

## Chapter 23

# BIOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPES OF THE 'SMALL HUMAN': FIGURING THE CHILD IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN REFUGEE CRISIS IN EUROPE

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THEY ARE OF COURSE frozen in a moment of crying, or quiet and glassy-eyed; caught, protean, on the shores of the Mediterranean, or standing amongst tents, dust in their hair. And beyond their labelling as 'child' or 'young boy/girl' (Figure 23.1), they are, in all likelihood, unnamed. We have come to know by now the stock representational positions that refugee children will have assumed by the time they reach our screens and pages, as figures emblematic of the abject suffering entailed in what has



**Figure 23.1** A young girl from Syria walks on the beach after reaching the shores of Lesbos, having crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey, 2015.

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come to be termed 'the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East'. Yet the affective and apparently empathetic stance of such images belies the complex power play attached to representations of the refugee child – narratives that pose many questions about the political dynamics of contact, hospitality, empathy and alliance that surface through the traumatic encounter between vulnerable 'Middle Eastern subject'<sup>1</sup> and powerful European state. Apolitical and universal as the refugee child's suffering may initially appear, it in fact assumes an extreme political potency when read against the backdrop of the post/colonial landscape<sup>2</sup> – for as this chapter will suggest, refugee children are not only figures within, but also come to figure the fraught encounter between an increasingly embattled, fluid and tangible 'Middle East', and a contested Europe that, in its desire to maintain the order of post/colonial boundaries increasingly being undone by the flows of uncontrollable bodies, is seeking to redraw the map on biopolitical terms. Thus by approaching 'the contemporary refugee crisis' afresh through the unexpected, overdetermined but frequently silenced figure of the child, this chapter presents a radical new interpretation of the 'crisis' as biopolitical fall-out to long-standing imperialist and Orientalist imagined geographies, while ultimately pushing beyond this terrain, towards an alternative discursive mode in which the playfully cerebral voice of the child comes to contest biopolitical categorisation altogether. As I shall suggest, this alternative discursive mode bears profound implications – not simply for the way that it permits us to perceive forms of political, ethical and cultural intolerance within the European response to 'the refugee crisis', but for the manner in which it invites us, as postcolonial scholars, to refuse hierarchised constructions of human bodies and subjects within the transnational post/colonial landscape.

What, then, might it mean to read 'the Middle Eastern refugee child' as both biopolitical figure and as post/colonial subject, even narrator? This chapter enacts four moves designed to guide us towards an understanding of the refugee child's unique significance within the post/colonial, biopolitical landscape. First, it maps out the distinctive post/colonial dynamics of a landscape thrown into crisis through the forms of intercultural contact instigated by the arrival of refugee bodies. Identifying the European response to this landscape as a biopolitical drive designed to reinforce long-standing colonial and imperialist divisions between Europe and the Middle East, it locates the figure of the refugee child as one of particular discursive significance. Second, it focuses on the figure of the drowned Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi/Alan Shenu, in order to reveal how the biopolitical and ultimately necropolitical are mobilised through the construction of the child as 'exceptional' within the fraught post/colonial space of the Mediterranean crossing. Third, the chapter explores the 'collaborative life-narrative' of the disabled adolescent Syrian refugee Nujeen Mustafa, written in collaboration with the foreign correspondent Christina Lamb. Focusing on the ambiguous dynamics of narrative agency at stake within the text, the analysis reveals how the mediated voice of the child may simultaneously render transparent the mechanisms of the biopolitical landscape, while also affirming the authority of this system through the construction of the disabled child as 'doubly deserving' refugee. Pushing at the seams of this text, however, are moments where the adolescent voice disrupts the official narrative ascribed to Nujeen's childhood. By reading these moments in a 'childishly' playful manner, the chapter ultimately seeks to identify an alternative discursive mode that might be understood as 'the small human'. Here, in the fourth, final section of the chapter, we find powerful microcosmic challenges to the paternal/maternal rhetoric of the biopolitical, necropolitical and imperialist

narratives that have determined the landscape of Middle Eastern refugee experience to date – and ultimately, we recover an understanding of the ways in which refugee subjects and bodies, beyond discourse and in their very smallness, matter.

### Crisis in the Contact Zone: Refugee Biopolitics and the Post/Colonial Middle Eastern Landscape

The flow of contemporary refugee populations within and beyond the MENA region has tended to be viewed as disconnected from – indeed, as interloper within – the European landscape. Yet European discursive constructions of these population flows reveal much about their underlying post/colonial dynamics. Indeed, ‘the refugee crisis’ can be read not only as connected to, but as product of this landscape’s colonial heritage. Despite the cultural heterogeneity of populations currently seeking asylum in Europe,<sup>3</sup> the contemporary ‘crisis’ has come to be equated primarily with the international flow of Syrian refugees, over five million of whom have fled Syria following the outbreak of conflict. Of these refugees, the vast majority reside within ‘the Middle East’, with some 3.2 million in Turkey, over a million in Lebanon and over 650,000 in Jordan.<sup>4</sup> Applications for asylum in Europe remain, in contrast, relatively small: since 2011, there have been just over 970,000 applications (the majority of which are refused), and of these some 64 per cent of applicants have been to Germany and Sweden.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has described the arrival of those seeking asylum at Europe’s borders ‘on a scale not seen since the end of the Second World War’ as ‘one of the continent’s [Europe’s] defining challenges of the early 21st century, with long-lasting implications for humanitarian practice [and] regional stability’.<sup>6</sup> This comment is telling in that it presents the ‘crisis’ as an exceptional condition that is distressing and disruptive not so much for the humanitarian challenge it poses to *refugees* as to *Europe itself*, when brought into contact with those typically constructed as its antithetical ‘other’. In this we sense a separatist introspection that is indicative of what Lucy Mayblin identifies as the legacies of colonial thought reproduced within the European asylum system, manifested as ‘ideas of distinct, geographically located “races”, of human beings as hierarchy’.<sup>7</sup>

When read from a non-Eurocentric perspective, however, the ‘refugee crisis’ proves far from exceptional, or disconnected from Europe; rather, it can be located squarely within the remit of colonial interplay between the regions. The figure of the refugee is an achingly familiar one in the post/colonial Middle Eastern landscape. Said’s identification of the ‘helpless, miserable-looking refugee’<sup>8</sup> as the enduring twentieth-century visual signifier of Palestine alerts us to the sense in which legacies of colonial and imperialist intervention have continually manifested themselves as flows of displaced bodies within and across the borders problematically instated under Sykes-Picot.<sup>9</sup> While somewhat lacking in political specificity, Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the ‘refugee crisis’ as a product of the ‘failed [postcolonial] state’ proves an instructive starting point:

Most refugees come from ‘failed states’ . . . In all these instances, this disintegration of state power is not purely a local phenomenon but the result of international economics and politics; in such cases, as in Libya and Iraq, it is even a direct outcome of Western intervention . . . One should also note that the origins of the Middle

Eastern 'failed states' are to be found in the arbitrary borders drawn after the First World War by the UK and France, which thereby created 'artificial' states. In uniting Sunnis in Syria and Iraq, ISIS is ultimately bringing together what was torn apart by the colonial masters.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Žižek paints in broad and polemical brushstrokes, but his reading nevertheless gestures to a more detailed and complex subtext of interconnectedness between long-standing legacies of empire and flows of refugees. Over the course of the twentieth century, for instance, over 750,000 refugees fled Palestine during the British-engineered establishment of the State of Israel and subsequent *Nakba*;<sup>11</sup> some 800,000 exited Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, a conflict that sprung in part from the political legacies of French mandate;<sup>12</sup> while the Gulf War, the partial product of disputed claims to Kuwaiti territory and resources as outlined by the UK Protectorate in 1922,<sup>13</sup> led to the flight of over a million Iraqis into Iran, and 850,000 Yemenis fleeing Saudi Arabia for their homeland.<sup>14</sup> In the twenty-first century, meanwhile, Western arms-length intervention in the contentiously defined 'Greater Middle East',<sup>15</sup> a neo-Orientalist imagined geography tallying with perceived locales of 'terrorist threat', produced some 700,000 Afghan refugees in 2001 alone, following US- and UK-backed military intervention in Afghanistan,<sup>16</sup> while 'Operation Enduring Freedom' resulted in the displacement of some 4 million people within and beyond Iraq.<sup>17</sup> Against this backdrop, Said's comments in 'Reflections on Exile' resonate not only as a powerful summary of the twentieth century, but also as a foreshadowing of the next, when he writes that 'our age – with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration'.<sup>18</sup> What Said does not articulate in this characteristically elegant assessment, though, is the quite brutal sense in which flows of displaced and refugee populations within and across the borders of the problematically defined 'Middle East' therefore testify to the enduring openness of colonial wounds, rubbed and ripped open afresh by contemporary imperialist intervention. Within this landscape, refugees stand both as the biopolitical fall-out to colonial and imperial legacies in the region, and as the victims of the violent 'forward slash' ('/') that perpetually separates the 'colonial' from the 'post'.

While contemporary Middle Eastern refugee populations can be read as the complex legacies of colonial power in the region, so can the distinctive nature of the recent European response be traced to an endemic and enduring Orientalist ideology that has emerged with renewed vigour in the wake of the attacks of 11 September, and subsequent imperialist intervention. While there has not been overt, policy based discrimination against Middle Eastern refugees within European asylum systems,<sup>19</sup> a number of analysts have noted the methodological shift that has taken place in asylum responses since the attacks of 11 September, which coincides with the emergence of large refugee populations from the MENA region. Kristen Sarah Biehl, for instance, notes the European transition away from human rights-driven models outlined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, towards a 'security paradigm' whereby

immigration and refugee flows are progressively being viewed as a security threat to national welfare systems, cultural and national identities, and domestic peace and stability, which in turn has been used to justify fortified policing measures, restrictive immigration legislation, and the narrowing of state obligations towards refugees.<sup>20</sup>

Biehl claims that this shift towards the securitisation of ‘nonstate actors such as displaced persons and refugees’ can be linked to a post-September 11th concern with ‘global terrorism and other criminal syndicates’.<sup>21</sup> Arguably (and ironically), the increased number of Afghan and Iraqi refugees arriving at European borders following US- and UK-backed invasions in 2002 and 2003 served to reinforce the ideological alignment of terrorist threat, refugee and specifically Middle Eastern subject in post-9/11 European govern/mentalities.<sup>22</sup> This association between Islamic terrorist threat and Middle Eastern refugee subject has been reignited with the mass arrival of Syrian refugees at Europe’s borders, and the Orientalist underpinnings of this association are clear not only from European media discourse,<sup>23</sup> but also (as subsequent analysis in this section will demonstrate) from the renewed securitisation methods implemented at European borders specifically in response to the potential ‘threat’ of the Middle Eastern refugee body, which echo post-9/11 strategies. This complex cycle of imperialist intervention, refugee flow and perception of ‘terror threat’ must, as Angela Naimou notes, be read not simply as a manifestation of Orientalist attitude, but as a more profound ‘working-through’ of the colonial subconscious. In addition to the figure of the refugee reinvoking the classic Orientalist tenets of simultaneously alluring and threatening ‘other’, occupying as they do the conflicting positions of ‘fugitive’, ‘victim’ and ‘militant enem[y]’, poised for ‘Islamic invasion’,<sup>24</sup> Naimou argues that their visible, tangible presence within European space holds up an uneasy mirror in which Europe is forced to confront ‘the not-quite-afterimages of unending wars elsewhere’ (p. 227), fought in order to ‘guarantee peace at home’ (p. 228). As a figure that forces Europe to confront the human cost of imperialist and neo-colonial policies, the Middle Eastern refugee therefore stages a traumatic ‘return of the repressed’ in the post/colonial landscape, presenting not simply a crisis of scale, nor of securitisation, but also of conscience.

How, then, might Europe secure itself from these perceived crises of securitisation, identification and conscience? Since it is through the presence of bodies that the imagined and physical geographies of a secure post/colonial Europe are thrown into crisis, it is hardly surprising that the European response should be biopolitical in nature. For Agamben, this shift from the exercise of sovereign power through the ‘territorial state to state of population’<sup>25</sup> is the quintessence of the biopolitical landscape – a topography identified first by Foucault, who mapped out the ways in which European governmentalities shifted profoundly in the eighteenth century towards ‘a technology of power centered on life’<sup>26</sup> as a means to achieve ‘the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations’ (p. 262). Within such a landscape, it is not simply that life is controlled; rather, biological existence itself is rendered political, and the technologisation and institutionalisation of bodies becomes a means to define and affirm sovereign power. A number of scholars have, by now, translated the extreme pertinence of Foucault’s and Agamben’s biopolitics into the context of contemporary refugee experience.<sup>27</sup> In his insightful transposition of ‘refugee biopolitics’ into the postcolonial arena, David Farrier notes that

the decision to award sanctuary is often one that directly concerns issues of life and death: fear of wrongful death is frequently what motivates asylum claims and, as the principle of *non-refoulement* makes clear, a decision to return them to their country of origin might involve placing the asylum seeker at fatal risk.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the state's capacity to award or deny sanctuary fits neatly within Agamben's summary of biopolitics as the 'management of life'<sup>29</sup> – more specifically, the 'apparatuses for organizing, assessing, and investing populations in terms of the biopolitical (in)capacities of life and death'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the very production of the category of 'refugee', awarded to those 'deserving' of sanctuary according to the Refugee Status Determination system employed by European states (a system that, in seeking to determine the 'plausibility' of the asylum seeker's claim, privileges bodily evidence – scars, wounds or disabilities – over more complex signifiers of need or vulnerability)<sup>31</sup> can be read as a discursive manifestation of the biopolitical drive to 'organize and assess' what otherwise remains the messily illegible transitory subject.<sup>32</sup>

Less readily noted, however, is the correlation between renewed Orientalist and imperialist attitudes towards the post/colonial Middle East, and the emergence of the European biopolitical drive. In her compelling study of the biopolitical technologies adopted in a post-9/11 European context, Bhitaj Ajana notes how biometric technologies such as the Eurodac project, an EU-wide fingerprint technology database, and the UK Applicant Registration Card, a biometric identity card that manages movement and access to welfare, both assume forms of 'function creep' whereby technologies assume applications beyond their overt intentions, here forging a discursive as well as material connection between the asylum seeker and the criminal.<sup>33</sup> In her reading of the post-9/11 arena, she argues that the 'exceptional' use of 'control practices' has become 'the norm' in its policing of refugee bodies (p. 592): a clear manifestation of Agamben's theorisation of the 'state of exception' as the condition through which the sovereign is able to assert their totalising power through their ability to decide who is treated as 'exceptional' before otherwise incontrovertible systems, thus simultaneously 'bind[ing] and . . . abandon[ing] the living being to law'.<sup>34</sup> As Benjamin Muller notes, however, very particular kinds of body are produced as 'exceptional' within the post/colonial landscape, through 'border controls that differentiate on the basis of race, class, economic need, "well-founded fears", health, and a host of other (arguably arbitrary) categories between the legitimate and illegitimate' that, while ostensibly 'official', in fact reflect cultural anxieties around the 'refugee as a sick body, terrorist, threat to identity'.<sup>35</sup> Thus a specifically *refugee* biopolitics serves to enforce the racial, cultural and psychological distinctions between European 'self' and Middle Eastern 'other' in a manner that ultimately affirms the familiar imagined geographies of 'Occident' and 'Orient'.

The construction of the Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe as a 'state of exception' is starkly evident in the mechanisms that have been put in place to control the flow of bodies into the European 'core', while also 'preserv[ing] the passport-free travel that most EU citizens enjoy under the Schengen Agreement'.<sup>36</sup> This includes the anomalous closure of Macedonian, Slovenian, Austrian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Estonian and, tellingly, Greco-Turkish and Spanish-Moroccan borders (direct contact-zones between Europe and the Middle East/North Africa) in response to the arrival of large refugee populations at them,<sup>37</sup> and the construction of immigration 'Hot Spots' in Greece and Italy designed to process the mass flow of bodies. Here, in fortified and heavily policed facilities, the new arrivals must register themselves through biopolitical mechanisms: any existing passports and papers must be inspected; fingerprints linked to the Eurodac system are taken; bodies, particularly of undocumented infants, are sometimes numbered in pen on skin; photographs are taken and temporary visas issued, ranging from 30 to 180 days in duration, depending on the nationality assigned to the refugee body.<sup>38</sup> While

Agamben's formulation of biopolitics has sometimes been criticised for its apparent ahistorical abstraction,<sup>39</sup> the Middle Eastern refugee subject therefore represents a powerful – if disturbing – manifestation of these concepts brought to (bare) life in/as a figure of the post/colonial landscape. Indeed, the aggressively biopolitical nature of these systems becomes particularly visible when contrasted with the alternative response strategies that have been displayed within the MENA region itself. Despite the comparatively more difficult economic situation of key refugee hosts such as Lebanon, and the significant pressures that the mass arrival of displaced Syrians have placed on social infrastructure, it is notable that both Lebanon and Jordan have facilitated the speedy mass resettlement of displaced populations within local community settings without immediate resort to formal asylum registration processes, and have focused their economic efforts on inter-community support for both displaced and local populations, avoiding the dehumanising hierarchical segregation visible at Europe's borders.<sup>40</sup>

Against this backdrop, the figure of the child surfaces as one of particular complexity and significance. If the European response to the Middle Eastern refugee population *en masse* has served to demonstrate their biopolitical dehumanisation, then the child represents what Ticktin describes as a 'humanitarian exception'<sup>41</sup> within the logic of biopolitics. In part – and for reasons that the following section of this chapter will clarify further – this is because the sheer scale of childhood refugeeism has rendered their suffering bodies extremely visible, and impossible for the European biopolitical order to ignore. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has described the Syrian conflict as having created 'a children's refugee crisis',<sup>42</sup> and there are currently some 2.3 million registered Syrian refugee children: around half of the registered Syrian refugee population,<sup>43</sup> while the particularly vulnerable category of unaccompanied minors making the sea crossing to Italy doubled in 2016.<sup>44</sup> Adults have also been arriving on a similar scale – but as De Graeve and Bex point out, children are read as 'exceptionally vulnerable',<sup>45</sup> meaning a 'focus on the suffering of bodies of abandoned minors removes the humanitarian response from the political sphere and converts it into a moral imperative to relieve suffering, a sheer matter of compassion' (p. 503). This is possible because in contrast with the already politically inscribed body of the adult, the child, constituted 'as a figure',<sup>46</sup> presents 'a tabula rasa on which culture can be written'.<sup>47</sup> Small wonder, then, that European visual and textual narratives have proliferated around the refugee child. By turning, now, to a selection of these narratives, this chapter asks: how are the biopolitical and post/colonial inscribed on the figure of the refugee child? How, therefore, does the child render these discourses supremely legible? And how, ultimately, might reading and voicing alternative versions of 'the small human' challenge these narratives? In order to reach this possibility, we must turn, first, to where the journey of the Middle Eastern refugee child begins, or ends: to the Mediterranean, as traumatically fluid site of bodily encounter between Middle East and Europe.

### Seen and Not Heard: The Maternal State and the 'Safe' Refugee Child

It is his smallness that we see first. A body, face-down in the sand, arms lying unnaturally straight, palms turned to the sky. Small feet, small shoes, small legs. A small boy, drowned in the Mediterranean, washed up on the shores of Turkey in a failed attempt to reach Greece. When the image of the three-year-old Syrian toddler 'Aylan

Kurdi’ was released on 1 September 2015, it rapidly assumed a status ‘beyond the “iconic”’,<sup>48</sup> saturating global media and bringing about unprecedented shifts in the European response to refugees. Within hours, French President François Hollande had telephoned several European leaders to remind them of their ‘responsibilities’ toward refugees and to call for the formulation of a common EU policy.<sup>49</sup> Two days later, Angela Merkel would commit to admitting several thousand refugees stranded in Hungary, which subsequently led to the establishment of a ‘humanitarian corridor’ between Northern Greece and Southern Bavaria.<sup>50</sup> The image also galvanised public sympathies: it was reproduced as a giant mural by Turkish graffiti artists on the banks of the Main river in Frankfurt as an act of memorial and protest (see Figure 23.2), while the artist Ai Wei Wei controversially restaged it with his own body, as part of a series of works designed to call attention to the growing scale of the crisis, and his solidarity with refugees. The image has even been credited in the longer term with inciting a shift from the economically associated term ‘migrant crisis’ to the more sympathetic ‘refugee crisis’ in public discourse (p. 2). While images of refugees had, by 2015, circulated prolifically, it would seem it was the smallness of this refugee boy’s body – and, in its childhood innocence, the implied crime of his death – that would incite such a vast shift in the attitudes of ‘Fortress Europe’.<sup>51</sup>

How does the exceptional response to Kurdi’s death narrate something of the biopolitical? Several critics have, by now, noted that vast as the scale of response may have been, the narratives that proliferated around Kurdi’s body misread, even obscured, small details of great significance. The first is his name. While exceptionally transcending the



**Figure 23.2** Oguz Sen and Justus Becker, mural of Aylan Kurdi/Alan Shenu, 2016. Public domain (Wikimedia Commons)<sup>52</sup>

generic marker of 'child', his naming as 'Aylan Kurdi' proved to be a mis-inscription, and a product of the administrative systems attached to the passage of the refugee body. The toddler's surname was in fact 'Shenu', 'Kurdi' simply meaning 'Kurd': an ethnic determiner attached to him by the authorities in Turkey. 'Aylan', meanwhile, proved to be a mis-transliteration by Turkish authorities of 'Alan', a Kurdish name meaning 'flag-bearer': a testament to his family's national pride, itself a bitter reminder of the schisms imposed on Kurdistan during the period of European mandate, which have endured into the present day.<sup>53</sup> Thus, while the act of his naming ostensibly appeared to individualise Alan Shenu within the European media, it in fact came to testify to the dehumanising processes of renarration through which the refugee body must pass. So, too, has the seemingly universal pathos inspired by Alan also been read in subtly racialised terms. As Robert Fisk writes, 'being . . . dressed like a little European boy, and being white rather than brown-skinned' enabled him to be read as "our" child'.<sup>54</sup> It was perhaps, then, not the fact of a Middle Eastern refugee child's death, but rather, of the child's being 'just like a European', that engendered such affective outcry – and to those 'like us', the arms of a 'maternal Europe' must be opened.

The 'maternal' response engendered by Alan Shenu's death – a maternity identified by Syrian refugees themselves, who have come to refer to the German President, the most generous granter of asylum in Europe, as 'Mama Merkel'<sup>55</sup> – reveals a complex fluidity to European biopolitics, though one that can be accounted for through post-colonial interpretation. If the old tenet that children 'should be seen and not heard' now appears outdated, it still rings true in paternalist (or, in this context, maternalist) state constructions of the 'deserving' refugee as 'a figure who is thought to "speak" to us in a particular way: wordlessly',<sup>56</sup> though their abject suffering should remain visibly legible. In this, they come to embody the familiar Spivakian figure of 'the subaltern': a figure voiceless not so much through their own physical muteness, as their lack of access to the discourses that represent them. This construction of the child as ultimate 'subaltern' fits neatly within the familiar 'colonial rescue fantasy' that has typically motivated much imperialist intervention in the contemporary Middle East. In the invasion of Afghanistan, for instance, it was the voiceless figure of the *burqa*-clad Afghan woman that Bush purported to 'save' by waging war with the Taliban. (In fact, this military intervention went on to produce an internally displaced population that was predominantly female.)<sup>57</sup> In this context, a division emerged between the 'deserving' figure of the subaltern Afghan woman requiring rescue, versus the 'threatening' body of the terrorist Afghan male. It might be said that a similar division has been mapped onto Middle Eastern refugees at the shores of Europe, whereby the 'safe' and 'deserving' body of the child refugee stands in opposition to the 'threatening' and 'undeserving' refugee adult. Indeed, the narratives of suspicion and danger that have frequently been attached to the Middle Eastern adult refugee in the European press seem to support this hypothesis, and while emphasis has been placed on children's cultural *sameness*, accounts of adult refugees strongly emphasise cultural *difference*, and hence 'unbelonging'.<sup>58</sup>

Rather than the maternal response of European state actors to Alan Shenu's death disrupting the biopolitical and post/colonial order, then, it can instead be read as a function of this very system, whereby refugee bodies come to be categorised and narrated onto terms conducive to the European state. In this, the biopolitics of compassion towards the refugee child comes to embody what Miriam Ticktin terms 'armed love':

'practices of the state, which may be benevolent and kind, but [which] may also include deportation, detention or violence',<sup>59</sup> as well as selective passivity or disengagement. As a state system of passive aggression, 'armed love' is strongly reminiscent of the Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics, developed in *Society Must Be Defended*, in which the biopolitical order is characterised as 'the *power to "make" live and "let" die*'.<sup>60</sup> Here, intervention is carefully counterbalanced with inertia; boundaries and mechanisms are imposed on the distribution of compassion. Indeed, in its moments of passive-aggressive disengagement – the limits that are placed on the maternal instincts of the state, we find the biopolitical tipping over into what Mbembe specifies as the 'necropolitical', wherein 'politics [is] the work of death' and 'sovereignty . . . the right to kill'.<sup>61</sup> In his essay, Mbembe asks provocatively: 'under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised?' (p. 12). An answer to his question can be found in the Mediterranean, which can be read as a site of post/colonial necropolitics.

As the primary site of transition between Libya and Italy, and between Turkey and Greece, the Mediterranean stands as a fluid boundary that must be negotiated by any Middle Eastern refugee seeking to reach Europe.<sup>62</sup> In 2016, some 1 million people crossed its waters in rubber dinghies and plastic boats captained by smugglers or refugees themselves, and an average of fourteen people per day died during the crossing.<sup>63</sup> Refugees in fear of their lives are forced to undertake this illegal crossing, given the absence of other official passages granted into Europe, and in summing up the most productive EU response to the crisis, the UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) identifies 'an urgent need for States to increase pathways for admission, such as resettlement, private sponsorship, family reunification and student scholarship schemes . . . so they do not have to resort to dangerous journeys' (n.p.). Instead, however, the European response has been to implement 'search-and-rescue-at-sea' operations such as the Italian-led Mare Nostrum, and EU-led Frontex scheme, which intervenes when vessels approaching European shores are in peril.<sup>64</sup> While such schemes have saved thousands of lives, it is nevertheless possible to read the focus on this policy as necropolitical in nature. In interview, one Syrian refugee, Hanan al-Hasan, sums up this necropolitics with total clarity:

All this killing, all this blood, I can't believe it. The people can't stay in Syria in this war. They try to come to Europe, and look what Europe is doing. They let them pay smugglers €5,000, €6,000, €10,000 and go by the sea and die. And after, when they arrive, they say 'welcome'. Why? Why don't you try and bring these people here safely? If you arrive, they say 'welcome'; if you die in the sea, they say 'never mind'. Why?<sup>65</sup>

Here, necropolitics is expressed as state *inaction*, whereby the failure to provide alternatives to the dangerous crossing effectively renders the possibility of European sanctuary a matter of maritime 'natural selection'. In this, the European state conveniently defers the responsibility of designating the refugee as *homo sacer* – the 'sacred man' who can be sacrificed without legal consequence<sup>66</sup> – to that ultimate necropolitical sovereign: the uncontrollable sea. The Mediterranean Sea can therefore be read as a necropolitical frontier and site of deferred sovereign authority, passively harnessed in the task of separating and controlling the flow of bodies from Middle East to Europe. As Mbembe notes, this necropolitical construction is inherently colonial in nature,

reproducing as it does the mentality of the frontier as ‘inhabited by “savages”’ rendered distinct from the civilised world through ‘the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master’.<sup>67</sup> Quoting Arendt, he reminds us that it is ultimately this assignation of the ‘savage other’ to ‘nature’ which meant that ‘when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they committed murder’ (p. 24). Here, we might read that assignation of the ‘savage’ to a more literal ‘natural’ realm – that of the Mediterranean as ‘the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of “civilization”’ (p. 24), and as site of ‘unwitting murder’. In this formulation, the Mediterranean can be connected to a much longer-standing landscape of colonial frontier-building, designed for purposes of self-protection and containment, and enforced through rigorous necropolitical strategies.<sup>68</sup>

How, then, does the doubled and over-inscribed figure of Aylan Kurdi/Alan Shenu enable us to read the biopolitical, post/colonial landscape of Middle Eastern refugee experience in (search of) Europe? Read as ‘Aylan Kurdi’ – a palimpsestic narrative construction of the ‘safe, deserving’ subaltern refugee ready to be welcomed into the arms of a maternal Europe – this small human reveals the passive-aggressive ‘armed love’ that underpins the functioning of refugee biopolitics. Read as ‘Alan Shenu’, however – the child obscured by these narratives – he also reveals the necropolitical frontiers that divide Europe from Middle East in the post/colonial landscape; frontiers at which the long-standing imperialist divisions between ‘safe’ and ‘threatening’, ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ bodies are reproduced and humans, in all their infinitely precious smallness, are left to be lost to the sea.

### Thinking Children: Mediating Biopower in the ‘Collaborative Life Narrative’

Children have not only figured as voiceless, nameless subalterns in representations of the contemporary Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe. Quite the contrary: in journalistic and literary accounts, their voices appear to be highly prized for their apparently ‘untainted, unbiased inquiry’, ‘natural sensitivity’ and ‘innocence’<sup>69</sup>: all qualities associated with the child narrator as a construct in postcolonial fiction more broadly. As Kate Douglas notes, these qualities have made the child’s voice particularly attractive to social justice campaigners ‘determined to give “a voice to the voiceless”’,<sup>70</sup> and within the context of the contemporary Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe, the ‘collaborative life narrative’ has emerged as a popular tool through which the child’s voice can be harnessed.<sup>71</sup> While this medium, which ostensibly enables a child to tell their own story through various modes of collaboration with a more experienced adult author, can be read as a necessary response to the child’s limited access to language and resources and thus as an enabling tool, they also, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson remind us, result in texts that are ‘multiply mediated . . . and despite assurances of co-production, power relations between teller and recorder/editor are often asymmetrical’.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, in its implication that life can be ‘written’ ‘collaboratively’, the genre implies a problematically biopolitical mediation of agency; one which ironically mirrors the techniques of collaborative testimonial production demanded of asylum seekers in many European asylum application systems.<sup>73</sup> Within the context of the contemporary Middle Eastern refugee crisis, these narratives therefore come to offer multiple forms of

insight – not simply into the traumatic experiences and extraordinary resilience of child refugees, but also into the ways in which childhood, refugeeism and need are *figured* for a European audience. Focusing particularly on the collaborative life-narrative *Nujeen*, by Nujeen Mustafa with Christina Lamb, the following analysis explores how Nujeen's narrative is framed by Lamb in order to construct a deserving legitimacy that, while revealing the machinations of the biopolitical system, unwittingly affirms its authority. Competing with this dominant narrative, however, are moments at which Nujeen's own observations and perceptions push against the coherence of the biopolitical narrative, including its construction of the 'child' as a category. It is in Nujeen's moments of adolescent outburst and self-expression that we start to glimpse the subversive potential of 'childishness', as a playful mode of thought that has the potential to break the post/colonial, biopolitical narrative.

The collaborative life narrative *Nujeen*, by Nujeen Mustafa with Christina Lamb, presents an account of childhood refugee experience that is exceptional in many senses. Originally published in 2016 with the sensationalist subtitle *One Girl's Incredible Journey from War-torn Syria in a Wheelchair*,<sup>74</sup> the text recounts the precarious journeys undertaken by Nujeen, a Kurdish teenager living in Syria who was born with cerebral palsy, and who covered a total of 3,593 miles in her flight from Aleppo to Germany from 2012 to 2015, assisted only by her older sister, Nasreen. Co-written 'with' the prestigious Foreign Correspondent and author Christina Lamb<sup>75</sup> in a vivacious, adolescent first tense reminiscent at times of Nujeen's beloved American soap operas (through which, denied access to school in Aleppo, we learn that Nujeen taught herself English), the text also bears the hallmarks of Lamb's experienced journalistic hand: the text opens with a careful act of foreshadowing, delivered through a dramatic Prologue; paragraph breaks foreground poignant observations while complex political background is seamlessly interwoven with Nujeen's unique personal insights into her experiences as a refugee. While it is therefore difficult to ascertain the level of narrative mediation performed by Lamb, it is clear that Nujeen's own voice has been moulded into a coherent and compelling narrative through a process of at least rewriting and editing, while her own voice has been supplemented with information that contextualises her experiences, rendering them politically resonant. In this, it is possible to argue that while Nujeen figures prominently as a narrative focus, she is also presented by Lamb as a powerfully empathetic figure that facilitates the narration of the refugee crisis more broadly. Indeed, it could be said that Nujeen's exceptional identity as *disabled* child refugee also imbues her with a 'doubly deserving' status designed to forge a powerful empathy with readers across the political spectrum.<sup>76</sup> In this way, Nujeen is presented both as exception, and as 'everychild', embodying all that is uncontestedly legitimate and deserving 'before the law' of the asylum system.

Nujeen's presentation as 'child refugee figurehead' therefore inadvertently affirms the logic of 'armed love' that reaches out only to the most deserving, and within the content of Nujeen's narrative itself, Mustafa/Lamb also present an unwitting, if uneasy alliance between refugee and biopolitical state in their account of Nujeen's reception into the German asylum system. In this, they confirm Nevzat Soguk's recognition that

the very refugee or migrant bodies, which, while at first undermining . . . a state's claim that it is in control of its proper territories/borders, at times also becomes a source of re/presentation for the state(ism) whereby the state(ism) poses itself as an ontological necessity.<sup>77</sup>

We see this ‘ontological necessity’ of the state presented particularly through her ‘exceptional’ biopolitical status as ‘disabled child’ within the text, and thus as ‘doubly deserving’ subject of the German state healthcare system – a biotechnology that functions in symbiosis with the asylum system. At several points early in the text, Nujeen hints that her enthusiasm for flight to Europe stems not simply from her terror at the war-torn Syrian landscape, but also from the medical possibilities that this might facilitate for her. When her brother Shiar mentions the possibility of travel to Germany, Nujeen discloses that ‘when everyone was sleeping I borrowed Shiar’s laptop and Googled “Germany cures for cerebral palsy”’.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the measure of Nujeen’s achievement of what she terms ‘A Normal Life’ (the title of Part Three of the text) emerges in her absorption into the German medical system once she has been granted refugee status. Attending a physiotherapist via her school, she also receives an official diagnosis of ‘what I have wrong with me’ (Stage One tetra-spacidity) while her school also refers her to an ophthalmologist and dentist. When Nujeen declares, ‘There’s a lot to be fixed!’ (p. 245), she therefore subtly affirms Foucault’s reading of ‘the privilege of hygiene and the function of medicine as [modes of] social control’,<sup>79</sup> whereby the categorisation and treatment of the body as ‘sick’ or ‘disabled’ renders it the subject of state dependency. Indeed, it is telling that Foucault reads the state of childhood itself as a condition that comes to be medicalised within the biopolitical system, its ‘correct management’ a means to ‘codify relations between adults and children’, thus producing a tightly regulated social hierarchy between the ‘caring’ and ‘cared-for’ (p. 280).

Read as a manifestation of refugee biopolitics, the state could be said to assume the role of ‘surrogate mother’ here. Yet as Nujeen’s narrative reveals, the tightly controlled structures of ‘care’ also strip the refugee body of its agency. Nujeen/Lamb vividly describe the medical technologies to which the refugee body is subjected, when Nujeen is finally received into Germany:

Just as we had imagined about Germany, everything was very organized. We were directed to what they called Bearbeitungsstrasse or Processing Street in a sports hall. They gave us plastic bags for our phones and valuables, photographed us and checked us for contagious diseases like TB and scabies. I do understand the need to register everyone but, honestly, we’re not a disease or an epidemic. Still, I can’t complain because at least in Germany the door was open, unlike some other EU countries. (p. 217)

The strong sense of ‘organization’ experienced by Nujeen gestures towards the biopolitical technologies at play here, and while she recognises the dehumanising effects of the processing system, her casual comment that she ‘can’t complain’ presents a potent signal of the denial of her narrative agency, whereby she is reduced to ‘subaltern’ body. Not only is the refugee body reduced to biopolitical object within this narrative; its construction as potential ‘disease’ and ‘threat’ to the ‘uncontaminated’ German landscape implies a racialised biopolitics that echoes the familiar Western association of ‘the Orient’ with ‘poverty, disease and underdevelopment’.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the presentation of Nujeen’s medical treatment as the condition of her assimilation into German ‘Normal Life’ is also suggestive of the ideological presentation of the ‘West’ as bearer of rational, salvational scientific knowledge, in contrast with the ‘Orient’ as realm of

undeveloped, 'backwardness', which ultimately 'invite[s] the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other' (p. 48). Nujeen's implicit construction as *duty* of the European state – as disabled Syrian child refugee – therefore ultimately affirms its biopolitical and imperialist hierarchies, and casts it in role of 'strict post/colonial parent', determined to set boundaries that may discipline and exclude, but do so in the service of 'caring' for the most 'deserving' children, providing a 'correct' upbringing according to standards imagined as specifically 'Western'.

If Lamb's presentation of Nujeen as 'doubly deserving', 'legitimate' refugee serves to reproduce the narrative of the biopolitical state, there are also moments within the text at which the coherent narrative figuration of Nujeen is thrown into crisis, and her status as 'tabula rasa on which culture can be inscribed' is contested.<sup>81</sup> These moments of narrative agency emerge through unexpected, discontinuous utterances that see Nujeen asserting her individual personality and 'childish' (though not necessarily immature) perception of the world. In these moments, we see her actively though inadvertently contesting the authority of the biopolitical narrative. Significantly, the first sense in which this occurs is through the ambiguity of Nujeen's own bodily status. We learn that at the time of her crossing into Europe in 2015, she is aged sixteen, and thus an 'adolescent': a liminal state that pushes at the straightforward positionings of 'carer' and 'cared-for' within the biopolitical system. As De Graeve and Bex note, the refugee adolescent is often therefore read as threatening, and 'cultural stereotypes of "non-White" adolescents, loitering around in groups on streets . . . and thought to be particularly prone to violent and criminal behaviours' (p. 496) abound in Western media representation. Similarly, the agency demonstrated by the adolescent refugee in 'initiating and shaping their migration' (p. 496) disrupts their construction as passive 'subaltern' in need of rescue.<sup>82</sup> Nujeen's adolescent tendencies emerge infrequently over the course of the text, but it is possible to identify several instances where Nujeen's adolescent voice resists her accommodation into the biopolitical state narrative.

Like many adolescents, Nujeen sometimes privileges emotion over rationality, and one moment in the text serves to subvert the narrative of the 'grateful, deserving refugee' particularly effectively. Towards the start of the life narrative, we learn of her obsession with the melodramatic American soap opera, *Days of Our Lives*, which she picks up on satellite TV from her home in Aleppo. The series becomes an escapist mechanism, as well as a means to learn English – but Nujeen also develops a typically adolescent obsession with this drama, in particular with the fraught romantic relationship between EJ and Sami – to such an extent that when interviewed by an American journalist at the Hungarian border, she complains at the fact that her favourite character, EJ, has been killed off. In a surprising turn of events, she later learns that this information has been used in a feature expressing sympathy for Syrian refugees on the American TV show *Last Week Tonight*, and as a gesture of solidarity, the actors playing Sami and EJ produce a sketch directly referencing Nujeen, in which EJ is resurrected. Nujeen recalls the typically overblown dialogue:

'Coming back from the dead is not hard', [EJ] replied. 'You know what's hard – getting from Syria to Germany'. He talked a little about the migrant crisis. Then he said he had read about 'this incredible sixteen-year old from Kobane called Nujeen Mustafa' . . . Sami repeated my name like it was something wondrous. (p. 227)

While initially elated at this clip, though, Nujeen describes a swift and complex shift in her adolescent emotions:

The following morning I woke and felt as if something had been stolen from me. *Days of Our Lives* had been my own thing, it was private. Also the video clip wasn't realistic – EJ and Sami would have had a fight. I would have liked that better than them talking about me. (p. 227)

Here, Nujeen's adolescent desire for privacy and defense of her individuality both push against her construction as 'deserving refugee figurehead'. Privileging emotional over reasoned response, her refusal of submissive gratitude can be read as a subversively adolescent contestation of the paternalist adult interpretation of her desires: it seems that these well-meaning adults *just don't get her*. Similarly, Nujeen later discloses that when settled in Germany, she is one of a dozen refugees invited to meet with the American Ambassador to the United Nations in Berlin. Here, she is again cast in the role of 'legitimate refugee figurehead', and is invited to present her story as affirmation of this narrative. Yet Nujeen's brief account of the episode reveals her discomfort with the way in which the refugees are made to figure within this narrative: 'everyone told their stories . . . and I wished I didn't have to listen', she relates, also disclosing that 'Ambassadors don't have much time and we didn't get long to speak'. Instead of testifying to her abject misery and gratitude for state attention, Nujeen instead questions her construction as 'exceptional figurehead', and 'subaltern Other': 'Everyone wants to speak to me because I am smiling . . . Am I like an alien?' (p. 261), she asks the Ambassador when she finally meets her. Here, we sense Nujeen's adolescent emotions bubbling beneath the surface: her sense of disaffection articulated as subtle narrative rebellion against the parental authority of the maternal state.

Nujeen claims further authority over the narration of her identity, needs and desires as a 'child' through her resistance to the expectations placed on her at school that she should play and socialise with her peers. Nujeen explains that instead, she prefers to 'play' through learning. Indeed, throughout the narrative, we learn that Nujeen's sense of curiosity and desire for stimulation has been expressed as a quest for knowledge, accessed in true post-Millennial style through satellite TV and Internet: mentally accessible realms she has appropriated as a means to compensate for the physical limits imposed on her body. Nujeen's technological autodidacticism can be read as resistant to the school-as-biotechnology, designed to enforce particular modes of knowledge and social behaviours through adult guidance. Interestingly, her alternative understanding of 'play' as a mode that does not have to be simply physical, but that can also be mental, bears parallels with Agamben's observations regarding what he terms 'studious play' in *State of Exception*, when he writes:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original use value that precedes the law, but a new use that is born only after it. . . . This liberation is the task of study, or of play.<sup>83</sup>

Here, 'play' is articulated as a subversive means to appropriate law according to new, non-canonical uses. Crucially, play and study are presented as interchangeable here: the

division between 'adult' and 'childish' modes of enquiry into the world are collapsed, and indeed, the childhood tendencies towards rule-breaking, emotion, experimentation, wonder, creativity and spontaneity are presented as essential responses to the totalising authority of the paternal/maternal sovereign state. Through her insistence on 'studious play', Nujeen resists the narrative of 'correct' childhood enforced through the school as biotechnological institution. Indeed, by insisting on the vital importance of the *cerebral*, Nujeen enacts a sharp if playful move against the post/colonial biopolitical narrative – for by privileging her mental agility and agency over her biological *disability*, she refuses both the biopolitical narrative of the 'doubly deserving', 'doubly victimised' disabled child refugee, *and* the post/colonial narrative of 'subaltern Other', cast as the *subject* of Western knowledge, and beneficiary of Western tutoring.

Small, seemingly insignificant moments of the text therefore reveal Nujeen's 'childish' resistance to her narrative figuration according to the post/colonial biopolitical narrative of the 'refugee child'. Here, then, we see 'childishness' removed from its derogatory, paternalist association with immaturity, and instead validated as a powerfully emotive cerebral mode that bears the potential to contest the sovereign 'law'. It is with playful studiousness, then, that we might turn away, at last, from the *figure* of the 'refugee child', and towards, instead, the playfully constructed *idea* of 'the small human'.

### Unreasonable Conclusions: 'The Small Human'

The 'Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe' has been represented primarily as a crisis of scale, the numbers of Middle Eastern inhabitants reaching out to Europe in need of sanctuary unprecedented in modern history. Yet as this chapter has argued, the crisis is also one of post/colonial conscience – for the flows of refugees now reaching Europe operate as spectres of colonial and imperialist intervention, and while these refugees bear disconcertingly human faces, so are their racialised bodies also indelibly inscribed with the Orientalist assumptions that have long been used to justify the construction of divisive physical as well as imaginative geographies. This chapter's radical proposition is that this crisis of conscience has led to the employment of biopolitical strategies at the borders of Europe: mechanisms that, while appearing to present ethically (and politically) affirmative possibilities of 'care', also categorise and regulate human lives in ways that implicitly exclude, reject and render illegitimate, thereby tipping over into the territory of the *necropolitical*, and reinforcing the post/colonial sovereignty of threatened geopolitical boundaries through the errant mobile body itself.

As image, concept and category, the 'Middle Eastern refugee child' emerges as figurehead of this post/colonial, biopolitical landscape, *par excellence*. In their apparent immaturity, lack of access to narrative agency and dependency, their childish bodies are figured as apolitical, *therefore* innocent, deserving and legitimate, as well as ripe for political inscription (starkly evident in the renaming and media frenzy to which the Kurdish toddler Alan Shenu was subjected after his death). Through the exceptional legibility of their suffering, they prove the rule of the biopolitical system's necessity: a manifestation of European paternalism/maternalism that, in its reception of the Middle Eastern 'Other', operates through a mode of 'armed love' that authorises biopolitical technologies and institutions, and affirms the sovereignty of the European state. Thus, if the flows of errant refugee bodies reaching Europe represent an implicit threat to the post/colonial landscape, the child represents and renders transparent the biopolitical mechanisms that are employed to reinforce physical and

ideological boundaries between Europe and the Middle East, and thus to reproduce the familiar structures of the colonial/imperial landscape.

This chapter has sought to instigate new ways of perceiving and critiquing the intersection of the biopolitical with the post/colonial landscape. Yet one of the major challenges that we experience in this task is dealing with this landscape's usage of a language of seeming empathy and affect. Here, Nujeen Mustafa's 'collaborative life-narrative' with Christina Lamb is deeply revealing of how even expressions of apparent solidarity with the refugee child, which recognise the oppressive and traumatic nature of the post/colonial biopolitical landscape, may also ultimately operate in its service, precisely through the figuration of the child as deserving victim and thus legitimate beneficiary of the system. The language of 'care' employed within this system could be seen to imply that it is unsympathetic, *unreasonable*, even, to question the state's commitment to the child. As Mbembe reminds us, however, within the necropolitical system,

*reason* is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason. . . . The romance of sovereignty, in this case, rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning.<sup>84</sup>

The language of reason, then, becomes an articulation of sovereignty, and it is no accident that it is through Nujeen's moments of *unreasonable*, emotive, individual adolescence that we find such a powerful contestation of the language of biopolitical state sovereignty. As an ambiguously and fluidly self-defined 'child', Nujeen demonstrates the capacity to *think* differently from the biopolitical post/colonial sovereign – and in this, she reveals that we have much to learn from 'the small human'.

'The small human' certainly originates with children themselves, though it extends far beyond them. As a starting-point, this chapter demonstrated that children demand our serious attention within the postcolonial Middle Eastern refugee crisis in Europe because they reveal the trauma and injustice of the post/colonial landscape, and we find their suffering perpetuated by the biopolitical drives that govern it. This becomes evident when we start to regard the child not as 'figure' within the crisis, but as an individual who, in their non-symbolic human existence, is significant *because* they are small, not a category, or sovereign, and in this, the term 'human' usurps the term 'child' as a signifier of powerful connectivity, rather than of biopolitical difference. Indeed, it is tempting to draw parallels between my conceptualisation of 'the small human' and Judith Butler's formulation of 'precarious life', through which she seeks to recognise 'the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense'. Only by apprehending the precarity of human life in our present age, Butler argues, can we 'reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique . . . [and] understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent' in a way that ultimately leads to new modes of 'sensate democracy' and cross-cultural solidarity in the service of frail human precarity.<sup>85</sup> While 'the small human' also invites this renewed critical apprehension of and solidarity with precarious humanity, though, it does not premise that precarity upon notions of children's distinctive vulnerability, nor of frailty. In place of this mature paternal/maternal rationality, 'the small human' instead invites us to reject sovereign modes of reason, and learn to think not simply *about* children, as objects of scrutiny, but instead, *like* them. Over the course of this

chapter, I have suggested that 'the small human' can be read as a 'childish' mode of thought that radically contests the 'rational' post/colonial, biopolitical strategies of the sovereign state – not least because in reimagining 'the small human' as a primarily cerebral condition, it undoes the categorisation of 'the child' as a primarily biopolitical category, and urges us to refuse the privileging of body over mind – the underlying strategy of the post/colonial, biopolitical state. Indeed, while it proves essential to build empathy and solidarity with the experiences of children, we have seen that the production of this sympathy as an 'exceptional' condition perpetuates racially prejudicial, biopolitical modes of exclusion that ultimately reproduce the long-standing divisions of the post/colonial landscape. Thus 'the small human', while precarious, is not synonymous with victimhood; rather, it holds a transgressive potential applicable to all humans. Relatable to Agamben's theorisation of 'studious play', 'the small human' embraces children's broader creative approach to the world, as they encounter it for the first time, and thus reshape it on their own terms. Unregulated by presuppositions, laws or limits, they are unafraid to break rules, create mess, privilege emotion, think illogically, tantrum, refuse, imagine, and in their imaginative creativity, this has tangibly liberating implications for the way the world emerges at their hands: boxes are turned into castles, apples into planets.

Let us, then, as scholars of the post/colonial 'Middle East', also approach our subject as 'small humans' – playing studiously, and studying playfully, thinking around borders and boundaries, laws and categories in childishly creative ways that make a mess of their authority and conjure new, fresh uses for them. The playful scholarly afterlife of this chapter, then, invites us to imagine new uses for categories such as 'Middle East', 'Europe', 'post/colonial', 'refugee', in which the small human is not a sub-category to be cast as exceptional, but a mode of creative rethinking. Perhaps, by adopting the mindset of 'the small human', the violent forward-slash that perpetually separates the 'post' from the 'colonial' might come to be playfully reimagined according to an entirely new use – no longer as the division between traumatic past and forever delayed futurity, nor between refugee and non-refugee, Middle Eastern and European, illegitimate and legitimate body – but instead, as a ladder propped against a wall; a gate opening; a border flying to the sky.

## Notes

1. The term 'Middle Eastern subject' is placed in scare quotes here to denote the problematic blanket categorisation of refugee individuals from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Turkey, Iran and Palestine as 'Middle Eastern'. However, this term has been employed prolifically in European discourse on the current 'refugee crisis', and as such, upholds Western imaginaries of the 'region'. Its usage throughout this essay therefore recognises its construction as one of European discursive homogenisation.
2. I employ the schismatic term 'post/colonial' (rather than postcolonial) throughout this essay in order to indicate the simultaneity of colonial structures/legacies and postcolonial desires/realities that operate in continual and self-negating interplay within this context.
3. The top ten nationalities applying for EU asylum in 2015 were refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Albania, Iran, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan and the Ukraine. Eurostat, 'Figure 2: Countries of Citizenship for (Non-EU) Asylum Seekers, 2015–2016', [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics) (last accessed 25 October 2017).

4. UNHCR, 'Syria Emergency', *UNHCR*, October 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html> (last accessed 26 October 2017), n.p.
5. UNHCR, 'Europe: Syrian Asylum Applications', *UNHCR Data Portal*, 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php> (last accessed 26 October 2017), n.p.
6. UNHCR, 'The Sea Route to Europe: The Mediterranean Passage in the Age of Refugees', *UNHCR*, July 2015, [www.unhcr.org/5592bd059.html](http://www.unhcr.org/5592bd059.html) (last accessed 11 April 2017), p. 19, 2.
7. Mayblin looks specifically at the British asylum system. Lucy Mayblin, *Asylum After Empire: Colonial Legacies in the Politics of Asylum Seeking* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), pp. 1–2.
8. Edward W. Said, with photographs by Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 4.
9. See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012).
10. Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles With the Neighbours* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 46–7. For a more detailed analysis of the contemporary Syrian conflict as post/colonial manifestation, see Chapter 22 by miriam cooke within this volume.
11. This is the figure cited by Masalha; the numbers are contested, and have been placed much higher. Nur Masalha, *The Palestinian Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed, 2012), p. 2.
12. A number of scholars have traced the origins of the Lebanese Civil War to the construction of Lebanese nationalism and the political system of Confessionalism during the French Mandate, which laid the grounds for later sectarian conflict. See Michael Johnson, *All Honourable Men: The Social Origins of War in Lebanon* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. 4. Refugee population cited in Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), p. 139.
13. See Joe Stork and Ann Lesch, 'Background to the Crisis: Why War?', *Middle East Report*, 167 (1990), pp. 11–18.
14. See UNHCR, 'Chronology: 1991 Gulf War Crisis', *Public Information Section: UNHCR* 2003, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/subsites/iraqcrisis/3e798c2d4/chronology-1991-gulf-war-crisis.html> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p.
15. The term 'Greater Middle East' was coined by the Bush presidency, and is a powerful indicator of the ways in which definitions of 'the Middle East' alter in relation to perceived notions of threat. See Dar al Hayat, 'US Working Paper for G-8 Sherpas: G-8 Greater Middle East Partnership', *al Hayat*, 15 March 2004, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/AlHayat%20Article.pdf> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p.
16. Hiram Ruiz and Margaret Emery, 'Afghanistan's Refugee Crisis', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 24 September 2001, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092401> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p.
17. UNHCR, 'Operations: Iraq', *UNHCR*, April 2017, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2547> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p.
18. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 174.
19. It is, however, possible to identify distinct national bias exercised *within* the processing systems themselves. In 2015, for instance, Syrian families arriving on Lesbos were processed via faster, cleaner systems than lone male Syrian, Iraqi or Afghan refugees, thus revealing endemic assumptions around 'safer' and 'more worthy' refugee identities within the region. John Domokos and Patrick Kingsley, 'Chaos on Greek islands as refugee system favours Syrians', *The Guardian*, 21 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/>

- nov/21/chaos-greek-islands-three-tier-refugee-registration-system-syria-lesbos (last accessed 26 October 2017), n.p.
20. Kristen Sarah Biehl, 'Governing Through Uncertainty: Experiences of Being a Refugee in Turkey as a Country for Temporary Asylum', *Social Analysis*, 59:1 (2015), pp. 57–75; pp. 65–6.
  21. Lionel Beehner, 'Are Syria's Do-It-Yourself Refugees Outliers or Examples of a New Norm?', *Journal of International Affairs*, 68:2 (2015), pp. 157–75; p. 162.
  22. Western 'arms-length' intervention in the contentiously defined 'Greater Middle East' produced some 700,000 Afghan refugees in 2001 alone, while 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in 2003 resulted in the displacement of some 4 million people within and beyond Iraq. See Hiram Ruiz and Margaret Emery, 'Afghanistan's Refugee Crisis', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 24 September 2001, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero092401> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p. and UNHCR, 'Operations: Iraq', *UNHCR*, April 2017, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2547> (last accessed 11 April 2017), n.p.
  23. See for instance Joseph Curtis, 'Some of the refugees from Syria's civil war are "definitely" terrorists, claims President Assad', *Daily Mail Online*, 9 February 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/-4209710/Some-refugees-Syria-definitely-terrorists.html> (last accessed 26 October 2017), n.p.
  24. Angela Naimou, 'Double Vision: Refugee Crises and the Afterimages of Endless War', *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies*, 43:1 (2016), pp. 226–33; p. 226. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  25. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 131.
  26. Michel Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power over Life', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 258–72; p. 266. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  27. See for instance Benjamin Muller, 'Globalization, Security, Paradox: Towards a Refugee Politics', *Refuge*, 22:2 (2004), pp. 49–57; p. 52.
  28. David Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 38.
  29. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. xx.
  30. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse, 'Introduction: Beyond Biopolitics: The Governance of Life and Death', in Patricia Ticineto Clough and Craig Willse (eds), *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 1–18; p. 4.
  31. See Douglas McDonald, 'Simply Impossible: Plausibility assessment in refugee status determination', *Alternative Law Journal*, 39:4 (2014), pp. 241–5 and David Rhys Jones and Sally Verity Smith, 'Medical Evidence in Asylum and Human Rights Appeals', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 16:3 (2004), pp. 381–410.
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  35. Muller, 'Globalization, Security, Paradox', p. 52.
  36. Daniel Trilling, 'What to Do with the People Who Do Make It Across?', *London Review of Books*, 37:19 (2015), <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37n19/daniel-trilling/what-to-do-with-the-people-who-do-make-it-across> (last accessed 12 April 2017), n.p.

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47. De Graeve and Bex, 'Imageries of Family and Nation', p. 494.
48. Robert Fisk, 'Alan Kurdi symbolised an army of dead children. We ignore them at our peril', *The Independent*, 1 September 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/a-year-on-from-alan-kurdi-we-continue-to-ignore-the-facts-in-front-of-us-and-we-ignore-them-at-our-a7220111.html> (last accessed 13 April 2017), n.p.
49. 'French President calls Erdogan over images of drowned Syrian boy, calls for common EU policy', *Daily Sabah*, 3 September 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/09/03/french-president-calls-erdogan-over-images-of-drowned-syrian-boy-calls-for-common-eu-refugee-policy> (last accessed 13 April 2017), n.p.
50. Carolyn Pedwell, 'Mediated Habits: Images, Networked Affect and Social Change', *Subjectivity*, 10:2 (2017), <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41286-017-0025-y> (last accessed 13 April 2017), pp. 1–23; p. 2. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
51. While originally stemming from the context of the Second World War, the term is today pejoratively applied to the immigration constraints imposed by Europe. See Trilling, 'What to Do with the People'.
52. This mural of Alan smiling and surrounded by teddies was produced after a previous mural of his drowned body was daubed with the tellingly biopolitical slogan 'Borders Save

- Lives'. Note that I choose not to reproduce the image of Aylan/Alan's drowned body that was widely circulated in the media, on the grounds that to do so would be to perpetuate the dehumanising symbolic abstraction of his death. Instead, this mural – which celebrates his living, childish identity – appears to me a more powerful indication of the subversive potential of 'the small human' that, as I argue in the final section of this chapter, is to be found in children's playfulness, resilience and disregard for adult authority
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  54. Fisk, 'Alan Kurdi symbolised an army'.
  55. Philip Oltermann, "'Mama Merkel": the compassionate mother of Syrian refugees', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2015/sep/01/mama-merkel-the-compassionate-mother-of-syrian-refugees> (last accessed 13 April 2017), n.p.
  56. Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11:3 (1996), pp. 377–404; p. 390.
  57. See R. Khanna, 'Taking a stand for Afghanistan: Women and the Left', *Signs*, 28:1 (2002), pp. 464–5.
  58. See for example Max Hastings, 'As the first plane-load of Syrian refugees arrive, Max Hastings reveals the deadly threat of Britain's enemy within', *Daily Mail*, 16 November 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3319873/As-plane-loads-Syrian-refugees-arrive-MAX-HASTINGS-reveals-deadly-threat-Britain-s-enemy-within.html> (last accessed 4 May 2017), n.p.
  59. Miriam Ticktin, *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 184.
  60. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 241.
  61. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), pp. 11–40; p. 16. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  62. UNHCR, 'The Middle East and North Africa, Global Appeal – Update, 2018, [http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/ga2017/pdf/13\\_MENA\\_Summary.pdf](http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/ga2017/pdf/13_MENA_Summary.pdf) (last accessed 31 March 2017), p. 74.
  63. William Spindler, 'Mediterranean Sea: 100 reported dead yesterday, bringing year total to 5,000', *UNHCR*, 23 December 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2016/12/585ce804105/mediterranean-sea-100-people-reported-dead-yesterday-bringing-year-total.html> (last accessed 14 April 2017), n.p. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  64. UNHCR, 'The Sea Route to Europe', n.p.
  65. Hanan al-Hasan, quoted in Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, *Cast Away: Stories of Survival from Europe's Refugee Crisis* (London: Portobello, 2016), epigraph.
  66. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.
  67. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 24. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  68. For further discussion of the colonial frontier as necropolitical mechanism, see *ibid.* p. 24.
  69. Meenakshi Bharat, *The Ultimate Colony: The Child in Postcolonial Fiction* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2003), p. 12.
  70. Kate Douglas, 'Lost and Found: the Life Narratives of Child Asylum Seekers', *Life Writing*, 3:1 (2006), pp. 41–59; p. 47.
  71. See for example Gulwali Passarlay, with Nadene Ghouri, *The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee* (London: Atlantic, 2015) and Fabio Geda, *In the Sea There are Crocodiles: The Story of Enaiatollah Akbari* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011).
  72. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 191.

73. For further discussion of the problematic role of testimonial as a mode of asylum seekers' self-narration, see Agnes Wooley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
74. Nujeen Mustafa with Christina Lamb, *Nujeen: One Girl's Incredible Journey from War-torn Syria in a Wheelchair* (London: William Collins, 2016). The text was later reissued with the title *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom* (2017).
75. Lamb has worked as foreign correspondent throughout the Middle East, notably Afghanistan. She has previously produced a collaborative life-narrative with the Afghan teenager Malala Yousafzai (see [www.christinalamb.net](http://www.christinalamb.net) (last accessed 21 April 2017)). In interview, Lamb reveals that she met Mustafa at the Hungarian-Serbian border during an assignment on the day it was closed. See the Harper Broadcast, 'Christina Lamb on Nujeen Mustafa's incredible journey from war-torn Syria in a wheelchair', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYuQnadr70> (last accessed 21 April 2017).
76. It is interesting to note that the figure of the 'disabled child' as the bearer of 'exceptional' qualities surfaces as a recurring trope in postcolonial fiction more broadly. See Clare Barker, *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
77. Nevat Soguk, 'Transnational/Transborder Bodies: Resistance, Accommodation, and Exile in Refugee and Migrant Movements on the US-Mexican Border', in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds), *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 285–325; p. 294.
78. Mustafa, *Nujeen*, p. 110. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
79. Michel Foucault, 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 273–90; p. 282. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
80. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 348. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
81. De Graeve and Bex, 'Imageries of Family and Nation', p. 494. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
82. The biopolitical anxieties around the ambiguous adolescent refugee body are keenly evident in Jack Straw's call for the testing of adolescents' teeth in order to determine their status as 'child' where it is in dispute – due to the absence of birth records, for example. See Tom Powell, 'Jack Straw backs calls for age tests on refugee children from the Calais Jungle camp', *Evening Standard*, 20 October 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/jack-straw-former-home-secretary-backs-calls-for-age-tests-on-migrant-children-a3373871.html> (last accessed 28 April 2017), n.p.
83. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 64. I am indebted to Philip Leonard for pointing out Agamben's reference to 'play' within this text.
84. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 13. Emphasis added.
85. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 151.