

Welcome to Finnish Literature!

Hassan Blasim and the Politics of Belonging

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The article discusses Hassan Blasim's precarious position in the Finnish literary field. Blasim is an Iraqi-born author who came as a refugee to Finland in 2004. Since then, he has become an internationally acclaimed author whose short stories, written in Arabic, have been translated into more than 20 languages, including Finnish. However, his inclusion in the Finnish literary field is questionable: while he has gained increasing recognition in the form of awards and grants, he cannot join, due to the original language of his work, either the national writers' union for Finnish speakers or its Swedish-language counterpart. Blasim's status as an immigrant makes him a stranger in Finland, part insider and part outsider. The article elaborates on the sociological concept of "stranger", as explicated by Georg Simmel, in reference to writers like Blasim. It also examines the media reception of Blasim and his books in Finland. The analysed material consists of journalistic texts on Blasim as well as his books published in Finnish newspapers and magazines from 2009 to 2014, from the first articles about him in the Finnish media to the news of him receiving the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize.

Hassan Blasim is an Iraqi-born author who came as a refugee to Finland in 2004. Two collections of his short stories, written in Arabic, are available in translation for Finnish readers. However, his inclusion in the Finnish literary field is questionable: on one hand, his books are discussed by the Finnish media and he is receiving increasing recognition;¹ but on the other hand, due to the original language of his

1 Blasim is mentioned in the latest general reference book of contemporary literature in Finland (*Suomen nykykirjallisuus I–II*, 2013) as an example of writers with immigrant backgrounds living and working in the country. He also gets attention from researchers who consider him part of the literary field in Finland. The Finnish Literary Society is going to make an "author interview" with him, which will be recorded and stored in the literary archives for the use of scholars. He has received various grants and awards in Finland. At European Literature Night in London in 2015, Blasim was even announced by one of the financiers of the event as representing Finland (<http://www.finnish-institute.org.uk/en/articles/1451-european-literature-night-vii-brings-the-continents-top-writers-to-london>). Moreover, Blasim takes active part in discussions about literature, as well as politics, in Finland. In May 2015, for instance, he was invited to the Helsinki Lit event to read from his book, but instead he gave a powerful talk that criticized the way in which writers with immigrant backgrounds are treated in Finland. Broadcast live on television, this speech created further discussion in the media.

work, he cannot join, for example, either the national writers' union for Finnish speakers or the one for Swedish speakers only (see Korhonen & Paqvalén 2016, 19–20). Overall, it can be argued that it is his status as an immigrant that makes him a stranger in Finland, part insider and part outsider. The article discusses Blasim's precarious position in the Finnish literary field.

Blasim's work is essentially transnational. His first publishing channel was the Internet, and his readers are scattered all around the Arabic-speaking world. Blasim's writing circulates around the globe not only in the original Arabic but also in translations. Two collections of his short stories that appeared first in English translations, *The Madman of Freedom Square* (2009) and *The Iraqi Christ* (2013), have been translated extensively into other languages, and an American edition of his work, *The Corpse Exhibition*, was published by Penguin (USA) in 2014. A publisher in Italy released the first uncensored collection of Blasim's short stories in Arabic in 2015 in book form (Al-Nawas 2017).

The themes of Blasim's stories seem to find appeal among readers all around the world. Even though his style is often characterised in terms of such genres as magical realism and absurdism, his stories invariably address real, tangible subjects. Most of the stories are set in the past decades of Iraq's history: the war with Iran, the aftermath of the Gulf War, the horrors following the most recent U.S. invasion and the Iraqi exile. However, they are not so much stories about war but stories about how war permeates the minds of the people involved in it. The characters in his stories are dislocated and existentially lost. One of his central themes involves the difficulties of processing the trauma caused by war.

Although the reception of Blasim's texts has internationally been laudatory – he was described by the *Guardian* as “perhaps the greatest writer of Arabic fiction alive” (Yassin-Kassab 2010) – he has been relatively unknown in Finland. However, after he won the esteemed Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in the UK in 2014, several articles and news stories were also written about him in Finnish media. The Finland Award, granted to Blasim by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2015, can be seen as a breakthrough into Finland's cultural scene, although his visibility outside of it should not be overestimated.

Despite his success, Blasim remains an immigrant, a status that inevitably also affects his position in the literary field of Finland. In the case of Blasim, *the politics of belonging*,² mentioned in the title of this article, is multi-layered and mutable. Prior to 2016, his not belonging to the nation of Finland was signified by the fact that he had been denied citizenship due to failing the required language test. Now, as the holder of a Finnish passport, he is able to travel much more easily than with the so-called “alien's passport” he used to have before. However, the question of his belonging to the literary field in Finland is still a matter of debate. The language

2 The use of the concept “politics of belonging” in this article is influenced by the work of Nira Yuval-Davis (2011), as she has pointed out how politics of belonging include struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community. (See also Lähdesjärvi et al. 2016.)

he uses for writing is perhaps the most important thing that defines and restricts his inclusion.

In order to understand Blasim's public image in Finland, it is necessary to develop a wider conception of how immigrants are represented in the national mediascape. According to research conducted on the Finnish media, the portrayal of immigrants and other minorities often implies a certain kind of understanding about Finnish culture and people in which the country and its inhabitants are seen as homogeneous and monolingual. The embodied multiculturalisation of immigrants in Finland results in a persistent drawing of boundaries between Finnishness and strangeness (e.g. Horsti 2005; Rossi 2011; Haavisto 2011). In her research on the media's role in positioning minorities in Finland, Camilla Haavisto stresses the importance of accepting Finnishness as a flexible category (Haavisto 2011, 203). The need for reconsidering Finnish literature – or rather, literature in Finland – as a flexible category is equally justified.

In this article, I will first discuss the sociological concept of “stranger”, as enunciated by Georg Simmel, in reference to writers like Blasim. Secondly, I will examine the media reception of Blasim and his books in Finland. The analysed material consists of journalistic texts on Blasim and his books published in Finnish newspapers and magazines in 2009–2014, from the first articles about him in the Finnish media to the news of him receiving the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, and it includes book reviews, columns, interviews and articles. The variety of the analysed texts provides a comprehensive overview of the printed media covering literature and literary culture in Finland.³

Out of Place

In the photograph (see p. 70), Hassan Blasim is standing on a frozen lake close to Tampere, Finland, where he lived at the time. The picture was published in a 3-page interview in Finland's biggest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, in the middle of March 2014 (Zidan 2014). Translated into English, the headline of the story runs: “Literary sensation from Pispala.”⁴ However, the headline and the man in the picture may raise questions. For example, how exactly is he *from* Pispala?

Pispala is a residential area in Tampere, known for its homey wooden houses built topsy-turvy on a narrow ridge between two lakes; that is the view Blasim is facing while he is posing for the photograph. But is Blasim not clearly an immigrant, a refugee from Iraq, who writes in Arabic? What does Pispala have to do with Arabic literature?

3 The analysed media texts comprise 16 articles (including interviews and news stories), 13 critiques (of which two were published in three regional newspapers and one in four regional newspapers), and one column. The articles were mostly published in daily newspapers, but some appeared in weekly magazines and other publications.

4 “Kirjallinen sensaatio Pispalasta.”

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Kirjallinen sensaatio Pispalasta

Brittilehti kutsuu Hassan Blasimia
"ehkä parhaaksi elossa olevaksi
arabialaiskirjailijaksi". Irakista
paennut Blasim asuu Tampereella
eikä kaippaa sieltä minnekään.

"Literary sensation from Pispala" (Zidan 2014, C1).

For Finns, there is nothing particularly strange in connecting Pispala with literature. The national canon of Finnish literature includes several esteemed authors identified as coming from Pispala; these are writers who were born and lived there, and who also use Pispala as a setting in their stories. However, Pispala is not just any kind of milieu for a narrative, since it has working class written all over it, so to speak. Pispala is famous not only as a picturesque neighbourhood, which nowadays attracts both artists and people of means, but also because of its history as a community founded by the factory workers of Tampere. Accordingly, the place has a strong symbolic meaning. The last battle of the Finnish Civil War in the Tampere area took place at the top of Pispala ridge in the year 1918; it is the very place where the Reds – consisting mainly of industrial and agrarian workers – lost the war.⁵

Thus, presenting Hassan Blasim as being from Pispala is, in the parlance of cultural studies, a fascinating *articulation*. This particular association of two seemingly mismatching things, an Arab author in the Finnish literary landscape, inspires thought about several concepts that are often discussed in studies focusing on transnationalism, such as place and belonging, mobility of identities, and migration (e.g. Pollari et al. 2015). In addition, from the point of view of literary studies, Blasim's case evokes questions concerning the multilingualism of the national literary field as well as the formation of the literary canon in Finland.

Even though the article in *Helsingin Sanomat* accentuates how after a long and tiresome journey as a refugee Blasim has finally found a place of his own in Pispala, as a writer he seems to be in some ways dislocated. According to Pascale Casanova, “the study of literature almost everywhere in the world is organized along national lines”, and this is “a result of the appropriation of literatures and literature histories by political nations during the nineteenth century” (Casanova 2007, xi). However, in the history of literature, being geographically or linguistically “out of place” is not at all an unusual position – quite the contrary. The list of writers in exile or writers who have voluntarily emigrated from their country of origin is long and contains many distinguished writers, from Joseph Conrad to W. G. Sebald, from V. S. Naipaul to Salman Rushdie. Nevertheless, this kind of transnational mobility, which is so visible in “world literature”, is not necessarily perceived by national literary histories that often fail to identify authors who function in two or more countries or write in two or more languages (Pollari et al. 2015, 6). The latest reference book on contemporary literature in Finland, published in two volumes in 2013, does include a chapter on the profession of authors “getting more international”⁶ while focusing on writers that have moved to Finland from abroad (Nissilä & Rantonen 2013). All in all, however, literature has had such strong significance in imagining the Finnish

5 Societal and political tensions leading to the Finnish Civil War are depicted in several novels set in Pispala, such as F. E. Sillanpää's *Hiltu ja Ragnar* (1923) and Lauri Viita's *Moreeni* (1950).

6 In the original, “kansainvälistyvä kirjailijakunta”.

nation that the literary field would seem to reject strangers like Blasim. He sticks out like a naked bulrush on a frozen lake.

The dilemma of placing writers like Blasim in the national atlas of literature is reflected in the process of classifying, categorising and labelling them. In the Nordic countries, one of the terms most commonly used and discussed by both critics and scholars has been “immigrant author” (e.g. Kongslien 2007; Gebauer & Schwartz Lausten 2010; Behschnitt & Nilsson 2013). However, the problems implied by the concept are widely known (Löytty 2015). Discussing literature written by writers with an immigrant background in Sweden, Magnus Nilsson writes that “[t]his construction of the category of ‘immigrant literature’ limits the representational scope of this literature, and produces othering and exoticizing representations of non-Swedish ethnicities” (Nilsson 2010, 1).

In her pioneering study on “transnational literature” in Finland, Hanna-Leena Nissilä highlights the significance of concepts as methodological instruments directing the orientation of the research (Nissilä 2016, 51). Choosing the conceptual framework and additional terminology has certain consequences for the direction of the analysis. For example, concepts like “immigrant literature” – or “refugee literature”, another term used in regard to writers like Blasim – draw attention to only one possible interpretational frame at a time. Blasim is certainly a refugee and an immigrant in Finland, but describing him as a refugee or immigrant writer narrows his writer’s identity as well as the scope of interpretations made of his texts. (Löytty 2015.) However, as Nissilä argues, the choice of concepts depends on the research question; the background or the transnational mobility of the given author may very well be of importance (Nissilä 2106, 51–52).

Stranger – Partly in, Partly out

Despite his being a stranger in the literary field of Finland, Blasim is certainly not a complete outsider or alien with no recognizable features: as German sociologist Georg Simmel (1971/1908) pointed out, the figure of a stranger is always a product of a negotiation between the familiar and the alien. In the beginning of the 20th century, Simmel wrote that the stranger may be a member of a group in a spatial sense, but not in a social sense; s/he may be among us but not one of us. In other words, a stranger is located in an area where the circles of the familiar and the alien overlap. However, that person is familiar enough to be identified and categorized as a stranger. In the words of Sara Ahmed, “we recognize somebody as a stranger, rather than simply failing to recognize them” (2000, 21). Therefore, “the inhabitants of Sirius are not exactly strangers to us”, as Simmel writes, “they are beyond being far and near” (1971/1908, 143–144). In short, strangership is an element of the group itself.

Simmelian sociology understands strangership as a social position (Huttunen 2002, 331) rather than as a feature of an individual, and as a position it is always

relational and contextual. Indeed, there are different degrees to being a stranger, and in this respect the concept differs from another commonly applied term that is used in reference to difference and alterity, namely “otherness”. As a concept, “other” directs analysis to a pattern of binary logic (either/or) (Hall 1997), whereas the position of being a stranger undermines this binarism, taking into account that it is possible to simultaneously be both an insider and outsider or a member and non-member; thus, the question of belonging is not reduced to choosing just one mutually exclusive option.

In her study on positioning practices of minorities in Finland, *Conditionally One of ‘Us’*, Camilla Haavisto analyses the discursive organization of difference in print media. According to her, “when minority actors have visibility and voice, their similarity and close relation to ‘us’ seem to be emphasised, and when they lack visibility and voice, the more their differences and lack of relationships to ‘us’ are underlined.” She illustrates the intensity of strangership by drawing continua on which, for example, “visibility and voice go from visible and loud to invisible and silent.” (Haavisto 2011, 190–191.)

This means that belonging can be thought of as a *process of integration*. It is indeed possible to be “conditionally one of ‘us’” or relatively integrated, to belong partly, to have two or more loyalties, to identify with several places simultaneously, or to have one’s heart partly here and partly elsewhere. Thus, in the same way as the concept of strangership implies the relativity of otherness, the process of integration implies the relativity of belonging.

However, it must be kept in mind that in a world that follows the national order, simultaneous belonging and not belonging can, of course, be very disconcerting and disturbing. In his essay on the social construction of ambivalence, Zygmunt Bauman (2007, 61) writes that the enforcement of any classifications inevitably means the production of anomalies. By anomaly, he refers to “phenomena which are perceived as ‘anomalous’ only as far as they span the categories whose staying apart is the meaning of order”. Bauman discusses the Simmelian concept of stranger and states: “There is hardly an anomaly more anomalous than the stranger. He stands *between* friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside.” (Ibid., italics in original.)

Nonetheless, as the articulation that made Blasim a Finnish writer or a writer from Pispala indicates, writers in exile do not exist outside the national fields of literature or in a no-man’s land (Pollari et al. 2015, 8–13). Instead, they are often – always, sometimes, necessarily, most likely? – connected to more than one regional context, and therefore they become personifications of ambivalence.

One of Blasim’s short stories, *The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes* (2009), illustrates in a forceful way what happens if the “stranger” attempts to assimilate all the way. When an Iraqi refugee by the name of Salim Abdul Husein arrives in the Netherlands, he changes his name to Carlos Fuentes, “a brown name” that suits the complexion of his skin but does not reveal his Iraqi origin. Carlos soon learns Dutch, marries a Dutch woman, enrolls in “numerous courses on Dutch culture

and history”, and consequently obtains Dutch citizenship. The metamorphosis is so complete that “Fuentes felt his skin and blood has changed for ever and that his lungs were now breathing real life.”

Despite his systematic efforts, however, Carlos is not able to get rid of his original self. He begins to have nightmares of his true identity being disclosed and ridiculed. At the end of the story, he has a dream where he meets Salim Abdul Husain, who is laughing at Carlos’ changed identity. In the nightmare, Carlos shoots Salim, while in reality Carlos Fuentes is found dead on the pavement, and the newspapers report about “an Iraqi man” – not a Dutch national – who committed suicide by jumping from the sixth floor window. (Blasim 2009, 77–84.)

The significance of language is emphasized in the short story. In one of his nightmares, Carlos is standing in the courtroom, accused of planting a car bomb in the centre of Amsterdam, but the judges forbid him from speaking Dutch, “with the intent to humiliate and degrade him”. The “agony and distress” are ratcheted up when the Iraqi translator tells him not to speak “in his incomprehensible rustic accent”. (Ibid., 81.)

Among other things, *The Nightmares of Carlos Fuentes* demonstrates the difficulties inherent in the position of a stranger. While Blasim has not by any means pursued the status of a “Finnish writer”, the question of his place is raised as soon as he steps into the literary field, which is organized so often along national lines as well as congruent linguistic lines.

This ambivalence is also implied in the categorising of Blasim as a transnational writer. The prefix ‘trans-’ refers to border crossings, and it signifies the obvious fact that Blasim cannot be located in one place only. The term also contains the stem ‘natio’, which indicates the significance of the national order in the prevailing worldview in general and in the definitions of literature in particular. Despite the recent, inexorable trajectories of globalization, depending of course on the specific research question, nations may still be meaningful units of analysis, even in the case of writers in exile. Even if it would sound somewhat peculiar to call Blasim simply either an Iraqi writer or a Finnish writer, both locations of identities, Iraq and Finland, are of importance when his place in the transnational cartography of literature is considered.

Reception in Finland

I will now analyse the reception of Blasim in Finnish media by “measuring” his degree of strangeness in critiques and articles. How much of a stranger is he considered to be? I will pay special attention to the way in which Blasim is *located* in the critiques and articles. These locations are defined in *narratives of belonging* used to describe either his background or present circumstances. There are at least two narratives, namely local and global, that appear to be conflicting. Although it looks as if he was drawn in opposite directions, I would like to think that there is a dynamic tension between the local and global versions of the story.

First, Blasim's exilic, transnational background is presented by telling about his personal journey from Iraq to Finland. Although he now lives in Finland, he continues to travel around the world, promoting his books, attending book faires, etc. Moreover, his texts circulate in the global book market as translations and adaptations. In addition, Blasim's books are transnational because in many critiques the location of his oeuvre is discussed in terms of the aesthetic traditions of world literature. Secondly, in all articles about him and almost all critiques about his books, he is located in his present place of residence: Finland, Tampere, Pispala, Helsinki. This version of the narrative emphasizes the significance of his local ties.

Blasim was introduced to Finnish readers first and foremost as a refugee living in exile in Finland. The reason why he is written about is markedly and explicitly connected to his being a stranger in Finland. Obviously, this approach is justified because some of his short stories depict refugees and the Iraqi diaspora. The other reason for the interest of the media is the success of his books, particularly in the English-speaking world; foreign cultural capital is often considered very strong currency in Finland.

In 2010, when the first collection of his short stories was published in English but not yet in Finnish, the *Helsingin Sanomat* featured a lengthy article in which Blasim's story is told in detail but the focus is on the breakthrough of his work in the English and Arabic book markets, not in Finland. It is mentioned only briefly that a Finnish publisher is considering translating his first collection of short stories. In other words, in this early version of the narrative, his present life in Finland is like an excuse for the story, which is a *curiosity*. The article seems to be implying that readers should be excited about the fact that this foreign writer on the verge of international success presently lives in the country. In the article, Blasim's journey as a refugee is said to be filled with fantastic coincidences, while ending up in Finland is mentioned only briefly and with no dramatic twist: "He came to Finland in 2004. He doesn't have an Iraqi passport, because he is atheist." (Petäjä 2010.)

However, the writer, a well-known journalist working at the *Helsingin Sanomat*, introduces Blasim with a reassurance that "the Finnish reader should not be scared" of his texts, since his short stories are much easier to approach than Salman Rushdie's books, which "touch the changeable interface of the East and West". By contrast, Blasim writes "in a cool and laconic way without unnecessary intricacies or heavy cultural decorations". (Ibid.) It is suggested that the implied reader of the text will agree with the journalist that the Finnish audience is more comfortable with texts that do not possess "unnecessary intricacies". One may assume that the "heavy cultural decorations" that are labelled as unnecessary by the journalist refer to some kind of Orientalist writing tradition, as implied by Rushdie and Blasim's place of origin.

Blasim's literary style is presented to Finnish readers by references to both Eastern and Western literary cultures. An illustrative example of localising Blasim within specific literary traditions is provided by *Kiiltomato* (6.3.2013), an online literary magazine. The critique of Blasim's first collection in Finnish starts with

references to both modern European literature and the tradition of Arabic literature: “If Gogol or Kafka were to write the *Thousand and One Nights* set in contemporary Baghdad, the outcome would resemble Hassan Blasim’s collection of short stories *The Madman of Freedom Square (Majnun sahat al-hurriyya)*.” (Salomaa 2013.)

In addition to Gogol and Kafka, authors like Fuentes, Musil, García Márquez and Borges are named as kindred spirits to Blasim in the critiques of his books. His style is called magical realism, fantasy, metafiction and described as surreal, absurd, and minimalistic. It is said to be allegorical but also realistic. *Thousand and One Nights* is mentioned in several critiques. In this way, Blasim is localized in-between Eastern and Western traditions. (Poutiainen 2012; Saxell 2012; Nerg 2013; Tunkkari 2013; Salomaa 2014; Pietarinen 2014.) However, what is common to all intertextual references is that only a very few comparisons are made to Finnish literature.⁷

In perhaps the very first article on him in Finland, Blasim was introduced to readers by the heading “New Finnish Literature”. The writer of the article was the social anthropologist Marko Juntunen, who has conducted research on migration and can speak Arabic. The magazine it appeared in is published by Kehitysyhteistyön Palvelukeskus (Kepa), a platform for Finnish civil society organizations focusing on development cooperation. The headline of the article notes the concrete place where Blasim worked a café in Kallio, Helsinki. The caption of the article is stuffed with “nation speak” (Hannerz 1999):

“An Iraqi author is writing in Arabic in a bar in Helsinki for a British publisher.” (Juntunen 2009.)

The tendency to literally “locate him on the map” is rather generic in the stories about Blasim, as there are a striking number of references to exact places where he works and lives in almost every piece of writing about him: in Helsinki he writes in cafés in Kallio and Käpylä (Petäjä 2010; Janhunen 2014), two residential areas inhabited by freelance writers and nowadays also wealthy young couples, while in Tampere he worked first in an artists’ commune and then in his simple and cozy apartment in Pispala (Gustafsson 2012).

Some kind of version of the narrative of Blasim’s journey from Iraq to Finland is told in almost every article about him. In critiques, if his background is not discussed in the actual body of the text, the biographical context is given in the headline, caption or a separate fact box (e.g. Jelkänen 2014). In many cases, Finland is made to look like a safe haven for a refugee from Iraq who had been persecuted because

7 In one article about Blasim, the imagery of the language reminds the critic of Edith Södergran’s “visionarity” (Jelkänen 2014). [“Ajoittain kielen kuvallisuus muistuttaa Edith Södergranin (1892–1923) visionäärisyyttä, joskin myyttillinen kuvasto on Lähi-idästä: on granaattiomenapuita, skorpioneja ja lammaslauvoja.”] In addition, Blasim is compared to other Finnish writers in some literature blogs: in the blog “Luettua elämää”, the writer refers to Veijo Meri’s absurd portrayal of war in his novel *Manillaköysi* (1957) as something similar to Blasim’s oeuvre, and in the blog “Reader, why did I marry him”, the writer finds in P. I. Jääskeläinen’s *Lumikko ja yhdeksän muuta* (2006; English translation *The Rabbit Back Literature Society*, 2013) a kind of meta-level narrative typical of many of Blasim’s short stories.

of his previous career as a film director. In his present place of residence, however, there are other kinds of obstacles to do his artistic work and get it published: “In Finland, Blasim didn’t have to be afraid of the secret police, but his documentary work was complicated by the language barrier and the program policy of the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation.” (Gustafsson 2012.)

When his first book was published in Finnish, a critic of the *Helsingin Sanomat* (Pääkkönen 2012) located Blasim without further ado as part of the Finnish literary field, writing that “the topics of Blasim’s short stories are far from Finnish average prose and short stories”, but “[t]herefore it is great that the guild of Finnish authors has gotten an Iraqi-born author as an adjunct.”⁸ According to this critic, Finnish literature is simply enriched and strengthened by Blasim, and it seems that writers like Blasim do not cause any pressure to refine perceptions of Finnish literature and how it should be perceived.

As mentioned earlier, the place where Blasim lives in Finland plays an important role in his public image in the country. He has received recognition from the city of Tampere, first in the form of its literary award (2013) and then, after he was awarded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, at an official reception organized in his honour. A press release rather outspokenly promoted the merits of the city in supporting the writer: “The employment aid provided by Tampere city, together with the wage subsidy of the state, have granted him the circumstances to work as a writer in 2012–2013 at this crucial point in his career.”⁹

This highlighting of the importance of Tampere for Blasim’s work as a professional writer can be interpreted as a way to integrate and attach him to a specific place. He is not just a writer who happens to live in Tampere but a writer whom the city of Tampere has generously helped to achieve success. The significance of Tampere for Blasim – or perhaps the other way around, the significance of Blasim for Tampere – can be illustrated by the following headlines in different newspapers. For while the same critique of his book was featured in several newspapers, only in *Aamulehti*, published in Tampere, is the town mentioned in the headline:

“Hassan Blasim dislocates the soul” (*Pohjolan Sanomat* 12.1.2014)

“The Iraqi Hassan Blasim dislocates the soul” (*Satakunnan Kansa* 23.10.2014)

“Settled in Tampere, Hassan Blasim dislocates the soul” (*Aamulehti* 19.1.2014)¹⁰

Another article about Blasim in *Aamulehti* had a headline asking, “Does a future Nobel live in Pispala?”, thus locating him both in a local context as well as in the

8 “Blasimin novellit ovat aihepiiriltään kaukana suomalaisesta keskivertoproosasta ja novelleista. Siksi on hienoa, että suomalainen kirjailijakunta on saanut täydennykseksi irakilaisentyisen kirjailijan.”

9 <http://www.tampere.fi/tampereinfo/ajankohtaista/lkzIcKeEW.html>. Translation mine.

10 “Hassan Blasim kääntää sielun sijoiltaan” (*Pohjolan Sanomat* 12.1.2014).

”Irakilainen Hassan Blasim kääntää sielun sijoiltaan” (*Satakunnan Kansa* 23.10.2014).

”Tampereelle asettunut Hassan Blasim kääntää sielun sijoiltaan” (*Aamulehti* 19.1.2014).

transnational field of world literature. Similar locating takes place in the body of the text, as the writer of the article compares Blasim to “Finnish writers”, whose texts are evaluated by considering their chances to win the Finlandia Literary Prize, whereas Blasim competes in a completely different league – in the running for a Nobel Literary Prize – thus being located above or outside the Finnish literary field. At the same time, in the wish that Blasim would win the Nobel Prize for Finland, the national dimension is strongly present.

Pispala has certainly become an important part of Blasim’s public image in Finland (e.g. Kuusela 2012; Aishi 2012). When he won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in May 2014, the *Helsingin Sanomat* had the headline “Independent Prize goes to Pispala” (Majander 2014).¹¹ The interpretation presented by the headline indeed follows a certain logic: if Blasim is considered to be “from Pispala”, the prize certainly goes “to Pispala”. In Tampere, the articulation lives on, even though Blasim moved to Helsinki some time ago. When he received the Finland Award on 8 December 2015, the headline in the online version of Tampere’s *Aamulehti* ran “The Finland Award for arts to Hassan Blasim from Pispala”,¹² while the printed version the next day stated that the award was given to Blasim, who had previously lived in Pispala.

Partly Included

The texts about Hassan Blasim in the Finnish media can be read as a narrative of integration. Over the last few years, he has shifted on a continuum from strangership towards a degree of familiarity. Especially after his international success, Finnish journalists and critics appear to be counting him as “one of us”; strangership is indeed relational as well as mutable.

As a scholar who belongs to an academic discipline called “Finnish literature”, for me Blasim’s presence in Finland and his visibility in the literary field raise interesting questions concerning definitions of the discipline itself. Should we define the object of our research so that writers like Blasim might be included? And if we do so, should we reconsider the hierarchy between the original work and the translation as primary and secondary and analyse the target texts as part of Finnish literature? There is no doubt that the Finnish translations made by Sampsa Peltonen are of high quality. On the other hand, the inclusion of Blasim in Finnish literature may well cause demand for Arabic-speaking scholars to enter into the discipline – after all, Arabic is Finland’s fifth-most spoken language. In any case, I find it extremely important to include “strangers” like Blasim in the conceptions about the literary field in Finland.

11 Actually, the article incorrectly claims that Blasim had lived in Pispala for ten years.

12 <http://www.aamulehti.fi/Kulttuuri/1195009570492/artikkeli/taiteen+suomi-palkinto+pispalalaiselle+hassan+blasimille.html>.

Cases like Blasim help us scholars to perceive the regional as well as linguistic dimensions of literary culture and the varying positions a writer can have in them. When the literary field is viewed as consisting of overlapping circles of different sizes – local, national and transnational – authors like Blasim indicate how the position in different circles may differ as well as shift. For example, while an author can be well known both locally and transnationally, it does not mean that he or she is necessarily celebrated on a national level. From the point of view of Finnish literary institutions such as the academic discipline of Finnish literature, “strangers” like Blasim may eventually provoke some sort of identity crisis. Recently, there has been discussion about the positions of majority and minority languages in Finland, as well as in Nordic countries in general (e.g. Korhonen 2017). However, from the point of view of an author, being part of the national literature may or may not be essential. For the career of Hassan Blasim, being classified as a Finnish author may not be of any significance, but for the future of cultural classifications such as “Finnish literature”, the inclusion of transnational and multilingual writers may prove to be a valuable, positive force.

In the research concerning literature written in minority languages and by authors who do not have as clear access to speak for themselves as writers using the majority language, due to the linguistic barriers prevailing in the literary field, there are various ethical issues to be considered. There is, for example, the question of othering: is there a danger for Blasim to be used as some sort of multicultural or multilingual token in the pursuit of diversifying the literary field in Finland? In addition, I regularly engage in self-accusations about the power hierarchies involved in the construction of the research I am conducting; the position of a researcher is inevitably a position of dominance. I was reminded of this hierarchy by a poem with the ironic title “A refugee in the paradise that is Europe”, which Blasim published on his Facebook wall.¹³ While the poem addresses the situation of a refugee arriving in Europe, it has a clear message for Europeans as well. I think it is only fair that the subject of my research has the last word:

Academics get new grant money to research your body and your soul.
 Politicians drink red wine after an emergency meeting to discuss your fate.
 They study history in search of an answer for your daughter, who's freezing in the forest cold.
 They weep crocodile tears over your pain.
 They come out in demonstrations against you and build walls.
 Green activists put up pictures of you in the street.
 Others sit on their sofas, comment wearily on your picture on Facebook, and go to sleep.
 They strip away your humanity in debates that are clever and sharp as knives.

¹³ The poem has been published in Swedish in Dagens Nyheter: <http://www.dn.se/dnbok/en-flykting-i-det-europeiska-paradis-et-av-hassan-blasim/>. The Finnish translation of the poem was performed on Finnish television by the singer Maija Vilkkumaa while the writer was seen in the background of the video: <http://areena.yle.fi/1-3395051>.

They write you down today and, with the eraser of selfishness, make you disappear the next morning.

They expect to come across their own humanity through your tragedy.
(Blasim 2015.)

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