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## **Of werewolves, jungles, and refugees: more-than-human figures along the Balkan**

### **Route**

*....The werewolf [...] is its origin the figure of the man (sic) who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf [...] is decisive here. The life of the bandit [...] is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, physis and nomos, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the loup garou, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither. (Agamben 1998, 63).*

This article critically engages with the figure of the werewolf to discuss the ways in which the refugees entering Europe along the so-called Western Balkan Route are often translated into more-than-human figures by the authorities' management of their informal mobilities. Following the so-called refugee crisis in the summer of 2015, when around one million refugees crossed the Balkan region along a semi-formal humanitarian corridor (IOM 2015), the second part of 2015 and the early months of 2016 witnessed many border closures, the erection of walls and the enforcement of other forms of high-tech control of refugee movement within the region. The closure of humanitarian corridor generated a new informal geography comprised of thousands of stranded refugees that attempted to irregularly cross borders and inhabited forests and makeshift dwellings established along the border regions (Stojić Mitorvić et al. 2020). Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of the werewolf as a threshold figure between the *civitas*/city and the *silva*/forest (Agamben 1998; see also Giaccaria and Minca 2011), this article investigates how the geographical metaphor

of the jungle is evoked by the refugees along this informal corridor to describe (and constitute) bordering spatial thresholds which are literally marked on their bodies. The werewolf, in its more-than-human condition, arguably represents a useful figure to reflect on how these refugees are at times abandoned to these unruly spatialities and, in the process, treated as more-than-human bordering figures.

A more-than-human perspective has been adopted by a growing body of work in geography to reflect on how people engage with different experiences of nature and relate to non-humans (see, among many others, Greenhough 2014). In discussing the initial stage of this development in the discipline, Panelli (2010, 80) observes that ‘examples of more-than-human social geographies [...] show how contrasting social meanings of nature are mobilized and unsettled’. She also notes that these studies highlight ‘how differing groups of people have complex relations with “nature” which coincidentally reinforce social differences and wider power relations’ (ibid.). While acknowledging the significance of these debates to appreciate, for example, the more-than-human dimension of home-making for migrants (see Alam et al. 2020 and the value of more-than-human analytical lenses to reconceptualise human-forest interactions and the diverse ways in which people’s lives are deeply entwined with non-humans (see, McGregor and Thomas, 2018), the approach to the more-than-human adopted by this article departs from those conversations. By selectively engaging with Agamben’s (2002) speculations on the anthropogenesis that has historically qualified in Western thought the *caesura* between ‘the human’ and the ‘non-human’, the more-than-human here is conceptualised as the presumed (re)emergence of animality in individuals that have been ‘banned to the forest’. Accordingly, Rita Sakr’s analysis of the refugee ‘more-than-human journeys’ along the Balkan Route is central in how this article is using the term to discuss the incorporation of the ‘forest’ and its more-than-human dimension into narratives

concerning both werewolves and refugees. Evoking the powerful figure of the *werewolf-refugee*, the article thus argues that the forest is a real and metaphorical site which plays a key role in the border practices and politics related to the informal mobilities of thousands of refugees who try to reach Europe along this informal corridor each year. What the figure of the werewolf-refugee illustrates is how the abandonment of the refugee to the forest is often associated to representations of implicit zoomorphism populating some of the mainstream contemporary accounts of such informal journeys across the Balkan Route, in this way exposing them to the invisible but real violence of the border. Through the metaphorical application of the werewolf-refugee the article thus intends to contribute to the existing debates on the refugee political geographies of the Balkan Route to highlight their more-than-human biopolitical dimension. What is more, I will argue that the figure of the werewolf described by Agamben as part of his conceptualisation of the sovereign ban represents a powerful metaphor of the impossibility to entirely exclude the other-that-is-in-us, the non-human that resides in all of us. This is why, I will conclude, the refugee abandoned to the forest disturbingly evokes the more-than-human-in-us that we would prefer not to be confronted with.

The article is thus organised into four main sections. The first briefly discusses how the figure of the werewolf has historically been a recurrent motif in European folkloric accounts and how in the Nineteenth century it has populated narratives depicting the stranger and the abnormal as somewhat marked by more-than-human characteristics. The second section reflects on how the werewolf has been presented by Agamben as a key figure in what he describes as the structure of the ban, that is, the process of 'inclusive exclusion' that produces populations of 'banned' individuals, historically defined by their human/non-human nature and their 'roaming' at the threshold between the city and the forest. Drawing from these

considerations, the third section introduces the Balkan Route and its informal refugee mobilities, and explains how they have largely relied on the existence and the incorporation of a set of unruly spatialities, often made of makeshift camps but also forests and bushes converted into temporarily inhabited ‘jungles’ by banned individuals-on-the-move (and tolerated by the authorities as a deliberate form of non-governance). The last section tries to illustrate the explicit and implicit violence at the border by engaging with Rita Sakr’s (2018) powerful analysis of two short stories penned by Iraqi former refugee Hassan Blasim and what she defines as a *more-than-human refugee journey* across the Balkan Route. This fourth section prepares the ground for our final considerations about how the refugees abandoned to the threshold between the city and forest – to use Agamben’s spatial metaphors – may be transformed into more-than-human figures subjected to unsanctioned violence and invisibility. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of engaging with the werewolf-refugee as a more-than-human threshold figure in order to understand the condition of refugees along the Balkan Route, and appreciate that their ban to the forest is also a way to avoid encountering the more-than-human dimension that resides within all of us.

## **Werewolves**

According to Guðmundsdóttir, in her analysis of *The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature*, ‘people throughout the world have long been fascinated by the idea of shape-shifting. In all corners of the world there are stories about people who have the ability to transform themselves into animals’, including bears and wolves. This ability was ‘generally viewed negatively, and those with such powers are often sorcerers or witches’ (2007, 277). Guðmundsdóttir also explains that werewolves were described ‘in the ancient narratives of Greek, Roman, and Celtic society and developed in varying ways’ (2007, 290). For example,

in the song ‘Alphesi boeus’, ‘Virgil writes about Moeris, who is transformed into a wolf and hides in the woods’, while werewolves are mentioned in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, ‘who lived in the first century AD’ (ibid.). Citing another historian, Pliny, who lived in the first century AD, Guðmundsdóttir suggests that narratives concerning werewolves ‘had been circulating for centuries before his time’ (2007, 291). The interesting thing is that, even then, these transformative subjects ‘were considered to be even worse than real wolves, since they possessed human understanding and therefore did harm to both humans and other animals through their rapacity and greed.’ (ibid.).

In line with this reconstruction, Bruckner confirms that the topic of werewolves has indeed travelled ‘handily through time and space as a recurrent motif in folklore and myth that periodically takes shape in written form’ and that ‘[W]erewolves, as a cultural product, have been and always will be a reflection of their time’ (2011, 270). de Blécourt explains for example that ‘the idea that so-called “feral children,” children who are left in the wild and raised by animals, gave rise to stories about werewolves that probably go back to the classic image of the Roman twins Romulus and Remus, who were suckled by a wolf. It will have been strengthened by Rudyard Kipling’s late nineteenth-century *The Jungle Book*, which had the boy Mowgli growing up among wolves.’ (2013, 193). Feral children have thus become a key ‘ingredient of werewolf explanations’ across centuries in Europe: ‘Their inability to communicate with humans, their diet of raw food, their hairy skin, and their animal posture are cited as “classic signs of the wolf-child, the lycanthrope, homo ferus.”’ (2013, 194). In a different intervention, de Blécourt argues that brigands have been seen as disguised werewolves since the medieval period, while being also accused of assaulting women in the forest (2007, 33, 39). According to this analysis, ‘during most of the sixteenth century the concept of the werewolf was practically unknown. When it was introduced in the 1590s, by

way of criminal trials, the fascination with it spread rapidly [...] Werewolves thereby merged with, but did not necessarily replace, existing notions about male sexual deviancy.’ (2007, 40). If the werewolf’s main characteristic was sexual, concludes de Blécourt, ‘it would certainly explain his irrepressible sexual urge mentioned in the legends.’ (2007, 39).

In reflecting on more recent manifestations of interest for this figure, Bourgault du Coudray writes that the image of the werewolf represents today a variation on the imagery of hybridity ‘able to contribute fascinating new perspectives to current theoretical debates, particularly as [...] it is an icon with deep-rooted origins in myth, folklore and literature.’ (2002, 1). By referring to Foucault’s work on sexuality, she suggests that ‘like other Gothic monsters, the representation of the werewolf came to be implicated in nineteenth-century processes of identity formation’ (2002, 2). What is more, Bourgault du Coudray links the figure of the werewolf to how the long histories of monstrous bodies have contributed to define the humanist European subject via the definition of its radical Other(s). ‘Representations of the werewolf in nineteenth-century literature support this conceptualisation of monstrosity. Werewolves consistently embodied difference in their human forms, and their transformation into the animal form of a wolf distanced them still further from the model of the white, middle-class male which was assumed to represent the “human” in most nineteenth-century discourse’ (ibid.). From a more explicitly political perspective, she insists, it is important to highlight how ‘Lycanthropy was often presented as a threat emanating from the underclasses’, with street-people at times depicted as a ‘greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man. . . for their high cheeks and protruding jaws’, in this implying that ‘these classes were perceived as a threat to civilization and the future prosperity of the human race’ precisely for the ‘bestial origins’ from which they evolved (ibid.). Particularly important for the argument of this paper, the werewolf was also

constructed as a monstrous Other, as a stranger from a foreign country or even a different race: 'Delineation of racial Otherness in such representations created and maintained discursive boundaries of race, a project which accompanied Victorian colonial expansion. [...] racial mingling, crossbreeding, and intermarriage fuelled scientific and political interest in establishing clear lines of demarcation between East and West' (2002, 3).

Such a process of inherent 'animalisation' of the Other incorporated by the identification and stigmatisation of monstrous figures, remained, however, an unaccomplished project, in the sense that such monstrous Others could not be entirely 'animalised'. On the contrary, the fact that, in the werewolf, the human was entwined with the non-human troubled the process of identity politics in which this depiction of feral beings at the margin of the European civilisation was involved. In other words, werewolves were precisely *humans turning into feral beasts*, whose human origins could never be entirely eliminated, and who could return human under certain circumstances. For Bourgault du Coudray:

Like other monsters, then, the werewolf embodied a composite Otherness which gave expression to anxieties about working class degeneracy, colonial insurrection and racial atavism, women's corporeality and sexuality, and the bestial heritage of humanity. The physical defects or stigmata of the werewolf's human incarnation suggested the presence of the interior beast, much as bumps on the skull or facial characteristics were interpreted by phrenologists as evidence of interior characteristics and tendencies.' (2002, 7).

While these 'narratives about lycanthropy frequently dramatized the contrast between the sculpted, civilised human form and the hairy, slaving beast' (2002, 8), at the same they represented – I would like to argue – the fear of *the persistence of the-animal-in-us*. This fear



explains the need on the part of ‘civilised’ European societies to endlessly remark their fully human nature, a laborious enterprise to which werewolves and other monsters – but also the working classes or the strangers – contributed to by illustrating what would happen if such animality was not controlled and kept at bay. Bourgault du Coudray therefore rightly states that the monstrosity and ferocity of the werewolf elaborated during the course of the nineteenth century was tightly related to the awareness, in Western modern culture, that the Other will not stay outside but would always threaten ‘to tear away the boundaries which separate it from the Same.’ (2002, 12).

By mirroring such fear of a return to nature of the European civilised self, the figure of the werewolf was somehow kept alive in the popular imagination of the nineteenth century and intermittently reprised by the literature or even the cinema in the century that followed, while being maintained in its original location, which is at the margin between the forest and the city, between the unruly spaces of the *silva* and the civilised tamed nature of the *civitas* (Agamben 1998). Notably, Bourgault du Coudray’s article ends with a reference to Kristeva’s concept of abjection by suggesting that

for Kristeva, the abject is “something rejected from which one does not part” [...] The process of abjection thus assembles an externalised grotesque identity from the exclusions of normative middle-class society, only to produce a more compound form of grotesque, one which involves the internalisation of the same excluded material by the middle-class subject. When depicted as a peasant, foreigner, native, woman, or debauched aristocrat indulging in bestiality, cannibalism, lust, murder and even nudity, and particularly when it is in wolf form, the werewolf is a quintessential example of the simple grotesque which results from the impulse of abjection. [...] the wolf hunches quietly and invisibly within the upright citizen, the symbiosis of the

human and the wolf embodying the hybrid, complex, unconscious grotesque. (2002, 8-9)

In discussing the relationship between *Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body*, Shildrick illustrates this process by remarking how monsters

‘cannot exist apart from “normal” bodies, but at the same time they are excessive to the binary, uncontained by any fixed category of exclusion... they refuse to stay in place [since] the catachrestic term “monster” both escapes binary closure and displaces simple difference. Monsters signify, then, not the oppositional other safely fenced off within its own boundaries, but the otherness of possible, worlds, or possible versions of ourselves, not yet realized.’ (1996, 8).

This is precisely why I find the werewolf a useful figure to reflect on the figure of the refugee abandoned (literally *and* metaphorically) to the forest and inhabiting its margins. The werewolf presence is in fact also defined by its geography, since its transformation from a human into a quasi-beast happens in the forest and its ‘crimes’ are perpetrated within the unruly context of the forest. Its appearances are reported historically at the edge of the villages, its bodily ambivalent presence perceived through the narratives that feed into the popular imagination. The fear that werewolves generates is thus associated to such ambivalent and at times obscure nature, torn between its human origin and its more-than-human presence. This is why the werewolf represents a powerful metaphor of the impossibility to entirely exclude the other-that-is-in-us, the non-human that resides in all of us. In the same fashion, the abandoned refugee in the forest disturbingly evokes the more-than-human-in-us that we would like to avoid being confronted with. As Shildrick rightly affirms: ‘at the very moment of definition, the subject is marked by its excluded other, the

absent presence which primary identification must deny and on which it relies' (1996, 6). In other words, 'the monster is always within' (ibid.) and keeping it in the forest is only a way to defer the moment in which the more-than-human in us will reveal itself.

## **Thresholds**

The secondary literature on Agamben has abundantly discussed (and criticised) the ways in which his philosophical project treats the question of the 'animality of man' (sic.), and I can only briefly and selectively make reference to it here by focusing on interventions that have deliberately engaged with the figure of the werewolf and its relevance in Agamben's conceptual architecture. The question of the animality of man is of course not new, recall Teshainer and Filho (2019) in their reading of the Italian philosopher's speculations on this issue: 'Agamben (2002) states that, since Aristotle, this is the fundamental question of metaphysics, as the very definition of man incorporates animality [...]. There is an animality in man' (2019, 186). While 'it is true that we are animals,' Teshainer and Filho however note that Agamben (2002) envisages another possibility: 'that this animality can become the very definition of the being ...' (2019, 187).

Along the same lines, ten Bos (2005), in highlighting the centrality of the concept of threshold for Agamben's project, proposes to link this concept to his critical speculations on the separation between the human and the non-human in Western thought, and suggests that it should not come as a surprise that 'Agamben has written extensively on werewolves, centaurs, ape-men, and other creatures that seem to blur the distinction between the human and the animal' (2005, 19). Only if we understand that politics should be about a *communality with the non-human*, insists ten Bos, we may appreciate 'that this threshold is

not only a danger but perhaps also, against all odds, an opportunity.’ (ibid.) From a different angle, Cisney’s analysis of Agamben’s figure of *homo sacer*<sup>1</sup> highlights how the Italian political philosopher ‘points to whereby homo sacer is brought into proximity with a beast-man’ (2008, 172). According to Agamben, recalls Cisney, ‘ancient Germanic law was to be founded on the concept of peace (*Fried*) and the corresponding exclusion from the community of the wrongdoer, who therefore became *friedlos*, without peace, and whom anyone was permitted to kill without committing homicide’ (Agamben 1998, 63). Germanic and Anglo-Saxon sources – continues Agamben – ‘underline the bandits liminal status by defining him as a wolf-man (*wargus*, *werwolf*, the Latin *garulphus*, from which the French *loup garou*, “werewolf,” is derived) (ibid.) There is therefore an etymological connection, Cisney concludes, ‘between the bandit, he who is without peace, and the werewolf, in that the word *wargus* was used in both cases.’ (2008, 172)

Swiffen (2012, 349) argues that for Agamben ‘the bandit was literally “banned” by the law. It could be killed without the death being a homicide and it was forbidden to shelter a bandit.’ In this sense, ‘the law applied to the bandit in the maintenance of the relation of ban’, something confirmed by Germanic and Anglo-Saxon sources marking ‘the bandit’s liminal status by defining it as a wolfman’ (ibid.).

Also according to Teshainer and Filho, the werewolf is a borderline/threshold figure in the Anglo-Saxon tradition: ‘In this tradition, there is a chance that man be tried and abandoned, by that same trial, by the law. He starts to wander in an area of indeterminacy and can no longer be considered a man – or at least a man who lives with other men under the same law.

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<sup>1</sup> *Homo sacer* (sacred man), is for Agamben an ‘obscure figure of archaic Roman law’, a figure whose bare life (*nuda vita*) ‘is included in the juridical order [...] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred tests of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries (1998, 12).

The werewolf wanders through the world, and he no longer has a human form-of-life.’ (2019, 187). When man is turned into a werewolf, an animal-man, Teshainer and Filho argue, ‘there is no longer any law that can ensure his form-of-life because all that is left is his bare life – something that any living organism has. The animal-man enters a zone where the possibility of being killed is real. The law abandons him and makes possible what was not possible: man becoming non-human.’ (ibid.) For Cisney, the werewolf ‘is neither wolf, wholly outside the law, nor man, under the reign of law, but an indescribable amalgamation of both. The werewolf lives in the zone of indeterminacy.’ (2008, 172). In this light,

the state of nature is not a real epoch chronologically prior to the foundation of the City but a principle internal to the City, which appears at the moment the City is considered *tanquam dissoluta*, “as if it were dissolved” [...] Accordingly, when Hobbes founds sovereignty by means of a reference to the state in which “man is a wolf to men”, *homo hominis lupus*, in the word “wolf” (*lupus*) we ought to hear an echo of the *wargus* and the *caput lupinem* of the laws of Edward the Confessor: at issue is not simply *fera bestia* and natural life but rather a zone of indistinction between the human and the animal, a werewolf, a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man—in other words, a bandit, a *homo sacer*. (Agamben 1998, 63-64).

The werewolf is thus the threshold figure that Agamben adopts to explain the structure of the ban, literally a wolf-man, a being in which the divide between what is human and what is not human is impossible to draw, the figure of the man (sic.) banned by his community.

However, ‘the werewolf does not only metaphorically inhabit this threshold of indistinction; he inhabits and moves through real spaces’ and spatial thresholds – the borderscape at the margin of the forest or the edge of the city – ‘spaces which, with his very presence and his

hybrid nature, he contributes to producing.’ (Minca 2006, 392). The long history of accounts concerning animal-men recalled in the previous section clearly identifies in the border between the forest and the city the space in which the werewolf manifests its ambivalent and mutable nature. The terrifying contact with a human beast has thus been described as a moment of unsettling realisation of the re-emerging animal-in-us, that is, of the persistence of the non-human in all humans, something brutally embodied by the more-than-human condition of the werewolf figure.

While Agamben never explicitly drew a parallel between the figures of the werewolf and that of the refugee, I would now like to provocatively reflect on how a dialogue between these two figures may help in analysing the informal geographies of the Balkan Route and their relationship to the forest and its margins. Despite the scrutiny and criticism of Agamben’s work on these concepts (see, for example, Caffo and Sferrazza Papa 2015), I nonetheless find the figure of the werewolf to be useful in reflecting on the refugees along the Balkan Route, their condition of being ‘banned from the city’ and the violence they are subsequently exposed to. What is more, the refugees inhabiting what they themselves describe as ‘the jungle’ (see Agier, 2018) do inhabit threshold spaces and do represent in many ways what Agamben has famously defined as ‘a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state’ (2000, 20). This explains why, writes Nedoh, ‘in the fields of political theory, migration and refugee studies, human geography, critical legal thinking and elsewhere, Agamben’s analysis of the figure of the refugee as a limit-concept of traditional political philosophy [...] was already broadly used for explaining the very precarious conditions within refugee camps across the globe.’ (2017, 4). What Agamben proposes, according to Nedoh (2017, 6), is to understand ‘the figure of the refugee not only as a central figure of the “coming political community,” but also as a limit-concept,’ marking a point of epistemological rupture within

modern political philosophy: ‘Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history.’ (Agamben 2000, 21). Considering the refugee-in-the-forest as a threshold figure in the production of political subjectivities today, may thus help interrogating their ‘ban-from-the-city’ as a strategy aimed and shed light on the ways in which the structure of the ban is operationalised and spatialised along the Balkan Route (and possibly elsewhere) today.

## **Jungles**

As noted above, the Balkan Route became the best-known informal corridor for refugee mobility in Europe during what was described as the ‘long summer of migration’ (Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020) in 2015 when almost one million refugees arriving from the Middle East reached Europe overland using this long established but relatively little-known pathway (Thorpe 2019). After crossing either Greece or Bulgaria, and then Serbia, the refugees normally entered the EU again via Hungary or Croatia (Lukić 2016; Pastore 2019). Their journey was facilitated by the short existence of a semi-formal corridor, which was supported by transportation organised by the governments of the region. However, in the second half of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 this corridor was gradually closed, and new border walls were built along the Balkan Route by Hungary, Bulgaria, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, and North Macedonia, often accompanied by episodes of illegal pushbacks (MSF 2017; Milivojević 2019). Korte, in her article *Who Is the Animal in the Zoo?*, highlights that ‘while the fence was the most visible action taken by the Hungarian authorities, it was certainly not the only one [...] The ‘push-backs’ to Serbia have been applied across the entire Hungarian

territory, leading to cases where people who entered Hungary by other means and had never been in Serbia were nevertheless pushed back to the Serbian side of the fence. (2020, 7-8).

The result of these interventions was that thousands of refugees became stranded along the Route, particularly in Serbia. Considered a transit country by authorities and refugees alike, Serbia has been hosting thousands of refugees in its archipelago of reception centres and camps for asylum seekers. I have discussed at length elsewhere (Author XXX) the development of a specific geography of camps in the region. Here, it suffices to say that while the humanitarian support offered by these camps was largely utilised by the refugees, at the same time, many decided to leave or not to reside in formal camps and instead preferred to sleep rough in the forest and the fields to be able to cross the border irregularly with the support of smugglers. However, the preparation for this journey through the fields and the mountains at Serbia's border with the EU entailed significant waiting times and the ability of being easily reached by those same networks of smugglers to assist with the journey across the border when the time came. This resulted in many refugees establishing and/or residing in makeshift camps along the Route, some of which became well-known pivot points along this informal corridor, located either in abandoned factories or minor buildings in the countryside, or in the forests along the border areas, in this way giving life to a myriad of 'jungles'. The term 'jungle', according to Agier (2018, 2), was commonly used to refer to the makeshift camps in Calais and derives from the distortion and resignification of the Pashtun term *djangal* which originally means 'forest'; however, along the Balkan Route, the term has been generally adopted by refugees, volunteers and journalists alike to refer to the unruly spatialities comprised of makeshift arrangements to accommodate refugees waiting for the opportunity to move further and especially the spaces of 'wilderness' – be it the forest or the



mountains crossed to move further north or the unoccupied fields surrounding their improvised encampments.

This counter-archipelago of informal dwellings consisted of established makeshift camps, such as the so-called Belgrade Barracks (which hosted over 2000 refugees in dire winter conditions for months), the Grafosrem Factory in Šid, and the 'Old Brick Factory' in Subotica, as well as a number of improvised rough accommodations at the edges of the forest near villages, roads and potential border passages (Thorpe 2019). According to the UNHCR (2020), at the end of 2020, almost 7,000 refugees were registered in institutional camps in Serbia, while about 2200 were thought to be sleeping rough around the country (but many more could have gone undetected). Overall, this geography of refugee makeshift arrangements was known to the authorities and the humanitarian organisations, and also to the residents of the towns and villages with which they interacted. Perhaps the most extraordinary case of such interplay of visibility and invisibility, was in the abovementioned barracks behind the central station in Belgrade during the cold winter months of 2017, where the refugees staying there were abandoned by the authorities to their miserable (but unpoliced) condition of refugees-in-waiting with no interventions to either help or hinder their onward journey. No attempt of evicting the refugees was made until there was a circulation of images in the international media of the camp, which led to most of the residents being moved to a formal camp and the barracks were eventually bulldozed (Stojić Mitrović et al 2020). However, during those winter months, one could see in some of the central streets of the Serbian capital ghostly figures walking in the snow covered by grey blankets, and their faces blackened by the fumes of the materials burned in the barracks to resist the cold. Surrounded by other people's indifference, these refugees manifested in their appearance, in their exposure to the elements, in their silent presence in the city a disturbing

‘return to nature’, and were accordingly often forced by the police to return to the barracks. Similar figures could be encountered in those days in other, smaller makeshift camps, in other ‘jungles’ in the northern border regions, where, gathered around an improvised fire, small groups of men were surviving day after day, while waiting to engage with ‘the game’, the term refugees use to indicate their attempts to cross the border irregularly (Author XXX).

These refugees were literally inhabiting a threshold between the city and the forest (in its literal and metaphorical sense), human figures subjected to border regimes that were not only imposed on them but also marked on their bodies, with the multiple scars and the broken bones some displayed in the Barracks as an effect of the pushbacks during previous attempts to cross the border (Walker, 2019). These refugees and the jungles they inhabited were thus part of the reproduction of the specific borderscapes characterising the broader political geographies of the Balkan Route, geographies made of forced circular movements, material borders with walls and fences, pushbacks and violence-at-the-border perpetuated by the authorities (Minca and Umek 2020), but also refugee informal mobilities facilitated by smugglers, humanitarian organisations *and* (other) authorities determined not to track, identify or assist those not incorporated in the formal camp system. Such interplay between lack of intervention and pushbacks should be seen, according to Tazzioli, as part of a mode of governing migrations through non-governing, something that includes a ‘degree of opacity and implementation of migration policies’ (2020, 64). In this perspective, the combined presence of formal and informal camps, of humanitarian support but also neglect and abandonment, may be interpreted as the result of such a mode of governing, which was also at the origin of the unofficial ban of refugees to the jungles and to moving along the thresholds spatialities between ‘the forest’ and ‘the city’.

I have analysed elsewhere (Author XXX) the management and the lack of management of the Balkan Route as a manifestation of a broader geopolitics of containment of these informal refugee mobilities operating at different scales. While the grand geographies linked to the most conventional state geopolitical narratives continue to represent (or not represent at all) these mobilities as unregulated (and poorly mapped) flows of unidentified individuals across the region, the scale of makeshift camps and jungles tends to disappear from sight, together with the perilous journeys and the dire living conditions of thousands of individuals experiencing such wild spatialities of Europe. For this reason, Rygiel (2011, 7), referring to the Jungle in Calais, has argued that ‘it is so important to investigate camp spaces like “the jungle” not as simply spaces of exceptionality and bare life but as spaces of politics in their own right.’ Having said that, these unruly spatialities, made largely invisible by the official border politics of the governments of the countries crossed by the Balkan Route<sup>2</sup>, are sites where the refugees are constantly exposed ‘at the risk of violence, trafficking, and other abusive practices including injury, trauma, exploitation, and dispossession’ (Mandić 2018, 2). While I endorse van Houtum’s claim that this kind of border politics may be seen as a way of ‘making of borders via the making of others, othering’ (2010, 960), which produces a ‘geopoliticisation of human life’ (Hyndman 2011) and a related population of unwanted, redundant people, I would like to argue that this managed-and-unmanaged informal mobility is also marked by a progressive ‘animalisation’ of the refugee-body-on-the-move in the forests and across the borders of this corner of Europe. And this is where the werewolf figure may help in understanding how the refugee along the Balkan Route may experience a more-than-human journey.

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the process of repression or even erasure of the refugees’ bare life and of their exposure to violence and eventual death from public memory or record see in Bargu’s reflections on ‘Sovereignty as erasure’ (Bargu 2014) and Bradley’s recent ‘genealogy of political erasure’ (2019).

## More-than-human journeys

Rita Sakr, in a recent article entitled *The more-than-human refugee journey*, analyses two short stories authored by writer and former refugee Hassan Blasim focussed on refugee journeys through the Balkan Route and highlights how these stories reflect a setting which ‘emphasizes the mutual encroachment of inhabited space and wilderness, national territoriality and environmental fluidity.’ (2018, 770). Sakr also reflects on how, in those stories, the refugee journey is pervaded by more-than-human elements and how the werewolf figure emerges in Blasim’s fictional narrative.

After recalling the importance of the existing ‘[t]ransdisciplinary investigations of the intersections between biopolitical and ecological research in recent years’, Sakr suggests that ‘a similar nexus of more-than-human encounters and transformations in real and imagined forests punctuating the trajectories of forced and clandestine migration to Europe can be found in Hassan Blasim’s collections of short stories, *The Madman of Freedom Square* (Blasim [2009] 2016) and *The Iraqi Christ* (Blasim 2013)...’ (2018, 766, 767). In line with our prior considerations on the werewolf figure, she argues that what is normally presented as a stable and reassuring border ‘between the human and non-human is undermined when the bodies leave the biopolitically managed network of connected cities and enter liminal space-times of abandonment at the Serbian forest-border’ (2018, 770). In this respect, she mentions reports from Amnesty International showing how refugees inhabiting the so-called jungles have often been exposed to extensive ill-treatment and exploitation by the police on the Serbian side of the Serbian–Hungarian border. Notably, her analysis insists on the geographical dimension of this selective biopolitical management of refugee bodies, identifying in the forest/jungle a set of threshold spatialities which are essential in the

transformation of those bodies into a more-than-human presence along this informal corridor. Accordingly, Sakr recognises in Blasim's stories a valuable illustration of the how forced and irregular migration in this region offers 'new opportunities to address territoriality, life and truth at their limits in real and imagined sites where forest and border, human and non-human meet to suggest more-than-human futures for the paradoxical project of reclaiming human rights.' (2018, 767).

Starting from the story entitled *The Truck to Berlin*, Sakr explains that it is not by chance that the horrific events there narrated 'occur in thick and vast forests that are adjacent to national borders' (2018, 769), forests that represent 'the most conceptually dense geographical anchor for the exploration of the perilous dynamics of forced and clandestine migration as well as their related geopolitical and representational parameters.' (ibid.). The story is about a clandestine journey of 'thirty-five young Iraqis', transported by a Turkish smuggler in 'a closed truck exporting tinned fruit from Istanbul to Berlin' (Blasim 2016, 68 in Sakr 2018, 770) and found dead by the Serbian police, a story that, despite being fictional, resonates with real-world events, and particular with the tragic discovery of over 70 dead refugees in a truck abandoned on an Austrian highway in August 2015 (Harding 2015). Also in Blasim's story the refugees are abandoned by the smuggler, but this time found "on the edge of a small border town surrounded by forest on all sides" in an "abandoned poultry field" (2016, 72, in Sakr, 2018, 770). What the police discover in *The Truck to Berlin* are 34 'dismembered corpses while a "bloodstained youth" escapes from the truck into the forest and is reported to have crossed the border into Hungary.' (Blasim 2016, 73) And here is where the zoomorphic figure of the werewolf makes its appearance. The Serbian police record, in Blasim's story, is challenged by the account of a single policeman who declares that 'as soon as the man reached the forest he started to run on all fours, then turned into a grey wolf, before he

vanished' (ibid.). And here is also where Sakr references Agamben to recall how the werewolf is 'a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city [...] the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply a wolf [. . .] is decisive here.' (2017, 89, in Sakr 2018, 771).

The powerful account of the lone policeman describing 'the threshold of the forest' as a site where a human 'morph[s] into a wolf' is read by Sakr as a testimony 'to the horror of Europe's new heart of darkness but resists a full articulation of the moral and political implications of the extraterritoriality of violence against secretly migrating bodies.' (2018, 771). This passage is particularly relevant for my main argument. What the figure of the werewolf-refugee highlights here is precisely how the abandonment of the refugee to the forest and the jungle is tightly connected to a sort of implicit zoomorphism which penetrates some of the mainstream contemporary narratives that describe (or fail to describe) such invisible journeys across the Balkan Route. What I am trying to say is that the refugee-morphed-into-a-more-than-human-being may not only disappear into the darkness of the forest without being seen, but may also 'inhabit the jungle' and therefore the thresholds between the spaces of the human and non-human which expose them to the invisible but real violence of the border. Sakr is therefore correct in highlighting that:

...Blasim's text is the confrontation with the crisis of representation concerning what has been dubbed as 'the refugee crisis' in the mass media. This pertains to the sensationalism and trivialization of the loss of human life and the failure to represent abandonment and assaults on 'bare life' in the heterotopic spaces<sup>3</sup> of the Mediterranean and the Balkan forest-border where accountability for not saving and/or violating

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<sup>3</sup> For an original reflection on the constitution of heterotopic space see Foucault's 1967 path-breaking intervention entitled *Of other spaces*.

human life is blurred by extraterritoriality. [...] the Afghan's story of the 'twenty-four bodies', the 'hungry wolves' and the man 'turned into a grey wolf' marks the unhinging of the representational boundaries of the speciesist imaginary at the limits of territoriality, life and truth. [...] 'The Truck to Berlin' magnifies the violence of metaphor and the metaphorical space of violence against the other/alien body and implies that participating in or witnessing without bearing witness to such violence are forms of complicity in representational madness. (2018, 773, 771-72)

Sakr insists on this perspective by explaining that in another story, *The Iraqi Christ*, Basim returns to the Serbian forests near the Hungarian border, this time by focusing on the role played by the thousands of 'border hunters' arranged by the Hungarian police to, literally, 'hunt' in the forest at night terrified individuals, hunters who have been reported to 'take selfies with beaten and humiliated migrants' (2018, 774, see also Dearden 2017). Sakr suggests that while:

the term "border hunters" inscribes unapologetically the non-human as a target for the boundary-enforcing operation [...] blurring the boundaries between the human and the non-human as they both cross its space-time, the forest suggests a more ecologically attuned perspective on freedom of movement, based in the claims of the environment rather than the nation. Yet a utopian conceptualization of the extraterritoriality of the forest is immediately disrupted by Blasim's introduction of a militarized disciplinary force combining the human and non-human as the Hungarian army dogs sniff a corpse among the asylum-seekers. The biopolitical parameters of the heterotopic wilderness and related predatory dynamics are thus reasserted as the clandestine migrating human body is exposed and immobilized in discipline and death while the non-human force is co-opted by the nation state. (2018, 774-775)

While these stories powerfully illustrate the political geographies at play along the Balkan Route and in the Serbian northern borderscapes since the beginning of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, at the same time they help in reflecting on how the structure of the ban is employed along this informal refugee corridor. To recall once again Agamben’s original reference to the werewolf, it is important to note how the visible-invisible geographies of informal mobility discussed in this article are pervaded by thresholds and borders marked by a specific topology permeated by more-than-human references, which, crucially, are embodied by refugee mobile subjects ‘banned from the city’ and abandoned to the forest and to the dark violence it facilitates. The concluding section is thus dedicated to this metaphorical and effective *return to nature* of the refugee, and to its transformative power.

### **Back to the forest**

This article has investigated the figure of the werewolf to reflect on the ways in which informal refugee journeys along the Balkan Route are affected by a more-than-human political geography based on a specific form of border and migration management. Drawing from Agamben’s conceptualisations of the werewolf as a key figure in determining the structure of the ban, I have explored how this figure has historically been presented in European accounts as a threshold between the human and the non-human. The transformative power of humans turning into wolves has also been discussed in light of the exclusionary practices employed by western ‘civilised’ societies in order to distinguish and protect themselves from the ‘animality’ that arguably resides in all humans, and from groups and individuals who, because of their social, cultural or racial presumed qualifications, were perceived as a threat to such entirely ‘humanised’ societies. The forest has thus historically



been represented as the site where humans may morph into animals, and in particular into werewolves, and therefore as the natural topos of such potential emergence of ‘animality-in-us’. Here, the forest was thus discussed in relation to what may provocatively be described as the figure of the werewolf-refugee and their the more-than-human transformations along the Balkan Route – a space which coincides ‘neither with any of the homogeneous national territories nor with their topographical sum, but [...] rather act on them by articulating and perforating them topologically as in the Klein bottle or in the Möbius strip, where exterior and interior in-determine each other’. (Agamben 2000, 24.5).

In the hope to contribute to the existing debates on the Balkan Route and its informal refugee geographies, I would thus like to conclude by advancing a few general considerations concerning the more-than-human dimension of the refugee journeys discussed in this article. First, while practices of desubjectification of refugees are common at official border crossings and in the procedures related to their identification and control (see Hyndman, 2000), in the forest, away from the public eye, these practices can be driven by primordial forces, like the example of the Hungarian ‘border hunters’ seems to reveal, where the idea of ‘hunting’ the refugee necessitates a conception of them as prey in the bush. Second, in the region considered here, the forest and the border tend to become one and the same, since the forest is a borderscape where refugees live and move; the porosity of such forest-as-a-border is what allows the ban of the refugee from the city and their informal mobility to continue, in this way reproducing the image of their unruly wild presence from which (European) society must be protected. Third, an implicit zoomorphism of the many accounts concerning refugees-on-the-move along the Balkan Route has emerged in many instances, including one case (in Bosnia-Herzegovina) where refugees were forced to move to an ‘authorised makeshift camp’ established on a former industrial waste dump populated by rats and snakes,

and surrounded by a forest that remains a minefield never entirely cleared after the Yugoslavian war of the 1990s. Notably, the refugees were allowed to leave at any time to try the game and cross the border a few kilometres away, and disappear in the wilderness of that forest space (Author, XXX). Fourth, the refugee-in-the-forest represents a troubling site where the human-in-us may come into question and the animal-in-us may suddenly re-emerge, and therefore needs to be kept in movement, away from the city, as a wild but partially tamed presence. This is perhaps why the border police, in the forest, often deprives the refugees of their shoes and their phones and return them to a sort of state of nature, allowing them to leave and survive in the jungle. Finally, the werewolf-refugee, represented as a border figure, as a mutable character, as a human in transformation, may remind us that we can all be refugees, fuelling in this way anxieties about invasion and a potential dissolution of what Agamben calls the *civitas*. Accordingly, the fear of the more-than-human-in-us perhaps explains why borders and walls in the Balkan region need to remain penetrable and the informal Route active, because the visible-invisible presence of werewolves-refugees allows this fear to be contained in the forest and to avoid questioning the ontological possibility of redefining the human in us, even if this comes at the price of abandoning the refugees to the jungle. In this way, we may perpetuate the delusionary avoidance of looking these refugees in the face, a face in which we would (be forced to) recognise, ‘the otherness of possible, worlds, or possible versions of ourselves, *not yet realized*.’ (Shildrick 1996, 8, italics added).

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