



# Crime Fiction's Disobedient Gaze: Refugees' Vulnerability in Ausma Zehanat Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018)

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Crime fiction hinges on a breach of the social order that the intervention of a detective aims to correct, thereby generating in readers of the genre feelings of satisfaction, and meeting our very human need to feel safe. Thus, crime fiction simultaneously caters for our vicarious thirst for adventure and acknowledges our fear of death. In critiquing the genre, the means through which a resolution is achieved and the breach in the social order rectified—through trial by the criminal's peers, through an accidental death, or through a vigilante's execution, to mention but a few likely resolutions—can be considered extremely significant insofar as it conveys each author's ideological position on the social structures they

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are working within. However, these structures are most often national ones, as crime fiction (and particularly the subgenre known as “police procedurals”) is grounded in a nation-state judicial system, so international human rights usually remain beyond its bounds. Yet, this is the field explored since 2015 in Ausma Zehanat Khan’s series of mysteries led by two Canadian police officers, Esa Khattak and Rachel Getty. Khan, who holds a Ph.D. in international human rights and is a former adjunct law professor, targets in each of her novels international failures to protect human rights, usually in combination with an individual breach of the social order. Her first work, *The Unquiet Dead* (2015), uncovered a Balkan war criminal living under false pretences in Canada and used the police procedural form to address the legacy of the massacre of Srebrenica in 1995, a conflict to which her novella *A Death in Sarajevo* (2017a) would return. Her second mystery, *The Language of Secrets* (2016), was again set in Canada and dealt with the struggle to stop a terror attack, whereas the third *Among the Ruins* (2017b) moved to Iran to disclose the lack of rights of its citizens under an oppressive regime. Perhaps because an international scenario allowed the writer more leeway to frame such major questions, the fourth novel, *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018), has the two Canadian detectives sent to the Greek island of Lesbos to investigate the disappearance of a Canadian case worker for an NGO called *Woman to Woman*, which has suspiciously coincided with the killing of an Interpol female officer and a young male refugee at one of the camps.

Working thus at the intersection between human rights and the crime narrative, Khan’s mysteries use the latter to critique the former. Consequently, I argue that Khan’s crime fiction consistently exerts a “disobedient gaze” on the current international human rights situation, a term I borrow from Pezzani and Heller’s (2013) analysis of ongoing human rights violations in the Mediterranean:

The strategy that we have tried to mobilize in order to address this issue in our ongoing project Forensic Oceanography is to exercise a “disobedient gaze,” which aims not to disclose what the regime of migration management attempts to unveil—clandestine migration; but unveil that which it attempts to hide—the political violence it is founded on and the human rights violations that are its structural outcome. (Pezzani and Heller 2013, 294)

Thus, although at first sight, Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* appears to follow crime fiction conventions in the search for the criminal, its larger mandate is to explore the plight of those caught between the borders of nation-states and without access to further mobility, mostly but not exclusively Syrian nationals stranded on the shores of Turkey and Greece, reached after escaping at considerable risk the dictatorial regime of Bashad-el-Assad and their war-ravaged homes. This novel, published in the United States under the equally significant title *No Place of Refuge*, unveils the extreme vulnerability of this population in the context of the much wider violence and general non-assistance policies carried out by European border management actors throughout the Mediterranean, an area that was described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as "the most deadly stretch of water for refugees and migrants in 2011" on a press briefing note published on their website (31/1/2012).

My main argument in this chapter is that *A Dangerous Crossing* makes a powerful critique of the failure of European states and transnational institutions to morally respond to the needs of a population whose vulnerability is context-specific but, through the negligence and shortcomings of those official agencies, actually borders on what Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds have termed "pathogenic vulnerability," resulting from "social policy interventions aimed to ameliorate inherent or situational vulnerability [that] have the contradictory effect of increasing vulnerability" (2014, 9). In that sense, the Mediterranean refugee crisis represented in the novel can serve to illuminate the complex materiality of vulnerability in migratory contexts closely connected to Fortress-Europe policies. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, I look into the tangled threads bringing together literature, international human rights, and their definition of the human through the lens of the European migrant crisis of the mid-2010s shown in Khan's police procedural. In the second, I examine more closely the overlapping forms of gendered violence bearing on Syrian refugees as depicted in the novel and tease out ensuing manifestations of vulnerability and resistance. Ultimately, my goal is to frame the question of whether the conventions of the crime fiction genre can appropriately be used for the advocacy of those placed in situations of high vulnerability and to overcome western readers' prejudices rooted in white privilege that circulate negative affects of hatred and fear against racialised bodies or that facilitate numbness to others' suffering. I

conclude that Khan's deployment of the crime genre and the "disobedient gaze" she casts in this novel aims to undo the epistemology of ignorance (Sullivan and Tuana 2007) that often underpins racial and gender oppression and to further establish new "affective economies" (Ahmed 2004) that help us imagine an alternative epistemology of resistance to deeply entrenched forms of normalised injustice (Medina 2012).

## 6.2 LITERATURE, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE HUMAN: THE CASE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Between roughly 2014 and 2019, the strict border management carried out within the European Union was thrown into disarray due to the massive arrival of refugees. Late in 2014, thousands of asylum seekers awaiting passage into the UK set up camp in Calais, while on several Greek islands, camps meant to accommodate only a few thousand filled with inmates way beyond their original capacity. Viewers around the world were shocked by mass-media circulated images of the appalling sanitary conditions in the camps, while the cost of innocent lives in transit towards more secure parts of the world was made evident in 2015 by the picture of Syrian three-year-old Alan Kurdi, dead on Turkey's shore. The combination of news and images in those years not only mobilised public opinion but also managed to convey to what an extent forced migration and statelessness challenged many deeply entrenched understandings of sociality and belonging in the West. Already in 1995, in a short essay entitled "We refugees," the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben demanded "a no-longer-delayable renewal of categories" (1995a, 117), pointing out that international refugee agencies established in the twentieth century (including the present UN High Commission for Refugees, active since 1951) were ill-equipped to deal with the problem adequately, so that "the entire question was transferred into the hands of the police and of humanitarian organisations" (1995a, 115–16).

Agamben has not been alone in pointing out how insufficient international human rights and human rights agencies are in addressing the problem of asylum. Insofar as sovereignty resides in a nation-state and its associated territory, international human rights are simply unattainable for many caught between borders, since those rights can only be realised within the context of the nation-state and their international institution, the United Nations. What's more, as Alexandra Moore has pointed out, the principles stated in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights are

“inseparable from European imperialism as a history of capitalist accumulation and its legacies” (2015, 5). This conundrum has intensified since the 1990s in the European context due to a chain of events: the fall of the Berlin wall, the Balkan war and the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the liberalisation of movement of people and goods within European Union territories deriving from the Shengen agreements of 1985 and 1995. Last but not least, European migration policies have been subjected to further stress from the increased border securitisation after 2001 connected to terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid, and London, among other locations. The wars unfolding in the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria) together with the Arab Spring revolutions in several countries have likewise pushed millions of forced migrants out of their homes in search of safe routes into Europe starting from several Mediterranean hotspots.

The arts have not remained indifferent to this prolonged humanitarian crisis (or rather, series of crises). On the contrary, just a few months after the photo of young Alan Kurdi filled every screen on the planet, Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei replicated the image on the island of Lesbos, where he was working on an installation in memory of the migrants. Although to some this was a tasteless exploitation of the boy's untimely death, others interpreted it as an attempt to keep focused on the grievability of all human beings at a time when the shocking image was already fading from public attention, in line with Judith Butler's often quoted statement that:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (2004, xiv–xv)

Literature and the visual arts have the power to represent precisely “who is [not] normatively human” and to make visible the logics of inclusion and exclusion undergirding the concept of the human in human rights. As Nayar contends, “[c]ultural discourses and their texts, in many media forms and genres, tell stories of what it means to be human or to be denied humanity” (2016, xi). Not surprisingly, a remarkable number of novels and films since the 1990s have engaged in the portrayal of these tensions between the nation-state and the forced migrant. In Canada, one could mention Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005), Kim

Thuy's *Ru* (2009), Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009), Wayde Compton's *The Outer Harbour* (2014), and Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* (2018), to name but a few published around the same dates of Khan's book release. A veritable explosion of scholarly interest in these works has followed, although, to be fair, the literary imagination has for a much longer time addressed the notion of the human and of human rights (Parikh 2019, 1). It is telling that two major academic presses in English (Cambridge UP and Routledge) have made available "Companion" books of essays on the subject lately. Together with a substantial outpouring of critical writing on what is variously called the refugee novel or human rights fiction (Farrier 2011; Anker 2012; Woolley 2014; Moore 2015; Nayar 2016; Gopal 2020), this attests to the growth of both public and scholarly interest in what has undoubtedly become a solid and highly productive interdisciplinary field.<sup>1</sup>

However, crime fiction is not usually included in these studies, despite the genre's power "to educate readers and deliver social and cultural critique on compelling and urgent topical issues of its time" (Beyer 2020, 379). Beyer's interesting account of the intersection of migration and crime writing maps out how the latter has picked up highly politicised themes such as human trafficking or modern slavery, and how its generic conventions allow it to probe into the hidden face of migration, "cut[ting] through simplistic political and media discourses [and revealing] the complex and often horrendous realities behind the stereotypes" (Beyer 2020, 383). This is very much the case, I would argue, of Ausma Zehanat Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing*, in which the author displays a wide knowledge of the situation of displaced Syrians on Eastern Mediterranean shores. The poor living conditions on the camps that will be analysed below, the brutality, violence, and exploitation that seem to be part and parcel with the refugee condition, were all comprehensively researched by the Canadian author, as the "Author's Note" at the end of the book makes clear. There, Khan concisely reports the main events and consequences of the Syrian War at the time of writing the book (autumn 2017), including a death toll of half a million people and the displacement of eleven million more (six of them internally). She also sets down some of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the key players in the conflict, the dictatorial regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). A further two-page "Recommended Reading" section allows concerned readers to contrast her facts with a considerable number of books and international human rights

agencies' reports such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. Moreover, in the "Acknowledgments," Khan claims to have conducted interviews with war refugees, government and NGOs employees, journalists, lawyers, volunteers, etc., to better understand the different aspects involved in the subject.

The novel's point of entry rests on the work of an NGO called *Woman to Woman* established by police officer Esa Khattak's sister and their friend Audrey Clare, who has gone missing during a visit to Lesbos, where the NGO had been operating for a year. On top of the disappearance, an Interpol officer and a young male refugee have been found dead, shot with Audrey's gun, and the NGO staff member in Lesbos, a former refugee herself, has been detained by Interpol. As a result, Khattak's involvement is double, both personal and political. Before the action moves to Greece, however, the initial chapters set in Canada carefully lay the groundwork to explicate for readers some of the complexities involved in this particular case caused by the global refugee situation described above. Khattak and his partner variously meet with politicians and NGO officers, from whom they learn about the shortcomings of the international Convention of Refugees to deal with the current situation of over sixty-two million displaced persons, and of the labyrinthine process of asylum applications that keeps refugees in camps for months or even years.<sup>2</sup> The dead boy appears to have applied for asylum in Canada, claiming to have family there that could sponsor him. Khattak and Getty's visit to the Fakhri family is extremely enlightening, as it awakens readers to some of the features that distance refugees from other migrants. Throughout the short interview, both Ahmed and Dania Fakhri exhibit obvious signs of fear and distress at being visited by police. When their child starts wailing and Rachel Getty picks her up to comfort her, they interpret it as a threatening move, expecting the officers to use the child as leverage to get information from them. Finally, Ahmed asks Khattak whether they are looking for a bribe and responds to his assurances that the police are there to protect them with "I can't pay for protection" (Khan 2018, 81). It is Esa Khattak's turn to feel distressed. He had not anticipated that Syrian refugees brought with them a deep distrust of the police forces due to their experiences in a corrupt, totalitarian regime where thousands of people have been tortured, imprisoned, and often "disappeared" or summarily executed on trumped-up charges. In Syria, the police *are* the enemy. His self-reproaches at his insensitivity are highly significant:

I couldn't have been more callous if I tried. We should have gotten background. We have no idea what this family has been through. We made this man think we were no different than the men who work for Assad. He was terrorized. *I'm* the one who terrorized him. And his wife." Now he did curse at himself. "God knows what she must have thought, what she's already been through. (Khan 2018, 82)

This scene establishes the double victimisation refugees are often subjected to by law enforcement, first in their home country and later in the host country.<sup>3</sup> As a result, readers are encouraged to continue reading not just with an open mind but with clear empathy towards the suffering of refugees that the following chapters will dwell on in all its brutality. In fact, I will argue below that empathy is a key affect in Khan's novel that returns in several compelling scenes throughout the narrative and therefore plays a crucial role in the author's human rights advocacy.

Yet, the representation of these refugees as victims also unveils the deep inequalities implicit in humanitarianism and brings us back to the question of the human in human rights. For Fassin (2007), humanitarian action performs a politics of life in contrast to military action or the diverse forms of necropolitics carried out by certain regimes and institutions. However, since humanitarian action "is aimed at those who are considered at risk of physical disappearance and incapable of maintaining their own existence" (2007, 511), it essentialises the victims and places them in an unequal position in relation to those providing them with the aid they need. Fassin goes on to describe a triple set of ontological inequalities that are "constitutive of the humanitarian project and effectively insurmountable within the value systems of Western societies" (2007, 519).<sup>4</sup> From this one might conclude, as Agamben did earlier, that the very categories of refugee/citizen require dismantling altogether.

### 6.3 REFUGEES' VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE: A DANGEROUS CROSSING

When the plot shifts to Greece in chapter twelve, Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* launches a double critique of two interlocking kinds of systemic violence that explains Syrian refugees' vulnerability. The first is the critique of state-sponsored violence, specifically in their case the one wielded by Assad's government, which has allegedly resulted in grave crimes against Syrian citizens both before and during the current conflict.



In the “Author’s Note,” Khan denounces the arbitrary arrests, torture, and enforced “disappearances” tens of thousands of Syrians have been subjected to under this regime of terror, drawing from various reports by independent international agencies such as the already mentioned Amnesty International (2017) or Human Rights Watch (2015). Such agencies also assign responsibility for most civilian deaths during the war so far to Al-Assad’s regime, in targeting civilian sites such as hospitals and schools and in deploying forbidden chemical weapons (Khan 2018, 339).

The body of the young man that had been shot to death in a refugee camp in Lesbos bears testimony to this serious accusation. Unclaimed by family, friends, and even governments, this young body eloquently tells a story of unspoken horrors to those able to read it, like the Greek pathologist and the Canadian detective Rachel Getty, who attends the post-mortem:

[The pathologist] pulled back the sheet that covered Sami’s body with a prayerful murmur. Instantly, Rachel knew why.

The boy’s body was scarred and bruised, marked and discolored from his sternum to his toes. Puckered round scars that peppered his torso looked like cigarette burns. There were jagged slashes through his flesh, wounds that hadn’t been stitched... they looked more like they’d been cauterized. Some of the flesh looked sick, as if it had begun decaying long before his death. There were other signs Rachel recognized: broken bones that had never had the chance to knit or be repaired.

And the boy’s testicles were missing.

She choked back the sob that rose in her throat, casting the good doctor a horrified glance. He was still praying to himself. (Khan 2018, 99)

This scene once more leans on the concept of empathy that is crucial to many refugee narratives (Goellnicht 2019). According to Anthony M. Clohesy, in the post-war period, empathy has become both “a condition for care and compassion” and an ability that can be and should be cultivated because it is “integral to the healthy emotional development of the individual and vital for the maintenance of a well-ordered society” (2013, 16). In the quote above, the pathologist, a figure of detached scientific demeanour, whispers a prayer, manifesting his compassion. The detective, another illustration of an objective point of view, is nonetheless horrified into a sob. Although crime fiction provides frequent descriptions of mutilated and injured bodies such as this one and the rhetorical technique of withholding the final revelation of its corporeal damage to the very end

to maximise readers' shock is not new in the genre either, the reactions of the onlookers are significantly meant to key us in as to what affects are appropriate in this context; our own reactions of horror and pity at the violence repeatedly inflicted on him are meant to mirror theirs.

As the narrative unfolds, the various wounds mapped out on this abject body will be traced back to a detention system that has annihilated thousands of real or imagined dissidents.<sup>5</sup> While obviously the Canadian detectives in this fiction cannot possibly offer a solution to state-sponsored violence unfolding in Syria, yet the author manages to hint that some reparation may be achieved eventually. The tortured body's evidence, as well as other substantial intelligence secretly smuggled out of Syria, is made available to the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, an independent agency that documents war crimes *during* rather than after a conflict, so that the International Criminal Court may later prosecute them (Khan 2018, 243–245). Thus, Khan's narrative bolsters up faith in international human rights institutions and their defence of human rights, even though they can only provide a delayed, and thus ultimately unsatisfactory, kind of justice.

The second critique Khan builds into her work is aimed, as repeatedly stressed throughout this essay, at current migration management policies in Europe, and particularly at the sharp increase of refugee camps on its borders. Although originally designed as an emergency solution in extraordinary circumstances, they have now become the rule. This paradox was pinned down by Hannah Arendt decades ago:

No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as “inalienable” those human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves. Their situation has deteriorated just as stubbornly, until the internment camp—prior to the second World War the exception rather than the rule for the stateless—has become the routine solution for the problem of domicile of the “displaced persons.” (1973, 279)

*A Dangerous Crossing* depicts through the eyes of Khan's Canadian detectives three of these camps in Greece (two on Lesbos, one on Chios) and a fourth in Turkey, throwing into relief their numerous health and sanitation problems. The portrayal of those who do not have the right

to have rights dwells on the pitiful conditions and general abandonment and dehumanisation of the camps: “The first thing Esa noticed [...] was a concrete barrier painted over with slogans that read like cries of despair: no borders, no borders, no borders, the prayers of the stateless” (2018, 175). Furthermore, the refugee camp is rendered here along the lines of Eleni Coundouriotis’s description of a site of stasis that runs counter to the refugee’s pull to flight and movement (2016). The camp stands out for its atemporality; time has stopped here, leaving refugees’ lives suspended:

A generation was losing its childhood: six thousand children were trapped on Chios without access to education or adequate health care. All around the camps were groups of people, young and old, with no occupation, no chance of earning a livelihood, unable to return, unable to move on. The camps were not a permanent solution, yet no other solution had been proffered. (Khan 2018, 175–176)

Stranded between borders, these persons are left in a state of extreme vulnerability not only in terms of their mental or physical health, but insofar as they are sitting targets for many sources of violence. Verbal violence is widely spread; in the media, the language of hate is used to describe them as hordes, an invasion, a flood (Khan 2018, 130). Physical violence is often random but also occasionally organised by neo-nazi groups like the Greek party Golden Dawn, which in the novel assaults the Souda camp, hurling stones at the residents and torching their tents in the middle of the night (Khan 2018, 191–197).

Asylum seekers are also vulnerable to the exploitation of profiteers that promise to take them to safety, rings of smugglers who make their fortunes on people’s despair. Consequently, the detectives uncover a well-oiled machinery thriving on desperation (Khan 2018, 207) that organises routes to get refugees across without regard for their safety, with an eye only on its own profits. One of its most cruel scams, as the detectives find out, consists of making and selling counterfeit lifejackets that afford refugees a sense of safety on the overcrowded boats yet cause their drowning or their strangulation because they are hydrophilic and become a heavy weight around the neck (Khan 2018, 218).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, one can agree here with Domínguez García’s reminder that migrants are subject to a double condition, vulnerability as to themselves and risk as perceived by the host community (2016, 107). Gender

further intervenes in this condition, emphasising female vulnerability and male risk. Such differential treatment is rendered visible on several occasions. Before leaving Canada, a seasoned diplomat remarked to Khattak that boys on the verge of manhood are considered “the most dangerous creature in the world. There *is* no refuge for these boys” (2018, 39). Similarly, a young refugee perceptively sees himself through the eyes of the locals: “People were no longer seeing the boy Ali, in love with the girl, Israa. They saw a young man on the prowl, a predator who might strike, who needed to be contained. Kindness had become happenstance, too illusory to be prized” (Khan 2018, 151). As a result, young men travelling alone are last to qualify for visas and resettlement, they remain the undesirables (Khan 2018, 215). Similarly, female vulnerability is proportionately enhanced during transit, particularly for minors. The website of Missing Children Europe, the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children, mentioned by Khan in the novel, reports that tens of thousands of children in migration continue to go missing, to which the author adds that “a disproportionate number of minors are missing from the Turkish coast” (Khan 2018, 289). The central mystery that the Canadian detectives are meant to unravel is, as mentioned above, the disappearance of a Canadian female case worker, Audrey Clare, which in turn is tangled up with the disappearance of a Syrian refugee girl, Israa. It is only the Canadian tragedy that brings the spotlight on to the Syrian tragedy, which makes the narrator muse on the grievability of human life in words that powerfully resonate with Butler’s train of thought in *Precarious Life* (2004) cited above:

Police officers with their government’s backing were searching for Audrey Clare, dispatched by the fame and resources of her brother. Ali was searching for a girl among thousands of refugees, a girl without money and family, a girl whose dismal fate Esa envisioned as only a police officer could: she had drowned at sea, she had fallen on prostitution in Izmir, she’d been snatched back across the border, or she’d disappeared in the hands of smugglers.

One life was sought with crushing urgency; the other had vanished unremarked.

These were scales Esa had been weighing all his life, an actuary of the dead and disposable. (Khan 2018, 156–157)

Khan’s assessment of the differential value of these two women calls attention to the biopolitical economy of the disposable, with its entailing

categories of gender, race, or faith. The crime narrative opens up a space to unveil the often horrific forms of migrant exploitation that seldom reach the media. Refugee camps are notoriously unsafe places for girls and women, and sexual violence is much too often involved (Martín-Lucas 2010). However, the latter categories also weigh heavily against the refugees in this novel, since they are dark-skinned Muslims and so within the “global economies of fear since September 11” (Ahmed 2004, 128), they are cause for apprehension to Western eyes. Yet, the narrative presents them from the detectives’ viewpoint as what they truly are, children. On one occasion, some boys invited Khattak to join in their game, to everyone’s delight: “[Rachel had] seen another side to Khattak, laughing and affectionate with children who were thrilled to find someone who spoke their tongue—someone who looked like them [...] They’d teased him mercilessly, delighted to be teased in return” (Khan 2018, 144). This humanising representation in the generally dehumanising context of the refugee camp is fundamental because the detective constitutes the moral compass of the crime story, as s/he is the one identifying those responsible for the crime committed. In that sense, the detective must often balance “the judicial code against the moral code in order to arrive at a just decision about the distribution of responsibility and guilt” (Pyrhönen 1999, 18). Thus taking issue with western regimes of asylum, Khan’s crime narrative refuses to frame the refugee as nonhuman. Instead, affects towards refugees are redistributed through Khattak, who is at the same time one of us (western) and one of them (dark-skinned, Muslim); in the citation above and elsewhere, he is “someone who looked like them” by virtue of his Pashtun background. To be fair, this shift in the characterisation of the detective is not new, since crime fiction has long incorporated many different embodiments, including the “ethnic/minority sleuth” (Matzke and Mühleisen 2006, 5). Yet, in combination with the regular appeals to empathy with the refugee evenly distributed through the narrative, Khattak’s racialisation works to generate an alternative “affective economy” in Ahmed’s definition as those emotions that align individuals with communities “through the very intensity of their attachments” (2004, 119). In other words, western readers are brought into a closer relationality to the refugee. As a result, the ethnic detective becomes an instrument of the moral regime of the crime narrative, working to undo the “epistemology of ignorance” identified by Sullivan and Tuana (2007) as those instances in which a

lack of knowledge is actively produced in support of white privilege and supremacy.

A further, equally important tool for imagining this new affective economy is the representation of resistance through a young male refugee called Ali. His is an example of resistance drawing from vulnerability in Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay's definition (2016) because it shows his vulnerability as empowering him for action rather than mooring him in the kind of inaction, passivity, and stagnation that the refugee camp stands for in the western imagination. First, Ali got the missing Canadian NGO case worker Audrey Clare involved in the disappearance of the girl Israa, with whom he had fled Damascus, and later in the narrative, he nudges the Canadian detectives on in the direction of his desires, feeding them information, providing contacts, and generally becoming the link between the refugee world and the outsiders. Ultimately, his resistance is enabling not just for him, but also for Israa and her little sister Aya, for it allows the detectives to uncover a trafficking ring that had been operating under pretence of humanitarian action, and to rescue both Israa and Audrey unharmed from them. This example of self-empowerment transforms a story of victimisation into one of action; Ali has instrumentalised for his own purposes the western mechanisms of law and order, and in so doing has undercut the affective functioning of humanitarian causes, that rests on "a moral call to appeal to the public to 'help the victims', and in so doing they reaffirm rather than question the borders of assigned injurability" (Sabsay 2016, 280). In addition, the fact that the source of the violence against women is a trafficking ring, rather than an isolated culprit, points readers towards a critique of systemic axes of inequality.

## 6.4 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS RESISTANT IMAGINATIONS

In *The Epistemology of Resistance* (2012), Jose Medina argues that:

The imagination can be both empowering and disempowering. It can create and deepen vulnerabilities, but it can also make people stronger and able to resist. Different ways of imagining can sensitize or desensitize people to human experiences—not only those of others, but even one's own; they can make people feel close or distant to others—and even to aspects of themselves; and they can create or sever social bonds, affective

ties, and relations of empathy or antipathy, solidarity or lack of solidarity. (252)

Khan's *A Dangerous Crossing* helps readers expand the limits of our imagination and with it "the very core of our moral sense and political agency" (Medina 2012, 256) by providing a moving picture of deep gender vulnerabilities demanding our empathy and by envisioning new affective economies that surpass the alienating anti-Islamic, anti-refugee language of hatred that often reaches us via the media. This task seems quite adequate for the vehicle of crime fiction, since its central function is no other than achieving justice for victims (Beyer 2020, 380). In that regard, the author uses the conventions of the crime genre and the plot of trafficking, already very familiar to consumers of popular culture (Domínguez-García 2016, 104) to mobilise our emotions towards refugees' extreme vulnerability and to strengthen our ethical and political sensibilities regarding their "bare life" outside of nation-state citizen rights (Agamben 1995b). This kind of mobilisation is in line with what Michelle Rodino-Colocino labels "transformative empathy," that is, a bridging of differences "promoting listening rather than distancing or looking at 'speakers' as 'others'" (2018, 97).<sup>7</sup> It is transformative because it requires self-reflexion and is conducive to a change in our original assumptions, in contrast to a "passive empathy" that maintains extant differences untouched.

As analysed above, Khan's act of advocacy for Syrian refugees frames insightful questions about the material effects of current migration management practices in Europe and more widely in the West, and also addresses the very notion of the (gendered) human as the subject of international human rights and as the object of humanitarian action, finding them both wanting in many respects. The very fact that the criminal was preying on migrant female children and young girls, turning them into a lucrative business while posing as providing humanitarian assistance, is worth noticing insofar as it turns the politics of life of humanitarianism into a trading of life that characterises advanced capitalism and neo-liberal practices.<sup>8</sup> Anti-refugee language tends to insist on the need to identify the "true" refugee from the "bogus" one, and on how impossible it is at times to tell one from the other. In this novel, however, there is no bogus refugee, just a bogus good Samaritan profiting from vulnerabilities created by the current regime of border securitisation and strict migratory regulations.

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## NOTES

1. I am referring to *The Routledge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (2016) and *The Cambridge Companion to Human Rights and Literature* (2019).
2. Puumala et al. (2017) provide an interesting account of the asylum determination process as situated between institutional practice and migration governance, between law and politics, international human rights and states’ sovereignty. They also explain how deeply the success of asylum applications rests on credibility.
3. I am grateful to Beatriz Domínguez-García for pointing this out.
4. For another take on humanitarianism in a different European context, see Elena Cantueso’s essay in this collection.
5. I am referencing here Kristeva’s definition of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982). For another reading of abjection in literature, see Elena Jaime de Pablos’s essay in this collection.
6. Chinese visual artist Ai Weiwei singled out the lifejacket as a symbol of the refugee condition in his 2016 exhibition “Safe Passage.”
7. I am grateful to Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco for bringing Rodino-Colocino’s concept to my attention.
8. For other examples of capitalism’s trading on life see Rosi Braidotti (2013, 59).

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