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Hybrid Species and Literatures: Ibrahim al-Koni's 'Composite Apparition'

SUSAN MCHUGH

Contemporary Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Koni's novels, all set in the Sahara desert, are filled with scenes of mutual transformations of desert animals and nomadic people, often under extreme duress. An exemplary moment midway through *Nazīf al-Hajar* (translated in 2002 as *The Bleeding of the Stone*) involves the metamorphosis of a captive man into a mouflon, a large-horned wild mountain sheep called in the local dialects (as al-Koni prefers) a waddan:

[The event was] something the people of the oasis constantly recounted, around which they wove legends. The young men told them how they'd witnessed [...] a man break loose from his captivity and change into a waddan, then run off toward the mountains, bounding over the rocks like the wind, heedless of the bullets flying all around him. Had anyone ever seen a man transformed into a waddan? Had anyone ever seen a person escape the Italians' guns, running on until he vanished into the darkness of the mountains? The wise oasis Sufis [were...] convinced one and all that this man was a saint of God. That evening they went to the Sufi mosque and celebrated [...] filled with joy that the divine spirit should come to dwell in a wretched creature of this world.¹

Relayed through so many interpreters—'young men', 'wise oasis Sufis', and other 'people of the oasis'—what exactly happens here is difficult to say, but in this telling the event brings into sharp focus a threat to much more than an individual's life.

Asouf, the man in question, has arrived at this scene as a nomadic herdsman who has lost all of his animals to an extreme drought. And, in seeking refuge at the oasis, he inadvertently becomes a witness to a far greater tragedy. The 'Italians' guns' obliquely refer to what is perhaps the least known and most horrific genocide of the twentieth century, that is, the Italian colonial authorities' confinement from 1929 to 1933 of what is estimated to be over a hundred thousand nomadic North

African tribal peoples, who were then starved to death alongside their herds in barbed-wire enclosures later used as models for the Nazi death camps.² Driven by hunger to his 'first and last encounter with the oasis people' at a time and place in which countless others like him died in detainment, the fictional herdsman's capture by colonial military forces seems tantamount to a death sentence, from which he is delivered by his fantastic transformation into a waddan (*The Bleeding of the Stone*, p. 74). As 'the oldest animal in the Sahara' (*The Bleeding of the Stone*, p. 136) and one once revered for its 'totemic, noble significance in pre-Islamic Berber North Africa', and subsequently rendered extinct in parts of Europe as early as the seventeenth century, the waddan seems a fitting metaphor for the Maghribian nomad fleeing colonial European forces.³ But the novel envisions a far more complex relationship between the two.

Although the animal that Asouf appears to become in order to escape certain doom is one he himself has known all his life in the Sahara, the waddan erupts as an extremely rare spectacle to the oasis people witnessing the transfiguration. Not exactly innocent bystanders, they too have used the 'Italians' guns', only to hunt this kind of animal along with so many other wild species to the brink of oblivion. Amid a story in which the herdsman comes to believe he was born to protect this severely endangered species, and in the end gets slaughtered in place of the animal when he refuses to show hunters where to find it, al-Koni introduces a curious flight-line with this momentary image of the hybrid human-animal fleeing the scene of historic mass killings. Under what conditions is such a transformation 'seen'? And to what exactly does 'a person escape' in the act of becoming an animal? Comparing several similar moments across al-Koni's fictions, this essay outlines a pattern in which hybrid figures are used to evoke ancient animist belief systems in order to develop a unique critical perspective on state-sanctioned slaughter.

To be clear, this way of reading al-Koni's fictions goes against the mainstream. Like many contemporary writers who draw from animist traditions to emphasize local perspectives, he has been embraced as a 'magical realist' by postcolonial literary critics, who point to the scene cited above as evidence, for instance, of 'successful act[s] of political resistance' brought about through 'supernatural' forces.⁴ But I find this 'magical realist' reading problematic because it reduces the animal aspects to symbols of exploitation among humans, and in a way that avoids reading these stories on their own terms. After all, the 'wretched creature' to whom the Sufis refer could be the herdsman, the waddan, and both at once, and what such a presentation calls for is a way of

understanding the contemporary novelist's ambiguity as having its own aesthetic integrity, much like that of postmodern animal art.⁵

The interdisciplinary strategies of animal studies may prove more useful in this respect. Within the discipline of literary studies, the interpretive categorization of 'magical realist' effectively elevates al-Koni's regionally rooted body of work to the global category of postcolonial literature by attributing a clean, hierarchical divide between magical/transcendent and realist/natural elements.⁶ While not overtly patronizing, this trend toward interpreting animist figures and events strictly in terms of metaphors for the human nonetheless betrays a curiously studied ignorance of what not so long ago were readily dismissed as the simplistic hallmarks of primitive forms like legends and folktales. Reversing this trend by outlining a means of intervening in the parallel 'metaphor model' problem within anthropology, Rane Willerslev reframes animism in terms of an 'indigenous metaphysics' that deeply unsettles 'ontological certainties', and therefore signals an opportunity for 'critical dialogue' concerning 'theories of knowledge',⁷ an approach that I adapt here in order to account for al-Koni's representations of hybrids on their own desert nomad terms.

This critical move also seems necessary because the postcolonialist emphasis on the 'transcendental'⁸ qualities proves hard to reconcile with what for many readers makes these narratives so special, namely, their scrupulous attention to the histories and material realities of life in the Saharan environment. Within the sub-field of Arabic literary studies, these novels are praised as pivotal for re-orienting the novel form away from urban – or 'oasis' (another of al-Koni's preferred terms) – settings, and toward the desert countryside.⁹ More precisely, it is not the arid and semi-arid landscapes but rather the rich social fabrics of 'desert dwellers' that typify the work of this prolific novelist, who is the author of over eighty books, all written in Arabic and translated into thirty-five languages.¹⁰ While it is intriguing to consider how this perspective enables al-Koni's development of a historical theory of the Sahara as the cradle of civilization, and of his own tribespeople – 'among the very first of history's "first peoples"'¹¹ – as the inheritors of humanity's ancient past, the question that I want to pursue is why so many of his more recent novels use cross-species transformations to anchor a metaphysics that is not only indigenous but also nomadic. By examining how a very specific array of mutual dependencies of all of those that characterize life itself – what feminist historian of science Donna Haraway theorizes in terms of 'companion species'¹² – becomes a series of platforms from

which hybrids such as the waddan-man spring forth, my aim is to reveal the emergence of a peculiarly productive response to the mass tragedies that figure so prominently across al-Koni's fictions, as well as his own desert past.

'THE DESERT IS A HOMELAND THAT HAS MIGRATED'¹³

The most widely translated Arabic novelist today, al-Koni now lives in exile in Switzerland, but he was born in southeastern Libya into the nomadic, matriarchal Tuareg (Tawāriq) tribe. Charting his childhood desert home, his novels consistently highlight the perspectives of his traditionally nomadic people from their own Saharan countryside, again a perspective that places al-Koni on the leading edge of Arabic literature. While his novelistic 're-writing' of desert life gains acclaim for adding to the growing number of fictions foregrounding cultural diversity within Islamic communities, what requires further elaboration is how exactly al-Koni's concern with 'the balance between [...] indigenous and imported forces' challenges the historical exclusion of his own particular tribal perspective from within a form that is largely (and erroneously) assumed to be exported exclusively from European-language traditions.¹⁴ To underscore this point, I want to bring into the foreground some of the subtle ways in which al-Koni's novels expose the larger forces that link the erasure of the modern genocidal history of the Tuareg to the extermination of Saharan animal life by creatively drawing from the hybridity of their cultural traditions, as represented in everyday practices as well as literatures, mythologies, and material artifacts.

The Tuareg are known for their veiled men, a practice that reflects their own highly localized adaptation of Islam to a matriarchal culture with ancient roots across this region. Tuareg tribespeople historically have been known to inhabit the deepest Sahara, ranging from eastern Libya and southern Algeria to northern Burkina Faso, and their caravans cross most of Mali and Niger in between. Through details in al-Koni's novels, their story unfolds as one of systematic persecution that derives from their allegiance to no single nation but rather to a way of life that is inseparable from the grazing animals of the open desert. For the Tuareg's home 'is not the semidesert conveniently close to major conurbations that most western visitors to the region get to see', explains one critic, 'but the desolate wastes'.¹⁵

In this extreme setting, human-animal encounters become terrific sources of drama, more often than not proving matters of life and

death for individuals and populations alike. As one of al-Koni's characters enigmatically explains, the Sahara at its deepest 'hides all sorts of treasures, including extinct animals' across vast, inhospitably dry landscapes (*The Bleeding of the Stone*, p. 125). Steeped in the nomad's worldview, such comments announce these fictions' profound challenges to urban-oriented logics, let alone imaginations. Therefore, it is important to consider carefully the various methods through which this desert-dweller's viewpoint both references and extends a belief system that is rooted in shared human-animal lives, in other words, a metaphysics that is the key to survival for the ancient, nomadic peoples and animals who persist beyond the enclosures of modern, settled life.

The everyday inter-species relationships of humans and herd animals central to Tuareg culture are the focus of al-Koni's 1990 novels *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Al-Tibir*, the English-language version of which appeared in 2008 as *Gold Dust*. Both are written in a distinctive style that combines realistic twentieth-century details with the timeless aphorisms of desert country life, and feature cross-species transformations at pivotal moments. Such inclusions might simply be read as prefiguring al-Koni's 2002 novel *Anubis* (translated in 2005 as *Anubis: A Desert Novel*), which relays the author's version of the founding myth of the Tuareg's (and therefore his own) divine human-jackal ancestor. Yet, by aligning the hybrid creatures along with other elements across these fictions, I want to suggest further that al-Koni more deliberately crafts these 'composite apparitions' as integral components of the desert dweller's perspective, and with broader implications for reading animist literatures and cultures through companion species theory.

Unlike so many companion animal stories, al-Koni's novels take a decidedly unsentimental view of human-animal relations. Unfolding through stark and inevitably violent scenes, cross-species relationships signal the endangerment of individuals as often as the unlikely survival of ancient cultures and species alike in their desert home. The plots of his 1990 novels are exemplary in this respect: *The Bleeding of the Stone* is the tale of a herdsman's fatal attempt to physically and spiritually protect the waddan and himself, and *Gold Dust* tells the doomed (and, yes, platonic) love story of an exiled man and his precious piebald camel, set at the twilight of the era in which camels reigned as primary providers of desert transport. Drawing from animist aspects of the Tuareg's belief system in ways that ultimately work to recast the individual, intersubjective, cross-species relationship as one in which whole populations hang in

the balance, both novels ultimately leverage perspectives on still greater losses of cross-species companionships and the nomadic cultures rooted in them that are centrally figured in *Anubis*.

‘THE DESERT HAS EXISTED AND WILL CONTINUE TO EXIST. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN WE DID NOT EXIST; EVENTUALLY WE WILL CEASE TO EXIST’ (*Anubis*, p. 181).

There are at least two formal aspects of animist gods like Anubis that seem particularly promising for intervention in stories of genocide and extinction. One is that, because fictional animal gods are categorically hybrids—that is, they are supernatural figures taking animal shapes in human imaginations—they build in a triangulated form, which helps to model a way of moving beyond the oppositions that ordinarily deadlock discussions of (human) postcolonial conditions amid environmental catastrophes.¹⁶ And another is their historicity: as figures of animist belief systems, these hybrid figures mark long histories of human engagements with other species in particular locales, sometimes long after the disappearance of these cultures and the creatures represented therein. Extending an emergent trope in contemporary literature through the central figure of the animist god,¹⁷ al-Koni’s *Anubis* moreover explicitly thematizes the hybridity of such deities by having the god tell the tale of his own emergence, as well as by insisting at many levels that his story can only ever be pieced together through fragments.

The latter strategy is hard to miss in the Author’s Note that begins the novel *Anubis*, in which al-Koni describes his work as a distillation of the stories of their tribal ancestor Anubi, the Tuareg name for the jackal-man god who might be more generally recognized in his Egyptian morph as Anubis. From the outset, Anubi’s ‘legend, one that reach[es] back to primeval times’, is difficult to relate coherently because by custom it is not only orally transmitted but also ‘claimed by several rival peoples alternately joined by alliances and then separated by conflicts’ across the ages (*Anubis*, p. xv). The politics of nomadic life are thus introduced in terms of perpetual conflict (a point to which I will return at the end of this essay), into which the nascent novelist was thrust by his early childhood introduction to this god as his own Tuareg tribal ancestor. For him, reclaiming this collective inheritance involved travels that necessarily immersed him in a culture that literally and figuratively rides on the backs of animals: ‘I made forays in every direction by camel and crossed the desert accompanied by a few of my relatives, visiting the most far-flung

tribes in Azjirr, Aïr, Adagh, and Ahaggar, so that I could question their leaders, elders, and sages' for more details and stories of the god's life (*Anubis*, p. xvi).

Hybrid at a formal level as well, *Anubis* is the most blatantly palimpsest of al-Koni's novels. In the opening autobiographical account, which moves quickly from boyish adventure to scholarly journey, al-Koni describes himself as engaged in an oddly anthropological process of becoming a novelist. He meticulously collected stories from every possible source, 'from the mouths of matriarchs' to 'crumbling leather' manuscripts, including copies of ancient rock inscriptions in the ancient Tifinagh script, and then 'devot[ing] an even longer period of time to piecing together the narratives', drafting it first in his native Tuareg tongue Tamasheq, and many years later translating his own manuscript into Arabic for publication as the novel *Anubis* (*Anubis*, pp. xvi-xvii). Such details relay a sense of his craft as not simply transcoding between different languages but more profoundly interweaving cultural fragments across distances of many dimensions, including those of geography, history, genre, and even species.

This admixture of oral histories, myths, and ancient manuscripts helps to explain why reading *Anubis* is a profoundly disorienting experience, and it also affirms that the novel represents a world that is never purely imaginary. In al-Koni's telling, the god's species hybridization and other animal associations prevent the mythic hero's tale from settling into a stereotypical bildungsroman or other narrative journey into a fully realized self. Instead, the story of the predatory jackal-human deity emerges unstably through a series of human-animal transformations, the most thickly described of which centre on his prey-animal morphs, that is, the moments when he becomes part-gazelle and part-waddan along the journey to becoming a hybrid canine-and-divine person who eats then consequently becomes shunned forever by his 'animal kin' (*Anubis*, p. 74). Comparing the human, animal, even animal god interactions underpinning such scenes with similar ones in al-Koni's other novels, a larger picture emerges of how people live by animals in the desert, and through enduring lifeways that are not readily grasped by others. Interspersed with sometimes bewildering, sometimes revolting depictions of cross-species co-dependence, these stories figure the movement of desert lives beyond the magical sentiments of urban 'oasis' viewpoints and into the exceptionally harsh realities of desert survival.

Anubis is told from the shifting perspective of Anubi himself, introduced as a prototypic Tuareg youth who is born to a life of exile

fated by patricide. Crisscrossing the desert, his confused and confusing wanderings tell the story of the birth of a nomadic people, yet they also expose a bare dependence of desert people on even simply the traces of animals. From the journey's start, Anubi must cling to the tracks of camel caravans in order to maintain even the faintest hope of staving off death by dehydration. As one of the many desert aphorisms collected in the novel's final section explains, 'Water is blood that has lost its true color' (*Anubis*, p. 180) a sentiment echoed in *Gold Dust*'s characterization of 'thirst' as 'the worst enemy one can have in the greater Sahara', and water as 'the most potent source of protection in the desert'.¹⁸ Amid these extreme conditions, al-Koni stages the emergence of a peculiar resignation to deprivation—rather, an embrace of emptiness—as the mindset of survival that distinguishes all of the desert's inhabitants, a nomad philosophy that makes Saharan life possible.

This begins to explain why, at particularly grim moments, for instance, when characters lost in the desert resort to drinking animal urine—worst of all, camel pee, a 'thick, salty, and syrupy' liquid¹⁹—they are not presented as debased but rather as enlightened. In this perilous situation, dehydrated to the point of being 'perched between consciousness and oblivion', inhabiting 'that interval between life and death', *Gold Dust*'s protagonist Ukhayyad licks the micturate dribbling down the thigh of his camel, a creature introduced as no ordinary animal but rather as a rare thoroughbred or 'mahri' piebald, who has been the man's companion since childhood. Lost together in the open desert as a result of Ukhayyad's efforts to heal his mahri of a disfiguring and possibly deadly skin condition, it is with a sense of relief that readers are told, 'It had been divine inspiration to tie his hand to the camel's tail' and so to maintain access to the liquid that he needs to live through this episode (*Gold Dust*, p. 49).

As in the man-waddan transformation scene in *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the human-animal connection is presented as a possible pathway to divinity, in this case leading to a more literal vision of heaven on earth. When the camel finally leads the desperate man to a well, he reattaches himself by the foot to the camel's tail and plunges in, trusting the camel to 'carr[y] out his unspoken command' and 'pull [...] him out of that freshwater sea' even as death approaches with a vision of 'the houris in paradise' (*Gold Dust*, p. 51). What seems most interesting is that the 'unspoken command' is depicted as successfully communicated between just this special '[m]an and camel [who] spoke to one another as brothers, by way of gesture' (*Gold Dust*, p. 50), a phrasing that suggests that the

purpose of such scenes is to contrast a human-animal hierarchy with a cross-species intimacy that erodes clean lines of division between the two.

More plainly, *Anubis* stages a similar scene to call into question perspectives from which the animal-urine-drinking nomad might be pathologized as degraded and delusional. When Anubi follows a hare only to lose all signs of the caravan trail he had been following, likewise becoming blinded by thirst in the desert, he luckily stumbles across a puddle of gazelle urine, and, drinking it, regains his vision in time to look into the eyes of its source. Although he knows he ought to be wary – 'gazelles', his mother had told him, 'are the livestock of the spirit world', the animals that the jinn ride (*Anubis*, p. 19) – he finds that this silent exchange of looks enables him to recover a peculiar sense of spirit along with life: 'I found within me the ability to comprehend the forgotten language, which reconciled my tongue with that of the gazelle's, united my destiny to the gazelle's, and created from my spirit and the gazelle's a single spirit' (*Anubis*, p. 21). Like so many incidents in this story, it is not clear whether anything has happened beyond a hallucination, and it is not so much Anubi's dream of recovering a common language that seems profound here as the actions encircling it.

Warning of 'the evil of metamorphoses', a wandering priest later explains to Anubi that this vision proved physically transformative to the boy as well. Again, as in the anecdote from *The Bleeding of the Stone* with which I began this essay, and more generally 'in the vein of the classical Arabic hadīth' invoked in other al-Koni novels, the fact of the metamorphosis is complicated by the integration of these competing interpretations of what happened into the story itself.²⁰ Morphing into 'an ugly, composite creature, half-man, half-beast' reviled by shepherds and their terrified flocks (*Anubis*, p. 27), Anubi unknowingly follows his vision by wandering the desert with 'the body of a gazelle and the head of a man', only returning to human form through another transformation, in which Anubi's mother made an offering of herself, and the priest 'slaughtered her like a ewe on the tomb of the ancestors' (*Anubis*, p. 32). Upon learning this, the outraged Anubi stabs and kills the priest, only to learn (many morphs later) that the dead man was the father he had been seeking, and that his mother had been trying to save him through (rather than from) cross-species transformations.

In contrast to this chaotic, bloody conflict within the human family, Anubi's first-person account of his own initial transformation as it takes place uniquely emphasizes sustaining connections between different

species in a particular location. Drinking animal urine under the duress of desert dehydration leads the boy to find an enduring inspiration through the mutual human-gazelle gaze, which he elaborates as 'a splendor that we observe only in eyes that have gazed into the eye of eternity till absence becomes second nature to them' (*Anubis*, p. 22). In such moments, the ancestor's invocation of memory, language, destiny, and spirit as recovered between species eerily resonates with the animal practices underpinning his descendants' ongoing persecution and unlikely perseverance, a point emphasized by Anubi's subsequent arrival at a particular place in the desert, the Tassili region at the border of Eastern Libya, which is renowned for its elaborate and largely well-preserved prehistoric frescoes and rock carvings.

In a scene replayed in both *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*, Anubi follows a huge waddan ram into a cave only to discover the colossal images, and dwells on the 'strangely contrived creatures' they depict. Gazing at the figures of 'legendary animals and women'—including men hunting and dancing, and, most compelling to him, 'other creatures concocted by matching men's bodies with animal heads crowned with horns or with birds' heads', which he describes as 'unnatural, composite creatures' (*Anubis*, p. 55)—Anubi's story becomes strangely self-reflexive. Is the god who is in between cross-species morphs recognizing the roots of his own legend in long-forgotten people's representations of themselves, even as he sees where his own story is taking him? Significantly, he then encounters another 'composite apparition', this time alive and with a giant gazelle's body and the head of a waddan, who locks eyes with him and transforms Anubi again, only into 'a monster, [...] a freak', and, just like the one returning his stare, 'a creature patched together from two different animals' (*Anubis*, p. 56).

Ancestral continuities shared between the Tuareg and the earlier inhabitants of this part of the Sahara certainly make symbolic or mythical meanings available to the fictional appearance of particularly these wild animals, whose real-life counterparts are under threat of extinction in this region.²¹ Yet it is also the case that beleaguered domesticated animals, especially camels, populate these scenes alongside persecuted Tuareg people, and in ways that suggest that the ancient carvings are more than simply a backdrop against which hybrid characters enter into these fictions. Recent transformations to the ways in which people and camels live together moreover inform the uniqueness of the human-camel melding in *Gold Dust*, which is by far the most sustained and remarkable companion species representation in al-Koni's work.

'THE DESERT IS NOT A LAND WASTED BY DEPRIVATION. THE DESERT IS A LAND THAT USE HAS DESTROYED' (*Anubis*, p. 177).

Authors of the 2006 UN report entitled *Livestock's Long Shadow* point to semi-arid places—like the fragile valleys to which al-Koni's human and animal nomads cling for refreshment in their travels in between arid landscapes and oases—as the environments most endangered by the soaring global markets for meat.²² Exponentially expanding scales of traditional cattle, goat, and sheep herding explain one dimension of the problem. But a more difficult aspect to grasp is the transformation of camels to primarily meat animals, which has escalated quickly with the normalization of Libyan-Chadian relations since the 1990s, where 'overstocking and overgrazing' particularly has accelerated 'desertification' in the region that concerns al-Koni.²³

Although, as extremely rarified racing animals, a few special mahris continue a tradition in which camel ownership signals prestige and political independence, the status of the vast majority of camels has changed abruptly from the valuable 'ships' or 'freighters of the desert', powering the sort of caravans on which young, vegetarian Asouf relies to restock his supply of grain before the crisis that leads to his transformation in *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Now overwhelmingly serving as commodities herded to market on foot over East African deserts by often ill-equipped young men, many of whom 'lose their way in the desert and perish together with their herds',²⁴ camels have become a 'symbol of backwardness' for the Arab Middle East, whose governments remain actively interested in settling nomads within their region.²⁵ And it is from this complex, ancient-to-contemporary set of associations that al-Koni draws in order to centrally figure a more literal and lasting human-animal metamorphosis in *Gold Dust*.

Reflecting on his own extreme dehydration experience with his precious piebald mahri, the main character Ukhayyad claims, 'The hardship we shared transformed us from two creatures into one' (*Gold Dust*, p. 105). To other characters in the novel, the man's excessive love for his camel is clearly the source of his downfall. Echoing the revelation scene in *Anubis*, however, *Gold Dust* lofts the notion that love signals the mutual adaptations of man and camel as companion species.

Again the plot is grim, for Ukhayyad is reduced to penury in an oasis settlement by the colonial Italians' wiping out his tribe, and at his wife's bequest on behalf of their starving infant son he tries to sell the camel, who in turn proves his specialness by faithfully returning each time. Enduring these and other trials, man and camel are depicted

ultimately as compelled by a shared desire to wander the desert together as ‘companions’, to ‘depart together, and together [...] return to their original state, to what they had been before birth’, and so to honour an ancient alliance (*Gold Dust*, p. 147). More to my point, these desires are thwarted by the lust of others for the titular metal, which informs a range of far more exploitative human–camel relationships within the novel, including the unremarkable plough–camels Ukhayyad is briefly hired to drive, the meat camel bought and later killed for his wedding feast, and last but not least the pair of riding camels to which bounty hunters horrifically bind Ukhayyad by hand and foot, in order to draw and quarter him to death in the novel’s conclusion.

A familiar thing happens amid this gruesome denouement, which is set among the caves featuring the ancient images of Tassili. Because he has ‘plac[ed] his heart with the piebald’, Ukhayyad’s human hunters eventually smoke him out by burning, cutting, and otherwise torturing his beloved mahri, but not before a waddan gives him this chance to escape and save himself (*Gold Dust*, p. 162). Initially Ukhayyad escapes the clutches of the bounty hunters because his tracks are masked by ‘a huge ram’ in a ‘ghostly encounter’ made all the more eerie by the millennia–old paintings of waddan hunts that he had just been pondering on the cave walls of his mountain refuge (*Gold Dust*, pp. 156–157). Just as in the scene with which I opened from *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the ram takes the place of the man to offer a way out of a condition of ‘exile’, again deliberately flagged here as created by ‘Italians’ who ‘invaded the country’, only this time it is unclear who (or whether anyone) is sacrificed. To the hunters who shoot him, the ram becomes their next meal, but to the more muddled Ukhayyad, who thinks of the waddan as sacrificing himself for his own benefit, the animal appears as a ‘divine messenger’, whose death brings more questions than answers: ‘Why did the innocent always fall at the hands of the most malevolent creatures? Why do such people kill every messenger that is sent to them?’ (*Gold Dust*, pp. 157–158).

At a rare speaking engagement in the US in 2011, al-Koni himself ventured some answers as he explained the origin of these scenes by recounting his own remarkable journey to view the Tassili images, which though difficult to date are estimated to be at least 10,000 years old.²⁶ Noting that the petroglyphs are supposedly protected as part of a UNESCO World Heritage site and located nowhere near any modern battles, the novelist recalled asking at the time why the carvings obviously had been defaced by bullets, only to learn that in recent years

some of neo-colonialist dictator Muammar al-Qadhafi's soldiers had intentionally shot at them. To al-Koni, this kind of artistic defacement is deeply disturbing, 'destroying the heritage of mankind, a message from mankind to mankind' sent from the earliest times to the present, and in such a way that is 'killing humanity', and 'not just humanity, but also plants, animals, and stones'.²⁷

Construed as an example of 'the assault of the present on the rest of time',²⁸ this characterization helps to explain in what sense the stones are 'bleeding' in the novel's title, as ancient monuments wounded and dying alongside the sustainable human-animal relationships of which they speak. Some argue that al-Koni's staging of these clashes between traditional nomadic and modern colonial 'settler' cultures favours no side, rather striking a clever balance in order to reveal how 'the conflict between the two ways of life and world views [. . .] drives civilization'.²⁹ If this is true of his work as a whole, then these three later novels might indicate a tipping point that favors an alternate, emergent sense of ancient and modern Saharan history as bridged by the animist figures in and around these fictions who persist beyond the genocides and extinctions of those who imagined and inspired them.

Again the killing fields of people like al-Koni's Tuareg remain doubly tragic for only just now gaining scholarly and worldwide recognition as sites of a singularly grotesque genocide, in which tens of thousands of people were forced to watch as the animals they depended on for transport, food, even companionship in this extreme environment perished of starvation first, fully aware that their own deaths were sure to follow. For the novelist, the problem with such histories is not that they are unrepresentable (as is so often claimed of Nazi death camp scenes). Rather, it is that their representation in strictly human terms only ever insufficiently accounts for the more profound, ongoing threat constituted by nomad forms that makes the perseverance of the Tuareg not simply like but also bound to that of the waddan, the gazelles, the camels, and all those adapted to desert life together, a perspective that he articulates through the many hybrid elements of his novels.

But do these novels make the case that this indigenous and nomad metaphysics is far more in need of saving than the people (and along with them plants, animals, and stones)? Although the historical recovery work now under way is an important and necessary step in documenting and ultimately redressing the injustices of past genocides, it does nothing to stop the mass killings presently under way, and along with them the extinctions of knowledges and feelings specific to nomads of all

kinds communicated by the ancient Tassili artists. In order to elaborate the broader dimensions of the creative challenge that al-Koni takes up through these fictions of human-animal hybridity, I close this essay by musing on what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term ‘nomadology’, a practice that resists the eclipsing of the nomad by the state (or, here, oasis) by invoking a logic that runs along the lines of al-Koni’s animism.

CODA: NOMADS AND NOMADOLOGY

Amid many startling entries in the concluding ‘Aphorisms of Anubis’ chapter of *Anubis* one enigmatic pair of sentences seems to underscore the lives and deaths of populations referenced by al-Koni’s depictions of human-animal hybridity: ‘Patriots boast of their affiliation with a homeland. The desert dweller boasts of his affiliation with nonexistence’ (*Anubis*, p. 172). While this aphorism includes elements of what biopolitical theorists like Roberto Esposito see as the negative ‘immunizing’ forces characterizing the modern politics of death in general and genocide in particular,³⁰ it strikes me that the statement’s most important aspect is its peculiarly ancient nomadic perspective. At least, how much farther can we imagine being from urban, ‘oasis’ life than to declare our allegiance to nonexistence? Recalling Anubi’s lesson from the gazelle that ‘splendour’ follows when ‘absence becomes second nature’, the systematic destruction of desert dwellers, human and nonhuman alike, appears in these lines to concern a much more enduring struggle between nomad and settled or, in conventional terms, state forms of power.

In their ‘Treatise on Nomadology – The War Machine’, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari take up the problem of the origins of the state, the political form so often cast as using capital to organize and ultimately disband more fluid social forms like clans or tribes. Conversely, they insist, the inverse is conceptually more plausible, because it is so clearly in the interest of the so-called ‘primitive societies’ to keep the formation of the state at bay. In other words, these other social forms are primitive in the sense not of locating origins, but rather of operating with a tactical simplicity to resist ‘the formation of a State apparatus’ at every turn, even to wield the power of ‘making such a formation impossible’.³¹

Nomadology thus begins to explain why novelists like al-Koni reference the horrors of genocide and extinction obliquely, in stories that end not in death camps but rather in a killing of humanity of a far different order. At the conclusion of both *Gold Dust* and *The Bleeding*

of the Stone, men who have tried to live apart from people alongside animals in the desert fail to protect even themselves, their killers driven by desires, respectively, for gold and meat that define oasis life. In this context, the novels (like the aphorism) might be seen overall as positively embracing 'nonexistence' as an alternative to capitulating to the insatiable appetites peculiar to settled life, and in ways that resonate not only with the historical slaughter of the Tuareg and other nomadic tribespeople alongside animals, but also with the categorical opposition to the state that their very existence represents.

For the cross-species relations on which nomadic desert lifeways depend do not illuminate the crushing impossibility of subaltern subjects so much as they pinpoint the struggle between the ideology of the modern state (in which power is vested only ever in human subjects) and that of nomad systems, which rely on the sort of shifting fields and forms of power envisioned through these fictions of animist gods alongside other hybrids, even the novels themselves.

Pointing to the formal hybridity of al-Koni's work as exemplary for prompting new thinking about the various narrative traditions contributing to the Arabic novel's inception, one literary critic suggests that what is at stake is the very 'linkage between developing notions of modernity (and the identification of those who are entitled to define it) and what can be termed pre-modernity'.³² Read through nomadology, however, these fictions seem to question such historical progressions by casting the state's subject (an agent of sovereign power) in an enduring struggle with the nomad (an interstitial figure of biopower), as two among many moving targets.

Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are notoriously difficult to export to other discussions,³³ so I want to be careful to claim only that their theory of 'nomadology' grows more intriguing in light of how al-Koni uses animist elements in fiction to align certain animal species extinctions and specific acts of human genocide, notably ones that have been under-represented in historical – but not anthropological or literary – records. In terms of nomadology, his novels thus figure an ongoing struggle, wherein, surrounding the subject of the state (in the terms of al-Koni's aphorism, the 'patriot' tied to the 'homeland'), ranges the nomad of the intermezzo, the vagabond of no-man's-land, who is constantly on the move, metamorphosing in 'a fuzzy aggregate' of alliances.³⁴

By outlining the elements that anchor these sensibilities in these fictions, my point is to suggest that these relations might reveal the state to be at best merely the regulator of its subjects, its own forms of power.

In never-ending opposition, nomadic human-animal relations give rise to other biopolitical formations, including positive and productive ones that in *The Bleeding of the Stone*, *Gold Dust*, and *Anubis* situate historical horrors amid ancient and ongoing struggles to assert the validity and vigour of lives that continue to be shared on the brink of nonexistence. After all, as yet another of al-Koni's aphorisms asserts, 'The desert is a paradise of nonexistence' (*Anubis*, p. 172).

NOTES

- 1 Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, translated by May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2002), pp. 73–74. Henceforth references are to this edition and are given in the body of the text.
- 2 See Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices: Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 43–54. On the relation of colonial acts of genocide and the invention of concentration camps, see Horst Dreschler, *'Let us die fighting': The Struggle of the Herrero and the Nama Against German Imperialism, 1884–1915* (London: Zed, 1980), and Dominik J. Schaller, 'From Conquest to Genocide: Colonial Rule in German Southwest Africa and German East Africa', in *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History*, edited by A. Dirk Moses (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 296–324.
- 3 Elliott Colla, 'Translator's Afterword', in Ibrahim al-Koni, *Gold Dust*, translated by Elliott Colla (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), p. 169. These quotations are translated by al-Koni's translators, not by the author.
- 4 Miriam Cooke, 'Magical Realism in Libya', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 41.1–2 (2010), 9–21 (p. 15). See also Stefan Sperl, 'Empire and Magic in a Tuareg Novel: Ibrahim al-Kūni's *al-Khusūf* (*The Lunar Eclipse*)', in *A Companion to Magical Realism*, edited by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2005), pp. 238–240.
- 5 Steve Baker in *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000) elaborates a similar point about contemporary fine-art images of animals by reading them in terms of a 'botched taxidermy' aesthetic, in which the 'botchedness or gone-wrongedness' does not signal artistic failure so much as a more complicated set of engagements with animal form, each of which is 'deliberate, and has its own integrity', p. 156
- 6 Cooke, 'Magical Realism in Libya', p. 12.
- 7 Rane Willerslev, *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 3.
- 8 Stefan Sperl, "'The Lunar Eclipse": History, Myth and Magic in Ibrāhīm al-Kawnī's First Novel', *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 9.3 (2006), 237–255 (p. 248).
- 9 Sabry Hafez, 'The Novel of the Desert, Poetics of Space and Dialectics of Freedom', in *La poétique de l'espace dans la littérature arabe moderne*, edited by Boutros Hallaq, Robin Ostle, and Stefan Wild (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2002), pp. 55–84 (p. 20).

- 10 Elliott Colla, 'Ibrahim al-Koni's Atlas of the Sahara', in *Bridges Across the Sahara: Social, Economic, and Cultural Impact of the Trans-Sahara Trade during the 19th and 20th Centuries*, edited by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 187–196 (p. 188).
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 In *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), Donna Haraway explains that the Latin derivation of 'companion' from *cum panis* ('with bread') figuratively underscores the conditions of 'messmates' that characterize all of species life, p. 17.
- 13 Ibrahim al-Koni, *Anubis: A Novel of Desert Life*, translated by William M. Hutchins (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), p. 179. Henceforth references are to this edition and are given in the body of the text.
- 14 Roger Allen, 'Rewriting Literary History: The Case of the Arabic Novel', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 38 (2007), p. 254. Earlier Allen honoured al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* as one of the top ten late twentieth-century novels, exemplifying his 'new and original fictional voice in Arabic', in *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 258.
- 15 Roger Allen, 'A Different Voice: The Novels of Ibrahim al-Kawnī', in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, edited by Issa J. Boullata and Terri DeYoung (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), pp. 151–159 (p. 154).
- 16 See Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, who conclude that, 'above all, perhaps, the metaphorisation and deployment of "animal" as a derogatory term in genocidal and marginalizing discourses [...] make it difficult even to discuss animals without generating a profound unease, even a rancorous antagonism, in many postcolonial contexts today', in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 135.
- 17 For an overview that includes examples of this trend, see my essay 'Being Out of Time: Animal Gods in Contemporary Extinction Fictions', *Australian Literary Studies*, 25.2 (2010), 1–16.
- 18 Ibrahim al-Koni, *Gold Dust*, translated by Elliott Colla (New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 44–46. Henceforth references are to this edition and are given in the body of the text.
- 19 Robert Irwin, *Camel* (London: Reaktion, 2010), p. 20. Irwin confirms that 'drinking camel urine' is a plausible way of surviving without water in the desert, p. 53.
- 20 Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p. 247.
- 21 Allen, 'A Different Voice', pp. 154–155.
- 22 Henning Steinfeld, Pierre Gerber, Tom Wassenaar, Vincent Castel, Mauricio Rosales, and Cees de Haan, *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006).
- 23 Meike Meerpohl, 'Camels as Trading Goods: The Transition from a Beast of Burden to a Commodity in the Trans-Saharan Trade between Chad and Libya', in *Bridges Across the Sahara*, edited by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 157–186 (p. 168).
- 24 Meerpohl, 'Camels as Trading Goods', p. 174.
- 25 Irwin, *Camel*, pp. 173–174.
- 26 Dating the over 15,000 Tassili petroglyphs is largely determined by the extinct or introduced species depicted in them because 'the Sahara, given its vast size and

- various political complications, is still an inadequately researched area in terms of rock art and very few dates exist'. Department of Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, 'African Rock Art: Tassili-n-Ajjer (?8000 B.C.-?)', in Heilbrunn *Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), < <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tass/hd-tass.htm> > [accessed 10 January 2012].
- 27 'Ibrahim al-Koni in Discussion with Ali Abdullatif Ahmida', University of New England, Biddeford, ME, 2 May 2011.
- 28 Alexander Kluge, quoted in Richard Dienst, *The Bonds of Debt* (New York: Verso, 2011), p. 125.
- 29 Colla, 'Ibrahim al-Koni's Atlas of the Sahara', pp. 187–196 (p. 194)
- 30 Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, translated by Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), passim.
- 31 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), translated by Brian Massumi as *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 357.
- 32 Allen, 'Rewriting Literary History', p. 252.
- 33 Tom Conley, 'Pantagruel-Animal', in *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*, edited by Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 43–60 (p. 45).
- 34 Although it may be in the interests of the State to lay claim to conquering chaos, Deleuze and Guattari open up the perspective of 'nomadology' through which the State is perpetually imperilled by 'the war machine', which, because it remains external to the State apparatus and its military institutions, remains the provenance of nomads (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 380).

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