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Burning “Between Two Fires”: The Individual under Erasure in Hassan Blasim’s “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes”

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Abstract: This essay uses Freudian–Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to interpret Hassan Blasim’s short story “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes”. Blasim’s story depicts the psychological struggles of an Iraqi emigrant relating to his embattled sense of belonging in a Dutch society due to the recurrent nightmares of his “traumatic” past. It challenges his assimilationist fantasies. I develop Lacan’s idea of ontological lack as a structural susceptibility that is exacerbated by actual experiences of trauma to underline how racialized refugees from the war-torn global South are doubly vulnerable to experiencing subjective dehiscence between their efforts to forget past war traumas and the challenges of assimilating into (white) host nations. This essay uses Blasim’s story to illustrate a serious psychological issue experienced by racialized minority subjects in white/European host countries.

Keywords: psychoanalytic theory; trauma; racialized subjectivity; dreams; Freud; Iraqi fiction

1. Introduction

MENA refugees in Europe suffer from the crisis of building stable identities in their host countries, being subject to two contradictory demands—to assimilate completely into their new cultures or to retain their unique non-European, non-Christian ethnic cultures. Their susceptibility, however, stems not from their inability to choose one identity over another but, rather, from the impossibility of choosing. No matter how hard they try to adopt a European identity, they can never successfully erase the label of being a refugee in Europe. And similarly, if they opt to retain their distinct non-European identities, they can only do so by conforming to Europe’s imaginary ideas about the non-European—black/brown, Muslim, Arab—other. Effectively submitting to one identity over the other does not guarantee them a stable immersive identity within the host nations. Faced with this “forced choice”, or a choice that is not a choice at all, MENA refugees have no agency or autonomy in constituting their identities insofar as these identities are given to them by the host cultures. It is, therefore, not an issue of their ability or inability to claim a stable identity but rather the impossibility of gaining an identity outside of Europe’s long historical imaginations of the other¹.

Hassan Blasim’s “The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes” (2014) [3] illustrates this situation through the story of an Iraqi refugee in Holland, Salim, aka Carlos, who, despite consciously trying to assimilate into Dutch society, suffers from haunting nightmares of his past life and is unable to cope with this trauma, and eventually commits suicide. Blasim’s story highlights the susceptibility of Salim/Carlos’s projections of himself as a model minority, an identity Salim consciously curates by doggedly rejecting his past life and identity; that is, the susceptibility of Salim’s fantasy of seamless assimilation and self-reinvention crumbles when the rejected past returns to confront him with the question, *Who he is*: an Arab refugee for whom the laws of Holland do not matter or Carlos, a law-abiding naturalized Dutch citizen? Returning in the form of traumatic nightmares, Salim’s past breaches, violates, and mocks his metaphysical certainty as a Dutch and unravels in the process the impossibility of ascertaining a stable identity within the symbolic order of Holland’s ostensibly multicultural (but actually racist) society.



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I define susceptibility in this essay as an extreme state of subjective vulnerability or a state of existence where the subject is unable to express its agency and autonomy or project a sense of its identity as metaphysical certainty. On the one hand, it can be argued that this subject-depreciative state results directly from historical or personal traumas; on the other hand, it can emerge from the traumatic realization of subjectivity as split. In what follows, I explore through Blasim's text how an individual's immediate symbolic or socio-historical situation(s) connect with the unconscious tension of his ontological lack, thereby making the subject susceptible to painful experiences of failing to assert a stable identity. Secondly, I want to claim that subjects scarred by the lasting legacies of imperialist wars, like Blasim's protagonist, are susceptible to self-harm, including suicide, as fantasies that allow us to overwrite historical and/or ontological traumas prove inadequate in these cases. As such, I wish to hypothesize that refugees and other forcibly displaced racialized/indigenous people prove to be more susceptible to extreme forms of subjective depreciations and therefore are "disproportionately affected by risk factors for suicide" (Cogo et al. 2002 [4]: n.p.)² due to their inability to construct sustainable defensive fantasies against socio-historical forces, which, while operating outside their control, still directly impact their lives and from the universal trauma of being human or dispersed/split between the conscious and the unconscious, between desire and the death drive, or the ego and the id.

2. "Between Two Fires": Identity under Erasure

Hassan Blasim is among those contemporary writers like Helen Oyemi and Warsan Shire whose works depict the struggles of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) refugees in Europe. After leaving Iraq in 2000 to escape persecution by Saddam Hussein's government for his film on the forced displacement of Kurds, Blasim walked around Europe for four years as an illegal refugee before being granted asylum by Finland, where he currently resides (see Armitstead et al. in *The Guardian* 2020 [6]: n.p.). Unlike Oyemi and Shire, both of whom write in English, Blasim writes exclusively in Arabic and, indeed, in "street Arabic", for which he is reviled by some in Iraq (ibid.). But his style and content are similar to Oyemi's and Shire's in that he also uses grotesque, phantasmagorical, and surreal narratives to describe the "horrors of war and its devastating impacts on the lives and psyches of Arabs" fleeing their war-torn homelands (Abbady 2023 [7] p.61). Violence is the main subject of Blasim's stories—the violence of war suffered by individuals in their home countries and the violence of dislocation suffered as refugees in Europe (Armitstead in *The Guardian* 2020 [6]: n.p.).

In the opening two paragraphs of the story, Blasim introduces us to Salim Abdul Husain, an Iraqi municipal employee in the cleaning department, who works with a team of sweepers to clean the city's streets in the aftermath of bomb/IED explosions. But nothing much is told about his life in Iraq except that Salim found his work monotonous, was "bored and miserable", and dreamed of the day he would be able to purchase a visa "to go to Holland and escape this hell of fire and death" (187). For this, he kept a close eye on valuables scattered in the debris of properties, human bodies, fruits, vegetables, and chickens, and everything in between incinerated by the blasts. Salim was, however, never "as lucky as his colleagues in finding the valuable left over from death", and the only time he scavenged a red gemstone studded "silver ring of great beauty" (187) from a dismembered human finger, he could not sell it as he developed "a secret spiritual relationship with the ring" (188). Post these sparse details of his life in Iraq, the rest of the story focuses on his life as a refugee in Holland, ending with his death "in 2009 under another name: Carlos Fuentes" (187).

This is strategic storytelling by Blasim because Salim himself wants to forget his life in Iraq, and his decision to change his name when applying for asylum in Holland represents a core element of "Nightmares"; namely, Salim does not want to be viewed by the Dutch as an Arab. What unfolds in the story is a conflict within Salim, aka Carlos, between the past life of "fire and death", which he seeks to disremember, and his attempts to assimilate into

Dutch society as a brown man but not of Arab descent. The truncated description of Salim's life in Iraq aligns well with the story's focus on how Carlos's fantasies of assimilation in Holland are upended by traumatic vignettes from his past, which contribute to his susceptibility to the irredeemable tension existing between a desire for self-preservation and the death drive (as a reaction against life/pleasure principle). At the same time, it can be said that Blasim's reluctance to delineate in detail Salim's traumatic experiences of war-torn Iraq is congruous with what 1990s trauma studies scholars claim about the experience of trauma: it cannot be represented; it is a limit to representation. Though no clear account is given by Blasim about Salim's experiences with trauma in Iraq, it can be inferred from his strategically trite narration about Salim's life in Iraq that it is something that Salim wants to forget and/or which he too cannot represent through words. This dispensation is captured best by the opening paragraph of the story, which, after (almost) formally introducing us to Salim (his full name, profession, etc.), ends abruptly with the sentence, "He died in Holland in 2009 under another name: Carlos Fuentes" (187). This cut should serve as a cue for Blasim's readers about what is coming next—a story about a character who dies struggling against the repeated returns of what he has cut out of his life, i.e., his past.

Salim's first step in erasing his past involves him changing his name. This is why when he eventually succeeds in gaining political asylum in Holland, he also "applie[s] to change his name from Salim Abdul Husain to Carlos Fuentes" ("Nightmares" 188). Salim's explanation for this to the immigration officer—fear of retaliation from "fanatical Islamist groups"—is however different from the real reason why he wanted to change his name: Salim wants to fully integrate into Dutch society with no one thinking of him as an Iraqi (ibid.); thus, after comparing "Latin" and "African" and "South Asian" names, Salim decides to "pose" as a South American with hopes that he would be able to sequester his traumatic past life and gain a new respectable identity in his adopted country (ibid.). Consequently, Carlos Fuentes is "born" after having died in Holland in 2009, just a few years after moving there, as Blasim's narrator tells us in the story's opening paragraph. The story of Salim/Carlos is the story of a man striving to erase his past life and gain a new identity under an adopted name in a new country.

This is a recurrent theme in Blasim's stories—refugees seeking asylum in Europe narrate a different story for official records and hide their real reasons for emigrating. For official records, they tell stories that would get them political asylum. In "Reality and the Record", another story in the *Corpse Exhibition*, Blasim prefaces by noting the following:

Everyone staying at the refugee reception center has two stories—the real one and one for the record. The stories for the record are the ones the new refugees tell to obtain the right to humanitarian asylum, written down in the immigration department and preserved in their private files. The real stories remain locked in the hearts of the refugees, for them to mull over in complete secrecy. That's not to say it's easy to tell the two apart. They merge and it becomes impossible to distinguish between them. ([8] p.157)

But the undisclosed stories are never completely forgotten nor erased. Instead, these often come out to the surface against the will of the subject.

Similarly, in "Nightmares", Salim/Carlos tells and hides two stories. The only difference is that his stories are addressed not just to an immigration officer or the white citizens of Holland but also, tragically, to himself: Salim does not want to be recognized as Arab and/or Iraqi, preferring instead any other ("brown") ethnic/national identity. He thinks the new name will guarantee him respect in Dutch society by establishing a reality where his identity as a foreigner is not associated to him being an "Arab" who he thinks are universally despised in Europe. Thus, he believes "Carlos Fuentes" is an appropriate "brown name" to suit his "complexion" and for securing him against an Arab identity ("Nightmares" 188).

But Salim/Carlos does not stop with changing his name. To make his transformation comprehensive, he refuses to speak Arabic, "mix with Arabs and Iraqis", and regularly

scoffs “at immigrants and other foreigners who did not respect the rules of Dutch life [calling them] retarded gerbils” (ibid., 189–190). Salim/Carlos believes Holland to be a land of promise, plenitude, and opportunities—a beacon of civilization—a city on the hill—shining brightly in contrast to the barbaric Arab lands to its east: “Everything [he] saw amazed him and humiliated him at the same time, from the softness of the toilet paper in Holland to the parliament building protected only by security cameras” (ibid., 189). This was the country and culture he worshipped, and to become its citizen, he learned “Dutch in record time [,] worked nonstop, paid his taxes, and refused to live on welfare” (190). The “highlight” of “his efforts” came when he “acquire[s] a good-hearted [white] Dutch girlfriend”, who, though cartoonish in appearance, respected him, and he treats her “as a sensitive and liberated man would”, that is, “like a Western man, in fact a little more so” (190). Because he marries a Dutch national, is proficient in the Dutch language, culture, and history, and has “no legal problem or criminal record in his file”, he receives Dutch citizenship in record time (190–191).

It would appear that Salim/Carlos accomplished his long-cherished wish to erase/bury his past life and reconstitute himself anew . . . except and until there was the “dream problem” (191). No matter how hard Salim/Carlos tries to bury his past life—that site of “misery, backwardness, death, piss, and camels”—and convince himself about the plenitude of his new “warm, safe, colorful” home overseen by a “decent government” that allows unrestricted individual freedoms (189), a haven sullied only by illegal immigrants who resemble “Stone Age savages”, his past life keeps returning through nightmares (190–191). In these nightmares, he loses his newfound identity insofar as he can no longer speak Dutch or is made fun of by Iraqi children for his “new” name. Yet, at times, more horribly, he encountered himself as an Arab terrorist guilty of planting “a car bomb in the center of Amsterdam” (191).

It can be argued that Salim’s conscious attempts to create a new imaginary identity (ego) by suppressing his (real) racial/ethnic/religious identity make him susceptible to these haunting nightmares. These nightmares unravel the true condition of his subjectivity, a subjectivity dispersed between his ego invested in forming an imaginary relationship with the (Dutch) symbolic order and the past that he has buried but which *returns* to haunt him. Salim is himself responsible for creating the condition of his susceptibility to a tension that pulverizes his ego by forcing him “into a confrontation with something”, which is not part of his everyday conscious life, “something which we could call an *id*”, or that emerges from beyond consciousness and intent: a confrontation in other words with what Lacan dubs the “*quod*”, or *what-is-it?* (Lacan 1988 [9], II: 177). In attempting to reject his past by sequestering his traumas from living in war-torn Iraq in a cone of silence, Salim unwittingly opens up this very wound that speaks back to him through his dreams or unconscious. Simply put, notwithstanding his efforts to establish a masterful new identity in Holland, Salim falls victim to an “experience of [the] unconscious”, which limits his conscious pursuits of identity, mastery, and plenitude by quibbling his assimilationist fantasies of wholesome being with questions such as who he is and what is it that he truly desires?

This brings us back to Salim’s dream problem because dreams often tell us that what we think we wish is not what we desire. Or, what we desire is not what we wish. In other words, dreams send us an inverted message that goes against our conscious life choices, decisions, and intentions. Dreams tell us that, as subjects, we are susceptible to what lurks beneath or beyond our conscious waking lives. So, no matter how much we try to determine sentient identities, we still remain extremely vulnerable to those unconscious forces (death drive, *jouissance*, etc.) that inescapably impact our conscious lives. While these nightmares start infrequently, they soon become routine, disrupting Salim/Carlos’s daily life. He plunges into existential crisis because the dreams stripped his new identity as Carlos and presented him solely as an Arab or Iraqi immigrant. The past he sought to sweep under the carpet kept returning through the dreams . . . but why? Aren’t dreams, at least according to Sigmund Freud, supposed to be wish-fulfillments of those desires that

cannot be admitted or satisfied in conscious life? If Carlos was satisfied with his conscious life, why do his dreams make him relive abjection, humiliation, guilt, and punishment?

3. The Dream Problem, or What Lies Beneath

Freud teaches us that dreams are composed of two parts: the manifest content and the latent thoughts, or what lies beneath. The dream's meaning derives, then, from the "work" of translating manifest/dream-content into latent/dream-thoughts. With this, Freud marked a fundamental departure in his *Interpretation of Dreams* from all previous studies of dreams. He writes,

It is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream's manifest content that we disentangle its [a dream's] meaning. We are thus presented with a new task that had no previous existence: the task, that is, of investigating the relations between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts, and of tracing out the processes by which the latter have been changed into the former. [10] [IV: 277]

But the task is not simply discovering or uncovering latent dream thoughts by digging or sifting through the manifest content. This notion prevalent amongst some about Freud's praxis being similar to that of an archaeologist—excavating the unconscious by clearing the layers of the conscious mind—is already challenged in the above passage by Freud's own emphasis on finding the relationship between manifest content and latent thoughts in terms of language structures. For, as he states in the following:

The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. [ibid.]

What is more, while latent/dream-thoughts can be known as soon as these are deciphered, the manifest or dream-contents, from where the interpretative journey toward dream-thoughts begins, are more complicated:

The dream-content [...] is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation [to the latent/dream-thoughts], we should clearly be led into error. [ibid.]

In sum, we cannot comfortably rely on the manifest content or the script of the dream to fully articulate the unconscious reasons giving rise to and shaping the dream.

Slavoj Žižek [11], following Jacques Lacan's re-reading of Freud, goes a step further in complicating, to wit, nuancing the significance of Freud's theory. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek cautions against assuming the manifest content as hiding the latent dream-thoughts, or solely relying on an analysis of the dream content to find the secret meanings hiding in the dream-thoughts. Instead, he proposes a different question for consideration: why do latent thoughts assume a specific kind of dream form or script? For Žižek, the model commonly associated with dream interpretation—plumbing, probing, drilling the conscious life for "hidden" unconscious meanings or desires—is misleading because the unconscious desire is neither located in the latent dream-thoughts nor beyond it. Rather, the unconscious (desire) articulates itself in the "interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text; it is therefore [...] more "on the surface", consisting entirely of the signifier's mechanisms [or] the form of the "dream" [i.e.,] the *dream-work*: the operations of *displacement* and *condensation* through which latent thoughts are distorted into a manifest "rebus" (1989: 13).

We should not, therefore, rush to analyze Salim/Carlos's nightmares as representing a conflict between what he has suppressed (his past identity) and his wish to assimilate into his new home/identity. Though Blasim's text is a work of fiction and not a Freudian study

of dreams, and given we do not know about his acquaintance with the works of Freud (and/or Lacan), perhaps except for those common ideas about Freud that circulate amongst the educated, I think his story still warrants a theoretical analysis and interpretation if only to better unravel the ontological crisis suffered by racially-marked immigrant and refugee minorities across our twenty-first-century global world. I do not deny that Blasim's "Nightmares" captures "the inner conflicts [of Arab] migrants who try to fit in[to] the host culture[s]" of European countries where they seek asylum, escaping war and devastation in their home countries (Abbady 2023 [7] p.66). However, I am not convinced that in Blasim's story, the conflict emerges from the tension between Salim's repressed unconscious and Carlos' conscious life. How theoretically correct are we to infer that Carlos's nightmares are caused by the *return of the repressed* or the identity and memories he intentionally exsanguinates from his body, mind, and speech? Specifically, can conscious rejection or denial of one's past identity and memories in adult life be considered the same as repression (*verdrängung*)? Freud theorizes repression as that primary process through which a child negotiates its Oedipal crisis—(sexual) feelings toward the mother and the interdiction against such feelings by the father. It is this process that constitutes an ontologically divided subject. Alternatively put, repression institutes the unconscious, which cannot be accessed by the conscious self; the repressed nonetheless continues to haunt the conscious mind through dreams, slips of pen, slips of tongue, etc.

Post this fundamental structuring of the subject, all those things the conscious mind decides to relegate to the unconscious can only be segregated to that space, which Freud dubs as the preconscious: though "unconscious in the 'descriptive' sense of the term", the subject-disruptive feelings or emotions consigned to the preconscious "differ from the contents of the unconscious [. . .] in that they are still in principle accessible to consciousness" (Laplanche & Pontalis [12] p.325). What Salim/Carlos seeks to consciously suppress in his adult life, I would stake, makes him susceptible to intense experiences of displeasure, punishment, and dispossession.

4. Dreams against Wish-Fulfilment

In *the Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud claims that dreams are not meaningless or absurd but, rather, function to fulfill wishes which otherwise remain prohibited in waking life (IV: 122). Dreams offer the dreamer a vicarious way to enjoy what they cannot in a conscious social life. However, as early as 1911, Freud admits to the presence of a "class of dreams [,] which offer a hard test to the theory of wish-fulfilment" (V: 473). He calls these "unpleasurable dreams" or "punishment-dreams" as dreams whose manifest content forces the dreamer to suffer unpleasurable experiences, including humiliation, censure, guilt, etc. (V: 557)³, which is to say that the subject is susceptible to the function of the death drive.

Freud does not recuse this class of dreams from his general theory of dreams as wish-fulfilment. Revisions made to this discussion of punishment dreams between 1911 and 1919 and the general shift in his theoretical focus in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) [13] evidence his reluctance to sideline discussing these dreams as exceptions. In fact, I will wager that his seriousness about delving deep into this exception to his hypothesis of dreams as wish-fulfillment has a direct impact on the radical theoretical departure he makes with *Beyond*, namely, moving beyond the human subject as always seeking remission of displeasure for pleasure to the human subject as fundamentally driven by an unconscious pursuit for displeasure⁴. But this theoretical journey was anything but smooth. In his 1911 discussion of these atypical dreams (which he revised in 1919 and again in the 1930s), Freud tries to explain their connection to his hypothesis about wish-fulfilment by sometimes referring to these as dreams of self-criticism, especially suffered by those who grew from humble origins to celebrity status, "punishment dreams of a *parvenu*", and at other times by referring to the "masochistic impulses in the mind" as responsible for reversing wish-fulfilment into a perverse enjoyment of dissatisfaction (V: 475–476). Further, he makes a bold point about how punishment dreams merely recreate a situation where the dreamer can reminisce, given the lessened censorship afforded by sleep, a past of unbridled (sexual)

enjoyments (V: 475–477). Indeed, if the conscious subject is prohibited from enjoying illicit social (sexual) relations, their dreams can offer an avenue for them to vicariously enjoy these pleasures without earning a reprimand from society.

Overall, Freud acknowledges that “punishment dreams” conflict with the dreamer’s pleasurable conscious/waking life by “reminding” the dreamer of a past which they considered traumatic or unpleasurable. Pertinently, he asks, how does “the dreamer’s enjoyment lay in his day-time existence, whereas in his dreams he was still haunted by the shadow of an unhappy life from which he had at last escaped” (V: 475)? He explains this point (as he often does) by referring to his own life: there are dreams which remind the dreamer of anxiety- or guilt-laden pasts, yet, paradoxically, these dreams also remind the dreamer of *that* past when they felt complete or wholesome. In effect, these dreams teach the dreamer that they should avoid their past enjoyments and should be content with the socially sanctioned enjoyments available to them in the present: what surface in unpleasurable dreams is the *fulfillment* of the wish for which a dreamer “may be punished” for indulging in a “forbidden wishful impulse” (V: 557). Is this why Salim/Carlos is haunted by nightmares about his past life? After moving to Holland and transforming himself, does he start unknowingly desiring the life he left behind?

Freud starts the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by admitting the necessary task of revising the idea, proposed two decades back, that there exists a tension between the unconscious or what is repressed in the unconscious and the emergence of this repressed in the conscious mind. Freud’s discovery of “traumatic neurosis” is prompted by evidence of compulsive repetition when past experiences of trauma that should ideally have been repressed are being lived out “as a contemporary experience” instead of being remembered “as something belonging to the past” (XVIII: 18). He subsequently proposes a revision of his previous theory of unconscious-conscious divergence by noting that “the unconscious—that is to say, the ‘repressed’—offers no resistance whatever to” being brought to the conscious level; that, in fact, the unconscious “has no other endeavour [sic] than to break through the pressure weighing down on it and force its way either to consciousness or to a discharge through some real action” (ibid., 19). In light of this inevitability, he suggests that we make a contrast not between the unconscious and the conscious but, rather, between the ego and the repressed because we now know “a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure” (ibid., 20).

This emphasis on the ego and its “mysterious masochistic trends” (XVIII: 14) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* appears to be Freud’s attempt to save his theory of dreams as wish-fulfillment. Faced with the evidence of “war neurosis” or veterans complaining about nightmares in which they are transported back to scenes of death and destitution, Freud doubles down in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* on establishing the responsibility of the ego’s masochistic impulses for this “bewildering” exception to his theory of dreams as wish-fulfillment (ibid., 12). In his famous anecdote about the fort-da game, Freud thus insists the loss of the mother, which the child could only experience passively, is reenacted through the game in order for the child to gain a sense of mastery over the situation—the child could bring the mother back to itself or willingly throw her away:

At the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was [. . .] he took on an *active* part. [16 [emphasis in the original]].

Therefore, even when replaying the scene of displeasure was painful, it nonetheless satisfied the child by giving it a sense of control. The child felt compelled to (symbolically) repeat and relive the unpleasurable experience in order to assert control over the dispossession he experienced in the actual instances of his mother leaving him alone.

For Freud, the compulsion to repeat subjective destitution—scenes of literal or metaphorical deaths—is motivated by the desire for a wholesome, masterly identity and against a world riven by traumatic cuts such as the mother leaving the child. The “compulsion to repeat” therefore “overrides the” immediate need for pleasure, i.e., the “pleasure principle”

(22). Yet this search for constancy in the world is only possible when divested through the symbolic order—through language, artistic creations, games, and dreams, which, too, being determined by condensation and displacement, is a symbolic space. What Freud dubs the child's "great cultural achievement" (15), Lacan interprets as the moment of the child's entry into the order of language and, as such, paradoxically, a moment when the child becomes forever susceptible to the ambivalence of language: The child can never capture through language, let alone overcome, the real experience of loss. It will remain forever a wandering soul seeking a wholesome being and constancy in a world from which it has alienated itself. Its pursuit of oneness, agency, and consistency will have to be repeated constantly through symbolic iterations of its own death until the moment real death ends the cycle.

Herein lies the significant turn characteristic of Freud's second theoretical intervention: the human subject is not simply seeking remission of displeasure for pleasure but is fundamentally driven by unpleasure; indeed, it is through a compulsive symbolization of unpleasure that the subject appears to defuse excess tension.

Because even when living in the symbolic order, and destined to live out life measured through words that slide endlessly in attempts to signify—and capture the real, there is no prospect of life outside the symbolic. As Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer [14] (2021) beautifully puts it,

The real is insurmountable, terrifying, and beyond our imaginings. [...] we cannot live there. [...] the real's asymbolia would destroy us, untether us completely from our subjectivity. [...] we [can] only safely glance off it unexpectedly, elliptically come in contact with its impossible force only to be drawn back into language's exquisite quilt, to the safety of subjectivity. [142]

Language is, paradoxically, both our "prison house" and a refuge against the real. Like Plato's cave-dwellers, we are reluctant to accept the invitation to go outside into the blinding light of the sun. And it is only when real death blankets us, that is, we return to the state of inorganic status, that we "exit from the constraints of language" into an unsymbolizable space "where language is undone", is non-existent, a "transcendent place—if you can call it a place—where language is forgotten or not yet invented. Some inchoate abyss where you forget the word for lampshade, and then light, and then death, and then there are no more words and that slow forgetting frees you from the Other and you are simply you, and then not". [143]

This abyss lies at the heart of Freud's "Copernican discovery": humans are the only species that acts against its self-interests [delete comma here]; alienated from its natural surroundings, the human animal as such nevertheless enjoys its own dissatisfaction because there are no other options. As Freud's experience with patients suffering from "traumatic neurosis" and "war neurosis" indicates, the subject feels compelled to relive agonizing situations even though repressing them would have been more convenient, or, as I often explain to my students about the death drive: try convincing your pet dog or cat to bungee-jump, get on a roller-coaster ride, or knowingly act in a way that puts their life at risk—they will not (in stark contrast with humans). Thus, though humans appear to seek pleasure—wholesome being, (promises of) plenitude, and security—they almost always find ways to diverge toward dissatisfaction, anxiety, and existential crises.

I want to conclude this section by asking two questions which I attempt to answer in the rest of this essay. First, are these nightmares Salim's efforts to regain mastery over his newfound identity? After all, the identity of Carlos he assumes comes from the outside, i.e., the big Other grounding the symbolic rules of Dutch society. Freud, in his discussion of "punishment-dreams" in 1930, notes that these "atypical" dreams result not from a conflict between the unconscious and the ego but from a conflict between the unconscious and the ego as constituted by the Super-ego (See, V: 558, fn 1)⁵, should we focus on understanding Salim/Carlos's nightmares apropos the role of the Super-ego (grounding Holland's symbolic order)? More specifically, Salim escapes Iraq to avoid a stressful life—a

life surrounded by death, misery, risk, and destitution—and he seeks asylum in Europe with the hope that Europe will allow him to live his life on his terms. But are the nightmares symptomatic of the realization that the life he wants is only possible if he submits to the commands of the big Other or Holland’s written and unspoken symbolic laws? He realizes perhaps that Holland also cannot grant him the subjective wholeness and independence he seeks, and the nightmares constitute a symptomatic effort to prevail over this helplessness.

Second, is Salim’s suffering as a subject split between his (disavowed) Iraqi and (desired) Dutch identities only an outward manifestation of a more substantial problem shared by humans across the globe and, namely, their fundamentally split ontology as speaking, desiring, and death-driven subjects? The question that becomes important here is not if Salim’s (attempted) assimilation into an ostensibly multicultural (but actually racist) society does not condition the experience and enactment of the psychological conflicts he experiences, but, rather, if his urgent need to shed a traumatic past through self-reinvention is more central, even if his PTSD manifests itself through self-destructive symptomatology that involves idealizing, internalizing and performing a fantasy of multicultural assimilation. Put differently, the question that haunts Blasim’s text and my essay is how Salim/Carlos’s specific symptomatology—ability or failure to adapt to Dutch society—might, first, stem from vulnerabilities experienced by Salim in war-torn Iraq, and, secondly, how this specific context relates to the universal human condition as lacking subjects.

5. Analyzing the Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes

Blasim’s story describes his protagonist Salim/Carlos’s three nightmares. All three, and the “dream problem” in general, start only after Salim/Carlos feels comfortably integrated into Dutch society, having learned the language, married a white Dutch woman, and received his citizenship. The nightmares must, therefore, be situated in the context of his satisfaction with securing a new identity as an ideal Dutch citizen:

Carlos [. . .] felt that his skin and blood had changed forever and that his lungs were now breathing real life [. . .] To strengthen his determination he would always repeat, ‘Yes, give me a country that treats me with respect, so that I can worship it all my life and pray for it’. [“Nightmares” 190–191]

The nightmares that start at this moment challenge Carlos’s newfound “Dutch” identity by forcing him to relive the life of Salim—an Arab Iraqi refugee in Europe. The first three nightmares in the story are as follows:

Nightmare 1: Carlos cannot speak Dutch! The embarrassing dream.

He is standing in front of his Dutch boss and speaks to him in an Iraqi dialect, which causes him great concern and a horrible pain in his head. He wakes up soaked in sweat and then bursts into tears. (ibid. 191).

Nightmare 2: Carlos the Coward. The irritating dream.

[H]e sees a group of children in the poor district where he was born running after him and making fun of his new name. They are shouting after him and clapping: ‘Carlos the coward, Carlos the sissy, Carlos the silly billy’. (ibid.).

Nightmare 3: Carlos, the Arab terrorist. The *mea culpa* dream.

[H]e has planted a car bomb in the center of Amsterdam. He is standing in the courtroom, ashamed and embarrassed. The judges are strict and will not let him speak Dutch, with the intent to humiliate and degrade him. They fetch him an Iraqi translator, who asks Carlos not to speak in his incomprehensible rustic accent, which adds to his agony and distress. (ibid. 191–192).

Nightmare 3 is a distinctly more aggravated variation of nightmare 1. In both, Carlos experiences a loss of his new identity. The Dutch boss and the judges, as figures of law or the symbolic big Other, refuse to recognize Carlos as Dutch; he is, thus, at serious risk of being implicated and punished by the law as an Arab terrorist who infiltrated Dutch

society and killed Dutch citizens. The loss of his Dutch and consequent reversion to Arabic is also intensified in nightmare 3, where the judges prohibit him from addressing the court in Dutch, and he must, therefore, speak Arabic (against his wishes). This prohibition dramatizes an extreme moment of vulnerability for Salim/Carlos insofar as it strips him of the labor he devoted to becoming fluent, which he has viewed as the most direct means of shuffling off his Arab past while registering his new Dutch identity. It is worth noting that while he is unable to express himself in Dutch in nightmare 1, he is restricted from it in nightmare 3 because “the judges [. . .] *would not* let him speak Dutch” (ibid. 191). This brings to the surface the quandary Salim/Carlos faces in Holland but perhaps seeks to disavow: no matter how he tries to sever his past Arab identity by hiding it under a false name, the big Other *still* knows who he really is. In their eyes, he is just an Arab refugee who can never become Dutch. We can interpret this [what?] as the moment when Salim/Carlos’ realizes through his dreams what he consciously did not know, but his unconscious knew very well about the impossibility of projecting a stable Dutch identity. In spite of Holland’s rules requiring proficiency from refugees in Dutch, which Salim successfully masters, he now recognizes a gap in the symbolic rules of the Other: his fluency in the language does not automatically make him a Dutch national. Salim’s nightmares tell him that no matter how much a non-white immigrant seeks to integrate into a white European society, they will always remain a foreigner and an other.

Additionally, the shame experienced by Carlos in nightmare 3 from the Iraqi translator is a displaced form of shame he experiences in nightmare 2 from the young Iraqi boys who call him a coward for changing his identity. In fact, nightmare 2 appears to be the galvanizing point between the first and third nightmares—it calls him out for his hypocrisy, which prompts him to acquire a more passive position in nightmare 3: not only is he restricted by the Dutch judges from speaking Dutch but another Iraqi reprimands him for his rustic dialect. At once, he becomes isolated within both Dutch and Iraqi societies as an outlier whose attempts to integrate into and/or move away from the respective societies remain unfulfilled despite his conscious efforts.

In what follows, I underline Carlos’s attempts to regain control of his nightmares and the unpleasurable susceptibilities evoked by these dreams so that he can successfully retain mastery over his new identity.

6. Carlos Finds a Cure

Carlos starts reading Eric Fromm’s *The Forgotten Language* to better understand dreams but is disappointed with Fromm’s observation that “We are free when we are asleep, in fact, freer than we are when awake [because] we are not subject to the laws of reality. During sleep the realm of necessity recedes and gives way to the realm of freedom” (ibid., 192). Dubbing Fromm “pure bullshit” Carlos turns his attention next to the connection between diet and sleep—he avoids root vegetables since he read somewhere that eating root vegetables causes a person to dream about their “past and roots” and instead he starts eating more poultry with the belief that “eating fowl of the air might bring about dreams that were happier and more liberated” (ibid., 192–193). As the days pass, Carlos veers more and more away from science toward “what he imagined” would help him “better integrate his dreams with his new life”:

His ambition [now] went beyond getting rid of troublesome dreams; he had to control the dreams, modify them, purge them of all their foul air, and integrate them with the salubrious rules of life in Holland. [ibid. 193]

What follows are more quirky behaviors—from abstaining from sexual intimacy with his wife to dyeing his hair green, painting “his face like an American Indian”, and sleeping with “three feathers taken from various birds” under his pillow (ibid., 194). But even after a month when none of these yielded any results, Carlos remains determined: “he was patient and his will was invincible” while waiting for one opportunity to completely “sweep out all the rubbish of the unconscious”. [ibid., 195]

Thus came that fateful summer night when Carlos went to bed wearing military fatigues with a “toy plastic rifle by his side” (ibid., 194). And that night, his wish came true: “He realized in his dream that he was dreaming. This was exactly what he had been seeking, to activate his conscious mind inside the dream” so that he could manipulate it to integrate with his conscious life (ibid., 194–195). The dream transported him to a dilapidated building in central Baghdad, which he surveyed through the telescopic sights of a rifle he was holding. Soon, he “broke through the door of the building and went into one flat after another, mercilessly wiping out everyone inside. Even the children did not survive the bursts of bullets” (ibid., 195). He found himself on a mission to kill everyone in that building and move to other buildings to kill everyone in the entire city, thereby erasing all his past memories of life in Baghdad⁶. But whom he wanted to kill most was his past self, Salim, and before long, he stood face to face with his antagonist:

on the sixth floor a surprise hit him when he stormed the first apartment and found himself face-to-face with Salim Abdul Husain! Salim was standing naked next to the window, holding a broom stained with blood. With a trembling hand Fuentes aimed his rifle at Salim’s head. Salim began to smile and repeated in derision, ‘Salim the Dutchman, Salim the Mexican, Salim the Iraqi, Salim the Frenchman, Salim the Indian, Salim the Pakistani, Salim the Nigerian’. He [. . .] started to spray Salim Abdul Husain with bullets, but Salim jumped out the window and not a single bullet hit him. When Fuentes’s wife woke up to the scream and stuck her head out the window, Carlos Fuentes was dead on the pavement, and a pool of blood was spreading slowly under his head. [ibid.]

Dutch newspapers reported the next day about the suicide of an “Iraqi man” who had “jumped from a sixth-floor window”, and a low-angle black and white photograph taken by an amateur photographer living in the neighborhood showed a “covered body” with an “outstretched right hand” protruding from under the sheet with a visible finger ring “glow[ing] red in the foreground, like a sun in hell” (ibid. 196). This was the same ring that Salim had found on a dismembered hand while cleaning a bombed Baghdad neighborhood.

7. The Curious Case of Salim Carlos Fuentes

Apropos my discussions of Freud and the close reading of Blasim’s text so far, we can begin to schematically present Salim/Carlos’s nightmares as a symptom, namely, a symptom of what Salim/Carlos thinks he desires (wishes) and what he really desires even if that desire exists as unacknowledged knowledge—what he does not know he knows. Salim/Carlos does not wish to inhabit two identities—Salim and Carlos. In fact, he wishes to erase his identity as Salim for his identity as Carlos. This is his conscious wish and for which he acts intentionally. He, we are told, also enjoys this newfound identity and detests his past life so much that he wants to bury it out of his conscious mind. In doing so, Carlos hopes to immerse himself in the command of the Super Ego, the laws of Dutch society, and shape his ego or sense of identity as a law-abiding Dutch citizen. Yet he fails and stands grievously implicated and reprimanded in his nightmares for his illicit enjoyment. In effect, then, his nightmares result from his partial failure to shed his traumatic past.

Carlos, it is my contention, is not reliving his past life because that abject, disgusting, and traumatic life returns in his nightmares, but, rather, because once “lost”, this past has now become a source of illegitimate enjoyment for him⁷. Put differently, though Carlos thinks being Dutch allows him to gain a satisfying sense of wholesome identity, he fails to realize how, in the process of reforming his identity, he has unwittingly deceived himself: the lost past, and only when it has been lost, turns into the very object that he desires (to enjoy). Yet this is an enjoyment that is inadmissible in conscious waking life. This is attested by the Kafkaesque “trials” of his nightmares 1 and 3, wherein the face-offs with the big Other, the question he asks without asking is: what am I to you, an Arab or Dutch?

Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that the symptoms of “traumatic neurosis approaches that of hysteria [. . .] but surpasses it as a rule in its strongly marked signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia)” (12). Salim/Carlos,

too, becomes a hypochondriac, trying out various remedies to end his nightmares, and insofar as he fails to completely reject his past and anoint his new self-identity over it, this past haunts his ego. In “Mourning and Melancholia” [16], Freud writes the following:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are profoundly painful dejection [,] inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. [XIV: 244]

Consequently, the ego is “poor and empty” in melancholia. The melancholic, Freud writes, represents his ego [. . .] as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. [. . .] This picture of a delusion (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and [. . .] an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life. [XIV: 246]

The tragedy (or, is it a tragi-comedy?) of Blasim’s story and character is for all to see: Carlos can never shed Salim and never completely bury his past. In fact, there is no Carlos without Salim or Salim without Carlos. Salim/Carlos is a knotted subject constituted by their unique *sinthome*. The Lacanian neologism *sinthome*, explains Žižek:

[F]unctions as the ultimate support of the subject’s consistency, the point [. . .] marking the dimension of “what is in the subject more than himself” and what he [. . .] “loves more than himself”, the point that is nonetheless neither the symptom (the coded message in which the subject receives its own message from the Other in reverse form) nor fantasy [. . .]. [Žižek 1992 [17]: 132]

It is the subject’s unique way of living its own fundamental *ex-sistence* or deriving enjoyment from repeating what is on the side of the death drive (See, Ragland 1995 [18], esp. Ch.3).

That is to say, he is the figure of an interminable coagulation of his past and present lives, histories, memories, and experiences, and it is via this knotting that he emerges as a conflicted, suppliant, and enjoying subject in the Global North. Therefore, it is impossible to abstract his lived experience in a new land only through all that renders him different and/or similar. In fact, Salim/Carlos exists in his new home without choice, only through his knotted subjectivity, with a range of contrapuntal forces shaping his being, some pleasurable and some not at all pleasurable. As such, he cannot constitute an exclusive identity. His subjective reality is inextricably tied to those very pasts which traumatize him.

The most significant contribution of Blasim’s story to understanding Salim’s struggles, however, has to be the historical context responsible for his protagonist’s failure to live with/as *sinthome*. Salim/Carlos fails because he wants to project a singular identity free from the past. But there is no such thing as a stable identity. All identity boils down to being a signifier—Dutch or Arab—that represents the subject for another signifier. In fact, there is no singular, all-encompassing identity since no signifier can fully signify the subject. Therefore, Salim unknowingly, in his pursuit of an identity, renders himself susceptible to the impossibility of constituting a water-tight identity as a non-Arab brown man and honorable Dutch citizen. The alienation humans experience in the symbolic order is a fundamental susceptibility of their being—a condition of human ontology—that cannot be undone. The stresses we experience in reality only become bearable through our fantasies—fantasies of a wholesome being through the pursuit of objects promising plenitude and satisfaction and a big Other’s mythical phallic rectitude guaranteeing the eventual fulfillment of desires. But Blasim takes this point of universality further by capturing this “truth” via Salim/Carlos’s immediate historical reality. In war-torn Iraq, Salim risks physical death, economic hardships, and existential uncertainty. He mediates this brutal reality through his fantasy of a new life via assimilation into and reinvention of his self as Carlos in Holland. Yet in Holland, this fantasy too starts to crumble under the force of the historical reality of how refugees are viewed and treated in Europe, including so-called multicultural societies. Unable to heal or suture his fantasy, Salim’s only recourse

is to escape the symbolic—the realm of words, identities, and other-ness—by returning to a state of nothingness. The only signifier that shines bright after he has exited the symbolic order, however, is the ring—a signifier that connects Salim to his past, to Iraq, to another dead man. Salim is as much a victim of the long-term legacies of imperialist wars as he is of being human. The historical situation contributes to and aggravates his suffering as a subject by chipping away at the security of his fantasies of self-reinvention. The difference between a subject who has been a victim of historical trauma(s) and one who has not experienced such devastating experiences lies here: the former are more prone to losing the security blankets of their fantasies than the latter. The former is more susceptible to encountering the meaninglessness of being than the latter.

Consider, for example, Woody Allen's 2011 feature film *Midnight in Paris* [19]. In this film, the central protagonist, Gil Pender (Owen Wilson), is a white American who works as a writer in Hollywood, is engaged to a woman from an affluent family, is planning to buy a condo in Malibu, yet feels dissatisfied with his life, fiancé, profession and wants to live in the past, specifically, 1920's Paris. For Gil, who wants to be a fiction writer, the past, especially Paris in the twenties, is the best time to live. He thus fantasizes about living in the 20s, meeting the Fitzgeralds, Hemingway, Eliot, Stein, and a long list of artists, filmmakers, and authors. In this fantasy, he also meets Adriana (Marion Cotillard), with whom he falls in love, but Adriana finds the twenties enervating and fantasizes about living in the *Belle Époque*. They travel back in time to the *Belle Époque*, and when Adriana decides to stay back, Gil realizes that there is actually no escaping one's reality. No matter how each of us finds our immediate realities dissatisfying and seeks escape in a time that we imagine/fantasize to be most self-fulfilling, once in that time-space, we realize how unfulfilling it is. Gil, in his reality, breaks up with his fiancé and immediately afterward "rebounds" back into a subsequent fantasy of living in Paris with another woman (Léa Seydoux) with whom he shares both the fantasy of walking in Paris in the rain and the enjoyment of listening to the music of Cole Porter.

Comparing Blasim's and Allen's texts, there is no doubt that while Allen's protagonist can continue to move from one fantasy to another, even when he (Gil) encounters a self-redefining moment or realizes there is no stress-less reality, he has the privilege to rebound or create another fantasy of him living his life in Paris. Unfortunately, for people like Salim who have gone through the rough grind of life, there are no similar prospects. This is where specific historical realities, often much despised by Lacanians, become important: Salim is more susceptible to confront the demise of fantasies that make life for humans bearable in symbolic orders than someone like Gil.

8. Conclusions

As I see it, the universality of the human subject, as evidenced by psychoanalysis, cannot ignore the immediate specificities of the particular symbolic histories of individual subjects. Blasim's story shows individuals who suffered traumatic experiences in the past are more susceptible to their ontological fragmentation even when they manage to escape to a safe and happy space far away from the past scenes of trauma. They are less capable of living through their fantasies of secure and happy lives because, sooner or later, their fantasies of well-being and plenitude are invaded by "desire to punish and to be punished, to subordinate and to be subordinated, to deliver and to receive pain" (Brown 2001 [20] p. 52). Salim/Carlos too appears susceptible to such a complex as he finds himself spreadeagled between his feelgood assimilationist wishes and his dreams where he experiences a need to be punished, condemned, and chastised for this fantasy.

The Wendy Brown quote that I cite above is made by her to describe Freud's essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919) [21]. She writes the following:

'A Child is Being Beaten' offers one of Freud's clearest statements of the slippery and perhaps misnamed (as sadism and masochism) configurations of the complex of desire to punish and to be punished, to subordinate and to be subordinated, to deliver and to receive pain. [ibid.]

I want to turn to this essay by Freud in concluding my essay because it helps us understand the complex terrain of Salim/Carlos's nightmares.

In this essay, Freud explores a ("pleasurable auto-erotic satisfact[ory]") fantasy (unconscious mental content) prevalent amongst patients suffering from hysteria and obsessional neurosis, namely, the fantasy of "a child is being beaten" (XVII: 180). According to Freud, some analysands during analysis remember a child being beaten by their parents or those in positions of authority (big Other), for example, teachers, etc. But this memory manifests first as "a child is being beaten" with the analysand looking at the scene from the outside or as a bystander. Freud notes two significant features of this fantasy. First, it is regularly remembered in conscious life and during analysis; another *ur*-fantasy is recalled, namely, "my father (big Other) is beating a child". Secondly, something remains unconscious between the manifest fantasy of a child being beaten and the retroactively remembered fantasy of the big Other beating a child. Jacques-Alain Miller, who reads these three moments not in terms of the *grammar of fantasy* but, rather, three *logical* stages of fantasy, comments that the missing, unconscious, or most difficult-to-remember stage of this fantasy is the second. This second stage reveals the "truth" or masochistic core of the fantasy insofar as in this stage, the passivity or objectivity of the first and the third stages are replaced with the admission by the analysand: it is I who is being beaten by the father/big Other. The analysands' position shifts from a third-person objective onlooker to a first-person experiencing the beating himself. Taken together, this fantasy represents the subject's (barred S) intense experience of their life and world as profoundly beyond self-mastery. This fantasy discloses the ego's sense of being caught up in a maelstrom externally and internally at once. Freud's exploration of this case unravels the real ontological dimension of speaking or desiring subjects: no matter how much we strive to sustain sovereignty over our lives and the world around us, we are always fundamentally alienated from both the self/ego and our existence. Inhabiting this fantasy implies being subject to the tension of life and death instincts [drives?]-of trying to reconcile our lack with direct exposure to the fact of being the lack. (?)

This is why Serge Leclair [22], in his book *A Child is being Killed* (1998), insists that humans being susceptible to the burdens of unconscious (secret) desires must at once live out these desires and also destroy them (and, therefore, by extension, their own self) in order to claim some semblance of being ("I"). Being human or claiming to be either Salim or Carlos inevitably entails opening the self up to the contrapuntal pulls and exegesis demanded by the life and death drives. Being human in terms of a sovereign masterful self is not possible. Only existence in the throes of these divergent *pulsions*, that is, as a subject dispersed or disappearing, is possible. Where Freud makes this case study interesting is in associating pleasure or (an) excessive enjoyment (*jouissance*) with each of the three (logical) stages of the fantasy. While "the scenes of beating was felt to be intolerable" (XVII: 180), irrespective of whether the analysand experienced these objectively or subjectively, there was always an iota of pleasure, which Freud says we cannot ignore. It is pleasure gained beyond "deprivation of love and humiliation" (*ibid.*, 187) because it is a kind of pleasure, as Wendy Brown notes, that is oddly satisfying.

But how can deprivation and punishment afford pleasure? Brown is useful again in addressing this question. She writes the following:

[the] importance [...] is [on] the way in which [the] offended stands for being punished—the o'ffence' activates t'he imagined situation of being beaten by [the loved object]' and thus provides reassurance that the illicit and problematic object of desire is present. [*ibid.*, 59]

In sum, "reliving a certain punishing recognition reassures us" of the presence of that (lost) object of desire (here, identity) "to which we remain perversely beholden". (*ibid.*)

What Salim/Carlos experiences through the nightmares is an encounter with that part of his life to which he remains perversely beholden. Carlos knows very well that he must bury Salim to have a good life as Carlos but somehow, he cannot. Salim returns

as the “illicit” object of enjoyment and suffering. If this pursuit of the beyond of the good characterizes Salim/Carlos’s susceptibility as a subject of the death drive, then his susceptibility to failing to emerge out of this quandary through another self-restitutive fantasy can only mean one thing: both Salim and Carlos must die. And in death, he too returns (almost) to that past which he sought to erase. His body lies on an unnamed street with the ring shining on his finger “like a sun in hell” (“Nightmares” 196). And then his body is transported back to Iraq where he is “buried in the cemetery in Najaf” (ibid.). The “hell” Salim wanted to escape (ibid., 187) does not leave him . . . it becomes embossed on his finger, his body, and his mind. In the end, he is returned to hell . . . to a country and people he so forcefully despised. The title of the story could well be “Susceptibilities of Carlos Fuentes”, and nothing would change, for it tells the story of those expendable bodies whose lives are deeply bound to psychological and historical forces outside their control to such an extent that they can exercise neither conscious will nor unconscious fantasies to escape their tragedies as subjects of the death drive and as victims of neo-imperial wars.

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Notes

- ¹ This predicament of MENA refugees resonates with the susceptibility experienced by Frantz Fanon as a colonized black man in Europe. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 [1952]) [1], Fanon writes that “White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man. [. . .] what is called the black soul is [also] a construction by white folk” (xviii); and, that, “Incapable of integrating [and] incapable of going unnoticed” (47), the black man “needs white approval” (34) for everything—he can never become white but, then, he “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 1967 [2] p.110). More specifically, Fanon underlines how colonialism instills in the black man a desire to be white and how the black man is caught between wanting to be white and failing to escape the identity (black) to which he is entrapped because of the color of his skin.
- ² See also Vijayakumar et al. (2021) [5]: n.p.
- ³ Freud was possibly led to consider unpleasurable dreams after Dr. M Hilferding discussed a dream from Peter Rosegger’s story “*Fremd gemacht*” during a session of the Vienna Psycho-Analytic Society. See, V 473, fn1. However, in his chapter “The Stimuli and Sources of Dream” from *the Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud discussed a dream by Maury which resonates with the type of dreams he would later call “unpleasurable” or “punishment” dreams. Though he does not identify this dream as “antithetical” to his theory of wish-fulfillment, preferring instead to discuss it as an example of how external stimuli provoke dreams, it can be seen as an early instance of the genre of unpleasurable dreams that Freud was to focus on about a decade later. See IV: 26–27.
- ⁴ I am not suggesting that these types of dreams contributed to the theoretical shift we saw in Freud at the beginning of the 1920s. It is possible to argue that isomorphic issues such as “negative therapeutic reaction”, “fate neurosis”, his work with patients suffering from “war neurosis”, etc., also equally contributed to what is considered the second phase in Freud’s thinking.
- ⁵ See also Freud’s *New Introductory Lectures* [15], specifically lectures xxix and xxxii.
- ⁶ Carlos’s excessive illegitimate enjoyment of being Salim(again)is, perhaps, most evident in this dream, which can be read as a more intense version of his nightmare 3, where he appears as a terrorist. In this final dream, not only does he terrorize the neighborhood, indiscriminately killing people, including children, but he even appears to enjoy it, remaining calm and composed and “pick[ing] off his victims with skill and precision”. In addition, he does not want to wake up before completing his “mission”, thinking to himself that if he had grenades, he could do the job faster and “move on to somewhere else” (“Nightmares” 195).
- ⁷ See Abbady for an excellent alternative reading of Blasim’s story as staging a rejection of the abject.

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