Concrete Stories, Decomposing Fictions: Body Parts and Body Politics in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

This article reads the English translation of Ahmed Saadawi's novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), to explore the "concrete stories" and "infrastructural narratives" devised by the US military in support of its occupation of Baghdad. By stitching together a city and society littered with composing and decomposing fictions, Saadawi's novel reveals how biopolitical governance produces, contra the hegemonic US war story of security consolidation and societal stabilization, pervasive *insecurity* instead. Saadawi's "decomposing fictions", as I call them, operate on three homologous terrains: the (de)composition of the city; the (de)composition of the body; and the (de)composition of the narrative itself. Through this three-tired conflation, Saadawi shows how body parts are biopolitical, and how narratives actively and materially reshape human bodies and urban infrastructures. The article therefore argues that the novel aligns with a critical posthumanist perspective, one that allows for a more rigorous consideration of narrative systems (including fictions) as constitutive of and impactful upon human and non-human bodies and urban infrastructures than other concepts, such as "planned violence" (Boehmer & Davies 2018), have so far allowed. By theorizing a more complex relationship between narrative form and the built environment in the contexts of militarized colonial and biopolitical urban governance, the article shows how Saadawi's novel not only challenges the "imaginative geographies" of the colonial present (Gregory 2004), but its material infrastructures as well.

Keywords: biopolitics, Baghdad, Ahmed Saadawi, Frankenstein, infrastructure, narrative

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Introduction: Concrete Stories

Reflecting in 2016 on the US-led counterinsurgency operation in Baghdad, former infantryman Major John Spencer remembered that "concrete" had been "the most effective weapon on the modern battlefield":

> Ask any Iraq War veteran about Jersey, Alaska, Texas, and Colorado and you will be surprised to get stories not about states, but about concrete barriers. [...] Baghdad was strewn with concrete—barriers, walls, and guard towers. Each type was named for a state, denoting their relative sizes and weights. [...] the US forces basically engaged in siege warfare. But atypical to historic examples, instead of attacking to break through fortified walls, they imposed the siege on the enemy by building walls. (Spencer 2016)

The initial US invasion of Iraq in 2003 destroyed what little remained Saddam Hussein's authoritarian state, creating a sudden power vacuum that led—especially in Baghdad—to looting, assassinations, and kidnappings, and later to IEDs, suicide bombings, and militia warfare (Cockburn

2006, 74-74; Tripp 2007). The city's infrastructural fabric was first torn apart, and soon after social ties began to decompose. Committed to a reactive project of "securitization", the occupation sought to contain the chaos the invasion had unleashed with a sophisticated and extensive policy of wall craft. As outbreaks of violence eroded the city's spatial coordinates, the US "weaponized" concrete, erecting barriers to "reduce the complexity of the environment", protect "secured" neighbourhoods, and "stitch" the city back together (Spencer 2016).[1]

In his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, published first in Arabic in 2013 and then translated into English by Jonathan Wright in 2018 (when it was also shortlisted for the Man Booker International), Iraqi author Ahmed Saadawi responds to the US occupation and its concrete reshaping of his city. With its titular invocation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the novel summons a thick tapestry of pre-existing cultural narratives in order to explore not only the "political" effects of these infrastructures of occupation, but their "formal" affects as well (Larkin 2013). Focusing solely on the novel in its English translation, in this article I will explore how Saadawi, through proliferating fictions and dismembered bodies, *decomposes* the physical infrastructures of the US occupation and the biopolitical storying of Baghdad they enabled.[2] Against the concrete "stitches" of the occupation's walls, what I will call *Frankenstein in Baghdad*'s "decomposing fictions" operate on three homologous terrains between which the novel itself invites comparison: the (de)composition of the city, indexed in the novel's many long descriptions of deteriorating infrastructure; the (de)composition of the human body, manifest most obviously in the bodies of suicide bombers and their victims, but also in the decomposing body of Saadawi's reinvention of Mary Shelley's monster, "the Whatsitsname"; and finally, the (de)composition of the narrative itself, as the novel obsesses over "rumours", "gossip", and unreliable sources. These

[1] Spencer (2016) is quick to credit British colonialism in South Africa and French colonialism in Algiers for first trialling these infrastructural strategies.
[2] I am aware that there are many additional motifs at work in the original Arabic (see, for example, Webster, 2018: 440, 447), but in the interests of space, I draw my critical reading entirely from the novel in its English translation.

proliferating fictions present themselves as counteractive narratives that respond to, resist, and unravel the US occupation's "concrete stories" and their "grammar of violence" (Tripp 2007, 33).

By establishing these three terrains of narrative, body, and city, before cycling repeatedly between them, Saadawi therefore moves beyond metaphor, allegory, or even homology to stitch together a much larger decomposing fiction. For Saadawi, body parts *are* body politics, and vice versa: in this novel, narratives reshape both human bodies and urban infrastructures in the most material of ways—that is, they are *infrastructural narratives*. In one of the few sustained analyses of the novel to date, Annie Webster draws on Susan Sontag's (2002) argument against the use of illness as metaphor to critique interpretations of Saadawi's monster as a "national allegory" (2018, 441).[3] Such readings, she contends, overlook "the visceral, biological significance of the Whatsitsname's anatomy", abstracting "the violence enacted upon individual bodies by referring to a collective body politic" (441). Webster's warning is pertinent: between 2003 and 2011 "there were 10,189 incidents in which at least one Iraqi civilian was killed in Baghdad province" (Marozzi 2015, 528), and the web-project, Iraq Body Count, has been building an ever-growing, cross-checked public database of civilian casualties since the beginning of the invasion ("About IBC", n.d.).

Nevertheless, I worry that an outright rejection of the novel's allegorical implications risks eliding its critical and resistant potential, especially in its English translation, and instead insist on reading Saadawi's body parts as both literal and metaphoric simultaneously. Because the novel's implicit allegories are always refracted through the decomposing bodies both of Saadawi's fictional monster and the infrastructures of the city itself, the novel actually refuses the separation of "political bodies" into *either* "national allegories" *or* "physical products" (Webster 2018, 443).

[3] Other readings of the novel, including Ola Abdalkafor's (2018) and Sinéad Murphy's (2018), have read the Baghdad of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in biopolitical terms, as I do here. However, by drawing variously on Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler, they are more concerned to emphasise the monster as the figure of "homo sacer" and a cypher for the production of Baghdad as a space of exception, or "living in death". Building on these readings, I want to emphasise more specifically the resistant, anti-colonial possibilities of Saadawi's decomposing fictions.

With this refusal comes an important emphasis on the way in which fictional narratives, physical bodies, and urban infrastructures are mutually (re)structuring and co-produced.

This has important theoretical implications for recent work on the relationship between literary narrative and urban infrastructure in colonial cities. As Elleke Boehmer and I (2018) have argued, literary narratives can offer "critical purchase" on the "planned violence" that reshapes colonial cities (5), where "planned violence" describes the attempt by a colonial occupier to alter societal and economic relations in their favour by restructuring a city's spatial composition.[4] However, Saadawi's interest in the homologous decomposition not only of bodies and infrastructure, but of *narrative itself*, presses on our admittedly ambitious assertion that literary forms such as the novel can "contribute to more productive processes of social and infrastructural re-imagination and reconfiguration" (2018, 5). Rather than strictly proving or disproving this claim, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* instead provides a thick textual surface that, much like the city itself, provides an opportunity for a more critical interrogation of the relationship between narrative and infrastructure, and between fiction and concrete, brought together as they are by simultaneously literal and metaphorical body parts and body politics. As I will conclude, Saadawi's novel aligns with a critically posthumanist perspective that might allows us to speak not only of *narratives of infrastructure* (the simple representation of physical infrastructures in literary narratives), but also of *infrastructural narratives*—that is, narrative systems (including fictions) that are materially constitutive of, and impactful upon, human and non-human bodies and urban infrastructures themselves (see Davies 2017, 18-39).

Biopolitics in Baghdad: Infrastructures of Occupation

[4] This specific practice was banned, albeit ineffectually, under the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention (see Welch 2008, 261).

In order to grasp fully the infrastructural narratives of Saadawi's novel, it is necessary to begin by outlining the biopolitical extent of the US occupation of Baghdad post-2003, and to take stock of the role that infrastructures played in the coercion, destruction, and decomposition of the city's existing social fabric. For although it is true that the occupation's walling may have initially "brought a limited and temporary solution to the effects of the sectarian violence" (Pieri 2014, 2; Damluji 2010), the construction of walls tended to entrench sectarian ghettoization (Hills 2010; Murrani 2016), subjecting Baghdad to what Martin Coward (2009) has called "urbicide". Sharing the same root as the word "genocide", which denotes the purposeful erosion of the social tissue binding self-identifying ethnic groups together, urbicide shifts critical attention to the eradication of the underlying spatial infrastructures that make social relations possible. By carving up pre-existing "social practices [and] redefining territorial boundaries among different ethno-religious groups" (Rashib & Alobaydi 2015, 190), the occupation's urbicide eroded the shared social stories that, like a kind of narrative cement, hold cities and communities together. For the Americans, however, the physical walls provided not only a secure quick fix; just as importantly, the "stories of concrete" that Major Spencer discusses above were themselves solid and reliable, affirmative of US foreign policy. These "concrete stories" therefore functioned as narratives of infrastructure, certainly, but also as *infrastructural narratives* that re-entrenched the occupation's territorial hegemony.

This biopolitical reordering of urban space has its roots in modern urban planning traditions that, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, drew on technocratic visualities honed in strategic colonial footholds and European metropoles (see King 1976; Mitchell 1988; Mirzoeff 2011). These visualities frequently deployed a metaphoric use of the body to describe the cities it (re)organized: roads were configured as circulatory systems; sewers and cemeteries were waste disposal organs; green spaces were respiratory networks allowing the city to breath (see Graham & Marvin 2001, 53-55; Gandy 2003, 8). Metaphors of the city-as-body have long structured discourses of biopolitical securitization, from the proto-colonialist *cordon sanitaire* (Nightingale 2012) to the modernist vision of the architect-as-surgeon cutting out "the cancer of the slums" (McGuirk 2014, 26). But

with the gradual urbanization of warfare (Graham 2004) and the more recent militarization of urban space (Graham 2011), counterinsurgency has become so saturated in "biologized thinking" (Dillon & Lobo-Guerro 2008, 278) that it now "actively imagines itself as a medical practice" (Mirzoeff 2009, 1739).

Today, as David Theo Goldberg (2015) contends, "political walls are [therefore] technologies" useful only for "organizing and promoting a political economy of ongoing conflict". They are symptoms of a larger "biopolitical" shift in contemporary urban warfare (Hardt & Negri 2004, 21), operating on the physical bodies of populations and infrastructural bodies of cities to sever and decompose—and then to stitch up and revive—the social and spatial tendons that once held the body politic together. In Baghdad, the "counterinsurgency doctrine" prescribed "three operational phases" for an outbreak of violence: "Stop the bleeding"; "Inpatient care—recovery"; "Outpatient care—movement to self-sufficiency" (Gregory 2009, 276). In his April 2008 testimony to the US congress, the infamous General David Patraeus compared ethno-sectarian violence in Iraq to "a cancer that continues to spread if left unchecked", while the US Army issue guide describes "counterinsurgents" as "surgeons cutting out cancerous tissues while keeping other vital organs intact" (see Mirzoeff 2009, 1739). Such "military metaphors", critiqued as early as the 1970s by Susan Sontag for their "stigmatizing of certain illnesses and, by extension, of those who are ill" (2002: 97), resurface here with little consideration by those who use them.

The infrastructural reshaping of Baghdad's body politic, and the metaphors used to describe its securitization, enabled a larger biopolitical *storying* of the city from 2004. The use of maps by colonial regimes to render occupied cities legible has been thoroughly documented (Weizman 2011; Akerman ed. 2017). But in Baghdad, the US occupation pioneered a new networked visualization system: "a sort of super GIS" (Geographic Information System) that operated on live data and tracked "the real-time movement of troops and the incidence of events" (Gregory 2009, 269). As Derek Gregory (2009) has shown, the system lowered "the threshold of visibility" from a panoptical survey to the city's most "intimate" social tissue (269). It marked a biopolitical shift from arterial to

capillary power, hooking the city up to an instantaneous surveillance system that transformed every layer of urban life—from basic infrastructures to ethnic social ties to linguistic dialects—into either a "weapon" or a "target" (Rafael, 2012).

This new GIS was called the Command Post of the Future. While referring to the use of this technology in *future* US military operations, the title also suggests a colonial yearning not simply to monitor insurgent activity in real-time, but even to predict its future movements. In rendering the city "readable, like a book", the occupation sought to rewrite it, to "build-in an effect of order and an effect of truth" that is crucial for biopolitical governance (Mitchell 1988, 33). These are "concrete stories": fixed, solid, verifiable infrastructural narratives that fundamentally reshape the urban environment they claim only to describe. The Command Post of the Future even interfaces with a "visualization and presentation software" that produces a "storyboard" of insurgent and counter-insurgent operations in Baghdad (Gregory 2009, 274), and which in turn feeds into a broader "Hollywood-style plotting of the war as a story" (Mirzoeff 2005, 87).

As both Mirzoeff and Gregory note, the hunt for and eventual capture of Saddam Hussein conformed neatly to this narrative. The widely circulated images of the deposed Iraqi leader taken shortly after his capture showed him being subject to a medical examination, reducing "the dictator" to nothing "more than a patient, subject to US biopower" (Mirzoeff 2005, 88). If the US-sanctioned war story skirted carefully around the Frankenstein-style plot latent in this narrative, cautious of conceding responsibility for the "monster" it had both historically and discursively created, the dissenting film-maker Michael Moore was quick to spot it: "just like the mythical Frankenstein, Saddam eventually spun out of control. He would no longer do what he was told by his master. Saddam had to be caught" (2003; see also Young 2008, 1-2).

However, Moore did not comment on the other Frankenstein plot haunting these processes: the US invasion devastated a city by targeting its most basic infrastructural systems before stitching it back together, with concrete walls and equally concrete stories, into a monstrous Baghdad that it could not then control. As I will now show, it is with Baghdad's violent context kept fully in mind

that Saadawi's novelistic compendium of decomposing fictions returns us via Frankenstein to Foucault, first revealing and then challenging the biopolitical mechanics and corporeal consequences of twenty-first-century colonial urban warfare, as well as the material infrastructures that support it.

Frankenstein in Baghdad's Decomposing Fictions

Frankenstein in Baghdad is set throughout 2005 and finishes in early 2006, a period when the US military's biopolitical regime was grappling with a fresh wave of suicide bombings and car explosions, and implementing new blast walling strategies in response (Murrani 2016, 205). The novel's plot is complex, bordering purposefully on the unreliable and incoherent: like the city and human bodies that it represents, it almost decomposes, unravelling at its frayed edges into a complex network of conflicting and unfalsifiable fictions. I will begin, then, by outlining some of the characters central to its plot, something the English translation of the novel does *itself* in an introductory "list of characters". There is "Faraj the estate agent: a small-time real estate manager who acquires properties in Battaween", a central and—significantly—religiously and culturally diverse Baghdadi neighbourhood where the majority of the novel's action is set; "Hadi the junk dealer: creator of the Whatsitsname", which is Saadawi's indecisive signifier for his version of Frankenstein's monster; "Mahmoud al-Sawadi: a young and ambitious journalist at *al-Haqiqa*", a real-life Baghdadi newspaper for which Mahmoud writes an article entitled "Frankenstein in Baghdad"; and "Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid: the head of the mysterious Tracking and Pursuit Department", a US-funded branch of the Iraqi government that employs a team of magicians and astrologers to surveil the city in real-time (Saadawi 2018, v-vi).

This inclusion of a cast list, which does not appear in the original Arabic edition, immediately functions as a para-textual performance of fictionality, while the absence from this list of the Whatsitsname itself immediately raises questions for readers in English about the monster's actual

existence, even *within* the fictional world of the novel. One fiction is nested inside another here, a narrative layering that, like Shelley's 1818 novel, has the monster's testimony recorded in direct speech at its centre. Saadaawi then provides additional para-textual material in the form of a government report that condemns the transgressive actions of the Tracking and Pursuit Department. Parodying the real-life US Command Post of the Future, this "mysterious" organization uses divination and tarot cards "to make predictions about crimes that would take place in the future" (72). In this introductory report, the Iraqi government claims to have identified and arrested an anonymous character named only as "the author", who was "found to be in possession of the text of a story" that is "about 250 pages long [and] divided into seventeen chapters" (2). Unsurprisingly, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is of similar length and divided (almost) into seventeen chapters.[5] Saadawi both evokes and flaunts the framing pretensions to realistic verisimilitude that are the generic hallmark of gothic fiction (Botting 2005, 72). He patterns his own narrative structure over Shelley's original template, which as Bruce Clarke observes, loops "its discourse back on itself" to "refer within itself to its own self-'correction'" (2014, 120). The effect, Clarke continues, is to *decompose* the narrative, blurring the voices of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the monster "into an undecidable *composite* of unreliable voices within overlapping frames" (120, my emphasis).

Adopting this decomposing structure, Saadawi begins his conflation of fictional story with monstrous body, a homologous alignment that is reinforced throughout the novel. Consider the character of Hadi, the monster's creator. Hadi is a junk dealer who spends his time scavenging bits of furniture and debris from across the city, before fixing them up and selling them on to string a precarious livelihood together. With the outbreak of suicide and car bombings, Hadi begins collecting decomposing body parts, stitching them together into the composite corpse that, when animated, will become the Whatsitsname. But Hadi is just as much a weaver of stories as he is a

[5] The book's eighteenth and nineteenth chapters are entitled "The Writer" and "The Criminal", and ostensibly reveal to us the identities of the author and the monster respectively (though these revelations remain ambiguous and unconvincing).

builder of bodies: “Hadi was a liar, everyone knew it” (54); he has been telling lies “for years” (240) and always “embellished his stories” (177); he is “careful to add realistic touches” (17) and “narrates” meticulous “details several times” because they give “his story credibility” (57). More than once it is suggested that the monster is nothing more than “a figment of Hadi’s sick imagination” (178), and despite the monster’s lengthy testimony relayed at the centre of the novel, the final chapter mysteriously suggests that Hadi might himself have been the monster all along.

Hadi’s incessant storytelling takes place in a society obsessed with gossip, as circulating rumours, unverifiable fictions, and sometimes outright lies compose and decompose around him. The journalist Mahmoud is always wondering “whether he should pursue that story” (76), while others point out to him: “If you were to write that story for the magazine, who would believe you?” (74). Brigadier Majid’s Tracking and Pursuit Department is “set up by the Americans [...] to monitor unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumours that arose around specific incidents” (72). Throughout, stories are either “exaggerations or fabrications” (74), or simply “hard to believe” (227); even the author himself, in Chapter Eighteen, begins to wonder if “the whole story was made up” (256). This relentless narrative composition and decomposition is embodied in the body of the monster, which Hadi has literally “stitched” together. Hadi’s motivations are noble enough: he compiles the decomposing parts of civilian victims to create “a complete corpse” that “wouldn’t be treated as rubbish [and instead] respected like other dead people and given a proper burial” (25). By composing these body parts into a corporeal whole, Hadi works desperately to instil narrative meaning—and possibly closure—into the violence of occupied Baghdad.

But the continual flux of narrative (de)composition is doubly embodied in Saadawi’s Whatsitsname, one particular feature of which differentiates him markedly from Shelley’s original monster. Once animated, the Whatsitsname discovers that “each piece of dead flesh that made up his body fell off if he didn’t avenge the person it came from within a certain amount of time. But if he did avenge someone, then that person’s piece would fall of anyway, as if it was no longer needed” (129). The monster must therefore continually recompose himself, assembling “new flesh

from new victims" in order "to replace the parts that were falling off" (129), just as Hadi, the monster's creator, must similarly assemble junk from across the city in order to make a living. A series of possible narratives, as well as organs and limbs, are therefore stitched into the monster's body. He is at first presented as a tantalisingly redemptive national allegory for the newly composed Iraq: "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" (140). But just as the occupation's urbicide dismembers Baghdad's social tissue, so too does the monster's body continue to decompose. His need to acquire new body parts, which eventually drives him to murder and dismember innocent victims himself, invites a further allegorical reading in which the monster represents a new Iraqi nation riven with vengeance and corruption—as Haytham Bahoora suggests, "the corpse [is] a direct metaphor for the failure of Iraq as a political project" (2015, 196).

However, I want to insist, with Webster (2018), that the novel presents the homologies of narrative and body not simply as metaphorical reflections of one another. Rather, they are built constitutively into the physical membranes of the biopolitical subject and also—as I will show below—into the material infrastructure of the city. As Webster comments, the perpetual rebuilding of the monster's body "echoes the destroy-and-build dynamics of the Iraq War" (445), metaphoric reverberations that always return to Baghdad's urban infrastructure. Just as Hadi stitches the monster together, so too does Saadawi knit the layers of narrative, body, and city into a tightly woven fabric. This multi-layered fabrication allows Saadawi to reveal the consequences of biopolitical governance that, contra the hegemonic US war story of security consolidation and societal stabilization, in fact produces a pervasive *insecurity*. As Michel Foucault comments, the "excess of biopower" makes it "technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive" (1997, 254). Where Foucault articulates biopower's productive quality through the cultural trope of Frankenstein and his

monster, Saadawi re-narrates Shelley's story to throw the systemic violence and insecurity produced by a hyper-surveillant biopolitics into corporeal relief. For Mark Lacy, in his reading of Foucauldian biopolitics, the "dangers in declaring an enemy *evil*—a monster—is that it installs a mode of securing where everything is permitted, reproducing cycles of violence" (2007, 75). This cyclical violence materializes into the decomposing body of Saadawi's monster, as he descends into a desperate and ultimately doomed scrabble for additional body parts that will keep him—and the novel's narrative—intact.

Commenting specifically on the US military's development of surveillance technologies, James Der Derian asks if "the simulations of Creative Technology"—of which the US Command Post of the Future is one obscene example—"will turn on their creators, like Frankenstein's monster?" (2009, 176). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is attuned to the cultural narratives surrounding such surveillance technologies, revealing how the Pentagon's seemingly objective geographic information systems stitch together infrastructural narratives that support US hegemony in the region. Importantly, the word "stitching" is not mentioned once in Shelley's original novel, and derives instead from Robert de Niro's influential portrayal of the monster in Kenneth Branagh's 1994 Hollywood film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, "the most widely known modern adaptation" (Friedman & Kavey 2016, 152). Saadawi's monster, unlike Shelley's, but like de Niro's, is described several times as having "a face with lines of stitches, a large nose and a mouth, like a gaping wound" (85), and when Mahmoud's article on the monster is eventually published in *al-Haqiqa* midway through the novel, it is printed alongside an image of de Niro's cosmetically stitched up face.[6] Even here, pretensions to narrative truth decompose. While Mahmoud tries "to be truthful and objective" in his article, his editor claims that it is "all about hype", swapping out Mahmoud's preferred title—"Urban Legends from the Streets of Iraq"—for the snappier "Frankenstein in Baghdad" (133). Mahmoud's move to fictionality, indicated by his choice of the

[6] Saadawi's monster is influenced by De Niro's portrayal in other important ways. Shelley's original creature paid no interest in the previous owners of the body parts from which he has been assembled, but in Brannagh's version, De Niro challenges his creator, asking "whose bodies were conjoined to create him", and even inheriting their memories and skills (he can play the flute) (Friedman & Kavey 2016, 154).

word “legends”, is rejected by his editor, who opts instead for a title that intentionally misleads readers over the objective truth of the monster’s existence.

This “hyped up” misrepresentation of Mahmoud’s article again raises questions about the documentary veracity of the novel itself, with which it shares its name. But the editor’s choice of “Frankenstein in Baghdad”—as opposed to “Frankenstein’s monster in Baghdad”—also gestures to a more common semantic slippage that, since Hollywood’s global popularization of the story, has tended to associate the name Frankenstein not with Victor, the creator, but with the monster itself. The result is to alert readers to the “Hollywood-style plotting of the war as a story” (Mirzoeff 2005, 87), a narrative discursively bolstered by the various organs of the “military-industrial-media-entertainment network” (Der Derian 2009, 176). By unstitching the networked sinews that hold this fiction-making body-machine together, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* unfolds the “fabrications” of the colonial present’s “imaginative geographies”, combining as they do both “something fictionalized” and “something made real” (Gregory 2004, 17). Furthermore, and as I will now explore in more detail, the novel also unravels the occupation’s *infrastructure*, too: Saadawi latches onto biopolitical attempts to concretize a narrative of security into the physical infrastructure of Baghdad, before asserting in response the fictionality of these securitization strategies to reveal how they create as many monsters as they contain.

Ahmed Saadawi’s Infrastructural Narratives

Throughout the novel, Baghdad’s infrastructure is shown in a state of decomposition. On the one hand, this infrastructure is oppressively evident in “the grey of the concrete barriers” that run “throughout the city” (Saadawi 2018, 133). On the other, while in Northern cities infrastructures “provide the fundamental background to modern urban everyday life—a background that is often hidden, assumed, even naturalized” (Graham 2010, 1-2), in Saadawi’s Baghdad they surface continually in moments of contingency and breakdown. Electricity is frequently cut off, plunging

characters into darkness (Saadawi 2018, 93); a number of local hotels purchase "diesel generators that could be commissioned from private workshops" (94); and one impoverished hotel owner is unable to "replace a single broken window or repair the leaks or blockages in the pipes and the sewerage" (176). The novel even concludes with an act of infrastructural repair:

> The NGOs and archaeological authorities had asked for work to be suspended on filling in the crater that the explosion had left, because of the wall that had appeared in the middle of the pool of water from the burst sewage and drinking-water pipes. Some claimed it was part of the wall of Abbasid Baghdad and was the most important discovery in Islamic archaeology in Baghdad for many decades. [...] But the Baghdad city authorities ignored all this and took everyone by surprise by filling the large hole with soil. The spokesman for the city authorities said, "We do not take half measures. [...] we have to repave the street." (257)

Coming at the novel's conclusion, this paragraph's technocratic mundanity is soon overshadowed by the climactic revelation of the monster's identity that immediately follows. But it remains evocative of the very same processes of (de)composition that repeatedly assemble and disassemble both the monster's body and the novel's narrative. The authorities here "stitch" together a wound that has cut through the veins—the water pipes, the road—of the city-as-body, overwriting in the process the rich Islamic history that remains sedimented into Baghdad's subterranean foundations. Saadawi evokes the organicist language of colonial urban planning not as a careless metaphor, but rather to emphasize the corporeal consequences of a biopolitical regime that fundamentally rewires the city's infrastructural body.

Saadawi collapses his decomposing narrative into both body and city (and vice versa) on several other occasions. The catastrophic suicide bombing with which the novel opens targets a group of "day labourers" waiting "for building or demolition work" (19), civilians locked into Baghdad's precarious infrastructural metabolism. The blast not only leaves "bodies lying in heaps on the asphalt", but also cuts "electricity wires" (20). Afterwards, Mahmoud makes his way down the street, "crunching underfoot the unseen shards of glass, small pieces of metal, and other debris"—from which we are to infer body parts—"from the explosion" (30). The security forces "seal off" Battaween on a number of occasions (131, 238), while Faraj the real-estate manager

roams around the city seizing abandoned homes and buying out terrified civilians (22), accumulating not pieces of junk or body parts but an extensive suite of dilapidated inner urban properties for redevelopment. Finally Hadi, the storyteller/liar and creator of the monster, lives in a decomposing house: he has rebuilt it out of "ruins" (22) that are "falling apart" (21)—it "wasn't really his" and "it wasn't really a house" (21). As Sana Murani has documented, since the US invasion a "culture of squatting has emerged in the Iraqi social structure, and thousands of people in Baghdad have occupied abandoned houses" (2016, 203). In Saadawi's city, infrastructure is not background noise, but itself a character subject to the same biopolitical rhythms of (de)composition that physically tear Iraqi civilians and communities apart.

In one of the novel's central chapters, Mahmoud arrives at his hotel to find a large group of people watching a news report on a television powered by a "little generator [that] was purring outside" (116).

> It was a big disaster, the biggest disaster that had struck Iraq so far [...] About a thousand people had been killed, either from drowning or being trampled to death, and no one knew who the culprit was. The government spokesman came out smiling as usual to announce that an attempted suicide bombing on the Imams Bridge had been prevented and that the criminal had escaped. (116)

With this news report, Saadawi suddenly locks his fiction-filled novel to a very specific, real-life disaster. On 31 August 2005, almost 1000 people were killed and another 320 injured when over a million Shia pilgrims panicked amid reports that a suicide bomber was among them. Crossing the Imams Bridge, once a key arterial route over the River Tigris that winds its way through Baghdad, the pilgrims were unable to escape, subsequently crushed to death by the ensuing stampede or drowned in the river into which they had either jumped or were pushed.

This particular event, the novel's most significant historical anchor, intersects with the three points of Saadawi's narrative-body-city triad. The government spokesman's initial comments, quoted above, are a lie, designed to gain credit for securitization—preventing the suicide bombing—out of what was in fact a securitization catastrophe. One of Saadawi's characters

observes that “responsibility for this incident lies with the government, which installed concrete barriers on the bridge itself”, while another claims that Al-Qaeda are to blame: “the mere mention of their name is a factor in creating insecurity and confusing people” (117). Here a single “rumour”, or fiction, initiates a stampede that is then exacerbated by the spatial containment of the bridge and concrete barriers.

With the darkest of ironies, this event is one of the few “concrete” stories in the entire novel: contemporaneous media coverage reported on hundreds of bodies lining hospital corridors and spilling onto the pavement outside (see ‘Iraq stampede deaths near 1,000’, 2005). The horror of the Imams Bridge tragedy notwithstanding, Saadawi uses it to make his point: this is a narrative *of* infrastructure, certainly, but it is also an *infrastructural narrative*, undergirding and holding together the novel’s larger thematic concerns. As one character comments of the disaster, the proliferation of unreliable fictions has “created a death machine [...] we’re going to see more and more death because of fear. The government and the occupation forces have to eliminate fear” (118). But the redemptive potential of this catastrophe is swiftly papered over, as the novel shifts suddenly from this scene to the office of Brigadier Majid in the Tracking and Pursuit Department. Here, watching the same news report on the television, Majid decides that “the culprit was still at large” (118)—it must be the Whatsitsname, he concludes, not the US occupation or the Iraqi government, who is to blame. Saadawi offers a brief glimpse of the infrastructural and corporeal consequences of Baghdad’s real-life biopolitical transformation, before the novel swiftly decomposes yet again into a proliferation of monstrous fictions.

Conclusion: Posthuman Explosions

Frankenstein in Baghdad begins and ends with a violent and bloody suicide bombing. In the aftermath of the first, Hadi finds a disembodied nose, the final body part that he will attach to his monster before it comes to life. Finding himself caught in the blast at the end of the book,

meanwhile, Hadi has his own nose blown off and is transformed into "a horrible creature": looking in the mirror he realizes "this wasn't the face of Hadi the junk dealer; it was the face of someone he had convinced himself was merely a figment of his fertile imagination. It was the face of the Whatsitsname" (258-259). In this surgical realignment, the creator of fictions undergoes a kind of "posthuman" metamorphosis, somehow becoming the subject of his own storytelling. I use the term posthuman cautiously here, but as I want to show in this concluding section, also advisedly. Of course, many critics have commented on the posthuman qualities of Shelley's original creature (Goss & Riquelme 2007; Mousley 2016), but while notions of the posthuman body are relevant here, the concept can also help us to take hold of the entangled, shifting interrelations that connect Saadawi's (de)composing narrative-body-city triad. It is by digging down into these various narrative and infrastructural layers that the novel unpicks the weaves and folds of colonial fabrication and biopolitical governance in Baghdad, especially as they are built into (and out of) the city's planned violence.

Suicide bombings structure the novel's plot: in addition to the two that bookend the novel, a third is indirectly responsible for bringing the Whatsitsname to life. For Hamid Dabashi, suicidal violence—he extends his discussion of suicide bombers to encompass self-immolation as protest—"is the ultimate denial of the state its singular and final site of legitimacy" (2012, 6). As Foucault theorizes and Saadawi narrativizes, biopower operates on and through the body not in some abstract or symbolic way, but viscerally and corporeally, like and sometimes as infrastructure itself, reshaping civilian life through both the surgical strike and the concrete wall. For Dabashi, US imperialism has rendered territorial boundaries an insufficient measure of the limits of state sovereignty, leaving only the body itself "as the solitary site of ([il]legtimate) state violence" (6). As he concludes, this body is a *posthuman* one, "a contingent and contextual being" that is no longer permitted the corporeal integrity or autonomous rationality of the Enlightenment human subject (4).

Saadawi is therefore writing of a biopolitical battlefield in which "the human" is not only literally, but also conceptually and legally, decomposing. For Talal Asad, the "horror" of suicide

bombing derives from its collapsing "of social and personal identity and the dissolution of form" (2007, 3). Just like the narrative of Saadawi's novel itself, the city and his characters' bodies continually decompose and are recomposed, obsessed as the book is with infrastructural and corporeal breakdown and repair. Indeed, Saadawi moves beyond Dabashi's fairly negative account of the "posthuman body"—one that laments the loss of the Enlightenment subject—to embed that supposedly "solitary site" into a much larger network of critically posthumanist life-systems that themselves hold together mutually interdependent embodied, infrastructural, and narrative dimensions.

This kind of critical posthumanism is less interested in Frankenstein-inspired monsters (though these have of course been important) as it is in "the ways in which agency and the production of knowledge have always been the emergent product of a distributed network of human and non-human agents" (King & Page 2017, 3). Saadawi's insistence on the inextricable relationships between narrative, body, and city systems is not in this view one of allegorical or metaphorical homology, but rather of posthuman "ecology" (Braidotti & Bignall eds., 2019). Here bodies and cities, along with their many human and non-human attributes, are fundamentally co-constituted, stitched together in and through a series of circulating infrastructural narratives.

Thus, if Boehmer and I somewhat ephemerally contend that narrative forms "contribute to more productive processes of social and infrastructural re-imagination and reconfiguration" (2018, 5), the thickly textured layers of Saadawi's novel suggest a more rigorous consideration of narrative systems (and fictions) as constitutive of—and impactful upon—human and non-human bodies and urban infrastructures. As I have suggested, the novel offers not only narratives *of* infrastructure, but also *infrastructural narratives*. For Clarke, fictions invested in producing "*allegories of writing*" and "*narratives of narrative*"—as both Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are—undergo a "posthuman metamorphosis" that allows us to track the "complex infrastructures of social and psychic systems" along and across which narratives circulate (2008, 13, 46-47). But Saadawi's novel more emphatically insists that narrative systems not only circulate

along these underlying corporeal and infrastructural systems, but also impact upon them, as each supposedly "separate" layer decomposes formally and thematically into and with the other. Importantly, decomposition need not always be synonymous with disintegration or defeat, but might instead constitute a methodological refusal of the partitioning of narrative from body and city: as Donna Haraway has argued, critical posthumanism prioritizes the need "to compost" and to "entangle", to "track the lines of living and dying", and to "live with consequences or with consequence" (2016, 36).

Haraway is most well-known for her "Cyborg Manifesto" (1984), where she insists on the compostible interconnections between multiple life-systems (human-animal, organism-machine, physical-nonphysical). Yet while Haraway points in her manifesto to the figure of the "monster" as a redemptive, even reparative figure that has "always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations" (2004, 37), she specifically distinguishes her cyborg from Shelley's monster, which she dismisses for its dependence on its patriarchal progenitor (9). Nevertheless, the continual decomposition and recomposition of Saadawi's Whatitsname clearly distinguish it from Shelley's original, which might therefore be read as a version of Haraway's resistant cyborg, refusing a singular "body" and repeatedly shifting our analytic focus to posthuman *systems* instead.

Drawing on Haraway's concept, Matthew Gandy has developed the metaphor of "cyborg urbanization" to illuminate more specifically "the simultaneity of concrete and imaginary perceptions of urban infrastructure" (2005, 39), or what I have been calling here the "concrete stories" and "infrastructural narratives" that are unravelled by *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. If the Whatsitsname is a cyborg, the novel's vision of Baghdad is emphatically that of cyborg urbanization, one in which fictions shape the concrete and narratives create urban infrastructure. The novel's anti-colonial challenge is therefore a posthuman one, found not exactly in the monster, nor the fictions he inspires, nor the urban space that he inhabits, but rather in the sinews and stitches that connect them all together.

To conclude, I want to illustrate this point by turning to one final scene from *Frankenstein in Baghdad* that cycles back to the biopolitical surveillance technologies exemplified by the US Command Post of the Future. In her reading of Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a colonial allegory, Gayatri Spivak hones in on a moment in which the creature seizes control of the "vision" of his creator. In this scene, Frankenstein shouts at the monster: "Begone! relieve from me the sight of your detested form." But the monster disobeys Frankenstein and refuses to leave, instead placing "his hated hands before [his creator's] eyes" and saying: "thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion. [...] I demand this from you" (Shelley 1996, 67). For Spivak, Shelley here allows "the monster the right to refuse the withholding of the master's returned gaze—to refuse an *apartheid* of speculation, as it were" (1992, 28). The colonial regime's deepest fear—a fear that it does not know and cannot acknowledge—is that the monster might eventually be caught and made visible, a final revelation that, though totalising its imperial vision, would simultaneously decompose its own structuring fictions. As Der Derian asks of current surveillance technologies, "if the map does become truly, hyperreally global, without the edge beyond which lies the unmappable, where will the monsters go?" (2009, 97).

Just as Shelley's monster insists on his visibility by confronting his colonial master, Saadawi's monster confronts the colonial regime with the fabricated vectors of its own imagined *and* infrastructural ("*apartheid* of speculation") geographies, as well as their monstrous consequences. Wondering through a part of the city that, "in the absence of the Americans and the Iraqi army", has descended into an urbicidal war zone, the Whatsitsname's eyes begin to decompose. His "eyesight turned cloudy", and when he rubs his right eye "the whole thing came out, like a dark lump" (153). With only one eye left ("the left eye"), the monster must find new body parts to avoid going completely blind. Despite his faltering vision, he spots an Iraqi civilian, an old man who, stumbling along and "looking around in fear", is "definitely innocent" (153-154). The monster attacks this civilian from behind, just as his one remaining eye mists over. He then blindly cuts the old man's eyes from the lifeless body and jams them into his eye sockets, allowing

him to see again. Because the eyes have not yet been stitched in, the monster also takes the man's glasses to keep them in place.

In this spiralling motif of competing visualities and their violent consequences, Saadawi decomposes the occupation's fictional war story, with its "performance of top sight" and "claim of ground truth" (Gregory 2009, 274). Gregory points out that, as Baghdad was slowly closed to foreign reporters throughout 2004 and 2005, the occupation's press briefings drew their authority from "the none too subtle point that 'many of you who haven't been out there [will] find this hard to believe'" (274)—you have to *see* it to believe it. Writing against these surgically composed fictions, Saadawi realizes the futility of entering into a competition for narrative truth, revealing instead their decompositional consequences both for civilian bodies and the city's infrastructure, or Baghdad's posthuman life-systems. Thus, the Whatsitsname's violent seizure of an old man's eyes becomes an anti-colonial critique. With his new eyes, the monster looks down at the Iraqi civilian he has just murdered in cold blood: "Seeing the body of the innocent old man, I had an idea and I clung to it—it looked like the truth I had been seeking" (155). According to the logic of Saadawi's fictional universe, in which the Whatsitsname seeks vengeance on behalf of the owner whose body parts he inherits, the monster arrives at a truthful impasse: he must now turn on himself. In this poignant moment of imminent self-destruction, delineations of perpetrator and victim, insurgent and counterinsurgent, colonized and colonizer, here decompose, exploding the "fabrications" of the occupation's imagined geographies (its fictions) *and* the violence of its infrastructural securitization strategies (its concrete). Much like the figure of the suicide bomber, Saadawi wrests the concrete stories from the colonial occupier by blasting them apart, transforming their geography of biopolitical control into a monstrously decomposing fiction.

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