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# Middle East – Topics & Arguments

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#11–2018

# Trauma

## **Researching Trauma**

Saadi Nikro

## **Beyond Trauma, What Kept them Going?**

Kholoud Saber Barakat,  
Pierre Philippot

## **Ruptures and Their Afterlife: A Cultural Critique of Trauma**

Orkideh Behrouzan

## **Theorizing Intergenerational Trauma in Tazmamart**

Brahim El Guabli

## **Towards a New Master Narrative of Trauma**

Sahar Elmougy

## **No More “Eloquent Silence”**

Nora Parr

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# EDITORIAL

## Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts

Stephan Milich, Lamia Moghnieh

**Keywords:** Trauma, Trauma Politics, PTSD, Research Field  
MENA, Power Structures, Interdisciplinary

Although psychologists have frequently observed “that civilians in the Middle East have been subjected to frequent episodes of violence, intra/inter-group conflicts and natural disasters” (Neria et al.), hinting at high rates of trauma and PTSD among the populations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), there has been until recently a lack of locally embedded research on trauma and the politics of suffering in this region. While generalizations about the extent of traumatization are regularly expressed by scientists as well as the media, e.g. in regard to Syrian refugees since 2012, Iraqi children after the US-led invasion in 2003, the current violent war in Yemen, the Lebanese civil war, and the Palestinian Nakba—all of them man-made disasters—claiming individual, collective, or national trauma as a political identity that demands justice, recognition of suffering, and rights of retribution has not yet acquired legal authority. Still, the politics of suffering from violence and war—how we articulate our suffering, to whom, and why—seems to be a matter of intense discussion and debate in the MENA, often taking a comparative approach: “who suffers the most, the Syrians, the Yemenis, or Palestinians living under occupation?” Embedded within these comparisons is a competition over the political recognition of victimhood

against violent states, settler colonialism, and foreign wars, and a critique of a hierarchy of suffering, at the center of which trauma is seen as a political position and a claim for justice. As violence, regime oppression, war, and displacement are on the rise in the region, one can detect a growing locally-informed literature and art production on trauma, the most visible coming from Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The work produced by Egyptian feminists in *Nazraa for Feminist Studies* and the *Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence*, recording experiences of violence against women and victims of torture, has relocated trauma into the center of Egyptian politics as a wound that denounces state and masculine violence. In Syria, media outlets like *Syria Untold* and *al-Jumhuriyya* have opened a platform for much-needed personal writings, reflections and intellectualization over how we experience unfathomable and repetitive violence, trauma, and memory, and living in post-violence exile (see Hassan “Clashing”; “Testimony”; Souleimane; Salamah; Khalifa; Mansoor). Likewise, the rise of Syrian documentary movies recording, witnessing, and narrating the experienced violence is also a collective exercise in interpretation and making political meaning of unfathomable events. Finally, Iraqi authors like Hasan

Balasim, Shakir Nuri, and Ahmad Sa’dawi engage in deep reflections on the intricate and at times absurd relationships between literary representation, bio-politics, and trauma.

It is crucial to think about the reasons why contemporary MENA writers and artists continue to address with overwhelming intensity issues related to trauma and suffering while academic trauma research remains scarce.<sup>1</sup> Their writings and cultural production prove to us every day that remembering and suffering are crucial positions against state violence and patriarchy that seek to erase and hide the traces of violence they committed. Despite the growing work, one may argue that (national) communities, highly affected by extreme forms of political violence like in Gaza or Syria could not yet effectively succeed in invoking trauma as a concept displaying political capital—although a few exceptions can be noted (e.g. Iraqi reparations to Kuwait after 1991). In the age of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin “Humanitarian”), claims over the past and present have, of course, political implications, and the construction of a cultural or historical trauma can influence public opinion and politics. This might be one reason why anthropologist Rosemarie Sayigh rightly criticizes the fact that while

a number of historical events served as paradigmatic models for historical traumas and atrocities, others are still silenced or forgotten and do not allow for a change of perspective nor a change “on the ground”. So for instance, loss of land, displacement, and other forms of dispossession are considered to be less “traumatic” than a number of other practices of injustice and political violence such as massacres. One reason for this form of disavowal can be explained by the fact that in some cases of historic injustice, no immediate and apparent threat of death emanated from these acts when they occurred. Holding in mind that these acts have often unfolded a deadly dynamic that can only be fully grasped when seen in its long-term consequences allows for a more comprehensive historical understanding that demands a different notion of temporality. With this in mind, it becomes clear that a concept like the “multi-directional memory” approach<sup>2</sup> by Michael Rothberg, although productive and insightful to a large extent, remains epistemologically limited, because it does not take enough into account the inherent power relations at work in each specific context, for “such interconnections are often, if not always, asymmetrical ones” (Cesari and Rigney 10).<sup>3</sup>

On another level, the high rates of external and internal conflicts in the MENA drive experts and journalists to assume the existence of a high level of traumatization among the populations. This has led to a mobilization of humanitarian aid for psychiatric and psychological treatments in the region. Yet, it has been difficult to translate this shared observation into a politics of social or global justice. If it is difficult for victimized communities to reclaim rights of reparation and compensation, it is usually impossible for the marginalized 'other'. Thus for instance, the violence and racism directed towards migrant workers by the Kafala system in the Gulf States or towards Sudanese asylum seekers in the MENA region is less likely to be considered a trauma. Their suffering, the violence they face on a daily level, remain invisible and outside of recognition.

Finally, the difficulties with which social groups make use (or not) of trauma for national reconciliation and justice stem from the fact that the causes for traumatization can frequently be found in state apparatuses themselves, with torture being used on a massive scale by state authorities as the clearest example.

### Trauma Politics

Hence, trauma studies related to the MENA region is not only an emerging field in the humanities and social sciences, but also a political and social field of manifold struggles over power and dominant regimes of truth. As already indicated above, this is largely due to the fact that under the umbrella term *trauma*, quite diverse realities are subsumed and, at times, almost epistemologically mixed up: On a first level of distinction, the same word trauma means psychological trauma of an individual, and the collective, social, historical, or cultural trauma of a group, class, community, milieu or nation. Additionally, trans- or intergenerational trauma can be situated at the interface between individual and collective forms of traumatization. All three forms contain different dynamics and cannot be dealt with by simple analogies. A further multiplicity to the meaning of trauma is created in everyday discursive language and in the media, when trauma is referred to as both the traumatic event and its symptoms, thereby mixing subjective and objective aspects of a traumatic situation, its cause, and its effect. On a different level, both victim and perpetrator can claim to be traumatized, of course from different causes and with different effects. The inherent danger here is one of de-contextualiza-

tion: since trauma is closely related to the status of the victim, it can be very attractive for perpetrators to claim to be traumatized in order to gain public empathy. This is what Fassin and Rechtsman might have alluded to in their groundbreaking *L'Empire du Traumatisme* when discussing the differing ways of claiming trauma in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.<sup>4</sup> It gets even more complex when trauma as a discursive concept is rejected as a form of suffering because it is linked to global aid economies and humanitarian understanding of victimhood as apolitical and passive. This potentially results in weakening the ethics of resistance to settler colonialism as in the case of Palestinian *šumūd* (Meari; on *šumūd* as cultural resistance see Rohrbach in this volume).<sup>5</sup> While claims of trauma have undeniably been emancipatory and helpful to a large extent in creating more social justice and allowing victims to reclaim rights and compensation in many contexts (e.g. women rights, child abuse, genocide), trauma can easily be adopted for political ends and interests that have a reactionary intention, like the argument put forward by a political official in the Arab Gulf that Syrian refugees should not be granted asylum or resident status in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council because those people are traumatized and therefore threatening.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting critically on the use of the trauma model is key to preventing a problematic usage of stereotypes, both in scientific and societal discourse. One recent example is the expert report “Stellungnahme: Traumatisierte Flüchtlinge – Schnelle Hilfe ist nötig” published in February 2018 of the *Leopoldina National Academy of Sciences* in Germany, which warns of the dangers of not immediately treating asylum seekers and refugees, claiming that large proportions of them would certainly be traumatized. The problematic aspect of their argumentation is the link they create between forced migration, trauma, and the propensity to violence (“appetitive aggression”), even stating that acculturative stress reinforces violent behavior (19). As in the case of the image of the traumatized veteran soldiers in the USA, PTSD and trauma can become a social stigma that indexes you as a dangerous and out-of-control violent man. This interdisciplinary study lacks regional expertise, and trauma here is not contextualized. It fosters a de-politicization that presents refugees as a homogenous group, all of them apparently sharing the same destiny and features. However important it is to provide psycho-social services for marginalized groups in society, it is highly problematic to serve recurring prejudices that might easily be instru-

mentalized by right-wing groups and politicians.<sup>7</sup> An open debate between scholars and practitioners on trauma in Germany (as well as in other countries) with different background and expertise is needed to avoid biased and unfounded assertions.

A further dimension of trauma politics particularly relevant to the MENA region has to do less with the violence experienced than with its aftermath and with the post-violence reconstruction of subject, place, and society. Multiple cases from the MENA—like the reconstruction plans in Syria that are underway, the reconstruction of Lebanon after the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and after the July War (2006), as well as the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip after continuous military interventions by Israel—clearly highlight the infrastructures and materialities of suffering in the region. The postwar reconstruction of Beirut after the Lebanese Civil War served to project its heritage into the neo-liberal future, erasing all physical traces of violence and raising questions about the possibility to recall, speak of, and remember the war. Likewise, the almost unimaginable rapid reconstruction of villages and neighborhoods in South Lebanon and the Suburbs of Beirut after the July War, and Hezbollah’s statement “we will make Dahiyeh<sup>8</sup> more beautiful than it was,” is

another form of urban erasure of the war’s traces that works towards strengthening the collective, while articulations of suffering from violence and its aftermath become less and less tolerated in the community (Moghnieh). What lies under these “beautiful” cities however, are layers and layers of things, emotions, and experiences left untold, unsaid, except maybe in private. In direct contrast to the fast and almost magical reconstruction of Lebanon, the reconstruction of the Gaza strip after Israeli wars and attacks is a story of debris and rubble (Barakat and Masri), especially after the Israeli war in 2014. The removal of rubble from the war was so slow that it took years to be accomplished, hindering the reconstruction process. The settler colonial violence committed in Gaza becomes thus physically sensed and experienced daily as one lives in and with the debris of war. All these cases show that war reconstruction politics make some of the infrastructures of suffering, where the latter materializes in the landscape itself. State and non-state war reconstruction projects are evidently political in the way they seek to erase and hide violence, thereby framing the discourse on suffering in societies.

A final aspect essential to understanding dominant regimes of truth like trauma is to



push ideas about the intricate relationship between bio-politics and trauma narratives further. One case in point is a widely circulated article by the Huffington Post about the curious case of a US military dog that “returned traumatized” from Iraq, inducing sympathy among (western) readers for a dog without sparing a word about the plight and suffering of the Iraqi population exposed to an illegal war intervention and occupation policies (Milich “Narrating”). This makes Judith Butler’s distinction between “grievable” and “ungrievable” lives all the more relevant. Fassin and Rechtman have formulated it well, when they explained that “trauma can be read in various ways, depending on the political purposes it serves” (209), while Radstone and Schwarz observed that “memory is active, forging its pasts to serve present interests.” (3)

The question that arises then with regard to the MENA region is how we can safeguard the emancipatory character of trauma (manifesting itself for instance in Judith Herman’s or Basma Abdelaziz’s empowering understanding of trauma work) while recording locally informed articulations of suffering in a meaningful, situational, and ethical way. Is it possible to deal with trauma in a manner that provides human beings with tools for recov-

ery and healing without disempowering them? In recent years, there has been much effort in international humanities and cultural studies to modify the trauma model by substituting the individualistic, event-based belatedness as well as the dictum of the un-narratability of a traumatic experience (Lyotard; Assmann; Caruth; van der Kolk; Laub; Das et al.) with an approach that pays attention to continuous and complex forms of traumatization and unforgotten experiences, adopting an eco-systemic and re-contextualizing, and thus more holistic view on traumatic situations and their processual nature.

### The Postcolonial Turn in Trauma Studies

While trauma has been increasingly accepted as the universal form of suffering on a global scale, a more systematic critique of trauma as a Eurocentric concept is of very recent date. As Irene Visser argues in her article “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects,” the call to decolonize trauma studies and theory can be located in the attempt to investigate trauma from a postcolonial studies approach, as a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* has suggested in 2008.

Although the influential anti-colonial intellectual, psychiatrist, and political activist Frantz Fanon (see Craps and Buelens;

Milich “Translating”) has framed different aspects of the colonial situation as traumatizing, the history of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery has not until recently impacted the creation of more widely acknowledged models of trauma, such as for instance with South African psychologists’ notion of Continuous Traumatic Stress (see Matthies-Boon in this volume).<sup>9</sup> But what would have happened if trauma had been modeled on the basis of Fanon’s conceptualization, as an effect of colonialism in the late 1950s and 60s? Very likely, it would not have turned into a globally acknowledged term of psychological and psychiatric diagnosis, due to western scientific hegemony. This illustrates well that while man-made trauma is intrinsically bound to victimhood, injustice and violence, the material and legal recognition of traumatization is always largely dependent on those in powerful political and societal positions. Fanon’s reports of his therapeutic encounters with both French soldiers and Algerians in the context of the war of liberation in his chapter “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” can still inspire notions of humanistic psychological work without effacing the necessary distinction between victim and perpetrator. More than that, his work is illuminating when reading outstanding works of world literature, like Mahmud

Darwish's poems on the dialectic between the occupier and the occupied, or Assia Djébar's writings on (post-)colonial Algeria and France.

So what seems to be crucial today is not only to develop and formulate concepts of suffering that are locally embedded and allow for empowerment and recuperation instead of silencing and dispossession, but also to search beyond the known paths. This demands a better understanding of how concepts like trauma and its diverse translations into languages like Arabic and Persian travel to new sites and contexts, and how they are integrated in regional systems of social practice, meaning production and cultural signs. These endeavors have to be accompanied by a constant process of critical reflection on the researcher's responsibility and complicity (Rothberg "Decolonizing", 232), how we as scholars, too—despite the limited reach of scientific knowledge production—are contributing to the dissemination of new ways of perceiving social reality, selfhood, and the past.

### Introducing the Issue

This special issue aims to contribute to a deeper and critical understanding of trauma in the societies, cultures, and histories of the Middle East and North Africa.

The collection of essays brings together perspectives from the social sciences, humanities, and literary studies, not least by exploring the narrativization of suffering, its performative and its non-verbal expression both in social reality and cultural production. In presenting explorations of literary texts, theatre, social realities, and theoretical reflection, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive, nuanced, and inclusive view on trauma and memory production both as a cultural and social materiality and as a political formation. To date, psychological research on trauma in the MENA has mostly been limited to quantitatively measuring the level of PTSD among certain affected groups. What has not yet been undertaken is a comprehensive investigation and exploration of different forms and features of traumatic experience and memory inspired by a critical perspective. This issue of META is meant to mark a beginning in this regard, possibly rather raising questions than giving definite answers, and also highlighting the areas, regions, and places that seem to be marginalized within this academic research on trauma. The diverse array of different approaches, topics, and disciplines expresses our concern to include and map the diversity and multiplicity of current trauma studies research related to the MENA. There are a

number of themes, concerns, and motives that link the essays of this special issue closely together: firstly, the desire to search for locally embedded conceptualizations and formulations of trauma beyond hegemonic models like PTSD, thereby giving voice to individuals who are usually not heard, but only talked about, and redirecting the view to marginalized and forgotten histories of trauma (Brykalski and Reyes; Nikro; Behrouzan; Matthies-Boon; Barakat and Philippot; Parr; Tijani); secondly, the political implications of discourses on trauma, but also how certain political regimes use(d) violence and traumatization as a tool to produce human devastation and submissive subjects, and how oppositional groups counter these devastating politics by creating their cultural trauma (Jebari; Tijani; Elmougy; Nader); third, the question of generation, surfacing in different forms in at least two of the special issue's essays (Behrouzan; El Guabli); and, last but not least, processes of the production of collective traumas and the cultural and discursive dynamics at work (Elmougy; Matthies-Boon; Lang).

The META articles invite a rethinking of trauma from the field, calling for adopting more complex and in-tuned forms of suffering that might fit better with people's

lived experiences and interpretations of life worlds in the context of violence and humanitarianism. Saadi Nikro's essay highlights the importance of attending to the methodology behind researching trauma as a crucial part of the work of de-colonizing and de-constructing it. He invites us to adopt a materialist phenomenology as a relational methodology "in which subjects, concepts, research agendas, and knowledge come to cohere" (36). By drawing on several encounters while conducting research in Lebanon, Nikro explores the relation between methodology and trauma as embedded and embodied life worlds. The second META article by Brykalski and Reyes explores the adoption of the concept of "Human Devastation Syndrome" (HDS) or *mutalāzima al-damār al-insānī* by Syrian doctors and practitioners to describe Syrian children's mental health. HDS has become a circulating term aimed to capture Syrian youth's experiences with violence beyond the trauma model. Based on anthropological and global health perspectives, this article follows two Syrian youths' process of making meaning of their experiences to uncover the interpretive value of locally-based concepts like HDS.

How do women survive and continue to live after experiences of violence; how do

they endure under harsh conditions of displacement? Barakat and Philippot present a study that analyzes the stories of five Syrian women displaced into Lebanon beyond the traditional and psychological model of women refugees as passive victims of patriarchy, sexual abuse, and other traumatizing experiences of violence. Based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the authors highlight how these women deal with their past and present situations amidst changing gender roles during displacement. What becomes relevant here is not the experience of trauma itself, but the process of surviving, living, and regaining agency after trauma. This, the authors argue, is linked to their ability to create meaning from the traumatic past and link it to their present situations. Being attentive to literary conceptualizations of trauma that resist the dominant Eurocentric trauma model and traumatic belatedness, Nora Parr's essay stresses the "everyday" forms of traumatization, of being confronted or living in constant violence. In her readings of Ibrahim Nasrallah's *Taḥta shams al-ḍuḥā* (Under the Midmorning Sun) and Iman Humaydan's *Bā' mithl Bayt... mithl Bayrūt* (B like house... like Beirut), she focuses on two features of literary trauma narrative, open-endings and repetition, closing with the plea to grasp the nature of un-exceptional, uneventful

trauma "with new structures of telling that can hold silence as part of the story, in all its ugly ineloquence." (123) Defying conventional assumptions about trauma literature as a working through past atrocities, trauma in these two novels has turned into the organizing pattern of the present.

Vivienne Matthies-Boon's article carries a similar engagement and concern to reconceptualize trauma as Brykalski and Reyes, Barakat and Philippot, and Parr as she introduces the phenomenological concept of Continuous Trauma Stress (CTS) within the context of Egypt. As this article shows, CTS is not a diagnostic term but a political conceptualization of trauma itself that accounts for structural violence and repression that are usually left unrecognized as valid forms of suffering. Based on life-story testimonies from forty young activists from Cairo, this article argues that concepts like CTS have the possibility to capture the trauma embedded in living in everyday deep violence and a repressive political order. Analyzing literary practices that create or recreate cultural traumas as a reaction to state violence, Sahar Elmougy's article "Towards a New Master Narrative of Trauma" takes a social constructivist approach by applying Jeffrey Alexander's notion of "cultural trauma" on recent poetic production. In close read-

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ings of US-American poet Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin" and Egyptian poet Mostafa Ibrahim's "I Have Seen Today," the detailed comparison between the two poems and their respective context illustrates how the use of specific discursive strategies, culturally embedded metaphors, and historic references contributes to the construction of a collectively shared sense of traumatic belonging. Read together with Matthies-Boon's analysis of recent expressions and manifestations of violent repression and articulations of trauma as immediate or slightly belated reaction, the two essays can show us much about the highly complex entanglements of psychological, social, material, and discursive traumatic situations/experiences and their effects and afterlife.

A different trajectory is taken by Tijani who highlights the work of the prolific yet neglected Kuwaiti-Iraqi novelist 'Ismā'īl Fahd 'Ismā'īl by claiming a close correlation between literary narrative and the author's biographical experiences. Caused by his imprisonment under the rule of Abd al-Karim Qasim, 'Ismā'īl suffered a traumatic wound that haunted most of his novels, putting him on a "revenge mission" against devastating authoritarian practices. Tijani draws on

Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytically inspired trauma concept, frequently used in scholarly studies on trauma fiction. His approach highlights the dimension of healing/recovery through writing. Anne Rohrbach's essay "(Re)Enacting Stories of Trauma: Playback Theatre as a Tool of Cultural Resistance in Palestine" looks beyond verbal output and literary production, illuminating the importance of performative communal practices of dealing with traumatic situations and their aftermath. Investigating the use of Playback Theatre in the Palestinian context as a therapeutic platform and tool of cultural resistance, she carves out the empowering potential of enacting and narrating painful events in a community setting, integrating all senses and fostering both agency and critical consciousness.

Orkideh Behrouzan's essay focuses on (inter-)generational trauma narratives and memory politics in Iran in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war. It looks at the processes of remembering, witnessing, and archiving the war among the members of the post-war generation in ways that challenge the dominant political discourse on the war, providing an alternative understanding of mental health beyond the clinical diagnostic model. Behrouzan's use of "toroma" as rupture instead of trauma opens up

ways to capture intergenerational and intersubjective experiences and recollections of historical conditions and wars. Sharing a similar focus on questions of intergenerational dynamics, Brahim El Guabli's essay "Theorizing Intergenerational Trauma in Tazmamart Testimonial Literature and Docu-testimonies" looks at how families affected by the state's repressive actions during the *Years of Lead* struggle with the impossibilities of dealing with disappearance, imprisonment, and absence of family members. Discussing a wide range of Moroccan cultural production, particularly testimonial literature and video documentations, the detailed analysis of the "pre-discursive period," during which traumatizing events could not be verbally addressed in the realm of the family, succeeds in elucidating the concealed forms and dynamics of transmitting traumatic situations with their felt emotions and affects to the next generation(s). Closely in dialogue with these works on traumatizing effects in recent Moroccan history, Idris Jebari looks at the process of transitional justice as manifested in the work of collective memory in Morocco and Algeria. The article examines historical and cultural productions that work on collective memory despite or beyond the dominant discourse of "therapeutic history" that hides

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is a lecturer of Arabic Literature at the University of Cologne. His research interests include contemporary Arabic poetry and prose, representations and concepts of exile and trauma, and perceptions and self-perceptions of psychology/psychotherapy in the Arab countries. He has published a book on Mahmoud Darwish's late poetry and on the poetics and politics of Palestinian and Iraqi exile poetry. He co-edited a volume on modern Iraqi culture (*Conflicting Narratives: War, trauma and memory in Modern Iraqi Culture*), and a second volume on "Representations and Visions of Homeland in Arabic Literature." Besides his research on notions of trauma in contemporary Arabic literature with a special interest in trauma politics, he translates Arabic poetry into German. **email:** [smilich@uni-koeln.de](mailto:smilich@uni-koeln.de)

and erases certain forms of violence. By drawing a comparative approach between these cultural works on memory and the state's own therapeutic narrative for healing the national communities, Jebari highlights the limitations of both countries' processes of transitional justice. Coming from a psychological and clinical psychiatric background, the Egyptian writer, human rights' activist, and artist Basma Abdelaziz is portrayed in the Close-Up section by Sam Nader (pseudonym). In addition to biographical information which highlights her courage in addressing and investigating existing structures of torture in Egypt and beyond, Nader discusses the literary as well as scholarly works of Abdelaziz, including a short online interview on her work with torture victims.

Last but not least, the Thesis/Anti-Thesis articles both address the critiques of trauma in the humanities today, as a concept that de-politicizes and de-contextualizes human suffering while silencing marginal and subversive ways of experiencing and living with violence in the MENA region. Lang's essay focuses on these concerns while highlighting the social constructions of trauma as a concept that caters to individual and psychological forms of suffering, while the social struc-

ture is ignored. This, Lang argues, becomes untenable when the collective or the group is traumatized. Matthies-Boon's anti-thesis essay comes not to necessarily contrast Lang's thesis but to stretch his critique further by proposing a phenomenological approach to trauma as rooted in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Much like Lang, Matthies-Boon argues against dismissing the concept of trauma altogether. She invites us to reinterpret this form of suffering in specific localities and contexts, thereby bringing back its roots to political and power dynamics. This "radicalization of trauma studies" (22) should start with a critical reflection on the Western knowledge production process itself and the biases that frame it. This also includes incorporating modes of violence like repression and structural violence into the definition of trauma itself. Behrouzan's concept of rupture is also relevant here as Matthies-Boon takes on a political and phenomenological understanding of trauma as "the breaking of our meaningful engagement with the world." (23)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Over the last five years, trauma as a research focus in cultural studies related to the MENA is on the rise. Before, there had been some pioneering projects, e.g. the Edinburgh-based *Research Network on Memory and Social Trauma in the Middle East* (2008-2010), initiated by Kamran Rastegar, a special issue of *Alif – Journal of Comparative Poetics*, dedicated to the topic of "Trauma and Memory", as well as Saadi Nikro's monograph *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon*. In Lebanon, trauma had become a central theme in literature, film, and art after the civil war. The Lebanese cultural production on war and violence has also created interesting debates around trauma and memory. A much earlier attempt of making use of (psychoanalytical) trauma theory was George Tarabechi's critical analysis of intellectual discourse on *turāth* (cultural heritage) and *aşāla* (cultural authenticity) after the *Naksa* in 1967 in his book *Al-Muthaqqafūna al-'arab wa-turāth*, framed as a traumatic reaction to the shock of the collapse

of Nasserist and other nationalist ideologies.

<sup>2</sup> Arguing against competitive approaches to history, Rothberg's approach draws attention to the productive power of careful analogical thinking, highlighting the potential of seeing and acknowledging related histories "to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" (13). Drawing critically on earlier thoughts about the entangled histories of the Holocaust and colonial genocides (e.g. Arendt and Césaire), "multi-directional memory considers a series of interventions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post-World War II present." (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 12)

<sup>3</sup> For an earlier, equally "relationalist" approach, see Ella Shohat's collection of older and more recent essays on Frantz Fanon as well as the "multi-directional" histories of Sephardic Jews, Palestinian Arabs, Catholic Spanish, and Native Americans (Shohat).

<sup>4</sup> For a similar approach, see José Brunner 2014.

<sup>5</sup> In the Palestinian context specifically, (al-qudra 'alā aş-) *şumūd* can be translated as resilience (besides *murūna* or *şalāba dākhiliya*), thereby highlighting the positive, empowering aspects of a *traumatic* situation.

<sup>6</sup> See a video by a Kuwaiti official on Facebook, whose content was disseminated by different agencies and with different ends: <https://www.facebook.com/RevNews/videos/kuwait-and-other-gcc-countries-are-too-valueable-to-accept-any/559499680870265>. See also an Amnesty International report, dating from December 2016: <https://www.amnesty.org.au/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers>.

<sup>7</sup> For a more nuanced way to put forward a similar claim, see Munz and Melcop.

<sup>8</sup> Southern suburbs of Beirut.

<sup>9</sup> See also the demand made by editors and authors of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, who, according to Visser (251), emphasize "the importance of a continued postcolonial critique of historical and political processes as the original sites of trauma for postcolonial communities (...)."

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# META



## Researching Trauma: Some Methodological Considerations for the Humanities

Norman Saadi Nikro

Since at least the mid-1990s trauma has come to form a more staple theme of research in the humanities, across and between the fields of history, literature, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and of

course psychoanalysis. More recently, there has been a concerted effort to “decolonize” trauma studies, outlining how the variegated field remains subservient to European and North American teleological and epistemological reper-

toires. And while accompanying critiques of trauma studies as a discourse—as an institutionally located reproductive mechanism of power and knowledge maintaining relational conduits of subject and object formations—have served to draw attention to the constitutive implications of research paradigms, this has taken place almost exclusively within the bounds of theory.

In this essay, I take as my point of departure the idea that in the humanities there has been an excessive amount of trauma theory, all the while neglecting to develop discussions around methodology. In proposing a consideration of methodology, I want to shift the debate from its over-determined theoretical concerns to the more worldly, fleshy, and physical contours of a materialist phenomenology focusing on modalities of encountering, inhabiting, and embodying specific livelihoods—livelihoods of people, of places, of things, of objects—including research subjects and research materials themselves. While discussing these themes I draw on some of my encounters with subjects of my research in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Trauma, Methodology, Humanities, Lebanon, Phenomenology, Research

Epistemology is true as long as it accounts for the impossibility of its own beginning and lets itself be driven at every stage by its inadequacy to the things themselves.

(Theodor Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*.)

### Trauma: Between Theory and Method

Since at least the mid-1990s trauma has come to form a staple theme of research in the humanities, across and between the fields of history, literature, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and psychoanalysis. More recently, there has been a concerted effort to “decolonize” trauma studies, outlining how the varying field remains subservient to European and North American teleological and epistemological repertoires. According to a prominent critic, Irene Visser, this subservience is informed by an “event-based model of trauma” (252) that underestimates “circumstances—colonial, racial, patriarchal”—in which trauma constitutes enduring textures of life.

Visser’s observation taps into significant research articulating a departure from event-based models of trauma. Writing from the South African context, Michela Borzaga emphasizes how a preoccupation

with the incidence of trauma underestimates textures of social livelihood. In her essay “Trauma in the Postcolony,” she writes (68): “to speak about trauma no longer means to investigate subjectivities and their mutual, shaping relationship with the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded, but only to speak about ‘events’, ‘stressors’, ‘accidents’.”

Borzaga’s emphasis on “context” is echoed by other critics writing in what can be called “the field of decolonizing trauma theory,” such as Stef Craps (43). While Craps and Borzaga share a critique of the predominating event-based model in trauma studies (of which I will say more below), they otherwise depart in a significant respect. This concerns the almost fetishistic faith that Craps invests in *theory* as a moral, largely epistemological agent of change. As he writes in the conclusion of his introduction:

I suggest that, rather than serving as the handmaiden of the status quo or a purveyor of voyeuristic skills, a decolonized trauma theory can act as a catalyst for meaningful change. By enabling us to recognize and attend to the sufferings of people around the world, an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can expose situa-

tions of injustice and abuse, and open up ways to imagine a different global future (Craps 7)

I do not want to downplay the valuable contribution to trauma studies by Craps and others,<sup>2</sup> especially concerning the significant critique of what Luckhurst has called “private therapeutic acts of self-improvement” (75). For my purposes, I want rather to question the excessive faith in theory.

Accordingly, in this essay I take as my point of departure the idea that in the humanities there has been an excessive amount of *trauma theory*, all the while neglecting to develop discussions around *methodology*.

In proposing a consideration of methodology, I want to shift the debate from its over-determined theoretical concerns to the more worldly, fleshy, and physical contours of a materialist phenomenology focusing on modalities of encountering, inhabiting, and embodying specific livelihoods—livelihoods of people, of places, of things, of objects—including research subjects and research materials themselves. Rather than profess universalizing pretensions immured in what Sara Ahmed has called a “paperless philosophy” (34), such a phenomenology is attuned to differential circulations of material and imaginary

resources by which subjects and objects comport themselves and “cohere.”

This shift from a theory of the production of knowledge to the methods and social modalities by which knowledge is gathered and applied (from logic to logistics, we can say) requires an alternative view of methodology itself. In phenomenological terms, methodology transpires not so much as a reproducible, categorical means of ordering the logic of knowledge production—which serves in the main to remove the presence of the researcher from the scene of research—but rather as an exercise of encountering research material and exchanging a sense of purpose with research subjects. Perhaps part of this shift in how methodology (the very term is imbued with a rather dry and prosaic aura, and hence tends to be avoided in the humanities) is discussed and debated involves a view of knowledge as know-how, as a practical and passionate exercise in learning, with others, how to know. This includes a willingness to reflect on circumstances in which one has learned how to know, and been induced to “unlearn” (hooks 38) how to know.

As I have come to learn through my developing relationship to my research and that of others, the phenomenological nexus of

knowledge and method is a particularly important ethical tangent for many of us whose research takes place in the Mashreq and Maghreb. Across these regions, much of the social texture and political culture, as well as intellectual know-how, is having to somehow incorporate and process more acute experiences of violence and trauma (physical and symbolic, actual and potential, sudden and enduring) as not only pressing concerns for everyday life, but also as not quite out of the ordinary. By ethical, I mean, in the first instance, that a researcher cultivates a sense of having a relationship to their research subjects and material. I think Michael Lambek is on the right track when, in his discussion of Gadamer and hermeneutics, he suggests a shift of “virtue ethics” from a Levinasian concern with the other to the “circumstances” (230) in which the other appears as other, potentially disturbing my terms of reference. More heterophonic than polyphonic, such an approach suggests that the relationship a researcher has with research subjects and material is mediated by a number of factors and tangents, all involving specific, mostly institutionally directed circulations and exchanges of power, know-how, desire, emotion, passion, and temperament—what Lambek in his essay articulates as an overlapping tension between “tradition and practice.”

From existential and professional experience, I have also come to learn that researchers tend to have negative assumptions concerning violence and trauma. Violence seems always to imply something destructive and immoral, at least according to conventional expectations of normality; or more precisely, according to an analytic temperament that fails to recognize that alignments between normal and abnormal resonate and come to cohere (or be rendered incoherent) as embodied hermeneutic patterns of self- and other-awareness—alignments that are thus always shifting. Kirsten Hastrup (313) has argued that research applications are designed to anticipate “order, pattern, system and essential stability,” and hence are poorly equipped to gauge “fragmentation and instability as part of human experience.” As researchers carry set assumptions about violence, it is inevitable that they categorize varying modes of violence the phenomenon will as beyond the pale of normality, underestimating how a research source, or else a research subject, embodies and makes hermeneutic sense of their social environments.

To borrow from Veena Das, a sensitivity to what I have called shifting alignments between normal and abnormal involves an attentiveness not only to the “ordinari-

ness" of how subjects of enduring violence and trauma revitalize their social circumstances, but indeed how research itself can be attuned to this ordinariness, can "descend into the ordinary." Writing about the fragments of speech articulated by one of her research subjects, Das writes: "it appears to me that filling out the repertoire to which each fragment points allows us to construct meaning as a process in which the spoken utterances derive their meaning from the lifeworld rather than from the abstract notions of structural semantics" (65). Indeed, in her critique of orienting research through the question "what happened?" Das maintains a critical distance from event-based models. She gives more emphasis to modalities in which violence and trauma are "folded into everyday relations" (75). This "folding" refers both to embodiments of lingering violence and trauma and capacities to reference and narrate experiences and circumstances of such.

Attentiveness to "ordinariness" does not mean that violence (political, domestic, civil, symbolic) should be excused, thematized as a basic attribute of life, or else rendered a constitutive theme of restorative justice. It is rather to foreground that ready-made notions of violence as negative and abnormal underestimate how

actual, emotional, potential, resistant, and symbolic violence play significant roles in maintaining textures of social life. In Lebanon, for example, *martyrdom* circulates, and is packaged and exchanged, as an emotional, productive modality of social bonding, very similar to the ceremonies and social imaginaries of war shrines, tombs, and narratives of unknown-soldier symbols in Australia or the United States.

Researchers also tend to view trauma through a negative lens, as an affliction that should be cured and overcome, or else that can be explained according to a neat, teleological model of cause and effect. As I mentioned above, trauma is often assumed to be associated with a specific event or incident, so that what comes after a "traumatic event" is viewed in terms of personal coping, or else configured as a remedial response to the traumatic event. In her discussion of "the humanitarian trauma model" in Lebanon, Moghnieh argues that trauma is mostly viewed by the "humanitarian experts" as a rupture to the psyche, and rarely recognized as a mode of reference revitalizing capacities for social being. Writing about the July War of 2006 (Israel's thirty-day bombing spree of Lebanon), Moghnieh says: "Humanitarian organizations that arrived in Lebanon to provide psycholog-

ical assistance relied on 'the trauma model' as a mode of intervention that understands violence solely as a traumatic encounter injuring and rupturing the psyche" (28).

Clinical and theoretical ways of speaking about trauma often presuppose a notion of the subject as primordially self-contained and indivisible (individual). Consequently, remedial theories and practices are geared towards patching up this indivisible container. In a temporal sense, the question "what happened?" assumes that trauma is concentrated in an incident of the past, and that present circumstances are innocent of enduring trauma. In the post-civil war years in Lebanon (after 1990), for example, not much effort was made to develop adequate public health facilities, remedial practices, and economic well-being to address enduring and lingering trauma as both personal disposition and social texture. My point is that the failure to do so is a constitutive condition of enduring trauma.

Traumatic symptoms can be valued as varying emotional, intellectual, social, and material ways of coping with distressing circumstances of livelihood, especially when such circumstances involve anticipa-

tions of further violence and the absence of adequate health care. Kai Erikson is one of the very few social anthropologists to have researched trauma in terms of social textures of livelihood and coping, going so far as to claim that no incident or event is itself inherently traumatic. He makes the somewhat radical suggestion that traumatic impulses—both articulate and haptic—are shared as modalities of cohering as a group or community.<sup>3</sup>

As I am suggesting, in the humanities critiques of trauma studies have tended to concentrate on theory, neglecting questions concerning methodology. But how should methodology be understood in relation to varying applications of research? How can methodology be regarded not merely as a way of conducting research and organizing findings, but rather as a relational mode of inhabiting a social texture of life in which trauma is variably embodied? How, indeed is methodology discussed in the humanities? To my mind, critical discussions of methodology tend to be restricted to questions of epistemology. This restriction underestimates how researchers can consider methodology in respect to a physical experience of being-with, or being in the midst, as it were. How, concerning the theme of this special issue—"the materiality of suffering

and the politics of trauma in specific contexts," to quote the call for papers—can a predominant comportment toward knowing be shifted to a more physical "comportment toward being,"<sup>4</sup> including *being-in* relationships with research subjects and materials?

In this paper, then, I emphasise a notion of methodology as a practical application of research, though having ethical and phenomenological implications. Although phenomenology has often been articulated through a guise of transcending (or "bracketing" beliefs and prejudices) circumstance,<sup>5</sup> its value lies in its basic assumption that subjects, bodies, or for that matter, concepts, are not defined according to their substantive properties, but by capacities, by relational modalities of comportment. As Sara Ahmed writes, speaking about race: "It can be problematic to describe whiteness as something we 'pass through': such an argument could make whiteness into something substantive, as if whiteness has an ontological force of its own that compels us and even 'drives' action" (135). Accordingly, I want to try to situate the question of methodology in respect to relational dynamics and circulations in which subjects, concepts, research agendas, and knowledge come to cohere.

As I have suggested, while in the social sciences there has been much debate concerning methodology, in the humanities trauma *theory* tends to hold sway. I can outline some of the questions I want to problematize as follows. How, for a start, should we understand "methodology" in respect to researching trauma, in respect to pain and suffering, to social textures of life and livelihood, as well as performative and narrative works that either thematize trauma or else reverberate as traumatized thresholds of social and cultural production? How can methodology be understood in terms of a materialist phenomenology? By this, I mean to suggest, as mentioned above, a shift away from a notion of methodology as a strict exercise of gathering and ordering knowledge to an awareness of *inhabiting* research and social environments consisting of certain modalities of comportment.

### Trauma in a Manifold Refrain

A particular assumption embedded in theories of trauma is that victimhood implies a passive orientation of self and circumstance, in relation to traumatic incidents and/or enduring psychological and physical pain. Consequently, a person's failure to speak about and articulate their pain, give voice to their experiences of violence, or else narrate their present

emotional and material circumstances of livelihood, indicates a failing, an incapacity. Yet this assumption tends, firstly, to encompass binary notions of normality and abnormality, and secondly, underestimates how a person is always actively engaging their circumstances and working on managing unpredictable occurrences of stimuli.

As a modicum of pain, trauma involves *relational* exchanges of voice and voicelessness, speech and speechlessness. The withdrawal of voice and speech can be another way of managing self and circumstance. In her acclaimed *The Body in Pain* (1987), Elaine Scarry discusses the theme of social extension in terms of a transformative momentum between body and voice, understanding these as modalities of inhabiting place and capacities to exchange a sense of self with others. If pain, according to Scarry, “destroys a person’s world, self, and voice” (49) directing a person towards corporeal contraction or withdrawal, then by contrast, the articulation of pain, expressing (pushing, breathing out) voice as an articulation of an experience of pain (if only to say “ahhhhh”), has remedial consequences. Accordingly, as an exchange of self with others, traumatic pain implicates an act of *listening* by which “one human being who is well and free

willingly turns himself into an image of the other’s psychic or sentient claims” (Scarry 50).

Scarry’s discussion suggests a notion of trauma as not only an experience of violence, but also as a way of holding oneself together in the lingering aftermath of violent incidents and events. For my purposes, she emphasizes a compelling notion of pain and trauma taking place as relational modalities of comportment, in between one subject and another, rather than restricted to a subject understood as an embodiment of substantive properties. Listening transpires as a vehicle by which the telling or else sound of pain takes place as a “projection” of oneself beyond their “suffering body,” beyond their body in pain.<sup>6</sup>

Yet listening, of course, is not always provided willingly and freely, but involves modicums of power and desire, institutional and otherwise, by which a subject is disposed to hear and receive the voice of another. The listening subject very often coheres as a professional, humanitarian mode of comportment that assumes a rather atomised notion of the subject according to a substantive notion of possessive individualism. So that while telling and listening take place as relational

modalities of inhabiting and sharing a site in which stories and voice<sup>7</sup> are exchanged, different institutional settings and conventionally channelled orientations involve varying capacities to tell and hear. We should thus be careful not to assume a rather liberal notion of place and subjectivity as primordially, or perhaps potentially, neutral, unmarked by institutional corridors of movement, comportment, deferment, and extension.

One of these institutional corridors is to be sure the formal place for production and exchange of scholarly research, a site that is certainly not immune from conduits of power. Towards putting into further relief my primary theme of a phenomenological methodology, I want to mention an example when the research institute—in this case, my home base at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient—became a site not only for a thematic discussion of trauma, but indeed for a listening to the projected, self-extended voice of a traumatised subject.

This occurred at one of our public colloquiums (always held on the last Thursday of the month, during semesters), when a colleague, Karin Mlodoč, gave a presentation of her research with Anfal women survivors in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> In the usual open discus-



sion following her talk, after some initial questions and comments, a middle-aged man tentatively indicated that he'd like to speak. As it turned out he was himself an Iraqi/Kurdish Anfal survivor (of a poison gas attack), and began speaking about his experiences. What struck me at the time were his thoughtful pauses, his intermittent hesitancy to speak and tell his stories—not because of timidity, or else insecurity with the German language, which he spoke fluently, albeit with a heavy accent.

Interestingly, he did not direct a question to my colleague Mlodoch, as the rest of us were wont to do. He rather addressed us all, moving his gaze across and around the room as he spoke. It seemed to me that he was not sure if the rest of us, with our academic preoccupations and research orientations, wanted to hear what he had to say. I think he was also not sure how much of his experience he should recount, perhaps to spare us, in the circumstance of a scholarly event, or else as a modicum of modesty, the gruesome details of his subjection and pain. As I recall the event, it seemed obvious that he was not sure how we were predisposed to *listen* to what he wanted to say. At the same time, he felt it was important that he speak, and give us some idea of his and his people's experiences.

The man was obviously acquainted with the research of my colleague, and had made an effort to visit our centre for the talk. Through their field trips, most of my colleagues at ZMO, I think it is fair to say, are acquainted with circumstances (if not events and incidents) of violence, and often work with subjects who have experienced violence.<sup>9</sup> So while the stories the gentleman shared may not have been shocking, such a direct account of personal experience of violence and pain sat uncomfortably with the research focus of the event, in an institution more adept to framing discussions of violence and trauma as themes of research. Obviously, his hesitations had also to do with his sense that the occasion was more about thematizing trauma as a modality of research and therefore was not an occasion for the telling and listening to a first-hand account of violence and trauma. Perhaps he felt that his intervention could make a valuable contribution to the way in which we were discussing these themes.

My point in recounting this incident is threefold. Firstly, the man's capacity to express his voice, narrate his experiences, is not only restricted by his experiences of violence and enduring trauma, but also concern the circumstances and occasions that influence and shape capacities to tell

and hear. Secondly, he did not merely articulate his stories, but actively managed his voice and how we were to receive and perhaps respond to his stories and voice. Thirdly, how I myself was induced to reflect on the ethical parameters of my research—indeed, to think more of the various ways in which my relationship to my research coheres. (One of the reviewers of my present essay, Vasiliki Touhouliotis, suggests that to some extent the institutional setting coheres by excluding from the scene casual modes of narration, usually restricted to the field of research. I think this is an interesting way of not only further discussing methodology as a modality of inhabiting the scene of research, but also how a “source”—such as the soliciting of a research subject's account of himself or herself—becomes a source. This is where I feel that a materialist phenomenology attuned to both the specificities and pluralities of circumstance provides a sense that a story transpires through different guises, carries different connotations, depending on the circumstances in which it takes place as a modality of exchange, or concerning how it is categorized and becomes part of a collection).

Such reflections, I feel, are important, if we are to consider how giving one's story and having it received does not take place in a

power vacuum, or else on a level playing field. More significantly, as I said at the beginning of this section, social textures of trauma entail modicums of voice/speech and voiceless/speechlessness not as incapacities, but as measures actively taken to manage how one engages circumstance and an exchange of self with others.

### **Black-and-White Photography**

On my first visit to Lebanon in 1979, large parts of Beirut, as well as other urban and rural areas of the country had become convulsed in bouts of recurrent armed conflict, massacres, and demographic cleansing, as well as foreign occupation. Amidst the violence, there were intermittent periods of calm. As various militias emerged and battled over control of streets, neighborhoods, villages, and towns, people had to make an effort not only to survive physically—access to bomb shelters, medical services, supplies of food and water, electricity and gas—but also make some sort of sense of the violence.

Increasingly, people had also to make sense of interludes of non-violence, usually with an air of anticipation of further violence. In the wake of the ensuing, brutal Israeli occupation of Beirut in 1982, the

political parties and their militias became increasingly territorial and opportunistic. Consequently, circumstances became unpredictable, as people were never sure when and where a bout of violence would break out, or else when and where an interlude of non-violence would emerge. As people had more pressingly to undergo a heady, intractable mix of actual, imaginary, symbolic, precipitate potential violence *and* non-violence, trauma became part of the texture and ethos of social life.<sup>10</sup> While people in their neighborhoods had a range of ready-to-hand vernacular terms to name violence and non-violence, the unpredictability tested their capacities to represent how they understood what was going on. Consequently, the vernacular had to be inventive. *Theory*, to be sure, constitutes another modality of exchanging terms of reference, often far removed from localized practices of talking about circumstance. Yet, in a dissimilar way to social vernaculars, the value of theory cannot be restricted to its ready-to-handness, to its practical application, but has also to strive to account for its relationship to its conditions of emergence. In other words, the question of the value of theory cannot be limited to questions of epistemology, but has also to entertain its phenomenological implications. Edward Said had something like this limitation in mind

when in the first of his traveling theory essays he writes about what he calls “resistances to theory” (242). By this he means that any theory transported from one place to another has to be sensitive to people’s own hermeneutic capacities to embody and make sense of themselves and their circumstances.

This critical insight is brilliantly captured by Ziad Rahbani and Jean Chamoun in one of the episodes of their satirical radio show *Baadna Taybeen: ‘oul Allah!* that was broadcast in Beirut from 1975 to 1978. The title can be translated as “We’re Still Alive, Thank God,” employing a mix of humour and irony to address the pulse beats of the civil violence.<sup>11</sup> While articulating political commentary, many of the episodes focused on how people processed their circumstances temperamentally, emotionally, and hermeneutically.

In an episode titled “Black-and-White Photographs,” Rahbani has his somewhat incredulous character tell a story about a photographer taking pictures of Lebanon (a “country drowning in war,” as is described in another installment, “Greetings from Lebanon”). Strangely, the color film the photographer used would only produce black-and-white images. When the character asks his interlocutor if he believes this story, the other remarks,



positively: “Of course, it makes sense. If you are photographing a black-and-white situation, as Lebanon currently is in, then you’ll get black-and-white images, even if you use a color film.” The first character rejoins with a quite logical follow-up: “then what should you use to make color photos?” The point of this comical exchange is that a form of representation embodies the symptomatic reverberations of its circumstance—a photograph *signifies* its subject by *resonating* with an encounter with the circumstances of its subject.

In other words, to make color photographs one would need to be in tune to the circumstances in which one engages a mode of representation, be more responsive to an encounter<sup>12</sup> with the subject being photographed, and not only the formal properties of the medium.

Rahbani and Chamoun directed their satirical humor towards the absurdity of predominating, largely expedient modes of representing and inevitably normalizing the violence and chaos, or else the normalization of the absurdity of violence—a successful colour photograph would only be true to the terms of reference framing the picture than the circumstances in which the picture is taken. At the time, *Baadna Taybeen: ‘oul Allah!* provided a rather radical response to ideological and political explanations of the

violence, precisely by avoiding any moralizing arguments that one way or another served to render the violence either normal or abnormal.

This particular rhythm of responsiveness that captures my discussion of trauma, especially concerning my interaction with and relationship to (my) research subjects and material in Lebanon. Yet my point is not that a researcher should not assume a moralizing or ideological argument or approach. Rather, my point is that the embodiment of this assumption should not become a substitute for giving an account of how my subjects of research themselves engage with and make sense—or perhaps avoid making sense—of their circumstances and livelihoods.

It is probably an exaggeration or else absurdity to say that amidst the chaos and utter unpredictability of recurrent incidences of civil violence there were outbreaks of non-violence. Yet this observation begins to give us a sense of how difficult it is to articulate violence and trauma as themes and experiences (sudden, enduring, precipitate, looming) according to logical terms of reference. Again, this is not to deny the relevance of a logical way of thematizing enduring violence and trauma, but rather to sug-

gest a relational approach attuned to instances in which research applied in color film is transformed into shades of black and white.

To return to my theme of a phenomenological notion of methodology, how can what I have called a “rhythm of responsiveness” inform a discussion of research in the field, keeping in mind how different disciplines entail varying practices of research? Being, in the main, a literary and cultural scholar myself, I sometimes wonder about what I understand as “fieldwork.” At the ZMO, I am surrounded by anthropologists who understand fieldwork very differently to myself. The contrast is so big that I have had to strive to learn to understand fieldwork as indeed a practice. In my first years at the ZMO, I shared an office with an anthropologist, Laura Menin. I noticed that she planned her field trips for two or three months at a time, whereas by contrast I would undertake more rapid one-week visits to Lebanon to attend a workshop, meet other academics, or do an interview. The latter were usually done in an office on a university campus, quite detached from the noise and bustle of, say, the Corniche, or a café in Hamra. Laura would say something like she needed to sense the climate, or imbibe the atmosphere. Is it necessary

for a literary and cultural studies scholar to imbibe the atmosphere of a place, especially when researching traces of trauma in works of cultural production, as I have previously done (Nikro *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*)? If so, how would a literary scholar go about doing this?

One aspect of literary and cultural studies that has always left me dissatisfied is not so much its concentration on visual and literary sources (which, unlike people, are in some respects more amenable to being detached from their immediate circulations of social production and exchange, and are thus more readily transportable). I rather mean how scholars often have no embodied experiences of the places where the literary texts they work with have been produced and reviewed, discussed and debated. For example, a literary scholar can have an interesting formal idea of a particular thematic element of literary production (memoir, say), and discuss a number of works of literature that express this specific theme. This can range over works of literature produced in different parts of the world and even in different languages (often read in translation), each work becoming an illustrative example of the central idea. Yet the works of literature themselves embody certain dynamics that to a significant extent only make sense in

respect to “their relationships to their conditions of production”.<sup>13</sup> By this, I do not mean the all-too-relativist point that a work of cultural production has to be read in respect to its context. I am rather thinking of a relational observation that its very livelihood involves a myriad range of practices of address (including that directed through research), review, and public debate—supplementary articulations contributing to the significance and resonance of a work of cultural production.

In other words, a work of literature (or a film) do not merely reflect a certain context, but provokes practices of referring to and engaging contexts, an emergence of context itself. To again refer to Rahbani and Chamoun's radio show, the medium (a color film) cannot be regarded as a neutral methodological means of representing events, but comes to phenomenologically embody the pulse beats and resonances (in black-and-white film) of an engagement with circumstance. The work of a literary scholar provides another layer of this embodiment.

### Phenomenological Methodologies

While noting the institutional circumstances and conduits by which applications of know-how take shape, coherence, and purpose, I want in this final section to

reflect on the phenomenological notion of methodology I have been proposing as a compliment to “trauma theory.”

To continue on a personal note, I feel that it is worthwhile considering how my relationship to my research is enabled, especially in respect to what on the one hand may seem like mundane logistics, though on the other hand play a role in orienting me towards gathering, sharing, and practicing my know-how. For example, I have the privilege of being able to visit my primary field of research, Lebanon, collect my “sources” (interviews, documents, artefacts), and then come back to my life and work in Europe. From the moment I plan my trip and book a return flight I embody and apply a methodology based around a separation of myself from the scene of my research, from what I call “my research field.” Like most researchers, I tend to carry with me a rather inflated sense of the significance of my work, as well as an expectation that people and things in Lebanon should be readily receptive to my endeavours. I travel into the “field” and return with my spoils—sources, exhibits, books, films—which I duly store as a reusable stock of resources.

Most of my intellectual training is informed by critical theories arising in Europe and North America. These theories embody,

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take for granted, specific notions of time and space (the former “progressive,” the latter split between “public” and “private”), subjectivity (possessive individual), and the sacred and secular (the former having been left behind, or else neatly quarantined away from political deliberations) as their hermeneutic horizons and epistemological repertoires. As many critics have pointed out, these epistemic assumptions inform predominant intellectual and humanitarian notions of trauma arising in Europe and North America.

The “research field” I visit and work in involves varying temporal, spatial, and economic modalities of life. This field, therefore, does not constitute a holistic package that I can oppose to Europe, and hence cannot be neatly wrapped up and contrasted to what in the process would transpire as an equally wrapped up and parcelled Europe and North America. In Lebanon, things are much messier, with significant differences within and between cities, towns and villages, and in relation to other places of the Mashreq and Maghreb. To what extent, I can well ask, do my “sources” (research subjects and research material) maintain their varying, site-specific modalities of hermeneutic livelihood once they are constrained to respond to the constitutive applications of my

research? Do they simply shed their previous ways of resonating and cohering? To what extent do such sources experience their hermeneutic vigor otherwise—not as “sources” for the gathering of knowledge? How, perhaps, can a source be regarded as a phenomenological embodiment of circumstance—including the institutional circumstances in which a source is stored and exchanged as a resource for practices of know-how, repertoires in knowing how to know? These questions become more vexing when considering how in Lebanon temporal and spatial experiences and imaginaries involve not merely acute experiences of violence and trauma, but also varying ways of thematically and/or symptomatically engaging violence and trauma.

Yet, as I have been suggesting, these questions involve a methodological practice that cannot be limited to epistemological arguments over the appropriateness of certain categories and classifications (such as “ideal types”). The question of methodology requires an attentiveness to relational modalities of inhabiting and making sense of one’s research in and through reciprocal vectors of social exchange.

The contemporary preoccupation with *theories* of trauma, as I said in my introductory remarks, tends to underestimate a phenomenological dimension of methodological practices. Where the optics of theory usually entails a convenient separation of the researcher from the scene of research, methodology implicates the researcher’s physical presence and practice. In a phenomenological refrain, methodology takes place through social practices of exchanging a sense of purpose with others, with research subjects and research materials.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The German Ministry of Education and Training (DFG) funded the research of which this essay is a part. This essay was presented at a seminar of the research group *Trajectories of Lives and Knowledge* of which I am a part, at the ZMO. I would like to thank my colleagues for their feedback. Also thanks to the reviewers, Dr. Muzna Al Masri and Dr. Vasiliki Touhouliotis for their valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed the critical literature and debates in my introduction to a special issue of the journal *Postcolonial Text* I edited. See Nikro, "Situating Postcolonial Trauma Studies", 2014; as well as in chapter 5 of my *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See his essay "Notes on Trauma and Community", in Caruth (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*). For an expanded discussion of his argument and fieldwork, see his *A New Species of Trouble*.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the phrase from the late William Spanos (*Toward a Non-Humanist Humanism: Theory After 9/11*), who provides a convincing critique of the (de)constructivist ethos of the last few decades in cultural and literary studies in, mostly, North America.

<sup>5</sup> Ihde (*Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*) provides an interesting discussion of what he calls "first phenomenology," in respect to his preoccupation with sound.

<sup>6</sup> For a similar, and just as compelling notion of listening, see the two chapters by Dori Laub (*Testimony*).

<sup>7</sup> On voice as sound not necessarily equal to speech, see Dolar, and Cavavero.

<sup>8</sup> See Mlodoch. Her colloquium presentation was on February 26, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> For a compelling discussion of the theme by another of my colleagues, see Alimia.

<sup>10</sup> Sami Hermez (*War is Coming*) provides a compelling ethnographic discussion of how people in Lebanon embody an anticipation of violence.

<sup>11</sup> Many of the episodes (all in Arabic) aired between 1975 to 1976 are available as MP3 files on the internet (Rahbani & Chamoun).

<sup>12</sup> On the photographic event as an "encounter," see Azoulay.

<sup>13</sup> By "production" I include printing and publishing, reviews and commentary, public readings and discussion, as well as adaptations of the work, be it a novel, a memoir, a film, etc.

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## “It’s a power, not a disease”: Syrian Youth Respond to Human Devastation Syndrome

Tory Brykalski, Diana Rayes

While it is well acknowledged that the effects of war and exile are devastating for Syrian youth, there has been less focus on how they interpret their experience of war and displacement. Integrating anthropological and global health perspectives, we invite two Syrian youth, Karim and Khadijah, to speak to larger theoretical questions about humanitarianism. We describe the creation of a new diagnostic term, “Human Devastation

Syndrome” (HDS) by the Syrian American Medical Society. Used to describe the effects of war and displacement on Syrian youth, HDS provides a lens through which Karim and Khadijah introduce their own theories of devastation.

**Keywords:** Syrian children, mental health, Syrian refugees, Lebanon, ethnography, Human Devastation Syndrome

### “There’s no need to number”

“There’s no need to number the number of men, women, and children who have died or become homeless, or of the cities or homes that have been devastated and stolen” (Masri 42).

“My exile here in Lebanon made me conscious of a lot of things,” Khadijah<sup>1</sup> said. It was July 13th, and we had called Khadijah to talk about the defeat of Dar‘ā, Syria. “It made me conscious of things like depression and these feelings and how much I need to know and express myself, and how little I am able to.” Originally from western Ghouta, Khadijah was ten years old when the first protest happened in her neighborhood. “Even though I was young I got really excited. I knew that I didn’t have freedom and I wanted it.” She joined the protests. “I thought that if I could achieve something, anything, I would be able to take control of my life, and cure my depression.” The Syrian government responded to her neighborhood’s protests with force.<sup>2</sup> “I know I’m traumatized,” she explained, “but I’ve accepted it. It’s in the past, and, to be honest, I’m bored of it.” It was very important for Khadijah that we understood this point. The suffering Khadijah experienced as a result of the siege of western Ghouta and her displace-



ment to Lebanon has not turned her into a traumatized victim. It has made her conscious.

Khadija's boredom with trauma is an important counternarrative to the seemingly endless cycle of photos of shell-shocked children, advocacy reports, and articles talking about the high levels of trauma experienced by Syria's "Lost Generation" (Chen; Collard; Durando; Hawilo; Hosseini; McVeigh; Stano; Taylor; UNICEF). These accounts paint a stark picture. They remind us that more than 14,000 Syrian children have been killed, more than 8 million have been displaced, more than 50% of children (and 90% of girls) have dropped out of school, and more than 180,000 children have had to start working to support their families since 2011 (Doupleff; Sirin and Rogers-Sirin). They also remind us that the long-term impact of these realities on children's mental health is significant. Chronic exposure to violence and warfare throughout the course of the Syrian war has resulted in a wide range of severe emotional and developmental disabilities among Syrian youth, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Devakumar et al.2; UNHCR). Without disregarding the real psychological effects of the war and displacement on Syrian young people, Khadija reminds us that these

numbers, reports, and diagnostic categories can never quite capture what it is that she has been through.<sup>3</sup>

Syrian medical and humanitarian professionals have struggled to capture the full depth of what children like Khadija have been through. In 2013, Dr. MK Hamza, a Syrian-American forensic neuropsychologist with the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), started using a new term, "Human Devastation Syndrome," to describe their suffering. A few years later the press picked the term up and it immediately solicited global attention via Arabic and English news outlets (ATTN; Syria Noor; Nabdsyria; Al-Arabiya; Storchlich; Davis). Most of this media provides minimal context to the term itself and merely cites Dr. Hamza. Here is how Dr. Hamza introduced the term in media interviews:

"We have talked to so many children, and their devastation is above and beyond what even soldiers are able to see in the war. They have seen dismantled human beings that used to be their parents or their siblings. You get out of a family of five or six or 10 or whatever – you get one survivor, two survivors sometimes. A lot of them have physical impairments. Amputations. Severe injuries. And they've made it to the refugee camp somehow." (ATTN)

The questions that motivate this article are about what the creation and circulation of Human Devastation Syndrome in general and this statement, in particular, adds to trauma-centered discussions about the mental health of Syrian children. How does it contribute to understanding Khadija's experience of mental illness and health?

To offer a preliminary answer to these questions, we turn to two young people, Khadija and Karim\*, and their thoughts about Human Devastation Syndrome (HDS). By foregrounding Karim and Khadija's experiences and interpretations, we are making explicit the fact that Syrian young people can and should be given the space to theorize about their own lives and articulate answers to larger theoretical questions about humanitarianism and representation.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, we also pose questions to SAMS and other humanitarian organizations about the relationship between the diagnoses and solutions they propose and the kinds of possibilities opened up by the term "human devastation." Inspired by Khadija and Karim's observations, we suggest that human devastation is not only a series of symptoms that can be diagnosed and treated; it is also something that can often be reproduced by the same humanitarian projects designed to help them.

### “Aliens of the century”

“There’s no need to number these things because Syrians themselves already know them. How can Syrians not know when what is happening is eating from their bodies and souls, and is drinking deeply and getting drunk on the blood of their children?” (Masri 42).

In this section, we introduce Karim and Khadija’s theorization of what humanitarian assistance means to them in the midst of widespread devastation. Both Khadija and Karim are leaders and beneficiaries in several different Syrian Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Both were ten years old when the Syrian revolution and war began, and both are now approaching the threshold of adulthood. Both want to study psychology and continue working with Syrian children and adolescents when they grow up. Despite this commitment to psychological services, they both also have significant criticisms of humanitarian psychological care. As a result, they are fluent in psychological discourse, able to be both self-reflective and analytical, and eager to share their thoughts and critiques with the wider public.

We first met Karim in a music therapy class in the Bekaa Valley in 2016. Originally from Hama, he fled to Lebanon with his family in 2012 after the Syrian government arrested his mother for the second time. During his first two years of his exile in Lebanon, Karim worked at a clothes shop and studied at home. He spent his free time volunteering with different Syrian Community Based Organizations (CBOs) by playing with children his age or younger. In 2015, Karim finally managed to register in Lebanese school. He started going to school and started working as a part-time translator and part-time co-teacher for an American music therapist. At first, Karim was enthusiastic about the program. It offered twelve weeks of intensive music training to a select group of children from the nearby refugee camps, at the end of which the children themselves would write and design a musical piece. As the weeks went on, however, children started to drop out, and the European therapist started to get stressed out. He started trying to discipline the kids, complaining that they were not “committed” enough. For Karim, the therapist’s response is a normal one in humanitarian and mental health interventions. “They think they are offering us the world,” Karim ironically observed, “and then go crazy when we don’t want it. What they don’t

understand is that they need us more than we need them.”

Karim quit his job a few weeks later and decided to start his own program. “This is my theory of life. If I can do a thing, why not do it? And if this thing can help me, and help children at the same time, why not do it?” It is important for Karim that his work with children is mutually beneficial. “When I first started working with children, I felt like the experience that they made for me, the experience that we made together, changed me and changed my life. My whole life I’ll say that I am not the one helping the children, they are helping me.” The problem with NGOs and humanitarians that run programs like the program he quit, he explained, is that they want to “help us.” While helping is not a bad thing, he suggests, unilaterally helping is. “The whole world wants to help us and write reports on us,” Karim said. “They turn us into the aliens of the century. They write about us and try to help us, and then are surprised when their help doesn’t work, and then write about us again. What’s the result? Nothing changes except that we become aliens.”

We met Khadija in January 2017. She was studying in a program run by a local university through a Syrian NGO designed to



help Syrian teenagers get into Lebanese universities. When she arrived in Lebanon, Khadija immediately registered in the Syrian Opposition school in her neighborhood. She passed the 9th and 12th-grade exams with distinction but was told when she started applying for universities that Syrian Opposition certificates were not recognized by the Lebanese Ministry of Education. She enrolled in the university-NGO program because they promised to sort out the problem and get her into universities. She was skeptical. At the end of the year when she found out that none of the program's beneficiaries would be receiving a scholarship, she was not surprised.

"All of these programs are fake," Khadija said. "They can't give us anything. All they want to do is make jobs for themselves and show people how much they are helping Syrian kids; they don't actually care about us. What's worse is that they think they are helping the poor hopeless Syrian kids. In reality, they are making it worse." This fake hope, for Khadija, is both an essential part of how humanitarian projects operate and part of what "makes Syrian kids depressed." "NGOs can't succeed," she says, "because if they succeeded, we would be better, in school, with good jobs, living the lives of our

choice. We would no longer be 'lost' and we would no longer need them. But that can't happen. They can't fix the problems, because they need the problems to have jobs." Khadija's critique of NGOs extends to psychosocial services.

Instead of helping her, the psychological services she has sought out have ironically made her "feel worse." "We know that no one cares," she explained. "If I told people about my experiences, my sadness, there's no result. I will receive nothing, no care, no attention, and nothing will change. So why talk? Talking makes it worse." Khadija's experience of depression is intimately related to her experience of what she calls '*ajiz*, or her inability to do or achieve something. If talking to a therapist, or registering in an NGO-run educational program, or protesting the Ministry of Education's mistreatment of her could affect change, she would do it. But "nothing can change" for Khadija. Nothing she can do, she insists, can make her life better. "It's like being in prison," she once told us. "Do you think these programs make life in prison easier or worse? They make life worse because they offer fake hope and remind us of our '*ajiz*.'" "But I'm not helpless," Khadija quickly clarified, always careful to avoid being a victim. For Khadija, the problem is the prison around her, not her

weakness. If she *could* achieve something, she would.

### "There Is a Monster"

"While it is possible to rebuild devastated buildings with money, effort, and time, what about the devastation of the spirit, the devastation of the human?" (Masri 42).

Among the many NGOs that provide mental health services to Syrian children, only a handful are CBOs or local NGOs that employ Syrian health professionals (Almoshmosh et al. 2016). Most of these were established by Syrian refugees who had fled Syria for Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon, or by the Syrian diaspora in the US and the UK. SAMS is one of these diaspora organizations. Originally founded in 1998 as a medical professional society by first-generation Syrian immigrants to the United States, SAMS evolved into an NGO in 2011 ("About SAMS Foundation").

In December 2017, we spoke with Dr. Hamza, who has been volunteering with SAMS since 2012. He also chairs the SAMS's mental health committee, which coordinates psychosocial and psychotherapeutic programming for Syrian refugees throughout Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan

as well as tele-mental health services inside Syria ("Salah's Story: Mitigating the Impact of Trauma"). After interacting with Syrian children in Lebanon and Jordan during medical missions, Dr. Hamza and his team observed that the wide variety of symptoms and high levels of trauma experienced by children surpassed the most severe levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health diagnosis outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and commonly attributed to the condition of Syrian refugees (Parekh; Hassan et al. 16). They were so high, he explained, that the DSM-5 was unable to account for them. HDS is more appropriate than either of these categories, Dr. Hamza explained, because it accounts for both the variety and intensity of children's symptoms ("Salah's Story: Mitigating the Impact of Trauma"). Ahmed et al. similarly conclude that HDS is similar to PTSD, but explicitly Syrian in its severity and pervasiveness. HDS is necessarily Syrian, they explain, because it helps us to "recognize the severity of the emotional and mental problems faced by Syrian people."

Trained in medical and forensic neuropsychology, Dr. Hamza insisted that we cannot separate the children's symptoms from their causes. "Someone," he elabo-

rated, "created criteria for how to completely devastate a human being, [and has been doing so] continuously ever since, non-stop. That's the main point [...] it's not just medical; it's intentional. It's programmed in both Syria and in host countries."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Hamza explained that mental health constructs like PTSD are culturally and politically limiting because they do not account for this intentionality. "A lot of what [Syrians] are experiencing is dehumanization and humiliation," he said. "When you cause the other person to despair, what are you aiming for? You are trying to humiliate him, to rip him or her from their own identity and state of being. You are demolishing the human inside. You want him to become a walking shell. This is different [than trauma]." HDS is different, we can infer from Dr. Hamza's comments, because it tries to account for the Syrian government's response to the Syrian people's demands for freedom and dignity.

Despite calls for culturally sensitive and locally grounded mental health research, only a few studies regarding Syrian mental health have sought to understand how Syrians who have survived war and displacement personally interpret their immaterial needs (Quosh et al. 288; Hassan et al. 22; Greene et al. 4).<sup>6</sup> As a

result, most mental health interventions by humanitarian organizations have tended to primarily rely on standardized approaches to mental health and categories like PTSD to make sense of the Syrian experience (Almoshmosh et al. 82; Save the Children; UNICEF; International Medical Corps; Hamdan-Mansour et al. 6). For Dr. Hamza, these studies fail to capture the harrowing nuance of the Syrian experience, which has been reported to include direct exposure to the torture or killing of family members, the loss of one or both parents, and intense fear due to unpredictable bombardment, all factors that have been shown to further exacerbate trauma among Syrian children (Almoshmosh et al. 82). He argues that HDS does, and thus tells a more compelling "story" than either PTSD or depression. Whether or not this story captures the perspectives of Syrians themselves, and the perspectives of Syrian youth in particular, is a question that will be explored in the rest of this section.

In our search for literature on devastation, we discovered that the term "human devastation," or *āldamār āl'insāny*, is already an analytic category in Syrian social thought. In the text cited throughout this article, "Closed for Reconstruction," Monzer Masri uses *human devastation* as

an alternative to mental and emotional health illness. For Masri, human devastation is a category that explains the root, rather than the effects, of the events that caused Syrian children to exhibit such an extreme variety of symptoms. It captures not only the intentionality of the violence that has so thoroughly devastated the Syrian population, but also captures the psychological dimensions that this scale of violence requires. "The failure to recognize the humanity of the person in front of you," Masri said to us in an interview we had with him, "is the cause of this devastation." This is why when he asks the question, "is it possible to rebuild and fix human devastation?" he intentionally refuses to provide an answer (42). He refuses because answering might run the risk of objectifying and therefore re-damaging the very humanity that needs to be rebuilt.

Like Masri, Dr. Hamza thinks that HDS is unlike the more biomedical ways of thinking about the aftermaths of violence. It cannot be cured. Unlike Masri, however, he wants to try to find a cure anyway. "I'm trying to build a team of researchers," he told us, "so we can work officially on the syndrome, in a scientific way." He is working towards publishing the first scientific report on HDS<sup>7</sup> and design programs for children by late 2018. Ultimately, Dr.

Hamza told us that he wants HDS to do more than just help diagnose and fix Syrian children; he wants it to "change the direction of the world." This is a change that Dr. Hamza hopes will come about by simply "telling a story" that "really describes the tragedy" of what Syrian young people are going through.

Notably, HDS itself has remained largely unacknowledged by scholars of Syrian mental health and humanitarian organizations providing mental health services to the Syrian population since its creation in early 2016. Since then, there have been no further comments or evidence posed by SAMS to substantiate HDS. With the exception of one academic article that describes HDS as the "Syrian" version of PTSD (Ahmed et al. 1228), HDS has been used mostly as an advocacy tool rather than a scientific and diagnosable medical construct, which risks affecting the legitimacy of the term. Lebanese journalist Hala Nasrallah included HDS in a larger critique she wrote on Facebook about the creation of new syndromes as tools to pathologize Syrians and warned people not to take HDS too seriously. It is probably only an American publicity stunt, she wrote, as it lacks the evidence needed to be a real syndrome (Nasrallah).<sup>8</sup> A Syrian health professional articulated his prob-

lem with SAMS's version of human devastation another way:

The problem is foreigners—even Syrian Americans, and Syrians living abroad—coming in and playing the role of a benevolent dictator in order to 'heal' us. They think that because they are experts they can come for a week and know what the problem is. When they say that they want to help us, all I hear is that they want to control us. (Dr. Khaled)

What is ironic about this critique is that Dr. Hamza told us that he adopted HDS explicitly to avoid this problem. So how did SAMS's well-intentioned attempt to get distorted into "control"? Based on our conversations with Karim and Khadija, we suggest that part of this distortion was caused by the persisting inability to incorporate children's perspectives into terms regarding their mental health. If humanitarian NGOs responding to the mental health crisis had done so, they would have learned, as we did, that while Syrian youth find the term itself compelling, they are deeply sensitive to and critical of NGO and research exploitation.

It is exploitative, Karim told us, when "people write a new report about how horrible our lives are and then walk away without

trying to make that life better." Circulating with little grounding in evidence-based research, HDS is more of a concept rather than a scientific diagnosis. "The organizations who work in mental health with Syrians care just about prestige and donors," Dr. Khaled explained. "They do things just to be able to say that we did something, not to actually effect change." From this perspective, SAMS's HDS has the potential to become just another term in the umbrella of mental health terms, such as "toxic stress" (Save the Children) and "hitting rock bottom" (UNICEF), that have emerged as a result of the Syrian war and have failed to receive substantial validation or interpretation by Syrians themselves. Furthermore, by imposing this term "devastated" on all Syrian children, SAMS risks painting a very grim picture regarding the mental health and well-being of Syrian children and adolescents such as Karim and Khadija. In Ahmed et al.'s interpretation of HDS, they conclude that this picture is grim enough to warrant a need to "manage" those who have survived the Syrian war. In this light, instead of helping us to understand those who are devastated, the term itself has been used to encourage the public to objectify and fear them, thus perpetuating the violence that it is trying to address. Despite their hardships, we see Karim and Khadija's

experiences as signs of strength, resilience, and power, and not of weakness or warning signs of extremism.

At the same time, both Khadija and Karim found aspects of HDS compelling. Prolific readers, both Karim and Khadija regularly read all the literature they can about Syrian refugees and mental health. At our prompting, they read the short Arabic media pieces that describe the creation of HDS. We asked Khadija what she thought. "I think [Dr. Hamza is] right!" she exclaimed, excited. "Lots of us have no idea what's going on inside of us. We think we are living, but we really aren't. We are missing a lot of things—playing, building relationships, feeling safe." Khadija herself says she has experienced something similar. "Yes," she acknowledged, "it's crazy how much we've changed. I no longer have any hope that anything good exists. I have learned over the last seven years that it is impossible to change anything. Learning this lesson devastated me." Khadija appreciated the article because it gave her a kind of language to explain what has been happening to both her and her friends and family. "It's not the same as a mental illness, because it's not something that can be treated. It's our life now."

Karim was a bit more cynical at first. "To be honest," Karim responded, "I didn't read all of [the HDS article] because they were just saying things that all the other psychologists say, that Syrian children are traumatized because of the war and getting bombed and all that s\*\*t, that they've been through trauma. And now they have this." At first glance, Karim understood HDS and the discourse around it to be similar to the discourses that turn him into an alien.

When Karim read the rest of the article, however, he changed his mind. "I don't know what to say, but I really think that it might be true. This might be what's happening. I feel that there are kids who really are going through something that people haven't discovered yet, but I don't know how to define it or make sense of it, you know?" Karim's inability to define what these kids are going through is important here. Because while something about HDS rang true to him, the language with which it was defined echoed other problematic reports and articles Karim had read that had made him feel like an alien. Significantly, Karim immediately took the term and made it his own. "You know, for example, why we take vaccines? So the cells can develop protection against specific diseases. I think mental health works

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in the same way: we develop our psychological power to prevent things from happening." Karim here is not quite talking about the same thing that Dr. Hamza was talking about. For Karim, human devastation is "like a vaccine." It is something that Syrian children "changed and evolved" within themselves to survive. For Karim, human devastation provides the language he needs to theorize his suffering positively, using theories of power and agency rather than theories of illness (Park 257). "I don't know what it is," Karim concluded, but it is "not an illness." It is a "power, and a weakness."

Based on Khadija and Karim's reflections, we suggest that SAMS's HDS may be able to serve two purposes for Syrian youth. First, it may provide an opportunity for them to find meaning in their experiences (Park 257). Karim found meaning in HDS, in part, because it gave him the language he needed to theorize the ways in which the devastation that has affected him and his community is a source of strength and power. Second, HDS may be able to act as a kind of social lubricant for broader conversations about mental health in Syrian society. Syrians find it easier to acknowledge their personal and psychological well-being when it is framed and treated as collective and shared (Hassan et al. 39).<sup>9</sup>

Individualized trauma and depression tend to be stigmatized. Khadija told us that she is scared to tell her family about her depression and anxiety. She lies to them when they ask her how she's doing because she says they can't understand. "It's sad, they think that depression and mental illness are against our religion. I'm the only one in my family who is depressed and they try to keep my sisters away from me. If I feel depressed or anxious, I am the problem. I did something wrong, so God is punishing me." Khadija's family refuses to accept Khadija's illness, she explained, in part because they fear being blamed. "So they use sin as an excuse." Human devastation is different though. "Everyone in my family is devastated. My sisters, my friends." When we asked her if her family would more readily accept HDS than depression, Khadija responded with a shrug. "It's not about accepting it or not. It's the reality, and they know it."

### Conclusion

Karim and Khadija ultimately teach us that human devastation is important, not because it is an appropriate diagnosis that captures their particular series of symptoms, but because it is useful for them. This does not mean that it will be useful for every Syrian child or adolescent. Something our relationship with Karim

and Khadija emphasized is the fact that each Syrian person is unique, and contains a multitude of perspectives and abilities. If we reduce this multitude into the category of "Syrian children" we risk reproducing the very violence we wish to help heal.

Ultimately, respecting the uniqueness of each human means that we cannot argue for or against the use of HDS, or any category. Because as both Karim and Khadija show us, even problematic categories can be useful. We can, however, encourage SAMS, other humanitarian organizations, and researchers to give infinitely more weight to the perspectives and abilities of the Syrian children and adolescents that they are in relationship with. What do they think about the questions we ask, or the papers we write?

Our conversations with Karim ended with a piece of advice. "It really important that you write about this in your paper," he told us. "People always think that the refugees have problems and need psychologists. You need to write about the fact that refugee kids can also be the psychologists! They know how to solve what makes us depressed. I believe they know the solution."

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This invitation to treat the children and adolescents we work and write with as psychologists is a profound methodological provocation. It invites us to treat Karim and Khadija not as case studies or examples of some wider population, but as insightful colleagues. With this in mind, what would it look like for us—academics, aid workers, and psychologists—to get out of the way and allow our colleagues, Karim and Khadija, to take control of their own lives, devastated or otherwise?<sup>10</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Khadija, and all names followed by asterisks, have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch and Karim Eid's *My Country: A Syrian Memoir* provides a comprehensive account of these two years.

<sup>3</sup> See Adams's *Metrics: What counts in global health* for a discussion on the politics of numbers, statistics, and metrics more generally.

<sup>4</sup> A great deal of anthropological literature outlines the imperative to do so (i.e. Boyden; Hart; Malkki).

<sup>5</sup> "Either Assad or we'll burn the country," the militias warned Khadija's neighborhood right before they attacked them in 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See Moghnieh (193-201) for a detailed analysis of the relationship between Syrian mental health treatment in Lebanon and the use of indicators like PTSD.

<sup>7</sup> The SAMS report on HDS has yet to be published as of the date of this article.

<sup>8</sup> Some Arabic articles refer to SAMS as an American NGO rather than a Syrian-American NGO.

<sup>9</sup> This has been the case in other war-affected populations that emphasize collective identity and collective frameworks of healing, which can often reduce the stigma of mental illness or psychological distress and facilitate community-level coping (Hussain & Bhusan; Nguyen-Gilham).

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# FOCUS

## Beyond Trauma, What Kept them Going? An Analysis of the Lives and Narratives of Five Syrian Women in Lebanon

Kholoud Saber Barakat, Pierre Philippot

Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, this paper analyzes the narratives of five women who fled from Syria to Lebanon, with the objective of understanding how they continue to lead their lives beyond trauma. Results showed that these women's ability to create meaning of their traumatic experiences and link it to their current lives is a determining factor in understanding their ability to move on. Finding a reason to keep going, creat-

ing a way to cope with loss, and perceiving an evolving sense of agency were significant aspects of getting over the traumatic event or enduring pain. Finally, changes in gender roles were identified by all five women, but their evaluation of these changes differed.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Agency, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Meaning-making, Gender roles, Syrian women

### Introduction and Background

The topic of psychological consequences of armed conflict is not new to psychology. Since WWI, several waves of studies have investigated the possible psycho-pathology associated with experiencing severely violent events. For decades, research efforts primarily adopted a neurological approach in explaining psychological responses of soldiers in war situations. In the early 1970s, towards and after the end of the Vietnam War, the term "psychological trauma" began to be widely used to refer to pathological responses to severe adversity, including violent events, mostly in the context of armed conflict (Jones and Wessely 217). Soon after, the notion of trauma was expanded to refer to a pathological response to various life-threatening events. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines trauma as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and physical symptoms like headaches or nausea." These symptoms of trauma were soon collated under the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which appeared for the first time in 1980 in the third edition of the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (McHugh and Treisman 212). PTSD now serves as a key diagnostic criterion, heavily relied upon by clinical psychology practitioners and academics alike.

Trauma and PTSD are useful indicators in the context of therapeutic practices, as they could be used to take stock of improvement for individuals who suffer from psychological symptoms after a life-threatening event. They are, however, problematic analytical tools in the context of research. Not only do they remain conceptually affected by their military roots (Andreasen 70), but they have also become loaded with political and economic implications, as they are used to grant recognition of victimization, and consequently economic benefits and/or political acknowledgement (Humphrey 40).

These shortcomings of using PTSD and trauma as analytical tools are aggravated by solely relying on quantitative research methods, and when focusing on an area of research such as refugees, which is already dominated by oversimplified preconceptions and victimization paradigms, and severely influenced by the politics of Western academia.

Moreover, the medical approach to applying the concepts of trauma and PTSD is built on the assumption that people who have witnessed life-threatening experiences “described as traumatic events” are expected to show responses that fall under previously defined categories (McHugh and Treisman 210). This restricts our ability to understand personalized interpretations of, and responses to, such events.

Most research conducted in the context of the Syrian conflict has employed this traditional medical approach, positing Syrians, and especially Syrian refugees, as passive victims in pursuit of universal recognition of their suffering. This becomes more problematic in the case of Syrian women, who suffer from structured gender-based societal, economic, and sexual violence, along with sharing the traumatic experiences of war and displacement with men (ABAAD and OXFAM 9). Consequently, the voices of the survivors, in terms of the unique meanings they give to their traumatic experiences and how they deal with them, have so far remained largely unheard.

### Context and Concepts

This paper is based on doctoral research in the field of clinical psychology, conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author. Originally, the research was aimed at examining depressive symptoms and PTSD among Syrian women in Lebanon in the aftermath of traumatic events in the contexts of war and displacement.

Shortly after starting interviews, it became clear that the war had further consequences for women that had not received much attention. In fact, early fieldwork insights were far from expected, as we were struck by the evolving strength, agency, and resilience of the interviewees. We therefore moved to the research question of this paper, i.e. “what kept them going?”, focusing on the narratives constructed by these women, and how they shed a different light on their unique modes of surviving and coping.

The intention is not to deny the persistence of depression and PTSD, but rather to focus on the fact that the interviewees themselves centered their stories around how they were capable of going on, managing their everyday lives along with the feelings of pain, anger, and loss, as well as symptoms of depression and PTSD. To that end, four main concepts are employed

in this paper as units of analysis: traumatic events, resilience, agency, and coping.

A traumatic event refers to a serious threat, whether directly, where the threat affected one's own life, safety, or physical integrity, or indirectly, where one has witnessed such a threat affecting someone else or learned about it affecting a close friend or family member. In this paper, any reference to a traumatic event refers to a war or displacement related event experienced and mentioned by an interviewee, apart from any subsequent meaning or response to that event. This separation is key, as the objective is to discuss and understand how each woman interpreted and responded to the traumatic events of her life in her unique, personalized way. This is also the reason why the term "traumatic event" is employed rather than simply "trauma," which is associated with the event, its meaning, and the response to it.

Resilience is one of the most commonly used notions in modern psychological studies of trauma, refugees, and post-conflict situations. However, the way in which it should be defined and investigated remains a subject of much disagreement. For a long time, it was seen as synonymous with invulnerability, i.e. the ability to successfully cope with adversity (Rutter

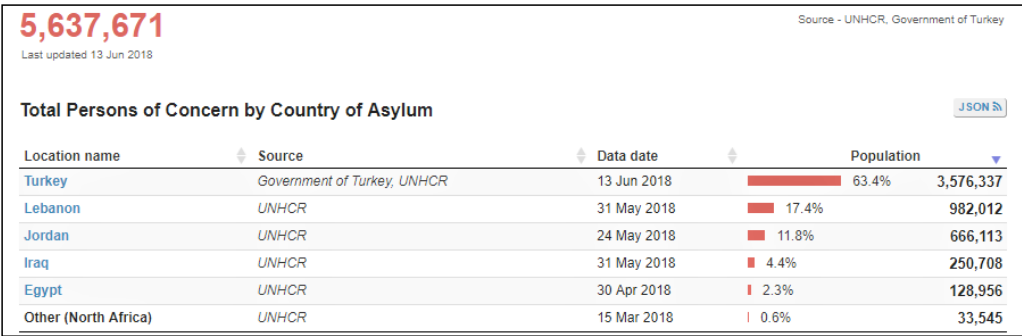


Fig. 1. Total number of Syrians by country of Asylum; UNHCR; 13 June 2018; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>.

599). This definition is constrained by pre-defined expected patterns of responses, where "successful" coping refers to responding to adversity in an "adaptive" way. More recently, resilience has been defined as "positive patterns of functioning or development during or following exposure to adversity" (Masten 4), posited as a dynamic active process, rather than a pre-existing ability (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker 543). Most importantly, recent approaches have highlighted that resilience is determined by cultural and social factors, which define, in the first place, what constitutes risk, and protection factors in a specific time and space (Zrally and Nyirazinyoye 1657). (Rousseau, Said and Gagne 634).

Agency traditionally refers to the ability to act or control one's environment. As such,

agency is considered the exception rather than the rule for marginalized groups such as women refugees (Davies 42). In this paper, however, agency is employed to refer to the sense of agency, i.e. ability to act and control one's environment as perceived by oneself, regardless of whether others share that perception. Finally, coping refers to the acts and thoughts used with the aim of reducing the stress associated with a traumatic experience.

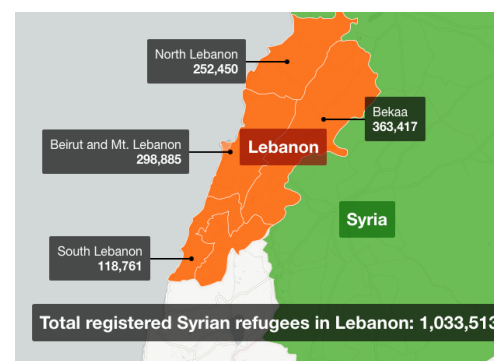
Method

This paper is based on research conducted in Lebanon between June and September 2017. Lebanon was selected for several reasons. First, Lebanon is the country which has received the second highest number of Syrians since the outbreak of conflict in 2011 (see Fig. 1).

Second, the Syrian population in Lebanon is particularly vulnerable, as they primarily come from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and currently live under tough social and economic conditions. As Lebanon did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians in Lebanon are not afforded legal refugee status. Consequently, they lack adequate and sustainable services, including food aid, medical care, housing, and education.

Third, through her previous work on psychological support to Arab women activists, the first author had built a network of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian NGOs that are in direct contact with Syrian women in Lebanon, and that were willing to facilitate the research. In total, seven NGOs working in three different regions in Lebanon (North Lebanon, Beirut, and Bekaa) provided support to the research (See Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup>

Each contact NGO arranged a meeting with a group of their female Syrian staff or beneficiaries, who were then given a choice to participate in answering a set of questionnaires (as part of a different quantitative study under the same doctoral project), as well as a choice to be also included in a qualitative study requiring a one-to-one one-hour interview.



**Fig. 2: Registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon by region; Hall, R.; 30 June 2016; <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-08-11/when-bomb-goes-lebanon-syrians-suffer>.**

Participants were briefed about the objective of the study prior to interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were warranted. It was explained that participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any point. Most importantly, it was made clear that no data would be shared with the contact NGO, and that participation or withdrawal would have no effect on the participant's relation with them. The option of receiving psychological support after the interview was offered to participants in case they wanted to talk further about their experiences or to deal with possible distress evoked during the interview.

One of the main concerns when starting the fieldwork was how to earn the trust

and cooperation of participants. Contrary to expectations, very high levels of motivation and cooperation were observed, to the extent that more women than initially planned were included upon their request. The interviewees provided two main common reasons for why they wanted to participate. The first was the fact that the researcher is an outsider. These women live in small, closed refugee communities, where they are very concerned about their privacy and security. A researcher who does not live in the same community, who would not share their stories with others from the community, and who would not be part of their everyday realities, was a suitable person to open up to, and provided a chance for disclosure. Second, many of the interviewees were receiving services, including psychosocial support, from Lebanese practitioners. The political and social tensions between the Lebanese host community and Syrians, and the perceived sense of being unwelcome, create a barrier that hinders cooperation. In some specific cases, participants mentioned incidents of racism, including sexual harassment and physical assault, which they were not willing to share with Lebanese practitioners. The fact that the researcher is Egyptian made them willing to participate and open up.



In-depth interviews were conducted primarily with a prospective sample of 30 women. All were above 18 years of age, fled from Syria after 2011 from areas directly affected by the conflict, and experienced one or more marked traumatic events related to the conflict and/or the displacement experience. Nine were volunteers or worked for the NGOs, thirteen were direct beneficiaries of contact NGO services, and eight were from the larger population who attended a one-time awareness event.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic by the first author and were audio-recorded after obtaining the participant's consent. They took place in a private room at the office of one of the contact NGOs. Each lasted around one hour using a semi-structured interview guide that covered several themes, including: background information about pre-2011 life in Syria, displacement experience, and the overall current living context; gender role and possible influences of conflict and displacement; war- or displacement-related traumatic experiences; responses to traumatic events; and personal techniques of coping.

Out of the thirty women interviewed, the five who are the most relevant to the cur-

rent research question were selected for this paper. They were chosen to reflect a variation in education, current family context, type of main traumatic event, current occupation and previous employment, contact NGO, and location in Lebanon (See table 1).

### Results

See Table 1 on next page.

### Data Analysis

The five interviews were transcribed by the first author. The parts deemed directly related to the research question were translated into English to validate the analysis with the second author. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to transcripts to identify prominent themes in each case, and subsequently common themes across cases.

IPA is a qualitative research approach, used mostly in psychology, concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience in a way that enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 32). Inspired by the ideas of Edmund Husserl, IPA aims to examine how people make sense of their major life experiences, especially when the every-

day is interrupted by a particular significant experience or major transition (1). The analysis started with initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes (80). Each of the themes presented below was identified in at least four of the five narratives. Quotes under each theme (taken from one or more participants), were chosen as examples for illustration (See Fig. 3)

### Findings

#### Theme I: Creating Meaning through Building a Narrative

A major theme identified throughout the interviews was the importance of the meaning that participants ascribed to their traumatic experiences. Through building their own narratives about what had happened, they gave it a meaning and linked it to their current realities.

This is in line with Janoff-Bulman's thesis, which highlights appraisal as a key process when experiencing a traumatic event. Appraisal refers to the interpretation each person gives to his/her trauma. Appraisal of a particular traumatic event differs based on characteristics both of the event itself and of the person undertaking the appraisal. In the case of several potentially traumatic events, the appraisal includes

PSEUDONYM	AGE	NATIONALITY/ CITIZENSHIP	SOCIAL STATUS & FAMILIAL SITUATION	HOUSEHOLD SITUATION	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION/ WORK HISTORY	REGION OF ORIGIN & YEAR OF DISPLACE- MENT	MAIN TRAUMATIC EVENT/S
Eman	27	Syrian	Married at 19, currently separated as husband forcibly disappeared since 2012. Started a legal proceeding for divorce	lives alone with 8 year-old son	University degree in psychology	Never worked in Syria, worked as a journalist in Jordan Now psychologist at a Syrian NGO in Beqaa	Daria - Damascus / left Syria in 2013 to Jordan then to Beqaa	Three attempts of arrest in Syria
Shyma'	21	Syrian	Married at 15, has two children	Abandoned by husband, lives alone with her children, depends on financial aid and loans	Primary school	worked for one month for a tailor at Shatela for 3\$ a week. Currently unemployed	Aleppo suburbs / fled in 2016 to Shatela, Beirut	Intimate partner violence + death of her three cousins in bombing
Om-Belal	43	Syrian	Married at 18, has 3 children, divorced	Lives with daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren	Secondary school	Housewife in Syria. Currently teacher at a Syrian NGO	Daria - Damascus/ Fled in 2013 to Beqaa	Son's death (he was a fighter at the free Syrian army)
Majda	48	Palestinian from Syria	First marriage at 18, has 3 children, divorced and remarried a year later.	Provider for her family (second husband and children from first marriage)	Secondary school	Hairdresser for 25 years Has a hair salon at North Lebanon	Yarmouk Camp - Damascus / fled to North Lebanon in 2013	Former Intimate partner violence + Cancer survivor + several war-related traumatic events
Rana	37	Syrian	Married at 16, has 5 children, her husband forcibly disappeared in 2012	Lives with elderly parents, 5 children, sister and sister-in-law and their 5 children	Preparatory school	Admin assistant at Syrian NGO	Daria-Damascus. Fled from her hometown in 2013, to other areas in Syria, Fled to Beqaa on 2014	Arrest and forced disappearance of husband and brother-in-law, death of brother + several war-related traumatic events

Table 1: Descriptive Data of five Interviewed Participants

The Identified Themes	
Theme I: Theme I: Creating Meaning through Building a Narrative	Sub-theme I-1: Redefining the Traumatic Event
	Sub-theme I-2: Ascribing Value to Loss
Theme II: Finding Reasons to Keep Going	Sub-theme II-1: Adopting a Cause
	Sub-theme II-2: Evolving Agency
	Sub-theme III-3: Embracing Hardship as Foundation for Resilience
Theme III: Finding Ways to Keep Going	Sub-theme III-1: Dealing with Memories of the Traumatic Event: a Decision to Forget or Not to Forget
	Sub-theme III-2: Coping through Social Comparison
Theme IV: Changing Gender Roles	Sub-theme IV-1: Reclaiming Spaces for Women
	Sub-theme IV-2: Evaluating the feeling of being less "Woman" than Before

Fig. 3: Themes and sub-themes of data analysis as identified by the authors

also determining what is traumatic and what is not, or what is the most traumatic and most significant to the person. Moreover, the appraisal process includes assessing the possible gains of the traumatic experience, reflected in “meaning-making” (Janoff-Bulman 118).

**Sub-theme I-1: Redefining the Traumatic Event**

Although all participants went through several war- and displacement-related traumatic experiences, the event that they considered as the main traumatic event

and center of their narrative varied markedly.

Shyma', for example, fled from Syria after the house of her parents-in-law, where she used to live, was destroyed by airstrikes. She spent nights in horror with her two children. She lost three cousins in the war. However, Shyma' only told war-related stories when asked direct questions about them. When asked if she thought those events were still affecting her, she spoke of nightmares and terror she still feels “all the time.” (Shyma' 6)

Obviously, Shyma' suffered from psychological symptoms, including symptoms of depression and PTSD. Nonetheless, the story that remarkably dominated the interview with Shyma' was that of her husband abandoning her, which she described as the turning point of her life. “After we joined him in Lebanon, he started to feel the responsibility is heavy on him. He asked me to go back to Syria, or else he would not be responsible for me anymore.” She recounted, “he threatened me: ‘I won't pay anything, and you manage yourself and the children,’ and then he left.” It was then that she started to feel lost. “It was scary, being alone in a strange country, where I do not know anyone” (Shyma' 3) she said. It was also the point at which she decided to be stronger, however, and her fears and worries remain primarily centered around being solely responsible for feeding and protecting her two children.

**Sub-theme I-2: Ascribing Value to Loss**  
The narrative created by each participant about her main traumatic event, and how it relates to her current life, played a crucial role in how she was enduring both. That was obvious in Om-Belal's story about her 19-year-old son who was killed in 2013 by Assad regime forces while fighting for the Free Syrian Army. She had ini-

tially been totally against her son joining the combat, not only for the obvious reason of worrying about losing him, but also because she was ideologically opposed to the cause he was pursuing. After his death, to deal with feelings of loss and pain, she needed to create a narrative in which her son's choice was not only accepted, but also depicted as an act of courage and heroism.

You know what was a consolation for me? His reputation was really good, before his martyrdom and after [...] I feel he died with honor. He refused to retreat until the last moment. Syrians were his people and he died fighting for them," she said. „He was not like others who promised to protect them and then left them facing death. (Om-Belal 6).

Ascribing value to loss emerged, for example in the interview of Om-Belal, as a key approach to meaning-making as described by Janoff-Bulman.

### **Theme II: Finding a Reason to Keep Going**

Each of the five women was able to find a reason to keep going, handle the hassles of everyday life, and gain agency and resilience. Identifying with the needs of one's children or pursuing a political struggle

were the two main reasons given during interviews. The perception of the growing agency and resilience were supporting factors.

For four of the five women interviewed, the first motive to keep going was based on identification with the mother role. Motherhood as a motive for survival is rooted in psychoanalytical literature. A main drive for a mother to survive is to protect her child and to offer ground for nonpathological development (Baraitser and Noack 117). Moreover, the prototypical feminine gender role in Syrian culture is centered around motherhood. Women are socialized to be good mothers, and a good mother in adversity will stand for her children. In this sense, motherhood was a drive to survive and gain agency and resilience.

Identifying with a social or political cause was also mentioned as a protecting factor in the context of adversity. Recent studies have suggested that political activity should be classified as a resilient response, especially to political violence (Afana, et al. 2). The literature on political trauma among Palestinians has indicated that civic and political engagement are protecting variables that lead to better psychological outcomes (Sousa 507).

### **Sub-theme II-1: Adopting a Cause**

Ola, a single mother living with her elderly parents and female relatives after her husband forcibly disappeared and her brother died, explained how as a mother responsible for five children she does not have the choice to collapse. "I have children," she said, "you must appear strong in front of them not to weaken them," and that is why she kept struggling (Rana 3).

In contrast, Eman, who is a psychologist and political and civil rights activists, fled from Syria after her husband was arrested and she faced several attempted arrests. She is also a single mother responsible for an 8-year-old son, yet she finds in political activism a reason to overcome her pain. "After I was forcibly displaced, and my friends were detained, I felt work is the way not to think about the hardships I am living in," she said, "I was working day and night at the (Anti-Assad) newspaper" (Eman 3). Eman works now as a psychologist with Syrian women. Meanwhile, she collects women's stories for an oral history project. She clearly sees her role in supporting Syrian women and the Syrian revolution as a reason to keep going.

Om-Belal combined the two reasons together. She decided to deal with losing her son through keeping his name alive.

She is trying to achieve that through civic engagement as a teacher for Syrian children whom she described as the future of Syria. "I was struggling with myself to keep myself alive and to go on," she said. "It is the memory of my son that made me do that, after his death I lost hope in life, for some time I stopped eating, [...] then I told myself I should be strong to continue his journey as far as I can." (Om-Belal 4)

#### **Sub-theme II-2: Evolving Agency**

Gaining agency was a marked consequence among the five women, as they all described how they feel that they became stronger after what they went through. It was obvious that they came to this perception through a process of comparing their current and old selves. "I feel I am strong, my husband used to make me feel like a weak person," Om-Belal said, "but after all that happened, I find myself remembering everything and I tell myself, no, not at all. They wanted me to be weak, both my husband and my family." (Om-Belal 4)

Majda, who survived cancer and two abusive relationships as well as war and displacement, described how she restarted her career as a hairdresser since she fled to Lebanon without having anything but a hair dryer. She eventually found success and brought her children to live with her.

"The feeling that I can work, I am financially independent, I am capable of supporting my children [...] I thank God, all I went through, I was able to stand it, to bear, and to get over it." She added, "there is no woman like me, I am not conceited, but I have self-confidence." (Majda 6)

#### **Sub-theme II-3: Embracing Hardship as Foundation for Resilience**

Some participants made a clear link between facing hardships and being able to keep going. Shyma', explaining how she was forced to be stronger, said: "the things I went through, my husband's abandonment, being alone in a foreign country, where I do not know anyone, [...] I should be able to defend myself" (Shyma' 5).

In other cases, the interviewee mentioned that she made a conscious decision to be stronger to face a specific traumatic event. Majda, describing her feeling when she was first diagnosed with cancer, said: "I decided to be stronger than cancer, I struggled. This period affected me a lot, [...] but I do not want to be weak, I want to be stronger than any circumstances." (Majda 5)

#### **Theme III: Finding Ways to Keep Going**

Dealing with pain related to a traumatic event, and managing the associated psy-

chological symptoms, is a common challenge in the aftermath of severe adversity. The dominant approach in psychology is based on a pre-defined categorization of coping strategies, divided mainly into active/internal or passive/external strategies that aim at adaptive emotional regulation (Erdener 62). As this paper focuses on understanding the unique personalized techniques each woman developed to deal with the psychological aftermath of her traumatic experiences, two main themes emerged, one related to dealing with memories of traumatic events and the other to emotions related to them.

#### **Sub-theme III-1: Dealing with Memories of the Traumatic Event: A Decision to Forget or Not to Forget**

When the first author apologized to Om-Belal for making her revisit tragic memories of her son's death, she responded: "It is true I still get emotional when I tell his story, but it could not be compared with what I was feeling the first and second years [...] I like telling the story of his martyrdom, I even wrote two blog posts about him." (Om-Belal 5) She emphasized how she does not want to forget. Despite the pain she feels when talking about her son, sharing his story and keeping his memory alive are her coping strategies. She also stressed how she

stopped using her given name after his death, and she asks people to call her after his name (The mother of Belal).

Other participants stated that they deal with war-related memories by trying to forget them or distracting themselves by keeping busy. Majda presented this strategy when responding to the question about what she does when she recalls war-related events. "I try to get busy with something," she said. "I tell myself it has ended, may God have mercy on those who died. We should take care of ourselves, life should go on, it should not stop at that point, we should go on." (Majda 7)

#### **Sub-theme III-2: Coping through Social Comparison**

A key coping mechanism employed to evaluate one's overall situation and regulate associated feelings relies on social comparison, i.e. comparison of one's tragedy with that of others. "Coping happens when I see what other people went through, much more than what I went through," Eman said, "I have a job and income [...], my situation is better than others." (Eman 7)

It should be noted that social comparison as expressed here is in line with Janoff-Bulman's description of a major strategy in

the appraisal processes using comparisons with experiences of other survivors (Janoff-Bulman 118)

#### **Theme IV: Changing Gender Roles**

The five participants underlined pre-2011 restrictions on women's mobility, education, and work. They agreed that marked changes have been happening with respect to gender roles. Some attributed these changes to concrete new aspects of life in Syria or asylum countries (i.e. men being less present due to mass killings or arrests, financial hardships, and work regulations in asylum countries). Others also explained how these new conditions led to a realization of the unfairness of gender relations and norms, which contributed to re-evaluation of past and present situations as part of the post-traumatic appraisal process.

#### **Sub-theme IV-1: Reclaiming Spaces for Women**

All five participants agreed that women's employment and freedom of movement significantly increased after 2011. They all reported obvious changes in gender roles in terms of access to public space, decision making, and employment.

Eman explained how the war forced women to enter the job market. "Because of the financial need, women were given

an additional role, besides the old traditional role which they still do," she said. "Women now generally have more chances to find jobs." She also pointed out how this influenced gender relations: "A woman now knows she has the right to confront her husband" (Eman 3) she asserted.

During the interview with Om-Belal, she expressed much anger at the situation before 2011, in which she believes women were suppressed and controlled. "Honestly, despite all disasters, the changes that happened are very positive," she said. "I always wanted to participate in building society, at least to continue my education. That was not allowed." Om-Belal emphasized how she realized that men used to manipulate women. "Men did not allow us to work or to go out alone, they used to claim they worried about us facing the outside world," she said, "but during the revolution, they were sending us out to protect them. In the checkpoint if a man was accompanied by a woman they would let him go. What a contradiction." She concluded: "I am sorry, but they were liars." (Om-Belal 7)

Om-Belal's narrative is a clear example of realization of the previous unbalanced gender relation, and the potential for - less



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restricted - new roles. This is consistent with the feminist approach in dealing with trauma, where severe adversity could be a driver of feminist consciousness.

#### Sub-theme IV-2: Evaluating the Feeling of Being Less "Woman" than Before

Although all five participants agreed that Syrian women in general gained agency and strength, two of them, contrary to the other three, expressed their preference for the previous situation.

When asked how she perceives the changes in women's position, Shyma' answered: "Before was better. Women originally were not used to having a say, they were like a piece of furniture. But they were safe [...] Now there are a lot of women who are alone after losing their husbands." (Shyma' 4). Shyma's dissatisfaction about the changing gender roles is clearly linked to being threatened and overwhelmed, and the challenges she is facing to provide food and shelter to her children after her husband abandoned her.

Rana also clarified why she believes women's position to have been better before: "I used to be happier and more relaxed, I was not running around [...]. Now, you do not think of yourself as a woman anymore, you are a mother responsible for children,

and a father as well [...] Now we have to go out among the men [...] I see this affecting our womanhood." (Rana 5)

Two factors could explain why the five women differ in how they evaluate overall changes in their personal strength in relation to gender roles: first, the perception and evaluation of gender relations and norms before 2011, which is shaped by the personal history and constructed narratives of each woman (i.e. history of gender relations and gender role satisfaction), and second, the extent to which current challenges are compromising basic needs or safety. However, despite differences in levels of satisfaction of current role responsibilities, growing agency and perceived strength were obvious in all interviews.

#### General Discussion and Conclusion

Traumatic events generally have a profound impact on the fundamental assumptions of individuals, as one's core assumptions about oneself and the world are shattered (Janoff-Bulman 56). The processes of reappraisal that lead to possible positive changes after the traumatic event/s include examining assumptions about oneself, others, and the world, and rebuilding them in a constructive way (Triplett, Tedeschi and Cann 400). One of the processes used when rebuilding

assumptions focuses on re-evaluation of the traumatic experience, considering possible benefits and purpose, which contributes to meaning-making (Janoff-Bulman 118). Another process is comparative evaluation of life before and after the traumatic experience.

In the context of Syrian women, one area of shattered assumptions is that surrounding gender roles. Experiences of war and displacement unveiled how unbalanced gender relations and norms were, leading to the questioning of previous cultural beliefs and assumptions and the evaluation of ongoing changes in gender roles, which generally contributed to increased sense of agency.

Syrian women were forced to undertake new responsibilities, particularly to find means of survival for themselves and their families. For some, this was a perceived opportunity of empowerment through which they broke the restraints of patriarchy and made the most of the current fluidity of gender norms. In contrast, others saw it as an overwhelming burden that threatened their established notions about their womanhood (ABAAD and OXFAM 13-14). However, in all cases, changes in gender roles markedly contributed to their sense of agency.



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Through the process of rebuilding assumptions, each of the five women created a narrative about her most significant traumatic experience. That narrative, influenced by current living conditions and giving meaning to what had happened, is reflected in the value of the new life or in the reason to keep going.

All interviewees gained increased agency as a result of the adversity they went through; however, their overall appreciation of this gained agency varied based on current living conditions. Meanwhile, all five women were able to find an adequate reason to live for, despite the persistent pain of traumatic experiences in the past and tough living conditions in the present. Motherhood was a key driver for most interviewees, while social and political activism was also a clear motive to keep going, as an independent factor or, in one case of a mother pursuing the political cause of a son killed in battle, in conjunction with motherhood.

Each woman used unique modes of coping to deal with the memories of their traumatic experience and manage the emotions associated with it. Those who succeeded in creating a continuity of narrative between their traumatic experience and the meaning ascribed thereto on the

one hand, and the reasons and values of their current life on the other, showed better coping with their pain and higher appreciation of their growing agency.

As a final note, by choosing in-depth interviews as a method to collect stories of Syrian women and IPA to analyze them, we have been operating under the assumption that each one of those stories is unique. Nevertheless, this does not preclude that there are patterns that could be extrapolated. The five women shared stories of war, structured gender-based violence, and hardships in the country of asylum, yet each developed her unique narrative as well as reasons and tools to survive. These women definitely are not representative of all Syrian women, or even all Syrian women in Lebanon, but their stories open the way for understanding the suffering, and hope, of all these women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The cooperating NGOs included The Syrian League for Citizenship, Women Now for Development, Restart Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, Al Najdeh Association, Basma & Zaytouna, Basamat for Development, and Abaad Resource Center for Gender Equality. They work in various locations in Lebanon covering the main areas that have the highest density of Syrians, including Beirut (Shatila Refugee Camp, Bourj el Barajneh), Beqaa (Chatura, El Ain, and Aarsal), and Tripoli (Al Badawi and Nahr al Bared refugee camps).

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## No More “Eloquent Silence”: Narratives of Occupation, Civil War, and Intifada Write Everyday Violence and Challenge Trauma Theory

Nora Parr

Discourse on trauma has re-emerged in an era where media and mobility bring it to global doorsteps. Frameworks for understanding trauma remain dictated by thinking that emerged from Europe's “great wars” and American deployment to Vietnam. This framework—which sees trauma and the terrible as “out of time” or “other” to a perceived normal daily experience—has formed what critics call the “empire of trauma.” This empire limits how war, violence, and the terrible can be talked about and understood as part of (or not part of) contemporary life. Looking at two trauma narratives, *Taḥta shams al-ḍuḥā* (2004) by Ibrahim Nasrallah and

*Bā' mithl Baīt... mthl Baīrūt* (1997; Trans *as in Beirut*, 2008) by Iman Humaydan, the paper gives short readings that disrupt what has emerged as a binary of trauma theory. It shows how repetition and open endings turn everyday/trauma into everyday trauma, then goes on to explore how the novels develop language and generic structures so that they hold—rather than silence—tellings of the terrible.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Eloquent silence, trauma, Arabic literature, Lebanese Civil War, Palestinian Intifadah, literary form

Bam. Just one. Ah! He screams. Bam... another one. [...] why is he silent?  
-*B as in Bayt... as in Beirut*<sup>2</sup>

[T]here was nothing but the lower half of Nimr's body, the half that was clutched to Yasin  
-*Under the Midmorning Sun*<sup>3</sup>

Maha and Camilla shoot Ranger, “Bam ... another one,” (Humaydan 213) in what he tells them are the final hours of the Lebanese Civil War. When the militia fighter—who had moved into their flat—is dead, they wonder “why is he silent?” (Humaydan 213). Trauma theory would interpret this silence as a marker for the experience of extreme violence, the expression of events so horrible they “resist [...] integration and expression” (Craps 45) into everyday life. Since “there are no words” sufficient to express trauma, horrendous violence can only be communicated through a profound “eloquent silence” (Ephratt 1909). Ranger, however, is not silent because he “has no words” for what has happened. He is silent because he is dead. The silence is not his, but belongs to Maha and Camilla, whose experiences before, during, and after his death are no less hideous than his assassination. The death of an abusive man (who represents the war) is only one of the

countless violent incidents of Lebanon's civil war; of countless violences in their lives. In Iman Humaydan's (b. 1956, Mt Lebanon, Lebanon) 1997 novel *Ba' Mithl Bayt ... Mithl Bayrut* [B like house... like Beirut] (Trans: *B as in Beirut*, 2008), then, silence is not the end of the narratable. Maha and Camilla are simply incredulous at the idea that the fighter (the war) could "stop talking," given his (its) long impact. Their question—aimed at the reader—marks the impossibility of the war's silence. For the women, violence of the preceding years continues to provide life's operating logic—despite or even because of Ranger's death. This is not the silence of trauma theory.

Trauma, as the concept developed out of Europe's "great wars," the Holocaust, and American deployment to Vietnam (Stonebridge 195; Craps 45-6), sets out a problematic binary between violence and the everyday that has limited use for reading texts like *Ba'*. Problematically, it also sees itself as a universal paradigm, as Fassin and Rechtman outlined in their *Empire of Trauma* (3-4). Suffering as a result of trauma is perceived as the "key-stone in the construction of the new truth" (Fassin and Rechtman 6) that has developed its own "language" able to "wield strong power to organize" (Das 107) and

apply its framework of understanding to diverse contexts. Everyone who suffers must be recognized, but only if they suffer in the right way (Fassin and Rechtman 6). When faced with non-Western narratives, trauma theory "tend[s] to validate, or even to impose" its own readings on suffering "from within the range of possible ways of interpreting the experience of a conflict" (Fassin and Rechtman 211). This "range of possible ways" presumes that the experience of violence is exceptional—and exceptional as constructed against a particular sense of an everyday norm. This norm is narrated through "linear plot development whose teleological goal is the resolution of conflict" (Coby 119). The everyday is a "presuppose[d] 'text' ... a story or history emplotted or predicted into narrative structures that are personally familiar to the reader" (Lang 19). This is a "western" notion of the ordinary (everyday) imagined chronologically as realism. It is opposed to the extraordinary, which is designated as a time of trauma.

The presumption is that "traumatic experience by its nature defies linear time" (Mostafa 209), and is placed "out of linear chronology" of the everyday (Stonebridge 195). Typical trauma narratives are thus non-linear and identified as postmodern (post-realist) where "interruptions and ...

flashbacks" "interfere" (Mostafa 209) with a constructed norm. Trauma and the everyday are mutually exclusive, so much so that the sealed time of trauma must never be "opened, accessed, interpreted or decoded no matter what apparatus or methodology is applied" (Lang 3). In other words, there *should* be silence because trauma is conceived as an "'unimaginable' reality, a logic of horror [...] incapable of referring to anything known" (Wardi qtd. in Paterson 11). What happens, then, when violence is the norm? This is explored in *Tahta shams al-ḍuḥā* (Under the Midmorning Sun) (2004), a story of Palestine and the Oslo Peace Accords, where the imposition of a closed "time of violence" only ends up "reinforcing the conditions that created the so-called trauma in the first place" (Behrouzan 2).

Written by 2018 International Prize for Arabic Fiction winner Ibrahim Nasrallah (b. 1954, Wihdat camp, Jordan), in this Palestinian text it is the fighter who takes a primary narrative role. 'Returning' to Ramallah in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the story opens (unlike *Ba'*) once violence is over—at least in theory. The very life history of *Shams'* protagonist, however, challenges the Oslo narrative that saw the Accords as an end to the violence of the 1948 Nakba. Born around 1936,

Yasin came into the world amid an Arab revolt against the British. Displaced in 1948, he joins the resistance in the 60s. When Israeli forces occupy the West Bank in 1967, Yasin is detained, tortured, and finally exiled. From Jordan and later Lebanon he carries out resistance operations, loses his fiancée and her son in the 1976 Tel Al-Zaatar massacre (Nimr, in the quote that opens this article), sees the resistance decimated in Jordan's Black September, and eventually moves to the new Palestinian Authority's de facto capital. His mid-90s "return" is where the novel opens. In PA-administered Ramallah, however, violence continues. Yasin is harassed at checkpoints, re-arrested by the Israeli military, tortured, and while in prison immortalized (without his consent) in a monodrama based on his *fida'i* heroism. He is finally shot in the face by the very playwright who memorialized him on stage. If trauma is unspeakable and "out of time," how can the trauma of all these distinct yet interconnecting violences be interpreted?

The "empire" of trauma is not so far removed from empire itself, and like colonial/post-colonial debates, there is no easy mapping of Arabic discourses of self, violence, and society onto existing trauma theory. In the Arabic context, "trauma"

(*sadma*) refers almost directly to the dominant framework described here. It tends to bypass generations of thought on the violence of colonialism<sup>4</sup> and the difficult job of reconciling a "pre-colonial" self with the European "modern" (El-Aris 4)—a "modern" that includes unique conceptions of time (Davis 4), space, and the individual (Mitchell, 96, 4). In her analysis of the experience of torture in contemporary Egypt, psychologist and fiction writer Basma Abdel Aziz has begun to address the overlaps and distinctions between existing Arabic discourses and trauma theory, and she has developed distinct vocabularies to describe the experience of violence. Aziz introduces, for example, "*karb*" (73). A formal Arabic word meaning worry, grief, anxiety, and torment (Wehr 959) in the Egyptian context, she explains, is used to discuss trauma as "stress/sadness" (Aziz 73). For Aziz the word marks a key difference, since "in English it [trauma] is broken down into stress and stressors, but in Arabic one word (*karb*) is used to describe the causes and effect" (73). The very grammar of trauma differs, and not only between the "empire" and contemporary Arabic contexts: "The meaning of *karb* changes for each culture and people's habit" (Aziz 73). Trauma theory and Arabic narratives of trauma, however, share the fundamental aim of "build[ing]

some logical meaning relating to what happened" (Aziz 77). The aim of analysis, then, is to think through (disentangle) these logics, and draw out the structures of understanding the works themselves create.

A structure of understanding, Mohammed Abd al-Jabri wrote, consists of "all of the relationships and connections of logical reasoning that build on one another" (6). Any attempt to make meaning from an event or phenomenon is done through this existing architecture. Breaking down the structure into a mass network of parts explains why "each culture and each people" craft unique (but connected) structures, "without propagating a single, solely valid view of reality" (Milich 286). These logics are investigated along two axes: first in the reorganization of time from a closed and teleological binary of everyday/trauma to an open and integrated narrative space that explores violence as an everyday and long-term condition. This turns trauma from a closed "other" to something open and undetermined. The second section pivots; building on a changed understanding of the teleological foundations of trauma theory it re-reads *Ba'* and *Shams* as agents creating logic through intervention in both language and genre structures. Identifying

these logics gives names to alternative frameworks for reading trauma.

### Everyday/Trauma to Trauma of the Everyday

*Ba'* and *Shams* engage what critics "from Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth" identify as a "discursive failure" (Gana 513) that separates the perceived differences between "trauma" and the "everyday." The novels engage this conception of time and show its problematic narrative implications. Their narrative logic defies discursive failure by addressing the trauma binary as part of the problem that characters living everyday trauma encounter. Narrative techniques break open the closed time of trauma: for *Ba'* it is repetition, for *Shams* open endings. In both texts the everyday and violence exist, in all their different forms, "here, living with us, as if they stand on the stage of a single scene" (al-Jabri 37). Everyday trauma is figured as an ongoing present-simultaneity.

#### 1.1 Repetition

*Ba'* stalls the narrative foreclosure of trauma theory through varied repetition. It is used at once "to defer death" (Khoury and Mroué 184) and "to bring out nuances of the text" (Shannon 84). It is what Umm Kulthum scholars describe as *taswir al-ma'na* (literally: picturing or illuminating

the meaning), when a single line is repeated "20 or more times, each time differently" (Shannon 86). Like the singer's ballads, *Ba'*'s repetition alters "the listener's experience of temporality" (Shannon 85), holding open a present full of "cumulative and anticipatory" (86) possibilities that comes to resemble al-Jabri's "stage" of Arabic culture. Repetition is juxtaposed with what miriam cooke calls the "war story," the teleology that "gives order to wars that are generally experienced as confusion" (cooke 15). Between repetition and the "war story," one character declares, is a "chasm of silence" (Humaydan T1/6) that parallels the "discursive failure" of trauma theory. In *Ba'*, the consequences of the failure are played out between a husband and wife. In the opening chapter, narrator and protagonist Lilian shows how useless trauma narratives are to describe her everyday, and uses repetition as a way to break down the closure that the 'war story' would impose.

The first of four narrators/protagonists, Lilian is married to a writer who loses his hand in an explosion. Without it he cannot write. Though he relearns left-handed penmanship, it is not the physical act of writing that has been damaged. When he tries to write, he ends up with "a pile of story beginnings: amputated stories with

unknown endings" (Humaydan T5-6). His political essays need the certainty of teleology for structure; without it he has nothing to say. The personal experience of violence forced him to learn that the war does not make teleological "sense." He can find no 'reason' or logic within the war story for the loss of his hand. However, "to search somewhere else" for a narrative logic, Lilian observes, "would require extraordinary courage" (T49) he does not have. For a time, he exists in the "chasm of silence" that separates teleology from everyday violence. Eventually, he reconnects with his Islamist brother who resurrects the story of their grandfather—martyred by the French—to regain a sense of purpose, a trajectory, a way of giving what is now styled as his "sacrifice" meaning. Lilian records her husband's defeat but does not share it. In the war she sees an open-ended unknown to which she adjusts. His injury is only one of these unknowns. In war, she describes: "Many things happened. Little things piled up and strung our lives together. We might remember them all, or we might just remember some of them, but we certainly won't ever understand their trajectories" (T7). Lilian admits she initially fought this "disorder," but finally "stopped making plans," (T7) concluding: "At some point we must accept our affairs as they are; ques-



tions become luxuries" (T7). Rather than calling this the "chaos" of war, Lilian demonstrates sense-making through "cumulative and anticipatory" repetition exemplified by her daily task of packing and unpacking the family's suitcases. "I tried to organize everything," (T2/8) she explains. But no single method of organization will fit the constantly shifting scene of war. There is no perfect way to order the clothes, no perfect set of clothes to take, so she "repeatedly emptied the contents onto the rug, shook the dust off and re-packed everything" (T2/8). The act, which "gave me strength" (T2/8), is Lilian's resistance to teleology and her way of absorbing the problem of the trauma binary. Constant repetition with slight variation becomes a way to narrate everyday violence, so the tedium of war—like the repeated lines of Umm Kulthum—is illuminated in all its minute, torturous, "cumulative and anticipatory" diversity.

Where Lilian packs, Warda lives a constantly restaged battle against dust. Nightly, after scrubbing the floors, she muses: "strange how the atoms of dust pile up so rapidly, like seconds in an hour, like time" (60). There is something about this accumulation, this neat layering of time, that bothers her. To combat the unrepresentative symbol of chronology,

she rearranges furniture to unsettle the dust and to create a replica of the shifting battle lines outside, inside. Just like the arrangement of the flat, the war shifted, and "it became another war" (T71). Warda uses the flat to stage her mastery of unpredictable repetition. With every rearrangement she maps and memorizes the precise configuration of parts: "I would close my eyes and guess where everything was" (T61), then play guessing games, putting away laundry with her eyes closed. Her space has a knowable order, though a constantly shifting one. This mapping extends beyond the living room. Warda "always knew where my room was in the building" and "where my building was in the neighborhood" and "all of the distances separating me from the coast" (T60). She is constantly ordering: city, country, war. Repetition adjusts to and reflects patterns of protracted violence. To know the war, for Warda, is to know the distance between the clothes on the line and the route to the wardrobe—which she had rearranged that morning—with eyes closed. This is as true during the peak of violence as it is when a ceasefire is declared. Though militiamen take off their fatigues and tanks disappear from the streets, Ba's women know nothing is "over."

The "end" of the Lebanese Civil War is depicted as yet another repetition with minor difference. This is why Maha recoils at Ranger's announcement that the "war is over" (T217). His declaration is an imposition (Cooke's 'war story') and it is only Ranger's latest. He is rude, controlling, and violent. He had all but moved into the women's flat, bringing the violence of outside, in. Like war, the women endure Ranger, but with the militiaman they eventually take narrative control. It starts with Maha's anger: "I didn't like what he said about how the war was going to end, just like that, while we waited" (T218). The two then restrain Ranger and question him about his participation in the violence of war. He admits to murdering men out of jealousy, using the clothes of a militiaman to exact personal vengeance. There has never been an "outside" and "inside" to the war, a beginning or an end. Stressing this, the women shoot Ranger after the declared cessation of violence and dispose of his body amidst the war dead—the war still claims dead bodies. In relief, Maha declares: "they may say the war has ended, but I haven't finished my story yet" (T227). Indeed, if the story had closed with the war it would have ended before Ranger is killed. His death, central to the experience of the women, crucially extends violence beyond the "war story."

Ranger's assassination brings a number of other components into the story of war. His misogyny and masculinist viciousness were what lead to his death, and also become part of the civil war narrative that Ba' tells. "Civil war," then, also becomes Warda's husband, who abandons her and keeps their daughter when her mental illness is discovered. War is the family of Maha's lover who refuse to recognize an interfaith romance; it is Camilla's grandmother constantly lamenting the absence of a "man in the house" (T116). It is not just one structure of violence, but many, which are also repeated, before and after, inside and outside, and across chapters. At its core Ba' tells a story that chronology cannot hold. Though the women narrate in separate chapters that tangentially reference each other, in each, one or two other women appear. Connections are not tied to linear plot. By teleological standards the inter-referencing "goes nowhere." The women, simply, all lived above or below each other in the same apartment building. Without a timeline, without chronology, their stories, with repeated themes and repeated violences, become the story of the war.

### 1.2 Open-endings

The protagonist of Shams also challenges constructions of time. Though he fought

for Palestine as a member of the resistance, Yasin does not see the Oslo Accords as a final victory. For him, it is simply the start of a new phase—one that will require the same determination to resist. Not unlike the repetition of Ba', Yasin's personal philosophy is one of beginnings, where each shift in violence marks not an end, but the necessity of innovation and adaptation. He envisions the Oslo Agreement as such a shift. Instead of leadership that sees things the same way, Yasin is faced with multiple urgent forces that would end his story—and the trauma of Palestine's past—through the teleological "Oslo Narrative" that has declared suffering over in order to lend legitimacy to the new Palestinian Authority government (Khalili, 117). When the "doors to his homeland [were] suddenly open" (42) because the new PA government was permitted to turn its Fatah fighters into a new cadre of police and bureaucrats, Yasin is offered a suspect "return." Suspect, because the "Palestine" of the Accords is neither the place he was born in, nor exiled from. He sees comrades kiss the earth "dreaming of a lost time" (14). Why this joy, Yasin wonders, when Israeli soldiers inspect their documents guns-in-hand. The returnees may not have expected the signs of continued occupation, but stick to the narrative of heroic return. Yasin would show no

such exuberance, stating, "when there remain on this ground no soldiers, then it will be time to kiss the earth" (45). He does not believe his role as a fighter has ended, though the Accords mandated an end to arms.

Part and parcel of his critique of return is the narrative closure it implies. He sees his comrades "return to their homelands just to die in them" (43). He decides to go to Ramallah to continue his resistance, this time to Oslo:

Ten years were waiting for him at least, there in front of him to do something, maybe something important, something that would make clear the meaning of this return for him. (44)

He wants his story to be an open one. This is challenged almost immediately, when Yasin is introduced to Salim al-Nasry, an actor and aspiring playwright in his 30s who grew up under Israeli occupation and looks to the hero as an imaginative way out. "This is a true hero," he believes, and wants to pen a "monodrama of no more than an hour and a quarter" (20) detailing his heroism. Salim asks Yasin if he can "write his story from beginning to end" (15). The endeavor repeats the form of Oslo's narrative closure and makes Yasin

uncomfortable—the end of the story as Salim imagines it, is his triumphal return. Yasin tries to explain:

The story doesn't end when it ends, it starts and when it does the beginning must continue until a new beginning [...] I don't see an ending at all, I see only a chain of beginnings. The ending is many beginnings: so where to start? (145)

Salim does not understand. Yasin pleads: his story is not exceptional, but average, in fact everyday:

In truth, all heroes are like each other. Try for example to tell the story of Nimr on its own, or of Umm Walid on her own, or of Numan, and what would happen? They would all become the main character and I would be secondary. Do you understand now the meaning of a story? And how can you manufacture one with the flip of a hand? (158)

It is the “ordering” of events that create the hero. The chosen ending that looks back with a heroic teleology is what divorces the person from the everyday that came before, during, and after. This compart-

mentalization excises characters from their larger realities.

Salim insists on writing the monodrama largely because he wants to get out from “under the thumb” of a corrupt boss who pockets the plentiful aid money a children's theater brings. He writes the play and performs it in Yasin's village, for “one night only,” as his 60-year-old muse wishes he could “escape far away” (19). However, “after a few days Salim al-Nasry returned asking if there could be another performance” (45). The play is such a hit, and Salim so disappointed at its short run that he treacherously wonders “what if Yasin was killed in prison? What if he died under torture?” (15); without the fighter he could tell a story of victory unimpeded. When soldiers come looking for Yasin, Salim is overjoyed: “from the day when Yasin was behind bars it became possible for Salim al-Nasry to carry out his project to its fullest extent” (15). “Yasin's absence planted in Salim that strange feeling of freedom, that the performance was his alone” (63). The play gleefully details Yasin's torture and post-'67 exile. By ending at Oslo, however, it structurally obliterates Yasin's more recent imprisonment. For the playwright, trauma of the Nakba, Naksa, colonialism, and occupation are displaced into some “other” time as long as the Oslo Narrative is maintained. Yasin's insistence that

trauma is not “a particular historical event that can be placed in brackets” (Holbing, 194) threatens Salim's worldview. “The difference between life on the stage and life in life” (134), as one journalist who learns the truth of the play puts it, becomes a mortal one. Unable to face the truth of continued violence, Salim murders Yasin as an Israeli tank enters Ramallah. The tank signals of the start of the Second Intifada, and Israeli military oppression of the people's anger over the failure of Oslo. Like Ranger, Salim imposes a trauma binary. This time, however, the binary wins. His closed narrative not only hides a continued reality of colonialism; it amplifies colonial violence.

### **The structures of telling everyday trauma**

For trauma theory, “the invention of a form susceptible to the transmission of an ‘unimaginable’ reality, a logic of horror” (Wardi, 39) was unthinkable. Ba' and Shams, however, plainly depict a “psychological reality of horror” (Shehadeh, 39). Their writings on violence are what Stephan Milich has elsewhere called a “wound turned into language” (153). Taking as given the fact of a narrative capacity to communicate everyday trauma, this section pivots, and looks at two examples of transmission's building blocks—words and genre—to more deeply

explore how wound is turned into language.

### 2.1 Words

Ba's title instigates a subtle play with language. It sets up associative links furnishing everyday words with traumatic meaning. Ba' mithl bayt...mithl Bayrut [B like house [bayt]... like Beirut] uses consonance to link Beirut—then synonymous with civil war bloodshed—with the personal and secure domain of the bayt [home]. The play requires readers to simultaneously register and reroute automatic associations. Language is shaped to communicate its context, and possibilities of the “real” expand. Taken from and expanded within the final lines of Lilian's narrative, the title associations swell as Lillian and her children await passage to Australia. The youngest pulls out his Arabic workbook “with the new smell of a library” (T58). Karim prepares to take his language abroad, where it will accommodate another reality. Demonstrating this word-flexibility, the scene unfolds:

Ba' said Karim, Ba' like Beirut. Yes, Ba' like Beirut, I answered. Ba', Beirut, bayt, added Karim. Yes, I whispered inside myself, Beirut ... remains home. (58)

Continuing the play, “remains” [baqāyā] here carries two meanings: “what remains,” and “what is left of.” The city “remains

home,” and is simultaneously “fragments of home” (T56) [literally: what remains of home]. Letters, words, and their connecting grammar build a meaning of home that includes death, violence, misogyny, and exile.

Characters of Ba' constantly struggle to expand language. Camilla, the youngest and the only diasporic narrator, arrives from abroad to make a Civil War documentary. She has been recruited to the crew because she speaks Arabic and knows the city. The film is never produced; Camilla finds no language capable of telling it. In Beirut, she discovers, language has “buried in its letters and behind its words a fear that was still alive” (T102). She may speak Arabic, but she does not yet have the language of war. Between the linear style of the documentary and the layered language of the city there remains “discursive failure.” The war has created new meaning for those who lived it, as Maha reflects: “when the sun had set, it left behind creatures trying to get used to a new language” (T102)—one permeated with meanings of everyday violence. Here, silence becomes embedded in language, an indicator of systemic colonial violences (Sacks, 77) and the “bottomless past” (T102) of words “exhumed” (T102) to describe the realities of violence. Words

become capable of meaning everything “between the blue of death and the blue of sky,” Maha reflects as her chapter closes, not because of, but despite the “loss from which there is no return, which waits for me to master it” (T223). Language mastery means speaking, not through an “eloquent” silence but one embedded in the practice of telling.

### 2.2 Genre

Despite attention to language, however, Yasin is written out of his own life in Salim's monodrama because “that's the sort of play it is” (36). Language is not the only structure mediating the telling of violence; genre also dictates what is possible to say. As Joe Cleary puts it, “European realism could never intellectually grasp” the realities of colonial locales, or of colonialism itself (259). The play is certainly realist, with Salim even rebuking the techniques of a Scandinavian theatre troupe that teaches the methods of Brecht. As the theatre director puts it, “there is no distance” between the Yasin on stage and the one Salim sees as the returned hero (13). Yasin is overtaken by the Oslo narrative (the war story, the realist play), but demonstrates through the structure of the novel, which closes after his death, that there is still the possibility of resistance. His charming, slightly clichéd insistence on love and

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romance challenges his community to see an alternative to Oslo, and demonstrates structurally Yasin's insistence that "all heroes are like each other," if the story is told the right way.

As he declares on the first day of his "return": "There must always be flowers," (35) because "we have become embarrassed of beautiful things more than we are embarrassed about bad things" (109). To prove it he asks Umm Walid:

Have you ever in your life seen an airplane drop flowers on a city?

Of course not.

But you've seen an airplane drop bombs on a city.

Any number of times.

You see! The world is crazy! And you! How many times have you told 'Abu Walid that you love him in front of other people? (136)

The logic they live under, Yasin implies, does Palestine a disservice. While it is too strong a narrative frame for the fighter to survive, his example is taken on by those less "under the thumb" of an Oslo narrative, and is illuminated in a novel that takes as its frame not the triumphal return but the story of its failure.

In mirrored scenes that open and close the novel, a narrator describes how "under the midmorning sun," Umm Walid sticks her head out of a window and yells:

"Abu Walid!"

"What is it?"

"I love you!" (5-6, 181)

Abu Walid blushes, muttering "Yasin will drive her crazy in the end" (5-6, 181). Between the first and final pages of the text, however, something has changed. As the novel closes, Abu Walid (after muttering about Yasin) yells back: "I love you" (181). Resistance is realized, not to the play or the Oslo narrative, but, at least, to the life of the protagonists. Yasin forges—through his acts of resistance—a logic of horror that is also the logic of life. His insistence on trauma as reality is not the normalization of violence that Nouri Gana warns can "encourage, however unintentionally, the acceptability of these normally exceptional measures" (505). As unexceptional, trauma penetrates the wall of silence that would surround it, so that it might be recognized, its vocabulary understood, and perhaps one day addressed with new structures of telling that can hold silence as part of the story, in all its ugly ineloquence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> With deep thanks to the editors and peer reviewers who helped develop the article. Their reflections and suggestions have been invaluable.

<sup>2</sup> Most references to *Ba'* are from the Max Weiss translation, and are indicated as such with T ahead of the page number. Where alternative translations have been made, page reference to both the Arabic and translation are provided. This quote is from the original Arabic (213, T224).

<sup>3</sup> All translations from *Shams* are my own (92-3).

<sup>4</sup> There is of course a history of Arabic intellectual debate about many psychological theories that stretches back to the late 19th century (See El Sharky 2016), but the debate remains pinned to European and later American ideas of the self.

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## Trauma in the Novels of the Iraqi-Kuwaiti Writer, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il

O. Ishaq Tijani

A prolific Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il (1940-) has published over thirty novels among other literary works. Though a less-studied Arabic novelist, his writings are comparable—in terms of quantity, genre, length, technique, and subject matter—to those of the Egyptians Najib Mahfuz and Tawfiq al-Hakim. This article argues that trauma is reflected not

just in Isma‘il’s fiction, but also in his own conflicted persona, his identity as an Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer. The article reads *al-Ḥabl*, in particular, as an autobiographical novel that portrays Isma‘il’s personal experiences of trauma in 1960s Iraq.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Fiction, Iraq/Kuwait conflicts, Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il

### Introduction

Iraqi traumas have been the focus of many fictional and non-fictional works. Sinan Anton’s novel *The Corpse Washer*, for example, presents graphic images of the post-2003 traumas being experienced in Iraq to date. Some of these works—by the more famous Iraqis—have been studied by other scholars (see, e.g., al-Musawi; Milich et al.). This article focuses on the life and works of Isma‘il Fahd Isma‘il, as they represent his personal traumatic experiences in Iraq in the 1950s-1960s. It argues that trauma is reflected not just in Isma‘il’s fiction, but also in his own conflicted persona, his identity as an Iraqi-Kuwaiti writer.

Isma‘il was born in 1940 in Basra<sup>1</sup>, where he also spent his childhood and youth. After his secondary education, he began to work in 1957 as a teacher in the same city. In 1967 he was compelled to relocate to Kuwait due to the political crises in Iraq in which he was indicted and imprisoned, as further explained below. He continued his teaching career in Kuwait before traveling for further study in Egypt in 1969. On returning to Kuwait, he worked as a civil servant while at the same time studying at the Kuwait Higher Institute of Theater, from where he graduated in 1976 with a bachelor’s degree in drama. In the late

1980s, he retired from the civil service to establish his own private business.

A more detailed literary biography of Isma'il is contained in al-'Ajmi's *Irtihālāt Kitābiyya* (Literary Journeys), which features an extended interview with the writer.<sup>2</sup> Of more importance here are the points that in 1961 Isma'il published a poem in the Beirut-based newspaper, *al-Ḥaḍāra* (Civilization), in which he lampooned the Iraqi dictator 'Abd al-Karim Qasim (r. 1958-1963), and that, so far, he has published over thirty novels among other literary works. Moreover, during his stay in Egypt and other short visits to Lebanon, Isma'il met several leading Arab writers, including Najib Mahfuz (or Naguib Mahfouz; 1911-2006), Salah 'Abd al-Sabur (1931-1981), 'Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi (1938-2015), and Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972). He also has contacts with other Iraqi writers including, most notably, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rubay'i (1939-). Just as Isma'il has been influenced by these people, so also has he influenced some younger Kuwaiti writers, including Layla al-'Uthman (1945-) and Talib al-Rifa'i (1958-). Isma'il is the leader and convener of a prominent literary circle, *Multaqā al-thulāthā* (The Tuesday Rendezvous), which usually meets on a weekly basis in his office in Kuwait City; I personally attended some of

its programs in 2003 (Tijani 21). Though one of the least-studied Arabic novelists, Isma'il continues to gain regional accolades, with two of his most recent novels long- and short-listed in 2014 and 2017, respectively, for the "International Prize for Arabic Fiction."<sup>3</sup>

### Trauma in Isma'il's Early Novels

In simple terms, trauma is defined as "a wound," "a violent shock," or "the consequences" that a thing, act, or event may have on someone's body and/or mind (Laplanche and Pontalis 465-466). For Sigmund Freud, trauma is more of a psychological problem of the mind than a medical—i.e., physiological/bodily—one. For him, "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event." Rather, it "is experienced [not] too soon" as "to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors" (as cited in Caruth 3-4). Echoing Freud, Caruth claims that trauma is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). By contrast, scholars of literary trauma studies argue that the representations of trauma vary from one writer to another

and from one cultural or historical context to the other (Visser 250-265).

This article considers as trauma any form of bodily and/or mental suffering, damage, pain, shock, etc., and their consequences as experienced by both Isma'il and his characters in the novels discussed hereunder. The cause of Isma'il's personal traumas was his earlier-mentioned poem in which he satirized 'Abd al-Karim Qasim for attempting to take over Kuwait in 1961. A brigadier in the Iraqi army, Qasim became Iraq's prime minister through the 14 July 1958 revolution that led to the abolishment of the Iraqi monarchy. He, too, was overthrown and assassinated during the February 1963 coup led by members of the Iraqi Baath Party. Some critics have described Qasim as a "benign dictator" who had "a significant impact on Iraqi society" in terms of economic prosperity, social and educational reforms, and the recognition of women's and minorities' rights (Davis). Nonetheless, all his goodwill toward the Iraqi people has been overshadowed by the fact that he:

Closed newspapers, banned political parties and refused to allow democratic elections [...]. The result of his actions was the degradation of political discourse. Politics was reduced to bina-

ries of good versus evil, revolutionaries versus reactionaries, nationalist heroes versus the agents of imperialism. (Davis)

To this end, many Iraqi intellectuals suffered governmental repression during his regime, and even during the subsequent military regimes. Many of them were killed, jailed, silenced, or forced into exile (al-Musawi; Milich et al.).

The focus here, however, is on Isma'il, who as a result of the publication of his poetic invective was repeatedly arrested, incarcerated, and tortured by officers of the Qasim regime (al-'Ajmi, *Irtihālāt* 9). Publishing the poem was not just a turning point in his life, but also the point at which he started experiencing an identity crisis. He declared:

I am a Kuwaiti from an Iraqi mother [...]. But the attempt by 'Abd al-Karim Qasim to take over Kuwait in 1961 segregated me from my peers among the then generation of Iraqi writers. There and then I felt uneasy being Kuwaiti. (9)

Openly criticizing the government brought an added physical and psychical assault unto him and his entire family. That Isma'il married four times and divorced

four times—twice in Iraq and twice in Kuwait (18)—might have been one of the lasting effects of that trauma on him. After his successive incarcerations, he was prevailed upon by his father to relocate. His father, too, abandoned his inherited huge farming business in Basra, and the entire family moved to Kuwait (9). This aspect of Isma'il's traumatized life is represented in his fiction, as he declared: “all my novels reflect, more or less, aspects of my past experience in life, although that reflection does not necessarily have to be exactly in the same manner as an event had happened to me” (25). While he did not specify those autobiographical elements in his works, he acknowledged that he empathizes with certain characters (25), some of whom I identify below.

Isma'il was on a *revenge* mission—to avenge his traumatic experiences in Iraq—when, upon settling down in Kuwait, he ventured into publishing his first set of novels in the early 1970s: *Kānat al-Samā' Zarqā'* (The Sky Was Blue), *al-Mustanqa'āt al-Ḍaw'iyya* (The Light Swamps), *al-Ḥabl* (The Rope), and *al-Ḍifāf al-Ukhrā'* (The Other Banks). These novels were written in the 1950s and 1960s whilst he was still in Iraq (al-'Ajmi, *Irtihālāt* 9-15), but he edited them upon moving to Kuwait and then Egypt. Roger Allen treats these novels as a quartet that successively portrays the

collective traumas of the Iraqis in the period in focus (154-155). Aspects of only two of them are briefly examined below.

### **Al-Mustanqa'āt al-Ḍaw'iyya: Trauma and the Mockery of the Oppressor**

One of the dimensions of Isma'il's revenge against the Qasim regime is mocking it. This mockery is embodied, for example, in the character of Humayda, the protagonist of the second novel. An intellectual, Humayda is imprisoned not because of his antagonistic writings—as his true identity is not known to the officers of the regime—but for committing manslaughter, as evident in this exchange between him and the chief warden of the prison:

- Did you kill someone?
- Two persons.
- [...]
- [...]
- [...] Why did you kill them?
- Because they killed their sister.
- Is that sister your beloved?
- No.
- [...] What exactly is your relationship with them?
- I was a spectator.
- And then a killer.
- Exactly. (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 37-38; see also al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 72-73)

Implying a mockery of the regime is the aspect of the novel that treats the friendship that soon evolves between Humayda and the unnamed chief warden, who has discovered the prisoner's real identity and shares his pro-masses ideas. That friendship culminates in the chief warden secretly taking Humayda out to a cinema. At the cinema, the prisoner surreptitiously undoes the chain with which he has been tied to a chair by his friend before using the same to shackle the chief warden. The prisoner goes out to the street to buy two bottles of soft drink and then comes back to meet his friend. Astounded, the chief warden queries:

- You [just] had the chance to run away. Why did you come back?!
- [Silence].
- You're crazy! I swear, you're crazy!
- [Silence].
- Why did you chain me to my seat?
- To prevent you from running after me.
- Why did you come back then?! (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 52-55; al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 77-78)

As al-'Ajmi notes, the prisoner wants to reciprocate his friend's goodwill by not running away, which could have caused

the latter serious trouble with the government (*A Novelist from Kuwait* 71-75).

On the other hand, one can say that Humayda's actions in the scene briefly described above signifies the idea that, rather than the ordinary citizens, it is the corrupt and brutal authorities—symbolized by the chief warden—that should be put under lock and key. Similarly, Humayda's decision to remain in prison implies that—for the intellectuals in particular—living in Iraq during the 1950s-1960s was like living in prison. He is able to continue writing against the regime while in prison—under the pseudo-name of Jasim Salih—because there is more time and freedom and less fear to do so there (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 78). This is something he might not have been able to do if he lived in the country as a free man.

The idea of prison as a place where people often derive inspirations, have more time and freedom to reflect and be creative, is also echoed in Isma'il's other works. In his third novel, for instance, the reader finds one of the characters—a revolutionary activist—narrating his ordeal to his fellow prisoner, the protagonist of the novel:

- [...] Iraqi policemen are never negligent [of their duties].

Surveillance... Sudden arrests [...].  
Remaining in prison is much better.  
Rather, much more relaxing.  
Prison is a school. (*al-Ḥabl* 41)

Finally, through the character of Humayda, Isma'il shows how the political repression of the Qasim regime had turned youthful, active, and progressive-minded Iraqis into passive, frustrated, and desperate individuals (*al-Mustanqa'āt* 78). Like Humayda, Isma'il is also an intellectual who was imprisoned by the regime. Aside from this, Humayda seems to have nothing more in common with the author. This is unlike the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl*.

### **Al-Ḥabl: Trauma, Revenge, and Restoration**

*Al-Ḥabl* sounds more autobiographical than its predecessors because it represents more of the author's personal trauma and revenge. The idea of revenge resonates throughout the narrative, with frequent mention of words such as *antaqim* (I'm avenging), *nāqim* (an avenger), and *naqma* (revenge or affliction), as evident, for instance, in one of the protagonist's internal musings:

*Kuntu nāqiman. Fa-kharajat naqmatī qaṣīdat hijā'* (I was avenging. And my revenge brings out a satiric poem). (79)

An unnamed Iraqi man from Basra, the protagonist, like the author, admits having written a satiric poem in which he criticizes the same historical figure. He narrates that, during one of the interrogation sessions, a police officer commanded:

- Prove your innocence.
- I'm innocent.
- [Reflecting:] But the lone poem which I composed and in which I lampooned 'Abd al-Karim Qasim spread quickly among people. It was secretly distributed. I heard more than one person reading its *maṭla'* (opening line).
- Prove your innocence.
- I'm not a member [of any revolutionary group].
- The poem!! (17)

Regrettably, that poem is no longer extant, the newspaper that published it is now defunct, and none of the few available scholarly works on Isma'il quote from it. Worse still, not a single line from it is quoted by Isma'il himself in any of his subsequent publications, including his extended interview cited in this article. Is this because the author is still being haunted and traumatized by the consequences of the satiric poem? In any case, my argument in this article is not about the text of the poem itself, but about its satiric

message, which caused both Isma'il's and his protagonist's trauma.

Extracts from the novel that illustrate the life-changing effects of the poem on the protagonist include when the reader finds him musing:

A single poem that is your entire life.  
Just one poem [...].  
[...]  
How many times have you challenged yourself to write another poem?! [...]  
[...]  
The poem... the revolution... the [political] Left... If only the revolution, if only the Left... In the past... thieves used to have their right hands cut off. But now it is the Left that is severed. (*al-Ḥabl* 18; see also Allen 154-155; al-'Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 75)

Like *al-Ḥabl*'s protagonist, it is a poem that changed the author's life forever—from an ordinary Iraqi-Kuwaiti citizen and a budding writer to a more committed literary political-ideologist. Through the poem, Isma'il was only trying, in Tarek El-Ariss's words, to "expose" or "hack" Qasim by exposing the folly of his action for attempting to annex Kuwait. But Isma'il was, in turn, "exposed, hacked, and scandalized" (511). The poem exposed Isma'il in two ways: firstly, to political victimization

through his repeated arrests, and secondly, to the outside world, as a voice to be reckoned with on the Arabic literary scene.

Moreover, following his political travails in Iraq, the author migrated to Kuwait, as earlier noted. It is probable that he was smuggled out of Iraq. He could not have used his authentic identification papers to facilitate his exit from a country whose leader—a tyrant—he had lampooned. Isma'il must have been designated a security-risk leftist on the government's watch list in the same way that the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* is marked "*siyāsī mutaṭarrif khaṭir*" (a dangerous political extremist) (56). This is following the protagonist's release from prison, when he applies for a passport from the Iraqi immigration department:

At last, after waiting for two months [...] there arrived my papers, on which it was written: "*siyāsī khaṭir ... mamnū' min al-safar ilā al-khārij*" (a dangerous political activist ... prohibited from traveling abroad). (41)

Desperate to leave the country and to avoid further incarceration, the protagonist is smuggled out of the country without any identification document, as he recounts:

My wife sold our bed. She sold the closet. We gathered ten dinars. I paid eight to an unknown man [who said to me]:

– I will take you to Kuwait without your passport. (41)

The security tag placed on him is repeated many times in the text, albeit in different phrases, to indicate how it haunts him throughout the narrative, including during his stay in Kuwait (24, 36). Isma‘il might have been haunted by the same tag as a former political prisoner, or “*mawqūf siyāsī*” (a political detainee) (*al-Ḥabl* 25).

### Torture

As earlier noted, Isma‘il declared that he was tortured by officers of the Qasim regime. Torture is also represented in *al-Ḥabl*, though captured through the point of view of another unnamed male character who is among the thirteen political detainees packed together in the same cell (68). Recounting his ordeal, the other political detainee tells the protagonist he has been arrested for writing an abusive essay against the government:

– [...] I suffered a severe torture... Look at my fingers!

I looked. Only one nail was left in his right hand. My body shivered.

– They insisted on getting [my] confessions... (26)

Terrified to see how his friend's hand has been severed, the protagonist “said to [himself]: ‘Then I’m a scapegoat (*kabsh al-fidā*)’” (26). With this statement, the brief torture scene ends, and the reader is left to guess the scale of the impending torture the protagonist is to experience, over and above the regular “*ḍarabāt*” (battering) and “*ṣafa‘āt*” (slaps) (23-24, 33, 36). Both the protagonist and his friend did not know each other prior to their imprisonment, but they both share the same democratic beliefs. Whereas his *comrade* actually belongs to a left-wing political association, the protagonist—like Isma‘il himself at the time of his ordeals in Iraq—does not (26). This explains what the protagonist means by referring to himself as a scapegoat, an appellation that also suits Isma‘il at that time. As a revenge, the author formally declared for Marxism as a literary-ideological persuasion when he traveled to Egypt in 1969. It was there and then that he physically joined the league of Arab leftist-leaning writers, some of whom have been earlier mentioned (al-‘Ajmi, *A Novelist from Kuwait* 64).

### Stealing as Revenge

The protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* has had a stealing habit since childhood; at least, he had stolen a carpentry tool as a ten-year-old (31-33, 60). After his deportation from Kuwait (40-43), he also returns to his stealing habit. On this occasion, however, his recourse to thievery is a form of revenge: to retrieve his meager but hard-earned booties from Kuwait—his “*ḥaṣīlat al-‘umr*” (lifetime savings) (47-48)—which had been confiscated at the Iraqi border. He recounts:

[The Iraqi immigration officer] said to the policeman:

– Search his pockets very well.

The policeman did so, thoroughly.

– Some cash, sir! ... Twenty dinars.

– Put it here.

– And a bottle of perfume.

– Great ... Put it here.

– Cigarettes ... Five packets of cigarettes. (47)

It can be argued that the protagonist's indulgence in stealing at childhood has little or no connection to his experience of trauma. Contrastingly, he recourses to stealing having lost his job since his time in prison, with no compensation or pension paid to him. All hope is lost for him in Iraq (35-36), even more so after forfeiting



his gains from Kuwait. Nonetheless, his real reason for returning to thievery is to avenge the confiscation of his possessions. He justifies this, for example, when he retorts: “*Hum saraqūni wa-yasriqūnī*” (They stole from me, and they are still stealing from me) (25), implying the denial of his rights as a citizen, as he tries to convince his wife to support his stealing mission. He is directing his anger to the government officials who represent the regime’s corruption and repressiveness (*al-Ḥabl* 49-50, 57-58). For him stealing now becomes a *mihna* (profession) that must be mastered (*iḥtirāf*) and perfectly executed (47-48), a situation that can be interpreted as a reflection of trauma. This is because some people commit crimes as a reaction to other people’s aggression or injustice, among other personal reasons.

Like *al-Ḥabl*’s protagonist, Isma‘il embarked on a revenge mission through the publication of his first set of novels, as earlier noted. The author, though, does not see these publications as constituting revenge in a strict sense. Nonetheless, one can read the protagonist’s acts of stealing as a child and an adult as allegorically autobiographical. As a child and young adult, Isma‘il saw writing as a hobby and child’s play; he never imagined the repercussions of writing anything against a military junta.

But, consequent upon his travails in and escape from Iraq, he felt challenged and invigorated, so he decided to take writing as a profession and perfect it in the same way that the protagonist of *al-Ḥabl* works assiduously to actualize his stealing mission.

### The Rope and the Restoration of a Trauma Victim

A rope is an item used to *connect* two sides, things, places, etc., and, from a biological point of view, it is like the umbilical cord that connects a baby with his/her mother. The novel’s title, *al-Ḥabl* or *The Rope*, refers to a rope used by the protagonist to climb over the roof of the house he wants to steal from. According to al-‘Ajmi, the rope “symbolizes [the protagonist’s] wife’s yearning for a normal life,” since she wants it to be used for drying clothes “rather than for theft” (*A Novelist from Kuwait* 77). This explanation is self-evident in the novel (11-12, 94).

I would read *The Rope* also as an allegory: it has both personal and political significance in the lives of both the protagonist and the author. The disagreement between the couple over the rope symbolizes the disagreement over the ownership of Kuwait land. That same disagreement is also embodied in Isma‘il’s personality, as he is torn between his affini-

ty with and loyalty to his fatherland and his motherland. Lastly, the province of Basra—with which both the author and his protagonist also share an affinity—is like a rope that connects the rest of Iraq with Kuwait, just as it is also Iraq’s main gateway to Iran.<sup>4</sup>

In the novel, *The Rope* is a symbol not just of a trauma-engendered crime, but also of trauma crisis resolution, or the restoration of a traumatized mind. This is captured in a dramatically presented scene featured in the final pages of the novel, where the protagonist gives up stealing and returns the rope to his wife. After successfully gaining entrance into the house of his most targeted victim, he is able to find items that are commensurate with what was confiscated from him:

A bottle of perfume. [His wife] will be delighted with that... Twenty dinars and a bottle of perfume... What about the packs of cigarettes?! (94)

“He initially takes a piece of gold [i.e., jewelry] but returns it to its place” (93), as that item was not included in what was forcibly taken from him. This point serves to underscore his honesty and integrity, which he strongly believes every human being should possess and always demonstrate:



"There must be honesty and truthfulness in whatever we do, even in thievery," he says to himself (89). His honesty is put to the test when he does not find packs of cigarettes in the house to complete the targeted number of items, thereby having his mission fully accomplished in just one place. (His earlier outings on the stealing mission were either preparatory, for fact-finding, or unsuccessful, because of the vigilance of the people of the house or the night watchmen in the neighborhood.) But he had promised his wife that this particular outing, whether successful or not, would be his last:

How many times have I promised her but failed!... Well, she will not be angry this time. Henceforth, she will have this rope for her alone. (94)

The protagonist's wife plays the stereotypical role of a submissive and conformist female throughout the narrative. Nevertheless, from the point of view of trauma studies, she performs the all-important role of a pacifier of a traumatized mind, admonishing her husband to stop stealing, and to forget and forgive (his oppressors). Still, his eventual renunciation of stealing is more as a result of self-repentance than of an external influence.

The author's portrayal of conscience and repentance as remedies for trauma is featured toward the end of the novel, where the unnamed third-person narrator tells us that the protagonist experiences "*shu'ūr bi-naqma*" (a feeling of self-indictment). This is when his movements awaken a baby girl in his victim's house. He enters the baby's room, carries her, and sits down to lull her back to sleep:

Mama!!

– Fear begins to reflect in her voice, as she sits tight on his lap. He nearly bursts into a jesting laughter.

He must leave her room now before she realizes it is a thief that has turned a mother. A jesting smile forms on his lips. It is followed by a feeling of self-indictment. (89)

This scene prompts the protagonist's sense of guilt as well as his resolution—expressed through the statement: "Oh, Devil! I will never be deceived by you, henceforth" (94)—with which the text ends. Literary trauma theorists would see the end of the novel in which the protagonist returns to a normal life as a kind of closure that symbolizes the possibility of *healing*, of the rehabilitation and restoration of a traumatized mind, which the classic trauma theorists believe are unhealable

(Caruth 3-4). The last two pages of *al-Ḥabl* provide the final process of that healing in a somewhat similar way as the American Toni Morrison's novel *Home*. As Visser writes:

[...] The final pages of *Home* speak unreservedly of healing, rejuvenation, and personal growth [...]:

*[The tree] looked*

*So beautiful.*

*Hurt right down the middle*

*But alive and well.*

The image of the beautiful tree symbolizes a sense of closure that is not the erasure or denial of past hurt, but which affirms growth and health to emphasize that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated. (257)

Isma'il uses the final scene in *al-Ḥabl* not only to provide a closure, but also to highlight that, irrespective of the reasons for doing it, any act of misdemeanor is a disservice to society. The scene also implies that the future generation should be considered, irrespective of one's position in a crisis, and that, with self-discipline, it is possible to overcome trauma.

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### Conclusion

Narrating or documenting one's traumatic experience is one of the most effective means of getting over it, or at least reducing its effects (Visser 250-265). Through his writings, Isma'il has documented some of his troubles in life, thereby realizing some healing from his traumatic past. If revenge is considered a cure for trauma (Beattie 513-524), then Isma'il's writings—through which he has exposed, mocked, or lampooned his oppressors, as explained in the foregoing—are his easiest means of (non-violent) revenge, of his trauma cure.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> He died on 25 September 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Please note that, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

<sup>2</sup> *Arabic Fiction Org*, <https://www.arabicfiction.org/ar/Ismail%20Fahd%20Ismail>. Accessed 9 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the economic and geographical significance of Basra to Iraq see, for example, Nabih Bulus, "Once Iraq's Crown Jewel, Basra Crumbles from Neglect." *Gulf News*, 13 July 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/news/mena/iraq/once-iraq-s-crown-jewel-basra-crumbles-from-neglect-1.2248038>. Accessed 13 July 2018.

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## (Re-)Enacting Stories of Trauma: Playback Theatre as a Tool of Cultural Resistance in Palestine

Anne Rohrbach

Playback Theatre opens up an artistic and interactive space for silenced voices and counter-narratives. It helps to address potentially traumatic experiences of (political) violence and oppression. The article discusses the resilient power of Playback Theatre in Palestine and gives insight into the strategies of an oppressed

population to define their own sense of self through stories that acknowledge the variety and dignity of their lives.

**Keywords:** Palestine, Palestinian Theater, Trauma, Cultural Resistance, Memory, Resilience

### Introduction

In the Palestinian Territories, the project of occupation and control is most evident in the daily practice of land confiscation, home demolitions, settler violence, military incursions, and political imprisonment, which leads to geographical, political, and social fragmentation and isolation. Adversity and alienation can be considered as an integral part of everyday life that might lead to diverse traumatic experiences. I argue that in this fragile and fragmented context, Playback Theatre offers a chance to name and revisit stories of suffering, loss, and violence and helps to mobilize solidarity and (re-)connect communities.

Against the background of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, my paper focuses on Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance and in this sense as an alternative to conventional trauma work. My research is embedded in the wider context of Palestinian cultural resistance and commemorative practices. During my research, I got in contact with several non-governmental organizations, amongst others *Cinema Jenin* (which unfortunately has been closed in the meantime) and the *Freedom Theatre*, which are both located in Jenin—specifically, in the Jenin refugee camp.<sup>1</sup> In 2012, one year after the assassi-

nation of Juliano Mer-Khamis, the charismatic leader of the Freedom Theatre, I travelled to Jenin for the first time. There were still ongoing interrogations and detentions to resolve his murder. Nevertheless, the members of the Freedom Theatre continued and reorganized their work based on the belief that artistic expression has a crucial role to play in creating a free and equal society.<sup>2</sup> A main concern of the Freedom Theatre is to reconstruct Palestinian culture by listening to and sharing (oppressed) stories.

In recent years I conducted several interviews with people engaging in cultural resistance in Jenin as well as in other places in the West Bank. In this paper I particularly focus on my research on Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance. I was introduced into Playback Theatre in 2014, when I joined the Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus project, where members of the Freedom Theatre and international activists go to stay with communities in key areas of oppression. Cultural activities like Playback Theatre have an important function during these *Freedom Rides*.<sup>3</sup> Playback Theatre invites community members to share personal stories that are directly transformed into improvised theater pieces by the actors. As will be described in greater detail later, sharing

stories becomes an act of witnessing that contains healing aspects as well.<sup>4</sup> I also want to highlight the importance of stories from children and youth, the most vulnerable members of society.<sup>5</sup> The Freedom Theatre offers special activities for children and youth in which they put much emphasis on play and creating a safe space as a foundation for children and youth to be free to express themselves creatively and strengthened in their ability to deal with difficulties in life (The Freedom Theatre, Child). Regarding children and youth, the importance of sharing (and enacting) stories through Playback Theatre is still in great need of deeper research and documentation.

### **Framing Cultural Resistance in the Palestinian Territories: The Freedom Theatre**

The founders of the Freedom Theatre had a vision of building a theater community that joins other forms of resistance. That means that the work of the theater was never aimed to pacify, but to stir, mobilize, and transform (Johansson and Wallin, *Freedom Theatre* 209). In this context, the Freedom Theatre often refers to cultural resistance as a core motivation for its work. Jonatan Stanczak and Johanna Wallin, two of the main members of the Freedom Theatre, explain that cultural resistance

remains a vague and multilayered concept, but that the following definition given by New Tactics in Human Rights comes close to the Freedom Theatre's understanding:

Cultural resistance is the broad use of arts, literature and traditional practices to challenge or fight unjust or oppressive systems and / or power holders within the context of nonviolent actions, campaigns and movements. At its core, cultural resistance is a way of reclaiming our humanity, and celebrating our work as individuals and communities. Cultural resistance tactics are particularly powerful because they serve multiple purposes. They inspire us to own our lives and invest in our communities, while building capacity for local leadership. (Wallin and Stanczak 1155)

In addition, Nabil Al-Raee, artistic director of the Freedom Theatre, points out that a number of factors have fueled debates and created a variety of approaches, concepts and vocabularies leading to concepts like "cultural resistance," "artistic resistance," and "cultural intifada." He emphasizes that "artistic activity is a direct assault on the military occupation of Palestine and requires trust and mutually

supportive and collaborative efforts that unify our purpose through a variety of artistic methods which celebrate our diversity. In this way, art can define and lead resistance" (Al-Raei 1730). Furthermore, Wallin and Stanczak argue that art, such as poetry, music, and theater, has always functioned as an identifying, healing, and unifying factor.

Researchers as well as therapists have already recognized the healing power of cultural expression through strengthening identity, creativity, self-esteem, reflection, and communication practices. This is particularly important in contexts and zones of (political and social) fragmentation. The Freedom Theatre's cultural resistance primarily targets the occupation from within or rather the internalization of oppression. In the Freedom Theatre's perspective, this is where cultural resistance comes in:

Just as we cannot imagine more colors that what our eyes have seen, it is difficult to imagine a reality beyond our own experiences and frames of reference. Art, as the expression of culture, can deconstruct an oppressive reality and make it comprehensible, which is the first step towards changing it. In such circumstances, the act of creating and performing becomes a subversive

act of resistance against the external and internal levels of occupation. (Wallin and Stanczak 1271)

While talking about the Freedom Theatre's concept of cultural resistance, one of his former students told me that Juliano Mer-Khamis always urged his students to be aware of the fact that the occupation of the mind was more dangerous than the occupation of the body. In an interview with Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, Mer-Khamis explained:

[W]e believe that the strongest struggle today should be cultural, moral. This must be clear. We are not teaching the boys and the girls how to use arms or how to create explosives, but we expose them to discourse of liberation, of liberty. We expose them to art, culture, music - which I believe can create better people for the future, and I hope that some of them, some of our friends in Jenin, will lead [...] and continue the resistance against the occupation through this project, through this theatre.

It is important to note that in the Palestinian context, cultural resistance is inextricably connected to the concept of *ṣumūd* (steadfastness). Over the years, there have

been multiple and overlapping discourses on *ṣumūd*, dependent upon the larger needs and contexts of time. As a national symbol, *ṣumūd* only started to be used in the 1960s as part of the Palestinian national movement and can be understood as a tactic of resistance to the Israeli occupation that relies upon adaptation to the difficulties of life under occupation. In other words, it is an active affirmation of the collective presence on the Palestinian land.<sup>6</sup> The ultimate symbols associated with the concept of *ṣumūd* are the olive tree as well as the peasant women and mother as signs of rootedness, continuity, and connectedness. In this respect, *ṣumūd* is about persevering despite the oppression and hardships that Palestinians face in their daily lives—for instance a community which rebuilds their school for the seventh time or students who go to university despite long waiting times at checkpoints. While planting new olive trees, Alaa, one of my interview partners, explained that for him *ṣumūd* means "keeping my humanity and soul, my ability to laugh and hope."

Against this background, the expression "to exist is to resist" is a common slogan found throughout the Palestinian Territories.

Şumūd (and its reference to cultural resistance) can be understood as a “resilient resistance,” a tactic of resistance that relies on the qualities of resilience such as getting by and adapting to a shock (Ryan 299). Of course, being resilient does not mean going through life without experiencing fear and pain (or other emotions) after adversity and loss, but resilience is found in a variety of thoughts, behaviors, and actions that can be learned and developed, such as in Playback Theatre. In this context, it can be understood as an alternative or rather additional tool for conventional trauma work.

### **Playback Theatre: Visualizing Personal Stories of Potentially Traumatic Experiences<sup>7</sup>**

Playback Theatre is a form of interactive and spontaneous theater. Although performances focus on a theme of interest or concern in a ritualized way, they follow no narrative agenda. Performances are carried out by a team of trained (ideally native) actors. The actors and actresses of the Freedom Bus are themselves Palestinians, which provides them with a deep “understanding of the psychological and socio-political context of stories they encounter” (Rivers, “Playback Theatre” 160). In a personal conversation, Ben Rivers, one of the founders of the *Freedom*

*Bus*, explained that the Playback process works best when performers are deeply familiar with the language, values, and traditions of the community. The inclusion of non-Palestinian actors would limit the efficacy of the work, especially in a context where many Palestinians feel that their narratives have already been denied or misrepresented (Rivers, “Narrative Power”). In addition, there are also musician(s), a conductor, and—in the case of international participants—a translator.<sup>8</sup>

In the following, I reflect upon a Playback Theatre event in a small community in Area C<sup>9</sup> of the Jordan Valley. The performance took place on the school playground. The conductor asked if someone from the audience wanted to share a personal story. After some representatives of the community shared their stories, children and minors were invited to tell their stories as well. 15-year-old Osama<sup>10</sup> raised his hand and entered the stage. He took a seat next to the conductor, who supported him by asking some questions about time, place, plot, and emotions:

When I was a little child, Israeli soldiers invaded my parent's home. I was afraid and I peed in my pants. They destroyed everything; they even destroyed my favorite doll with their heavy shoes. I

won't ever forget the sound of my doll breaking into pieces. They took my father and my cousin, they were beating them, they pushed them into their car and suddenly there was a big silence.

The teller chose the actors and actresses to enact the different roles. Then he watched his story recreated on stage supported by the music of an Oud.

In general, the performers must be very sensitive in their acting. Jo Salas (“Stories in the Moment” 119) explains:

Stories that are evidently or potentially traumatic for the teller should not be enacted literally. The teller needs to ‘see’ his or her story, but in a way that maintains a safe distance from it. Horrific events like a bombing or a rape can be depicted with minimal gestures, narration, or suggested offstage.

At the end of the representation, the actors and actresses turned to the teller, thanked him for the story, and waited on the opinion of their enactment.

Generally, after each performance the conductor asks the teller whether he or she felt represented by the enactment. If the teller is not fully satisfied, he or she can ask for variations. For instance, the conductor might counteract by inviting peo-



ple from the audience to share their feelings in response to the story they heard. After a while Rawda raised her hand and was invited to enter the stage:

It was in the evening when the soldiers invaded our home. I don't know what they were looking for, but they were shouting and wanted us to leave the house. I cried. My mother was still standing in the kitchen, making coffee. With a proud smile she looked at the soldiers, telling them that she would leave the house when she's done with the coffee. For a short moment, the soldiers seemed to be confused. After my mother finished her coffee, she left the house, walking upright.

Considering the political violence Palestinians face every day, these stories can function as examples of the profound impact on children's perception of space and reality. In this context it makes sense to refer to the work of Eyad El-Sarraj, who (amongst others) examined the prevalence and determinations of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip who lost their homes. I argue that his results might also be transferred to the effects of Israeli invasion and devastations of Palestinian homes in the West Bank. If we understand

home as a shelter and the heart of family life, then even the invasion or devastation of home can be a traumatic experience. Home contains vivid memories as well as attachment to (family) objects. In this context El-Sarraj emphasizes that home is often associated with feelings of security and consolation (Quota et al. 314). The (ongoing) invasions and devastations might undermine the children's sense of safety.

Theater has the power to create a safe and *liminal space* to visualize themes and emotions that are usually suppressed or even (social) taboo. Correspondingly, it offers the opportunity to express vulnerability, grief, anger, and other emotions that can be recognized and re-viewed through the performance. Ben Rivers emphasizes that

[a]udience members have expressed their appreciation for an aesthetic space that welcomes diverse emotions and complex narratives—and opportunity so often denied in the prevailing quest for order, sense and survival. (Rivers, "Narrative Power")

As shown by the examples above, stories that are shared during a Playback Theatre event are not only about violence and vic-

timhood; they rather emphasize agency (for instance in the sense of disobedience, as Rawdas story illustrates). The teller usually tells his or her story not only to inform the audience, but he or she is also urging the audience to fight against the injustice as well. Rivers ("Narrative Power") also explains that even though the Playback process is used to inform or mobilize local and regional audiences, many tellers also like to transmit their stories to the outside world. From the audience's point of view, Playback Theatre can thus be understood as a form of witnessing and as one way to counter representations of Palestinian life. For example, organizers of Playback Theatre events also arrange post-performance meetings where (international) event participants are able to discuss concrete actions as a result of the "testimonial process" (Rivers, "Narrating Power"). In addition, the Freedom Bus troupe tries to establish long-term relationships with the partnering communities to build trust and (re-)connect the fragmented communities within the West Bank.

### **Conclusion: Playback Theatre, Trauma Work, and Cultural Resistance**

As stressed above, there is no doubt that people living under occupation are at a high risk of psychological disturbances. Many studies have found that the experi-

ence of political violence often leads to different types of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that can develop following a traumatic event that threatens one's safety and makes one feel helpless (Freeman 6). For the Palestinian context, it is difficult to define or reduce the traumatic effects as post-traumatic stress disorder, because the trauma is neither past nor post, but continuing (Sehwail 55). This means that due to the fact that political violence is still an everyday experience, it is almost impossible to identify or even experience the setting as *post*-traumatic. Above, we also need to recognize that prominent trauma discourses reflect Western perspectives that tend towards apolitical and bio-medical models of assessment and intervention (Rivers, "Narrative Power"; Rivers, "Cherry Theft"; Rivers, "Educate"; Brunner, "Politik des Traumas"). Western trauma discourse is dominantly one of victimization. Of course, victims and perpetrators are necessary categories for thinking about violence, suffering, and vulnerability. But they are often used as dualistic and holistic concepts, which are not sufficient. As already mentioned above, I argue that the response to (political) violence is not limited to being traumatized, but includes resilience. In this sense, I prefer to use the term *potentially traumatic experiences*.

According to Papadopoulos, experiences of extreme adversity can result in a variety of internal states and external behaviors. He mentions negative responses (including psychiatric disorders), neutral responses (resilience), and positive responses. He introduces the term "adversity activated development" (AAD), which refers to new positive qualities resulting from adversity. Against this background, Rivers ("Playback Theatre" 158) points out that up to approximately 73,000 Palestinians who suffer from mental health disorders cannot access appropriate service due to the lack of funding, but also due to the social stigma surrounding psychiatric treatment. I fully agree with Rivers that storytelling and (interactive) theater can offer an important alternative to conventional trauma response. To have the chance to tell what happened to a broader audience in a secure and safe space and to see this story being enacted on stage can help a person to move forward with life. It can move traumatic memory into narrative memory. The person who shares his or her story is no longer alone with his or her painful memories and feelings. He or she is taking an active role, because he or she *chose* to enter the stage. Furthermore, people experience that there are similar stories and feelings, which might lead to solidarity and com-

munity mobilization. Their voices are no longer silenced, and they ideally gain public recognition and respect.

During my research I was able to talk to several *tellers* after diverse Playback Theatre events. Most of them explained that they felt a kind of relief and shifting of perspective that can play a crucial role in the healing process. Fox (and others) emphasize that Playback Theatre promotes both personal affirmation and social cohesion, which offers a powerful response to the alienation and disconnection that many people experience. Against this backdrop, the recognition of shared experiences can become a tool for cultural resistance. As mentioned earlier, from the audience's point of view, the opportunity to have one's story heard can be viewed as one way to counter external representations of the Palestinian reality.

It is important to emphasize that children and youth especially are faced with difficult realities. Their lives consist of more or less constant struggle. Violence affects them almost everywhere: on the streets, at school, and at home. Violence is becoming part of their language, their play and their worldview (Wallin 3990). Many children suffer from trauma and psychiatric disorders; for instance, hyperactivity,

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aggression, concentration problems, and insomnia are very common. Wallin clarifies that there are only a few avenues for release and rehabilitation available to them. Through Playback Theatre (and in Jenin in a broader sense through the children and youth activities of the Freedom Theatre) they have the ability to tell their own stories in a positive and safe environment where they are listened to, respected, and valued as equal individuals. The special strength of Playback Theatre lies in its "visualizing of personal stories." Children especially are rarely able to express their feelings verbally, particularly if they refer to potentially traumatic experiences. Through Playback Theatre their stories can be visualized and symbolized. This creative response can open a space for diverse feelings and in this sense stimulate resilience. To quote Ahmed Tobasi, theater school graduate and coordinator of theater workshops for young people:

In my opinion they [the children] are the most important audience to us. If we can find a solution to their problems through theatre, we will indirectly find the beginning of a solution to our society's problems. These children are the generation that will lead the country one day. (The Freedom Theatre, Child)<sup>11</sup>

Coming finally back to the concept of cultural resistance, it is important to stress that there can be no monopoly on the understanding of cultural resistance. This also means that there is no clear and precise definition of cultural resistance. In the context of the Freedom Theatre, Al-Raee points out that "it has been challenging for us to define clearly what we mean by the concept of 'cultural resistance'. [...] We have approached 'cultural resistance' largely in an intuitive and organic way, through our feelings" (Al-Raee, "Shared Responsibility" 1660). Against the backdrop of the Freedom Theatre, I have discussed Playback Theatre as a tool of cultural resistance and in this sense as an additional tool for conventional trauma work in the Palestinian territories.

Sharing Stories about life under occupation is not a new experience for most Palestinians. But Playback Theatre as a story-based strategy appeals to all our senses. It is social and interactive in nature and helps to provoke critical consciousness as well as coping strategies with potentially traumatic experiences. The importance of Playback Theatre for children and youth is still underappreciated, which in my opinion, needs to be remedied. I assume that the special (educational) activities of the Freedom Theatre

can make a significant contribution here as well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jenin was severely affected by the second intifada, when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) occupied the camp in 2002 after ten days of intensive fighting. More than a quarter of the population was rendered homeless. The so called *Battle of Jenin* plays an important role in framing personal and collective memories that refer to traumatic experiences (UNRWA).

<sup>2</sup> Within the Freedom Theatre there is the understanding that there are four main and intertwined levels of occupation: the external Israeli occupation, the internal political oppression in Palestine, the economic occupation, and finally the occupation from within.

<sup>3</sup> The initiative is inspired by the 1960s Freedom Rides that travelled across the Southern United States to highlight and challenge racism. In the Palestinian Territories, Freedom Bus events are typically organized in partnership with grassroots organizations, popular struggle committees, village councils, women's cooperatives, and local activists (Rivers, "Playback Theatre" 160). As a founding member of the Freedom Theatre's Freedom Bus initiative, Ben Rivers is jointly responsible for the use of Playback Theatre in the West Bank of the Palestinian Territories. He is specialized in the use of therapeutic and participatory theatre for community mobilization, cultural activism, and collective trauma response. He has worked extensively with communities impacted by structural oppression and political violence, for instance in India, Egypt and the Palestinian Territories.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to add that Playback Theatre is not about bringing Palestinians and Israelis together in the same events. First and foremost it aims at community mobilization and solidarity within the fragmented Palestinian Territories.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most prominent Palestinian psychiatrists dealing with the traumatic effects on children and youth was Eyad El-Sarraj. For example, he examined the prevalence and determinants of post-traumatic stress disorder among Palestinian children in the Gaza Strip who lost their home.

<sup>6</sup> Palestinians often differ between *static şumūd* and *resistance şumūd*. The former is more passive and defined as *maintenance of Palestinians on their land*; the latter contains a more dynamic ideology whose aim is to seek ways to undermine the Israeli occupation.

<sup>7</sup> As will be discussed later, I assume that the response to violence is not limited to being traumatized. That is why I prefer the term *potentially traumatic experiences*.

<sup>8</sup> This means that the stories I have witnessed are all translations from Arabic into English.

<sup>9</sup> The 1995 Oslo II Accord divided the West Bank into three types of area. Concentrations of Palestinian population in built-up areas, which are home to most of the Palestinians in the West Bank, were designated Areas A and B and were officially handed over to Palestinian Authority control. The remaining 60% of the West Bank was designated Area C and is the land that surrounds Area A and B. Area A is home to an estimated 180,000-300,000 Palestinians and to a settler population of at least 325,000 in 125 settlements and approximately 100 outposts. Israel retains full control over security and civil affairs, including planning, building, laying infrastructure, and development (B'Tselem, Planning).

<sup>10</sup> The names have been changed to protect the privacy of people involved.

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## Injustice Turned Inward? Continuous Traumatic Stress and Social Polarization in Egypt

Vivienne Matthies-Boon

Based on 40 life-story testimonies with young Cairene activists, this article argues that post-revolutionary Egypt was marked by Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS). CTS is a phenomenological term that accounts for the structurally traumatic nature of political repression. It emphasizes the continuing temporality of such pervasive traumatization and the structural political stressors that underpin it. CTS thus entails a specifically *political* conception of trauma, according to which traumatic stress is in fact constituted by a violent, corrupt, unaccountable *political and judicial system*. This article argues that the traumatic experiences of activists

in pre-and post-revolutionary Egypt are best perceived through the lens of CTS. It also insists that such traumatic stress—particularly the lack of justice and formal recourse—provided a fertile breeding ground for revenge and social polarization, which was directly incited by counter-revolutionary actors (such as the military and Muslim Brotherhood leadership), thereby sadly further contributing to the (seemingly endless) continuous cycle of continued traumatic stress.

**Keywords:** Egypt, Trauma, Polarization, Injustice, Revenge

### Introduction

This research draws on 40 life-story testimonies of young (18-35 years) Cairene activists (25 male, 15 female) from different political orientations (liberal, socialist, Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafist), conducted between October 2013 and February 2014. The experiences of these activists are marked by Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS), which is a phenomenological therapeutic term developed by anti-apartheid South African psychologists to accounts for the relentless traumatic nature of political repression and its ensuing social conflict (Straker and Moosa). The key markers of CTS are the emphasis on a different—*continuing*—temporality of traumatization and the emphasis on the structural *political stressors* that cause this traumatization (Straker; Straker and Moosa). CTS hence advances a specifically political conception of traumatic stress that is constituted by a violent, corrupted political and judicial system (Eagle and Kaminer; Straker). In contexts of CTS, traumatic injustices are systemic and pervasive: the political authorities that were supposed to protect the people are the direct perpetrators or at best colluding in the abuses. Hence, in CTS, there is no recourse to the judicial or reconciliation processes. Rather, “the law is part of the problem rather than potentially part of the



solution" (Straker and Moosa 458). CTS is particularly useful since it sheds light on the feelings of disorientation and numbing pervasiveness of fear due to the continuation and pervasiveness of traumatic threats from which there is no respite. It also notes the difficulty of differentiating between real and perceived or imagined threats within such situations (Eagle and Kaminer), and how in those circumstances there are often two divergent and overlapping coping mechanisms: namely withdrawal, isolation, and disinterest in (public) living, and feelings of increased anger, aggression, and even hatred of others (Eagle and Kaminer).

In post-revolutionary Egypt, we see a destructive cycle of continuous traumatic stress. As the state authorities violently repressed dissent and foreclosed the possibilities of justice and political reform, activists not only became disillusioned with politics (and withdrew from the public sphere into social isolation) (Matthies-Boon; Matthies-Boon and Head), but anger and frustration also turned inward on society. That is, society became increasingly polarized, and social aggression spread like wildfire, thereby sadly further contributing to the cycle of continued traumatic stress and its feelings of disorientation.

Below, I will first explore the concept of CTS, its usefulness, and its contribution to trauma theory. I will then provide a brief overview of the traumatic stresses—and particularly feelings of injustice—activists experienced after the 2011 revolution. We will see how social polarization increased, and how it sets in motion a cycle of revenge and emotional outlet that in fact unfortunately further aggravated people's experiences of CTS.<sup>1</sup>

### **Continuous Traumatic Stress: What's in a Term?**

The concept CTS was developed by psychologists in apartheid South Africa and provides a phenomenological account of the unpredictable, relentless, and pervasive traumatic stresses during political repression and civil conflict (Straker and Moosa). CTS arose as a therapeutic concept to supplement existing understandings of trauma, such as PTSD (Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoval-Zuckerman; Stevens et al.). Yet, it argued against the individualist, intra-psychical tendencies within much of the mainstream trauma literature and placed emphasis on the social and political contexts—i.e. the traumatic *stressors*—that cause the existential experiences of hopelessness, alienation, disorientation, and disassociation (Straker). The four characteristics of CTS are an emphasis on "the

context of stressor conditions, the temporal location of the stressor conditions, the complexity of discriminating between real and perceived or imagined threat, and the absence of external protective systems" (Eagle and Kaminer 85). CTS hence not only highlights the manner in which individual, social, and political dimensions of trauma are intertwined during state violence and repression, but also that in such contexts the traumatic experience is not located in the past, but continues to be omnipresent.

Moreover, Eagle and Kaminer argue that therapeutic help in such contexts should not focus on *symptom reduction* but rather on realistic threat discrimination. In situations of pervasive and unpredictable political violence, it becomes difficult to distinguish real traumatic threats from imagined or perceived future ones (Straker 216). This may lead to experiences of existential anxiety and fear that might in other circumstances be diagnosed as paranoia (Eagle and Kaminer 92). Yet, CTS scholars insist that it is important to realize that in cases of CTS, "the denial or minimisation of danger might be more problematic than exaggeration, even if such defences allow for reduction of anxiety" (Eagler and Kaminer 93). Such denial or minimalization could directly compromise

the individual's safety. Furthermore, CTS also highlights how in contexts of political repression, one of the essential presumptions of trauma therapy—namely therapeutic safety—cannot be guaranteed (Straker). Importantly, they also point out that within contexts of CTS, the social contract between the state and the individual is entirely broken, which means there is no path of official recourse for addressing the traumatic violence inflicted (Eagle and Kaminer). This includes structural abuse by the security state and its cronies, such as physical violence, but also other forms of systematic destructions of life, such as life-threatening poverty in contexts of political corruption.

Hence, one of the main contributions of CTS for our purposes here is the recognition that the authorities charged with the protection of people are not only informally embroiled but are the main perpetrators of traumatic violence (i.e. the threat to life and bodily integrity). This aggravates the traumatic impact since violations are accompanied by “resignation, collusion, nonretribution and licence for further violation at a systemic level” (Eagle and Kaminer 94). Or rather, “systems designed to create a sense of accountability and to minimize harm to citizens are ineffectual and overstretched, at best, or corrupt and

collusive with informal systems of power, at worst” (Eagle and Kaminer 93). Hence, there is no or very little respite from the continuous threat of violence, and the culture of fear and suspicion spreads through society. Individuals may experience not only a sensation of hyper alertness but also a deep sense of vulnerability, a sense of impotence or loss of control over one's own life, and an altered sense of reality that makes it difficult to comprehend experiences.

CTS may thus instill a sense of nihilistic resignation in some, through disinvestment in living and a minimization of exposure through avoidance (Eagle and Kaminer 94). CTS can lead to withdrawal from public life as people become “withdrawn into a protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden” (Erikson 195). As I highlighted elsewhere (Matthies-Boon), due to a lack of positive revolutionary outcomes and socially embedded coping mechanisms, such a withdrawal had deeply depoliticizing impacts in Egypt. It resulted in (re)atomization: the deliberate isolation of each individual “from all his peers through the machinations of the regime” (Glasius 348). However, this article focuses on the other possible reaction to CTS, that of expres-

sions of anger and aggression. In CTS, individuals may “engage with the perversion of the good, and the breakdown of systems [...] by assuming control themselves in violent or threatening ways” (Eagle and Kaminer 94). As Eagle and Kaminer explain, the adaptation towards structural dehumanization in CTS might instill a sense of paranoid defensiveness but also the desire for hatred and revenge, as well as the clinging to prejudices (Eagle and Kaminer 96). Structural continuous traumatization, and particularly its lack of legal or other recourse, hence provides a fertile breeding ground for the spread of further aggression and revenge (Eagle and Kaminer 94). This happened in post-revolutionary Egypt, where anger and frustration—encouraged by the counter-revolutionary forces of the military and the Brotherhood leadership, and stirred on by the polarizing Egyptian media—turned inward on society and turned people against each other. Social polarization spread like a wildfire because of the situation of CTS wherein so many people dwelled. Yet, whilst social polarization is an expression of CTS, it also further contributes to it, thereby closing the counter-revolutionary circle of repression.

### Interlude: Theoretical Similarities and Divergences

Before continuing I will first explore how CTS differs from and contributes to trauma theory, notably complex or social/cultural trauma. Like other concepts, CTS holds that trauma breaks the symbolic order of the world (Kirshner, 1994), how people bring meaning into and make sense of the world. What happens in trauma is a shattering of one's dwelling in the world—one's sense of being-in and being-with others in the world (Bracken; Stolorow). The world and one's social surroundings appear alien as trust in the justice of the world breaks down – leaving one hanging in a void of nihilistic *groundlessness*. Trauma thus<sup>2</sup> exposes the brutality of life, and frequently invokes anxiety and meaninglessness that may be expressed through sensations of numbing, avoidance behaviour, hyper-arousal and alertness, and difficulty sleeping.

As stated earlier, the concept of CTS differs from that of PTSD due to its explicit focus on the structural *political stressors* of *continuing* traumatic stress rather than the individual's (intrapsychic) responses to a past event. It thus also differs from complex-PTSD in that CTS recognizes the recurrence (or sequential layering) of traumatic experiences and explicitly locates

these in its systemic *political* contexts, whereas complex trauma focuses more on the sequencing of interpersonal trauma (e.g. sexual and childhood abuse) (Eagle and Kaminer; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoal-Zuckerman). CTS also diverges from the notion of cultural trauma (Alexander; Sztompka), which explores how particular cultural groups mobilize around traumatic experiences—see for instance minority rights movements. Cultural trauma not only potentially reifies social or cultural groups; it also presumes that groups are able to mobilize in the public arena. Yet, in CTS it is precisely the public arena that is at best systematically compromised and at worst entirely destroyed. Sztompka's insight that social trauma entails a rupture or a breakdown in social relations that poses an obstacle to creative and collective becoming remains relevant for CTS (Sztompka). For, in such situations, creative social becoming and collective pursuit of justice are indeed severely hampered, and may in fact itself aggravate conditions of CTS.

### Social Polarization as Continuous Traumatic Stress in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

Mubarak's rule fits the classical image of CTS: unbridled and unaccountable security state violence and structural poverty

that left a large section of Egyptians struggling for life. The neoliberalization of the economy empowered the corrupt, untouchable business-cum-political elite, whilst forcing millions into poverty, since the so-called trickle-down effect never materialized (Joya; Mitchell; Soliman). As this interviewee remarked:

People are left to rot and survive in the informal economic sectors. All Mubarak did was to secure his own people, and play us out against one another. (Interview 38)

Mubarak used his brutal security state apparatus—which reigned with impunity—to repress any social unrest (Ismail). The use of informers was rife as people were either willingly or unwillingly co-opted into the regime's security apparatus.<sup>3</sup> And so, we see the classical expression of CTS, namely one of (justified) paranoid anxiety and fear that permeate everyday life:

There was a lot of fear, and you cannot express yourself because you fear everyone around you. You know that we have a very strong intelligence security and you are expecting all the time that you speak that this guy or this woman is going to inform about you – and stuff like this. (Interview 32)

Yet, even this fear and suspicion can never fully repress the potential for new creative social becoming. During the 2011 revolution, people collectively expressed their frustration, anger, and depression, and directed it towards Mubarak and the security state (Matthies-Boon and Head). Interviewees recalled how they saw a new Egypt: brave people were fighting injustices, and they believed that poverty and state abuse would be eradicated. It was a time of social utopia and extreme hopefulness. Suddenly previously atomized people would talk to each other:

You see the Salafist person sit next to the most liberal person. [...] You see the poor classes with the crème de la crème and you see them sitting together enjoying a civil conversation and it was beautiful and so simple. (Interview 10)

Though the revolution was of course saturated with counter-revolutionary violence from its inception, it was the connection between people—and its potential for creative social becoming—that posed the gravest threat to the established political order. It drew people out of their atomized shells and made them collectively target the state's institutions.

After Mubarak's resignation and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) takeover, we see a deliberate attempt to break this spirit of collectivity and maintain the established political and economic order (HRW). SCAF violently dispersed protests (shooting, maiming, and killing protestors), publically stigmatized protestors (as being prostitutes, spies, and thugs), and insisted it was time for security and stability (playing on people's already heightened fears for economic survival). During SCAF's rule, we also see the torture of street children, virginity trials, and organized mass sexual assaults against women during protests. Female respondents explained how these mass assaults made them extremely fearful of going to protests, and when they did they were hyper-alert. Another tactic used to instill fear into protestors was the systematic use of torture. Torture is an effective tool for political repression since it instills a complete existential helplessness and uncanny loneliness at the hands of the other, and thus severs our trust in our shared social world. As this young man remarked:

You cannot describe what you lived in these moments. You cannot put it in words. You live in different world than other people. Once you have experienced what I have experienced, you

have experienced the worst and you live with death inside of you every day. (Interview 37)

Like him, all respondents who were tortured relayed how it ruptured their social relations and left them with a deep sense of alienation (from both themselves and others).

These are just some of the examples of grave physical force that was used by the security forces in 2012 to suppress political protest. Overall, the violence experienced by all respondents between 2011 and 2014 has been grave: twenty-six commented on the pervasiveness of death in their lives, twelve interviewees were tear-gassed, eleven were directly injured, seven were detained (and beaten), four were tortured, four were sexually abused, and three experienced near-death. Furthermore, twelve had friends who died, twelve had friends who were injured, nine had friends who were detained, and seven had friends who were tortured. Also, seven had family members who were injured, three had family member who were detained, two had family members who died, two had family members who were tortured, and one had a family member who nearly died. The threat of violence

was hence everywhere, continuous and ever pervasive.

What aggravated the traumatic nature of this pervasive violence was its perceived injustice. One young man narrated how during Mubarak's years he had not hoped for any justice, but the revolution instilled a deep ethical commitment in him to fight for the rights of those who died. Yet, "when we discovered that none of the people who killed were punished, we discovered that the worst part of it is the injustice, the violence, yeah" (Interview 38). It was hence not only that people were killed but the lack of political accountability and change that angered people. As this person remarked:

My real sentiment is that I am infuriated by injustice. [...] basically I don't want people to be unaccountable. My idea is that if something happens, the person no matter who he is, gets called on it and has to answer for it. [...] That's the key thing for me. I am not infuriated—for example if something happens to someone, I'm not very compassionate in terms of 'poor thing'. I'm just infuriated for that person. That's my notion of... not being able to get away with something sinister. (Interview 11)

This feeling of sinister injustice became further imprinted on respondents as they saw politicians act in their self-interests rather than for the common good. One such example is the secret handover deal Muslim Brotherhood leadership struck with the military in September 2011. This deal guaranteed the secrecy of the military's budget whilst ensuring quick elections that the Brotherhood would no doubt win (which it did in December 2011 and January 2012). Subsequently, the Brotherhood leadership called for its members not to join the protestors during the violent Mohamed Mahmoud clashes in November 2011. This left a deep sense of betrayal and injustice:

I will never forget and tolerate what the Brotherhood did at that moment... I can tolerate the police as we expected this of them but never the Brotherhood... they did not only remain silent, they incited against us... the Brotherhood wasted a historical chance for this country to become a real democratic country when they had their deals with the SCAF. (Interview 7)

When the Mohamed Morsi then became President after elections in June 2012, the political situation did not improve. Protests were frequently and violently dispersed

by either the security forces or Brotherhood vigilante groups after security forces had disappeared from the street. Moreover, protestors were again castigated as characters with questionable morality: thugs, prostitutes, and spies that sought to tarnish and bring down the nation. Security forces killed, tortured, and detained protestors en masse with impunity. Notable here is the Port Said massacre in February 2012 that killed 74 members of the Al Ahly football club supporters (Doward). Furthermore, on the formal political stage the Brotherhood stigmatized and excluded the political opposition. Social violence was further encouraged by, for instance, driving buses of Brotherhood supporters to sites of oppositional protests. This included the Presidential Palace protest in December 2012, where protestors objected to Morsi's presidential decree in November 2012 that granted him immunity against any legal challenge and called for a constitutional referendum on an overtly Islamist constitutional draft. Whilst until this point political violence had been directed at the state authorities, now civilians physically fought each other:

I'm always used to conflict and violence from the police, from the army, but what I saw around the palace in December 2012 was traumatic, shocking,

so ehm... I mean I... It is very hard to see one of your friends, or those who used to be your friends... I won't say that they are shooting us or anything like that because very few of them were using weapons, but almost every one of them was throwing stones, being violent with us... so imagine that anyone of them could be your friend, your neighbor, your brother even. And what made me more shocked that I... I always used to be a pacifist, peaceful... After the Islamists were attacking us, I started attacking back, throwing stones back and I was shocked at my reaction afterwards. I went back home, wondering how I did that. (Interview 1)

These clashes tore Egyptian society apart. Friends, colleagues, and relatives now openly fought each other as relations became polarized along anti- and pro-Brotherhood lines. Interviewees remarked how during the spring of 2013 social tensions increased and heated verbal and physical fights became a prominent feature of the everyday on the street, inside homes, or on public transport. They also explained how due to frustration with continued injustice and lies, they became increasingly impatient and aggressive with their social surroundings: they became unable to hear the opinions of

those politically opposed to them. What particularly weighed on them was the lack of structural, revolutionary progress, and that protestors had been killed precisely for the people they were now arguing with. The overwhelming absence of justice left a bitter taste, which for many triggered the desire for revenge. One respondent remarked how the violence of revenge had become an emotional outlet:

Revenge makes you go after your... and you forget about the fact that you are not making enough money, the fact that you don't have a job, that the fact that your health care system is... is ... is blah. All of that you're forgetting about that and you're focusing on revenging yourself from some people. (Interview 2)

Others also explained how during such violence they felt a release, a relief even, which was however compromised after the event by the realization that they were embroiled in a cycle of violence that had become difficult to stop. They felt increasingly alienated not just from themselves ("how could I have become this person?") but also from their social surroundings as basic social trust plummeted. This modus of extreme polarized violence further

intensified when civilian security forces withdrew from the street:

At the social level [...] we have a lot of fights, and because the police is not like playing a role so people started actually to... eh... bypass the law and get their own right by their own hands, so... yeah. (Interview 6)

Social violence spread like a wildfire throughout Egyptian society, with civilians or vigilante gangs now even engaging in public practices of torture:

It was a bit of shock, because we were used to the policemen doing torture, the army doing torture... the politicians doing torture like military police also for intelligence or whatever but for normal people like here in the streets torturing people who they think are thugs or whatever, different from them, dehumanizing people by other people is really shocking. (Interview 22)

Social tensions reached their peak on June 30 when millions demonstrated on the streets after the successful *tamarrud* (rebellion) campaign,<sup>4</sup> which called for early elections. The military provided Morsi with an ultimatum and deposed him on 3 July 2013. Brotherhood supporters organized



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the Ennahda and Rabaa sit-ins, which were violently dispersed by the Egyptian security services in August 2013, resulting in at least 817 dead. This massacre left a deep ambiguous imprint on all activists. Those who were present described scenes of horror: one young woman narrated how, inside a nearby mosque, the smell of wading through a thick layer of blood mixed with ice water (as the bodies were covered with blocks of ice since it was over 40°C) and seeing all these dead, mutilated bodies made her feel sick, as she was trying to help relatives find their loved ones. And another person recalled how his father, cousin, and Quran teacher had been killed right in front of him. Even those who were not present—and in fact politically opposed to the sit-in—expressed their deep concern and ambiguity towards the event and its political aftermath. They were angry with the people—including loved ones—that attended the sit-in and expressed deep disappointment with their political choice. At the same time, however, they were concerned with how this massacre was legitimized through hate speech in the media, and how it intensified the bloodthirsty tendencies they saw emerging around them. They narrated how since Rabaa, death and violence had become even more of a pervasive feature in Egyptian public life. They were fearful of going outside, even walk-

ing in the streets, due to random physical fights, verbal scuffles, and even acid attacks. They narrated finding dead bodies on the side of the street (and no one caring), dead bodies being thrown out of driving vans (again without anyone caring), and people being beaten to death by passersby as hatred and dehumanization reached a boiling point. The threat of violence was pervasive and instilled in many the tragic existential realization that life is cheap in Egypt. As one person remarked:

It's not like these people are monsters—this is how it happens, this is how it happens. You're living in this deep shit and you feel like that threatened and you feel like, you know—lives are cheap in Egypt. And people are aware of that. It's a very brutal thought. Life here is superfluous and people here are aware of that. It is a really brutal thought. (Interview 19)

They also asserted that this omnipresence of intense violence solidified the Egyptian political landscape into two oppositional camps—the military and the Brotherhood—which left no alternative space. As one young man put it: “the two big elephants are fighting, and we are grass that is being trampled” (Interview 38). Or, in the almost prophetic words of this young person:

First the system of Mubarak will be more and more and more stronger, and the poor will be poorer more than now. The rich will be richer and more than now. There will not be any freedom, any justice—justice only if you are rich and in power, then you will have justice. If you are poor, no way. And no one will feel like a human, just everybody will just be looking for food and drink for his family. No one will care about anything. They will live a bad life more than now I think. No one will care about anyone. Step by step... this country is going to go down. (Interview 12)

### Conclusion

This article argued that CTS is a useful concept to make sense of post-revolutionary experiences in Egypt. It provides a lens through which to comprehend the feelings of disorientation that result out of the relentless traumatic stress that is part and parcel of a deeply violent and corrupt political order. In the case of Egypt, this violence also provided fertile breeding ground for revenge and social polarization that was directly incited by counter-revolutionary actors (the military and Muslim Brotherhood leadership). It thereby sadly further contributed to the continued reproduction of traumatic stress.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CTS is not a necessary reason for social polarization, but rather that where it is encouraged by powerful political actors (such as the military and the Brotherhood leadership) it provides a fertile breeding ground.

<sup>2</sup> We should note that trauma is one of the few concepts that includes its own etiology, as it refers to both the experience and the consequences of that experience.

<sup>3</sup> See Salwa Ismail's work.

<sup>4</sup> Tamarrud, a Nasserist and Old Regime (pro-military) alliance, successfully mobilized large sections of Egyptian society to demonstrate on 30 June.

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## Towards a New Master Narrative of Trauma: A Reading of Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin" and Mustafa Ibrahim's "I Have Seen Today"

Sahar Elmougy

The Egyptian revolutionaries, who in 2011 called for "bread, freedom and social justice," witnessed the shattering of their dream and suffered the pain of being abandoned by the masses and silenced by the post-revolution regime in Egypt. The aim of this article is to explore indications of the creation of a "cultural trauma" (Alexander, "Towards") for the Egyptian revolutionaries through a reading of Mustafa Ibrahim's poem "I Have Seen Today." In order to accomplish this task, this paper will first examine how the cultural trauma of African Americans (Eyerman, *Slavery*) responds to fresh trig-

gers. In Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin," the election of Donald Trump as US president is the trigger to the older trauma. Comparing Ibrahim's poem to Hayes's aims at underlining the tools used by the Egyptian revolutionaries to create "a new master narrative" of trauma (Alexander, "Towards" 12) that could reconstruct the collective identity and redirect the course of political action.

**Keywords:** Cultural trauma, Master narrative, Poetry, African American, 2011 Egyptian Revolution

### On Cultural Trauma

No matter how numerous the victims of a massive trauma are or what the nature of their suffering is, neither the occurrence of the event nor the realization of its harrowing nature would make it a cultural trauma. "Events are not inherently traumatic" (Alexander 8). History abounds with examples of extreme suffering that were not transformed into cultural traumas. One such case is that of the German people in WWII. They suffered the death, injury, and anguish of millions of soldiers, the death of civilians, the rape of women, and the destruction of cities and towns. However, such traumatic experiences did not automatically become a cultural trauma because it would have conflicted with the trauma construction in postwar Germany, which centered on the communal harm inflicted by the Germans on others (Heins and Langenohl 3).

What transfers a trauma from the sphere of individual suffering to the cultural level is a socially mediated process by means of which "collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain" (Alexander 10). The intentional creation of cultural traumas "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their

memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). If the collective actors succeed in representing the trauma as ineradicable, "the memory does in fact take on the characteristics of indelibility and unshakeability" (Smelser 42). To achieve such a goal, the gap between event and representation should be bridged so that "a compelling framework of cultural classification", i.e. the telling of a new story, is undertaken (Alexander 12). The success of this act of storytelling involves the persuasion of a wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized by a particular experience or event (12).

One example of an effective metamorphosis of individual trauma into a collective, cultural trauma is that of African Americans. The gap between event and representation, which Alexander calls "the trauma process" or the process of "meaning making," was bridged by the efforts of the "carrier groups," those who a) have the ideal and material interests, b) are situated in particular places in the social structure, and c) have the discursive talents for articulating their claims in the public sphere (11). In the African American case, "the creation of trauma as a new master narrative" (12) has been undertaken by black intellectuals, activists, and artists since the late

decades of the nineteenth century (Eyerman, "Cultural" 61). The memory of slavery and its representation in speech and artworks grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization (61). The formation of this identity had taken different routes, which involved "openness to new forms of identification and the attempt to leave others behind" (Eyerman, *Slavery* 4). For instance, after the failure of the Reconstruction Era to integrate freed slaves and their offspring into American society as full American citizens, the ideas of returning to Africa or immigrating to the northern states and Canada were debated and seriously considered before eventually being dropped. Meanwhile, W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the "double consciousness," of being both African and American (4), was adopted.

Alexander states that for a new master narrative to succeed, the process of collective representation must provide answers to four questions: a) What is the nature of pain? What happened to the particular group and to the wider collectivity to which it belongs? b) What is the nature of the victim? What group of persons was affected by the traumatizing pain? c) What is the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience? To what extent do the

members of the audience of the trauma representations experience an identification with the victimized group? d) Who is the perpetrator? (12-15)

From the slave narratives, dating back to the eighteenth century, to the writings of the twenty-first, African American "carrier groups" have been wrestling with these questions. The ongoing nature of the African American trauma process sheds light on the young experience of the Egyptian revolutionaries in terms of the time they need and the questions they have to address in order to create a new master narrative of their own cultural trauma.

It should be noted that the acts of the articulation of trauma, which have been taking place since 2011, have been produced under repressive conditions. The generations of Egyptian youth that led the 25th-January demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak's regime and were hailed for their creativity and courage by both Egyptian authorities and international voices are now "languishing behind bars" (Amnesty 2). The 2015 report by Amnesty International states that "today mass protests have given way to mass arrests, as 2011's 'Generation Protest' has become 2015's 'Generation Jail'" (2). The report

documents and condemns the Egyptian authorities' crackdown on political opposition and the sweeping arrests of youth from across the country's political spectrum (2). It is thus, in a sense, a battle of contested memories between the Egyptian regime and the revolutionaries. If the regime wins, it will ensure that the young generation will not challenge it in the future. But if the revolutionaries manage to transform their individual suffering into a cultural trauma, their new master narrative can well include and necessitate trials of perpetrators, demands for reparations, and control over the future.

To examine how Mustafa Ibrahim's poem "I Have Seen Today" lays the foundations for a cultural trauma, this paper starts with a reading of Terrance Hayes's "American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin." Standing upon the solid grounds of the African American cultural trauma, how does the poem respond to the presidency of Donald Trump?

### Sustaining a Master Narrative

Trump's presidency has stirred up a storm of worry, anger, shock as well as calls for resistance in American artistic and intellectual circles. Around the time of his inauguration, "[p]rotesting artists [...] proposed everything from boycotts to museum clo-

sures to public statements" (Wilkinson). Literary readings were held. Newspapers' culture pages and literary websites published artists' reflections on the meaning of resistance at that particular time (Wilkinson). *The Huffington Post* posed the question of "What it Means to be an Artist in the Time of Trump." It called upon artists "as activists, optimists, truth-tellers and revolutionaries, to resist the normalization of hate and prejudice [and] to stand up for the communities that have been marginalized" (Priscilla and Brooks). The responses of the artists interviewed, of many ethnicities and genders, pooled down in one big river, namely: resisting white supremacy, alerting the community to the experience of marginalization, countering the darkness that rose to the surface with Trump, and resisting xenophobia, sexism, and racism.

African Americans are among the many groups threatened by Trump's aggressive and racist policies and rhetoric. However, the uniqueness of this group is derived from a long history of oppression that resulted in the formation of a distinctive collective identity. Eyerman stresses the importance of noting that "the notion of 'African American' is not itself a natural category, but rather a historically formed collective identity that first of all required

articulation then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate" ("Cultural" 76). Written in response to Trump's presidency (Sealey), "American Sonnets" represents this collective identity and contributes to the articulation of the experience of African Americans in the here and now. Since oppression is still a reality, the poem addresses the same questions for which the trauma process of African Americans had to provide answers since its inception, namely: the nature of pain, the nature of the victim, the relationship of the victim to a wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility (Alexander 13-15).

Sonnet One situates the reader vis-à-vis the nature of pain and the identity of the victim. It establishes the vulnerability of the self in long, Whitmanesque lines (run-on lines characterized by catalogues in the tradition of Walt Whitman), which list existential threats such as cancer, disease, and "the grim reaper herself" side by side with dangers specific to the African American condition: bullets, bullwhips (reminiscent of the time of slavery), and Archie Bunker, the *All In The Family* 1970s TV character who exercised his bigotry against the African Americans, amongst others. All of this and more "kill me," the poetic persona declares (Hayes). Sonnet Two registers the

persona's smooth movement from the collective to the personal to the collective once again. The vulnerable collective self reveals another aspect, a liveliness shown in "Our uproarious breathing and ruckus. Our eruptions/our disregard for dust" (Hayes). The image of dust eventually leads to the "last hoorah" of the persona's sister and the horror of beholding her head on the pillow. The refrain "For a long time the numbers were balanced. The number alive equal to the number in graves" underlines the pain deeply rooted in the collective memory. It foregrounds the "we," which is essential to the act of representation, since it is this collectivity that faces danger and endures suffering (Alexander and Breese xiii).

Cataloguing the names of assassins invokes the collective memory, which orients and unifies the group "through time and over space" (Eyerman, "The Past" 161):

I pour a pinch of serious poison for you  
James  
Earl Ray Dylann Roof I pour a punch of  
piss for you  
George Zimmerman John Wilkes  
Booth Robert  
Chambliss Thomas Edwin Blanton Jr  
Bobby Frank  
Cherry Herman Frank Cash Jim Crow

your name  
Is a gate opening upon another gate  
[...] (Hayes)

The absence of punctuation marks denies the perpetrators individuality. They are all one: those who assassinated King and Lincoln, the white terrorists who bombed the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in 1963, and the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation in the southern states after the Reconstruction Era. It also collapses the temporal element. These scars of old wounds belong to the present because they have become part of the live identity of a people. Furthermore, the trauma is relived with each new trigger.

The affect of anger is foregrounded in the above lines. The successive plosive alliterations of the b's and p's load the persona's language with an anger embedded in the collective memory. Smelser states that "experiencing the language of negative affect is a necessary condition for believing that a cultural trauma exists or is threatening" (41). Such affect creates connections between the African American trauma and the wider audience capable of empathy with a particular group's ordeals. The anger builds up towards the following lines:

Love trumps power or blood to trump  
power  
Beauty trumps power or blood to  
trump power  
Justice trumps power or blood to  
trump power (Hayes)

The play on the word "trump" shifts from an affirmation of noble values to a threat of blood beating power off. Pain breeds anger and the anger here is transformed into challenge, as the persona reminds those in power that it is either that love, beauty, and justice win or else blood will "trump power." In speaking of the higher values, the poem establishes a relation to the wider audience. Alexander states that at the beginning of a trauma process, most audience members see little or no relation between them and the victimized group. "Only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma" (14). Far from it being "at the beginning," the African American master narrative still needs to address the wider audience.

The tone of challenge in Sonnet Four is directed against the perpetrator, the assassin of the earth of "my nigga eyes," the deep well of "my nigga throat," the

tender balls of “my nigga testicles,” “my tongue” (Hayes). The anonymous addressee is not a person. It is the white culture that the persona challenges: “Still I speak for the dead. You cannot assassinate my ghosts” (Hayes). Here, Hayes builds on an already existing figuration of trauma in the ghost. In his analysis of Toni Morrison’s *BeLoved* as a text which helped establish some of the basic narrative conventions of trauma fiction, Luckhurst pinpoints the centrality of the ghost. It “embodied the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory, the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present” (93). Ghosts carry the history of untold violence, the stories of the “sixty million and more” to whom *BeLoved* is dedicated. Hayes’s ghosts come from the same collective narrative and share the same twofold function: tracing the stories of the unnamed, and speaking for an entire community (94).

Drawing from the reservoir of collective memory, foregrounding the “we” who face the danger, feel the anger, and dare the perpetrator, “American Sonnets” still addresses the fundamental questions African Americans have been engaging with since the end of the Reconstruction Era in 1877. Even successful master narratives of cultural trauma need constant bol-

stering, especially when justice is not actualized.

### Inscribing a New Narrative

Examining the case of the Egyptian revolutionaries through the lens of the African American trauma process yields some basic insights. First, it reveals the lack of temporal distance. Seven years is too short a time to frame a narrative. The African American master narrative went through many different phases, each posing its perils as well as the creative means to overcome them. In this light, the oppressive conditions under which Egypt’s revolutionaries have been operating since 2011 represent only one phase in a longer journey towards justice. Furthermore, a reading of the cultural trauma of African Americans underlines the need for the accumulation of a literature capable of convincing the wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized. To this end, a massive aesthetic body has been produced since 2011. The act of representation is evident in poetry and fictional works, theater and storytelling performances, and movies and visual documentation of the state’s atrocities. There is a revolutionary narrative awaiting a change of conditions in order to gain prominence in the public sphere. Mustafa Ibrahim’s “I Have Seen Today” intimately belongs to

this creative output. The poem, published in Arabic in a poetry collection entitled *The Manifesto*, excerpts of which are translated in this paper, was written by someone who was an active participant in the 2011 uprising. He states how, like his fellow revolutionaries, he was chased and tear-gassed by the state police and how he witnessed the killing of protestors, some of whom he only got to know after their murder, as in the case of Mohamed Mostafa, whose death is depicted in “I Have Seen Today” (Ibrahim).

When juxtaposed to Hayes’s “American Sonnets,” “I Have Seen Today” reveals a striking similarity in the way it grapples with the questions for which a new master narrative of trauma needs to provide answers. The poem takes off from a similar point to Hayes’s text. In the quartet epilogue, Ibrahim identifies the victim:

If you say we are small bunch, we’ll tell  
you we’ll even get smaller  
We are sifting dirt in order to offer it up  
to you  
People leave us in the sun to stay in the  
shade  
And al-Hosseini, our master, has never  
cared for number. (Ibrahim 120)



The victim is the smaller group that held its ground and persisted when abandoned by the many. As in the case of "American Sonnets," the "we" that faces danger and endures suffering is constructed (Alexander and Breese xiii). This "we" is a prerequisite to the framing of a narrative since "[s]uffering collectivities... do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being" (xii). In a poem entitled "The Prophets are Many," Ibrahim describes this collectivity as "a generation who parents itself in a fake time/ their clothes smell of vinegar and yeast/ not good at dictation, they are writing the *sira* (history of prophethood)" (55). When asked what he meant by "a generation who parents itself," Ibrahim talked about his generation that grew up in the cultural void of the Mubarak era and neither received guidance nor were provided with good enough role models by their elders. In her analysis of the radical change effected by younger generations in the definition of the intellectual in post-revolutionary Egypt, Abulelnaga states that they "did not emerge from the womb of the cultural or political institution" (70). Discarding the discourse of the older intellectuals, many of whom have been tamed by the cultural institutions, the new intellectuals expressed their opinions in both art and activism and

offered "alternative choices and new approaches" (71).

Unlike Hayes, who builds on an existing cultural trauma, Ibrahim is aware of the lack of a collective memory specifically for the revolutionaries to use as a frame of reference. Hence, he chooses to connect to a culturally significant narrative of revolt against tyrannical political figures, martyrdom, infanticide, and the rise of good in the face of evil. Ibrahim resorts to a trauma etched on the collective Arabo-Islamic memory, that of the betrayal and martyrdom of al-Hossein (Prophet Muhammad's grandson), in order to resonate with the wider audience the poem intends to address.

The murdered young revolutionary in 2011 is likened to al-Hossein, who was killed while thirsty in the desert of Iraq in 680 CE. Encouraged by a large crowd of supporters to go to Kufa (Iraq) to oust Yazid bin Mu'awiya, the corrupt Umayyad ruler (r. 680-683 A.D.), and claim his rightful place as the Muslim caliph, al-Hossein was betrayed by the very people who pledged allegiance to him. His murder at the hands of Yazid has established the Battle of Karbala as a definitive historical trauma in Shiism (Dabashi). Eventually, it broke free from the religious frame to

become a cultural narrative of revolution (75).

Loss and defeat bind the stories of al-Hossein and Egypt's revolutionaries. However, in the collective memory, the tragedy of Karbala was transformed into triumph. Defeated and killed, al-Hossein was resurrected into an eternal rebel whose story captures the paradox of moral victory and political failure (Dabashi 83). This transformation of tragedy into triumph, which is one of the common processes of cultural traumas, is a strategy for overcoming loss (Eyerma, "The Past" 161). This is why the allegory of al-Hossein not only provides a cultural link between the present moment and the collective memory, but also yields a way for making sense out of the revolutionaries' suffering.

The poem starts off with the scene of the historical trauma, the killing of al-Hossein. It then oscillates between the allegory and the present moment. The cinematic techniques of montage, zoom in, and fading out eventually collapse the temporal element, converging the two stories in one. As the poem progresses, the past becomes the present not only through the employment of motifs from the allegory—the chase, the abandonment, and the thirst—but also because during the escape

of the revolutionaries we no longer see Cairo. It is Kufa that is the setting of the traumatic scene. It is Yazid who stands on the balcony surrounded by his soldiers. Pointing “his sword” towards the revolutionaries (Ibrahim 123), they disperse:

I don't know who of us was crucified,  
who was beaten,  
Who hid in the minaret, who was thrown from above it  
Or even who got lost and was killed by thirst.  
All streets a trap, all houses a trap.  
Kufa is asleep even before night time.  
She put her fingers in her ears and left us outside her door  
To die. (123)

While anachrony (disruption of narrative time) is not rare or modern, Luckhurst states how a late body of visual and written stories involving trauma has played around with narrative time (80). Anachrony in the poem allows a re-enactment of the cycle of revolt; hence, when the time, place, and name of the murdered revolutionary are specified, the present is lodged in the older narrative:

The sound of protest chanting,  
interrupted by the sirens of ambulance.  
[...]

the camera zooms in on the khaki clothes,  
two rows of army soldiers, lined horizontally, suddenly appear,  
The tiles of the pavement are taken out, broken,  
The storyteller begins in a shaken voice:  
I hold Mohamed Mostafa on the ground.  
I cry as I turn him from his shoulder to his back,  
we quickly carry him, I hold him from his armpits,  
my fingers feeling his heart  
with every beat fading out,  
his blood not dripping,  
it was pouring,  
the doctors later said  
What was cut is an important artery. (Ibrahim 134-135)

Since dealing with the nature of pain is essential for the trauma process, “American Sonnets” reiterates the refrain, which reminds the wider audience that “The number alive [are] equal to the number in graves.” Ibrahim, on the other hand, traces the nature of pain through reliance on the senses: the sounds of chanting and the sirens, feeling the heartbeats dying down, and the color of blood. The sense of urgency and horror, embodied in the fast

linguistic pace, is ironically juxtaposed with what happens hours after the killing:

The Camera shows a young man soaking his hands in blood,  
In tears, his friend passes by,  
He is saying something, repeating it, as if memorizing:  
Bid your friends in the night battle goodbye  
and in the morning show their blood to the passersby,  
to the buses carrying people to their work. (137)

Similar to how “American Sonnets” names the perpetrator as some entity bigger than Trump (white culture), the perpetrator in 2011 is not only the tyrannical political leader. Just like how the Shiite community was implicated in al-Hosseini's killing by abandoning him, the masses who rose against Mubarak and then walked out on the revolutionaries are implicated as well. Angry at them, the persona warns al-Hosseini to “go back/ Those for whom you want to struggle and sacrifice/ Are contented slaves/ And in the last scene you will die alone” (Ibrahim 133). The Language of negative affect, a necessary condition for the audience to believe that a cultural trauma exists (Smelser 41), is evident in Ibrahim's poem as it was in Hayes's. But

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while "American Sonnets" addresses the perpetrator with the angry voice of the group, the primary concern of Ibrahim is to persuade an audience who does not realize yet that the revolutionaries' trauma could be theirs as well.

The act of witnessing, present in the title, in the way the poem is narrated as a testimony of what happened, is hammered upon in the final lines of the poem. In a twofold move, the repetition of "I have seen today" is a preservation of the revolutionaries' memory and an invocation of the rebellion of al-Hossein. The challenge is embedded in the promise that as long as tyranny exists, so will revolt. This is the Karbala legacy:

I have seen today the picture at a distance  
 I have said today al-Hossein is to be killed many times  
 I have seen today as in a revolutionary dream:  
 soldiers crowded over al-Hossein's corpse  
 beating him with sticks every time he tries to rise up.  
 [...]  
 I have seen today blood on army belts  
 I have known today that al-Hossein is us

Every time he gets killed, he lives. (Ibrahim 138)

To conclude, since cultural traumas involve an intentional act of creation, master narratives in the making could benefit from knowledge of the trauma process. Reading Mustafa Ibrahim's poem through the lens of the African American cultural trauma offers insights into the triumphs of Egyptian revolutionaries as well as the challenges awaiting them in the creation of their own cultural trauma. By laying claim to a wound and a defeat which were not the revolutionaries' alone and by etching their suffering onto the Egyptian collective memory, "I Have Seen Today" attempts to reconstruct the collective identity. It is through writing the past that the collectivity seeking "bread, freedom and social justice" could re-direct the course of political action. The challenge however, is that the creation of a cultural trauma is a long and arduous endeavor of many individuals who manage to imagine a collectivity into being and frame a story that persuades the wider audience that they, too, have been traumatized—an immense feat indeed.

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## Therapeutic History and the Enduring Memories of Violence in Algeria and Morocco

Idriss Jebari

This article examines the experience of transitional justice and its relation to collective memory of authoritarian repression in Morocco (1965-1992) and the Civil War in Algeria (1991-2002). It confronts and compares to the two states' therapeutic historical discourse produced to heal the national community after these periods of violence and its impact on the countries' historians, journalists, filmmakers, and novelists from 2004 to 2017. The article argues that Algeria and Morocco's rigorous definition of the "victim" during these two episodes (the imprisoned and disappeared) excluded the way communities suffered during this period and, as

a result, has delayed healing, forgiveness, and national reconciliation. This article highlights the limits of two overpoliticized processes of transitional justice in the Maghreb and their limited conception of what it meant to "come to terms with the past." However, it finds optimism in the ongoing efforts by new historiography and cultural actors to confront the lasting traumatic aftermaths outside of official definitions and on their own terms.

**Keywords:** Maghreb, Collective Memory, Therapeutic History, Transitional justice, Authoritarianism

Obstacles to political democratization in Algeria and Morocco, when considered in longer time frames, should include the countries' violent pasts and their continued legacies. Two significant episodes of political violence have caused a breakdown of a national consensus in contemporary history: in Morocco, the "Years of Lead" (*sanawāt al-raṣaṣ*) from 1965 to the 1990s, and in Algeria, the Civil War, also known as the "dark decade", from 1991 to 2002. During these two periods, the state carried out systematic and violent repression against opposition forces—military putschists and leftists in Morocco, and Islamists in Algeria. The respective security apparatuses "disappeared" opponents and systematically tortured or unlawfully detained those accused or suspected of unlawful acts. Ordinary Algerians and Moroccans lived through these periods under fear and silence.

Both countries have since addressed these violent episodes through processes of transitional justice. From 2004 to 2005, Morocco's Truth and Justice Commission (*Instance Équité et Réconciliation*, henceforth IER) was tasked with determining if and how the state was responsible for violent acts from 1955 to 1999, and with proposing adequate remedies. In 2005, Algerians voted overwhelmingly in favor

of a referendum on a “Civilian Concord,” which offered amnesty for Islamist insurgents in exchange for their peaceful surrender. These experiences were launched during two delicate political transitions of power and helped craft a consensus among the political elite and the Army by restoring the state’s legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

The political elite produced a new historical narrative of these periods to heal the population’s wounds by replacing a narrative of repressed memories, silence, and resentment with one of forgiveness and “moving on.” They took inspiration from other experiences in the Global South, including the South African experience, by creating a national theatrical stage to formally recognize the past, offer a symbolic commemoration of victimhood, and allow the community to overcome their pain (Lanegran 116, 119). While it is conventional to assess their democratizing impact, for which the verdict is pessimistic (Vairel 230; Joffé 223, 225), this article considers social and cultural responses to this historical discourse and its impact on trauma and national reconciliation.

The production of a “therapeutic history” after violence represents an essential means to rebuild a divided community. For Jill Salberg, “the human need for a

narrative that makes sense” is put under strain after trauma because trauma complicates “the easy flow from experience, to thought then to word” (Salberg and Grand 246), forcing individuals to fragment or deny their memories. Therapeutic history offers a remedy after past perpetrators have accepted responsibility for past crimes, by offering public apologies and restitutions, and telling the history of past violence (Hamber and Wilson 144-45; Barkan 323; Tileaga 350; Moon 72). In addition, it refers to the centrality of historical myths for nation-building (Smith 6). Within Middle East studies, increasing attention is devoted to the politics of memory between the state and civil society, academia, journalism, and the cultural sphere. In Turkey, Duygu Gül Kaya addresses the politics of memory around the 1915 Armenian Genocide and how Armenians, Alevis, and Kurds have sought a rewriting of the Kemalist-driven narrative of Turkish history and the AKP government’s resistance (Gül Kaya 682).

With a similar focus on the politics of memory in the aftermath of transitional justice experiences in the Maghreb, I explore how the states’ recognition of past violence has impacted collective traumas among Algerians and Moroccans. This article argues that the two “therapeutic

histories” centered on a specific conception of victimhood that failed to grasp how collective communities have suffered during those two periods. The authorities claimed that the symbolic process of transitional justice and official recognition were enough to put an end to claims of collective trauma. This has been politically convenient but extremely limited. A small category of victims have been vindicated and rehabilitated, namely the Algerian Islamist fighters, and Moroccan leftists and military putschists. Meanwhile, other stories of suffering during this period have been relegated, while these members continue to struggle to remember, share their stories, and grieve publicly.

In the past years, several historical and cultural productions have tackled the lasting manifestations of collective trauma. They are distinctive for their efforts to make sense of the past’s impact on the present, rather than merely depicting life and violence during these two periods. Their authors hope to portray collective stories and experiences that could ultimately enrich the national narrative. Despite this initial pessimistic assessment regarding therapeutic history’s limited ability to confront collective trauma, these cultural productions offer a way to address its limits by enriching the storytelling and reaching

out to broader audiences. Additionally, they can help transform Algerian and Moroccan political cultures by promoting notions of forgiveness, pluralism, and state accountability.

This article will read and discuss a sample of influential and representative works of memory in relation to the state-led therapeutic historical discourse. I will assess the historiographical outcomes of the creation of archives in Morocco following the IER recommendations, with Leila Kilani's 2008 documentary *Nos Lieux Interdits* (engl. Our Forbidden Places) and Fatna El Bouih's prison testimony as counterpoints. Finally, I will review the amnesty's negative impact on Algerian historiography before bringing in new forms of writing and rapport to memory, namely Adlene Meddi's novel 1994. In both cases, these works will be read with regard to their social impact from individuals to the broader national community.

### **Therapeutic History, Collective Trauma and the Nation**

To assess Algeria's Civilian Concord and Morocco's Truth Commission, especially their historical narrative's ability to replace trauma and amnesia with a healthier relationship to the past, we dive at heart of the symbolic "pact" between state and popu-

lations, struck during the anti-colonial struggle against France.<sup>2</sup> The states' violence against their populations broke this bond, and the therapeutic historical discourse was meant to mend this relationship, mostly by reiterating its terms and dismissing the episode of violence as an abnormal event. I argue that neither gave sufficient space to the cathartic expression of painful remembrance nor did they encourage new histories based on collective experiences of the violence.

The Moroccan transitional justice was launched alongside regime political openings after three decades of Hassan II's rule, which had been characterized by repressive state policies and economic inequality. The historically persecuted socialist party was welcomed back into the political system, and the King launched a range of liberalizing measures that included a commitment to human rights protection and the "cleaning-up" of the country's nepotistic political system (Sweet 22-5). Hassan II also ordered the release of political prisoners and publicly acknowledged the existence of secret prisons such as Tazmamart, which he had persistently denied before, before affirming it was a "page that has been turned" (Miller 202-4).

These measures, merely a reconfiguration of power, grew in scope when Hassan II passed away in 1999. His son Muhammad VI came to power to continue this dynamic. Moroccan civil society pressured the state to launch a transitional justice based on truth-seeking about the Years of Lead. In 1999, Moroccan human rights activists and former political prisoners established the *Forum Vérité et Justice* (engl. Forum for Truth and Justice, henceforth FVJ), which organized sit-ins in strategic locations (Vairel 231-2). The new king's advisors began working with the FVJ leadership, including former political prisoner Driss Benzekri, to establish the IER in 2003.

The IER's work helped the monarchy refurbish its image as a reformist and benevolent actor, especially after its prior legacy of violence. The IER carried out its truth-seeking task earnestly: Benzekri's team traveled across the country interviewing Moroccans who had submitted claims and amassed an important collection of oral testimonies. Unfortunately, it suffered from pre-fixed limits. Only two heavily edited public sessions of testimonies were eventually aired on television, and no state actors were named or accused. While the final report recognized the state's systematic political use of violent methods (IER Report), the authorities were keen to close



this affair quickly, and the question of criminal responsibility and legal redress was not pursued. Instead, the IER recommended reparations and the investigation of disappeared Moroccans, and it called for the creation a national archive compiling administrative documentation and former victims testimonies (around 16,000 files) (Mohsen-Finan 332).

To understand its historiographical impact, we must consider how the Moroccan transitional justice process was limited by clear political considerations. It was designed for “restructuring the exercise of state power in Morocco” and promoting a new type of elite. The monarchy’s involvement in human rights violations and repair also limited its effectiveness (Vairel 230). In fact, the IER’s work was actively advertised as evidence of the monarchy’s reformed and reformist qualities (Mohsen-Finan 327). Unsurprisingly, the country’s post-IER official historiography continues to portray it as the country’s central actor and the main agent of change, while occulting the popular experiences of violence during the Years of Lead. In 2011, the esteemed historian Mohamed Kably edited *Histoire du Maroc: Réactualisation et Synthèse* (engl. History of Morocco: Update and Synthesis). Rather than usher in a new historiographical content and a social his-

torical focus integrating oral testimonies, the volume’s chapter on the post-independence period merely discussed the struggle between the monarchy and the nationalist movement, with the addition of the political repression against the left, the army, and leftist movements (Kably 664-9). Victims outside of these groups are totally ignored, showing the process’s glaring limitations and limited outcome.

Algeria’s nationalist historical myth was founded on the union between its population and leadership during the anti-colonial struggle, and it was severely undermined by the Civil War massacres. Initially, the Algerian leadership pursued national forgiveness primarily to end the fighting. Abdelaziz Bouteflika campaigned during the 1999 presidential elections on a platform of amnesty for insurgents who laid down their weapons, building on secret contacts with their leaders (Joffé 215-6; Ruedy 258-70). To justify pardoning Algerians guilty of civilian massacres, Bouteflika’s carefully crafted narrative affirmed that the principle of *rahma* (engl. clemency, mercy) was a key component of Algerian culture and society (Joffé 215; Martinez 245-50). He toured the country extensively and told his audience that the Algerian nation was forgiving and willing to consent to sacrifices for the higher goal.

Bouteflika spoke passionately and was embraced as the savior figure that would heal the nation, justifying his actions repeatedly “*bi- ’ismi l-cha’b*” (In the people’s name) (Bouteflika “Projet de Charte pour la Paix et la Réconciliation Nationale”). However, the 1999 Law only targeted individuals who had “stop[ped] these criminal activities” and wished to “be reintegrated in society” (art.1) but had not committed heinous crimes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the state drew a path toward national forgiveness by choosing peace and oblivion over accountability.

In the second stage, after Bouteflika’s 2005 re-election, Algerians sanctioned a referendum on the Charter for National Reconciliation that enshrined the principles of amnesty and banned religious political parties. The Charter also dealt with the state’s responsibility for violence and continued to sideline civilian suffering from its narrative. The Charter’s last provision celebrated the security forces efforts to “safeguard the nation” and their “patriotism” and banned any investigation or litigation against them for “the actions they carried out to protect people and goods, to safeguard the Nation and the institutions of the Algerian Republic,” equating it with efforts to “dishonor those serving agents or tarnish Algeria’s image” (Art.

44-6). In return, the state granted financial reparations for victims of state repression, including to families of the disappeared, which exonerated the state from further responsibility (Art. 37-8).

Algeria was accused of “burying secrets under the rug” by human rights organizations for abandoning accountability and transparency (Mundy 152; HRW; Bustos 119-21). Major questions remained unanswered over the army’s role during village massacres in 1996-97, questions fueled by military whistleblowers encapsulated in the slogan “Qui-Tue?” (engl. Who Kills?). The Charter also silenced a narrative of national suffering and expected families to reiterate their trust toward the state and move on.

Despite these limitations, the 2005 amnesty helped install peace, reintegrate Islamist fighters, and reduce the army’s omnipotence. In both countries, therapeutic history was a means to restore national unity rather than to directly address responsibility over past violence. The politics of memory left Algerians and Moroccans unable to express their own painful memories after 2005 and without enough common basis for communities to move on. The next section explores the aftermath of Morocco’s truth commission

and Algeria’s civilian concord from the public’s perspective, and their responses to these limitations.

### **Morocco: The Incomplete Archive**

The IER amassed a rich archive of testimonies and documentation and created a hopeful expectation for a constructive relationship to the past. Leila Kilani’s 2008 documentary *Nos Lieux Interdits* was produced in collaboration with the IER and represents a fascinating resource that reflects on the work of memory, but it also depicts the “failure” of the archival project (Pierre-Bouthier 12). Subsequent events have confirmed Kilani’s early pessimism. The documentary contains several crucial moments for the overall process and fleshes out the range of postures four Moroccan families have adopted in reaction to the disappearance or loss of a family member. From their intimate living rooms, they spoke openly. Several former prisoners in the documentary adamantly defend the need to achieve symbolic closure and recognition of their ordeal, which is consistent with the principles of the Moroccan prison literature as a “narrative of resistance” (Slyomovics 85; El Guabli 170; Moukhli 354-55). Overall, however, the majority express the pervasiveness of silence, resignation, and fear. Often times, relatives are even opposed to learning

about the missing person’s fate and reopening old wounds.

The documentary shifts our perspective by capturing the process by which painful memories are exhumed and, in turn, how “ordinary Moroccans” have carried with them this heavy past. One case shows a young woman engaging her grandmother, Roqia, about the disappearance of her grandfather, Said, a trade union activist, around the May 1st protests, probably in 1972 or 1973. Instead of answers, all they have is an old picture of the group of activists. The intergenerational conversation at first goes nowhere, and the younger woman is frustrated by Roqia’s incomplete and reluctant answers. Badgered by the granddaughter’s desire for precise details (dates, names, places), Roqia retreats behind excuses of ignorance, probably rehearsed over the years as a defense mechanism: “I am uneducated,” “I do not know these things,” and “your grandfather wouldn’t tell me.” Later in the documentary, Roqia and her daughter eventually meet an IER investigator who commits to helping them find the truth about Said. Another family member, talking to Said’s old friends, learned that he was part of a secret leftist cell. When asked to confirm this, Roqia acts as if she did not hear. The question is repeated a few times until she

concedes: "I knew... but what could I say? They knew each other and why they were getting arrested, exiled and killed, it was because of that." The main characters finally reconcile themselves with the truth and a consistent narrative.

The generational element drives the excavation of memory by involving family members with their own search for truth, around them and with the IER institutions. The grandmother is made to reflect beyond the defensive excuses she erected and the impact of her husband's disappearance (loss of income, fear of retribution, etc.). The new story of this period is more accurate, including the grandfather's involvement in an underground leftist cell, which explains his disappearance.<sup>4</sup> The work of recollection is slow and uncertain, but it has set a useful dynamic in motion. Additionally, these testimonies look beyond the usual victim, Said, and shed light on Roqia, traditionally neglected by the "prison literature" genre.

A decade later, the country's historiography has failed to live up to its initial promise. Instead of a rich, plural, and socially-inclusive account of the Years of Lead, as Kably's synthesis volume showed, academic historians have failed to produce a new research agenda (despite the establishment of a Center for "Present Time" in Rabat's Muhammad V University).

The most encouraging historiographical developments since the IER have come from outside academic circles, according to Sonja Hegasy. A younger generation of emboldened journalists and historians building on the new archival "apparatus" have been writing in an intermediary genre (Hegasy 87). This includes the historical magazine *Zamane*, established in late 2010 in French and 2013 in Arabic, which has frequently published front-page articles on various aspects of the Years of Lead: on Hassan II, former Interior Minister Driss Basri, the military putsches, and the Moroccan opposition. For Hegasy, this publication represents a "transformative memory" made possible by the IER archives and broader institutional machinery (Hegasy 102). However, there are reasons to caution against her optimism. *Zamane's* creation owed more to the Moroccan public's pent-up curiosity about this taboo past rather than a sustained historiographical interest, as its declining sales and quality of content attest.

Another range of criticism has been addressed by the former leftist militant and prisoner Fatna El Bouih and the anthropologist Susan Slyomovics regarding the operability of the Moroccan archives. Slyomovics dampened this enthusiasm over the "promises of a human

rights archive" by following the journey of former political prisoner Fatna El Bouih (1977-82), who testified to the IER. Later, she asked to look at her file, but faced considerable administrative hurdles to access the archive, in which one must already know about content's existence, rather than discovering new content through archival research (by definition, the purpose of an archive) (Slyomovics 27-34). El Bouih was disappointed to find her file did not contain any description of her activities as a young militant (the cause of her arrest) (Barrada Interview with Fatna El Bouih). In order to complete the archive's flawed file, she wrote her own account in *Une femme nommée Rachid* (engl. A Woman Called Rachid).

El Bouih's trajectory shows how the therapeutic journey yielded the greatest results when she went beyond the IER archives. She has since emerged as an important public actor. In a recent interview on 2M's influential show *Mais Encore*, she went over her trajectory from her arrest, prison life, and reintegration. El Bouih was arrested in 1978 as a 20-year-old for her involvement with the leftist group 23 Mars and spent 5 years in the infamous Moulay Derb Cherif prison in Casablanca. She explained how only a few women were imprisoned at the time which caused dis-

comfort for the male prison guards, who referred to her as “Rachid 35” rather than Fatna. She reminisces about the eight strong women who never divulged any information, even if it meant staying in prison, as opposed to their male counterparts. Her narrative of female resilience and subversion of the male-dominated repressive apparatus is absent from the more established Moroccan prison literature, which often depicts personal obliteration under torture.

El Bouih is a success story of reintegration and has established several civil society initiatives to help other former women prisoners in their transition. In the absence of more inclusive mechanisms or historiographies, unconventional prisoners are left out of the official narrative, the IER’s provisions, or the state’s institutional machinery. El Bouih’s case shows that the process of transforming archives into a new narrative remains dependent on carriers of memory themselves. A decade after its initial promise, the Commission’s results have been limited. The process is hampered by a rigid definition of past victims (military putschists and leftist militants) who spent years in jails and recovered their human existence thanks to the IER process (and the monarchy’s enlightened intervention), excluding from the

narrative those victims who have helped themselves. The Moroccan archive remains incomplete, and history’s therapeutic role is underwhelming for the wider community.

### **Algeria: Social Remembering Out of Amnesia**

Since the 2005 Reconciliation Charter, Algeria has maintained peace. Algerians, however, have lived under a latent sense of social fragmentation and continued distrust for the authorities. Evidence suggests that the collective memory of the dark decade enhanced these social feelings.

Civil society objected to Bouteflika’s “civilian concord” for pursuing amnesty for Islamists and shielding the army from scrutiny while denying civilian suffering. Several associations of the families of victims, including *Djazairouna* through its founder Cherifa Kheddar, and the *Collectif des Familles de Disparu(e)s en Algérie* and its spokesperson Nassera Dutour, were very vocal and active in the initial years (Joffé 219-220). Dutour lost her 21-year-old son, who was “kidnapped on January 30 1997 by the police,” not knowing, ten years later, whether to want him alive in a prison or dead and at peace so she can mourn (Dutour 144-5). Algerians with questions like hers were

met with state refusal and urged to “forgive” for the nation’s sake (Dutour 146).

Despite the weakness and decay of Algerian NGOs (Liverani 47), Nassera Dutour gives voice to a silent majority within Algerian society. For the anthropologist Abderrahman Moussaoui, the wider problem lies with the disconnect between state’s conception of repentance and victimhood, and different groups’ collective memories. Moussaoui argues that the memory of the Civil War is “fragmented into various sides each claiming the status of victim”: the Islamists following their stolen election in 1991, and the political authorities who accuse unruly youth of failing to appreciate their sacrifices for independence, while the civilian population resent “terrorists” and the authorities for failing to protect them from massacres (Moussaoui 36). For Moussaoui, to “consolidate memories” would amount to “defining a new consensus [...] a consistent commemorative project and rebuild social ties” (Moussaoui 38, 61).

Due to a prevailing inertia in the country, Moussaoui’s call for a new historical narrative is unlikely to materialize. The Algerian ruling political class continues to embrace the historical myth of the Algerian war of independence and the memory of the glorious martyrs of 1954 to establish the

regime's legitimacy, unbothered by the fact that youth already rebelled against this paradigm during the Algiers riots of October 1988 (Evans, 102). In 2012, Algeria celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence by doubling down on its historiographical importance as the founding and continual collective myth (Branche and Djerbal 162). Unfortunately, Algerian historians have failed to challenge the myth and offer revisionist and plural histories (Djerbal Personal Interview). There is little appetite to challenge the many taboos around the nineties, especially considering continued terrorism in the Algerian peripheries, such as the Ain Amenas attack (January 2013), or a fear over unleashing "monsters [from] the cupboard" (Mundy 145-50).

Talking and writing about the dark decade in Algeria still represents a significant red line, and society continues to struggle to live with its legacies. In July 2017, the French publication *Le Monde Diplomatique* published a harrowing article on Algeria "twenty years after the massacres" which was banned in the country. The journalist Pierre Daum traveled to the towns that suffered attacks and massacres during the Civil War. He spoke with Algerians who lost friends and family members, and his conversations were met

with a wall of silence, anger, or despair. Daum noted the increased religiosity among Algerians, even those whose family members were killed by Islamists. The urban and secular Algerians lament that "the Islamists lost the war but won the minds," and that religion here plays the role of a powerful, addictive "pain-killing drug," convenient for the authorities as it saves them the effort of a genuine collective therapy. Meanwhile, the imperatives of the present, made more difficult by soaring costs of living, youth unemployment, and political uncertainty continue to relegate the past to oblivion (Martinez and Rasmus 1-15).

Faced with the calcified politics of memory in Algeria, novelists and filmmakers have explored new forms to remember the dark decade. This new wave of production has emerged after the 2005 law and differs from its predecessors who viewed the Civil War as an abnormal and alien moment in the country's history, such as Merzak Allouache's movie *Bab el-Oued City* (1994), or the novels of Assia Djebar or Maïssa Bey, who, for Meryem Belkaid, wrote as a "refusal of denial, amnesia and falsification" (Belkaid 132). These fascinating productions still consider the Civil War as an abnormal event and write as a means to return to the "ordinary Algeria". Instead,

the following generation, who matured during the Civil War, possess a different memory.

Adlene Meddi provides a telling example in his novel 1994. Meddi, a journalist for *al-Watan*, wrote this book partly from his experience and interviews, and his novel has benefitted from important coverage and interest. It depicts the war and daily terrorism from the vantage point of four teenagers in East Algiers, in the run-up to their decision to form a secret commando unit to track and kill both Islamists and the police they accuse of terrorizing society. The novel contains insightful descriptions of life around the regular attacks and manages to recreate an atmosphere where anyone is at risk of being mistaken for a guilty part by the security apparatus, the "srabess" (in spoken Algerian, from the French "service") who perform their security mission with impunity. What sets this novel apart is its rapport toward the past: it is about the act of overcoming amnesia. Ten years later, two of the four friends, Amin and Sidali, look back at this period to understand how their present-day difficulties stem from events that took place in 1994. Their painful memories are layered and pushed down, only to unravel and drive them to the brink. Amin, the main protagonist,

breaks down when his military father passes away. His repressed feelings gush to the surface and send him into a violent spiral and psychological internment. Sidali, who languished in exile since 1994, returns to save his friends and reconnect with the past that led him to escape to France.

By describing the incidence of the past on the present, this novel uniquely resonates with Algerian readers. Meddi called it a “restitution of an atmosphere” rather than a factual account of events (Hamrouche, Interview with Adlene Meddi). The four teenagers were meant as “a metaphor for my generation [...] which I have felt was a wasted one in the process of production of Algeria”. Due to the destruction around them, when this generation was constructing themselves, they become “ill-adapted to life” (Hamrouche, Interview with Adlene Meddi). The novel envisages a positive resolution when Sidali finishes retelling the story of the murder and reaches an epiphany about the feelings of resentment from his generation’s Algerians. They blamed their parents, the “nationalist heros,” whose guiltless enjoyment during the sixties and seventies led to the events of the Civil War “without thinking about their children who would grow in their apocalypse” (Meddi 303-4, 315). Sidali, vis-

iting his victim’s grave from 1994, then breaks down in tears.

Cultural actors like Adlene Meddi can observe society and mobilize creative forms to show Algerian society in its struggles with unaddressed trauma. Compared to other productions on the Civil War, this novel explores the source of Algerian collective trauma, and envisages a resolution by portraying how individuals restore continuity and achieve personal closure. In sum, cultural productions have the potential to address the shortcomings of the official history, not only by offering a complementary testimony, but by revisiting the past and processing these memories. Unfortunately, Meddi’s novels and other cultural productions would need to branch out from their usual audiences, namely urban and secular Algerians, by being integrated into the state’s official history.

### Conclusion

This article sought to answer the question of what happens to collective trauma after limited transitional justice experiences. Producing a historical discourse that merely acknowledges past violence has been insufficient to help Algerians and Moroccans achieve closure and national reconciliation. Each country adopted a specific and restrictive definition of the

victims who would benefit from reparations in Morocco or amnesty in Algeria, which obscured the collective suffering of communities during these two periods. A common national narrative cannot account for every citizen’s experience, but it must at least provide enough of a common narrative to allow individuals to reconcile themselves with the past they remember and send a powerful signal for an inclusive community.

Faced with the historical discourse’s limits, historians and cultural actors in both societies have been stifled by the contours of official historical narratives or official amnesia. They have occasionally experimented with hybrid forms, as was the case with the Moroccan *Zamane* magazine. However, the most successful efforts to excavate collective memory came from writers and filmmakers who could truly subvert the borders and content of official history, as Fatna El Bouih and Adlene Meddi’s works attest. In Algeria and Morocco, these examples foreshadow a growing desire for the acknowledgement of their experience as part of the country’s historical narrative, more than judicial punishment or financial compensation.

The key to “breaking the cycle of hatred” after political violence becomes possible



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when victims forego their claim to retribution (Minow 17). The Algerian and Moroccan decision-makers assumed that victims would forget and move on for the nation, yet the failure to integrate a more inclusive conception of trauma and memory has hollowed the two attempts for national reconciliation, which is symptomatic of how authoritarian regimes deal with their societies. Thinking ahead to current conflicts in the Arab world, including Libya, Syria, and Egypt, the North African transitional justice experience should give us pause (Fisher and Stewart 4; Sriram 6). Any serious and viable path toward post-conflict reconciliation should recognize that unaddressed or poorly constructed dominant historical narratives that are inconsistent with collective memories of this violence jeopardize national reconciliation. Therapeutic history, therefore, will only work if it is generous enough to be attached to most people's stories.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mohammed VI replaced his father Hassan II in 1999, and Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected President during the Civil War with the powerful military's approval.

<sup>2</sup> The Algerian armed struggled lasted from 1954 to 1962 (McDougall 195) and the Moroccan campaign lasted from 1944 to 1956 (Miller 151-56).

<sup>3</sup> "People who have committed or participated in crimes leading to death, collective massacres, explosive attacks in public spaces, and rape; article 7.

<sup>4</sup> Presumably had ties to the armed insurrections of 1972-73 against the Moroccan regime, see Mehdi Bennouna's work.

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## Theorizing Intergenerational Trauma in Tazmamart Testimonial Literature and Docu-testimonies

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Drawing on testimonial writings by the wives of Tazmamart prisoners and two documentary films (docu-testimonies) about this notorious disappearance camp, I argue that Tazmamart-induced traumas are intergenerational. Approached as a continuum, Tazmamart-induced traumas reveal the intergenerational transference of trauma from mothers to children in the pre-discursive period. In this article, I specifically focus my analysis on the pre-discursive period—a time when families did not articulate their traumas in spoken

words in the presence of the children and during which Tazmamart was not a matter of public discourse in Morocco. This theorization of intergenerational transference of traumatic experiences will shift scholarly attention from individual experiences to the collective memory of the “Years of Lead” in its intergenerational dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Trauma, Tazmamart, Intergenerational, Memory, Transmission, Years of Lead, Women, Children

### Introduction

The creation of Tazmamart secret prison camp in Morocco was a direct response to the failed consecutive coups d'état against King Hassan II's regime in 1971 and 1972. Sentenced by a military tribunal to serve prison terms ranging between three years and life for allegedly participating in one of the coups, sixty-two officers and soldiers were serving their jail time in an official maximum security prison when they were kidnapped and taken to an unknown location in August 1973. Thanks to the combination of the disappeared soldiers' agency and the bravery of some sympathetic guards, both the location of Tazmamart secret prison and the inhumane conditions of the soldiers' detention were only revealed to their families months later. However, the Moroccan state would continue denying the prison's existence for nearly twenty years until the release of the twenty-seven survivors in 1991. Symbolizing Morocco's collective memory of the *Years of Lead* (1956-1999), Tazmamart disappearance experiences would later shape the development of Moroccan testimonial literature (El Guabli).

I argue that testimonial literature (particularly prison literature) and docu-testimonies (testimonial documentary films) reveal the intergenerational transmission

of Tazmamart-induced traumas between the mothers' and the children's generations in pre-adulthood years. Analyzed from an intergenerational perspective, Tazmamart ceases to be the story of the fifty-eight soldiers who ended up in the Saharan jail for eighteen years. It rather emerges as a traumatic experience that has deep intergenerational and even transgenerational ramifications visible in testimonial literature and docu-testimonies. Because Morocco has not witnessed the formation of organized second-generation memory stakeholders' groups, the study of intergenerational trauma articulated in testimonial literature and docu-testimonies is even more crucial for our understanding of the intergenerational dimensions of the Moroccan Years of Lead.

Taking into consideration the Freudian concept and its discontents, I use trauma in this context to refer to a continuum of psychological, somatic, social, and spatial consequences of a transformative, overpowering, and sudden accident that disrupts the normalcy of the traumatized subject's life and disintegrates their lifeworld (Caruth). In theorizing Tazmamart-induced trauma as a continuum, I open up the possibility of analyzing the embodied transmission of Tazmamart trauma among two

generations of its victims. I begin with the sudden eruption of the coups d'état in 1971 and 1972 and conclude with the liberation of the disappeared soldiers from their protracted disappearance in Tazmamart. Here, I will investigate the ways in which Tazmamart-induced traumas were passed on from mothers to children in the period before this transference was articulated or discussed in the wider society. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for a substantive engagement with this intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory, occurring and developing as these children come of age.

### **Tazmamart Testimonial Literature and Docu-testimonies**

The professionalization of Tazmamart testimonial literature between 2003 and 2005 resulted in innovative writing strategies, including the publication of women-authored memoirs as well as mixed memoirs. *Tazmamart côté femme: Témoignage*, Rabea Bennouna's woman-only memoir, is a third-person narration in which she tells of her long journey from the arrest and disappearance of her husband, Abdellatif Belkbir, to her filing for financial reparations from the state in 1999. *Kabazal: Les emmurés de Tazmamart (Kabazal)* by Salah and Aïda Hachad is a mixed memoir recording its co-authors' experiences of

Tazmamart. Aïda Hachad's half of *Kabazal*, which I analyze here, is a first-person narration of the brutal unraveling of her family's life in the aftermath of Colonel Amekrane's coup against Hassan II in August 1972. *Opération Boraq F5: 16 août 1972, l'attaque du Boeing royal (Opération Boraq)*, also a mixed memoir, carries the names of Ahmed El Ouafi and his wife Kalima El Ouafi. Kalima El Ouafi's half of the memoirs recounts the dramatic turn her family life took after her husband's arrest and disappearance to the secret Tazmamart prison camp.

Tazmamart's fascinating cinematographic potential has also drawn the attention of documentary filmmakers. Leïla Kila's *Nos lieux interdits* brings out the complexities of Tazmamart from the perspective of a mother (Rahma), her son (Sa'id), and their unnamed uncle. Filmed as part of Leïla Kilani's commission to archive the work of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) and released in 2008, *Nos lieux interdits* documents conversations with different generations of victims of the Moroccan Years of Lead. Juxtaposing memories of different generations of Moroccans, *Nos lieux interdits* is a rich embodiment of the intergenerational memories of the traumas caused by state violence. Although technically less sophis-

ticated than *Nos lieux interdits*, Yunus Jannuhi's documentary film *Al-Ṭarīq ilā Tazmamart* focuses exclusively on Tazmamart victims. *Al-Ṭarīq ilā Tazmamart's* features three wives of former Tazmamart detainees: Sharifa Dghughi, Rqiyya al-'Abbasi, and Halima Bin Bushta. While their husbands were imprisoned, each of these three women eventually migrated elsewhere—the former to Libya and then the U.S., the second to Italy, and the third between different cities in Morocco. Unearthing a new aspect of Tazmamart's traumatic effects, Jannuhi's docu-testimony places geographical displacement at the heart of this traumatic experience. Jannuhi's film thus has a fundamental role to play in the revelation of the gendered nature of Tazmamart-induced trauma and its fuller, intergenerational implications.

Viewed together, these testimonial writings and docu-testimonies share three important traits. First, these works record and illustrate traumatic experiences that were not articulated in spoken words within the family unit, thus inciting us to investigate the transmission of intergenerational trauma within the family in forms other than narrative. Second, the traumas of these women and children are interconnected and related to a wider

political context that has consequences for Moroccan collective memory. Third, the experiences recounted in these works reveal the necessity of rethinking and expanding the notions of victimhood and disappearance to other categories of Moroccans who had survived a related de facto disappearance even as they lived in society.

### **Tazmamart Families as Loci of Intergenerational Trauma**

Arguing for the intergenerational nature of Tazmamart-induced traumas requires a distinction of the different generations involved. German sociologist Karl Mannheim developed three crucial criteria to determine what constitutes a generation: first, the members of a generation share a "generation location," which means that—to varying degrees—constituents of the same generation share the same historical experiences; second, people forming a generation have a conscious awareness of their shared culture as a generation; and third, generations come in "generation-units," which are groups of individuals who belong to the same generation and whose shared identity as a generation is forged by their responses to "common experiences" (292; 306). Mannheim's definition of generation allows us to discern three distinct generations of Moroccans—

even beyond Tazmamart survivors—whose identities were shaped or re-shaped by Tazmamart-induced traumas and the intergenerational transference of its memories. Within each Tazmamart familial unit, there are three generations: the grandparents, who mainly accept Tazmamart as fate, the parents, predominantly the mothers who were left to struggle alone after the husband's disappearance, and the children, many of whom were too young to grasp the gravity of the changes that occurred in their lives.

Grounded mainly in Holocaust studies, intergenerational trauma scholarship examines the passing down and inheritance of older generations' experiences marred by violence, genocide and repression (Schwab; Hirsch; Achugar; Atkinson). While much research has focused on storytelling and discursive practices as media of transmission (Fried; Achugar), Daniela Jara underlines the fact that, in the investigation of intergenerational transmission of memories of political violence, a focus on the family shows that "the passing on of such experiences is not necessarily connected to speaking" since transmission can happen independently of verbalization and narrative (66). In fact, Tazmamart testimonial literature and docu-testimonies prove that between silence and nar-

ration there exists a wide spectrum of embodied alternatives through which the intergenerational transmission of this trauma-laden experience can take place.

My theorization of Tazmamart-induced intergenerational trauma between the mothers' generation and the children's is illuminated by Jan Assmann's robust and influential distinction between "communicative memory" and "cultural memory," and Marianne Hirsch's notion of "post-memory." Communicative memory, which is both autobiographic and intergenerational and extends over up to three generations, is my focus here. This is where I find the familial, non-discursive transference of Tazmamart-induced traumas. Cultural memory, which is transgenerational and more institutionalized and exteriorized, is more relevant to questions of canonization and commemoration (Assmann 110-111). Postmemory describes the relationship of members of a "post-generation" (the generation that came after) to traumas they themselves did not experience but which are connected to "the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" (Hirsch 4-5). Although postmemory describes the memories of the generation born after, scholarship has extended the concept, as I do here, to include overlapping genera-

tions, such as parents and their children (Levey 7). Postmemory of Tazmamart-induced traumas is at work in the way in which the younger generation of Tazmamart victims internalize and grapple with traumas they never experienced directly. In light of these theoretical works, I will draw on testimonial literature and docu-testimonies to theorize how the mothers' generation's Tazmamart-induced traumas were manifested in their children despite the mothers' diligent endeavors to spare them such knowledge.

### **The Mothers' Generation's Tazmamart-induced Traumas**

#### **1 The Disintegration of the Families' Lifeworld**

Both testimonial literature and docu-testimonies about Tazmamart depict the sudden disintegration of the families' lifeworld as a traumatic shock. As soon as their husbands were arrested for allegedly plotting the downing of the king's plane, detainees' wives and children began to be held accountable for the consequences of their husbands' supposedly treasonous act. *Social apartheid*—that is, social ostracism or exclusion—was the first trauma-inducing measure that followed from the coup d'état in 1972, and with it came the loss of social status and the suspension of families' privileges.

Inducing feelings of loneliness and solitude, social exclusion exacerbated the mothers' generation's traumatic loss of their husbands and social status. Kalima El Ouafi, for instance, wrote that "when the misfortune struck, I found myself completely helpless, alone, with my two children to raise" (113-114). The sudden realization that the women had no social safety network to help absorb the shock of their socioeconomic downfall brought a devastating and abrupt end to a happy family life. Even when the marriage was unhappy, as in the case of Rabea Bennouna and Abdellatif Belkbir, the memoir records the destructive effect of the absence of a social network, which led Bennouna to a "lonely traversing of this portion of her life" (44). The power of isolation was such that it evoked a state of strandedness within society. This social exclusion had a direct impact on the families' daily lives. Aïda Hachad, for instance, stressed the fact that social ostracism was such that even the milkman "had changed his itinerary, thus avoiding the households of the officers implicated in the coup d'état" (205). This societal response was the first in a long series of traumatizing experiences that stemmed from the coup, and it had sudden and dramatic consequences for these implicated families.



Women's responses to their traumatic social isolation varied. While some wives were able to survive social ostracism by living with their immediate families in Morocco, others who were less fortunate worked through their traumas in geographic dislocation. The film *Al-Ṭarīq ilā Tazmamart* presents us with two interesting cases of women who emigrated during their husbands' disappearances and reunited with them afterward. When her husband Dris Dghughi, a pilot at the Kenitra Air Base, was arrested, Sharifa Dghughi was barely twenty years old. Connecting her suffering to her young age at the time, Dghughi told the filmmaker "I suffered. I suffered a lot. I saw a lot in my life." We discover that Sharifa's suffering involved living in Libya for a while, then emigrating to the United States. Transplanted from her own society, Sharifa fled the source of her trauma. Similarly, Rqiyya al-'Abbasi seized an opportunity to leave the country supposedly for economic reasons, but the truth was that the lack of social support was too overpowering for the mothers' generation to face alone. Atkinson's powerful observation that trauma is "gendered, raced, classed, [and] economized" illuminates the larger Moroccan context in allowing us to see how Tazmamart-induced trauma included

displacement, loss of community, and gender-based repression (3).

Social apartheid and constant surveillance took a toll on the mother's physical and mental health. Bennouna furnishes the clearest example of the intertwining of physical pain with the traumatizing pressure the Moroccan state exerted on women. Bennouna writes that as a "direct consequence of the frightening mental fatigue," doctors diagnosed a "cyst in her breast," urging her to undergo surgery immediately (44). In her crisp and frank style, Bennouna adds that the "daily injustice" inflicted on her was too overpowering to not have taken a toll on her body (44). Indeed, unable to bear the constant mental and social stress, Bennouna succumbed to her deep paranoia and eventually attempted suicide (97). El Ouafi was no different in the transformation of her Tazmamart-induced traumas into

profound depression, which translated into repetitive insomnia, cephalagia and frequent moments of weakness (134).

Tazmamart-induced trauma, in this sense, is a composite continuum that affected the mothers' generation socially, mentally, physically, and even spatially, thus creat-

ing even more circumstances for the children to appropriate these embodied traumas as theirs at a time when they were not expressed in any discursive form.

## 2 Ḥugra as State-Sanctioned Trauma

*Ḥugra*, the Moroccan state's vindictive mistreatment of these families, bred feelings of unworthiness and powerlessness, which have been a traumatizing force in the mothers' generation's memoirs. *Ḥugra*, which can also be described as contempt for other people's dignity, can be seen at work in situations where the distribution of power is uneven. Furthermore, *ḥugra* is a flagrant abuse of power that involves discrimination against a person, unjust granting of favors, and intentional reminding of the victim of *ḥugra* that they have no voice and can do nothing to redress the injustice done to them. An emblematic example of the traumatizing effect of *ḥugra* is described in Aïda Hachad's reaction to the preferential treatment M'bark Touil received in Tazmamart thanks to his wife's American citizenship. Thanks to Nancy Touil's advocacy in the USA, Touil was allowed to spend time in the sun, take walks in the prison yard, have a mattress, and even receive *La Vache Qui Rit* cheese wedges, while his colleagues in the same block were deprived of everything.



The Moroccan state's discriminatory behavior in Touil's case struck a very sensitive chord for the other disappeared soldiers and their wives. Aïda Hachad, specifically, could not hide her shock at the news that Mbark Touil enjoyed rights that other disappeared prisoners were denied. In Hachad's mind, this traumatic *hugra* generates crucial questions about citizenship as it relates to the Moroccan state's obligation to respect an American citizen's partner even as it ran roughshod over the rights of Moroccan citizens. Outraged and scandalized to learn that "Mbark Touil benefitted from a special, favorable regimen while the others perished slowly," Hachad condemned state-sanctioned, citizenship-based discrimination (242). Furthermore, Hachad formulates a well-thought-out explanation for this flagrant disrespect for the most basic norms of fairness, which she attributes to the fact that Moroccan women

were worth nothing. We were nothing but insignificant "petty subjects" subject to tallage and exploitable at will. Faced with such contempt, I swore to myself to show our officials what Moroccan women are capable of. I repeated everywhere [I went] and to everyone the shame endured by Moroccan families: segregation even inside prisons, a special regimen

for foreigners and their spouses, and hell for Moroccan citizens (242).

Having received no response from Princess Meryem, whom she implored to intercede on behalf of her husband, it became all too clear to Hachad that Moroccan officials had fulfilled Touil's needs because, as an American, Nancy Touil "was by definition a citizen: a human being who is recognized in her rights" (260). The ineluctable comparison between citizenship and a lack thereof pushed Hachad to conclude, in more general terms this time, that "Moroccans are merely subjects with no rights because the regime never considered us to be human beings" (260). The feeling of their nothingness instilled feelings of abjection and worthlessness, which deepened women's anger and defiance, which they redirected, in many cases, to drive their social and professional success.

### **Children Acting Out Mothers' Traumatic Legacies**

#### **1 Traumatization by Osmosis in Tazmamart Testimonial Literature**

I now turn my attention to investigating how the children's generation manifested its internalization of their mothers' generation's Tazmamart-induced traumatic experiences. One of the main characteris-

tics of intergenerational trauma is its inheritance through social and embodied practices that transfer the experiences to the younger generation without their experiencing it directly. Consequently, although the mothers' generation avoided discussing their suffering with or in the presence of their children during the disappearance of their husbands, Tazmamart's full traumatic significance was passed down to the children. Inheriting the mothers' generation's anxieties, unsteady moods, and unexplained sadness, children used their agency to make their mothers' wounds their own, which later manifested itself in their changes in behavior at home and in the outside world. Rabea Bennouna observed that at school her son "rarely participated in play with his peers, confining himself to a seat in the covered part of the playground during the merciless recess time." (69) Alluding to her son's indirect inheritance of her own trauma, Bennouna wrote that, despite her son's lack of "consciousness of his father's tragic fate," its "dramatic effluvia" were present in the air for him to breathe (69). This secret took on a more tangible, behavioral form as was evidenced by the little Belkbir "[having gone] through a stage of unexplained rejection of everything in the familiar surroundings" (69). Because of the father's

absence from the home, Kalima El Ouafi's younger son almost never talked, and "communicating with him becomes even more difficult every day," whereas her older son's response to the trauma of the father's absence was such that Kalima El Ouafi was afraid that he had become autistic and might need medical treatment (118).

While an invented story could explain away Captain Ahmed El Ouafi's absence from his children's life, the deterioration of their living conditions, which worsened drastically and continuously over time, conveyed the repressed, never-addressed problem to the children. Kalima El Ouafi has drawn attention to their altered circumstances in her juxtaposition of a time when they could "order food from the American store and acquire high quality products" with a later time when everyone had to "fasten their belts in a drastic way" (115). For El Ouafi's children, this deterioration of their comfortable living situation was experienced as the embodiment of a secret related to their father's absence. A reaction as simple as a tantrum, in this context, signals the child's awareness of a disruptive occurrence transforming their lives. El Ouafi's youngest son always wonders "[w]hy the breakfast was not similar to when [his] father was around." The

dilemma, then, for El Ouafi was "[h]ow to explain to them that their [former] life was finished and that they have to erase it, let go of it?" (115). Interestingly, this tension between the mother, who tried hard to hide the troubling reality that turned their life upside down, and the children's critical awareness of the abnormality of their situation created conditions for transference of this unnamed event that submerged their lives in unspoken suffering.

Deep fear, especially regarding the loss of the remaining parent, is yet another manifestation of the inherited Tazmamart-induced intergenerational trauma. In an extremely revealing passage, Kalima El Ouafi describes how her youngest son was haunted by the idea that, whenever she went to Rabat to follow up on her requests for the father's release from Tazmamart, she might disappear as well. Because of the particular nature of the circumstances in which he grew up, Redouane, El Ouafi's younger son, surmised that his mother's advocacy was dangerous for her life. At a pivotal point in his coming of age, Redouane had gained enough consciousness to internalize his father's disappearance as a *modus operandi* in the country. The scary knowledge that he had acquired in unclear circumstances pushed him to demand that his

mother suspend her efforts to obtain his father's release. The children kept to themselves in school and displayed signs of social aloofness, which Rabea Bennouna characterizes in her son as a tendency to exhibit "reserved or even taciturn behavior" (69). Therefore, without overriding their agency, it could be concluded that feelings of uncertainty and distrust among the children's generation is another manifestation of their inheritance of their mothers' traumas.

## 2 Houda Hachad: A Child's Recounting of Tazmamart Intergenerational Trauma

If testimonial writings of both Bennouna and El Ouafi report on their children's internalization of Tazmamart-induced havoc in their lives, this intergenerational trauma found its clearest expression in Houda Hachad's testimony in *Kabazal*. This chapter, entitled "Houda Hachad," is an explicit illustration of the way Tazmamart-induced trauma was transmitted from the mothers' generation to the children's. After her father's release, Houda tells her mother that "[s]he was looking for neither comfort nor answers to her questions." She only wanted to "confide, to talk about herself and the 'problem' that has colored in our existence with black." Aïda informs her readers that, in her need to express her pain, "she [Houda] chose [...] her

mother to listen to her wound say what it had to say" (296). After all the years that they had spent together avoiding this secret that had overshadowed their existence, the time had finally come for Houda to confront her mother.

Unexpectedly, Houda Hachad's testimony is a reversal of the traditional model of intergenerational trauma. Here the child from the younger generation serves as a mirror for the mother's generation, reflecting the trauma the mother inadvertently passed down to her. Contrary to what many of the mothers' generation assumed about preventing their children from knowing about Tazmamart, Houda reveals to her mother that she knew from an early age that their family was hiding a big secret involving her father, and that her mother was in fact the one who imparted this knowledge to her. Not only did Houda hear from one of her classmates about her father's disappearance, but she also searched her mother's belongings to find out what really happened to the father. Furthermore, Houda reveals that she was able to decode her mother's embodied trauma, deciphering that her mother's solitary suffering was a sign of the problem connected to the absent father:

You lived alone; you worked alone.  
You were raising your two children

alone. You were a sad woman. Even if you tried, you were not able to hide your sadness from us. I have linked this sadness to the absence of family, to the absence of moral support. [...] I understood that you were a woman whose destiny was marked by a huge trial. [...] But my brother and I did not know the nature of this tragedy (297).

Thus, what Aïda assumed had been hidden from her children had actually been passed on to them. Whether Houda gained access to truthful information about Tazmamart does not matter as much as her use of her agency to figure out that her family harbored an unsettling secret that was the source of their abnormal status in society. Houda, thus, shows that she not only knew what was happening, but she also articulated the secret her mother harbored for many years in order to allow herself and her mother to bring this traumatic experience to the discursive realm.

### 3 Sa'id al-Haddan: An Adult Who Seeks to Re-bury His Childhood Traumas

'Allal al-Haddan's family story illustrates the future-oriented nature of the intergenerational transmission of Tazmamart-induced trauma. In one of the scenes, *Nos lieux interdits* films the al-Haddan family

meeting an Equity and Reconciliation Commission delegation. Meeting with the visitors in the family's modest living room are Sa'id, his mother Rahma, and a newborn infant—most likely Sa'id's baby—held by his grandmother (Rahma). As Salah al-Wadi', an ERC member, explains the ERC's mission to the family, the camera zooms in closely on Sa'id, Rahma, and the infant, thus declaring the intergenerational theme that underlies *Nos lieux interdits*. The symbolism of this unnamed baby's presence is powerful in the sense that s/he is already witnessing the older generations' discussion of a thirty-year-old problem that will nevertheless have a bearing on his/her own future, as we realize that the baby's life has been set up to inherit this past from her/his grandmother and father.

Sa'id al-Haddan, now in his thirties, is the son of pilot 'Allal al-Haddan, a soldier who died in the early years following his transfer to Tazmamart. When the 1972 coup d'état erupted, Sa'id's parents had not been married for long, and Sa'id himself had not even been born when his father was disappeared to Tazmamart. Although Sa'id had never had a tangible relationship with his father, his requests to the ERC include uncovering the truth about his father's death, securing his reburial, and

transforming Tazmamart prison into a site of memory. Slowly, the film uncovers that throughout his childhood, Sa'id's mother not only kept silent on his father's whereabouts, but she also erased his connection to him through a name change, thus explaining Sa'id's fixation on the reburial of his father's remains' according the Islamic rites of death. These impulses are the crucible in which his unaddressed childhood traumas are manifested. In fact, his irrational need to rebury his father is his last chance to overcome the fact that he "ha[s] never seen [his] father and [his] relationship with him remained [...] imaginary" (Kilani).

Sa'id's compulsive need to know his father's death story and rebury his remains is an endeavor to achieve some closure for his childhood trauma. The father's reburial would have afforded Sa'id the opportunity to revisit the source of his inherited trauma to make sense of his own, internally shattered existence. However, ERC adduced religious considerations to reject his demand to reconnect with his father through his remains. When informed of ERC's decision, Sa'id cries in front of the camera, indicating his disappointment at the ERC's process, which denied him his right to work through his intergenerational trauma in the manner he thought was

appropriate. In his interview with an ERC psychiatrist, Sa'id gives some revealing answers:

ERC psychiatrist. The image you have of your father is fragmented? [...] Are you overwhelmed by all of this?

Sa'id. Overwhelmed, I have always been overwhelmed.

ERC psychiatrist. How so? What do you mean?

Sa'id. All of this is caused by the absence of my father [...] I have always felt that I was looked at as "son of a traitor" and I struggled to prove that that was not true. (Kilani).

When asked if he regained his confidence, Sa'id tells his therapist that he had not and confesses that insecurity has become his second nature. As his therapist reassures him that his confidence would be recovered, Sa'id defensively and curtly wonders if "forgetting my father?" was the price for recovery. He immediately answers with a defiant "I refuse." In this sense, he refused to forget a father he never knew, but also a father whose very absence has been cemented into years of traumatic experiences that he inherited from his family despite silence and lack of direct communication about this trauma within the family during his childhood.

## Conclusion

In this article I argued that testimonial literature and docu-testimonies provide crucial clues for the theorization of the transmission of Tazmamart-induced traumas between mothers and children in the period before children's awareness of Tazmamart. I based this analysis on writings by the wives of disappeared soldiers and two docu-testimonies that make an essential contribution to the conceptualization of intergenerational and gendered traumas of state violence and its memory. This analysis charts a new path for future study of the Years of Lead and their long-term implications for collective memory and for the formation of individuals' identities and subjectivities. One might be tempted to think—as indeed the Moroccan state and the ERC do—that the ERC process, which culminated in the publication of a final report and the payment of handsome reparations checks to the victims, are in themselves sufficient to turn the page on the Years of Lead. Testimonial literature and docu-testimonies, however, demonstrate that the implications of Tazmamart-induced traumas transcend the direct victims. In fact, they are trans- and inter-generational traumas that resist any facile attempts to limit the impact of Tazmamart (and the Years of Lead) to one generation alone. Now that a significant

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amount of credible, testimonial accounts established what happened during the Years of Lead, it is high time we grappled with how these traumas and their memories have impacted generations of Moroccans.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a condensed version of Chapter V of the author's dissertation. El Guabli, Brahim. *Other-Archives: Literature Rewrites the Nation in Post-1956 Morocco*. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2018.

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## Ruptures and Their Afterlife: A Cultural Critique of Trauma

Orkideh Behrouzan

This paper provides a cultural critique of the concept of trauma by examining the generational narratives of *toromā* in the Iranian context and the psychologization of memory in the aftermath of the 1980s. It examines memory-work as a cultural and political resource for witnessing and historicizing the otherwise muted discourse of the Iran-Iraq War and the anomie of the 1980s Iran. The paper elaborates on the concept of rupture, as an alternative to trauma, for its recognition of the complexity, multiplicity, and diffusion of historical conditions and their afterlife. These narratives of rupture show how generations are constructed and

negotiated, not temporally, but based on the political and emotional stakes of *how*, and *what*, one remembers, thereby informing the identity politics of young Iranians and generating new socialities and cultural forms. The paper approaches the psychological afterlife of social anomie as both a clinical and a cultural/political experience and raises questions about the ethics of engagement with the two constructed concepts of “mental health” and the “Middle East.”

**Keywords:** mental health, war trauma, rupture, Iran Iraq War, psychiatry, Middle East, memory-work, generational memory

The crisis of representation in/around the Middle East challenges us to re-examine the limits of clinical and anthropological inquiry and to revisit what we mean by “mental health.” What is absent from most debates is an engagement with the fragmented nature of experience as well as the multiplicity of existing pedagogical and cultural discourses across different parts of the region (and within each). In what follows I use an interdisciplinary examination of particular psychological and social experience of youth in post-revolution and post-war Iran as a case study to provide a cultural critique of the concept of “trauma,” its uncritical usage in scholarship and lay discourses, and its contested usefulness in evaluating psychological wellbeing. The broader aim is to revisit prevailing conceptual and methodological assumptions in public health, psychiatry, anthropology, and psychoanalysis.

The conceptual underpinning of this piece stems from the theoretical context explored in my 2016 monograph, *Prozāk Diaries*, which investigates the psychopolitics of wellbeing in Iran and problematizes the translation of complex histories and lived experiences to the universal notion of “trauma” without contextualizing it in its own much-contested historical tra-



jectory in the West.<sup>1</sup> Using anthropological and psychoanalytical frameworks, the book analyzes the generational memories of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, the 1980-83 Cultural Revolution, and the political and cultural double-binds of 1980s Iran. It illustrates how self-identified generations such as the “1980s generation” continue to remember, process, and work through cultural and political shifts that quietly inscribed ruptures in their experiences of the self and the world around them. In their *generationally* organized memories and subjectivity-work, I located emerging languages, cultural forms, and generational aesthetics that were acutely informed by psychiatric and clinical discourses. In their works of art, literature, and/or other cultural productions, online and offline, they refer to some of their experiences as *toromā*, a Persian term hardly translatable to the individual, singular, and universal concept of “trauma” as understood in Western scholarship. The experience of the double binds of ordinary life in 1980s Iran, for example, is not easily translatable to individual *trauma*. Rather, it can be captured in the concept of *rupture*,<sup>2</sup> which recognizes the complexity, multiplicity, and diffusion of historical conditions and their afterlife. I will elaborate on the concept and share some thoughts on the ethics of engagement

with the two constructs of “mental health” and the “Middle East.”

Iran's experience provides a reflexive opportunity, primarily because the passage of three decades since the end of the conflict has allowed for the long-term complexities of anomie to come to the surface. Iranians' experiences of the war itself and its cultural and psychological legacies provide insight and raise timely questions about the afterlife of ruptures across the region in the coming years.

### Remembering is Our Gift: The 1980s and its Memories

Thirty years since it ended, the Iran-Iraq war continues to shape Iranians' sense of the world around them. The longest trench war of the 20th century, officially dubbed “Sacred Defense,” resulted in over one million deaths on both sides. But to reduce the anomie of the 1980s to war experience would be myopic. I have elsewhere shown how the Iran-Iraq War was situated in broader experiences of postrevolutionary anomie and the 1980-83 Cultural Revolution that transformed public life by ideological propaganda, the institutionalization of new gendered and gendering moral order and Islamic codes of dress and conduct, and consequential shifts in cultural policy (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries).

The war and the Cultural Revolution transformed Iranian society by engendering new forms of civilian life, the significant impact of which on children and adolescents has been largely overlooked.

For children of the 1980s, much of collective memory is shaped, depending on their age, by their childhood experience of double-binds and internalized anxieties in the face of not only war conditions, but also contradictory obligations, moral policing, ideological imperatives (in school, educational paradigms, the media, and the public sphere), and significantly, witnessing their parents' hurried transition into the new era; whether forced or fervently celebrated, in the child's eye, the transformation of grown-ups' lifeworlds remained an impenetrable experience (Behrouzan, Prozak Diaries). As sweeping tides drew ideological and culture wars throughout and after the 1980s, the ensuing double-binds were hardly lost on children.

Similarly, even though the physical aspect of the war was contained to border provinces, its experience was extended into the nation's ordinary life via an omnipresent media campaign, school teachings, higher education policies, and a visible presence of imageries in urban spaces as

well as institutions, not to mention waves of internal displacement. During the so-called “War of Cities,” too, civilians in twenty-seven Iranian cities experienced intense episodes of missile raids, particularly between 1984 and 1987 (Khaji et al.). Even for children who were physically distant from bombing sites, missile attacks, the brutal use of mustard gas and nerve agents on the city of Sardasht, and the reverberations of war propaganda in the media and in educational agendas continue to occupy a central place in their collective adult minds.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, wartime creation of compensatory structures and identity categories such as *jānbāz* (disabled veteran) had consequences in the postwar era: while providing recognition and care for some veterans and their kin, these labels continue to receive conflicting interpretations. Many veterans returned to society only to experience resentment, neglect, or grief for bygone revolutionary ideals; others might be denied eligibility for compensation (especially as years pass) or are reluctant to claim stigmatized compensatory benefits. Some found themselves ideologically distanced from their children and a society that has fast moved on from wartime values of austerity, stoicism, and egalitarianism toward neoliberalization (Behrouzan, Prozak Diaries).

Significantly, we have failed to incorporate such postwar sociopolitical and cultural transformations in our debates on mental health. These invisible wounds escape the quantitative and diagnostic measurements of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).<sup>4</sup> In our evaluation of war casualties, for example, we often rely on statistics of certain psychiatric diagnoses (Behrouzan, “Medicalization as a Way of Life”).<sup>5</sup> But these statistics need to be interpreted critically with attention to what they cannot reveal: the cultural meanings that shape individuals’ experiences of diagnostic categories and of the standards based on which they are constructed.

In the psychological afterlife of social ruptures, alternative histories of loss are written. These alternative histories and emotional states create cultural forms that outlive wars and social crises. One such cultural form is the creation of generational identities that outlast the crisis and continually inform a society’s sense of wellbeing. I focus on the complexities of these generational forms and on specific internalized memories of childhood that have a persistent presence in young Iranians’ lives, in nightmares, in cultural/artistic expressions, and/or in symptoms of pathology. I examine these childhood

memories against the construct of trauma in order to underscore the limitations of the concept.

Several generational identities have emerged in Iran with exclusive references to the 1980s, creating an emotionally charged identity politics manifest in young Iranians’ use of labels and memorabilia. Persistent self-identification with, and contestation over, labels such as “the 1980s generation,” “Children of the 1980s,” or the “burnt generation,” raises questions about the fluid demarcations of these identities. The label *daheh-ye shasti-hā*, or “the 1980s generation,” for instance, is claimed by youth of various ages: rivalries exist as to whether the label identifies those who were born in the late 70s and early 80s and thus somewhat remember wartime, those who were born in the late 80s with no immediate experience of the war but identifying with its legacies, or those who were older children in the 80s with vivid memories of its tensions. It is precisely this ambiguity that calls for attention to the *affective* nature of this identity politics and its relation to a very specific period of anomie. Today’s prominence of these generational identifications in Iranian public discourse urges us to investigate the psychological and political significations of the 1980s.

The 1980s generation has created a particular generational aesthetic around 1980s cultural symbols and material memories (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The return of these conflicted pasts can be traced in cultural expressions as well as in *toromāik* nightmares, both of which serve to show how “trauma” as a framework fails to capture the nuances of such deeply wounded contexts and subjective experiences. Recurring dreams are common, “of crashes, airplanes crashing into our house,” and of episodes of fleeing or being stuck. As are hearing screams, sirens, or explosions, “most commonly, loud cries of a big crowd; chaos, chaos” or “waking with a racing heart, sweating, and a feeling of panic.” In these flashbacks the war is only one of the several identifiers of anxiety. Many, across ideological divides, recall anxieties in the face of the morality police, e.g., “being arrested for a loose headscarf,” or “losing my father in the battlefield,” or “memories of mourning ceremonies in school,” or even the more seemingly trivial double-bind of following pious teachings in school while knowing, for instance, that one’s parents’ possession of alcohol or music cassettes at home could have dire consequences. Even though revolutionary tides subsided in the following years and their grip on social liberties loosened, they left their mark on

children’s minds. So did memories of loss and mourning, when collective solidarity and grief for the nation’s martyrs often evoked a deep sense of melancholy and perplexity among children. Sometimes these flashbacks come and go unexpectedly, as one self-identified *dahey-e shasti* put it: “If I think hard, I can remember some of these scenes or sounds in real life, or from television, or from school. The war was always around us. Our generation is who it is today because of growing up during the war.”<sup>6</sup>

The quick transition from “I” to “we” is a common feature in these narratives. Such pluralization helps to ground one’s experience in a shared history and thus give it meaning. Generalizations about *nasl-e mā* (our generation) signify an unspoken know-what about a shared experiential identity. However, they are far from monolithic and are ideologically and socioeconomically diverse, at times even opposing, and yet what unites them is their rootedness in the psychological significations of a particular temporality. It is precisely the *shared* nature of this *toromā* that should make us resist the temptation to pathologize and reduce these experiences to medicalized artefacts.

These returns and flashbacks create anxiety, helplessness, and at times PTSD-like symptoms. While enacting psychoanalytical notions of repression, displacement, dissociation, and belated retellings, they also convey a historically grounded intuition that shapes people’s sensory perceptions and emotional states. Several generationally recognized references to the 1980s return and reflect the embodied cultural sensibilities of each generation. Such cultural embodiments are not always conscious, but can reveal the historical grounds of distress (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). Not unlike their cultural productions, this generation’s flashbacks and dreams are filled with cultural references: e.g., war anthems and wartime sirens that still awaken visceral reactions and autonomous reflexes in the body. They are indeed situated in waking life, and traces of them are widely found in rapidly circulating blog and social media posts, YouTube videos, and other creative and cultural expressions.<sup>7</sup>

Significantly, generational recollections mobilize various strategies such as humor and irony as common narrative strategies that not only create new generational vernaculars, but also underscore the culturally *generative* capacity of so-called *toromātik* memories. This is significant.

The abundance of jokes found on Iranians' 1980s-themed blogs and social media groups reminds us of the dangers of myopic pathologization and the importance of understanding psychological and linguistic processes that individuals mobilize in acts of remembering and meaning-making, especially when the remembered past is rendered absurd. Narrative strategies like humor are significant for their psychological functionality, as is the psychoanalytical notion of dissociation, for example when remembering intense experiences "as if we were not there."

The (cultural) details of experience, too, are important in these recollections. Cultural symbols from the 1980s are increasingly circulated in cultural productions and the media inside and outside of Iran, each demarcating carefully organized generational aesthetics. They include material reminders of wartime austerity and sanctions or the moral policing of the 1980s (e.g., ration coupons, changing school uniforms, or the domestic shampoo brand *Darugar*, the latter holding a special place in *sensory* memory for its deep yellow color and distinctive smell) as well as sounds (e.g., the siren reminding of missile raids, or religious chants routinely recited in schools). I have elsewhere provided a sensory reading of these evocative objects and material

remains (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries), each provoking a host of feelings, from nostalgia, anxiety, and fear, to a compelling sense of the uncanny: one would not want to go back to the reality of the 1980s, but one cannot resist the pull of nostalgia either.

It is tempting to interpret this persisting memory-work as mere self-indulgent nostalgia; sometimes even such indulgence can itself be ethnographically and psychologically significant. However, through objects and imageries, these mini-generations are also writing alternative histories of a decade of anomie that they perceive as unaccounted for in official discourse. This urge for keeping alive one's own, marginalized, version of history is at the heart of these recollections. Creating new forms of kinship, this communal memory-work is a call for recognition and accountability. These aspiring "diagnosticians and historians"<sup>8</sup> performatively engage in memory-work, online and offline, contributing to broader psycho-political processes of recognition for different generational experiences (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The politics of this collective, at times contradictory, historicization should not be overlooked: it extends cultural negotiations and contestations over unspoken memory-wounds that are by default ideologi-

cally and politically charged. Remembering, in other words, is intertwined with the politics of voice and legitimation. But this remembering is not merely retrospective. Even though this generational identity politics draws on the 1980s, its generational ethos remains forward-looking and becomes part of the ongoing construction of distinct generational aspirations, hopes, and desires. And in this identity politics, it is the mundane, the ordinary, and the seemingly trivial material relics that speak volumes.

Most compellingly, during the 2009 uprisings in the aftermath of the presidential elections and the emergence of the Green Movement, many members of the "1980s generation," now wearing green wristbands and joining street protests, changed their Facebook profile pictures to the image of the infamous *Darugar* shampoo bottle, a reminder of who they were (children of austere war times, sanctions, and culture wars) and a token of deep solidarity with a new generation of "martyrs" whose lives were taken during the crackdown of the 2009 protests. Even the term "martyr," which until then belonged to the official and state-sanctioned vocabulary of the Iran-Iraq War and thus belonged to a particular generational and political sensibility, was now vehemently recycled by

young Iranians across revolutionary and secular ideological divides, gaining new meanings in reworked wartime anthems and revolutionary songs, online and on the streets. The much-circulated last Facebook status of one of the young martyrs of the 2009 protests summed it up: "To those who are not survived by their wills but by their Facebook pages." The "will" is a reference to the battlefield letters of the Iran-Iraq War's soldiers, heartfelt confessions of faith and last wishes addressed to their loved ones. Now, the Facebook generation that had long faced the accusation of distancing itself from revolutionary ideologies was re-instrumentalizing the semantics of the decade that gave birth to them. It was the 1980s that united them and gave them a sense of what they did (not) want.

The Persianized term *toromā* cannot be assumed to be a direct translation for trauma, even though it is informed by the public psychiatric discourses of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The *toromā* that the 1980s generation refers to is constructed in the intimate space shared by the "I" and the "we." It is hardly locatable in a single traumatic event. It is culturally significant for guiding how generations construct themselves, how history is psychologically imprinted and reconstructed in the collective mind,

and how the language of pathology (i.e., *toromā*) becomes a cultural and political resource. It also becomes a channel through which to interpret and articulate emotions and memories that were perplexing in the child's mind and/or silenced by institutional dogma. Locating pathology in the individual brain (in clinical concepts like *toromā*) and thus seemingly depoliticizing historical experience, these renditions of *toromā* nonetheless create a new generational politics that is committed to justice, while simultaneously endeavoring to work through, and make sense of, the past.

### The Afterlife of Ruptures

The paradigm of trauma falls short in capturing generational experiences and memories of the 1980s, partly because it individualizes loss and detaches it from its sociocultural meaning, and partly because it universalizes trauma and takes it for granted, and thus privileges only certain forms of therapeutic intervention. A purely clinical outlook defines (individual) normative stages, demarcates "normal" and "pathological" reactions to an event, and aims to get rid of excessive disturbing memory. This outlook is hardly sufficient when individuals *insist* on remembering and historicizing their collective (or generational) memories of ruptures.<sup>10</sup>

To move beyond trauma as a singular, universal, and individual entity requires a conceptual framework that captures the multiplicity and fragmentation of subjective experiences as well as the infusion of psychological ruptures into ordinary life. Iranians' renditions of *toromā* show that this inscription of historical loss into daily life (Das Life and Words; The Act of Witnessing) and the embodiment of its cultural symbols cannot be captured by the universalizing framework that overlooks the creation of new cultural discourses (Kleinman; Kitanaka; Scheper-Hughes; Fischer). Indeed, macro-events such as the war are invoked in people's interpretations of their psychological states. But the long-term infusion of broader losses (of lives, of childhood, of ideals, of moral integrity) into daily life escapes a diagnostic category like PTSD; nor can it be boxed in historical meta-narratives. Regardless, such diagnostic categories continue to guide how professionals and institutions assess psychological wellbeing, even though the diagnosis of PTSD is itself contested for being situated in a specific cultural and ideological history.<sup>11</sup>

Several scholars have critiqued the globalizing forces of psychiatry that, often in the context of war humanitarianism, universal-

ize or individualize trauma and privilege certain forms of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> However, these critiques are *themselves* situated in their own cultural contexts. Firstly, they risk overlooking both the enormity of psychological pain and the agency with which people may internalize and mobilize diagnostic categories in order to inhabit their experiences of loss. Secondly, they often assume a top-down biomedical apparatus imposing itself on people's interpretations. Iranian public discourses of mental health, however, were not merely the outcome of hegemonic biomedical interventions upon passive recipients, but grew out of a long history of Iranian psychiatry and historical conditions and institutional (medical, psychiatric, and governmental) discourses that were performatively and actively mobilized by people toward specific political and clinical ends (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). There is little room in prevailing critiques of trauma for such performative mobilization of clinical discourses by ordinary people.

These critiques also risk overlooking the complex ways people pragmatically combine various cultural resources and epistemologies that are far from mutually exclusive. A cultural investigation into the symbolism that underlies Iranians' interpretations shows the importance of under-

standing the historical and emotional trajectories of their affective structures in relation to Shi'ism and mysticism (Good et al.; Fischer, *Iran*; Fischer and Abedi; Beeman), as well as more recent histories of post-revolutionary anomie and double-bind (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*). Finally, when problematizing the dominance of "trauma" in mental health discourses, scholarship has hardly provided alternative frameworks that can speak to *both* clinical realities and cultural particularities. This is where anthropological and psychoanalytical listening can complement each other in examining Iranians' generational narratives of past *toromā*, as these narratives demand close attention not only to content, but also to modes of sharing and interpretation as well as the intense emotional reactions they evoke. Understanding their cultural symbolism is as important as understanding psychological [coping] mechanisms (Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*). Key here is the necessity of a marriage between the psychological and the political; i.e., the recognition of the very real psychological burden of experiences that are nonetheless socio-politically configured.

Psychoanalysis maintains that unrecognized losses could be followed by hyper-remembering.<sup>13</sup> Among young Iranians,

the compulsive revival and mobilization of the 1980s cultural relics facilitates active historicization and witnessing to a decade of *toromā* that "took away" a generation's childhood and to losses for which mourning was largely forbidden. Chief among those losses was the massacre of thousands of political prisoners, an unspoken tragedy that took over two decades to enter public discourse and that contributed to yet further generational formations among the survivors, many of whom were parents to the 1980s children. These contexts are utterly significant. In her *Act of Witnessing*, Veena Das argues that while individual lives are defined by their contexts, "they are also generative of new contexts" (Das: 210). These acts of remembering created dynamic cultural contexts, online and offline, in blogs and works of art, in dreams and waking life, where recursive processes of remembering or forgetting continue to produce new contexts, language forms, and generational sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> This contextualized memory-work reveals the situatedness of *both* trauma and *toromā* in their particular cultural and historical trajectories.

Trauma theories (primarily North American) often assume trauma is an essential, singular, or total event. The influential work of Cathy Caruth (Caruth



Unclaimed Experience), for example, follows Freud in arguing that psychic trauma is not locatable in one's past, but rather "in the way that its very unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor."<sup>15</sup> She maintains that trauma manifests in belated rearticulations of the traumatic event in one's language and actions, in order to work through the incomprehensibility of what was not fully grasped at the time of its occurrence. This delayed narrative, in turn, becomes traumatic; turning into "...a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience*: 4). The theory also argues that there is an urge, an "inherent necessity," for belated repetitions of experience that can in turn be further traumatizing. The reconstruction of traumatic memory will thus require a delayed dialogue, with the therapeutic aim of liberating the victim from the silence imposed (on language) by the unspeakability of the experience. There is shared ground here with anthropology's awareness of the impossibility of history as a grand narrative.<sup>16</sup> However, anthropology remains acutely sensitive to the cross-cultural interpretations of this therapeutic encounter and inherent power relations between the so-called victim's voice and the listener.

In my work on listening to the compulsive repetitions of generational memories and the re-traumatizing effect of remembering (particularly in dreams), psychoanalytical frameworks have been extremely helpful. But a solely psychoanalytical focus would have failed in capturing two significant features. The first is the culturally generative capacity of such retellings—i.e., the generational, historical, political, and cultural meanings that individuals assign to their narratives and the cultural and political forms they create out of them. This argument is not a matter of normative judgement, nor is it undermining the psychological burden of experience; rather, it is about recognizing the complexity of a metaphorical grey zone and inhabiting the black and the white at once. Secondly, beyond unconscious repressive mechanisms, Iranians' memory-work was also subject to other forms of inarticulation and silencing in the 1980s and belated articulation since the 1990s (particularly in the virtual space). For them, the psychoanalytical belatedness of articulation was intertwined with the silencing of censorship, culture wars, and intra- and intergenerational politics of legitimation or suspicion (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*).

Other psychoanalytical theories of trauma offer commonalities with anthropology

and room for cultural analysis.<sup>17</sup> The Laplanchian and object relations psychoanalytic theories, for example, shift the focus away from the traumatic event and towards processes of remembering and meaning-making (Laplanche and Pontalis). While for Caruth (or Freud) it is the traumatic event that returns and traumatizes and is eventually meant to be re-assimilated and recovered in the analytical process, for Laplanchian and British theories, it is the belated processes of association that render memory traumatic. This approach allows us to situate the experience in the social context in which remembering is enabled, forced, or forbidden. (What happens, for example, when grief endures over time for one whose child was executed in prison but whose death cannot be publicly acknowledged or mourned three decades later?). This approach is thus complementary to anthropological insight into the *context* of traumatic experience and memory-work (Das *The Act of Witnessing; Life and Words*).

Moreover, this approach underscores linguistic and cultural symbolics and therefore the incommensurability of experiences across different factions of a generation. It thus helps to de-universalize trauma, providing another point of com-



plementarity with anthropological scholarship that explores the cultural contexts of mental illness (Kleinman *Culture and Depression*; Kleinman *Illness Narratives*; Good). Finally, by focusing on the interpretations and meanings forwarded by narrators *themselves*, it allows their voices to emerge (in all their complexity and contradictions) within their own cultural grammar and local contexts. This shift of focus to performativity provides a useful conversation with anthropology. And it is in this conceptual conversation that I situate the concept of rupture (as opposed to trauma) for understanding *toromā*. Conceptually, trauma is deemed universal, individual, and singular. Rupture captures the particular, shared, and fluid nature of memory-wounds; it takes our focus away from the external “event” and toward the consequent processes of sharing, remembering, and working through memory-wounds that are otherwise muted by either institutional memory or clinical classifications.

The historically informed modes in which Iranian youth reconstruct experiences of *toromā* underscore political and cultural hermeneutics. *Toromā* is hardly about a single traumatic event; it is scattered across historical occurrences and relays how history is psychologically lived by

infusing itself into the present and the future. Persian vocabularies such as *toromā*, *khoreh-ye ruhi* (psychological canker-like wound), *āsib-e ruhi* (loosely, “psychological damage”), *zarbeh-ye ruhi* (blow to the soul), and *feshār-e ruhi* (distress and pressure on the soul/psyche) emerge within their own psychological grammar (Behrouzan Prozak Diaries). The concept of rupture conveys the diffused nature of these psychological experiences that are rooted in disturbing historical conditions and their aftermath. Ruptures manifest through cultural references, emotional themes, and, significantly, new language forms with which disturbing experiences are performatively internalized and interpreted. Understanding ruptures therefore necessitates understanding the cultural, linguistic, and psychological significations of the historical legacy they belong to.

Trauma is assumed to be experienced by the individual; ruptures, however, are intersubjectively interpreted, negotiated, legitimated, and reconstructed, ultimately informing generational demarcations. Ruptures continually seep into the social mind. Being shared is their condition of possibility. While trauma is assumed to be psychological and pathological, ruptures can be culturally generative, creating new

socialities, communities, language forms, and cultural aesthetics. What differentiates them from a purely pathologized understanding of trauma is also the fact that, while they undoubtedly disrupt life and create psychological pain, they also paradoxically carry the possibility of working through themselves due to the cultural and political forms they can harness. This is additionally significant in terms of their representational ethics: “we are not victims,” young Iranians adamantly remind us.

These generational re-articulations help to anchor oneself in time and distinguish oneself from those who do not share their experience, thus mapping broader social and political discourses that shape one’s subjectivity. As if an attempt to make temporality intelligible as non-linear, incohesive, and eruptive, they make a historical claim toward a decade that marks for them the beginning and the end of times. Anchoring themselves in time is not a matter of chronology or eventfulness (or trauma for that matter); rather, it is about the pull of the evocations, the inner turmoil, projections, transferences, and displacements that a particular moment in their shared past evokes in them and creates a community of avid rememberers.

No word captures the viscosity of ruptures better than the Persian word *khoreh* (canker), the usage of which is situated in a particular literary and historical context. The idea that ruptured pasts invade the present like a “corrosive wound” or canker is often brought up by Iranians with reference to the oft-quoted words of Sadegh Hedayat in his seminal novella *Blind Owl* (Hedayat: 1). “There are certain wounds in life that, like a canker (*khoreh*), continue to gnaw at the soul and eat it away in solitude.” The word *khoreh* is also an old name for leprosy and is sometimes used to describe the invasive nature of cancer. *Khoreh* is not a scar, but a *zakhm* (open wound); not a lifeless remnant of catastrophe, but a consuming and venomous lesion, evoking Veena Das’s concept of “poisonous knowledge,” i.e., embodied knowledge of the past that cannot be unknown and that descends into one’s present (Das *The Act of Witnessing*). For young Iranians, the poisonous knowledge of the 1980s ruptures are incommensurable across generations; they are diffused, fragmented, unpolished, and incomplete, at times perceived as unacknowledged, unrecognized, and unaccounted for. The growing circulation of their recollections is driven in part by the inherent psychological necessity of retelling, and in part by a dynamic generational voice that feels

compelled to make sense of history and to work through the pains of the past while moving toward the possibilities of the future.

Iranians’ diverse articulations of memory-wounds illustrate that *toromā* turns the seemingly de-politicizing and de-socializing notion of psychological trauma on its head by rendering memories cultural and political resources. Compulsive and collective remembering, online and offline, serves as a historicizing call for justice and accountability, while also re-socializing and re-politicizing the otherwise silenced critical discourse of the Iran-Iraq War and the anomie of the 1980s (Behrouzan *Prozak Diaries*). Narratives of rupture also show how generations are constructed and negotiated, not temporally, but based on the political and emotional stakes of *how*, and *what*, one remembers. They inform the identity politics of young Iranians and generate new socialities and cultural forms. The psychological afterlife of social anomie is thus both a clinical and a cultural/political experience; investigating it is therefore situated in a crisis of representation.

### Moving Beyond Trauma and Towards New Representational Ethics

That the “Middle East” is increasingly misrepresented and often reduced to studies of conflict or trauma has political and clinical ramifications. Institutional narratives of both politics and public health often gravitate towards binaries of heroism and victimhood, of “trauma” and “resilience.” Lived experiences, however, surpass time and space and reside somewhere in between. The place to locate them is the messy grounds of ordinary life, in unending negotiations and choices that emerge out of the mundane. These experiences are continually interpreted and re-interpreted, escaping total representation. What ethics of engagement does this representational impasse engender?

In 2014, I started the initiative “Beyond Trauma”, a collaborative project for a cultural critique of current mental health discourses in the region. It aims to address problematic assumptions in scholarship, research, policy, and practice, and to seek situated approaches to wellbeing (Behrouzan “Beyond Trauma”). It focuses on the representational assumptions of terms such as “Middle East” and “mental health,” the psychologization and de-politicization of conditions that are rooted in political disorder, the scarcity of interdisci-

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is a physician, medical anthropologist, and the author of *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran* (2016, Stanford University Press). She teaches at SOAS University of London and leads the collaborative, multi-cited project *Beyond "Trauma": Emergent Agendas for Understanding Mental Health in the Middle East*. The initiative underscores the compelling role of diverse cultural practices, historical conditions, moral contexts, and medical pedagogies in shaping psychological wellbeing and the afterlife of social ruptures.  
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plinary work due to rigid conceptual and methodological boundaries, and the dominance of specific clinical frameworks in public health debates. It underscores, through collaboration among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, the diverse ways in which psychological wellbeing is conceptualized across the region and encourages bottom-up qualitative research in historical, cultural, and clinical domains.<sup>18</sup>

Commonly, "mental health" in the region is evaluated in terms of individual diagnoses such as PTSD. Such an isolated clinical outlook reduces psychological wellbeing to the absence of mental illness, obscuring the sociopolitical reality of ruptures, and reifying social memory into a clinical symptom that ought to be cured and cleansed. It pathologizes memory at the expense of other various aspects of experience that not only generate new forms of life and cultural prospects, but that can also lead to new therapeutic potentials. The point here is not to undermine the burden of the pathological, but to better understand it by situating it in its broader political context and to challenge a black-and-white representation of pathology itself.

Scholarship and practice of mental health primarily focus on the individual and the inner pain; social sciences and humanities underscore the outer, the sociopolitical, the collective. In a nuanced investigation of psychological wellbeing, neither focus should come at the expense of the other. Combining clinical *and* cultural sensibilities can enhance both inquiries. This requires understanding the variety of available cultural and/or clinical resources, in each cultural context, for creating a meaningful life.

Of course, the psychiatric medicalization of social anomie has already been the subject of critical analyses in various disciplines, including medical anthropology.<sup>19</sup> But such critique has yet to grow in relation to Middle East Studies. "Beyond Trauma" aims to place Middle East Studies in a conceptual and methodological conversation with critical studies of science, health, and medicine in order to explore historical, cultural *and* clinical conceptualizations of psychological wellbeing. Part of this endeavor is to critically examine theories of trauma that are uncritically adapted in Middle Eastern contexts, to revisit disciplinary assumptions, and to interrogate the ethical and political stakes of mental health care research, practice, and policy in the region. This requires multi-sited, col-

laborative, and comparative work across different parts of the region, and a serious engagement between arts and humanities, social sciences, and psychiatry and psychological sciences (Behrouzan "Beyond Trauma").

A culturally situated critique of the construct of mental health necessitates an interdisciplinary exploration of cultural forms, historical trajectories, psychoanalytical insights, localized psychiatric and psychological knowledge, local pedagogies, and globalized knowledge-forms including neuroscience and epigenetics. It also requires a commitment to justice, recognition of moral complexities, and innovation (in both research and practice) in the face of uncertainty and precarity. The first step is to listen intimately and with ears stripped of disciplinary assumptions. I hope the conceptual implications of my work on narratives of *toromā* will prove useful beyond Iran, and that they will be complemented –or challenged– by contributions from other parts of the region.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following sections of this paper are specifically informed by the findings of the larger project discussed in *Prozak Diaries* (Behrouzan), particularly chapters 4, 5, and 6, support for which is acknowledged in the book.

<sup>2</sup> See Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries*, chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Behrouzan's *Medicalization as a Way of Life* for an analysis of relational PTSD, and *Prozak Diaries*, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 for a detailed analysis of how life was transformed during the 1980s from the perspective of children and adolescents.

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, I have discussed normative debates on postwar mental health that focus on clinical measurements of veterans' and civilians' individual trauma, and have argued that the psychological ramifications of social and political ruptures include, but cannot be reduced to, clinical symptoms (Behrouzan "Medicalization as a Way of Life"; *Prozak Diaries*).

<sup>5</sup> Existing estimations and mortality reports for the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, are constantly contested and vary across sources. Murray and Woods; Chubin and Tripp; Khoury provide insightful historical overviews. Iran's Martyrs Organization reports the existence of over 550,000 *jānbāz* (war-disabled veterans) and over 42,000 former prisoners of war in Iran, 120,000 of whom being chemically injured veterans, 43,000 documented *jānbāz-e a'sāb va ravān* (psychologically inflicted veterans), and 7,200 veterans with serious psychiatric disorders, and a growing number of immediate kin experiencing the psychological symptoms of depression and anxiety. For more, see Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> For more on *toromatik* dreams, see Behrouzan and Fischer; Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of these reconstructions of memory in the Iranian blogosphere or *Weblogestan*, see Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries*, Chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup> See Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries*, Chapter 4

<sup>10</sup> See chapter 4 of Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries* on top-down mental health awareness campaigns of the 1980s as well as the bottom-up and performative emergence of psychiatric subjectivities among youth since the 1990s.

<sup>11</sup> This section is informed by a detailed discussion of trauma theories in Behrouzan, *Prozak Diaries*, Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> See Young's historical analysis of the political economy and ideological contexts within which PTSD was constructed in the aftermath of World War II and the Vietnam War (Young). Also see Fassin and Rechtman for a historical trajectory of 'trauma' discourses and their limitations. On the paradigm of PTSD in psychiatry, see Rechtman.

<sup>13</sup> See Summerfield for his critique of international organizations offering programs for "posttraumatic stress" in war zones. Fassin and Rechtman too provide a Foucauldian analysis of how trauma victims, certain modes of truth production, and constructions of individual trauma emerged (Fassin and Rechtman).

<sup>14</sup> For more on hyper-remembering, see Clewell.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of scholarship on memory, see the conclusion of Chapter 5 in Behrouzan's *Prozak Dairies*.

<sup>16</sup> Caruth's work relies on re-readings of Freud, whose earlier work defines the traumatic event as external, while his later work focused on a theory of trauma as the origin of consciousness. Lacanians, on the other hand, approach recollection in terms of the impossibility of responding to the destruction caused by the traumatic experience (Laplanche and Pontalis). Also see endnote 15.

<sup>17</sup> See Crapanzano; Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory"

<sup>18</sup> In Chapter 5 of *Prozak Dairies* I have discussed the trajectory of prevailing American trauma theories based on the clinical experiences of the survivors of traumatic memories, the establishment of PTSD in the DSM, as well as connections with the neuroscience of memory (Radstone; Van der Kolk; Kolk et al.). In this school of thought, the ungrasped traumatic event ought to be re-integrated into the consciousness by way of the analytical process. French (Laplanchian theories based on formulations of Laplanche and Pontalis) and British (object relations) schools of psychoanalysis have challenged this approach by underscoring the unconscious processes of producing associations with traumatic memory (Radstone). They call for attention to culturally shaped spaces of mediation between the narrator and the witness/therapist.

<sup>19</sup> See the 2015 Special Issue in *Medicine Anthropology Theory (MAT)*, published after the first Beyond Trauma Workshop: <http://www.medanthrotheory.org/issue/vol-2-3/>.

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→ <sup>20</sup> See Footnotes 13 and 14.

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## CLOSE UP



## Basma Abdelaziz – A Portrait

Sam Nader (pseudonym)

**Keywords:** Basma Abdelaziz, Torture, PTSD  
Trauma fiction, Human rights' activist,

### Introduction

I saw Basma Abdelaziz for the first time on March 15th, 2018. She was discussing her book *Huna badan* (Abdelaziz). Since that day, over a period of four months, I have read five of her books. I have also started following her Facebook page and reading her weekly newspaper column. Each one of her works added to my knowledge about a certain subject, made me think about an issue from a different point of view, or made me feel the pain of a certain group of people. I hope that by drawing this portrait of her, I may introduce her to new readers who may benefit from her writings as I did. Aside from this personal reason that may seem quite subjective, many objective reasons make me want to present her work in this portrait.

First, there are very few studies in the Arabic language about torture and the trauma suffered by its victims, and the same applies to studies about Arab victims. Second, this research (Abdelaziz *Dhākirat al-qahr*) is done by a person who had firsthand experience with torture victims when working with the Nadeem Centre in Egypt in providing help to these victims. Third, the educational background of Abdelaziz made her better qualified to understand the trauma from a medical point of view and to describe it in accurate

terms. Finally but importantly, her literary skills made her present the topic in a language that is readable by a wide audience. Why are these reasons important? Because they result in exposing the subject of torture to Arab society. This society is to a great extent ignorant about the topic; it does not have clear answers for the following questions.

Which acts are considered torture?  
Who does it and why?  
How did the international society fight it so far?

These and many other questions are answered by her studies. And probably what is more important is that her writings make Arab society, which unfortunately tolerates a certain degree of torture, more aware of the trauma suffered by the victims and therefore more sympathetic to these victims.

For the non-Arab reader, the writings of Abdelaziz will give a better understanding of the torture mechanisms used in this region of the world, who the perpetrators are, what their motives are, how the different civil society organizations fight back, etc. If the reader is a scholar, he or she will have more information about a region that is understudied. And perhaps this scholar will get more insights about what is universal and what is particular about torture and

1976	Born in Cairo
2000	Earned BA in Medicine and Surgery
2002	Joined the General Secretariat of Mental Health
2002	Joined the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture
2005	Earned MS in Neuropsychiatry
2007	The book <i>Mā warā' al-ta'dhib</i> (Beyond Torture) was published
2008	The book <i>'Ashān rabbunā yusahhil</i> (May God Make it Easy) was published
2008	The book <i>Al-walad alladhī ikhtafā</i> (The Boy Who Disappeared) was published
2008	Winner of the Sawiris Cultural Award
2008	Winner of the General Organisation for Cultural Palaces Award
2009	Winner of the Ahmed Bahaa-Eddin Award
2010	Earned Diploma in Sociology
2010	Started writing a weekly column in <i>Al-Shorouk</i> newspaper
2011	The book <i>Ighrā' al-sulṭa al-muṭlaqa</i> (Temptation of Absolute Power) was published
2013	The novel <i>Al-Ṭābūr</i> (The Queue) was published
2014	The book <i>Dhākirat al-qahr</i> (Memory of Subjugation) was published
2016	The book <i>Saṭwat al-naṣṣ</i> (The Power of Text) was published
2016	Melville House published an English translation of <i>The Queue</i>
2016	Named one of Foreign Policy's Leading Global Thinkers
2018	Named by The Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute as one of Arabic public opinion's top influencers
2018	The novel <i>Huna badan</i> was published

Table I : Biography, based on an interview with Basma Abdelaziz

the trauma that results from it. If the reader is not a scholar, simply by understanding these issues, she may play an important role as a citizen to pressure the creation of laws that fight torture and the regimes that practice it.

In this essay, I will give a short biography of Basma Abdelaziz, will then try to shed some light on her life as an activist and as a doctor who plays an important role in helping torture victims, and will end this part with a short interview done online with her. The second part of the essay talks

about her body of research and literary work in general.

**How did it start?**

The following is the story told by Abdelaziz about how she started working with torture victims and about her personal experiences while doing so.

After graduating from medical school, she decided to specialize in psychiatry, and wanted to work with torture victims. In 2002, she decided to join the Nadeem

Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture because it was the only NGO working in this domain, on professional bases, with a well-qualified team composed of psychiatrists and lawyers. It was an important experience for her because she met many victims, from Egypt and other countries, such as Sudanese refugees who were trying to find their way to resettlement. She saw with her own eyes the devastating effects of torture and how its victims, as patients, represent a class apart: A torture victim with severe psychological symptoms resists improvement on all types of medications and therapies, and this until his torturer is punished somehow. Only then does the victim feel redressed, and shows complete cure, even without medication.

After working at the Al-Nadeem Center for more than 10 years, she left at the end of 2012 to engage in her postgraduate studies (sociology at Poitiers University-France). She became more involved in campaigning against torture during this time. She believes that a victim who feels shattered, broken, and humiliated, regains his/her feeling of dignity when he/she sees that people start defending him/her and start standing against torture. This constitutes an essential part of the therapeutic process for a victim.

Her activities included visiting victims wherever they are and protesting in front of a custody or police station where a detainee is being tortured. Of course this did not happen without a price to pay. She was denied the post of a staff member in the Faculty of Medicine at Ain Shams University because the national state security office interfered and refused to let her get this post.

#### Online interview

To better understand Abdelaziz's views on torture, I have conducted a short online interview with her. Here are my questions and her answers.

#### What made you focus on the topic of torture and the trauma that ensues?

When I was a student in the medical school, I saw a booklet, with the cover carrying the picture of a totally burnt man. The man was a farmer, accused of stealing a goat as I remember. But he denied all charges, so he was subjected to extreme torture in custody. They threatened to burn him, and this is what they did literally. The officer set fire to his body while he was asleep. Ninety percent of his whole body area was burnt. This booklet was published by two NGOs. El-Nadeem Centre was one of them. After overcoming the

trauma of watching the man's horrible pictures, and knowing that despite the intense tries done by doctors of Al-Nadeem to save his life, he died, I decided to work in this field. I also decided to campaign against torture and to help its victims as much as I can.

#### You have worked directly with Egyptian and Sudanese torture victims and have studied, as part of your research, torture in many other countries. Did you find any particularity in the Egyptian case?

Torture methods are nearly similar all over the world but some differences may exist based on the nature of the country. For example, Sudanese who had experienced torture reported being suspended from trees while having their hands and legs tied, with honey covering their bodies. They were left in this position for hours, sometimes days, to allow mosquitos and other types of insects to nourish on their blood.

Sexual harassment, which may precede rape, is considered to be one of the most effective torture methods in Egypt for both men and women. The stigma of being raped in the society would push anyone to make any confession he is asked to—even for things that he has never

committed. And this is just to avoid this lifelong stigma.

The way the Egyptian society recognizes torture is very far from what we have been taught from the international definitions. A slap on the face, an obscene word, or a serious threat of harming loved ones would never be looked at by anyone as torture. Actually it is torture. The culture of our society, however, accepts a certain degree of violence, and approves it to be daily practiced.

Many torture victims are deeply terrified in such a way that they would never talk about their experience. Honestly speaking, they may have the right to stay silent, because no one is able to guarantee their safety. Sometimes even they face second detention and undergo a second phase of torture to prevent them from making an official complaint.

Recovery depends much on the surrounding environment, whether supportive or not, whether blaming the victim or not. It also depends on the degree of protection and sympathy that the society and family are offering. That is to say, medications only are never enough.

**“It is very difficult to treat torture victims and it would be great to make the society aware of the horrors of torture.” Do you agree with this statement? If you do—even partially—what methods would you suggest to raise this awareness in the Egyptian society?**

Treatment of torture victims is not that difficult. However, it is never complete without the full understanding and support of the society. So, raising awareness about torture burden, explaining to people that “torture” is not a kind of legal punishment, and explaining that everyone deserves a fair humanistic treatment would help much in reaching the state of healing and cure.

I guess that endorsement by public figures would help much especially since our society is not a reading one, so famous people talking against torture would have a good impact. To a lesser extent, short documentaries and movies revealing how this practice would affect the victim and the whole community may be much more helpful than other tools and methods in raising awareness. This is not to say that writings, research, and studies are of no use. They are, but on a different level of action. When we come to the step of fixing and modifying the way the perpetrators

work, we would definitely need the academic view to help us.

### The writings

Abdelaziz is a doctor, activist, researcher, writer, and artist. Each of these qualities has enriched the others and benefited from them. I believe that a big part of the truthfulness in the two novels that I read from her, *Huna badan* and *Al-Ṭābūr*, is a result of her research work (Abdelaziz). Also, being a visual artist made her very careful to make each of her books look aesthetically beautiful, starting from the cover to the internal drawings accompanying the text. In this section, I will give a short preview of the books that I have read from her. *Dhākirat al-qahr* will be put in its own section as it is the book that talks about torture (Abdelaziz).

### Al-Tabūr

*Al-Ṭābūr* is a smart and witty novel. It creates a rich world and efficiently captures most of the elements that characterize a country ruled by a deposit regime. In addition—and this is what it makes it feel so real—it shows how the people have accepted the illogical and meaningless rules and adapted their lives to them (Abdelaziz).

I have found that Abdelaziz was courageous—and this where the activist shows her face—to produce this novel with its clear insinuation. I believe that people like her who are not afraid to express their opinions and who are talented in putting these opinions in a form that is easy for other people to comprehend and to identify with will help in increasing public awareness and understanding of political and social issues—probably much more than a speech given by a politician.

#### **Temptation of Absolute Power**

The book contains very good and comprehensive research work on the abuse of power by the police institution, its reasons, and its implications. It also ends with very interesting conclusions. Even though it was written before 2011, it is a very good read for anyone who wants to study why the January 25th Revolution happened in the first place. It even ends with a prophecy: “Would these incidents lead to something similar to what happened in 1977?” This is what actually happened in the 2011 revolution (Abdelaziz, *Temptation of Absolute Power*: 127).

Abdelaziz observes in the book that unfortunately the great majority of Egyptians believe that a criminal does not have the right to be treated humanely. This creates

an environment that tolerates torture, as explained in *Dhākirat al-qahr*. Abdelaziz does a very good job in explaining how a police agent, who has this abuse of power behavior, is made. And based on the knowledge acquired from her research, she portrays in the novel *Huna badan* some of these techniques and how they are applied to the newly recruited security agents (Abdelaziz).

I must say that what I admire most in this book is that the activist who has experienced police atrocities firsthand (I mean by seeing and hearing from their victims) did not compromise the integrity of the researcher who was still able to produce an unbiased scientific study.

#### **Saṭwat al-naṣṣ**

In this book, Abdelaziz applies critical discourse analysis techniques to analyze the discourse made by Al-Azhar, arguably the most influential religious institution in the Sunni Muslim world, during the power struggle in Egypt in the second half of 2013 (*Saṭwat al-naṣṣ*). I believe that readers would be more interested in following the analysis arguments and would understand more the analysis techniques because they are applied to important incidents that happened in very recent history. The book does a great job in analyzing the

text, enumerating the different techniques used by Al-Azhar, and deducing what was the intention of using them.

#### **Huna badan**

In the imaginary world of this novel, Abdelaziz is able to present different models of different characters who took part in the Egyptian Revolution and the events that followed it. Even though she represents the events in a neutral way—or maybe because of this—I felt sympathy for most of the characters of the novel, even those who were on opposing sides. As I said, these characters are not necessarily on the same side, and many of them do not share my values or my political opinions, but because they are presented as humans, I felt this sympathy. Through the reading of the book, one starts to understand the circumstances that made such a person a killer, what made another person want to risk his life, what made a third person take this side instead of the other opposing side, and so on (*Huna badan*).

This book is the most recent of Abdelaziz's work. I feel that it has benefited the most from the writer's experience in the different domains. All of the novel's elements are well written and accurate: the manipulation of bodies and minds by the ruler, the influence of religious discourse on the

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masses, and the diversity of the individuals in the novel and their motivations, beliefs, and behaviors.

### **Dhākirat al-qahr**

The book is written in a language that is simple yet accurate. This makes it a good read for a specialist as well as a non-specialist. It covers many of the topics related to torture:

- What is torture? What is its purpose? What are the techniques used? How does it differ from legal punishments? What is its history and what is the context in which it was practiced?
- What is stress? Causes of stress? Torture as a shocking event. Adaptation to stress and to torture.
- Shock as a direct cause for psychological disorders. Torture as a cause of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- A very detailed field study on torture victims that includes PTSD symptoms, treatment, situation in prisons, political versus non-political prisoners, torture syndrome, and testimonials.
- The torture perpetrators: who benefits from torture? How are the actual perpetrators convinced/pushed to do this? What are the techniques used? What is the role of the non-participating public?

- The role of medical professionals in helping the torture victims and unfortunately, in some cases, in helping the perpetrators.

The book also asks a number of interesting questions:

- Are dogmatic regimes more inclined to commit torture?
- Are some people by nature willing to participate in torture? Or would any population be influenced by a propaganda that incites fear of an apocalyptic alternative and would participate in—or at least not object to—torture to avoid such an alternative?
- Can torture victims fight back? And can they be cured?

I find that the book contains material that is very useful for researchers of this topic, people working in the domain of helping torture victims, or the victims themselves. I even find it a good self-help book. For example, the part that explains how torture victims adapt/fight back is very useful and inspiring at the same time. Probably the methods they use do not always succeed for torture victims, but they could be more successful in less severe situations in normal life for non-torture-victims (Abdelaziz *Dhākirat al-qahr*).

A final note, as Abdelaziz rightly wrote in the book, is that Egyptian society in its majority accepts torture. This is why I think that this book and other similar studies are very important in making people know how bad torture is and in helping victims not to feel ashamed, excluded, or less than others because of what happened to them.

### **Conclusion**

I believe that Basma Abdelaziz's non-fiction writings give the reader a very good understanding of many of the political and social issues like abuse of power, torture, and religion's role in the Arab region and especially in Egypt. Her novels that probably make her ideas reach a much wider audience complement this research work.

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# ANTI/THESIS

## ANTI-THESIS

## No Such Thing as Society? A Critique of Hegemonic Notions of Trauma in the Research on Cultural Production

Felix Lang

The notion of trauma is widely used in contemporary research on literature, film, music, and other forms of cultural production in the Arab world. Building on a tradition of trauma studies in the humanities, much of this work is predicated on an essentialist and naturalized notion of trauma as developed in the seminal work of the literary scholar Cathy Caruth, among others. In this article I suggest that

such a notion of trauma is problematic as it depoliticizes human suffering and marginalizes non-hegemonic ways of dealing with experiences of violence. In order to address these problems, I propose to turn to social constructivist approaches to trauma.

**Keywords:** Cultural Trauma, Literature, Film, Arab World, Trauma Studies

Violence and human suffering have long occupied an important place in scholarship on the Arab world. Notions of individual and collective trauma would seem to lend themselves to the analysis of cultural products from Moroccan prison literature to Lebanese post-civil war visual art as well as the social and political contexts in which they are produced. Indeed, we have seen the development of a substantial body of research in this field over the past twenty years. What is seldom questioned in these accounts are the assumptions about the relations between the individual, the social, and the political implicitly carried by the trauma paradigm. As I will argue in the following, the espousal of an essentialist, naturalized notion of trauma puts much research in the humanities at risk of uncritically perpetuating a trauma paradigm that depoliticizes human suffering and marginalizes non-hegemonic ways of dealing with experiences of violence. Taking the lead from the social sciences and scholars like Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander et al.), Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman (Fassin and Rechtman), I want to propose a social constructivist approach to trauma as a basis for a self-reflexive use of the term in our research.

In the most current notions of trauma in the humanities, such as Caruth's psychoanalytically informed work (Caruth), trauma is the result of an event so gravely interfering with basic human needs for safety, order, and love that it cannot be integrated into a person's existing conceptual framework. In other words, the experience cannot be processed and the *truth* of the event is hidden in the unconscious and only surfaces in the form of symptoms. Trauma appears as a direct response of the individual to a particular type of event, a kind of psychological reflex. This naturalist or essentialist notion of trauma brackets out the social—except as a stimulus. This is all the more surprising when we take a look at the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the official diagnosis which became the heir of traumatic neurosis in the early 1980s (cf. Fassin and Rechtman 77-97). The lists of potentially traumatic events and symptoms potentially related to traumatic experiences stretch over two pages in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Organisation 275-276). In other words, psychiatrists present us with a system of classification in which *trauma* groups together diverse forms of human suffering. This classification, as all classifications, is a social product, and it is

as such that *trauma* acquires a crucial role in individuals' lives. Through social recognition as trauma, suffering becomes legitimate—and it becomes so as the result of political struggles of women's groups, Vietnam veterans, and many other groups (Fassin 77-97; Leys 5). That trauma came to be understood as the effect of an extraordinary event on an ordinary person, rather than the response of a somewhat deficient individual to otherwise ordinary events, (Fassin and Rechtman 86) in the early 1980s is not so much a greater approximation of some *objective truth* about relations between violence and human suffering as a moral re-evaluation of the phenomenon.

When bracketing out the social seems at least questionable on the individual level, it is on the level of collective traumata that an essentialist notion of trauma becomes untenable. As Alexander has shown (Alexander), cultural traumata do not come into being in a direct and non-reflexive response to a historic event but are the product of what he terms the trauma process through which a certain event becomes recognized as *traumatic* by a social group.

Scholars of the humanities with a research focus on trauma, just as many other actors

who deal with it professionally, such as the humanitarian aid organizations on which Fassin focusses, and of course artists themselves, contribute to the traumatization of events and experiences in two different ways. On the one hand, scholars are claiming for a certain group of victims the legitimacy of trauma by tracing its effects in cultural products. On the other hand, where artists themselves make use of the aesthetic repertoire connected to trauma, scholars act as self-appointed spokespersons—indeed, much of the appeal of the concept of trauma for the humanities seems to stem from the moral urge to make heard the voices of those who are marginalized and to confirm a shared humanity through the universality of trauma.

Recognizing the agency of artists and scholars in these processes is the first step towards a critical and self-reflexive approach to trauma that avoids the “naturalistic fallacy” (8).<sup>1</sup> To be clear, my intention is not to dispute that the experience of violence can produce human suffering. However, as soon as a system of classification for the objectively observable symptoms is developed, it becomes a social construct. Once we acknowledge the social dimension and the social uses of trauma, the artists and scholars' decision

to traumatize works of art is open to debate. Far from being a neutral clinical diagnosis, trauma becomes an instrument and stake in social and political struggles, in which researchers and artists inevitably position themselves—a fact that is of particular importance when dealing with a part of the world which finds itself in a dominated position in the global field of power, such as the Middle East and North Africa.

Trauma, as it used in much of humanities research today, is editing out the social. On the individual level, it does so by positing an autonomous individual confronted with stimuli from its environment. On the collective level, it constructs a social body—a *collective individual*, if you will—whose responses to the outside world are modelled on individual trauma. While the psychiatrist finds the symptoms of PTSD in the individual's behavior, the humanities scholar diagnoses whole social groups and societies with trauma based on their symptomatic cultural products. This focus on the traumatizing event and the traumatized subject leads to a de-contextualization of human suffering. Such de-contextualization relegates to the background social, political, and economic (structural) reasons for human suffering and helps to stabilize

the power relations that characterize the status quo.

Initially, the most alluring feature of trauma theory in its essentialist guise is probably the notion that the universality of trauma offers a way of fostering understanding and solidarity across cultures. When the *traumatic* event and the response of the individual became the focus of attention with the redefinition of traumatic neurosis as PTSD in 1980, hierarchies of suffering were abolished: the suffering of the Holocaust survivor, the Vietnam veteran, the child abuse victim, and the Syrian refugee are equally legitimate. However, the question of how the conditions in which traumatic situations arise have come about in the first place appears of minor importance. Particularly when we deal with trauma as a result of warfare and repression of authoritarian regimes, as in the case of the Middle East, abstracting from the structural inequalities that lie at the heart of man-made violence and trauma leads to an obfuscation of the political stakes involved. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the dominance of the language of trauma in articulating human suffering offers the role of the victim as the only possible role for entering the political arena (Fassin and Rechtman 211-212). This is precisely where the notion

of trauma becomes problematic: it limits the ways political grievances can be articulated and trades recognition of trauma for recognition of the causes for human suffering in social inequality, political power struggles, and economic interests. Accepting as a given the existence of *traumatizing events*, it functions to contain the threat posed to the power structures by those who have suffered and continue to suffer from the violence they produce.

The dialectic that turns a notion of trauma that emancipated victims from the moral judgment of society into an instrument of the political disempowerment of social groups in dominated positions is also evident in the marginalization and devaluation of ways of dealing with human suffering that do not conform to the hegemonic trauma paradigm. The importance of bearing witness to traumatic experiences, and the necessity of their recognition as such for overcoming their effects, on an individual and collective level, is an interesting case in point. For instance, Kidron compares children of survivors of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime in Canada and second generation Holocaust survivors. In Khmer families, the silence surrounding the experiences of the genocide is not experienced as oppressive. The parents' experiences, no doubt *traumatic*

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in the DSM classification, are not being traumatized in the community's discourse and fail to produce the expected symptoms, a fact that Kidron puts down to a set of social, religious, and economic reasons (Kidron, "Silent Legacies"; "Alterity"). The parents' silence, in this case, is not experienced as unsettling by the children; it is seen as a sign of strength. While such non-hegemonic ways of dealing with human suffering are routinely pursued on the level of the individual and smaller social groups—albeit without being recognized as legitimate—the state of affairs is very different on the level of society. Here, witnessing and testimony have become central elements in the process of dealing with human suffering on a collective level, which has become a global norm for dealing with the violent past in post-conflict societies. Truth commissions, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other transitional justice mechanisms, including international criminal courts (e.g. Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia) that have been developed from the 1990s onwards (see Simić for an overview) make clear how the notion of trauma is projected on the social plane and used to implement a hegemonic memory regime, which, incidentally, sidelines socio-economic questions (Miller; Nagy). Deviations from the norm, as in for

instance post-civil war Lebanon with its memory cultures fragmented along communitarian lines, are frequently condemned on moral grounds. On the other hand, an initiative like the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which dealt with human rights abuses during the Years of Lead (1959-1999) in Morocco and ultimately served to legitimize an authoritarian regime, is met with approval by the international community. Making trauma the prism through which human suffering as a result of socio-political conflicts is perceived opens the door to imposing a way of dealing with the past that serves the interests of the dominant players in the field of power, in particular the states of western Europe and the US, for instance by ignoring socio-economic reasons for conflict.

That said, my argument should not be misconstrued as summarily rejecting trauma as an idiom for articulating human suffering. Neither do I claim that non-hegemonic ways of doing so are necessarily less problematic. But whatever idiom we chose to talk about human suffering in its many guises and forms, we need to be aware that this choice is a political one.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The established critique of trauma as a Eurocentric concept still adheres to a naturalistic notion of trauma. It aims to extend the notion of trauma to include, and thus recognise as legitimate, modes of suffering restricted to minorities and postcolonial subjects. See Andermahr for a recent overview; also Craps.

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## ANTI-THESIS

## Towards a Critical Trauma Studies: A Response to Felix Lang

Vivienne Matthies-Boon

In this response, I agree with Felix Lang about the need to problematize trauma studies' prevalent and underlying assumptions. However, I suggest that we should go a step further, namely towards a phenomenological account of trauma rooted in Frankfurt School of critical theory. Such an approach enables us to pay attention to the political power dynamics within which trauma studies is enmeshed,

and argue against the reification and objectification of trauma. It also allows for an intersubjective (re)interpretation of trauma that explicitly grounds the experiences of trauma in *social* and *political* contexts.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Critical Theory, Politics, Phenomenology

First, of all, let me just say that I agree with much of what Felix Lang has written. And so, this anti-thesis is not so much an anti-thesis as a call to take his essay a few steps further. Or dare I say, it is an attempt to move it towards a self-reflexive *political radicalization* of trauma studies. By that, I mean the deliberate attempt to question (and thereby change) the social structures and political values of trauma studies as well as the realities that trauma studies engage with. I argue that those of us working within trauma studies (however loosely defined) should undertake a *self-reflexive* examination of the political biases of our knowledge production and explicitly aim towards a *critical theoretical* interpretation of our practices. I believe that by drawing inspiration from Frankfurt School of critical theory, we can 1) take a stance against the reification and objectification of trauma, 2) pay attention to the political power dynamics within which trauma studies is enmeshed, and 3) argue for an intersubjective (re)interpretation of trauma that explicitly links the self to the social and political world(s).<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt School of critical theory, in its varied forms,<sup>2</sup> has above all taught us that theoretical knowledge production and socio-political practices are inherently intertwined. And the aim of critical theory is to offer a (never-ending and self-reflexive) critique of the



established political status quo—in which individual, social and political realms are interconnected—with the explicit aim of emancipation and liberation from divergent modes of alienation.

In terms of trauma studies, this means first of all recognizing that trauma as such is not a neutral, objective diagnostic concept, but rather that the very notion of trauma may entail an objectification and reification of divergent experiences and expressions. As Felix Lang and others before him (see Bracken; Craps; Hacking; Young) have argued, the concept of trauma—commonly linked to PTSD—is not politically neutral but a direct result of a particular political struggle—namely the Vietnam War veterans' lobby—which risks projecting onto history and others a universalist conception of trauma that potentially erases differences of experience and expression. In doing so, and through its diagnostic categories, trauma studies validates and invalidates certain experiences of trauma. Not only that, but the diagnostic and medicalizing tendency in much of the trauma studies literature also potentially stigmatizes the *abnormal* traumatized *Other*, whilst reducing philosophical questions of meaning and the soul to issues of malfunctioning brain-wiring (Bracken 34). Moreover, as Susannah

Radstone has pointed out, the eventism inherent in mainstream conceptions of trauma also illustrates its Westocentric underpinnings (Radstone): trauma is an *abnormal* overwhelming event (or short series of events) rather than the structural underpinning of life itself (see Craps). For instance, as Steph Craps remarked, in Sierra Leone the “normal experience is one of oppression, deprivation and upheaval; freedom, affluence and stability—the Western standard of normality—are the exception rather than the rule” (Craps 4). Western trauma interventions were hence sharply criticized by the local population: “You call it a disorder... We call it life” (Craps 4)

Having said all this, if we do want to pursue a more critical notion of trauma that is not blinded to its biases and diversity of expressions, we do not have to (re)invent the entire wheel. There is scholarship that we can draw on. Particularly noteworthy here are the philosophical and phenomenological undertakings on trauma by Patrick Bracken and Robert D Stolorow—unfortunately absent from Felix Lang's considerations—which enable us to consider the different ways in which trauma entails the (attempted) breaking of our meaningful engagement with the world. The point here is explicitly not to develop

diagnostic criteria but rather to note how traumatic suffering—including repression and deprivation—might be *existentially* experienced, thereby opening trauma studies up to distinctly philosophical and phenomenological analyses. Particularly when such a phenomenological understanding of experiences of, for instance, an unsafe and unpredictable world, is linked with the critical and explicitly political writings on *continuous traumatic stress* (CTS), the door is opened towards a more political, phenomenological, and reflexive conception of trauma. The term CTS was developed by anti-apartheid activists in South Africa (Straker) and explicitly argues against the eventism of trauma studies through the insistence that in much of the world traumatic experiences are relentless, structural, and continuous (Eagle and Kaminer; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoal-Zuckerman; Pat-Horenczyk et al.; Stevens et al.; Straker). Importantly, trauma is also often directly perpetrated by or at least informally tied up with the established political orders who frequently reign with a sense of impunity and unaccountability, thereby aggravating traumatic stress. In an anti-diagnostic stance, the activists also insist that the different expressions of traumatic stress are not a pathological but a normal response to political repression, human rights violations, and other forms

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of radical unsafety—from which therapeutic safety cannot be guaranteed. CTS thus urges us to re-evaluate the particularly Westocentric underpinnings of the dominant conception of trauma, and the hierarchies of suffering and alienation it imposes.

Felix Lang is correct to note there is a flattening of trauma, in the sense that much of the mainstream literature on trauma regards these traumatic experiences (from Rwanda to Syria) to be the same as it pays scant attention to the vastly different social, cultural, political contexts and meaning-making practices. Yet, whilst there is a flattening, there is also a hierarchization of trauma that exposes its own political biases. For instance, much of the existing trauma studies literature takes the Holocaust as being the most unique and ultimate pinnacle of trauma. This is not to take away from the gravity of the Holocaust and the systematic destruction of human life as such, but when we consider the relative absence of serious considerations of the slave trade or indeed the Nakba (Sayigh) in the theoretical trauma studies literature—as well as the fact that many of the international centers of trauma expertise are located in Israel (rather than say Gaza or the West Bank)—one cannot help but wonder about the political orientations and purposes of trauma studies

knowledge production itself. The question here is: who has a political voice? Whose voice is articulated and whose voice is heard, and by whom? What does it mean to have a political voice, and is the witnessing that trauma studies calls us to do always emancipatory (Caruth)? Or can it itself lead to further repression and silencing through in- and out-group creations?

It is indeed time that we recognize the power dynamics at play within trauma studies itself: trauma is not a neutral construct, but one whose knowledge production is tied up with social, economic, and political power (like other fields of scholarship). One good starting point is, I argue, to create links between trauma studies and the critical political theory of the Frankfurt School, thereby seeking to avoid the tendency of reification of trauma as a neutral category and highlighting its distinctly political manifestations and implications. Linking trauma more closely to critical theory enables us to explore the dimensions of alienation, reification, and political power imbalances and injustices in varied forms. For instance, in the case of Egypt, directly linking the existential traumatic experiences of activists in post-revolutionary Egypt with Jurgen Habermas's colonization of the lifeworld

enabled an elucidation of the political (counter-revolutionary and strategic) purposes behind the emotional and physical destruction, social atomization, and tactics of polarization and dehumanization experienced by activists (Matthies-Boon and Head). Whilst, vice versa, phenomenological analyses of existentially traumatic experiences can lead to a clarification as to how the destruction of a person's or a group's social and political world contributes to particular processes of alienation and political (de)mobilization—and are thus important for our critical theoretical social and political undertakings (Matthies-Boon). Critical theoretical conceptions of trauma allow us to link the phenomenological experiences of personal estrangement and distress to processes of political alienation and social destruction, thereby deepening our analysis. Hence, the study of trauma is a clear political act, but one that must be situated in a mode of never-ending self-reflexive radical critique—one that does not provide easy answers but in fact continuously raises radically uneasy questions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, in the space of this response I do not have sufficient capacity to develop the more precise outlines of a Frankfurt School conception of trauma, but this is the subject of my forthcoming book *Life, Death and Alienation: Counter-Revolutionary Trauma in Egypt*.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that with Frankfurt School critical theory I include the divergent thoughts and works of the different generations, including (but not limited to) Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser.

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# OFF-TOPIC

## Negotiating Life in Times of Crisis: The Transnational Return Migration of Refugee Adolescents and Young Adults from Germany to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Simon Moses Schleimer

In this article, the concept of transnational migration serves as a foundation for analyzing the perspectives of children and adolescents on family movements of migration, their transnational practices, and their sense of belonging. The article discusses, on the basis of a case study, the critical situations children and young people encounter in the context of transnational migration and education. Drawing on Lorenzer's methodology of hermeneutical cultural analysis, the researcher conducted a set of interviews with refugee

children, adolescents, and young adults who have returned with their families from Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan. The article shows that, in light of the conflicts arising for the interviewees in the experience of transnational return, a special emphasis on education can aid their integration into the new society.

**Keywords:** Transnational migration, Return migration, Iraqi Kurdistan, Crisis, Education

### Introduction

Until the 1990s, studies on return migration emphasized the need to consider the return of migrants to their countries of origin a "second migration" (Wolbert 19) due to the challenge to the return and reintegration process posed by unrealistic expectations and idealized, mythical imaginations around the country concerned on the part of the re-entrants. Some scholars went as far as regarding a return—in the words of Unger a "special case" (30) within movements of migration—as more conflict-laden than the initial migration (Markowitz and Stefansson). In the view of Gmelch and others, a return was the definitive end point of the migration process.

In the 1990s, an approach centering on the concept of transnational migration has greatly expanded theories of migration and return migration, taking into account the nature of the phenomenon as diverse in its dynamics, emerging through repeated migrations, symbolic transnational ties, or transnational practices of daily life:

We have defined transnationalism as the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement. Immigrants who build

such social fields are designated 'transmigrants'. Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – that span borders. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, feel concerns, and develop identities. (Glick Schiller et al. 1f.)

Likewise, researchers informed by the transnational approach assert that the concept of return migration has to be “broadened and considered as a transnational process rather than a one-way occasion” (Eastmind 17). A return features a distinctive *turn-over* dynamic and may be followed by further migrations.

The mainstream of international migration studies prior to the advent of the transnational approach “can be guilty of masking [...] the experience of children and young people” (Hatfield 244). They were seen as “baggage” (Orellana et al. 588) within family migrations and as “vulnerable, needy and powerless” (White et al. 7). The present-day discipline of migration studies accords them the status of active partners in familial migrations, with interests, experiences, and wishes of their own. However, their specific experiences and perspectives remain under-researched (Hunner-Kreisel and Bühler-Niederberger).

The article at hand offers a view on the transnational approach to migration that proceeds from education science and brings a psychosocial perspective to bear on the issues. It discusses, on the basis of a case study, the experiences of Kurdish<sup>1</sup> children, adolescents, and young adults who have returned with their families from Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan. The interviewees developed ties to Iraqi Kurdistan several years before they returned with their families and are involved in diverse transnational practices; their identities appear mutable in accordance with the environment they are living in, and most of them consider their return to be only temporary and plan to migrate back to Germany or to another country in the future. The analysis will focus on the interviewees' individual experiences and on the role of education within the process of return; a specific emphasis on challenges, contradictions, and crises emerging from the experience of return migration will seek to cast light on an area hitherto neglected in transnational migration studies.

### Transnational Migration and Education

International discourse on migration once featured a prominent focus on the problems, conflicts, and difficulties experienced by migrants in relation to their migration; iconic manifestations of this

attitude appear in what Park termed the “marginal man” and Oberg's concept of “culture shock.” The predominant view on migrants characterized them as uprooted and torn between different cultures. The concept of transnational migration has revised this limited perspective and introduced the idea that migrants switch creatively and autonomously between countries, regions, and cultures (Glick Schiller et al.). A consequent emphasis within current migration research is migrants' potential to make use of migration-related resources, competencies, and opportunities.

The concept of transnational migration has also gained considerable attention in research studies in educational science. Of especial note is the study conducted by Fürstenau on young adults who repeatedly migrate between Germany and Portugal. The author shows that continuous migration between two education systems is more of an enrichment than a challenge for the migrants. The study by Sievers, Griesse, and Schulte focuses on migrants who have developed transnational activities between Germany and Turkey; its authors illustrate the capacity of transnational migration to present an opportunity to overcome the discriminatory structures of Germany's education

system. Research by Goeke has demonstrated that transnational migration plays a positive role in boosting educational success for the adolescents within his study in both their countries, Germany and Croatia. Additionally, German research from the 1980s and 1990s has shown that placing emphasis on education and educational success can be an important strategy for reintegrating children and adolescents from so-called “guest worker” families into their or their parents’ countries of origin after their return there from Germany (cf. Wolbert).

### **Transnational Migration and Crises**

The current discourse on transnational migration may risk creating the impression that migrants can adapt effortlessly to different conditions in several countries and expand their room for maneuver in such a way as to avoid discrimination and disadvantage (Gesemann 12). It casts transnational migration as almost exclusively positive, rather than as a process that may give rise to contradictions and crises. Only a few researchers emphasize the challenging aspects of transnational migrations. Rohr has contributed significantly to the discourse by investigating children and adolescents’ transnational lives in Ecuador and finding that broken promises, unfulfilled hopes, and disappointments may be

concomitants of transnational migrations. This contradiction and complexity are aspects which the discourse on transnational migration should not shy away from including and exploring.

From a psychosocial point of view, all forms of migration are conflictual experiences associated with feelings of separation and sorrow (Rohr et al. 8). Researchers have characterized migrations as a “shock” or as a traumatic experience, even where these effects are not evidently visible (Grinberg and Grinberg 9; Akhtar).<sup>2</sup> The article at hand assumes that every migration is accompanied by a crisis. Filipp and Aymanns define a crisis as a critical life event that challenges an individual’s self-concept. The literature asserts that a crisis is a normal situation every migrant has to cope with (Kronsteiner 329f.), precipitated by the loss of people, objectives, places, language, culture, and/or traditions (Grinberg and Grinberg 28). Garza-Guerreo points to the mourning of these losses as one of the major challenges in overcoming the crisis. Throughout this process, migrants can rebuild their identity and the migration can become an experience of innovation and renewal. If the process goes less positively, migrants may develop chronic conditions with pro-

found and lasting effects and manifestations (Grinberg and Grinberg).

This psychosocial perspective on transnational migration can serve as a basis for raising new questions that, though yet to attract the focal interest of research in this field, are key to our understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of transnational migrations. It is imperative in this context to determine whether transnational migrations can also cause crises to arise when they are not single and permanent, but multiple and in each instance temporary.

### **Return Migration to Iraqi Kurdistan<sup>3</sup> and Education**

In the early 1990s studies on Kurdish children, adolescents, and young adults in Germany indicated that transnational practices have not been inherent to their lives. Şenol, who conducted the first study on Kurdish children and adolescents in Germany, highlights complex identity crises as part of the processes by which these young people integrate into German society. The study describes its subjects’ inability to align their families’ expectations with those of their societal surroundings. In consequence, many of Şenol’s interviewees felt rejected by one or the other. Kızılhan found that most of the Kurdish adolescents interviewed for his study did



not feel properly part of German society because of the lack of official recognition of the Kurds' ethnic identity. Implicit in this finding is an *either-or* approach: either the adolescents are *Kurdish* or they are *German*. Schmidt and Skubsch disagree with this apparent binary opposition in their studies, published in the late 1990s. They point out that Kurdish adolescents with experiences of migration develop an identity that allows them to adapt to both societal and familial expectations. However, most of the adolescents interviewed for their studies wish to integrate into the German society. Since the widespread use of the internet and social media, along with political and social changes which have ushered in new opportunities for regular visits particularly to Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish children and adolescents living in Germany and other European countries have acquired the opportunity to come to know their family members in the Kurdish regions and familiarize themselves more closely with the Kurdish language and traditions and practices of daily life. In addition to these symbolic transnational practices and temporary mobility, an increasing number of Kurdish families have decided to return permanently or temporarily from various European countries to Iraqi Kurdistan since 2003 (cf.

Askari; Emanuelsson; Keles; Salam; Schleimer).<sup>4</sup>

The children, adolescents, and young adults investigated in the study at hand returned between 2003 and 2013 to the highly dynamic society of Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the US liberated the Kurdish region in the northern part of Iraq in 1991, turning the region into a semi-autonomous area after a long history of violent conflicts, Iraqi Kurdistan has been engaged in a "dramatic and [...] on-going transformation process" (Salam 2). Economic growth due largely to oil production, socio-political and cultural developments, and higher levels of stability and security, especially subsequent to the establishment after Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003 of a new constitution for Iraq defining Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous region, have precipitated processes of change and lent them momentum. In the context of this study, changes in the significance of education within Iraqi Kurdistan acquire specific import. Yakub Othman has suggested that most of the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan did not attach great importance to education during times of conflict and war. However, since the beginning of the above-described processes of change, education has gained great precedence as a value in the region and, as Salam

points out, as a further catalyst to societal transformation (279).

According to Salam, returned migrants hope both to support the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to promote its independence and to profit from the manifold development processes currently in progress in the region. Askari states accordingly that many Kurds returned due to "new political and economic possibilities" (193). However, while they receive acknowledgement among some sectors of Kurdish society as valuable contributors to the processes of transformation and pluralization currently underway, returned migrants face hostility from other quarters because of the experiences and lifestyles they had enjoyed abroad (Salam). Returned children, adolescents, and young adults may equally be confronted with suspicion from members of society who do not value transnational identities, practices, and realities and are instead keen to maintain "old values" and "tradition," as King puts it.

### Research Methodology

The qualitative research study at hand explores the question of how Kurdish children, adolescents, and young adults with experience of transnational migration cope with their families' return from

Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan, and specifically analyzes the role of education in the return process. During field research carried out between 2011 and 2013, the researcher conducted a total of 32 in-depth interviews with returned Kurdish children, adolescents, and young adults aged between fourteen and twenty-five. The strategy for the selection of interviewees was based on the “snowball effect” (Reinders). The interviews were conducted in the three largest cities in Iraqi Kurdistan in locations determined by the interviewees, such as schools, universities, at the interviewees' homes, or in public places such as cafés or parks.

All interviewees were born in Germany or moved there with their families to various different regions and cities at a young age, during either the first Gulf War (1990-1991) or the intra-Kurdish conflict (1994-1998). They returned with their families to one of the three biggest cities in Iraqi Kurdistan after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. All of them developed transnational practices during their time in Germany, which emerged on the basis of lasting and profound relationships with family members and friends in Iraqi Kurdistan supported by modern means of communication and regular visits to the region. They passed through the German

educational system, some of them attained school-leaving qualifications in Germany, and all of them continued their education after their return.

The interviewees showed a distinct desire to communicate, which was of importance and benefit to conducting a narrative interview. However, some of them were unfamiliar with the narrative form of the interview and did not respond to a storytelling prompt. The interviewer therefore discussed the opening question with all interviewees before the start of the interview, in addition to using further stimuli, such as alternative versions of the opening question, during the interview in order to elicit more narrations. The structure of the interviews was designed to prompt self-reflection, meaning that their narrations foregrounded their personal thoughts and memories.

Analysis of the interviews took place on the basis of Lorenzer's method of scenic understanding, which is based on a methodology of in-depth hermeneutical cultural analysis and seeks to understand the multiple layers of meaning within interviews and texts. The use of the method permits the identification of social processes, relationships, and realities that are not immediately visible and that the inter-

viewees do not explicitly express. The interpretation of the interviews commenced with the collection of “first impressions” (Salling Olesen and Weber 21), followed by an exploration of specific sequences with the aim of validating, revising, or refuting the initial approaches to the text's understanding. The interpretation process additionally sought to infer the significance of education to the adolescent returners. Concluding, the use and arrangement of further sequences enabled the researcher to present the findings in the form of a single case analysis, thus elaborating a holistic and realistic view of the interviewee's reality. While this method does not generate quantitative findings, it does allow the formulation of certain generalizations by identifying aspects common to all single case analyses (Geertz 37).

In pointing out that hermeneutical interpretations are always culture-bound, Chakkarath raises the question of whether it is even possible to understand and analyze interviews or texts whose interlocutors or authors are located in different cultures (272). He suggests critical discussion and reflection of different interpretations as essential for avoiding the falsification of understandings and interpretations. The researcher sought to do justice to this

injunction by embedding the interpretation process in the context of two interdisciplinary groups consisting of members from diverse methodological and disciplinary backgrounds and concluding the interpretation of each interview in a psychoanalytical supervision meeting.

### Case Study

Yin considers that even a “single case study can be the basis for significant explanations and generalisations” (6). This article will therefore present only one case study, which will act as an example of the interviewed children, adolescents, and young adults’ lives in Iraqi Kurdistan after their return from Germany. Its selection derives from its incorporation of two aspects shared by most case studies in the sample: the way the interviewees experienced their return and the role of education in the process.

Firmesk<sup>5</sup> was 23 years old at the time of the interview in 2013. In 1996, at the age of six, she fled with her mother, her sister, who is four years younger than her, and her brother, who is five years younger, from their home town in the south-east of Iraqi Kurdistan to a city in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. Her youngest brother, who was four years old in 2013, was born in Germany. Firmesk’s father had

fled to Germany several years before his wife and his children. All members of the family have taken German citizenship. Firmesk was unaware of the reasons for her family’s migration to Germany and stated that she “has never asked.”<sup>6</sup> She assumed that her father had migrated as a *guest worker*, and did not know that labor migration from Iraqi Kurdistan to Germany was not possible.

Firmesk attended a comprehensive school and had planned to study education-orientated social work after leaving, but failed to win a university place, after which her parents decided to return permanently to their old home town in Iraqi Kurdistan so that she might continue her education. Returning in 2012, she commenced a course of bachelor’s degree studies in humanities at a public university, and has returned temporarily to Germany on several occasions for practical placements and summer schools.

Although she has been asked to work as a lecturer at a university in Iraqi Kurdistan, Firmesk still plans to return to Germany to continue her studies there. She hinted in the interview that her return to Iraqi Kurdistan may not be the last migration in her life, and also commented that she does not yet know where to settle in the

future and that she wants to keep all her options open.

The way in which Firmesk talked about her life before migrating to Germany was particularly striking. She described her childhood in chronological order, concentrating on facts without adding thoughts or reflections or discussing matters in emotional terms. She referred to her grandmother as the most important person in her childhood because she had raised her and her siblings while her mother worked to provide for the family after her father’s migration to Germany. However, she would not be drawn out further on her time with her grandmother:

As I told you before: I was at my grandmother’s house very often and she sang songs to me. It was a nice time. I had a nice childhood. [...] Yes, I was [...] a good child.

She mentioned her grandmother only once more, while describing the period immediately after the family’s arrival in Germany:

Suddenly we were away from grandma. We had been with her every day, every night. Yes [...] I was alone in Germany and my parents had other things to do.

They wanted to have a new life and find schools for us and [they wanted] us to be successful and have better opportunities. But I had my old life. Suddenly it was gone and I was supposed to talk in German all the time because it was important to my parents. Then I forgot how to talk in Kurdish because I was so busy learning German.

Firmesk said very little about her life in Germany. After talking about her parents and their desire for her and her siblings to succeed in the German education system, she focused on descriptions related to her return migration to Iraqi Kurdistan. She referred to having constantly struggled with disapproval from the people now around her, but added quickly that she has not let their opinions influence her life and behavior. She complained of rejection by some of her fellow students and lecturers:

But there are some boys who do not want to accept that a girl is more successful than they are. They are like that. It hurts them when a girl is more successful! [...] They always say 'You are way too German!' I feel unwanted.

When I asked her how she handles situations of this kind, she confessed:

To be quite honest: it is hard. Sometimes ... I don't feel understood and I don't know what to do. When I talk to my parents they are mad at me or they fear that I won't finish my studies. So I don't tell them. [...] I tried to talk to my mother. She told me 'We are here again, it's different. Do concentrate on your studies.' I am successful in my studies ... Fortunately! That is why they cannot say anything. But everything is chaotic [here in Iraqi Kurdistan] and everyone trusts their gut. But I get used to it quickly. I had to. What shall I say? I miss Germany a lot and would like to be there. And when I am there ... I have no place at a university although I did wait for one for a long time. [...] It's okay. I will stay [in Iraqi Kurdistan] if I get the good job at the university they promised me. Not a single person understands it. I don't even understand myself. [...] I always say: 'I am both' [Kurdish and German].

At first sight, Firmesk appears a typical representative of the transnational migrant as depicted in current research. She incorporates both Germany and Iraqi Kurdistan into her life, physically by being mobile as well as symbolically by remaining in contact with family members and friends in Germany, reading German

newspapers online, and watching German television. It appears, then, as if she is able to integrate her experiences in Germany and Iraqi Kurdistan into her daily life and tap into the full potential of the transnational practices she performs. A driving factor for Firmesk's active pursuit of a transnational way of life appears to be her education. Her international mobility, in enabling her to continue working towards her objectives in another country, helps her to overcome or work around the educational limitations imposed by circumstances elsewhere, in this case her inability to secure a university place in Germany. Firmesk describes her ongoing migrations and border-crossing practices as a natural and personally non-challenging part of her life.

However, from a psychosocial perspective, the interview with Firmesk reveals a number of conflicts and challenges. It seems as if it is almost impossible for her to talk about crises, which emerged in the context both of her migration to Germany and of her return migration to Iraqi Kurdistan. She hints at them, but essentially either reinterprets them or places them, to a substantial extent, under what might be called a taboo. One reason for her reluctance or inability to talk about the crises, conflicts, and challenging and emo-

tional aspects of her experience of migration may be the weight of parental expectation in regard to her and her siblings' education. Firmesk in particular, whose stagnating educational career was one of her parents' reasons for returning to Iraqi Kurdistan, is subject to the expectation to subordinate all else in her life to the achievement of educational goals. To this end, the expectation upon Firmesk is that she migrates and return migrates without experiencing—or expressing—any difficulties, focuses wholeheartedly on her studies after migrating, and becomes educationally successful by making use of the resources a transnational lifestyle provides. Firmesk's statements in the interview reveal that she does not want to be a burden to her family and therefore constantly and ambitiously attempts to fulfil her parents' expectations, which includes the denial or suppression of any migration- and return migration-related experience of crisis.

Firmesk's acquiescence to this exclusive focus on education helps her to handle the crises arising through her experience of migration and return migration by pursuing her educational goals as a distraction from confrontation with the crises. Educational success offers her a basis for the further development of her transna-


tional lifestyle because she knows that a return to Germany will only be realizable if her educational success is sufficient to admit her to a university there. Moreover, educational success provides her with self-confidence, which in turn generates a sense of stability in her new environment after her return migration. It is a stability not seriously undermined by the conflicts she describes experiencing with fellow students and other members of Kurdish society due to her transnational identity and lifestyle. Indeed, educational success offers her a defense for her way of living and increases her acceptance by her social environment.

### Discussion

As a case study representative of all interviews, Firmesk's story shows that the interviewees do not consider their return from Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan as permanent, but instead as a return in a transnational sense; they keep their options open without committing themselves to one context. The interviews, as exemplified by Firmesk's case, also demonstrate the occasional transnational activity and mobility the returned children, adolescents and young adults tend to show. These transnational activities and practices, and their focal point—on either Germany or Iraqi Kurdistan—differ in accordance with the

life stage of the interviewees and the contexts in which they live. Firmesk, for instance, did not become more transnationally active until after her family's return to Iraqi Kurdistan. She started moving between Germany and Iraqi Kurdistan in the context of her studies at the university in Iraqi Kurdistan. The primary transnational practices in which she engages on a day-to-day basis are of a symbolic nature and aimed at maintaining ties to her former life in Germany.

In a manner again representative of all interviews, Firmesk's case study indicates that despite their involvement in transnational practices, the young people's transnational return from Germany to Iraqi Kurdistan is more than simply a return to their or their parents' country of origin. Instead, the children, adolescents, and young adults experience the return as a new migration, with attendant conflictual experiences. The apparent ease of the border-crossing activities engaged in by these young people belies the multi-layered, complex, and potentially crisis-generating nature of the turning point marked by the return. Delcroix found that discussion of the migration among families is an important factor in coping with migration-related crises. However, like most of the interviewees, Firmesk did not talk with her




family about their migration to Germany or the reasons behind it, nor about their return to Iraqi Kurdistan or that region's history; neither did the family discuss the migration-related crises that arose. A reason for the apparent taboo on these topics may lie in the trauma resulting from the systematic persecution of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein's regime and/or in families' experiences during their flight from Iraqi Kurdistan. Differences within families in attitude towards returning to Iraqi Kurdistan may be another factor; the interviewees' parents often identify strongly with Iraqi Kurdistan, and most of them returned with the intent of remaining there permanently. They consider Iraqi Kurdistan their home, from which they had been separated (cf. Ammann). Their children take a contrasting view: to them, Iraqi Kurdistan is not their sole locus of belonging, and their families' return is part of an ongoing, reversible, and transnational migration (cf. Baser). The parents, however, expect their children to fully accept their decision to return permanently and appear to impose taboos upon doubts and upon discussion of challenges encountered in relation to the return, uneasiness around their new life in Iraqi Kurdistan, and any sense of crisis the return has occasioned.

A further finding of Firmsesk's case which is exemplary for the wider sample relates to the status of educational success for both the parents and their children, with the former expecting the latter to attain or continue to attain it after returning to Iraqi Kurdistan. The interviews show that education takes on a range of functions in the interviewees' lives. First, achieving or maintaining educational success is, for most of them, the only way to continue their transnational practices and lifestyles. They plan to return to Germany, at least temporarily, after completing their schooling or graduating from university in order to continue their education. Educational success affords them the additional opportunity to expedite their integration into and acceptance in Kurdish society. Accordingly, transnational identities that appear, in the interviewees' accounts, to cause conflict with some sections of society tend to meet with greater acceptance when their bearers are educationally successful. In this context, I note an additional practical advantage of a transnational educational pathway in the shape of improved opportunities to live and work in either Germany or Iraqi Kurdistan. More broadly, the multiple opportunities that are concomitants of educational success in Germany and Iraqi Kurdistan, and the focus on education that precipitates this

success, help the interviewees to overcome crises arising from the experience of return migration by supporting their psychosocial stability and general wellbeing, giving them aims for the future, allowing them to maintain a transnational lifestyle and transnational practices of daily life, and enabling them to integrate into society in Iraqi Kurdistan without committing themselves fully to it.

### Conclusion

The qualitative study at hand has investigated a number of issues that had previously not been the focus of close attention in recent discourse on transnational migration. While most studies in the mainstream of this discourse continue to concentrate on adults/parents as the principal actors of migrations, this study pays attention to the experiences of children, adolescents, and young adults. Most of the young people interviewed for the study had no choice but to follow their parents' decision, yet we would do them a disservice if we were to characterize them as passive; they develop their own transnational practices and dynamics, which may differ from those of their parents. Transnational practices, especially those related to education, also fulfil functional roles. Educational and academic success in both Germany and Iraqi Kurdistan appears to help the





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interviewees to navigate their transnational lives and opens up multiple opportunities for their futures in either or both countries.

One focal point of interest in this study has been the analysis of crises occasioned by transnational migration. It is evident from the findings that the interviewees' transnational return can trigger such crises, even, strikingly, where another migration is already planned and the situation of living in one country is only temporary. Focusing on education can help the young people to overcome these crises. It fulfils a stabilizing function by strengthening their capacity for self-perception, their transnational practices and lifestyles, and their opportunities to integrate into Kurdish society, which values educational success. However, the case study has shown that these processes cause crises and are full of friction.

In investigating transnational migration from a psychosocial perspective, this article has demonstrated the complexity of transnational migration as a phenomenon and an experience, and in so doing complements existing research and highlights another important and currently neglected facet of the concept.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is important at this juncture to note that *the* Kurds as a homogenous group do not exist, because Kurdish societies, identities, traditions, and languages are highly diverse. Accordingly, there is no valid general definition of *the* Kurds (Ammann 42). An additional, crucial factor which requires consideration is the broad range of dimensions which affect an individual's identity, such as gender, age, abilities, religious beliefs, socio-economic status and sexual orientation, none of which exist in isolation and all of which overlap to some degree. Nevertheless, Ammann also points out, without going into detail on processes of culturalization and/or ethnicization, that certain historical benchmarks and other factors do shape the identities and the everyday lives of most Kurds (42).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical discussion of the concept of trauma in the context of migration, see Mlodoč (18).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the principal historical events which have left their mark on the history of Iraqi Kurdistan and which may also be influential factors in the migration and return migration of Kurds, see Ahmad et al. (28).

<sup>4</sup> It is of course the case that not all migrants can be considered *transnational*; neither can all Kurds in the diaspora. Not all of them develop ties to more than one country, not all of them who take part in transnational practices do so all the time, and not all of them take part in transnational practices with consistent intensity. I hence concur with Alinia, in her study on Kurdish identities: "[E]ach individual acts differently [...] and defines her/his own relation to the society based on their own specific situation, needs and experiences" (251).

<sup>5</sup> *Firmesk* is a pseudonym. I have omitted the names of cities and institutions in order to protect the interviewee's identity.

<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted in German and all quotations have been translated from German to English.

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