Research Article

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Damaging Traverses: Decolonizing Trauma and Migration through the Lens of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Layla Alammar's Novel *Silence is a Sense*

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abstract

The present paper explores the representation of the Syrian refugee crisis in Layla Alammar's novel Silence Is a Sense. It interrogates the traumatic experience that undergirds the physical crossing of Europe through the exploration of the main character's silence. Placing the refugee at the center of focus, the paper troubles the established trauma model and its concomitant notions of memory, testimony, and the unspeakable. It argues that the embodied experience of the refugee, the socio-historical context, and the institutions with which she interacts shape the way the event is lived, interpreted and signified to others. The dynamics of silence, speech, writing and interpretation showcase the ambivalence of the refugee experience, the intensity of her trauma, the institutional constraints the main character faces, and the ethical necessity of story-telling in bringing about the recognition of the other.

Keywords: trauma, refugee, Syria, coloniality, unspeakability, silence

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most memorable scenes of 2015, and perhaps that of the entire decade, is the image of the Alan (Aylan) Kurdi's little body washing on the shores of Türkiye. By September of that year, tens of thousands of Syrians fled their homes to seek refuge in neighboring countries like Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Türkiye after violence broke down in numerous cities across their country as a result of the intensifying armed confrontation between rebel forces and the government. The sudden flux of people seeking refuge has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Dawn Chatty notes that the international aid infrastructure was unable to perform effectively in the face of the heterogeneous group of educated and skilled Syrian population, often employing biased views when determining service provisions and needs assessments (2017, 27). The limited access of aid, rising unemployment rates and the inaccessibility of education prompted many Syrians to venture into Europe for better living conditions, a surge that received massive media coverage. Emily Burns and Michel M. Haigh indicate that the media coverage of the crisis in major newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* was thematic, focusing on the victimhood of the refugees fleeing violent conflict rather than presenting them as economically motivated migrants (2025, 402). In the European coverage, the sentiments associated with the portrayal of the event fluctuated from positive to negative by the end of 2015. In their report for the Council of Europe, Myria Georgiou and Rafal Zaborowski demonstrate how the coverage of the crisis has undergone a multiphasic shift wherein the initial tolerance ceded the way to a humanitarian tone, then gradually transformed into security concerns in the wake of the Paris attacks in November (2017, 8). The tone inevitably mediates the way the event is understood and imagined by the host communities, creating "the symbolic conditions of possibility under which we are invited to imagine the predicament of these sufferers as well as think, act and feel towards them (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 617). The testimonials of the victims barely reached the surface of the coverage, as the event was coopted by right wing politicians pushing for their conservative agenda, reinforcing the idea that refugees are an economic burden, and a threat to the nation (620). The categorization of the migrant and the refugee in international law and domestic immigration laws oversimplify the intentions behind border crossing, leaving room for preconceived notions to determine "the legitimacy and deservingness" of who is allowed entry (Abdelaaty and Hamlin 2022, 233). These discursive constructions overlook the lived experience of the Syrian refugee, rendering the structural silencing and the psychic trauma of the crossing pertinent issues that need to be addressed. Attending to testimonies, different forms of storytelling and representation of the trauma of the Syrian refugee are pivotal to voice the embodied experience of the Syrian refugee. The Kuwaiti writer Layla Alammar's novel *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) is one of the early fictional representations of the tragic displacement of millions of Syrians and the psychic effects it has engendered.

Following the life of an unnamed, first-person narrator, the novel depicts the trials and tribulations of the main character, a Syrian woman traversing the European continent, crossing the English Channel, and settling in a quiet apartment block in an unnamed city in England. Observing people's lives from her balcony, she assumes the peculiar position of a mute onlooker, privy to the innerworkings of other people's lives without addressing much of hers. She levers this position as a gazing subject to write articles for a reputable online magazine called The New Press. However, by virtue of her background as an asylum seeker and the circumstantial rise of xenophobia, the magazine solicits her to write about her refugee experience. What comes out is a series of reflections that deconstruct nationalism, religion, memory and trauma.

In particular, the novel explores the unspeakability of trauma in the way large scale events incapacitate the victim's recalling and linguistic abilities, damaging her physical capacity to produce meaning manifesting in her becoming mute. The process of writing and self-expression that the novel explores deconstructs this traumatic response and the way it has been theorized by traditional trauma studies. As I shall demonstrate, the traumatic experience of trekking across Europe has been deferred through the process of writing, which led to the opening up of space to critically engage with the underlying causes of this complex trauma. The protagonist engages in a process of rearranging and interrogating the social and political factors that have led to the well-known yet disregarded Syrian refugee crisis all while questioning the underpinnings of xenophobia and nationalism in Britain. Writing short stories as opposed to the native-informant-like op-eds she was commissioned to make by the magazine editor provides her with the means necessary to express that cultural moment. Through its depictions of the *long pause* of trauma and its chronic quality, the novel effectively troubles the binary between the exceptional and the mundane, the extreme and the quotidian, casting an important light on the complexity of the experience of the racialized other as a refugee and the role of speech and silence in the process of testimony and healing.

In order to investigate the complex relationship between migration and trauma, this article will be divided into four sections. The first section will look into the traditional trauma model, pioneered by Cathy Caruth's groundbreaking work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), in order to excavate the theoretical underpinnings of the model. I will argue that this model falls short of providing an adequate explanation to the experience of collective chronic trauma, and, following, Steph Craps's suggestion, I resort to Franz Fanon's concept *racial epidermal schema* to view traumatic responses beyond the decontextualized pathological lens of the individual sufferer in order to embed her within greater structural mechanisms, namely the everlasting effects of colonialism, or, coloniality (Quijano 2000). His concept facilitates the grasping of the effects of coloniality on the psyche of sufferers of chronic trauma and their quotidian lived experience. In the third section, I demonstrate how the experiential, embodied aspect of trauma is dependent upon the interpretive webs in which the survivor is situated, affecting how memory, recollection and healing take place. In the final section, I consolidate these theoretical aspects to address how memory, experience, time, and silence and speech arise in the novel, arguing that the protagonist's mutism is directly informed by intensive sensory input and the structural configurations of journalism, psychiatry and border control. The same affective and structural conditions also determine the way she chooses to tell her story and step away from her silence.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRADITIONAL TRAUMA MODEL

The traditional model for trauma studies was established by Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Fellman and Geoffrey Hartman in the 1990's which consecrated significant attention to the literary expression of trauma. The model relied heavily on the Freudian interpretation of hysteria which was readapted to make sense of the delayed response of trauma survivors. According to Michelle Balaev (2018, 361), Breuer and Freud's Studies on Hysteria (1895) has established that the experience of trauma undergoes a process of repression, latency, triggering and remembrance. That is to say, the traumatic event is unassimilated by the victim in the present moment of its occurrence. It is rather stored in the unconscious as raw data. Once this "punctual" (Forter 2011, 98) event has passed, the victim goes through a latency period or Nachtraglichkeit wherein the effects of the event are not consciously felt. Only a secondary event can open the gates of the past memory to rush to the surface of the victim's consciousness.

As remembering takes place, psychological pain arises, and particular meanings become associated with the traumatic event. Trauma is thus understood by mainstream theorists and established literary critics as one that causes dissociation and amnesia during the latency phase and psychic distress once it is remembered.

Freud's later work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) has provided another layer to the established understanding of trauma. The observation of the shell-shocked war veterans has led Freud to revise the earlier model, arguing instead that traumatic events lead to traumatic neurosis (Balaev 2018, 362). In the aftermath of the traumatic event, the unity of the ego is undermined as a result of the psychic tension it generates, causing a "breach" (ibid). Unlike his earlier understanding, Freud singles out unexpected fear as the cause that disables the protective shield: anxiety. The sudden shock thus overwhelms the ego to the point of becoming inoperable, allowing the event to "enter the inner psyche without the adequate internal defense" (ibid). Repetition compulsion characterizes the response at the heart of traumatic neurosis, whereby the memory of the events is repeated in the present. The survivor holds the futile hope of mastering the psychic tension through that repetition, generating a warped experience of time, where the past is always held in the present. Alongside this temporal pathology, Freud also posits that the memory of the event is a memory of a memory that took place in the survivor's dreams, amounting to a distorted recollection of the event. Recalling the event through narrative means in light of the pathologies that trauma inaugurates become central points of inquiry within trauma studies.

These pathologies form one of the backbones of the Caruthian model of trauma criticism. In her acclaimed book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth demonstrates how trauma is unrepresentable and unspeakable. Due to its large-scale, fear-inducing effect, the traumatic event is posited as that which cannot be captured by language, exceeds the victim's comprehension, and collapses structures of narrative representation. Fundamental to her argument is the paradox of immediacy and belatedness. Since the victim's psyche catches the event in an unmediated, defenseless fashion, she remains oblivious to its meaning which leads to its reoccurrence in her present (Baelev 2018, 364; Meretoja 2018, 25). The problem that arises consequently is that any attempt at communicating the atrocity forces an institutionally sanctioned structure of meaning to appropriate its meaning (Meretoja 29). So, any attempt at signifying and forming an understanding of the event leads to its distortion and appropriation, subjecting the victims to another form of violence. The paradox at hand then makes the event only locatable through approximation, one that is tied to an inherent absence. Silence, as a result, sits uneasily as an anticipated reaction to trauma.

The traditional model of theorizing and understanding trauma has considerable limitations. According to Hanna Meretoja, there is an overemphasis on extraordinary, one-time events that irrevocably transforms the victim's experience as well as an unexamined presupposition of the immediacy of experience (2018, 26-27). Moreover, as Michelle Baelev notes, the model biologizes the traumatic response, rendering it a transhistorical, universal experience of all victims (2018, 363). Chronic exposure to structural racism and microaggressions, for example, elude the evaluative and critical capacity of this model. The postcolonial experience with culturally and historically specific modes of expressing grief and pain and with dealing with injustice remain unaccounted for and risk being essentialized. The definition of trauma, its symptoms and cure should be seen as institutional

and cultural products of a specific sociohistorical formation (Craps 2013, 20). It arguably takes the experience of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" as the norm (ibid).

The subject of this universal conception of trauma is preoccupied with creating coherence to his life story, adamant on overcoming his split ego, and is detached from the materiality of everyday life.

The cumulative, quotidian forms of oppression produce traumatic responses which are seldom discussed. The overwhelming influence of the latter theories of Freud leaves the traumatic experience of identity formation unexplored. Greg Forter (2011) highlights the need to examine social relations' impact on psychic well-being. As he puts it, "the primal scene represents the pathogenic confrontation that each of us must make with this social inscription" (106). The victim is embedded in a sociohistorical matrix which was closed off by Freud's revisions of his earlier exploration of hysteria. Forter, however, finds merit in maintaining the bi-phasic earlier model captured by the concept of the primal scene. The idea goes that the initial surprising event is not made sense of until a second event retrospectively makes the first one meaningful, becoming traumatic in hindsight. The important aspect in Forter's formulation is his emphasis on transformation, maturation and resignification. Rather than succumbing to the defeated view of repetition ad infinitum, Forter provides another way of seeing trauma. Through his reading of William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! (1936), Forter presents a different reading of the traumatic response that emphasizes the power structure in which the survivor circulates. Instead of presenting the survivor as a detached individual overtaken by an extraordinary event, Forter draws attention to the embeddedness of the survivor in the social space, emphasizing how social scripts mediate the survivor's response to an overwhelming event. Forter presents the traumatic response as characterized first by a break, in which the victim undergoes a phase in which she becomes unable to speak. During this moment, the victim experiences a dissolution of her beliefs on how the world operates and undergoes a "search for new conceptual moorings" (Stampfl 2014, 29). This phase is only transitional in so far as once those new moorings are determined, the victim reframes the world and her position therein, leading to, not only a regaining of speech, but also a restoration of action. Through Forter's interpretation, the traumatized victim is recast within the power relations that permeate the sociocultural space in which she is embedded. It highlights becoming aware of her particular social positioning as potentially traumatic which invites the consideration of the interpretative nature of experience, and the chronic quality that trauma can assume in the context of systemic oppression. This particular point allows us to consider the experience of post/colonial subjects whose lives are already suffused by traumatizing forms of oppression on daily basis to interrogate the meaning of their silence and the epistemic undercurrents of the stories they choose to share.

2. FRANZ FANON AND THE LONG PAUSE OF TRAUMA

The non-exceptional quality of the post/colonial trauma sets it apart from punctual forms of trauma (Forter 2011, 98). The habitual exposure to collective and individual violence renders trauma a chronic experience that registers as normal. If taken from within the premise of hegemonic

trauma models, the psychological damage that the structures engender are depoliticized, and healing becomes an individual responsibility. Steph Craps (2013) singles out Franz Fanon as the most robust critic of how modern structures, both colonial and postcolonial, pathologize and depoliticize the responses of the colonized to quotidian forms of oppression (29). Principally, Fanon captures the moment of being objectified by the white gaze as one that generates psychic splitting and an altered reality in which he "existed triply" (Fanon 2021, 92 in Craps 29).

Rather than seeing this psychic splitting through the backdrop of a unified, coherent (Western) subject, Craps suggests evaluating it in relation to unjust social and economic realities (30-33). Fanon's theorization of racial epidermal schema postulated in *Black Skins, White Masks* (2021) offers an important angle to address the materiality of oppression in its chronic and pervasive forms.

Although a psychiatrist by profession, it is important to view Franz Fanon as a theoretician of the post/colonial situation in his own right. Combining psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and existentialist philosophy, he opens up new ways of interrogating oppression as an embodied experience. At the core of his writing, he presents how the colonial system determines the terms from which the meaning of one's humanity is established: to be black, Arab, Malagasy is to be less than human, cloistered in the "zone of non-being" (Césaire 1972; Fanon 2021). Using phenomenological terms, Fanon highlights how his body schema is distilled within the normative terms of the colonial system , a repository of a "thousand details, anecdotes, stories" that pose as "real" renderings of his identity (Fanon 91). Products of historical-racial notions, the stories shape what he now calls racial epidermal schema activated by the white gaze. Instead of occupying his body as his own, he experiences it as an object.

It has been largely debated that there is an unexplored underlying assumption in Fanon's account of racial epidermal schema. Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (2024) notes that the debate has been characterized by a pathological reading of the black experience. The readings are based on a drawn distinction between body image and body schema (111). From a phenomenological perspective, the body image is made up of a network of cultural conceptions of a particular body, whereas the body schema captures the individual's capacity to reflexively coordinate her sensory and motor skills (ibid). Typically, these two aspects organically interact with one another to produce a regular lived experience. Black experience, it has been asserted, deviates from the norm in that the black person's body image incorporates colonial ideology so much so that it becomes their own. The body schema, in its turn, gets reconstituted in relation to the colonially produced body image through the white gaze. The oppressed person becomes hyperaware of herself, constantly monitoring herself and surroundings as a result of being unsettled by the non-reciprocity of the other's gaze (112). The pathologization of black experience along these terms employs the supposition of the existence of a biological body that exists prior to cultural and colonial inscription, and incidentally, it happens to be best represented by the white body (Romdenh-Romluc 2024, 115). Most importantly, the readings fail to consider the contradictions that Fanon captures through racial epidermal schema which posit the oppressed as active resistors of coloniality rather than passive recipients of dehumanizing injustice.

What transpires from these readings is a particular incapacity to register the impact of prolonged trauma on the oppressed through the forms of expression with which they choose to articulate their pain. Fanon's work puts into words the affective range that gets subsumed on the one hand under

[1]Henceforth will be referred to as coloniality (Quijano 2000) to highlight its continuous effects even in the postcolonial era.

medical and academic jargon, and on the other hand, under the specularization of the brutalized black/oppressed body. Her over-exposed body is always aching but never speaks.

The problem of the unspeakable should be recast differently within power structures so adamant on exposing the racialized, oppressed body as mere unfeeling flesh, a thing among other things. Through her interpretation of Fanon's *Black Skins* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, Alia Al-Saji (2024) suggests that rather than allotting full transparency to the experience of the oppressed which is presumably readily available through the visuality of their bodies, we should instead dwell with them in their colonial wounds and recognize the ambivalence of their experience (7). Despite the fact that the oppressed have internalized the racializing and oppressive projections of coloniality, "colonized affectivity remains evasive and opaque… the colonized body contracts, resists, protects itself" (ibid). The presence of the body and its affectivity should be foregrounded for its capacity to capture the materiality of experience in ways that speech simply cannot (Stampfl 19). The surplus that Al-Saji describes is not facilely captured through visual and discursive means. Al-Saji insists that the proximity afforded by dwelling is the only means through which we can intuit the depth of the colonial wound.

Dwelling in the wound and bearing witness to it requires a different understanding of the racial epidermal schema. Rather than centering Merleau-Ponty's theorization of body schema, Al-Saji takes colonialism as a starting point. Rather than presenting it as a one-time event, colonialism is first and foremost a complex web of power relations and a mode of epistemic knowledge that produce legitimate human subjects and exploitable and disposable others through a dual system of reference (Maldonado-Torres 2018, 119). Coloniality's dehumanizing processes carve out the contours of embodiment which produce both the colonized flesh and the normative body (Al- Saji 12). Seen as less-than-human, the colonized/oppressed flesh does not have a body schema; rather, her world is reorganized in such a way that reaffirms her incapacity to navigate it, bumping into images, reactions, and spaces that corroborate her inferiority. The stereotypes are experienced as sensings which the oppressed feels as her own skin, constituting racial epidermal schema (11-12). Notably, there is a coercive aspect to this dynamic: the sensings that shape the experience of the racialized/oppressed body are made to be reflexively accepted. In other words, since the stereotypes are ontologized under the weight of coloniality, it follows that the sensings picked up on by the oppressed are factual, reflecting reality as it is. Fanon attests to this point:

> Disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from my self, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body. Yet, this reconsideration of myself, this thematization, was not my idea. I wanted quite simply to be a man among men. (92)

Here lies the colonial wound; here lies the trauma of coloniality. It is chronic because it is ontological.

But what do the oppressed do with all these sensings? As painful as they are in skewing their orientation to the world, the sensings should be read "as responses by the racialized flesh" (Al -Saji 2024, 13). The colonized experience an affective panoply that shape their knowledge of their

world, for “knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble, all those feelings that are crucially felt on the bodily surface, the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world” (Truran 2022, 30). Existing in unjust power relations, a sense of refusal is always espoused with those sensings, forming the fabric of the oppressed experience and their chronic trauma. The rejection, however, is not a momentary occurrence. Rather, it figures within what Al-Saji calls colonial duration. From within her critique of the phenomenological body, Al-Saji also presents a critique of time. Under the workings of coloniality, time is not experienced in a linear fashion. Rather, it is a temporality in which the past weighs heavily in the present, a weight that manifests itself through the sensings that figure the wound, for “colonized and enslaved pasts coexist, re-membered in their dismemberment, enduring in their affective weight and protective opacity” (16). The sensings/reactions that shape the affective landscape of the oppressed stretch thus beyond the moment, a form of affect-memory that defers its actual meaning (14). The opaque responses of the racialized flesh, the chronic wound it carries, thus hold the historical load of colonialism, that is, coloniality, that always colors the present experience of the oppressed, one that cannot be negated. It is woven into the fabric of everyday life, making the account of the exceptionality of trauma insufficient (Rajiva 2017, 12). The omnipresent load of history at once closes off the horizon of possibility and leaves it wide open, constituting a compelling space for evaluative and critical engagement.

So, how can we dwell with/in the wound and sense the trauma it engenders? To bear witness to the opacity of affect, its pre-reflective sensings, the unlocalizability of the pain the wound evokes, and “to understand the (de)structuring work of colonial duration, there at its wounding” (Al-Saji 2024, 19)? I propose that engaging with trauma narratives that deal with the wounds of coloniality necessitates deploying narrative hermeneutics. As Hanna Meretoja (2020) argues, we cannot impose a hierarchy between experience and narratives as it has been the case in mainstream theorizations of trauma, wherein experience is posited as only mediated when it is subsumed within a narrative structure (28-29). Rather, we should see both as belonging to an interpretative continuum in which the person’s pre-reflexive sensings, which are interpretations in and of themselves, enter into a dialogical relationship with preexisting structures of interpretation. From this we can say that dwelling with/in the wound is to tend to the ways in which the survivor’s interpretations of their affect-memory bump into hegemonic structures, maintain their ambiguity, and refuse to be absorbed into a synthesis that assimilates and flattens its unique orientation.

3. LIVED EXPERIENCE, INTERPRETATION AND THE (UN)SPEAKABILITY OF TRAUMA

The hermeneutical approach to trauma narratives is premised on the argument that all experience is more or less interpretative. Quotidian occurrences always go through a meaning-making sieve that colors them in specific ways. The filter is made of a multitude of cultural narratives which amount to “interpretative practices [that] shape the way we experience thigs in the first place” (Meretoja 2018, 57). Rather than seeing traumatic events as destructive of our capacity to apprehend and signify them, the hermeneutical approach sees that “we always already engage in prereflective narrative interpretation” (Meretoja 2020, 44). The unspeakability of trauma is recast as a form of a culturally specific interpretation or a rhetorical device to which many meanings are attached

(Stampfl 2014, 15). Rather than sustaining the ordered division between living, interpreting and telling, the approach posits experience as conditioned by the social and cultural structures in which the person lives. The structures delimit the qualitative contours of what is experienced, how it is understood, and the ways in which it is narrated. Past narratives color the present experience and map out provisionally the future horizon of possibilities. They are performative insofar as they "shape not only our cognitive understanding of the world, but also our affective orientations and our sense of the possible" (Meretoja 2018, 51). The approach allows to critically engage with the longue durée of trauma, attend to the surrounding interpretive structures, and read the refusal at the heart of the colonized affect.

When we speak of the colonial wound, the narratives surrounding the colonized/oppressed as less-than-human interpellates her in a particular identity. However, the dialogical aspect of narrative hermeneutics sheds light on the infinitesimal maneuvers the colonized/oppressed do to break down the hegemonic narratives that fix them in place. In this respect, dialogism breaks away from the assumption that discourse simply encounters its object. As Bakhtin asserts, it also confronts a myriad of social meanings that surround that object (1981, 276). While hegemonic models of sense making are implicated in the organization of our/their experience, Fanon's account is an example that shows that they cannot be reduced to them. Au contraire, he managed to signify the lived experience of the black person by taking up the same narratives and breaking them down, illustrating that not all experience has a narrative structure (Meretoja 2018, 60). His prereflective sensings intervened in his interpretations of his surroundings, what Meretoja calls "the basic structure of sense perception" (61), the colonial duration of his wound colored his experience of the present in ways that became inextricably involved in his interpretation. His account, as a narrative of colonial trauma, becomes a conscious interpretation of an interpretation, a retrospective double hermeneutic that dialogically engages with its surrounding narrative structures.

Similarly, dwelling with/in the colonial wound necessarily entails tending to the narrative interpretations of the oppressed as they repeatedly engage with their surroundings. It is through their deconstruction of dominant meanings that we can glimpse the sensings that color their experience. Their chronic trauma is signified from within the gap that those sensings form, sustaining the discrepancies and the ambiguity of those sensings.

On this basis, I argue that *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) stands as an example that complicates our understanding of both trauma and the colonial wound in the way it intersects with the refugee experience. Narrated in the first person, we are presented with a nameless main character who loses her capacity to speak after trekking across Europe, crossing the Channel and arriving to British soil as a Syrian refugee. While it is evident in her account that the actual process of crossing borders amounts to a punctual traumatic experience, the gradual unfolding of the story presents the entire historical backdrop of the Syrian refugee crisis that connects the one-time event of fleeing to the chronic wounding of coloniality. My reading of the narrative employs what Michelle Balaev calls a pluralistic trauma model (2018, 366). It is pluralistic insofar as I will complicate "the unspeakable trope in seeking to understand not only the structural dimensions of trauma that often develop in terms of trauma's dissociative effects on consciousness and memory, but also the cultural dimensions of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression" (ibid). In this way, an in line with Steph Crap's (2013) emphasis on the social and cultural specificity of trauma response,

I challenge the response that the traditional model universalizes through the examination of the speech/silence binary as it arises from various power dynamics, the interrogation of the exceptional and punctual form of traumatic events, and examining the affective range at the center of the embodied experience of trauma. While it is evident that the protagonist's psychic defenses are disabled, that initial response is temporary and opaque, sitting uneasily between intentionality and reticence. I argue that the protagonist undergoes an interpretative phase in which she gradually makes sense of her prereflective sensings, culminating into an ethical engagement, her final phase. On the one hand, the interpretative phase stands in tension with the traditional model in that it troubles the understanding of the unspeakable as fundamentally unsignifiable. On the other hand, it also troubles the status of what is spoken when the speaking subject is physically incapable of speech, as it is the case of the mute protagonist. *Silence Is a Sense* thus offers us a unique way of portraying trauma that opens up new horizons of understanding and evaluating trauma narratives within trauma studies.

4. *WRITE DOWN: I AM AN ARAB/I AM A NAME WITHOUT AND EPITHET*: MAKING SENSE OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

In light of the earlier theoretical directions, my analysis of *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) will consider the intricacies of border crossing, the psychiatric institution, journalism, and their bearings on the protagonist's experience. In particular, I will look into how these structural dynamics shape her memory, recollection and the way her physical speechlessness interacts with her refusal to communicate. In order to do so, I will first examine the material records that are depicted in the novel, presenting them as indexical signs to the traumatic event of leaving Syria and crossing two continents. To do so, I demonstrate how the testimonial capacity of these recordings is appropriated by the psychiatric institution to fit a particular diagnostic model. Then I will shed light on how the sensorial landscape at the heart of the protagonist's experience clashes with this structure through the process of recollection, silence and writing. Speechlessness will be presented as only a phase of the traumatic response, which is gradually divorced from its involuntary quality, becoming an intentional reticence on the main character's part. The dynamics of silence and speech will be further explored by interrogating the protagonist's relationship with her editor, Josie, in the wake of the rising xenophobia and the terrorist attacks taking place in Britain. Her role as a mediator-cum-native informant is challenged through the pieces she writes for the magazine. I will illustrate that she injects her past experience and her sensorial input to offer a different interpretation of nationalism, fundamentalism and identity, contributions that are either censored or discredited, as they generate disproportionate backlash from readers and the editor. Finally, I argue that fiction writing is posited in the novel as a compromise that allows the protagonist to mitigate the constraints imposed on her attempts at sense-making, rendering silence an inadequate response.

4. 1. The Medical Gaze and the Refugee's Self-records

Having been propelled by the insisting editor, Josie, to write pieces that grant insider access to the experience of the refugee and their journey to England, the protagonist, after much emotional

[2] Mahmoud Darwish, "Identity Card", Marxists.org, 1964, https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/darwish/1964/identity-card.htm

resistance, unboxes the material traces of her institutionalization. They consist of daily logs, journal entries and psychiatric reports–indexical signs that are indicative of the trauma of the crossing

Citing her age, gender, and ethnicity, the first report she sifts through points out that she had "gastrointestinal parasites, anemia, severe dehydration, tuberculosis, and chronic bacterial skin infection" (Alammar 2021, 67). The series of diagnoses depict a malnourished individual who was exposed to unsanitary conditions and suffered from a weakened immune system that was vulnerable to infection. It further indicates that there was no support from relief organizations along the journey. The first diagnostic is followed by an MRI report that indicates that there are no abnormalities in her brain imaging and prescribed Sertraline 25mg as the starting dose, a drug used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder as well as major depressive disorder . Alongside the medication, Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) was also prescribed. This shows that she has undergone a pre-assessment for PTSD and met the criteria for this type of therapy.

CPT is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy targeted at sufferers of PTSD. According to the treatment guidelines set up in The Therapist Manual for Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD (2024), the treatment is administered over twelve sessions wherein the survivor learns to address and rework their beliefs in relation to the traumatic event (Resick et al., 7). The sessions are organized in a way so as to allow the survivor to express her thoughts about the causes of the event. The therapist is expected to scrutinize the account and challenge the thinking processes in which the survivor is caught up. Because it is related to cognition, the ultimate aim is to train the survivor to identify the thought patterns associated with the event and modify them, building the capacity to apply them outside of the therapeutic context. Interviews and self-reporting are the basis from which the CPT operates. Such an interference with thought processes can have a negative impact on the survivor for the simple fact that they are borne out of cultural contexts. If that interference is not, in its turn, contextualized itself, then we are faced with what Craps has demonstrated as intervening in and obstructing healing processes (2013, 22).

The next document shows that the starting of the course of treatment never took place. The protagonist has been institutionalized because she was physically and verbally unresponsive despite being conscious (Alammar 2021, 68). The tone, though medical and objective, evinces a sense of frustration, almost anger, as it documents that it took three days to obtain handwritten responses to assessments which were supposed to be answered orally. "This clinician has determined", the document reports of the protagonist's mutism that it, "is an obstinate and voluntary silence unaccompanied by abnormalities in the muscles of articulation" (69). It seems that the reported scowls and glares, confusion and shock were indicative of psychiatric pathology. To test this supposition, the controversial Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory test was administered to assess mental health issues such as psychopathy as the test is considered to be "a means of constructing a differential diagnosis for mental health problems, and as a versatile test to achieve transferrable psychological data" which will be compared to a normative dataset according to Augustus E. Floyd and Vikas Gupta[4] . Her observable lack of cooperation is consequently diagnosed as a form of mute hysteria (69).

An account of her hysteric presentation is subsequently provided. Her ego has reportedly disintegrated as it has presumably become unable to handle reality. The fragmentation of her ego is manifesting through the defense mechanisms she is adopting, namely intellectualization, compartmentalization and repression (70). Indicative of her repression is her fixation on the body and sex, which was interpreted as an indication of "sexual and/or physical trauma" (ibid). Furthermore, the records indicate an anxious hyper-vigilance evinced in her overdeveloped spatial-visual and perceptual- organizational skills and her sub-par working memory.

The final test in the bundle at last validates some of the survivor's observed reactions, as "not an entirely irrational response" given her medical record. It notes her alertness to her surroundings as if she is in constant danger, her grim perception of the world evident in her belief that there is nothing that can absolve humanity from its acts, and her pronounced distrust of others. The objective gaze of the medical institution is juxtaposed to personal recordings that the protagonist gathered along the journey. They are fragmented and temporally jumbled, transmitting the disarray of the experience as it is being recorded.

The reported malnourishment of the protagonist is fleshed out in descriptions of how she and the group she was with were surviving on flatbread for three days, and once they received help, the food was "snatched out of outstretched hands" (67), indicating a discrepancy between what was needed and what was provided. The physical feelings of hunger and thirst are evoked again when one of the scrapes simply declares that she no longer cries because she would rather save up the water. The desperation deepens, however, once we deduce that they had to consume rotten potatoes, the sight of them bringing the protagonist back to a memory, "it reminded me of a film baba used to let us watch with a boy in a concentration camp or something and they give them these ugly potatoes and he says the bugs are good to eat because at least its (sic) protein" (ibid). Evidently, as she weathers the material conditions of her fleeing the country, her bodily experience is mediated in real time as she lives through them, interspersed as it is with her personal memories as well as a wider range of cultural narrative of trauma.

The intertextual quality of the cultural and personal narratives that mediate the way she recorded some of the moments in her journey are further exacerbated in the way the past and present commingle and become concurrent with sensory input. Her past experience of violence in Syria and her present experience of border violence become identical, almost indistinguishable. The sensory input of the sound of gunshots, the smell of fire, and the thumping of teargas shells create the anticipation of being bombed in the protagonist: "screaming today, pop pop pop of gunfire and the scent of scorched earth. bombs in the clouds that you can hear but cant see Hanging (sic)". It becomes clear that the description is of border violence, as we learn that "a nice volunteer on the macedonian (sic) border gave us water to clean our eyes" (68). The ephemeral benevolence of the volunteer is contrasted with the cruelty of the border police, "snapp(ing) their teeth like wild hungry dogs" (69). The callousness of the border machine is further sensed through the urgency of the statement "DONT GET CAUGHT!" and the despair underlying being stranded in a beach with no way to move beyond the barricade, a restriction that makes her feel like an animal (71).

[4] Floyd AE, Gupta V. "Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory",
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK557525/ .

The perceptual details at the core of these recorded fragments refer us back to the materiality of border violence, the brutality of which seizes the migrant body in its entirety. At the same time, the records as material repositories of those snippets of events deconstruct the seeming objectivity of documentation in the way it demonstrates the interpretative quality of all accounts.

The trauma that the fragments indicate give context to the protagonist's silence. The medical gaze of Dr Thompson stands out in its incapacity to apprehend the protagonist's pain that undergirds her speechlessness. During one of their sessions, the psychiatrist, who represents the established understanding of trauma, shows the survivor Freud's "Topography of the Mind" to illustrate, in spatial terms, the location of her unprocessed fear that is attached to her trauma. It is all in the unconscious, she demonstrates, where her memories are stored, alongside "irrational wishes", "immoral urges" and "selfish needs" (147). The categorization of the different parts of the psyche is put into question when the protagonist doubts the mechanism of repression, wondering if the role of Dr Thompson is to bring up those memories buried in the unconscious to the surface of her awareness. Her doubt is motivated by a sense of horror rather than simple doubt because her experience slips away, unrecognized. Her fears, the depths of her trauma are omnipresent, clouding her days, unobstructed. Far from being intangible abstractions, they are embodied on her skin, "crawling all over me, all the time, biting, like electric sparks" (148). When the memory of her trauma is formulated in embodied terms, then the expectation of narrative integration of the event is also put into question.

The omnipresence of the protagonist's fears disavows the linearity of time in the way it establishes a coherent relationship among past, present and future occurrences. The therapeutic protocol of identifying the traumatic event is informed by this hegemonic conception of time which reckons with a singular and punctual incident that alters the experience of the victim. Pointing out that moment in time, speaking of it, and integrating it to the present are the necessary steps for healing, as it has been established. The dichotomy of a before and an after, however, is unsettled under the weight of chronic trauma, the "long pause" it effectuates make her "perpetually astride that line" (148). The duration of her fleeing exposed her to not only one instance of sexual violence, food insecurity, and overexposure to the elements. By the same token, that duration is oversaturated with the weight of coloniality as it animates the postcolonial conditions of institutionalized subjugation, state violence and capitalist exploitation permeating Syria and the entire region.

4. 2. What Lies Beneath the Structure: The Dynamics of Silence and Interpretation

The conditions that shape the protagonist's reality are therefore not the same as the ones that construct Dr Thompson's nor her assumptions about her patient's lived experience, for it was evident to the protagonist that "she [Dr Thompson] lived, that all of them here lived, outside the kind of reality of which I would need to speak" (ibid). The exteriority she discerns here amounts to the idea of ontological pluralism (Lugones 2003, 55). The plurality of reality to which the protagonist points attest to the way lived experience as forms of sociality escape the hegemonic structures that create the mirage of a singular reality. And because it escapes them, to speak of them becomes a challenge, "to make her see it," the protagonist admits, "I would have to find new words, new definitions with which to confront her" (ibid). The impossibility of finding conceptual bases to signify her reality, at least at that stage of her recovery, is one facet that undergirds her silence.

The other facet of the protagonist's silence is shaped by her dissociation. Her detachment is closely tied to her senses being stunned by an overabundance of input. Because her trauma lives on her skin, her sensitivity to external stimulus is overamplified and relentlessly present. Early in her journey, her sensitivity gradually manifested itself through the form of allergies. At the threshold of the European border, somewhere between Greece and Hungary, she started noticing that her "body began attacking itself" (9). The beginning of the dissolution of the geopolitical boundary is presented as an embodied immune response wherein her stuffed nose attempts blocking away the "would-be invaders" all while cutting off her oxygen supply. At the same time, the passage also transposes the dissolution of her psyche onto her immune response. In this way, her vitality, her defenses, and her border crossing cut through her experience and heighten her senses. Silence as a form of unresponsiveness thus communicates her being extremely overwhelmed by her surroundings; her silence is a response in and of itself. Her capacities for apprehension and judgement are not suspended or lost; they are fully operational:

> … you cannot say that the world is silent. It is noise and chaos…. It is bombs and gunfire and babies crying in trees and mothers wailing and fathers shouting and rushing rivers and howling winds and crunching tyres (sic) and and and. It is the furthest possible thing from silence. And it seemed to me that the only way to counter this cacophony was to go quiet, to express nothing. The only reasonable response was to fill myself up with silence. (149)

Her silence is thus the product of a radically different orientation to the world mediated by her senses. It both captures her complete immersion in the sensory and psychic texture of her trauma as it pierces through her body and mind, which put into question the very essence of her humanity, and her attempts at transcending it, to dial down its intensity. Her lived experience remains obscure, almost unsignifiable, insofar as it is communicated through hegemonic signs and within the structure that produce her as a traumatized woman who is a Syrian refugee.

4. 3. The Writing of Silence

The configuration of her silence in relation to signification is palpable in her interaction with the editor of the established magazine, *The New Press*. The protagonist's contribution to the magazine was initially directed toward writing op-eds that offer an outsider's perspective to the goings-on of the city she lives in. At first glance, it seems like an empowering position in which the protagonist can redirect the gaze that cast her as a boat person and a hysterical mute toward itself. However, it is quickly dissolved as it places her own self as the main focus again after the editor solicited the protagonist for insider information on the reality of the refugee as they cross Europe and the English Channel, assimilation, and religious difference.

The first instinct of the protagonist's is to be cautious, having lived back home through constant surveillance, "where the walls have ears and you spend your life hiding and fabricating, trying to learn the rules to games you have no hope of ever winning" (15). This self-censorship is instinctive, geared toward survival only. It also reflects an internalization of the power structure that draws the contours of what is permissible and therefore signifiable.

However, in the way the novel insists on ontological pluralism, the protagonist's internalization cannot be taken as an exhaustion of her capacity to critically engage with the structure that interpellates her. In her early contribution, signed under the pen name The Voiceless, she remarks how religion has reified the binary opposition between "us" and "them" in a way that obscures the line of continuity among the messages across faiths, seeing it all as symptomatic of how "the message gets twisted and corrupted and adulterated by our own clumsy attempts to humanize it, to create systems from the ineffable" (22).

This highly philosophical take highlights precisely how human-made categorizations impose particular meanings, loyalties and truth effects to the world all while excluding the other. At the same time, it offers the grounds for interpreting that the Syrian crisis, at its beginning, was not religiously motivated. Rather, it represents the logical outcome of coloniality:

> … it was about freedom. It was about the right to live with dignity, the right to think without fear, the right to exist outside of a state of emergency. It was about rising unemployment rates among a restless youth and free-market policies that benefited the few rather than the many. It was about the rains that never came, the migration and the cities straining under the weight of all the people they held but could do nothing with. (25)

Her sober interpretation puts the Syrian crisis and the subsequent refugee crisis within a larger map that encompasses geopolitical power struggles, Western hegemony, capitalism, and climate change. Within these parameters, the Syrian is cast as a dehumanized being bereft of any value under the weight of coloniality, stuck in a long pause.

Her interpretation is set in juxtaposition to the mainstream narratives that draw the crisis in solely religious terms. She does not deny it, "religious conflict is sexy. It's easy to sell, the way it fits into the simple, dichotomous way people prefer to view the world. It's easy for news producers and politicians to frame it in terms of a cosmic war being waged in a land far, far away. But it isn't *real*" (24-25, emphasis added). The reductive narratives are thus reinterpreted from within the contours of her situated understanding which would, subsequently, connect the tough conditions of her home country, the atrocities of border crossing, and the xenophobia in England through the logic of the lack or fear of reciprocity.

The piece she submits to Josie thus demonstrates her level-headed analysis of the conditions back home. However, she remains apprehensive of the local Imam in the English city. After managing to secure the local mosque from the petty threat of a group of islamophobes who tried to crash their neighborhood celebration, Imam Abdurrahman tries to extend an invitation to the protagonist to attend the different workshops that they organize. Instantly, she feels unsettled by his gaze and threatened by what he sees, revealing an incredulity that echoes her earlier attitude toward Dr Thompson. Because her trauma is largely shaped by her fear of being captured and held in place, her impression that the Imam recognizes her pain creates the knee-jerk reaction of refusing his gaze. She reads it as informed by a lack of recognition because her "experiences are far beyond him, and if he does in fact know or has guessed what [she is], he can't possibly have

a frame of reference for it" (46). Her contribution to the magazine, then, is shaped by her liminality, where she does not fit in, and insists on not fitting in, of wanting to be invisible to workings of the complex web of power in which she circulates. Paradoxically, it amplifies her voice and mutes it at the same time.

Her editor, enthusiastic about her view on the conflict in Syria, encourages the protagonist for more. Unexpectedly, the next piece she submits is never published. In it, the protagonist, The Voiceless, meditates on the way algorithms foment division and xenophobia. As she sees it, there is a plethora of news articles that try to portray refugees as unthreatening. However, the way social media work to curate feeds that align with the user's perspective as well as magnify controversial topics to maximize engagement, work against these narratives, which, seemingly benign, still operate using established clichés which carry orientalist undertones. The algorithms bury down and marginalize views that are not aligned with the user's perspective, and consequently, lead to "reduced tolerance" (64).

Interrogating her role as an insider, she wonders, "is it my job, as a Muslim, to try to convince you not to be afraid of me? That my people are not hardwired to hate you, to want to blow you up on a tube or ram you with a van?" (ibid). Her deconstruction here goes beyond simply breaking down the role of the native informant who is supposed to supply objective knowledge about her culture wherein she functions as intermediary to facilitate "cooperation". Her argument essentially interrogates the dichotomy of good Muslim/bad Muslim with which the entire community has been categorized in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, and in 2015. It highlights the awkward moment in which all Muslims sense the obligation to distance themselves from the stereotype of being a fundamentalist just because of their religious affiliation, nationality, and racial/ethnic presentation all while claiming those intersecting identities, walking around "like modern-day prophets urging others to come out from the darkness and into the light" (ibid). Resolutely, she concludes that it is not her moral responsibility to dispel misconception during a time when information is readily available. This interpretation does not pass under Josie's radar who professionally rejects it under the claim that it lacks coherence, and that instead, she should write about her memories. Josie's reaction reveals how the hegemonic structure of mainstream journalism can easily discredit a counternarrative that does not fit within its logical parameters.

The tension between the writer and the editor further intensifies when the protagonist further reflects on her role as a writer in the magazine. Subsequent to the 2017 Manchester attacks, she writes up two pieces that demonstrate her ambivalence toward her positionality as a migrant. In the first one, published in a week's time after the attack, she clearly questions the notion of responsibility in the minds of attackers who rationalize their actions on religious bases. It is a deeply ethical question in the way it underscores the perplexing issue of how self-determination is deeply embedded in the principle of "there is no compulsion in religion" (95) and at the same time, as a principle, it does not deter those same people from imposing their view, to the point of eliminating the other. The next piece, a month later, she questions the same bases of exclusion, but in relation to British nationalism and the rise of Islamophobic attacks in the country in the aftermath of the attacks. In a short historical reflection, she captures the societal need for the

scapegoat, the internal group that needs to be rejected for its perceived difference. However, she argues, “this time there’s a conflation, in the minds of a disturbing majority, of Muslim Refugee and Muslim Terrorist. They are seen as one and the same” (123). She zeroes in on the ease with which threat and the outsider status become enmeshed, creating a perceptual barrier that redefines the presence of the refugee who is fleeing terror into becoming terror itself.

The problem of interpretation thus resurfaces, wherein she finds herself yet again a mediating agent who is expected to “reveal [herself] as some microcosm of refugee society.… to speak for the chaos of the world, to weave the abstracts of cultural convulsions and scapegoats and simple apathy into [her] story” (ibid). Leaning into the demand of transforming her life story into an abstraction devoid of any specificity, she points to the logical conclusion, that “by seeing ‘me’, by knowing ‘me’, you might know them [refugees] all, and I suppose – by extension – might feel some degree of empathy for them all”, eventually turning her writing into a tool to “humanize” (ibid). As noble as it may be, the issue to which she points out is the need to mitigate difference by representing it as another version of the same. The status of the refugee’s humanity is subtly questioned when the need to use forms of artistic media to soften their presumable difference. The call to humanize precisely pulls at the line that separates the Human from the less-than-human, a racial hierarchy that is the underlying characteristic of coloniality.

4. 4. The Ethical Imperative of Writing: The Recognition of the Other

It is after the xenophobic attack on the local mosque that the protagonist shifts gears to become a reluctant story-teller. The front of the building was vandalized overnight with racist, Islamophobic slurs, and trashed with the entrails of an animal, presumably a pig (139). The xenophobia ceased to be a distant concept, even for her, and began threatening the very safety she sought after. She thus resolutely reports on her journey across the continent, employing metaphors that mix body and geography:

> So shall I tell you instead how the topography of her, of Europe, is encoded in my body now? She’s in the limestone of my skin, dry and easily split. Her salt is in the dark seaweed of my hair, the tang of my sweat. My breasts, the hills of Serbia. The rolls of fat on my belly, my back and hips, like the creases and trenches of Macedonia. Her marshes and fens lie in the shadows of my armpits, the morass of my mound. Walking across Europe, I hung myself from the sky. I swung from star to star and curled up in every crescent moon. (142-143)

She juxtaposes literary quality of this passage with the materiality of encampment to showcase that these conditions are incomparable to the circumstances that pushed them to leave, making this “ordeal not only tolerable, but desirable” (144, emphasis in original). Still, the descriptions are scrutinized by Josie, who, troubled by the depiction of the weather, urged her to make it less emotive. What she was requesting however, is “to alter the memory, so as to show a contrast, some symbolism over reality.…something to hint at optimism and hope, as if the reality wasn’t that I was, every day, terrified that running and hiding and being smuggled was going to be the rest of my life” (156). In other words, she is inviting her to construct her interpretations of the world into a particular narrative that subsumes the reality of her lived experience.

Josie's comment and the subsumptive quality that is at the core of constructing narratives is eventually challenged. In the next piece she submits, she points to the paradoxical nature of the visibility of the refugee; in the way it is portrayed as a burden but whose experience is never understood despite the reports that are generated about them. The testimonies collected from detainees and asylum seekers are relayed by writers who were not subjected to the same conditions that the others did. It comes back to a fundamental misalignment of the experiences of the two parties. The refugee is bound to the immediacy of her material needs and her sensory experience. The material texture of this experience is diluted in favor for metaphorical language, transforming it "into a soliloquy on how time is what ultimately kills you or the hypocrisy of Western ideals of justice and democracy" (163). However, this performative level of abstraction cannot hold under the weight of state violence enacted on the refugee body, whose flesh is broken "into a hundred thousand infinite parts" (ibid). To her, the refugee's full immersion in the sensory, material world reinvents literary expression itself. Because of their liminality, deeply enmeshed in hegemonic structures all while floating in its infra-structures, the meaning of their tales is always found in the cracks, in the "gaps", "the lacunae", "the silence" (164). Attuning to those stops figure to be the crucial points to build a story and cultivate understanding and empathy.

The crude reality of the refugee crossing, relayed accurately by the protagonist, was faced with disbelief and scrutiny, however. Not only did Josie inform her that the details she provided was "overwhelming", but she also admitted that it might not even be believable. Commenters on the magazine's website admitted as much, voicing that "it's a good story, but something about it just didn't sit right" (146). Being discredited for relaying the texture of the journey echoes again the dilemma for the protagonist whose voicelessness has become a volatile quality that exceeds merely her physical capacity to speak.

In the aftermath of the infuriating comment, the protagonist crafts the fictional story "Sweet Dew" as a desperate attempt to voice the unvoiced, to give another shape to the texture of her reality in spite of the risk of its alteration. A story within a story, "Sweet Dew" portrays the smuggling of a group of Syrians to Germany on board of a refrigerated truck. The group comprised of a Syrian family: a couple with their young child and their elderly parent; three men, and a lone woman. The driver orders the group who gathered near the truck to lie down on the fruit crates and informs them that they will pass through three checkpoints before arrival. Defeated by the arrangement, the group nonetheless acquiesces, and as they settle in the pitch-black container, they realize that they will quickly lose body heat, as well as oxygen. The main character, Mahmood, slowly undergoes an episode of hallucination as the group chats quietly to maintain a resemblance of morale.

The story combines motion, body and space to stretch the boundaries of storytelling. Unlike the stories that tackle the theme of migration, "Sweet Dew" does not follow the established formula of the immigrant narrative that focalize on a hero, a journey, and a series of trials that end in integration (Hron 2009, 15). The established narrative structure usually depicts a hero who is defined by his outsider status, who undergoes a typically arduous educational process wherein he discovers and assimilates new cultural norms. The short story our protagonist crafted and eventually submits to a fiction contest is fundamentally devoid of these structural characteristics. For one, the narrative is sensorially immersive, as it focalizes on the trans-like state of driving, and its psychological

effects on Mahmood and the rest of the group. The whir of the engine brings him back to the different landscapes he crossed, the raft he rode on, the negotiations he had to make in order to arrive to that moment, lying on top of melons. It is a series of fragments that interconnect through the different affective and sensory information he undergoes inside that moving truck. The interconnections bring to the fore the cold of the container, body odor, and the claustrophobic sensation of human bodies stacked in a very small space. The descriptive threads build an unspoken tapestry of despair and loss without any direct divulsion.

Second, and most importantly, the story creates a visual image that draws a parallel between these smuggled Syrians and the Middle Passage. The ordering of the group's bodies atop the melon crates echoes the arrangements of the enslaved Africans in slave ships whose bodies were held in place, with no possibility of movement:

> Mahmoud was the last to climb in slipping between two bottom rows of fruit near the door. Further up by his head was one of the two men; the other was in the row above them. Directly above Mahmood was the grandmother and the husband and wife and little girl. By Mahmoud's side was the young woman… (171-172)

Not only were they able to feel the hard wood right above their noses which highlights the shackle-like quality of their constraint, they were also unable to stop mid journey to relieve their limbs and bladders. After a few hours, Mahmoud "sensed the warmth and wetness against his fingers. 'It's alright,' he whispered, sighing as he released his own" (178). He eventually becomes unable to distinguish between his memory of his home back in Syria and his reality in the pitch-black container, as his panic surges with each checkpoint. It becomes evident that the abject body of the refugee, swarming in human excrement, troubles geographic, psychological and human boundaries.

By linking the Syrian experience of flight to the cultural narrative of the Middle Passage, our protagonist reinvents the established structure of migration and the trauma it engenders in a way that births a new method of interpreting that experience. The motif of rebirth is eventually presented when Mahmoud and the group are captured. The sensory shock of being released out of the tank invites the image of birthing, where Mahmood is overwhelmed by the "far too much air" and his unresponsive body (180). However, the idea of rebirth is closely tied with Mahmoud's resignation. Believing that he is going to die at the last checkpoint, he remembers his father's advice when he was a child, who told him that the only two options in life is "to die or fight" (178). Repeated as a mantra to soothe himself in the moment between the truck stopping and being caught by the police, the phrase "die or fight" recodes the container in which they were being transported into a double scepter of their death and their new life.

The short story, "Sweet Dew" thus represents a new way of interpreting the experience of the Syrian refugee in light of preexisting narratives of forced migration. The writer Rana, whose name we learn at the end, finally finds a way to signify the gaps and fissures between herself as a refugee and whoever is willing to hear her testimony without erasing the sensory texture of the experience. She assumes, then, her ethical responsibility of telling what happened, a necessity that became vital after the Pakistani owner of the corner shop succumbs to his wounds after three xenophobes

attack him in his shop. Her story treads carefully the spoken and the unspoken in such a way that deconstructs silence and unspeakability.

5. CONCLUSION: TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK; AN IRRELEVANT QUESTION?

Whether writing is liberating or not, the novel reaches no conclusion. And Rana sarcastically voices this lack of resolution when she receives feedback from Josie, thinking "yes Josie, fiction is very liberating" (181). The promise of reaching the other and recognizing their experience remains always unstable and fraught with misunderstandings. Challenging institutions and their sanctioned narratives is a never-ending undertaking. There is, however, an ethical demand within the exploration of silence, representation and trauma that the story reflects on, a demand to do something.

By focusing on the less-than-human, the portrayal of the main character deconstructs the established notion of trauma and its related concepts, specifically the unspeakability and unrepresentability of the event-based punctual trauma. As it has been demonstrated, the delayed response to the traumatic event is but one phase in the many culturally specific responses. The temporalities in which the colonized subject exists need to be attended to in order to reveal the complexities of the experience of trauma and the ways healing can take place. In order to situate trauma in its historical context, I resort to narrative hermeneutics advanced by Hana Meretoja (2018) which places the experiential subject in the power structure in which she circulates rather than outside of them, a supposition that the traditional trauma model upholds. In the case of the Syrian refugee, the dire material conditions that the novel alludes to draws attention to the affective aspect of the survivor's crossing, wherein her sensings provide ample knowledge on those conditions. By emphasizing the momentary and embodied experience of the subject, the colonized body is brought to the foreground as a mediating agent that is fundamental to the process of understanding the traumatic event, forming the first layer of interpretation.

Moreover, by focalizing on the refugee and her status as abject, the present analysis showcases that it is reductive to think of the victim as incapable of integrating the events into their consciousness as it is implied in the emphasis on the unspeakability of trauma. The analysis demonstrates the sobriety of the protagonist's perspective in her unflinching estimation and criticism of both her home and her receiving country. Her silence is an ambivalent take on the atrocities and the dehumanization of the refugee, as it both signals the incomprehensibility of their lived experience, and the unavailability of narrative structures that can effectively communicate the complexity of their trauma.

The complexity of the trauma of the colonized and the layered meanings it carries invites us to consider what lies beyond the attempts at representing it. *Silence Is a Sense* (2021) thus invites us to reconsider the value of speech and the materiality of experience to foster recognition, and eventually, solidarity. It is evident that the reason behind Rana's refusal to speak lies beyond the lack of conceptual tools. Her silence communicates the fundamental lack of reciprocity and recognition, the severance of the interpersonal ties that link people together, turning them into

isolated clusters. Her silence is at once preconfigured by the medical institution and journalistic standards, and a reactive response to them. Her reluctance to write is precisely a compromise motivated by the need to create coalitions, to open up the refugee world to the other worlds to demonstrate how they are paradoxically all interconnected together by virtue of the logic of the power that sequesters them into neat categories.

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