

Angelo Arminio

“To Cross into a War Should be Difficult”

Borderlands and Transcultural Identities in Elliot Ackerman’s *Dark at the Crossing*

Abstract

Set a few years after the start of the Syrian civil war, Elliot Ackerman’s novel Dark at the Crossing (2017) offers a close look at the life along the border between Turkey and Syria while following the protagonist’s quest for purpose and his paradoxical attempt at crossing into war-torn Syria. This essay argues that the novel constructs the borderland as a space of violence influenced by economic and political interests that separate people both physically and spiritually, while global capitalism builds a sanitized environment to the benefit of diplomats and aid workers, as the shopping malls and luxury hotels of Gaziantep stand in stark contrast with the explosions a few miles away in Azaz. I use Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to situate the protagonist Haris Abadi, a former Iraqi interpreter who acquired American citizenship, as well as many of the characters living in the borderland as transcultural characters influenced by European and American imperialism who struggle to find their place in the world, all unfortunate victims of an imagined line—or, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s words, “unnatural boundary”—drawn by Western powers a century earlier. Through their hybrid nature they pose an inherent challenge to traditional notions of citizenship and belonging and expose the imperialist practices at work in and around the Syrian civil war. While most American border writing is understandably concerned with the southern border with Mexico or the concept of the frontier, I argue that Dark at the Crossing offers a unique perspective on the ramifications of war, globalization, and American imperialism in the Middle East.

Keywords: borderlands, border-crossing narrative, Middle East, postcolonial, Elliot Ackerman

Borders are often both the cause and the consequence of wars. Throughout history, disputes over territories have frequently been the *casus belli*, and an armistice almost always results in a redrawing of the world map. In the case of the United States of America, the redrawing of borders mostly coincided with its westward expansion, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, after which the new-born nation engaged in a conquest of lands inhabited by Native Americans that ended as it reached the eastern seaboard. To the south,

another war sparked by the presence of American settlers and illegal border crossings shaped what is nowadays the busiest border in the world (Mazza 2017, 34), the US-Mexico border. The imperialist practices following the Mexican-American war (1846-1848) ended up creating a sharp divide that separated communities which were themselves the product of European colonialism, with socio-economic consequences that last to this day and that eventually contributed to the emergence of the field of Borderlands Studies. As Ellwyn R. Stoddard notes in the first issue of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, where he traces the (pre)history of this field, after 1945 scholarly research in the political and social sciences gradually started focusing on the border itself, while in the 70s scholars from diverse disciplines came together to form the Association of Borderlands Scholars, which eventually moved towards the comparative study of borders in the 80s (Stoddard 1986, 11, 16, 17). A crucial step in this regard was Gloria E. Anzaldúa's famous book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), in which the Chicana writer blends poetry, autobiography, and critical theory to extend the concept of “borderlands” to abstract categories, claiming they exist “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 1987, iii). If, like Anzaldúa maintains, the borderland is “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (1987, 3), the territories surrounding Mesopotamia and the Levant can effectively be considered as “full-fledged” borderlands, especially considering their colonial past and their present significance in being—in the Western world—the imagined frontier between secular democracies and unstable Islamic states.

In this essay, I analyze Elliot Ackerman's *Dark at the Crossing* (2017) as an example of borderlands literature which highlights American (and more generally Western) imperialist practices in the Middle East that displace people both physically and culturally, all the while exposing the way modern capitalism's relationship with humanitarian work economically exploits the borderland between Syria and Turkey. I argue that Ackerman constructs the borderland as a site of violence caused by these imperialist practices (Ottoman, European, and American) which effectively make it the physical and abstract barrier between imagined versions of the West and the East, a line that magnetically attracts the displaced and those that stand between or do not conform with well-defined national identities. The characters of Ackerman's book are postcolonial subjects characterized by various “modalities of hybridity” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 41), and they are in a constant state of “nepantilism,” a term first used by Anzaldúa to define mestizas as the “product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual

values of one group to another” (1987, 78). Many of them ache for a return to the borderland, an attempt to recombine a fragmented self—a process that Anzaldúa calls the Coyolxauhqui imperative, an incessant process of reconstruction and healing which, in this case, fails after the crossing of the border.

While the border between the US and Mexico remains the object of special attention in the United States both in the national discourse on immigration and in academic research, its militarization in the 1990s was facilitated by excess equipment intended for another war (Rosas 2007, 81), far from the American Southwest. As the perceived threat of communism started waning in the years before the dissolution of the USSR, the United States shifted its foreign policy efforts away from Cold War issues by focusing more closely on an area of crucial strategic significance like the Middle East. The American-led intervention in Kuwait in response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of 1991 was followed by other military operations aimed at the removal of the Iraqi president, eventually culminating in the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, in the wider context of the Global War on Terror. Ackerman, a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has chosen to set his first three novels (*Green on Blue*, 2015; *Dark at the Crossing*, 2017; *Waiting for Eden*, 2018) precisely in the war-ravaged areas of the Middle East where he served as a member of the US Marine Corps.

Unlike most American veteran writers, who frequently choose to adopt the point of view of US soldiers in their fiction (e.g., Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds*, Matt Gallagher’s *Youngblood*, David Abrams’ *Fobbit*), Ackerman started his career as a novelist by offering different perspectives to his readers. Firstly, that of an Afghan boy (*Green on Blue*), and then that of an Iraqi interpreter turned American (*Dark at the Crossing*) who chooses to return to the Middle East from the United States to fight in the Free Syrian Army against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The choice to hand over the narration to an Afghan character in *Green on Blue* has merits in and of itself, especially at a time when, after the September 11 attacks in New York, the United States experienced a rise in islamophobia (Kumar 2012, 2) and Arab characters on the silver screen and on TV were already regularly being portrayed as inherently evil (Shaheen 2009, 12). As a result of these phenomena, the Arab—or Middle Eastern, or Muslims, as these terms were and still are unfortunately used interchangeably without much care—became the quintessential *other* for America, as these categories, associated with the most prominent wars of the first two decades of the 21st century, suddenly became “visible” (Shryock 2008, 93). The decision to focalize the narration on a hybrid protagonist like Haris in *Dark at the Crossing* is then even more significant, as it inscribes an Arab character within the national sphere of the United

States and brings about issues of citizenship and questions regarding the relationship between the United States and the inhabitants of the lands it invaded after the turn of the century.

1. What kind of hybridity? The colonized interpreter and the westernized refugees

American characters are comparatively scarce in Ackerman’s earliest books, but the presence of the military and cultural might of the United States can always be felt, even if it is sometimes relegated to the background, as is the case in *Green on Blue*. In *Dark at the Crossing*, the US is primarily represented by Haris Abadi, the Arab American former interpreter who travels to Turkey to cross the border with Syria. Throughout the book, the narration is interrupted by flashbacks that illustrate his past involvement in the war in Iraq and his relationship with Jim, an American soldier who helped him in the process of naturalization to become an American citizen for his service. Haris, however, is conflicted about his status as a double citizen, just as he is conflicted about his role in helping what many of his countrymen would have considered the enemy at the time. Accused by a fellow Iraqi of cooperating with the American invaders for personal gain, Haris realizes he is unsure as to the real reason he is really doing it. Although there is evidence throughout the novel that his actions are in some way an attempt at mediation to limit violent misunderstandings, the questioning of his motives seems to take him by surprise. His mind, however, rapidly finds an instinctive answer in the military and political might that the United States project and exercise around the world: “[...] the reason was inevitability. Their will was inevitable. Their wealth was inevitable” (Ackerman 2017, 106).

For much of *Dark at the Crossing*, Haris continues to struggle with his status as a representative of two worlds that seem irreversibly at odds. With strangers, he decides to deploy either nationality at will, depending on what seems favorable at the time, even though every so often neither allegiance can help him. His given name, fairly common in Arab countries, is very close to the Western names Harry and Harrison, and even though the latter are independent in origin, their affinity with Haris is used by Ackerman to construct an ‘onomastic bridge’ between cultures. As the author himself acknowledges in an interview with Sean Purio, the names are—somewhat controversially—treated as variants of the same name: “This is the Arabic spelling of a name that is also common in the west, and a very conscious choice on my part” (2016, 7). This is not the only detail that characterizes the protagonist of the novel as culturally unstable: his red hair and his occupation as a translator are other distinctive markers of his hybrid nature; he is the site where one world is combined with the other.

It would be hard to deny that Haris is constructed as a hybrid character, but the term has a troubled history in postcolonial studies. It is most closely associated with Homi K. Bhabha's influential work *The Location of Culture* (1994), in which the term *hybridity* is intended as that which characterizes postcolonial societies in general and postcolonial subjects in particular, “a difference ‘within,’ a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (1994, 12), which however is not seen as the encounter of multiple, self-contained cultures, as cultures cannot but be born out of hybridization (1994, 5). The concept has been at the same time extremely influential and extensively criticized for the unintended consequences of Bhabha's treatment of hybridity as standing in an implicit dichotomous relationship with purity and homogeneity (Moslund 2010, 34). Such a connection would essentially result in an opposition between hybrid colonial cultures and ‘pure’ Western ones—the latter of which are, however, themselves necessarily the result of processes of hybridization. However, recognizing the hybrid nature of all culture(s) is hardly of help here, because if cultures are already hybrid, the hybridity of postcolonial subjects or of their works becomes hardly noticeable and ceases to be of any significance. To avoid this pitfall, alternative understandings of hybridity have been put forth, accounting for the diversity of transcultural experiences (Shohat and Stam 1994, 41) and the different processes of hybridization. Along these lines, Robert J. Young has proposed an analogy with Bakhtin's theory of hybridity in language, differentiating between organic hybridity, an unconscious process which tends towards amalgamation, and intentional hybridity, which dialogically confronts the differences inherent in cultures. This distinction is useful both to avoid facile oppositions between ‘pure’ and hybrid cultures—usually correspondent to Western cultures as opposed to colonized ones—and to analyze the *politicized* nature of some forms of hybridity (Young 2005, 20), which seems to be what Bhabha had in mind when he wrote that hybridity “is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (1994, 114).

Even though they can be both seen as a consequence of American imperialist practices and follow similar patterns, the hybridity of Haris is not exactly the same as that of, for example, the Chicana/o along the US-Mexico border. From what can be inferred from the novel, Haris has no other ties to the United States other than the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and there is no physical border between the American continent and the Middle East, no intermingling of peoples and cultures along a territory shared at different times in history. As a newly colonized subject, Haris moves to the United States precisely because the United States moved to his native land, in a process reminiscent of the slogan “we are here because you were there,” used

by immigrants to the United Kingdom and adopted by Filipino Americans to refer to the forty years of American rule over the Southeast Asian archipelago (Bascara 2006, xxiv, xxv). The American invasion and Haris' collaboration with the US Army create a type of cultural hybrid that has experienced US culture primarily from afar and subsequently as an embedded translator at work for the American military complex. In other words, the protagonist's transcultural identity is not developed through his physical presence along a US border and the grappling with a colonial past, but in the contemporary liminal space of an American war. Accordingly, Haris mostly displays signs of intentional hybridity, and his process of (unfinished) assimilation is shown as not entirely straightforward. His life at Hurricane Point, the US Army Forward Operating Base in Ramadi, is completely detached from that of the other occupants—Americans carefully avoid the “terp ghetto” where the Iraqi translators are accommodated (Ackerman 2017, 76). Having already gained American citizenship but waiting to earn more money to move to escape Iraq, Haris is abandoned by the other interpreters and starts spending more time with the American soldiers on his team, where he is treated as little more than comic relief: “The guys from Triple Nickel didn't avoid him. They treated Haris like a mascot. These professional soldiers cursed him lovingly, appreciating his predicament” (Ackerman 2017, 36). Even his interactions with Jim, the boisterous sergeant who tries to form an emotional connection with him (the only American who does so), are rarely easy, as Haris is upset by the American's lack of empathy and general disregard for rules of engagement with Iraqis. Once he has saved up enough money to move to the United States with his sister, he finds himself lying about his place of origin in order to avoid awkward questions, in the meanwhile failing to effectively integrate into American society and reflecting on his loneliness, especially after his sister starts dating a rich Arab expat from the UAE. Throughout the novel, Haris feels uneasy about his acquired citizenship, so much so that once he is betrayed and robbed by Athid and Saied, the two men he encounters in Kilis and with whom he attempts to cross the border, he feels relieved at the thought of having been separated from his American passport: “Until he had lost his passport and money, Haris hadn't realized the burden they had been to him” (Ackerman 2017, 40).

The protagonist of the novel is then shown to resist a complete assimilation as an American, mirroring the failure of the American military to impose order on the lands invaded after the attacks in New York City in 2001. At the same time, Haris is fully recognized as a citizen of the United States, which means that he can rightfully contribute to the discussion on what it means to be an American, using his hybridity to challenge the power that invaded his land, in a process that involves, in Bhabha's words, “the strategic reversal of the process of domination through

disavowal” (1994, 112). The protagonist’s status as a cultural hybrid is then a direct menace to the discourses that support or facilitate the imperialist practices of the invading power, which according to Young lose their “univocal grip on meaning and [find themselves] open to the trace of the language of the other” (2005, 21). The inner negotiation of Haris’ identity as Iraqi, American, or both, naturally calls into question the meaning of citizenship in the United States and serve as a meditation on the lasting consequences of twenty years of uninterrupted military presence abroad.

As the traumatic moment of colonization, the war in Iraq—Haris’ “first war” (Ackerman 2017, 6)—is periodically referenced in the novel. Although the protagonist actively participates in military operations while being employed by the US Army, this experience is characterized as passive: “You’ve fought before—No, he reminded himself. You’ve been around fighting before. There’s a big difference. So are you going to do what you came to do?” (Ackerman 2017, 11). The Syrian Civil War, in contrast, is referred to as his “second war,” the one in which he is supposed to have an active role as he searches for purpose after the end of his first war. The war then comes to symbolize a point of arrival and a way to wash away the bitter flavor left by his decision to fight alongside the people who invaded his homeland. Ironically, Haris ultimately comes to see the war as an end in and of itself, unpreoccupied with which side he is supposed to fight, thereby following in the footsteps of Jim, who attempts to bond with him after he roughly handled an Iraqi teenager:

“It’s not what I found in Colombia, bud. It’s what I found in the war. This is where I belong.”
 “What about home?”
 “This is home,” answered Jim. He took the bottle from Haris and drank. They had emptied nearly a quarter of it.
 “By making your home here,” said Haris, “you’ve destroyed mine.”
 Jim drank again. “Or maybe we’re now from the same home.” (Ackerman 2017, 78-79)

Haris’ process of naturalization begins here, with the transformation of his homeland into a liminal warzone. Left without a homeland, he has no other option than to escape with his sister to the home of the invaders in search of a better life. His citizenship, however, comes at a cost—to be American means to be perpetually at war.

Haris is not the only prominent transcultural character in *Dark at the Crossing*. After his first failed attempt at crossing the border to join the war in Syria, the protagonist is rescued by Amir, a Syrian refugee now living in Gaziantep with his wife Daphne. It is immediately clear, to both Haris and the reader, that Amir’s privileged background partially shields him from the hardships suffered by other refugees: he is well-educated, picks his clothes carefully, speaks

English fluently with a British accent, and lives in an apartment in Gaziantep, in contrast with the great number of Syrians who have fled the war and are forced to live in tents on the Turkish side of the border or in the parks of the city. Daphne, whom Haris meets at dinner on the same day he is rescued, is similarly described as stylishly dressed and sophisticated, while her features—like the faded tips of her hair—point to her mixed origin: "On a woman of less interesting heritage they would've looked dyed and grown out, but later Haris would learn her mother had been French, her father Damascene" (Ackerman 2017, 65). Daphne's French mother and Amir's British accent are clear signs of their country's colonial past, which is further evoked by the couple's flight to Turkey, former home of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Syria from the end of the Middle Ages to the First World War. In other words, the couple's attributes, mannerisms, and language point to a certain kind of hybridity that Annika Rabo sees as typically Syrian: "Most Syrians, urban and rural, have ancestors coming from places that are not part of contemporary Syria. To uproot oneself and to move is part of a remembered and living history" (Rabo 2006, 70).

The couple's hybridity is, to use Young's terminology, predominantly organic. Their experience is indeed similar, obvious differences apart, to the life along the US-Mexico border: they are forced to leave their homeland and settle along the border, in a territory belonging to a former colonial empire that has seen hundreds of years of cultural exchanges. As such, Daphne and Amir function as a more general reminder of the effects of colonialism and the imposition of arbitrary lines, inhabitants of a borderland that is, in Anzaldúa's words, a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1987, 3). Anzaldúa follows these words by stating that "The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants," and accordingly Haris, an Arab-American trying to join the Syrian rebels, finds himself living along the border with Syrian refugees who were activists in the early days of the revolution (Ackerman 2017, 45). This place of *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word used by Anzaldúa to indicate a "liminal zone" where subjects are "in a constant state of displacement," reveals itself as a possible vantage point from which those that dwell in *nepantla* can see the world from multiple perspectives (Anzaldúa 2002, 1, 544, 549).

2. Between money and fighting: a border with war

The title of Ackerman's book immediately communicates to the reader that the physical and spiritual place that divides nation states, the borderland, is the magnetically charged center of the narrative. Marked by the same hybridity that characterizes its inhabitants, the border produces discourses that question our assumptions about national cultures and our own

affiliations, as Bhabha explains at the very beginning of *The Location of Culture*: “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (1994, 2). Following a similar line of reasoning, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett have noted how borderlands history has recently entered the mainstream in North American historiography, stressing the contact points and differences between this concept and that of the frontier. In their minds, there is a clear ideological distinction between frontier and borderlands history: “If frontiers were the places where we once told our master American narratives, then borderlands are the places where those narratives come unraveled” (2011, 338). In other words, it is precisely in borderlands narratives that the imperialist practices typical of the frontier narratives are questioned.

However, this meaning-building power of the liminal spaces between nation states is still marked, more often than not, by violence and discrimination. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa makes it clear that the border is characterized by its power to inflict violence upon those who attempt to cross it, in ways that are both state-mandated (through policing or military presence) but also resulting from the social and economic inequalities that the border generates: “Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power” (1987, 3). While Anzaldúa’s text follows these words by specifying that those in power are white men (an accurate description of the situation of the US-Mexico border), it needs to be stated that in the case of the border between Turkey and Syria, power has not been wielded only by Western powers like France, but primarily by the Ottomans, Turkey’s spiritual predecessors. Furthermore, and although violence along the border between the United States and Mexico could be equated to warfare, this particular border stands as the dividing line between a supposedly democratic and secular democracy and a country ravaged by an ongoing civil war. In addition to that, and as is often the case, the civil war has attracted the attention of global and regional political powers like the United States, Russia, and Turkey, all eager to swing the pendulum to achieve the result that most closely aligns with their interests. Crucially, and this is one of the most interesting aspects of Ackerman’s novel, the border attracts a slew of non-state actors, including humanitarian organizations, like the one managed by Marty, the “American man-child” that Haris meets through Amir, and solitary combatants and conmen, the “mishmash of fighters” (2017, 16) and border-dwellers that welcomes the protagonist at the Turkish checkpoint in Kilis.

In this scenario, with a closed border that impedes exchange and can only be crossed by being smuggled in for a considerable amount of money, the Syrian refugees are relegated to living in

tents and are completely excluded from everyday life in Gaziantep. The only cultural exchanges seem to take place—and this shocks Haris, and no doubt the reader—between wealthy Westerners who live along the border because of the war. Still covered in mud after having been betrayed by Athid (which is later revealed to be a member of ISIS), Haris is astounded to find out that there is a brand new shopping mall in Gaziantep, a few miles away from the explosions in Azaz, where many of the amenities seem wholly incompatible with war: trendy restaurants, high street fashion brands, and tech stores are evidently there to cater to an international rather than local clientele. The narrator immediately draws a comparison between this foreign presence and past colonial feats, noting that the “dining room felt like the mess tent of some khaki-clad expedition” (Ackerman 2017, 64). The patrons are shown to be considerably richer than the average local, especially the Americans and Western Europeans, who wear “high-tech trekking boots worth one month of a local Turk’s salary” (2017, 64). Amir seems to fit well into the crowd at the mall, where humanitarian missions are discussed at length, and this is when he reveals his affiliation with Marty, the American who manages a humanitarian agency from a villa that his employees call “the office.” The first time Haris meets Marty, the latter is playing hockey with a few locals, boasting about being the founder of “Antep’s first intramural hockey league,” a statement that immediately causes the protagonist to burst out laughing (Ackerman 2017, 145).

Here Ackerman uncovers the (not so) subtle ways in which humanitarian agencies create safe spaces for their employees in territories affected by extreme natural or political conditions, thereby replicating past colonial practices. In *Colonization and Humanitarianism: Histories, Geographies and Biographies*, Alan Lester and Fae Dussart track precisely the contradictory history of the emergence of humanitarianism and its relationship with colonial practices in 19th-century Britain (2014, 1). Lester and Dussart argue that “violent colonial conquest was foundational and intrinsic to the shared history of British humanitarianism and governmentality,” explaining how humanitarianism emerged as both a counterpart and a rationale for their colonial rule, acting as a justification that is “well known to have supported various forms of dispossession and exploitation” (2014, 1, 3). Humanitarian efforts to help Syria are therefore depicted almost as a vestigial form of European colonialism that operate in cooperation with global capitalism, as the comparatively rich Westerners require goods and services that can create a safe enclave in warzones and developing countries, allowing for capitalist practices to take place even at a few miles from death and destruction. As William Robinson argues in “Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype,” there is a transnational capitalist class that “has acquired a vested interest in

war, conflict, and repression as a means of accumulation,” and only stands to gain as wars are prolonged indefinitely (2019, 160). Building on Robinson’s argument, Roger Bromley points to Syria as a perfect example of this phenomenon, deeming it “the most egregious instance of this, with millions internally displaced and more than six million refugees” (2021, 20). In the novel, Marty becomes a stand-in for this class of postcolonial capitalist humanitarians—as Daphne asks Amir, tongue-in-cheek, “Do good guys make money off bad wars?” (Ackerman 2017, 70). This is the background against which Daphne—who wants to return to Syria in search of her lost daughter—and Haris approach the crossing of the border, the climactic episode that gives the novel its title. At that point, their quests appear quixotic to all effects and purposes, as all the evidence points to the death of Amir and Daphne’s daughter in the explosion that destroyed their home in Aleppo, while the Syrian Free Army, which Haris wanted to join because he believed in their cause, has essentially been defeated by the time he reaches the border. Their journey is almost paradoxical, as Ackerman inverts the usual border crossing narrative that follows refugees as they leave war zones in search of a better life—Daphne and Haris have already been through the traumatic experience of being uprooted and transported to a new place, and after their first border crossing, they long for a way to reach a place that promises nothing but death. As Anzaldúa states at the beginning of *Borderlands*, the in-between place at the margins of nations is often violent and unforgiving: “Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape” (1987, iii). Accordingly, a few hours after their successful crossing into Syria, Haris and Daphne are killed by Athid’s men, who pretend to be Assad’s soldiers and murder everyone who swears allegiance to the regime. Fragmented like the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, Haris and Daphne have lost all purpose, like the rest of those that have been displaced by the war, characterized by “a single form of suffering, one he knew in himself [Haris]: a home and a life taken away. Purposelessness” (Ackerman 2017, 216). Their return to the border reads like a tragic attempt at finding something that is lost forever after their first traumatic experience of border crossing. Theirs can be interpreted as failed effort to enact Anzaldúa’s idea of the Coyolxauhqui imperative, which she defines as “the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you’re embroiled in differently,” but also as a “symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way” (2009, 312). Ackerman’s characters must face a loss that is so great that they cannot reimagine their selves, and this causes them to go back to the border in search of what they have lost and can in fact never regain.

Haris and Daphne’s attempt is only technically successful, as they manage to leave Turkey and reach Aleppo only to be promptly punished for their effort. In “Crossing and Reading: Notes

Towards a Theory and a Method,” Johan Schimanski suggests that unsuccessful border crossings are usually characterized by human representations of the power of the border—typically embodied by border guards (2006, 43). While the border guards in Ackerman’s novel can indeed be seen as stand-ins for state power, they are not obstacles on the protagonist’s escape from war; on the contrary, they are the ones that reprimand Haris when he first attempts to cross into Syria to fight: “You’re a damn fool, and I won’t help one fool die with other fools. The border is closed” (Ackerman 2017, 12). In *Dark at the Crossing* the all-consuming power of war, aided by foreign and internal economic interests, depletes the productive opportunities of that borderlands typically offer and tragically ensures that trying to traverse the border can only result in death.

Angelo Arminio is a PhD candidate at the Sapienza Università di Roma and at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He earned both his BA and MA at Sapienza, with periods of study abroad at the University of York and at the Freie Universität Berlin. His current research focuses on the evolution of the fictional narratives of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, exploring questions of authority, memory, and the use of fictionality as a rhetorical tool. His research interests include contemporary narratives of war, postmodern and contemporary fiction, autofiction, and postclassical narratology.

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