For this reason, Jawad's art is fated to come to terms with raw death (31). This fact explains his woundedness and dissociates him from his own culture: 'You were heavily armed with faith, and that made your heart a castle. My heart, by contrast, is an abandoned house' (3). Jawad's wound is far from that of the Western romantic hero. In occupied Iraq, death is not fulfilling, but desecrating, because life is worthless (146). Devoid of the redemptive nature of Christ or the romantic self, martyrdom and the sense of purpose are simply out of question.

In an article on Colm Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*, José M. Yebra (2018) explores wound ethics as an encounter with the Other. The wound, as the site of vulnerability, is usually read as traumatic. Yet, Tóibín's version of the virgin Mary feels wounds and vulnerability in quite a different fashion: 'from the wounds and cuts of (and between) Mary, her son and their friends and relatives, arises a liminal area, a poetics of healing where scars are a physical meeting-point, the site of (their) relationality. It is in these wounds, and (later) the scars between the One and the Other, where their dispossession, as "the fissuring of the subject," takes place' (Yebra 2018: 38). Unlike Tóibín's positive reading of the wound as a relational site, wounds in *The Corpse Washer* set people apart. Jawad is wounded, as the country is, because he withdraws and is withdrawn. The politics of war terror and the country's subjugation explain why the protagonist must give up his artistic aspirations. Moreover, his brother, uncle, father and beloved Reem depart and leave wounds open. Mary finds 'in her vulnerability, woundedness and spirituality the way to address (and be addressed by) the Other in a caring fashion' (Yebra 2018: 39). However, Jawad is left with nobody other than corpses to care for. In this sense, necropolitics can be said to succeed as relationality is limited.

### 3. *The ethics and aesthetics of surviving trauma*

As mentioned above, Antoon's novel is paradigmatic of the Iraqi literary response to suffering under necropolitics. The absurdist, surrealist and gothic elements which, Firmani (2018) argues, most of these texts evince are patent in the martyrdom discourse of *The Corpse Washer*. The protagonist is exposed to terror and extreme violence to the point of numbness when he addresses the corpses to wash as 'the weekly harvest of death' (Antoon 2013: 131). Yet, Jawad's apparently insensitive words only confirm his extreme sensibility. The novel can only bear witness to his survival through nightmares and hallucinations, a dreamlike scenario that sublimates the actual effect of necropolitics. This background is achieved through the narration, especially in very short episodes that summon liminal states; that is, states blurring consciousness and unconsciousness, reality and fiction. In this way, the novel breaks with the Western conception of 'rationality' as a lacking narrative to render the 'truth' that cannot be otherwise uttered. For years, American veterans' narratives were the only version of the Iraq wars. The first wave of these veteran-writers, Tom Peter (2016: n. pag.) argues, focused on their traumata. That is, after America's callous treatment of Vietnam veterans, it was necessary to empathize with, praise and listen to the heroes in Iraq. Years later, when initial traumata were over, a second wave of veteran-writers emerged (Peter 2016: n. pag.). Scranton's *War Porn* is a case in point. Unlike first-wave novelists, 'Scranton resists the temptation to deliver a redemptive or sympathetic moment for soldiers who misbehave or suffer humiliation' (Peter 2016: n. pag.). Moreover, Peter points out, new voices render the effects of war and thus other perspectives are included: 'We're also introduced to an array of complex Iraqi characters, shifting our reflexive sympathies away from American soldiers as we see them through the eyes of the occupied'. Second-wave writers like Scranton incorporate Iraqi characters who summon a 'rich tradition of proverbs and poetry' (Peter 2016: n. pag.) and thus provide a much more realistic version of the Gulf wars. In the last decade a generation of Iraqi writers has developed an Iraqi version of the Iraq War unbiased by American conventions and ideology. *The Corpse Washer* is paradigmatic because it rescues the poetic tradition mentioned above, but especially the gaze of the occupied through surrealistic and gothic imagery.

### 3.1. Surrealism as criticism

*The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* refers to André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), the main idea of which was 'to release the creative powers of the unconscious mind [...] "to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality or super-reality"' (Chilvers 2009: 611). A foremost goal of the movement was to breach 'the dominance of reason and conscious control by releasing primitive urges and imagery' (611). It is with this purpose that surrealism resorted to the bizarre, incongruous and irrational to shock the viewer or reader (611). That post-9/11 Iraqi writers often use a dreamlike surrealist imagery is meaningful for various reasons. In contrast to the supposedly 'rational' narratives imposed by Western necropolitics, they often opt for an alternative view of reality. In this way, they can release the 'primitive' tradition these occupying forces have ignored or misunderstood (Antoon 2013: 31, 96). All in all, surrealism allows the narratives to transcend reality (often too traumatic to bear witness to) into an 'absolute' reality that is, despite its incongruity, more accurate than conventional reality. In *The Corpse Washer*, surrealistic moments are usually dreamlike encounters that challenge Jawad's everyday life.

In episode 6, 'an old man with long white hair and a long white beard wakes' the protagonist asking him to 'write down all the names' (26). Although Jawad is unable to understand whose names to write and to what purpose, he does what he is told while kneeling down. However, once the Christian God-like figure leaves, the youth notices he has only written 'Every soul shall taste death' hundreds of times (26). These words appear in the Quran three times alluding to humanity's inexorable mortality. Antoon's novel also addresses the inexorability of death, but in a dream-like scenario. The Islamic message the protagonist writes in dreams is the response to an apparently Christian God. Yet, even more important than the incongruous imagery, the fact addressed is that the piles of corpses caused by necropolitics cannot be named as subjects (in Western terms) but reduced to bare life. In other words, the cultural and religious incongruity of the scene serves to denounce necropolitics.

Episode 15 is another example of surrealism, used to denounce Islamist terrorism this time. Jawad's television set does not work except for a channel airing what seems the beheading of a Western prisoner: 'Five hooded men stand around a sixth, who kneels and wears an orange work suit. [...]. The leader pauses and looks at me, warning, *You better*

*change the channel, because what you will soon see will terrify you and you're not a man'* (54). The video ends as could be expected, with the alleged terrorists killing the hostage. The imagery is well known. However, the whole scene is again incongruous. When terrorist groups behead Western hostages like Steven Sotloff and James Foley, to name two of them, they intend to send a message to Western countries. In *The Corpse Washer*, Jawad is virtually forced to view the execution by an uncanny force, which is illogical and incomprehensible. Why would a group of alleged Islamist terrorists wish an Iraqi citizen to watch the video? The leader on the screen addresses him directly accusing him of not being manly enough to endure the gravity of the scene. The incongruity of the episode serves to break down stereotypes about Arabs. In being exposed to terror as a threatened spectator rather than as an actor, Jawad's surrealistic experience transcends reality, as is often constructed, and gives insight into an 'absolute' reality. Indeed, the effect of the 'fiction' that happens on screen (no matter how real the events are) is vivid and sensorial, 'I feel nauseated and turn off the TV, but blood flows from the screen' (54). However, the frames of fiction and reality are blurred: the 'real' beheading (many have been recorded and aired for propaganda) in the novel and the bizarre scene of blood flowing out of the television the protagonist recounts are mediated in fictional terms. They are performative and surrealistic, but they also address the liminal territory between home terrorism and foreign necropolitics.

The novel opens with a surrealistic scene in which Jawad observes a naked (perhaps dead) Reem lying on a marble bench at the beach (1). Before kissing her, the boy washes her after the ritualized fashion his father employed with the corpses, while a purifying rain is falling. The scene comes to an abrupt end when a group of foreign soldiers attack him and apparently rape and take her away (2). The youth is not only the narrator but also the focalizer and the object of the narration. In fact, as the victim of a traumatic episode, he dissociates from himself to come to terms with the event: 'I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling on a puddle of blood' (2). The episode is a nightmare but not a less reliable document for that reason. Being unable to speak, having his neck penetrated with a knife and kneeling on blood constitute a testimony of how necropolitics deprives Iraqi people of their humanity and turns them into bare life. The nightmare, Jawad points out, is recurring and precedes the actual events. Later in the novel, Reem leaves Jawad before marrying

because she is ill. However, there is another hallucinatory episode where he meets her again, which recalls the characteristics of trauma dislocated narratives. Unlike the beheading on television, the iconography is mystical, poetic and sensual, but eventually traumatic as well (123). The scene is surrealistic for several reasons, not only because Reem comes back from death with no apparent purpose. As happens in episode 15, the protagonist feels unable to control himself and his entourage, as happens with trauma victims who are haunted by 'a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control' (Caruth 1996: 2). His perception of reality is unreliable: he speaks but cannot hear his own voice or footsteps when walking (Antoon 2013: 123). Moreover, Reem is featured as a mystic (yet sensual) figure who Jawad worships and desires. Indeed, once he is next to her, he notices 'two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breasts' (123). However, the surrealism of the scene continues since the pomegranate is both a reward and a cursing for Jawad. In approaching her, 'the left pomegranate falls' and when he is about to pick it up, he notices 'Reem [is] crying as she tries to stop the fountain of blood gushing from the wound' (123). The protagonist is wounded because she is wounded. Yet, unlike the wound ethics that connects characters in a liminal way in Tóibín's *The Testament of Mary*, Jawad's wounds only distance him from his beloved. In this sense, although Michael Rothberg argues it is mandatory 'to construct new parables beyond Tancred and Clorinda' (2013: xvii) the scene recalls this story, which opens Cathy Caruth's pioneering volume on trauma theory.

The story of Tancred and Clorinda is originally addressed by Freud to explain the logic of trauma processes. In brief, Tancred kills his beloved Clorinda who is disguised as an enemy knight. Next, on his way to the crusades, he 'slashes his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut, and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved again' (Freud, in Caruth 1996: 2). The story is surrealistic because it utters the double incongruity of trauma, temporal and epistemological. As Caruth points out, it is not only the double temporality of trauma (that is, the moment the traumatic event takes place and its delayed unwilling repetitions), but the juxtaposition of knowing and unknowing that explains the nature of trauma. When Clorinda's crying voice comes out, Tancred bears witness to the Other's truth, which comes before the event

he had overlooked (3). Reem also addresses Jawad but it is the latter who is doubly wounded: first, when he was abandoned, and once again when, in picking up her pomegranate breast, he feels his arm bleeding. What Freud and Caruth infer from the parable is that

it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language' (Caruth 1996: 4).

In *The Corpse Washer*, the truth is available in these short hallucinatory episodes that—like a recasting of the story of Tancred and Clorinda—reveal what cannot be uttered in Jawad's more conventional narrative.

Episode 40, the shortest of the novel, is yet another example of surrealism, in this case related to Jawad's frustration as an artist. It features a brief hallucination in which the protagonist, back in the *mghassilchi*,<sup>1</sup> picks up a Giacometti statue to wash it as if it was a corpse. The effect is bizarre as 'the sculpture dissolves into tiny fragments' (141). Indeed, no matter how much he tries to fix the statue, 'everything disintegrates' (141). It is again an incongruous scene—why should Jawad wash a statue as if it were a corpse?—that explains in a particularly perceptive way not only the disintegration of Jawad's dreams, but the dissolution of Iraqi people's lives into bare lives under necropolitics. Jawad's uncle Sabri, an émigré in Germany, writes a poetic article that somehow responds to his nephew's hallucination. He compares Iraqis with palm trees to account for the massacres they have endured (97–98). This message of ecological humanity contests necropolitics, recasts vulnerability and demands the end of dispossession of the Iraqi Other under Western terms. The disintegration of Giacometti's statue conveys disintegration as the origin, and especially the effect, of the politics of domination that wounds the Other. By contrast, Sabri's words refer to Iraqis' resilience despite being fragmented and assailed. Fragmentation does not have to be negative if it is integrative and the terror of war ceases.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the word Jawad uses in reference to place where his father and he carry out the religious rituals of corpse washing.

### 3.2. *The gothic as real*

Both surrealism and the gothic are concerned with the irrational over the rational. However, whereas surrealism focuses on the incongruous and the dreamlike, the gothic is particularly keen on the supernatural, passionate, ruinous, chaotic and deadly elements of the Romantic movement. The effect of the gothic cannot be restricted to that period, though, since it is present in current culture, in horror and terror films, as well as in literature. Although far from mainstream sagas on vampires and werewolves, *The Corpse Washer* finds in the gothic another formula to contest the hero trauma myth and necropolitics. The effectiveness of the gothic in the novel consists in its 'truth.' While doing his military service, Jawad and his fellow soldiers are not attacked by a supernatural being, but by an American Humvee 'looking like a mythical animal intent on devouring us' (66). Likewise, when the protagonist pays a visit to his former art school after the American bombings, the building is humanized in its ruinous, chaotic and deadly condition: 'It looked like a corpse that had been skinned and then had its entrails burnt and its ribs exposed' (74). In using a prosopopeia, granting human characteristics to an inanimate being (as well as to Baghdad and Iraq) the discourse of terror gains emphasis; even a building suffers the effects of violence in human terms. In *Institutes of Oratory*, when dealing with prosopopeia, Quintilian points out: 'In this kind of figure, it is allowable even to bring down the gods from heaven, evoke the dead, and give voices to cities and states' (2009: 161). This is what Antoon's novel does when appealing to Iraq and its culture against the terror of war.

The gothic inclination for decay and death in *The Corpse Washer* is as supernatural as it is realistic. The narrator does not search for ruins to make up a romantic scenario. They become almost alive in front of him. The prosopopeia mentioned above is a way to confront and convey the effect of actual ruins. At other points, the novel accounts for and creates an apocalyptic landscape. In other words, gothic necropolitics merge the aesthetic with the 'reality' of blackness. A good example of this gothic excess of trauma and reality is the moment when the war comes back in 2003: 'After weeks of bombing we woke up one morning to find the sky pitch black. Black rain fell afterward, coloring everything with soot' (Anton 2013: 61). Jawad's words recall the aftermath of the bombing of oil wells but in a metaphoric way. What humans have produced becomes an apparently natural event, a black rain, which is obviously man-made.

The gothic sublimates and reveals an ominous real event (military invasion) that is granted mythic proportions (an apocalyptic rain). Thus, Jawad opens the door into the sublime, the unknown, what is to come, to explain the unexplainable, namely the traumatic effect of necropolitics in real life.

Often the gothic meets the surrealistic, as is the case of episode 38. It is one of Jawad's surrealistic dreams; this time, while he is washing the corpse of an old man, the latter wakes up and complains about Jawad's way of shrouding his body and decides to wash himself (138). The surrealistic scene turns into a gothic one when 'dozens of corpses start coming from every direction' (138). The living dead, a classic characteristic of gothic aesthetics, move around the protagonist in what at first glance recalls the *Danse Macabre*. Although the Dance of Death is a Christian motif, the conception applies to the scene in *The Corpse Washer*. Death is the great leveler and therefore all dance together knowing their fate is the same. Connected with this idea, the scene that Jawad witnesses outlines a relational community, all of the corpses helping each other (138).

Jawad's dream is not only a *memento mori*, it is a gothic display of dead bodies which serves yet again to address the consequences of war. As happens in zombies films, the corpses propagate causing alarm and terror in the viewer: 'Their numbers multiply and they fill the entire *mghaysil*' (138). Sarah Baker explores the zombie gothic in *The Walking Dead* (2010) as a genre that conveys current cultural anxieties. The series portrays 'decay, chaos and lawlessness in post-apocalyptic [America]' (2010: n. pag.). What the series fictionalizes in the case of America (namely an apocalyptic scenario where pre-apocalyptic capitalism and family and social values have vanished) is real in Antoon's Iraq. For Baker, the zombie narrative responds to Western anxieties, particularly the 'many fundamental weaknesses that may ultimately collapse through one form of global disaster or another' (2010: n. pag.). In *The Corpse Washer*, the collapse has already come true. The necropolitics that Western forces have practiced in other territories may be sublimated in zombie fiction, but it is the origin of the decay of those other territories where the zombie is no longer a mere fiction. As a rule, readers worldwide are exposed to Western cultural anxieties 'nurtured about the rise in terrorist activity around the world, witnessed with the collapse of the World Trade Centre towers, and the threats of pandemics that might

eviscerate the human race in the form of SARS' (Baker 2010: n. pag.). Iraqi novels (such as Antoon's) account for the cultural anxieties of the non-Western Other. Baker points out: 'zombies, vampires and other apocalyptic monsters are used as faceless creatures to present either an unknown threat or pose them as social critique' (2010: n. pag.). Jawad's corpses are also faceless creatures that apparently threaten him in the nightmare. However, these corpses are eventually *homines sacri* that question not so much Iraqi society but the effect of necropolitics, of which they are evidence. Thus, although Baker's reading of *The Walking Dead* is significant and helps to understand how anxieties are currently articulated, the use of this gothic motif is rather different in *The Corpse Washer*. The difference between survivors and victims is slight. The dead who haunt survivors such as Jawad in dreams do not embody the fear 'that electrifies the collective mind (Kavka)' (Baker 2010: n. pag.), as zombies do in American fiction. They do not represent or trigger the downfall of the family and society. In short, the liminality between life and death, which in *The Walking Dead* and similar representations evince anxieties, cannot hold in a society under necropolitics. It is difficult to imagine threats to one's cultural, familial and societal stability when there is no stability whatsoever. When the terror of war and lack of sovereignty turn life into bare life, the walking dead and post-apocalypse are not metaphors but super-reality.

### 3.3. *Martyrdom revised*

As mentioned above, American fiction on the Iraq wars mostly feature the myth of the trauma hero to overcome national guilt by substituting the ultimate victims (Iraqi civilians) with vicarious perpetrators/trauma victims (American soldiers). *The Corpse Washer* focuses instead on martyrdom and survival as tokens of (self-)violence as a consequence of necropolitics. In inflecting violence on one's self and culture, the martyr and the survivor are *homines sacri*, their lives being unworthy or guilt-ridden. The cultural significance of martyrdom for the country is patent as Jawad's expatriate uncle Sabri first wants to visit the Martyr's Monument (Antoon 2013: 94). When they approach the monument occupied by foreign forces (94), they view this spatialization of martyrdom as 'a premeditated insult' (94). What for the occupiers are acts of revelry and violence to be controlled are for the occupied acts of dispossession that reify martyrdom as a cultural symbol. This does not

mean the novel upholds violence in the name of martyrdom. On the contrary, Jawad vicariously addresses a friend's death in a terrorist attack as a personal issue.

Adil Mhaybis, whom Jawad befriended in his days at the academy, is one of the victims of a suicide bomber. The novel avoids identifying martyrdom with suicide bombing, thus breaking with the Western stereotype which often identifies Muslim with terrorist. Paradoxically, the protagonist is reading about the Mesopotamian creation myths when he learns about the massacre: the rich creative culture of Iraq is often eclipsed by the violence that necropolitics only feeds. Moreover, in focusing on Adil, the victim of the attack, martyrdom is clearly on his side and not on the bomber's, as the narrator recalls, 'the *cowardly* terrorist attack on al-Mutanabbi Street' (162, our italics). After Adil's death, Jawad reflects on the 'stage of anger and despair in which [terrorists'] lives have no value, and no other life or soul have value either' (162). When necropolitics turns life into bare life the unconceivable becomes possible, which does not mean Jawad justifies or legitimates death. On the contrary, when life is rendered worthless the protagonist feels some consideration is necessary, especially as more and more bodies become bombs (162). The body thus works as the sacrificial weapon of a crusade that Jawad abhors. Once more, *The Corpse Washer* rebuffs a positive reading of wound ethics because wounds result from extreme and calculated violence. With Adil's death, the problematic ethics of death and woundedness under necropolitics is put to the fore. The invasion and embargo, as well as failed democracy, bring up a sense of dispossession in Iraq which transmutes into violence. In other words, state war violence brings about an insidious violence that in the end wounds the obliterated victims, mostly civilians. Jawad reflects on this complex web of multidirectional links of victimhood and perpetratorship when he figures out the encounter between Adil and the terrorist after death: 'Will Adil see his killer dragged to hell and will he spit on him, or will he just look at him abhorrently?' (163). Adil is a victim of a double perpetrator, his murderer and, vicariously, those responsible for state-sponsored war. Paradoxically, the violence of the terrorist does not target the necropolitical agent but its most vulnerable victim. The terrorist decides whose life is bare; his victims' lives are made bare twice: when foreign invaders 'other' and dispossess them, and when their terrorist fellow citizen snatches their lives. All this said, whereas the myth of the

trauma hero dispatches American national guilt by substituting the actual victim for the trauma victim in American fiction on the Iraq wars, *The Corpse Washer* focuses on the ultimate victim. In this sense, no Freudian substitution holds and guilt is accordingly never dispatched. State-sponsored war and terrorist violence cannot be whitewashed or whitewash one another. Jawad and the rest of Iraqi victims of both violences are not the enemy, but the wounded ones.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The article started with a reference to subjugated knowledge as a major vindication of Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. Indeed, instead of the redemptive goal of most American fiction on the Iraq wars, the novel reveals the complex reality of a country that Western necropolitics has hidden. The knowledge of the subjugated proves to be powerful when given a voice. However, subjugation in *The Corpse Washer* goes beyond knowledge. Drawing on Mbembe (2003), necropolitics makes reference to the subjugation of life. Moreover, as has been shown, the novel explores the subjugation of the country as geographic space. The triple subjugation, of knowledge (in Foucault), of life (in Mbembe), and of space is thus addressed and countered in *The Corpse Washer*. Jawad's country has been policed, spatialized, dispossessed and accounted for in Western terms. In this sense, the narration of the protagonist is ethical and political, a vindication of his and the country's aspirations; in sharing his frustration with that of the nation as a whole, he moves readers ethically and politically. This is the basis of Jawad's persistence and his response to necropolitics and the state of exception imposed by Western forces. He is no romantic hero, as the trauma myth makes American veterans. He is wounded but not redemptive, at least not in a triumphant fashion, because his story is not intended to save Iraq from necropolitics and cultural trauma. His wound reveals his vulnerability, which is the knowledge of the subjugated. Yet, Jawad attains a revelatory discourse out of vulnerability, his failed career as an artist, and his humanity. His hallucinations, dreams and imagination make up surrealistic and gothic scenes that disclose the traumata caused by war, invasions and the embargo. It is not, however, the spectacle of severing that characterizes and justifies Jawad's discourse but his resilience when meeting corpses and death, vindicating the knowledge of the subjugated and the memory of his family and country. His resilience is not over-joyous though. It

comes from his humble station, disregarding any triumphalist conception of martyrdom.

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