

Syrian Refugee Storytelling and the ‘Survivor-Witness-Messenger’:  
Knowledge and Violence in Displacement Narratives

**This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Multidisciplinary  
Gender Studies**

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Date of Submission: March 2021

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of collaboration except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any work that has already been submitted before for any other degree or other qualification except as declared in the preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the Politics and International Studies Degree Committee.

## **Syrian Refugee Storytelling and the ‘Survivor-Witness-Messenger’: Knowledge and Violence in Displacement Narratives**

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### Abstract

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Syrian refugee narratives (in original oral history interviews, memoirs and news media), the thesis carries out a discourse analysis of a variety of texts to examine how subjectivities and global relations of power are discursively produced and cited. Following Carolyn J. Dean’s ‘survivor-witness’ figure, the thesis proposes the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ as a role through which to interpret the complex and contesting demands made upon Syrian refugee narrators. This suggestion builds on Dean’s term by emphasising the interlocking relation of movement, survival and the deliverance of testimony in existing discourses around Syrian refugees as well as within their own stories. The thesis is concerned with possible interpretations of the texts which read for citations of this figure, whether through occupying the role, explicitly rejecting it or engaging with it ambivalently, and how such citations produce the narrators as international political subjects. The first half of the thesis focuses on how the narrators discursively produce certain spaces as having a racializing and gendering effect of dehumanisation upon displaced subjects as well as on the contested and complex narrative explorations of the politics of gratitude as producing a pressure to narrativize suffering for Western audiences. In the second half, the thesis’s argument for the possibility of reading for such discursive engagements with space, gender, race and humanity through the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure turns to the intertextual relations between the texts analysed, other Syrian refugee narratives and wider international discourses on refugees, violence and testimony. From metaphors comparing regime oppression in Syria to scenes of domestic violence to the genres coalescing around narrators based on gender and age, these chapters argue for a recognition of an inter-connected network of international actors involved in the production and commodification of Syrian stories with a multiplicity of implications for the discursive shaping of categories such as refugee, witness and human.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the participants who generously shared their time, stories and insights for the purpose of this research – they are co-contributors and co-analysts of the narratives considered here. Thank you, also, to Layla\* who was hired to interpret during the interviews and translate transcripts for co-editing – she was an integral partner in this project and I am very thankful for her work and company during fieldwork.

Thank you to Emmanuel College for awarding me the Derek Brewer PhD studentship which made my doctoral studies and time at this University possible as well as additional funding from the College for attending a conference in 2019. Thank you also to the Department of Politics and International Studies for funding which facilitated the fieldwork for this project. I also want to thank those staff and fellow students at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Gender Studies who were supportive, collaborative and funny when we all needed it most.

Thank you, also, to my excellent supervisor, Dr Lauren Wilcox, who guided me so well but allowed me to follow my own path, at my own pace.

I am also grateful to my mum, Liz Doyle, for her long-standing encouragement and confidence in me and to my sisters, Grace and Lydia Doyle for their provision of entertainment and affection in varying quantities. I am also thankful for friends in Cambridge and elsewhere who listened to various different explanations of this project and who also helped me by *not* talking about this project when needed.

Finally, I was supported endlessly by Ashley Williams, who did not know what he was getting himself in for.

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## Introduction

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Hassan Akkad pinpoints the shock and discomfort generated by his campaign against the British government on behalf of NHS cleaners, porters and immigrant workers<sup>1</sup> as a matter of narrative disjuncture for Western audiences:

I think partly because usually refugees – Syrians – are at the receiving end of humanitarian action. So when I am doing this, and raising £35,000 for Barts trust, they think it's the wrong way round.(Adams and The Guardian, 2020)

Akkad had already experienced a small level of fame through the inclusion of his camera-phone footage of the boat journey from Turkey to Greece in a *BBC* documentary series (Bluemel *et al.*, 2016). Reflecting on that contribution he observes how such narratives shape unbalanced relations of power across numerous storytelling scenarios. This is partially summarised in the article which also cites Akkad directly:

He does not feel he was properly credited or compensated for the *BBC Exodus* film – he says he received no payment for the five hours of footage

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<sup>1</sup> Akkad shared a video to social media addressing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson asking the government to reconsider a decision to both exclude low-paid NHS workers such as cleaners and porters from coronavirus bereavement funds and to maintain a £400 healthcare surcharge for immigrant NHS workers. After widespread public support for Akkad's message, these policies were dropped (BBC News, 2020).

he handed over – and has been determined to learn from that experience [...] “When I posted that hospital video, every production company on the face of the Earth contacted me, asking me to be involved in their Covid documentary,” he says, “but always as a contributor, never as a collaborator.” Instead he approached the hospital trust to ask if he could do some filming, after his shift was over, and he is now making a film of his own, “Not about patients but about [his] team that worked for the NHS.” (Adams and The Guardian, 2020)

Akkad’s perspective on the types of narrative which are more easily produced by and about Syrian refugees speaks to the core concerns of this thesis’s analysis of intertextual navigation of existing discourses within Syrian refugee storytelling. So too does his analysis of the deep resistance in storytelling industries such as journalism, television and film (which should also include academia and literary publishing) to financially compensating, and otherwise recognising the labour of, those who contribute the stories of their lives to such projects.

Akkad’s experiences and those of the narrators whose texts are the focus of this thesis are connected not only by their shared Syrian nationality and categorisation as refugees, but also by their positioning within a growing body of literature which constitutes a response to the persistent demand for Syrian refugee storytelling within literary, film, media and academic industries. Indeed, Bluebird, a non-fiction imprint of Macmillan, who published Syrian refugee Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini’s memoir, *Butterfly* (2018), acquired the rights to an untitled memoir by Akkad little more than a month after his video appeal reached viral fame (Chandler, 2020). This thesis, then, arises from an observation of the extensive and irregular discursive landscape constituted from narratives emanating from numerous actors involved in the refugee regime ‘complex’ (Betts, 2010) which produces knowledge specifically on the meaning of Syrian refugee identity and movement. I contend that any stories told by narrators like Akkad must navigate such a landscape, where they encounter intertextual resistance or permissibility depending on the narrative’s relation to existing gendered and racialised discourses of knowledge, power and subjectivity.

In the short memory of securitising discourses, the ‘refugee crisis’ beginning in 2015 and only declared as ‘ended’ in 2019 (Rankin and The Guardian, 2019) came to be figured as an unprecedented regional challenge for the EU and its nation states (Innes, 2010; Hammerstadt, 2014; Andersson, 2016a; Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017; de Genova, 2018; Guiraudon,

2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Gray and Franck, 2019; Kirkwood, 2019; Mourad and Norman, 2020; Taylor and Meissner, 2020). Central to representations of the refugee subjects whose mobility provoked such political anxiety was the role played by the Syrian civil war in displacing a population which was, at first, fleeing regime retaliation for demonstrations and, later, the overwhelming violence of civil war. These refugees were, across discourses, understood to simultaneously bear responsibility for constituting the majority of those gathering at Europe's gates, but, also, to be an exceptional category of asylum seeker whose national circumstances made the legitimacy of their flight self-evident (Yarris and Castañeda, 2015; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Mayanthi and Giordano, 2016; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris, 2018; Prøitz, 2018; Abbas, 2019, 2019; Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen, 2020).

When researching the contemporary politics of displacement, particularly the 'refugee crisis', an understanding of intersectionality and an application of its lessons is essential to understanding the discursive landscapes, citing logics of race, religion, culture, gender and more, in which Syrian refugees produce narrative and ultimately subjectivities. In the use of the term 'intersectionality', here and throughout the thesis, I mean to convey the methodology of analysis which accounts for the interactions which take place where identities and systems of oppression interact with each other. To carry out an intersectional analysis is to perceive that, in the example of Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term, 'the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' (1989, p. 140) or other combinations of experiences of identity-based oppression.

Therefore, in this project, my deployment of an intersectional analysis means that narratives are read for the numerous and generative ways in which subjects (and their experiences) are shaped by cross-cuttings of their racialised, gendered, classed and (dis)abled identities, as formed in relation to other discourses and actors. This also means that critical investigation beyond what is presumed to be a normative or 'typical' Syrian refugee identity or experience is prioritised, as to avoid recentring those who are most often represented, and who are least endangered by hierarchical systems of gender, sexuality, race, capital and (dis)ability as well as other facets of identity such as ethnicity or religion (Pittaway and Bartolomei, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Erevelles and Minear, 2010; MacKinnon, 2013; Mendoza, 2015; Chapman, 2016; Hughes, 2017; Yeo, 2017; Raghuram, 2019; Paz and Kook, 2020).

A focus on how dominant discourses produce marginalised subjects such as (Syrian) refugees does necessary work deconstructing the ways in which gendered, racialised and classed relations of power allow for certain actors to shape understandings of others, and thus their material conditions. Nonetheless, it can also reify the refugee as a passive, silenced and thus victimised figure. To ask questions, instead, in regard to the ways in which Syrian refugees do discursive work *in the context* of these powerful discourses means viewing these narrators as agential actors also engaged in knowledge-production and meaning-making. Avoiding binary understandings of relations of power, the research questions addressed in this thesis allow for two aspects of political subjectivity to be considered as simultaneous and interacting. For example, while refugees are subject to racializing and gendering discourses which map danger for Western subjects onto their bodies and places of origin, they also produce narratives themselves as actors in industries of refugee storytelling including news media, literary publishing and academia.

From methodology to conclusions, this research project follows a long genealogy of work in feminist theory and gender studies, both in terms of the deconstruction of gendered and gendering systems and practices in the context of displacement and in regard to the application of intersectional lenses to understand how engendering is inextricable from processes of racialising in the production of a political subject defined by its relationship to the state (Anderson *et al.*, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989; Massey, 1994; Hill Collins, 1998; Hyams, 2004; Ghorashi, 2005; Ackerly, Stern and True, 2006; Butler, 2006; Jacoby, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Ackerly and True, 2008; Sylvester *et al.*, 2011; Mendoza, 2015; Weber, 2015; Fobear, 2016; Lugones, 2016).

These existing contributions to feminist methodologies range from demonstrations of the intersection and interaction of systems of gender and race to applications of such theories, and of feminist ethics of care, to the relations of power and positionality within research and fieldwork. Ultimately, I would align with Ackerly, Stern and True's identification of the through-line running across diverse forms of feminist methodologies: 'the distinctiveness of feminist methodologies inside and outside IR lies in their reflexivity, which encourages the researcher to re-interrogate continually [their] own scholarship' (2006, p. 4)

Drawing on both these overarching interventions on the politics of subjectivity and knowledge and the granular contributions to a feminist researcher toolkit, this project aims to

enact some of these aims, firstly, by inclusion of methodology as content for analysis and, secondly, through the mechanisms of that analysis which looks for discursive production of multiple and productive relations between subjects. This means looking to specific scenarios of feminist methodology such as Jacoby's need for an 'awareness of the mutually constitutive relationship of experience, interpretation, and representation in fieldwork (2006, p. 173) or Fobear's contention that 'by focusing just on the role of the oral historian, we negate the interpretative authority and agency of the participants in crafting their story and shaping the research' (2016, p. 62) in order to facilitate research which pushes the broad goals of feminist methodologies onwards.

The specific task of this thesis is to examine how subjectivities and global relations of power are discursively produced and cited in Syrian refugee narratives while situating these within the existing landscape of extensive discourse around displacement in general and Syrian refugees specifically.

To do so I pose a series of research questions which aim to facilitate analysis of the narrative navigations performed by subjects whose identities and movements hold the weight of such copious discursive intervention by other actors, including researchers, media, activists and policy-makers. By exploring the possible interpretations which I suggest in response to these questions, the thesis contributes to a multidisciplinary body of literature and, specifically, to an area of study with feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist aims of building knowledge on gendered, racialised, classed and (dis)abled relations of power and the processes of intersubjectivity which they produce for actors within industries of (Syrian) refugee storytelling.

Therefore, this thesis asks how Syrian refugee storytellers, in memoirs, oral history and journalistic interviews, narrativize their experiences in relation to existing discourses which seek to produce certain Syrian refugee subjectivities. The choice of 'narrativize' as a term, rather than 'narrate', uses a word commonly used to reflect an understanding of narrative as a process of meaning-making and story-craft rather than a straightforward (re)presentation of empirical events or memories. This term has been utilised by scholars concerned with such processes in oral history and literary theory (White, 1981; LaCapra, 1994, 2014; BenEzer, 1999).

Secondly, I ask how a reading for such intertextuality in these narratives can illuminate how narrators produce stories in dialogue with these discourses, in order to make interventions on, and offer interpretations of, the ways in which political relations between Syrian refugees and other actors, including the Syrian state, humanitarian actors, host states and their citizens, have already been produced. The final research question asks how the contexts of story production, dissemination and consumption are in co-constitutive relation with the narratives and what textual analyses can be connected to the relations between narrators, co-authors, interviewers, editors and reader-consumers which then produce these as international political subjects. Posing research questions about Syrian refugee storytelling specifically responds to an identification of a growing body of literature of this type, as well as a relational market demand for the narratives, a significant aspect of international relations between refugees and other actors.

The use of intertextual methods to give descriptive accounts of sub-genres within this literature aims to produce an account of the interventions made by these narrators in international relations discourses and an interpretation of what these are doing within the international refugee regime. Reading specifically for the place of gender and race in these narratives assumes their established role in relations between all actors involved in the practices and discourses around displacement. This means that the ways in which subjects and their relations are produced as gendered and racialised provide a framework for examining the major themes of humanity, gratitude and, indeed knowledge and analysis-production themselves.

By broadly characterising research on displacement as roughly divided into that concerning ‘problems’, ‘figures’ and ‘voice’, this thesis will read for the implications of these preoccupations for Syrian refugee subjectivity and narrativization. Therefore, the following chapters argue for interpretations of these texts which identify gratitude, humanity and analytical labour as significant sites of intertextual work. I will also present an argument for a distinct international political economy of refugee storytelling, with three sub-genres constituting a specific market for Syrian refugee narratives within that. Ultimately, these suggestions form an argument for the significance of Syrian refugee storytelling as a matter

of international relations between global actors, including those involving in production (researchers, journalists, co-authors), dissemination (editors, publishers, NGOs), consumption (reviewers, readers, listeners) and citation (policy-makers, politicians and other refugee narrators).

Across five chapters, this thesis will follow the relations between identity, space and violence which have been narrativized to the effect of producing subjectivities in relation to one another within the refugee regime. From metaphors comparing regime oppression in Syria to scenes of domestic violence, and then to the genres coalescing around narrators based on gender and age, these chapters argue for a recognition of an inter-connected network of international actors involved in the production and commodification of Syrian stories with a multiplicity of implications for the discursive shaping of categories such as refugee, witness and human.

This thesis argues for a connection between the pervasive force of gratitude in these contexts and the ways in which academic literature, along with policy and media discourses, has produced displacement as a ‘problem’ for international relations to be theorised and solved through research. When Syrian refugee subjects further experience encounters which produce them as the very embodiment of the problem, rather than its victims (Soguk, 1996, pp. 23–4), narrativization of these experiences and a mapping of their intertextual relations connects the ‘problem’ framework and the coercive effect of gratitude upon refugees. Examining the way narrators represent the spatial experience of the asylum interview, from a narrator and their spouse being questioned in separate rooms by UN officials to a government waiting room in Berlin smelling of old vomit, this thesis goes on to suggest that narrators bring previous storytelling experiences to bear in later narrative encounters (Pearlman, 2018, p. 262; Mardini, 2018, p. 219).

In the thesis’ original interviews, narrators compare the comfort of the surroundings, the inclusion of consent paperwork and their choice of recording method, as well as the personal networks that built trust between us, against contrasting experiences they narrativized of hostile questioners, detainment, inattentive interpreters and the failure of other actors to keep them informed on their application or other end results of the interview. These implicit

expressions of gratitude for a narrative encounter which grants more agency and respect to the interviewee can be read in intertextual relation to this other stories in order to acknowledge how this politics of gratitude which operates through simultaneous conditional welcomes and threats, shapes the availability of refugee narrators to researchers and other actors who collect stories with declared aim of seeking marginalised voices.

In a reading of these texts for sites of interaction between space, violence and identity, narrators', citations of varying discourses on humanity are also crucial to such work. Sitting within understandings of specific violences as tied to non-Western spaces, and thus also to racialised subjects coming from them, is the narrators' invocation of 'humanity' as a category, a set of (ideal) norms and as certain practices of 'community' embedded in the international system and its co-constitutive relations of power. The sophisticated manner in which these narrators, through humanity as a capacious trope, draw a connection between experiences of extreme bodily suffering, such as starvation or torture, and the banality of waiting and being neglected by Western asylum bureaucracies further illuminates the violence of dominant discourses which demand gratitude from (Syrian) refugees (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Oka, 2014).

This thesis aims to unpick the divergent, and sometimes contradictory, logics implied by many narrators' appeals for assistance from humanity, their insistence of Syrians' inclusion within the category and their production of humanity as sullied or even lost due to 'dehumanising' violence. It will be seen how narrators, such as Kassem, for instance, repeatedly equivocate 'humanity' with Western states while telling stories of Syrians being abandoned to chemical weapons, starvation and other inhumane violence (Eid, 2018, p. 110). Others, Nujeen among them, make explicit pleas for their readers to relate to them as fellow human beings (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 268; Pearlman, 2018, p. 2018). They do so by emphasizing similitude between an apparently civilized, modern and orderly Western space and society (also uniquely secure for women, queer and disabled subjects) and the pre-war life of Syrians, as well as their current aspirations and economic contributions to host states.

I will argue that as a result of this examination we are left with a sense of humanity's fluid capacity as a signifier. While the invocation of the principles of humanity, violated by a failure to intervene against violent repression or unbearable living conditions, produces a sacred quality, the ability of actors such as regime soldiers or European border police to destabilise a subjects' identification with humanity suggests a different ontological production of the category. These storytellers emphasise the deep imbrication between the stability of categories such as the human and the spatial experiences which enact violence upon a person and estrange them, not only from their own bodies but also from a trust in human collectivity and solidarity.

The denaturalising of humanity has been a matter of extensive work in feminist, critical race and queer studies (Hartman, 1997; Agamben, 1998, 1998; Owens, 2009; Braidotti, 2013; Weber, 2016; Wilcox, 2017). But this thesis notes that while practices supposedly based around ideologies of shared humanity, such as humanitarian intervention, asylum and international development, are critiqued for hypocrisy by many of these narrators, they also imply that, for most subjects, relinquishing the category of human is not a risk they can afford. Reading for how narrators do indeed make claims on humanity as a category which is valuable, meaningful and a route to security does not preclude this thesis from facilitating insight on how, where discourses have detached the refugee from time and space, these narrators instead heavily emphasise the specificity of the spatial and temporal elements of their experiences of dehumanisation. Without attaching empirical definitions to what constitutes 'inhumane' violence or reifying 'humanity' as a natural community, I hold space for a critique of the internal logics of this concept by narrators as grounds for a resistance against narratives of Western benevolence and civilization.

This thesis also makes an intervention in a literature which is imbricated with the painful public discourse around gender, Islam and the West which has been repeatedly seen to reproduce homogenising, racist, Islamophobic and colonial tropes about Muslim or Arab men and women (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). The academic literature is no less at risk of such reproductions; discourses seeking the voices of Muslim women on the limited subjects of 'veiling' and domestic violence are arguably matters of scholarly fetishization mirroring that in Western media and political discourses (Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2002, 2013; Abu-Lughod,

2016; cooke, 2007; Chapman, 2016; Clycq, 2012; El-Tayeb, 2012; Jamal, 2017; Vintges, 2012; Razack, 2004, 2008; Keddie, 2018; Osanloo, 2017). Instead, I share with critical and postcolonial feminist scholars in IR, anthropology and refugee studies, not only a contestation of reductive understandings of the interactions between politics of gender, religion, culture and race in the Middle East, the West and globally, but also an awareness of the co-constitutive role played by academic practice of producing such tropes. Significantly, I build on this scholarship to argue that the acceptance of interpretive uncertainty and multiplicity must move beyond nods to nuance. Instead this understanding might be a foundation for an analysis of practices of the academy which perpetuate imbalanced interpretive authority such as a lack of dialogic relationships between participants, researchers and institutions as well as the dearth of public access to research publications.

The implication of these arguments is a drawing out of narrators' possible counter-focuses to the preoccupations, broadly speaking, of the academic, policy and media discursive landscape to which these stories are produced in relation. Therefore, where much of the academic research and its policy-maker collaborators would frame displacement, and then the refugee subjects themselves, as a 'problem' for international actors and the system of states in general, narrators' return focus onto the politics of gratitude. Such a relationship between subjects not only reproduces Syrian refugees as racially and culturally differentiated and indebted but can also have a coercive effect which demands narrativization as a proof of a subject's disavowal of 'aberrant' refugees (Soguk, 1996, p. 25). In turn, I argue that the focus, even in critical IR, on the implications of an abstracted refugee figure for foundational concepts such as sovereignty, security and the human or citizen can be seen as a homogenising co-option of refugees' own meaning-making around the identity often forced upon them (Kumsa, 2006; Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.*, 2009). And, finally, I suggest that the quest for Syrian refugee 'voices' risks reifying dynamics in which the narrator is understood to provide 'raw', authentic and localised knowledge while the researcher, journalist or co-author is vested with global, detached interpretative authority.

## **Methodology**

This section explains the methodological paths chosen to best explore the research questions outlined above as well as how these theoretical alignments facilitate the arguments which this thesis will make. Firstly, approaching such questions of subjectivity, identity and narratives in displacement discourses from within gender studies and feminist scholarship has led to an broad and specific academic and policy understanding of refugee experiences as well as how displaced peoples are produced, maintained and disciplined as ‘aberrant’ populations through the systems of gender and race already inextricable from international politics (Soguk, 1996, p. 24). This thesis similarly aims to make such a contribution to knowledge on the matter of Syrian refugee narrative within global networks of discourse and its political economy by carrying out an analysis which takes seriously the key dilemmas of feminist research such as questions of how agency, power, violence and identity interact for all subjects imbricated in the gendered politics of displacement, not only those categorised as refugees.

Therefore, the co-constitutive roles of researchers (including myself), the academy as a knowledge-producing industry, policy-makers, literary and media publishers of Syrian refugee stories and consumers and readers of such narratives as product are all considered throughout this project. This aims for an analysis of narrators’ storytelling work in the context of existing discourses on displacement in general and the specifics of the Syrian civil war as a refugee-producing context which draws on feminist theories of gendered and gendering discourses and practices as well as the methodological developments in gender studies which apply feminist stances to the discourses, practices and afterlives of research. From exploring the intertextuality of heavily gendered metaphors representing the Assad regime’s violence against civilians to examining the manner in which Syrian refugee memoirs are categorised and packaged into different genres depending on the identity of the narrators, this thesis applies feminist theory and aims to contribute to interdisciplinary gender studies scholarship. In order to more specifically position the contributions of this thesis within the multidisciplinary fields of scholarship in which it sits, I will consider the ways in which the research questions and the subsequent arguments share similarities with existing feminist and postcolonial research on displacement and refugees.

Firstly, along with many scholars in gender studies, postcolonial theory, critical race studies and queer theory, I aim for certain methodological practices to be a core part of the project and subject to critical examination along with other aspects of analysis. This means including the ethical and political relations between myself and participants in the research, including those such as the memoirists, whom I cannot meet but still have a relationship with as a reader and interpreter. My capacity to use collaborative methods such as co-editing, transcript analysis with interviewees and the inclusion of Layla\*, a paid interpreter, as a collaborator in reflective research design and analysis owes much to the literature which has made methods and methodology an urgent focus for feminist and postcolonial analysis, especially that which has moved beyond 'calls' to instead make practical interventions with new approaches.

On the question of my own place in this mapping of space, security and identity in an analysis of Syrian refugee narratives, I include how I am produced as a white woman subject, holding British citizenship and associated with an elite and wealthy university through the process of research, including the interview encounter. My co-constitutive role in the text of an interview narrative is most extensively explored in the second and fourth chapters. An 'ethnography of not knowing' (Cabot, 2016, p. 664) calls for humility, an acknowledgement of silences and those unrepresented in one's research but 'not knowing' can also apply to the open possibilities of interpretation of what *is* voiced and present in narrative data. In theorising the text of the transcript-narrative, the location of the interview and the narrative of this thesis as spaces in which processes of intersubjectivity occur, with implications for all actors, I reflect on my own experiences to argue for a curious but open-ended approach by the researcher to interpretative authority and certainty. I also make the case for greater space for multiplicity and the mobility of dialogue between those subjects with the most at stake in discourses such as those on gendered violence and Islamophobia.

Secondly, the emphasis on intertextuality as a method and methodology, as well as a theorisation of narrative as a tool for the discursive processes of intersubjectivity, have been crucial for facilitating this project. Through this approach, I focus on refugee storytelling and other intertextually related texts in order to offer both specific interventions on the case of Syrian refugees and broader gestures towards possible theorisations of narrative politics within the gendered and racialised international systems of borders, humanitarianism and

citizenship. This project begins from a perspective on intertextuality as a matter of methodological choice; understanding all these texts as interwoven with each other and other related narratives facilitates knowledge-building on how Syrian refugee narrators navigate storytelling in this context, in ways which cite, contest and discursively produce notions of political subjectivity and relationality.

I invoke intertextuality not ‘as a device fixing identities’ (Aradau and Huysmans, 2014, p. 606) but rather as a device which allows for the suggestion of numerous possible interactions between texts, which do discursive work to produce multifaceted and shifting political subjectivities. This perspective allows for a combination of this use of intertextuality with deconstructivist feminist methodologies which follow a legacy of scholarship that has concerned itself with denaturalising hierarchical oppositions foundational to systems of power, beginning from the perspective that ‘subjects have no existence prior to political practice’ mediated through discourse (Ashley, 1987, p. 410; Devetak, 2013, p. 208; see also Ashley, 1988; Walker, 1992; Doty, 1996; Shapiro and Alker, 1996; Agamben, 1998; Huysmans, 1998; Edkins, 2000; Haddad, 2003; Hyndman and Giles, 2004; Young, 2004; Devetak, 2005; Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005; Butler, 2006, 2009; Nyers, 2006; Shapiro, 2007; Weber, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Vintges, 2012; Tazzioli, 2015; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020).

Thus, the recognition of tensions and contradictions within gendered and racialised interactions between identity, space and violence also allows for a reading of non-linear and co-constitutive relations within discourse in the texts analysed in this thesis. What I also share with the body of critical scholarship is a fundamental concern with the relations of power which are productive of subjectivity, both for displaced peoples and other actors they encounter. This involves an understanding of the productive power of discourses which deploy logics of race, empire and gender to produce refugee subjects as feminised victims who should express gratitude or as carriers of regressive types of violence. But I also recognise the multiple interpretative possibilities that should be considered so as not to reify this production (Malkki, 1996; Puar and Rai, 2002; Puar, 2008; Weber, 2016; Abbas, 2019; Thiruselvam, 2019).

For example, by using intertextuality as method, the second chapter demonstrates how the linkages between various narrative encounters generate new textual citations and new political relations between narrators and their interviewers and readers and/or listeners. In doing so, the analysis follows up on narrators' observations of their interlocuters' preoccupations with gendered, and specifically sexual violence, as well as Islamist terrorism. I argue that narrators encounter slippery storytelling terrain, as some cite an expectation from non-refugees that they narrativize suffering as both expressions of gratitude for asylum and a demonstration of a rejection of specific violences tied to Middle Eastern and Muslim identities and spaces.

In both cases, I suggest that a 'survivor-witness-messenger' might be read in order to observe how narrators make a claim on humanity through the demonstration of similitude with (presumed Western) reader-consumers via a disavowal of associations with deviant and regressive violences. Thus, this thesis, I believe, makes its most significant contribution in the theorisation of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' as a useful figure through which to read and analyse refugee narratives. As will be established across the chapters, this figure has drawn inspiration from Dean's 'survivor-witness' while adapting the terminology to reflect the significance of meaning-making around movement for (Syrian) refugee narrators (Dean, 2017, 2019). The following section further argues for the relevance and utility of this figure, summarising how it has facilitated the arguments which have been laid out in the previous chapters as well as the future possibilities it may contain.

In choosing to follow the patterns of citation and contestation which constitutes the textual practices of witnessing and delivering testimony, I draw on a conceptualisation of the way in which a public role as witness is produced, through discourse, into a cultural figure in a network of international actors. When Carolyn J. Dean first posited the figure of the 'survivor-witness' in a 2017 article, she made a valuable intervention into studies of the production of Holocaust victims but also into existing transdisciplinary and transhistorical literatures on cultural understandings of trauma. Avoiding essentialised conceptualisations of identity or what constitutes a traumatic experience, this paper and her following monograph instead were specifically focused on the way an abstracted figure could be produced, through

various discourses and practices, to shift public consensus on the meaning of certain instances of political violence (Dean, 2017, pp. 629, 630, 2019, pp. 92, 96).

Dean strongly emphasises the temporal and cultural specificity of the ‘survivor-witness’ figure, reminding her readers that she argues for its emergence in ‘a Western and especially US cultural field that sought above all [...] to re-evaluate the meaning of survival in the context not only of industrialized genocide and murder, but also of the victim blaming that was pervasive in the 1960s’ (2019, pp. 117–8). She also uses a ‘long-view’ historical methodology to suggest that another figure came to supplant the ‘survivor-witness’ in terms of cultural relevancy and access to public narrativizing, in the 1990s: the ‘humanitarian-witness’ who speaks for the ‘global victim’ (Dean, 2019, pp. 136, 170). Utilising Dean’s work in this project does not mean I intend to draw comparisons between the experiences of Syrian refugees and victims of the Holocaust. Rather, the research applies Dean’s methodology to a different scenario but one in which a similar struggle has taken place to make around an abstracted figure understood as representative of a large, heterogenous population ‘rendered culturally legible’ at a global level (Dean, 2017, p. 629).

In applying Dean’s framework, I also consider the counterpart to the ‘survivor-witness’, the ‘humanitarian-witness’ which she argues came to eclipse the former figure from the 1990s onwards (2017, p. 629). If there is an equivalent interacting figure to the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure proposed in this thesis, it is found in actors such as researchers (including myself), journalists and co-authors. Particularly in the fifth chapter, the thesis considers how they (or we) might be understood by a Western public in a manner comparable to the ‘humanitarian witness’ and, crucially, in co-constitutive relation to ‘survivor-witness-messenger’. The ways in which Syrian refugee narratives and other intertextually linked texts produce these actors as global, detached and legitimately mobile subjects echo Dean’s theorisation of a colonial and racialised hierarchy of knowledge-producers structuring relations between the global victim and the ‘humanitarian-witness’ (Dean, 2019, pp. 169–170).

However, as this research focuses on texts in which a Syrian refugee is the narrator, the ‘humanitarian-witness’, or an equivalent relevant to this context, is not examined as a narrator engaging in their own discursive production. Instead, those who might fulfil a ‘humanitarian-witness’ role are included in the analysis as the consumer-readers and the editors or co-producers of Syrian refugee storytelling as it is disseminated in literary publishing, journalism and academic research. Therefore, this thesis takes a methodological approach based on the intertextuality of Syrian refugee narratives, their paratexts<sup>2</sup> and other texts to which they are connected while exploring research questions focused on discursive production of (inter)subjectivity and the specific relations between Syrian refugee narrators and other actors.

I wish the figure of ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ to be understood, in this thesis, not as an empirical descriptor or even a claim to an abstract theoretical figure along the lines of Agamben (1998), Haddad (2003, 2008) or even Weber’s (2016) writings, but rather as a trope within these narratives and discourses which is cited or briefly taken on or rejected in amorphous and ambiguous ways. By suggesting a name for such a trope, or indeed a mode of storytelling and of positioning a political subject, I aim to allow for connections to be made, for a through line of intertextuality to be identified in order to see the discursive work done in these texts and its further implications.

This is not a claim that narrators or other actors in narrative production would identify the trope or mode in such language, or indeed that my interpretation of citations and utilisations of ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figures or storytelling within this narratives are the only interpretations available. But I do contend that describing and attempting to make connections between language, symbolism and intertextual work in and between Syrian refugee narratives makes an important contribution to understanding the particularity of the discursive and narrative landscape that has formed around the subjectivity of Syrian refugees and the meaning inscribed to their movements.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term coined by literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) to describe text such as acknowledgements, promotional recommendations, dedications, title pages, covers, prefaces and author biographies which are situated ‘around’ a main text, usually a book. There are also historical and social science studies of paratexts (Jelodar *et al.*, 2013; Garritzen, 2020).

## Conducting narrative research

Participant selection criteria required that potential interviewees identify as Syrian, with the label ‘refugee’ occasionally used in discussion and documentation such as the consent forms and information sheet. However, self-identification with this term was not strictly necessary. Only legal adults were selected for participation as the specific experiences of children were not the focus of the research questions and I did not complete any ethical assessments or training for research with children. In seeking access to these participants, I approached numerous charities and non-governmental organisations working with Syrian refugees in the U.K., on the basis that this would both provide a mechanism for accountability and verification of myself as a researcher and offer the potential to perform some work in reciprocity (such as volunteering or teaching) or even a future narrative project with those participants who would like to put their storytelling to such a use.

It was important that the chosen organisation had the capacity and the flexibility to accommodate such a request so that my research would impede their normal work as little as possible; the best fit for these requirements was *The Welcoming*, a general refugee and migrant support organisation in Edinburgh. Not only does *The Welcoming* host events specifically for Syrian refugees, providing an access point for recruitment which would not require the rejection of interested participants of other nationalities, they also have Syrian employees who help inform the types of services offered to their community and who were open to carrying out remunerated work on recruitment and interpretation for my interviews.

Therefore, recruitment began at the weekly English language classes for Syrian women hosted off-site by *The Welcoming*, where I visited first as a casual language assistant, while informing all of my purpose of interviewee recruitment. I later held classes as a volunteer teacher, utilising my CELTA<sup>3</sup> training and extensive ESL<sup>4</sup> teaching experience with mixed ability groups. The *Welcoming* employee who I hired as an Arabic and Kurdish interpreter and often co-interviewer in the later data collection, Layla\*, also worked in these language classes to translate for the class leader when necessary. From Layla’s contacts and the women

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<sup>3</sup> Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (Cambridge Assessment English)

<sup>4</sup> English as a Second Language

who attended this language class, recruitment shifting to a snowballing method, with friends and family of interviewees being recruited through earlier participants. Layla included her time spent coordinating with these participants in her working hours for the project and her role as an intermediary was crucial in building trust between myself and the interviewees.

Interviewees were provided with information sheets<sup>5</sup> and signed consent forms (which they kept a copy of) in both English and Arabic or Kurdish. They were also provided with information and contact details for local and national resources for psychological or emotional support if they felt in need as a result of our interviews.

The coronavirus pandemic which caused national lockdowns did necessitate the cancellation of one final field-work visit for interview data collection in March 2020. Other disruption included, as all university staff and students will have experienced, a reduction in access to libraries and other resources as well as the challenges of ‘stay-at-home’ orders also felt by all. Overall, I have managed to limit the impact that this has had upon the thesis but there were opportunities for further narrativization and exploration by interviewees which I could not pursue. Given the burden placed on so many due to the pandemic, I eventually decided it was not appropriate to carry out follow-up data collection in another fashion such as on video calls or in written narratives.

The other data collection which required selection criteria concerned the choice of published first-person narratives by Syrian refugees. Without the limitations of travel and in-person data collection, these had a wider scope in terms of the age of the narrator and their eventual state of settlement. For example, both Yusra Mardini and Nujeen Mustafa, whose memoirs are included in this thesis, settled in Germany while another memoirist, Kassem Eid, was granted residence in the U.S. before attempting to return to Syria and make a second ‘refugee journey’ towards Europe. In Wendy Pearlman’s volume, the narrators of first-person life-stories which Pearlman and her research assistants have transcribed, translated and edited into

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<sup>5</sup> These described the research project in plain terms and provided the contact details of my supervisor and the wider POLIS department in case of the need to report concerns or complaints.

the chronological structure of her book, have settled in various locations including the U.S., Germany, the U.K., Sweden, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon.

In essence, to be included in the collection of memoirs analysed in the project, the narratives had to be first-person stories from Syrians who had been displaced from 2011 onwards. Again, ambivalence over the label of ‘refugee’ did not preclude inclusion, however, the identification of a distinct ‘Syrian refugee’ genre of narrative, especially in literary publishing and some journalism media, is a theme of interest in this thesis. This is explored further in Chapter Five, but for this discussion of methods and methodology, my awareness of which stories are presented as ‘Syrian refugee’ stories regardless of the narrators’ ‘self-identification’ should be acknowledged.

Throughout this thesis, I also make occasional reference to other texts which cannot strictly be said to have a Syrian refugee narrator: the clearest example is Alia Malek’s memoir and inter-generational family history, *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria*. As a narrator, Alia does tell the story of her departure from Syria as a result of the danger posed to her during the protests and the civil war. However, her birth in the U.S., her American citizenship and her recent move to Syria before the 2011 protests place her in a different positionality in regard to international systems of citizenship, borders and identity which make it difficult to consider her narrative in the same category as the ‘Syrian refugee story’ genre I am focused upon.

In the paratext of the book, Malek admits to a deliberate representation of her story as a part of the substantial literature on Syrian wartime and refugee experiences due to her perception that a history of her Syrian family would not be attractive to publishers or readers without a connection to such themes (Malek, 2018, p. 330). Therefore, while I do not focus on Alia as a narrator to the same extent as other memoirs, I have included some analysis of this text due to the intertextual links between texts framed by publishing and other media or political actors as sharing a genre and which are collectively contributing to establishing a representation of events in Syria or a shared Syrian refugee experience for the sake of a Western audience insulated from this specific type of chaos and suffering. Approaching the analysis of the key

texts from a methodological perspective emphasising intertextuality allows for a contextualised reading of these Syrian refugee narratives and an opportunity to build knowledge on how these narratives operate within gendered and racialised international discourses on displacement, violence and belonging through their linkages, citations and co-existence.

As I included the editorial choices of Pearlman, the memoirists' co-authors and editors and the journalists writing 'around' first person narrative in my analysis, I also constantly reflected, questioned and adapted my topic guide for the interviews I carried out in Edinburgh. These were semi-structured oral history interviews which shifted in focus over time as my core areas of interest began to emerge with ongoing data analysis. In the initial interviews, the topic guide suggested loose chronology to interviewees; I asked if there was a particular point in time that a participant would like to begin talking about but also, aware that many felt awkward and unsure of what I 'wanted' to know, I prepared introductory questions that began with childhood or other significant points in their life pre-war in Syria.

In later interviews with the same participants, Layla and I sometimes returned with questions specifically constructed to further explore themes each interviewee had raised the previous time or to facilitate narrative around a question we had developed in our discussions, as we compared the different interviews we conducted together. In this case, the interview topic guide planned a more structured beginning (for example, in one 'round' of interviews, we showed interviewees the cover images of prominent Syrian refugee memoirs to see if they had read or recognised them in order to start a dialogue on storytelling for different publics) and then was permitted to become structured by the changing turns of conversation and narrative that developed from mine, the interviewee and Layla's interactions.

In some cases, an interviewee was fluent enough in English to require little or no interpretation assistance from Layla and so she would adopt a more fluid role between interviewee and interviewer. For instance, sometimes she intervened with a vocabulary correction, on other occasions she asked questions following on from mine and in other cases she shared her own relevant stories in order to demonstrate similarities or differences with

that of the interviewee. Linguistic translation is not an untroubled issue within qualitative research and I acknowledge the limitations of moving narrative across more than one language which can only be very partially addressed through repeated discussion of transcripts and co-editing (Temple, 2013).

Approximately half of the interviews were audio-recorded; the remainder I recorded in written notes, using abbreviations and requests for summary or repetition in order to get the full content of a story or conversation written down. The latter method was used when interviewees did not wish to be recorded for (understandable) reasons such as concern for privacy or security. In the case of recordings, I would transcribe the English speech with Layla transcribing and translating the remainder. We would then return to interviewees with transcripts either fully in Arabic or Kurdish or in all languages which had been used. These transcripts would be read by the interviewee to confirm that they were comfortable with all that had been recorded, as well as to check for the need for error-correction, clarification or expansion.

Deployment of the methods and methodologies of feminist collaborative research, such as co-editing, also facilitated further conversation and storytelling about memory, narrative, surveillance and privacy. Such efforts, of course, still have their limits and should never be understood as a solution or counterbalance to the relations of race, class and gender at play between us as actors. For instance, while returning with a transcript offers a participant a second opportunity to make authorial decisions about the content of the narrative, whether or not they request such changes may be shaped by their comfort and confidence in doing so within this scenario.

Upon completing the cycles of transcription, translation, co-editing and so on, I had, at the point of data analysis, a collection of interview texts and published narrative texts to approach together through discourse analysis. This method, and its accompanying methodologies stemming from its antecedents and current common usage, are best placed to address the research questions of this project due to their facilitation of a reading for relations of power in and through systems of gender and race, class and capital, age and (dis)ability.

Analysing the texts, as narratives, in this manner means drawing on the approaches of scholars, across disciplines, who have worked with narrative to make open-ended interpretations which do not aim to make empirical claims but rather to suggest possibilities for the ways in which narrators tell stories to make a multiplicity of malleable interventions on their subjectivity and positionality within systems of gender, race, capital and (dis)ability (Cortazzi, 2001; Allan, 2005; Eastmond, 2007; Gemignani, 2011b; Good, 2011; Wibben, 2011; Gandsman, 2013; Picq, 2013; Gemignani, 2014; Daigle, 2016; Ritivoi, 2016; Khoury, 2018).

Another point on which this thesis aims to contribute to multidisciplinary refugee research is in the efforts made to carry out a holistic analysis of narratives as a significant co-constitutive facet of the refugee regime and through an international political economy analysis of Syrian refugee storytelling. I take this research to be an example of bringing the most scrutiny to bear on that which is sensed, in some manner, as most common sense or self-evident. In this example, I refer to the exceptionalism surrounding Syrian subjects and their experiences, as emblematic of the few deserving asylum seekers within the ‘refugee crisis’ as well as the faith placed by pro-refugee activists and NGOs in the value of refugee storytelling as both a means to an end and an end in itself (Vogl, 2013; Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck and Spencer, 2019).

In line with intertextual methodologies of this research and the arguments of the thesis on researchers as participants in an international political economy of refugee storytelling, this thesis is also considered narrative work constituting part of this body of intertextually connected stories. The way in which I have structured the thesis and the craft of textually demonstrating the analysis of data and communicating arguments, therefore, are also methods and methodologies of research. These reflect both the requirements of the academic procedure of the thesis as prescribed by the University and the accumulation of my learning and experience of writing analytical text in the humanities and social sciences. The narrative I produce in the thesis, as will be seen in the following chapters, is one that suggests deep and complicated inter-connection between texts and between international actors within the refugee regime, in which Syrian refugee storytelling specifically is shaped by these political and economic relations of power while also playing a role in their paradoxically simultaneous fluidity and stability.

This project focuses on Syrian refugee narratives in order to follow the trail of widespread preoccupation with the displacement from this particular point of origin and with the meanings inscribed to a mass reception of refugees into Europe, over the course of approximately ten years, with a peak around 2015. This has not been a static or stable set of narratives and their co-constitutive power relations. From discourses producing Syrian refugee movement as an exceptional case to those deploying long-standing tropes of racialised sexual threat to a fatigued fading of any outraged expressed against the Syrian state, the discursive landscape in which stories are told by and about Syrian refugees is complex and continuously shifting.

That means that texts such as the memoirs analysed here sit in the contexts of their publication but also within the changing context which later readers bring to bear. The interview data collected between 2019 and 2020 is again situated at a particular stage in the series of displacements experienced by Syrians, with participants thus always illuminating the change and continuity felt in the production of their positionalities. Specifically, some memoirists write within a context which implicitly promises impact on representations and experiences of Syrian refugees. A peak in international interest in their personhood and ability to produce compelling narrative might be seen to have been contained within understandings of Syrian refugee writers as exceptional based on how their resilience intersects with gendered, racialised and (dis)abled identities.

In this projects' interviews, the insistent interest of researchers and other actors in accessing Syrian refugees' memories and stories, as if straightforward and transactional, is a matter of unspoken assumption and acceptance. Years on from the frenzy of media and policy fascination, what are researchers and journalists still seeking from Syrian refugees? Indeed, many of the latter might prefer to shift focus to the experiences they share with refugees of other nationalities in Europe, rather than those that separate them.

Although not always represented transparently in all textual spaces of academic research, the journey of methodological shifts and growing reflexivity is an important part of explaining choices made in this project around methods and methodological approaches and, of course,

their relation to the theoretical positioning of the research. Indeed, for example, making space for various forms of narrative texts was a development which emerged out of the research process and efforts to learn and improve. This shift reflected the need for data collection and analysis to incorporate the wide landscape of narratives produced by and about Syrian refugees, demonstrating and exploring the production of these narratives as an international political economy in which oral history interviews can be seen as a product of intertextuality.

Similarly, reflections on the relations at play between researchers and participants, but also with auxiliary actors such as interpreters, cannot and should not be elided in the descriptions of methodological choices nor in the main arguments of the thesis. For example, the choice of holding data collection in Edinburgh, linked to an organisation with refugee employees and capacity to support the project comes with limitations. But this choice followed aims, grounded in methodological and theoretical approaches, to build solid relationships, recognise interpreters as contributors and economic actors, pursue ethical and reciprocal interactions with organisations with limited resources and goals of material assistance. And, finally, the analysis of this data, alongside other narrative texts, refuse logics of representation and significance which would undermine critical qualitative research as valid knowledge production.

What should be noted about the Edinburgh setting, is the divergent attitude of devolved Scottish government towards themes such as international responsibility and immigration, in comparison to Westminster (Weir, Wilson and Gorman, 2018; Armbruster, 2019; Howarth, 2019; Scottish Refugee Council and JustRight Scotland, 2021). This is not to suggest that diverging language is directly equivalent to a difference in material conditions for (Syrian) refugees; but this use of the British government as a foil for Scottish politicians and policy-makers has particular implications for Syrian refugee narrators who have settled in Edinburgh when navigating topes such as expectations of gratitude or obligations to narrativize traumatic experiences. These include practical differences in the implications of policy between Holyrood and Westminster but also, most relevantly to the stories examined here, a popular background assumption of comparable tolerance and welcome which any accounts of racist or other hostile behaviour must do heavy lifting to contradict while risking an appa-

of ingratitude .(Quinn, 2014; Mulvey, 2015, 2018; Howarth, 2019; Bradshaw, 2021; Rodger, 2021)

The limitations of this study's methodological approaches do not only apply to site and participant selections. As noted above, the troubled matter of translation has had an impact on this project, throughout the process. While the exclusive use of texts produced and published in English (or at least published in both English and other languages in a short timeframe) might have avoided the politics of power, along lines of racialisation and colonialism, this would cause two further limitations. Firstly, the assumption of absolution from complicity in the politics of translation when carried out by earlier actors such as the memoir co-authors or publishers carries the heavy risk of eliding the relations of power at play at those stages of textual production and reading Syrian refugee memoirs and similar as 'safe' texts about which Western researchers can make interpretive claims.

Secondly, without the inclusion of interviews, this research project leaves aside the tension between public and 'official' narratives by Syrian refugees and those produced elsewhere, in intertextual relation with these dominant stories. This is not to claim that the interviews can offer a more authentic representation of Syrian refugee experiences, or even that they are private instances of storytelling without enmeshment in institutions and other economic and political actors (Rickard, 1998; Cabot, 2016; Fobear, 2016). They are certainly not intra-community rather than inter-national; but indeed this also points to how their exclusion would elide a piece of the puzzle of an international political economy of (Syrian) refugee storytelling: academic and other research.

However, the pitfalls, in many senses, of linguistic interpretation and translation are not resolved in this justification; this is a longstanding and deeply entrenched question that requires collaborative critical approaches to new methodological stances and tools, beyond the power and scope of this thesis to settle (Roth, 2013; Temple, 2013; Piazzoli, 2015; Turhan and Bernard, 2021). In this case, at least, incorporating change and flexibility into the process of doctoral research was one method for acknowledging these limitations and beginning the work to acknowledge the credit for knowledge production due to interpreters and participants.

## A guide to the thesis

The first chapter positions this thesis among existing scholarship on the refugee figure and forced migration generally, as well as the body of work focussed specifically on displaced Syrian subjects. It lays out the major relevant contributions of refugee studies, International Relations, anthropology, history, memory studies and narrative studies to illustrate how these are in intertextual relation with the narratives analysed in this research. This is an attempt to map out the way that certain debates and preoccupations fall across the landscape of the multidisciplinary literature on forced movement and refugees without excessive contribution to the re-drawing of disciplinary lines. Ultimately, I identify the core concerns which have characterised this literature and thus shaped how the (Syrian) refugee subject is discursively produced as well as the international refugee regime at large. These are the preoccupations and frameworks of the refugee ‘problem’, ‘figure’ and ‘voice’.

The second, third and fourth chapters offer arguments, in connection to these three core themes, for the relevance of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ and the potential readings for narrators’ interventions on humanity, violence and space which this figure opens up. Chapter Two begins to untangle the slippery matter of gratitude from within narratives about storytelling, crucial and informative encounters between Syrian refugees and other actors in the international political economy of refugee storytelling. In this chapter, I cite Dina Nayeri<sup>6</sup> who draws a causal relationship between the pressure of gratitude and the assimilation of cultural difference to avoid racism and discrimination.

I suggest, through a reading of these narratives and with the ‘cultural valence’ of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ in mind, that this is not a fixed process and that instead a fetishization of difference and particularly of stories of suffering beyond normative Western citizen experiences can also be linked to the relation between refugee identity and gratitude (Dean, 2017, p. 635; Thiruselvam, 2019). Nayeri contends that Western host societies demand for refugees to ‘rub out their face as tribute’ (2017). But we should also perceive how some actors in politically diverse Western populations would deploy gratitude to ask for

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<sup>6</sup> Nayeri is a novelist and autobiographical writer. She arrived in the U.S. as an asylum seeker from Iran at the age of ten, becoming an American citizen when she was fifteen. She now also holds French citizenship through marriage and lives in the U.K.

storytelling labour just as Nayeri calls on her ‘quiet’ Middle Eastern students to ‘tune their voices and polish their stories [...] even more so if they arrived as refugees’ (2017) .

This chapter also takes on the task of including research methodologies and the researcher in the analysis while looking to the ways in which narrators produce stories about their experiences of narrativizing from the position, and category, of refugee. It does so in order to present an argument for reading complex discourses around gratitude in Syrian refugee narratives which are enmeshed with the ways in which other narrative encounters have produced narrators as the embodiment of the ‘refugee problem. The most pertinent example of such narrative encounters is the scenario of the asylum interview but the chapter also argues for a seeping of such an implicit entitlement to gratitude into relations between Syrian refugees and others who make demands upon them for narrative, such as host state citizens, journalists and researchers such as myself.

Further, the way in which Western popular and literary culture, as well as linguistic, anthropological and oral history research, have linked the capacity to narrativize one’s life equivalent with making a claim not only on subjectivity but specifically on being human means that the gratitude a refugee narrator might be expected to feel for an opportunity to tell their story overlaps, in fact, with a gratitude for a chance to be seen as human (Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Ochs and Capps, 1996; Ochs, 2004; Gemignani, 2011b; Garritzen, 2020). Thus, in Chapter Three, the analysis reads the narratives for testimony on the complex and non-linear relationship between dehumanisation and abandonment in time and space, in the context of racialised and gendered discourses which produce certain relationships between time, culture and understandings of what constitutes ‘humanity’ and who can occupy the category of ‘human’.

By focusing on narrators’ production of how a subject experiences space and time as a constitutive part of being humanised or dehumanised, this third chapter thus joins a large segment of IR and refugee studies in examining the biopolitics of containment and exposure as part of the refugee regime (Arendt, 1951; Agamben, 1998; Edkins, 2000; Dubernet, 2001; Charteris-Black, 2006; Lischer, 2006; Zembylas, 2010; Amoore and Hall, 2013; Turner,

2015; Janmyr, 2016; Jansen, 2016; Knudsen, 2016; McConnachie, 2016; Wedderburn, 2019). Drawing on Jasbir K. Puar's (2017) interventions on the regulation or curtailment of racialised and 'debilitated' subjects' capacity and futurity in certain spaces, the chapter argues that narratives on the violence produced through interactions between varying identities, space and security might carry out multiple functions, sometimes simultaneously, depending on the expected listener or reader.

Stories about dehumanising danger or undignified death in the prison, on the refugee path and in spaces experienced as a 'void' can be narrativized, and can be read, as an indictment of the system of states, borders and citizenship which coerces subjects already facing violence into other spaces of insecurity. I conclude that these narrators cite humanity in their stories about exceptional violence in order to critique the geographical distribution of the role of humanitarian and the status of 'not-fully-realised' humanity held by the refugee. But, going further, it has also been suggested that by questioning concepts presumed absolute in international humanitarian discourses such as the value of life and humanity for certain subjects, the narrators make claims on a status as human which only more forcefully demonstrates how they have already been produced as a *type* of humanity for whom debilitation and durational death can be tolerated to secure the futurity of 'fully realised' humanity (Hartman, 1997; Puar, 2017; Holohan, 2019). The 'survivor-witness-messenger' role is a crucial element of this argument as these narratives are overwhelmingly structured around delivering the message that Syrian refugees have been failed by 'humanity' through their spatial and temporal abandonment.

In Chapter Four, I begin from an observation of a recurring use of metaphor in Syrian refugee memoirs which represents the repressed peoples of Syria as a female figure (most often a mother and wife), victimised by the domestic violence of her male relative (most often a husband). Noting the intertextual background of existing metaphorical representations of nation-states in the image of an iconised female personage, the chapter allows for interpretative multiplicity, exploring the tensions between this metaphor and narrativizations of material violence as well as the analysis and storytelling emerging from discussion of this metaphor with the interviewees. It argues for the relevance of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role in Syrian refugee women narrators' responses to discussion of the

deployment of this metaphor as well as the complexity of narrators' engagement in discourses on gendered violence under the weight of even feminist scholarship's assumptions about agency, gender, race and power. The analysis demonstrates that the negotiation of story-telling encounters between actors with identities and experiences constitutive of power relations, such as between myself and the Syrian refugee interviewees, is crucial to building knowledge on violence produced by international structures of gender and race in line with a feminist methodology.

In this chapter, I argue that the feminist scholar's commitment to ethics of care and a progressive political positionality demands practices within research encounters, such as the interview, which recognise participants' analytical labour and frame that analysis as equivalent to and in dialogue with the interpretive work done by the researcher themselves (Robinson, 2006, 2011; Ackerly and True, 2008; Raghuram, 2019). This is equally a methodological contribution as I argue that there is a need for research on the intersectional experiences of particularly marginalised subjects in Western spaces to formulate practical ways in which to foreground the analytical labour and interpretative knowledge of those with 'lived experience' (Eastmond, 2007; Given, 2008; Krause and Enloe, 2015; Pearlman, 2016).

In the term 'analytical labour' I understand the work narrators carry out through narrativization and thus 'making meaning', as well as further efforts to give explanatory or explorative accounts of social and political phenomena, as analogous to the type of work which qualitative researchers are (usually) remunerated for and which is termed 'analysis'. One such method which might acknowledge this labour might be research design which allows for dialogue between participants which is not the subject of an ethnographic white gaze, in all its colonial authority, but rather which cites such knowledge-production with as analysis offered not 'raw' data.

The fifth and final chapter shifts course, integrating the analysis of the previous chapters into an initial assessment of the international political economy (IPE) of Syrian refugee storytelling and the role of this type of narrative production, as an industry, within the extensive politics of displacement. This is a preliminary foray into such an area of study and,

in part, the aim of the chapter is to make an argument for studies with the capacity for greater depth which consider these mechanisms of narrative production and consumption within IPE and the international relations of displacement as powerful co-constitutive forces of policy, lived conditions and experiences and of subjectivities. In this chapter, I characterise and explain three dominant genres in the Syrian refugee memoir corpus through the framework of gender, (dis)ability and age: *Brave Man Activists*, *Resilient Girls* and *World-Weary Women*

I then examine the question of ownership and voice in the context of commodified Syrian refugee narratives and the proliferation of economic actors involved in the market for these stories. And, finally, the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ is theorised as in co-constitutive relation with a figure similar to Dean’s ‘humanitarian-witness’. In this suggestion it is noted that not only can co-authors, journalists and researchers claim ownership over narratives and participate in the politics of displacement, but they also invite others to receive the survivor-witness-messenger’s testimony, to consume this as product and to assess the story against existing narratives and discourses which produce an ideal refugee to which the narrator is expected to align with and aspire. Such is the position that Akkad finds himself in all too often, held between the storytelling industries and the consumer-readers and -watchers whose understanding of him as a subject is shaped by an avalanche of existing narratives by other actors.

What follows is a brief description of the narrators of the texts, including the interviews, on which this project focuses. For sources such as Pearlman’s volume and journalistic interviews, I summarise the background information offered by these editors and authors. Each of the interviewees whom I recruited are named, throughout the thesis, using a pseudonym which I have assigned. Pearlman and some journalists have already anonymised their participants and therefore, while I still use an asterisk upon first use of the name in each chapter to flag anonymisation, I have not re-assigned pseudonyms as repetition of this process seems unnecessary. Throughout the thesis I use the first name of all narrators; this functions so as not to differentiate or reify hierarchies in status between the interviewees, Pearlman’s narrators and the memoirists as well as to reflect that each narrator, as represented by their first name, is produced as a character in their narrative among others, in almost a separation of selves.

Zaynab\* is one of the interviewees whose narratives, across various interviews, are analysed in this project. Zaynab is in her forties and is a widowed mother to three children who she lives with in Edinburgh. She previously lived in a small village in Syria, leaving after she found living under Daesh rule to be too dangerous, especially as a single mother. She travelled first to Lebanon and was then granted asylum in the U.K. through a remotely administered U.N. application.

Safiya\* is a woman in her thirties with two young children. She grew up in a village in northern Syria before attending university in Damascus. After marrying and falling pregnant she moved to a village on the outskirts of the city until her home was destroyed in an aerial bombardment. Safiya and her family then travelled to Lebanon where she applied for asylum in Europe through the UN and received permission to settle in the U.K..

Muna\* is a Kurdish Syrian woman in her late twenties who lived in a village in Syria during her early childhood before moving to Damascus for high school and university, where she qualified as a lawyer. She first moved to Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan when fleeing Syria, where she was trained and employed as a television journalist. She also met her fiancé, Tariq\* (also in his twenties), in Erbil, who, having travelled with a fake passport through Europe to join Muna, also participated in the interviews. Tariq was an accountant in Erbil and prior to moving to Kurdistan had also lived in Damascus and attended university there, although he and Muna had never crossed paths. He began the journey towards the U.K. with his male cousin, who was arrested by Greek police upon entry to the state and was convicted to a prison sentence for people-smuggling. Tariq then continued onto the Netherlands and, after two attempts at boarding a flight to the U.K., successfully arrived and married Muna.

Asya\* is Kurdish-Syrian and a mother of four in her late forties. Her husband passed away in a workplace accident prior to her departure from Syria. After her brothers-in-law kidnapped her children and used violence against her, she covertly travelled with her children and her younger sister to Erbil before being granted asylum in the U.K. through a remote UN application.

Jamila\* is in her thirties, married with children and left Syria after her husband and his family. Jamila's parents-in-law travelled to Turkey with her eldest son, who has physical and learning disabilities, because he was struggling to cope with the noise of bombardment. After suffering a gunshot wound and being held in prison for eighteen months, Jamila's husband

also fled to Turkey. Later, visa requirements at the Turkish border changed and so Jamila and her family reunited in Sudan and then travelled on to Egypt where her husband could receive medical treatment for his injuries. Through the UN, they applied for asylum and after two years travelled to the U.K. with permission.

Hevi\* is in her early twenties, also Kurdish Syrian, and left Damascus before being able to finish her university studies. She was granted asylum through a remote UN application while she was in Erbil and travelled with her sister. She plans to return to Syria when it is safe to do so and counts some Assad supporters among her friends.

Khawla Dunia contributes a version of her diaries from 2011 as chapter in *Diaries of a Unfinished Revolution* (Dunia, 2013). The preface to this book explains that the editors approached Dunia based on her ‘regular contributions to the influential website *Safhat Suriya* (Syrian Pages)’ (2013, p. ix) . She describes herself as an atheist of Alawite background and is an activist, lawyer, writer and researcher with previous publications including ‘Syrian Women between Reality and Ambition’ and ‘Report on the Damascus Declaration Detainees’ (2013, p. xv).

Kassem Eid’s narrative, *My Country: A Syrian Memoir*, was published in 2018, with a second edition in 2019. Eid gave interviews to news networks from Moadamiya as media spokesperson under a pseudonym from the beginning of the siege while also running an anonymous blog consisting of his diaries entries. First seeking asylum in the U.S., he took part in a speaking tour in 2014 and carried out a silent protest at the United Nations Security Council before eventually settling in Germany (Eid, 2018, pp. i, 192). He is Palestinian-Syrian, with both parents descending from Palestinian refugees who settled in Syria.

Marwan Hisham co-authored *Brothers of the Gun* (2018) with Molly Crabapple, as mentioned above, after publishing stories and photographs anonymously with *Vanity Fair* from Daesh-held Raqqa, his hometown. Now a freelance journalist, Hisham travelled first to Turkey before later returning to Raqqa post-publication (Hisham, 2019).

Yusra Mardini co-wrote *Butterfly* with Josie Le Blond, journalist and author based in Berlin. Yusra’s public profile was a result, firstly, of interviews with Belgian VRT journalist Steven Decraene and, later, due to her participation in the 2016 Rio Olympics in the Refugee team (Kitson and The Guardian, 2016; The Independent and Blair, 2016). In 2019 she was

appointed as a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

Nujeen Mustafa's memoir, first entitled *Nujeen* and later *The Girl from Aleppo*, was published in 2016, with the second edition released in 2017. She had previously gained international fame as a result of television news interviews she participated in along the European refugee path with various English-speaking networks (BBC News, 2015; Mackey, 2015). Her co-author, Christine Lamb, is a journalist and also co-wrote *I am Malala* (2013).

Samar Yazbek has written two memoirs; her first *A Woman in the Crossfire* is included in this study. Yazbek, an Alawite journalist and single mother, is also a novelist and worked with national and international media as well as local protest groups in Damascus from 2011 until she fled Syria.

The narrators from Pearlman's volume include, in order of appearance in the thesis, Sham, Abdel-Halim, Hadia, Tayseer, Kareem, Abdul Rahman, Adam, Adel-Aziz, Ghayth, Nabil, Imad, Wael, Hakem, Maher, Nur, Iman, Marcell, Talia, Bilal, Aziza, Abu Firas, Ibbrahim, Sami, Osama, Shafiq, Jalal, Ayham and Ahmed. Short demographic descriptions of each narrator, as well as interview dates and locations, are given at the beginning of Pearlman's volume and there are too many narrators for this to be replicated here (Pearlman, 2018, pp. xvii–xxviii).

I also briefly include Aeham Ahmad's *The Pianist of Yarmouk* and, as mentioned above, Alia Malek's *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria*. In a small selection of media texts, Syrian refugee narrators include Ammar and Sam in a *VICE* article, Maya Ghazai in an article for *Huffington Post*, Fuad al-Essa, Amira al Tabbaa and Hiba\* in an *NBC News* article.

## Chapter One

### Knowledge-Production as Discursive Landscape:

#### What Academia Tells Us About Refugee Problems, Figures and Voices

After her release from an Athens prison on bail, while still facing charges of people-smuggling, Sara Mardini, sister of Olympic swimmer and memoirist Yusra Mardini, told *The Guardian*: ‘I am a card with two faces [...] I have experienced being inside and outside the boat, I am a rescuer and a refugee’ (Smith, 2018b). Sara’s decision to begin volunteering in Lesbos, helping rescue those making the same sea crossing famously swam by the sisters, is described in the last chapter of the memoir, entitled ‘The Voice’. Yusra’s post-Rio Olympics future is described in parallel. As Sara leaves for Greece, Yusra also has ‘no time to rest’ and flies to New York to address the UN Leader Summit on Refugees: ‘I had a message to spread’ (Mardini, 2018, p. 277).

These sisters’ trajectories beyond the text of Yusra’s story seem to be divergent and yet in dialogue. One young Syrian refugee woman is arrested for bringing an overcrowded dinghy of refugees to shore (Smith, 2018a). This is a re-enactment of what first facilitated the production of the Mardini sisters as exceptional examples of (Middle Eastern) female resilience and leadership (Smith, 2018a). Another releases a memoir endorsed by Barack Obama and is appointed as the youngest ever Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR (Mardini, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Either might be understood,

within the numerous discourses surrounding displacement and refugee subjects in international humanitarianism, as both ‘a rescuer and a refugee’.

The paths available to them, however, are differently shaped. Sara encounters actors who produce her message and actions as criminal, justifying her detainment and prosecution (Campana, 2018; Smith, 2018b, 2018a). Meanwhile, Yusra’s welcome into practices of international humanitarianism such as ambassador positions and public speaking at global summits suggests there might be more than two faces to this card. To contrast these sisters’ experiences is to highlight how understandings of the refugee, as figure or as problem, produce the material conditions of life for displaced peoples. But the production of knowledge on the meaning of the refugee for the international system, or about how best to manage displaced populations, is also entangled in a network of narratives and their international political economies, in which refugees such as Sara and Yusra are actors.

The ways in which gender, race, class and (dis)ability as relations of power and systems of knowledge come to shape the interactions occurring in these networks is an overarching concern of this thesis (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1998; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010; Puar, 2017; Gray and Franck, 2019). With almost identical childhood training for competitive swimming, and having made the full journey from Syria to Germany together, how does Yusra become a darling of international organisations and European publishing, with endorsements from world leaders, while Sara can be legitimately charged as a people-smuggler, a spy and a member of a criminal gang, spending over a hundred days in prison until she is released on bail (Smith, 2018a)? From the outraged coverage in liberal news outlets of Sara’s imprisonment to the labelling of the less troublesome sister as a ‘Rebel Girl’, the way these subjects are discursively produced is shaped by co-existing and intersecting logics of gender and race operating in the various relevant contexts (Favilli, 2017).

Even in Yusra’s own memoir, the media interest in their story can be seen to implicitly cite an expectation that young women from Middle Eastern states such as Syria be restrained by specifically Muslim or Arab conditions of gendered repression; hence the evident surprise of journalists such as Steven upon discovering that the sisters are competitive athletes who

swam to Lesbos, pulling the boat along with them as others only took short turns (Mardini, 2018, p. 143). Yusra has already told her readers that Sara is struggling to recover from injury and has drawn away from swimming in retaliation against their father's pressure for them to sacrifice all to achieve (2018, pp. 18, 116, 207). She no longer has the bodily capacity to perform exceptionality on an international stage, like Yusra can, but she still joins her sister in Rio to tell their story together, as is expected by those waiting for them at the post-Games press conference (2018, p. 277).

Both women are also light-skinned and neither wear the hijab nor other religious coverings (Hucal, ABC News, 2018; Mardini, 2018, p. 13). Yusra's face and hair dominate the cover of her memoir, as a waist up photograph shows her rising out of the water below the title (image reproduced in Chapter Five, figure 16). Sara might have endured criminalisation and detention for her version of a Syrian refugee message, but aspects of her identity which still allow for her to be understood as an exceptional example of a refugee have granted her a public profile and an extent of international liberal sympathy. Within these same discourses around gendered and racialised relations between identity, space and security, such publicity and protections are not granted to those Syrian refugee subjects who would more easily be produced as an anonymous, threatening and regressive criminal in any European prison (Khosravi, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Andersson, 2014a; Gully and Itagaki, 2017).

Nonetheless, to figure oneself as both rescuer and refugee makes an identity claim which provokes a tension, described by Akkad in the introduction, within knowledge-production on displacement and refugees (Malkki, 1996; Abbas, 2019; Adams and The Guardian, 2020). Sara's return to Greece moves against the logic of - even pro-refugee activist - narratives of Syrians flight from spaces of danger to those of safety. Implicit in the contrast between the two sisters is an association of ingratitude with Sara's decision to not only leave the benevolently offered refuge of Germany but to also engage in activities criminalised by the European border regime and thus draw attention to a critique of its injustice. While a diversity of voices in the body of texts focused on experiences of Syrian refugees makes a welcome contestation against practices of silencing, the different relationships that these sisters have to the notion of 'voice' demonstrate how the existing discursive landscapes makes certain narratives more permissible and creates greater resistance to others.

For example, the preoccupation of knowledge-producers such as journalists and academics with the survival of warfare in Syria, and with suffering on the refugee path, might facilitate an invitation, or even a demand, that Syrian refugees bear witness on the exceptionality of displaced suffering. Furthermore, the testimony that such a messenger delivers is published, disseminated and consumed in a manner dependent on existing gendered, racialised and capitalist systems of international relations. The scholarship which contextualises this project, including this thesis itself, co-constitutes such systems and, in approaching them as such, we can better analyse and theorise the place of Syrian refugee narratives and that to which they intertextually relate.

This chapter takes on the task of reading discourses around non-Western, and specifically Arab and/or Muslim, displaced persons including those emanating from academic knowledge-production, which are understood to always be in intertextual relation with the narratives analysed in this research. The thesis will then be set up to build upon such scholarship but also to understand its role in shaping the difficulty of narrative paths chosen by Syrian storytellers, with an aim to contribute to knowledge of Syrian refugees own narrative navigation of this landscape. Furthermore, I am concerned with the ways in which industries such as academia not only theorise based on gendered and colonial presumptions about the international system but also play a role in producing these presumptions as social and political realities.

Other studies might look to how policies towards refugees have been shaped by refugee studies, International Relations (IR) and anthropological research, especially given how traditionalist IR has considered forced migration an aberration rather than a constitutive feature of the sovereign-state system (Loescher, 1996; Betts, 2009, 2014; Barnett, 2014; Gottwald, 2014; Hammerstadt, 2014). This dissertation instead considers non-typical scenes of international relations such as the academic oral history interview or the production of refugee memoirs to look for such gendered, racialised and classed interactions between subjects.

The following sections lay out the major relevant contributions of refugee studies, International Relations, anthropology, (oral) history, memory studies and narrative studies. These divisions are not clear-cut, and I do not wish to erase ‘cross-border’ thinking; numerous scholars are doing explicitly inter/transdisciplinary, disciplinarily undeclared or even anti-disciplinary work. Therefore, the chapter is organised with the aim of mapping out the landscape of narrative and discourse within which Syrian narrators’ stories sit and the productive work that has been done by academic knowledge-production to contribute to such a landscape.

This means that three core concerns form the basis of the chapter: how scholarship has produced displacement as a problem to be solved through study and policy-making, how scholars across disciplines have focused on an abstracted refugee figure and its implications for international institutions such as sovereignty and security, and, finally, how feminist, postcolonial and other critical studies work has wrestled with the notion of voice, and the apparent need to locate an authentic refugee voice and translate it for an academic audience. This chapter characterises the broad strokes of this academic literature thus far in order to allow for insight into overarching thematic relations in how refugees, as subjects, and displacement, as a phenomenon, have been produced and how this relates to the stories then told by Syrian narrators.

This analysis is carried out in order to make an argument for the significance of the focus on ‘problem’, ‘figure’ and ‘voice’ for Syrian refugee narrators, in terms of how these academic (and sometimes policy) discourses have already produced meaning around Syrian refugee subjectivities and experiences. In regard to the ‘problem’ framework in studies of displacement, the chapter argues that it is almost impossible to maintain a separation between displacement as a problem for the international system (and state actors) and the identification of refugees as problematic, abnormal and, eventually, deviant (Soguk, 1996, 1999; Weber, 2016). In this way, the complicated question of gratitude, comes to the fore as well as subsequent pressure for Syrian refugees to narrativize their lives to avoid being categorised as ‘problematic’ – read threatening, fraudulent or incapable of integration (Puar and Rai, 2002; Puar, 2008; Innes, 2010; Redclift, 2016; Weber, 2016; Mayblin, 2017; Boeyink, 2019; Rountree and Tilli, 2019).

This existing work which focuses on the politics of (colonial) humanitarian practices and discourses of gratitude not only contextualises the Syrian narratives considered in this thesis, but also form a basis for the analysis and findings by establishing understandings of the suffering subject and those positioned to aid as enmeshed in orientalising and feminising or infantilising relations. In articulating the role of the ‘problem’ framework in the intertextual shaping of refugee narratives, this thesis contributes to these bodies of work, not only in applying such to this context, but also in connecting these overarching relations and practices to specific but cross-cutting sites such as academic research and publishing industries which are particularly involved in the hyperfocus on explanations or ‘solutions’ for such a problem.

In turn, the significance, for Syrian refugee narrators, of knowledge-production on the ‘refugee figure’ in academia is twofold: firstly, in some narratives, an awareness of a Western, or white, ‘gaze’ can be interpreted from explicit contestations of the associations of specific violences (terrorist or sexual) and of economic burden with Syrian refugees, and indeed Middle Eastern refugees in general. Secondly, narrators are in intertextual relation with the critical literature concerned with the refugee figure as a counterpoint to the citizen, and indeed the human, when they invoke humanity either to make a claim on this category or to indict the international community for its failure to protect Syrians from dehumanising violence. The third chapter investigates this further and analyses how the narrators connect this ambivalent relationship with the category of human to the figuring of time and space as capable of having a dehumanising effect upon any subject.

The matter of research on refugee ‘voice’ or ‘voices’ is, perhaps, thornier, as much of this initial scholarship has emanated from a necessary pushback to a colonial and gendered methodological stance which presumed the validity and possibility of detached observation without the need for the knowledge held by subjects who were made into silent objects of study (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 1992, 2007; Malkki, 1996; Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Sigona, 2014). However, responding to the pitfalls of this approach has, in some cases, produced a fetishization of marginalised voices and an implied belief in the value of searching out ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ voices unsullied by relations with the researcher or existing discourses (Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Sigona, 2014; Cabot, 2016).

The implications of the scholarship’s search for voice likely include a connection between storytelling and an appeal to a Western, or international, humanitarian audience. Furthermore,

the methods and methodologies of research have come to produce stories from participants, including refugees, as a matter of ‘raw’ data which other actors, such as researchers, editors and so on, make valuable (in terms of culture and capital) through their interpretation and analysis (Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke, 2020). Hence, refugee narrators tell stories in a context where they are most often positioned as localised sources of information, not international producers of knowledge (Massey, 1994).

This chapter also gives an account of the multidisciplinary academic literature to support a case for the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ as a necessary and illuminative contribution to ways of reading Syrian refugee narratives and analysing the discourses and practices through which they are produced and consumed. This suggestion builds on Dean’s (2017, 2019) term ‘survivor-witness’ by emphasising the interlocking relation of movement, survival and the deliverance of testimony in existing discourses around Syrian refugees as well as within their own stories. The thesis is concerned with possible interpretations of the texts which read for use of the tropes, and thus the genre, of this figure, whether through occupying the role, explicitly rejecting it or engaging with it ambivalently, and how such interactions produce the narrators as international political subjects. This chapter makes initial suggestions of how the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ assists in reading for the implications of ‘problem’, ‘figure’ and ‘voice’ preoccupations for Syrian refugee narrators, which is then examined fully in the following three chapters.

## **Problem**

At present, many scholars are responding particularly to the period of approximately 2014 to 2016, labelled in political and media discourses as the refugee or migrant ‘crisis’ in Europe. Refugees from Syria were travelling into Europe during this period, as they had been since 2011, and many still are currently. People displaced from Syria by the civil war have also travelled towards Middle Eastern and African states, the Americas, Australasia, and other locations but narratives have largely focused on refugee experiences inside and at the borders of ‘Fortress Europe’ (El-Tayeb, 2011; Andersson, 2014b; de Genova, 2016; Czajka and Suchland, 2017)..

Economic threat discourses have meant an added complexity in the EU context due to formalised economic interdependency (through shared currency and other institutions) as well as norms of cooperation over border control (Andersson, 2014c, 2014b; Adams and BBC News, 2015; Nedergaard, 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that the presumptions by key international actors about the desirability of certain EU states as a ‘final destination’, means the relationship between refugees and the space they move into becomes more entangled with discourses of threat and security even if said space is far removed from the state in question (Ilgit and Klotz, 2018; Murray and Longo, 2018). For example, through both EU legislation and more informal diplomacy, Eastern European borders have become of major security interest for wealthy Western European states as their threat management is externalised into the broader EU border regime complex (Betts 2010; De Genova 2016).

Of the preoccupations identified in this chapter, ‘the refugee problem’ dates back further and reflects how research was, and continues to be, shaped by political understandings of globally shared crisis. Most accounts of refugee studies as a field begin with a description of post-Second World War refugee camps and a growing demand for expertise on how national and international policy should be formulated in response (Marrus, 1985; Skran and Daughtry, 2007; Elie, 2014). Early interventions on the topic of refugees explicitly located within the ‘boundaries’ of IR mostly subscribed, with little scepticism, to this ‘problem’ framework from a state policy perspective. Post-Second World War refugees in Europe and displaced Palestinians from 1948 were two popular areas of early research and theory. Work on the former topic describes, and sometimes advocates for, international cooperation or regional cooperation as a solution to the ‘problem’ of those still displaced in Europe (Moore, 1986; Gordenker, 1987; Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1992; Skran, 1995; Loescher, 1996; Barutciski and Suhrke, 2001; Keely, 2001; Marrus, 2002; Bagshaw, 2005). Meanwhile the displacement of Palestinians has been approached mostly as a factor in Israeli-Arab relations and conflict, rather than explored for its own significance as a global phenomenon (Peretz, 1959, 1993; El-Nimr, 1993; Sayigh, 1997; Hanafi and Long, 2010).

Yet these descriptive accounts of policy towards refugees by state and humanitarian actors often make a normative agenda explicit: that of ‘solving’ the problem refugees pose towards

themselves and the international community (Gallagher, 1994; Chimni, 2004; Milner, 2014; Davis *et al.*, 2018; Allsopp and Chase, 2019; Yassen, 2019). For example, scholars have suggested how some international actors or processes risk undermining refugees' claims to human rights or citizenship, a goal presumed to be universally desirable and morally imperative (Bradley, 2014; Darling, 2014; Gully and Itagaki, 2017; Robson, 2020). The 'problem' framework also extends to research more grounded in refugees' experiences rather than grand policy: the experience of displacement is suggested to be compiled from encounters with obstacles such as work restrictions, other financial precarity, familial separation, lack of basic amenities and so on. In more recent gendered readings of data on refugee experiences, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has come to the fore, presumed as the main 'problem' facing refugee women (sometimes assumed to be the only subjects 'with' gender) (Freedman, 2010b; Gerard and Pickering, 2014; 2016b, 2016a, 2017, 2018).

For Syrian refugees specifically, media and political discourses in the U.K. can be seen to produce conditions of exceptionality which partially 'desecuritize' certain groups of refugees (Huysmans, 1998; MacKenzie, 2009; Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck and Spencer, 2019). This process is heavily gendered and racialised, often deploying tropes of feminised vulnerability or racialised hierarchies of civilization (or arguably proximity to whiteness) (Neumann, 2011; Khosravi, 2012; Lugones, 2016). The language and practice of the U.K. Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement programme from 2015 onwards<sup>7</sup> provides a useful example of how securitising discourses are intertextually linked and dialogic through evidence of the need to counter successful securitisation of forced displacement and immigration in general with gendered and racialised desecuritising tropes (Wæver, 1995; Huysmans, 1998; Aradau, 2004; Huysmans and Buonfino, 2008; MacKenzie, 2009; Watson, 2009; Innes, 2010; Pope, 2017). But this does not mean Syrian refugees entirely avoid being produced, in discourses and practices, as constitutive of the 'problem' of displacement in the 2010s.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Gateway Protection Programme for the UK resettlement of UNHCR-recognised refugees (launched in 2004) as well as, to a lesser extent, the Vulnerable Children Scheme solely for refugee children in the Middle East and North Africa (launched 2016). Both are expected to merge with the SVPR programme in 2020.

Some Syrian narrators demonstrate awareness of this way of framing and analysing displacement, especially that caused by a civil-war conflict which can be discursively produced as a matter of state failure attributable to a national population at large. In Pearlman's volume, Lana\*, who lived between Jordan and Syria prior to 2011, compares travelling from Damascus as 'like coming from Switzerland' in the eyes of the Jordanian border guards until the protests and civil war provoked displacement (2018, p. 257). She attributes a change in the guard's attitude to the 'huge numbers of Syrians [who] started coming in as refugees'. She tells of being yelled at in the airport, as staff made it clear her and other Syrians' presence was suddenly an unwelcome inconvenience 'Syrians were treated like a burden' (2018, p. 257).

The same language is used by Marwan's uncle who appears at a very late stage in his narrative: the point at which Marwan has firmly decided to leave Syria. In explaining his commitment to their hometown, Raqqa, Marwan's uncle tells him: "We are smart people and no less than other people in advanced countries, [...] but we are destined to live in a time when our countries are in decline and even a burden on the world." (2018, p. 295). Marwan conveys a defeated tone from his uncle and reproduces this framing, common in early and even present-day academic research, of displacement as causally linked to a failure that can be tied to a certain space, which then becomes a problem to be solved by the rest of the international community. The narratives produced through this research, and its afterlives in policy and public discourses, are in intertextual relation with the stories told by Syrian refugee narrators such as the memoirs, narrative collections, news articles and original interview texts analysed in this dissertation.

The production of displacement as a matter to be theorised and eventually solved by scholars and policy-makers through the 'problem framework' has numerous implications for these narrators. As many scholars have already explored the ways in which refugees have been discursively produced as problematic and unnatural, I am instead primarily concerned here with the subsequent political relations between Syrian refugees and their host states and societies resulting from this framing of displacement: namely those relations laced with gratitude, and thus the threat of conditional welcome. For instance, Safiya\*, interviewed for this project, tells stories of welcoming interactions with 'native' British subjects with a tone

of surprise: ‘when I see people [here], they spoke to us and say lovely words. They say, you can stay here in this country all your life (May 2019).

This reported speech seems to reinstate relations between refugee and citizen subjects, as the latter are produced to each hold an individual capacity to grant permission to reside to refugees they encounter. Indeed, many of the narratives included in this project can be read for citations of having felt an expectation that refugees, especially successful asylum seekers, express gratitude. Furthermore, these relational entanglements produced by such expectations of gratitude can sometimes be seen to pressure or even coerce Syrian refugees into narrativization, as storytelling comes to be understood as a matter of reciprocal exchange for security and assistance.

Assuming that many narrators are aware of how refugees are discursively positioned as ‘out of place’, I suggest that delivering testimony in the cadence of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ on exceptional suffering both justifies movement to a sceptical Western host audience and fulfils liberal activists hopes of presenting such tales to compel action aiming to solve the ‘refugee problem’. Dean’s ‘survivor-witness’ category is figured as a vehicle by which the subject, defined by trauma and victimization, might be assigned ‘negative or positive cultural valence’ (2017, 635). She asserts that in the case of Holocaust survivors, the ‘survivor-witness’ role associated a new type of heroism, agency and knowledge with actors who had not previously been understood as possessing these qualities (2019, pp. 108, 173). In her account, this role appears in public spheres of narrative including, but not limited to, that of the law and legal testimony and crucially quotes from witnesses’ testimony which described their decisions, while at a nadir of suffering, to strive for survival in order to tell the world what had happened (Dean, 2019, pp. 94, 97, 100, 106, 112).

I draw on Dean’s conceptualisation of the way in which a public role as witness is produced, through discourse, into a cultural figure in a network of international actors. For example, in the recommendations for *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution*, a book in which chapters are authored by those who witnessed the events of the Arab Spring, Saira Shah’s<sup>8</sup> words of praise

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<sup>8</sup> Saira Shah is a documentary film-maker and writer born in London, of Afghan heritage. Her works include the documentary films *Beneath the Veil* (2001), *Unholy War* (2001) and *Death in Gaza* (2004) and the memoir *The Storyteller’s Daughter* (2003)

can be read for discursive work which contributes to a production of a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure: ‘if you want to understand the extraordinary happenings in the Middle East through the eyes of those who have lived them you must read this book [...] these stories of horror and bravery read like testimonies to history as it was made’ (Pearlman, 2018). This assignment of urgency and communicative power to the volume is an example of how the production of a genre, such as that around the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’, through which the narratives of Syrian refugees might be ‘rendered culturally legible’, involves numerous actors producing discourse on and around the stories (Dean, 2017, p. 629).

What must be further examined is such confidence in the existence of a, presumably Western, audience and economic market, for ‘understanding’ displacement as a global phenomenon, the Middle East as a differentiated space of insecurity and the peculiar experience of suffering as only accessed through some kind of occupation of the narrator’s positionality. However, some feminist and postcolonial critiques of the violence of border systems and citizenship as an organisation of political subjects offer an opportunity for narrators to align and contribute their own knowledge to such analysis (Hyndman, 2000, 2010; Hyndman and Giles, 2004). This is also the case in relation to narratives which would connect the violence and insecurity which has displaced Syrians (but also subjects from other postcolonial nation-states) to colonial legacies and neo-colonial practices.

For instance, Zaynab\* references my methods of recording in order to add emphasis to her story of witnessing military actors of numerous nationalities working with Daesh in Syria:

I can’t talk about all of Syria because I doesn’t know but for my village [...] I want you to write this down. I saw different nationalities with Daesh: Chinese, Japanese, [pulls on her face to mimic east Asian facial features], British, Afghan, Saudi, Tunisia, Egyptian, different nationalities. (January 2019)

By singling out this part of her story as a piece of information demanding communication and preservation, Zaynab implies that the presence of non-Syrian nationals is of significance for analysing and perhaps explaining events in Syria which have led to mass displacement. She

tells elsewhere in her narrative that living under the rule of Daesh was unbearable and pushed her to flee in a manner not experienced when her village was under the control of other military groups.

Therefore, attributing the effect which Daesh had upon the Syrian population and its transformation into ‘problems’ for the international community to a mixture of nationalities other than Syrian or even Middle Eastern, might be read to suggest an engagement with the ‘problem’ framework in order to resist collective blame. If Zaynab can demonstrate the interconnected nature of the displacement-provoking conflicts and living conditions in Syria with other places and actors, she can perhaps suggest a narrative which maybe does not contest the problem framework but does attempt to add nuance to its conclusions. In the use of gesture and facial manipulation to indicate ethnic difference, she may also indirectly cite tendencies in ‘problem-solving’ policy and research to attribute instability to racialised figures of disorder and ill-intent from China or Russia.

## Figure

People who are refugees can [...] find themselves quite quickly rising to a floating world either beyond or above politics, and beyond or above history [...] it is this floating world without the gravities of history and politics that can ultimately become a deeply dehumanizing environment for refugees, even as it shelters.  
(Malkki 1995, 518)

The more abstract ‘refugee figure’ emerges as a focus in later scholarship across disciplines, especially in various academic spaces concerned with critical approaches to established theories and research on migration and displacement. More so than a problem framework, producing an imagined singular refugee as representative of the phenomenon of displacement at large, offers a site upon which to tease out existing theoretical tussles. For example, scholars have deployed this figure to ask whether ‘the refugee’ should be understood as the antithesis of the citizen or universal international subject. Does this figure operate in discourses as a perverse one of dysfunction which must be resolved? Or does it instead

represent an inevitable and unsolvable product of the sovereign state system which in fact co-constitutes it (Xenos, 1993; Haddad, 2003; Benhabib, 2004)? As with all these, there is an element of Kristeva's 'abject': the fear of existing without citizenship, without a relationship of belonging to space and place is posed as an explanation for a preoccupation with 'solving' the condition of displacement and the presumption of a refugee identity as unwanted (Kristeva, 1982; Wilcox, 2014; Ibrahim, 2018).

In work which considers the 'refugee figure', unsurprisingly, critical scholars in IR, especially in security studies, have identified heavily gendered and racialised tropes. Weber (2016), Puar (2008, 2013) and Rai (2002) have also added to these readings, making crucial interventions via queer theory on the, often overlapping, figures of the refugee, migrant and terrorist as queer figures in IR through Western productions of underdeveloped and undevelopable 'homosociality' and the perversion of any movement from the global South to the global North (Weber, 2016, p. 98). Similar to studies of biopolitical sovereignty via case studies of spaces related to displacement such as the detention centre or the camp, this scholarship is concerned with how the refugee as subject and body is understood and produced rather than the abstract qualities of an ahistorical refugee figure (Amoore and Hall, 2013; Knudsen, 2016; Baar, 2017; Deleixhe, 2019; Tazzioli, 2019; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020).

For example, securitising representations of the lone non-European male immigrant (via image or discourse) have long been identified as racialised in their implications of sexual threat to (presumably white) 'native' European women (Razack, 2004; Weber, 2016; Hermanni and Neumann, 2019; Hirsi Ali, 2021). In recent memory, the moral panic in political and media narratives about sexual assaults in some German cities on New Year's Eve 2015 provided a clear example of how such tropes are mobilised (Boulila and Carri, 2017a; Gray and Franck, 2019). The figure of the female refugee has also been seen to be loaded with sexual, gendered and racialised tropes in securitising discourses; these mostly centre around child-bearing and reproduction implicitly linked to the threatening ability of the non-native women to produce children (with presumed higher fertility rates linked to civilizational tropes about male sexual restraint) and thus 'outnumber' the 'native' population (Innes, 2010; Czajka and Suchland, 2017). There is also now a well-established body of

literature across feminist postcolonial IR on how the female body is produced as a border of collective identity, in particular for Muslim women who are made hyper-visible by discourses around ‘the veil’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Razack, 2004; Jamal, 2005; Duits and van Zoonen, 2006; El-Tayeb, 2011; Croft, 2012; Bentley, 2018).

The theoretical approach also build on foundations laid by Michel Foucault and then, more specifically in regard to displacement, Arendt, by beginning from the former’s argument for subjectivity’s production at sites of power relations and the latter’s specificity on the violences historically made permissible on the basis of a political subjectivity (and thus humanity) constituted from its exclusions (Foucault, 1980, 2008; Hayden, 2007; Walters, 2015). Re-visits to Arendt’s (1951) theoretical writings on refugees, have produced fruitful IR theory on sovereignty, largely by finding ways to use the ‘refugee figure’ to theorise about sovereignty through study of the containment and control of atypical political subjects. Giorgio Agamben (1998), especially, has provoked much theoretical debate on how to understand the figure of the refugee within the Foucauldian understandings of power that dominate most critical IR theory (Owens, 2009; Deleixhe, 2019).

Feminist scholarship in refugee studies has often embarked on gendered analysis of displaced subjects by considering the specifics of the ‘refugee woman’ figure. One of the processes most firmly established in feminist refugee studies scholarship is the representation (or discursive production, depending on the theoretical and methodological approach) of refugees as feminised and therefore vulnerable and, most significantly, then depoliticised. For instance, Hajdukowski-Ahmed (2009, p. 25) contests this by arguing for ‘a politics of recognitions of the complex identity of refugee women and their agency’ within feminist research with refugees.

While the production of feminised and victimised refugees is understood to function through gendered discursive or visual production of refugee subjects regardless of individual gender, it has been suggested that the refugee woman is particularly susceptible to this treatment and not likely to be securitised as threatening as the figure of a (Muslim and/or non-white) refugee man might be (Johnson 2011; Gray and Franck 2019). Such assertions might be undermined in light of discourses which map the capacity for specifically terrorist and/or Islamist violence onto subjects such as ‘ISIS wives’ (especially the case of Shamima Begum

at the time of writing) or veiled Muslim women who are suspected of being terrorist men in disguise, remains to be seen (Loken and Zelenz, 2018; Rajina, 2021; Sephton, 2021).

Interdisciplinary work, crossing over with fields such as refugee studies or broader political theory, has produced the most radical work on displacement. Although it is worth noting that there has long been critiques of state-centrism and the treatment of sovereignty as self-evident alongside mainstream IR scholarship (Walker, 1992; Xenos, 1993; Doty, 1996, 1997; Shapiro and Alker, 1996; Soguk, 1996, 1999; Dillon, 1998). Much is made in these scholars' work of the parallel between the borders of nation-states and those boundaries that delineate and constitute academic disciplines (Doty, 1997). Here the implications of the refugee as a liminal figure, 'neither in nor out' (Dillon, 1998), are used to illuminate cracks in the core assumptions of traditionalist IR. These include the apparent consensus on the ontology of the international system as well as the relationships between power, identity and territory. Preparing ground for stronger trends in inter- and transdisciplinary research, Shapiro and Alker (1996) and other scholars' 'antidisciplinarity' was specifically focused on how international actors who contravened the logics of the 'moral geography' of territorial sovereignty, such as the refugee, could be mirrored by scholars crossing disciplinary borders which aimed to limit and police imaginative possibilities (Shapiro, 1994; Dillon, 1998).

During and after the 'refugee crisis' the Syrian refugee has come to be produced as a certain cultural figure within academic, political and media discourses on displacement (and migration generally), implicated with multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings. A handful of scholars have integrated their work about Syrian refugees into wider concerns with gendered and racialised identities, experiences of violence and representation or productions of vulnerability. Most notable have been Jane Freedman, Zeynep Kivilcim and Nurcan Özgür Baklacioğlu's (2017) edited volume *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis* and Hande Sözer's (2019) work on how categorising Syrian refugees as vulnerable excludes certain subjects and elides other conditions and experiences in displacement. The former has provided a necessary intervention into the literature which foregrounds gender and sexuality in its response to Syrian displacement which mostly considers insecurity, economic precarity and vulnerability for LGBT+ and women subjects.

Exploring the categorisation of the refugee has shifted from early analysis of international legal or linguistic definitions and human rights norms (Zetter, 1991; Shaw, 2012; Cole, 2018) towards deconstructive unpacking of the way categorising language discursively produces, rather than describes, the refugee subject (Goodman and Speer, 2007; Scheel and Squire, 2014; Thomaz, 2017; Sözer, 2019). In a way which allows us to connect numerous ‘figures’ operating within international discursive landscapes, some research has drawn parallels between ‘the refugee’ (and indeed ‘the migrant’) and the figure of the slave (Niang, 2020) or the clown (Amoore and Hall, 2013). For instance, in the numerous ways that the refugee figure might be produced, there might be greater reference to the trope of the (political) exile or to the trope of a traumatized victim, depending on the context and intended audience and delivery medium of a narrative.

This is ultimately not dissimilar to the analysis carried out by many securitisation theorists in IR who look at understandings of refugees (and/or migrants) as security threats. However, securitisation theory leaves room to take the state and other referents for granted and, as observed by Bilgin, has done little to address the historical absence of security threats *to* non-Western subjects (including refugees often presumed to be heading towards Europe, North America or Australasia) (Bilgin, 2010; Barkawi, 2016; Mabon and Kapur, 2018).

Additionally, in an understanding of the refugee as a co-constitutive shadow figure to the citizen, it has been firmly established that the refugee figure (along with the migrant) has been produced as non-normative along with woman, non-white, queer and disabled subjects (Weber, 2016). Aeham mirrors such conceptualisations when he reflects on a future as a refugee; in his language this means becoming indistinguishable from fellow displaced people and being aware of how he is seen by Western subjects as fearsome and incomprehensible:

I would become one of those miserable grey figures, one of the millions who came streaming into Europe. Some people think we only came to get a share of the wealth. But they don't understand us, don't know why we're forced to come. They're afraid of us. (2019, p. 4)

In response to displacement from Syria since the beginnings of protests and civil war, refugee studies research has relied strongly on ethnographic methodologies, often with the declared aims of documenting Syrian refugee experiences (especially during transit) and establishing the conditions in which Syrian refugees are living in various ‘host’ states (Chatty, 2017a; Arvanitis and Yelland, 2019; Blackburn, 2019; Kvittingen *et al.*, 2019).

But even less empirical work on how refugee identity is produced and understood (by numerous actors) can also replicate the ‘problem’ logic. Scholars who have observed how media, state and humanitarian discourses and images consistently produce refugee identity as feminised and infantilised sometimes run the risk of suggesting that this phenomenon of power-knowledge can be countered by gifting ‘agency’ or ‘voice’ to refugees (Wright, 2014; Cabot, 2019). As a result of this body of work, including these scholars’ works and those responding to and building on them, debate has more or less shifted from matters of visibility for refugees towards questions of voice. The former concerned the erasure or ‘invisibility’ of refugees in certain contexts, as well as moments of hypervisibility through markers of difference which were read for gendered, racialised, sexualised and ethno-religious meanings (2007, 2009; Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007; Johnson, 2011, 2016; Vigh, 2011; Sözer, 2014, 2019).

In regard to Syrian national identity, the literature has, unsurprisingly, shifted greatly since 2011. In the period before mass protest and civil war, most scholarship raised questions about which narratives might be incorporated into national identity discourses, for example, whether Greater Syria might come to be promoted more heavily by political elites as a concept with contemporary relevance (Zisser, 2006). In the last decade, however, overwhelmingly the theme has been that of fracture; with a greater emphasis on Syrian national identity as a mythology of the Assad regimes, there has been a more critical interest in the practice and performance of national identity in a context of international condemnation and delegitimization (Stanton, 2014). Furthermore, greater attention has been given to those who have been marginalised in Syria by aspects of their identity, such as Kurds or Palestinian refugees (Tejel, 2009; McGee, 2014; Soguk, 2015; Al-Hardan, 2016).

This diversification of research and greater acknowledgement of division as a feature of nation-states and national identity, should be drawn on by scholars working with Syrian refugees. Considering Syrian identity must include work on Syrian IDPs, Syrians remaining in place, regime and rebel supporters, diverse ethnic and religious groups as well as the Syrian diaspora that existed prior to 2011 (Cooke, 2011; Al-Hardan, 2016; Paasche, 2016; Pearlman, 2016). Similar proposals have been made in research on refugee identity: this body of work has considered whether subjects claim or are labelled with a generalised refugee identity as well as the impact that displacement may have upon various facets of individual and collective identity, such as gender, ethnicity, political alignment and sexuality. Some case study work has suggested that a shared refugee identity may be deployed circumstantially; perhaps to denote solidarity between various refugee communities in a host state or, more functionally, in order to access information networks to ease the navigation of asylum and other institutional procedures (Weedon, 2004; Rainbird, 2012).

Some narrators address the matter of a ‘refugee identity’ directly, often expressing discomfort with the term itself and describing even stronger emotional affect connected to the associations which dominant discourses have tied strongly to the label through repeated production of securitising narratives. Ghayth\* in Pearlman’s volume, critiques this latter process when she explains why she and her colleagues in refugee-support organisation use the word ‘newcomers’ instead:

Today, the word “refugee” is used in a horrible way. It’s something either to be pitied or blamed for everything. Overpopulation? It’s the refugees. Rents going up? It’s the refugees. Crime? It’s the refugees. If you label people refugees, they remain refugees for the rest of their lives. For that reason. The organization I work with here doesn’t use this word [and...] after a while, they are no longer newcomers – just members of society. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 272)

Nujeen, on the other hand demonstrates a shifting and ambivalent relationship with the complicated relationship between labels and connotations. She describes hating the German term ‘*Flüchtlinge*’ as well as the English words ‘refugee and migrant’ which are ‘totally harsh’ (2017, p. 263). However, she seems to accept a form of shared identity with refugees

in Europe, implicitly referring to those from the Middle East, as her identification with a role as ‘ambassador for our culture and region’ for the purpose of ‘improv[ing] the image of refugees’ sits within a list of events including the sexual assaults in Cologne and the terrorist attack on Berlin Christmas markets in 2016 (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 277).

In addition, the way in which categorisation as a refugee can become equivalent to dehumanisation can be read in narrators’ stories of specifically fearing suffering or deaths understood to be notorious experiences endured by refugees who have become so numerous as to be indistinguishable. Yusra, for example, describes her travelling group arguing over land or sea routes to Europe:

[my cousin] isn’t happy about spending all that money to cross the water. Besides, like many Syrians, he fears drowning in the sea [...] The others can maybe tread water for a few minutes but they wouldn’t stand a chance without life jackets. And even then we’ve heard stories about fake jackets stuffed with packaging that dragged people down when they got wet. We’ve heard all the stories. Everyone is terrified of the sea (Mardini, 2018, p. 76).

Similarly, Nujeen tells of her and other refugees’ avoidance of certain camps which have been produced in media and policy discourses as spaces emblematic of the ‘refugee crisis’. For example, describing her and Nasrine’s suspension of the official transport at the Hungarian border, she explains that ‘only desperate people would go [on the buses] because everyone was scared of being stuck there or sent back and we’d heard horror stories about the conditions’ (2017, p. 181). Due to the overlap identified between the category of human and that of citizen, especially as citizenship comes to be understood as a prerequisite for claiming human rights, research on the meaning-making done around the ‘refugee figure’ has great relevance for knowledge-production on the notion and qualities of humanity itself.

From Liisa H. Malkki’s observation of mass movements depicted as a ‘sea of humanity’ (1996, p. 377) to Siobhan Holohan’s understanding of the exile-refugee as ‘constructed as less than human in language and law’ (2019, p. 3), the imbrication of discourses around migration with those concerned with existentialism of the human species, and its racialised

and gendered facets, has been made clear (also Bellamy and McDonald, 2002; Hayden, 2007; Knudsen, 2016).

Therefore, understanding the academic literature as constitutive in the international relations of displacement allows us to connect the numerous theorisations of the ‘refugee figure’ to a resistance by refugee narrators, in testimony delivered in relation to a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role, against their abandonment as abstracted dehumanised figures in empty spaces of meaningless violence. The utility and the implications of exploring the refugee as figure are complex and slippery; as the use of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ in this thesis suggests, I do not mean to suggest that identification of roles with accompanying tropes within discourses must always re-enact that reductivism which it observes. However, I do contend that a reckoning of scholars’ involvement in producing a discursive landscape, including such (abstracted) figures, through which Syrian refugees’ own narratives must navigate, is long overdue.

## **Voice**

Voice is a continually contentious concept in social and political science research on marginalised subjects, including in feminist and gender studies. Seeking the voices of those previously understood as silent or silenced can be framed as matter of amplifying voices of authenticity or of speaking of truth to power. These are two very attractive modes of understanding speech from refugees for those who locate the value of their work in the possibility of offering a counterpoint to dominant narratives about refugees ‘from above’. Anthropologists studying refugee experiences, with progressive intentions, have often produced the ‘voice’ of their participants as easily relayed, represented or translated in their ethnographic analysis and some still hold to this understanding (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 1992, 2007; Chatty, 2014; Sigona, 2014; Wright, 2014; Tammam, 2019). This is significant because this discipline has had a central role in the foundation of refugee studies and its research agendas.

Most accounts of the history of the refugee studies field, of which there are a handful, point to an anthropological leaning as an explanation to its current position (Malkki, 1995; Chimni, 1998; Scalettaris, 2007; Chatty, 2014). Strong links with policy and development

organisations have also shaped the scope and aims of refugee studies (Scalettaris, 2007; Bakewell, 2008; Bloch, 2020). The Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, a milestone in the growth of the field, finds a home in the Department of International Development. However, a fetishization of voice has been identified by those practicing reflexivity and decolonising critiques of the discipline and its associated policy areas (Gough, 1968, 1993; Asad, 1973; Lewis, 1973; Patch and McMorrow, 1977; Kothari, 2006; Mosse, 2008a, 2008b, 2013; McDowell, 2014; Zetter and Ruaudel, 2014; Asch, 2015; Paasche, 2016).

Most recently, alternative conceptualisations and methodologies have been suggested, such as a shift towards ethnographies of anthropological research itself as well as greater space for autoethnographic work which places refugee speakers in positions of analytic agency as experts on their own experience and the wider politics of displacement (e.g. Khosravi 2010). ‘Visibility’-centred research focuses on how refugees are perceived and what scholars’ roles might be to contest those representations, whereas the search for ‘voice’ can suggest a less tokenistic understanding of refugee research participants (Malkki 1996; Abu-Lughod 2013; Johnson 2015; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Selim et al. 2018). However, an understanding of ‘voice’ as a catch-all good for research with feminist and postcolonial aims might be seen to make similar errors in reductivism, reproducing relations between researcher and refugee as between global, rational observer and situated subject with only localised knowledge.

In summary, the effort to transmit refugee voices through multidisciplinary ethnographic research (largely interviews) has gone some way in countering the work of silencing done by refugee and migration regimes at large. Comparable to calls for greater visibility in response to erasure, this scholarship has produced descriptive work and a greater diversity of case studies representing refugee experience within the discipline (Malkki 1996; 2002; Allan 2005; 2013; Clack, Brittain, and Turton 2017). The assumptions around the ease (or empiricism) of representation do, however, lead to essentialising logics and away from acknowledgement of how the refugee voice is produced in the moment of the anthropological encounter, rather than pre-existing and easily interpreted. Kivilcim’s (2016, 2017) independent scholarship, along with Sözer’s (2019), demonstrates how, instead, research on refugee experiences can simultaneously expose unjust conditions linked to gendered,

racialised and sexualised identities but also acknowledge the fluidity of refugee subjectivities and their own assignation of meaning to those identities.

Perhaps due to her historical background, Dean sidesteps the somewhat earnest advocacy of ‘giving voice’ that has been identified as verging on fetishization in self-reflexive critical literature (Sigona, 2014; Cabot, 2016, 2019). Despite considering the figure of the victim across a certain period of history and identifying a shift in cultural value and voice from said victim to the ‘humanitarian witness’, Dean steers clear of seeing this as an empirical relation between subjects which requires solving and instead asks us to consider the continuous and perhaps intractable *problematiques* between suffering, witnessing and speaking (Dean, 2017, p. 628, 2019, p. 179). Similarly to Peter Gatrell (2013, 2017, 2019), in his history of the refugee, Dean foregrounds a deep intertextual understanding of how a figure such as the Holocaust victim-cum-witness or ‘the refugee’ operates like a character within narratives and of how references to other texts and tropes from relevant genres are crucial to effective production of meaning.

For example, the strong emphasis on voice and messages in the final chapter of Yusra’s memoir can be theorised as part of certain discursive productions of ideal refugees as capable, resilient and delivering a message of universal human similitude. The work of numerous international actors, including the UN, world leaders and publishing workers to co-shape such a message and Yusra’s public persona is all the more visible when placed in relation to the comparative difficulty faced by Sara when acting on a message of specific obligations to secure refugee lives at European borders (Campana, 2018; Hucal, ABC News, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019; McCarvel and Olympic Channel, 2020). In this thesis, Chapter Five argues that the ways in which narrators are presented and, in effect, marketed, in relation to gender, age and (dis)ability, shapes how easily a storyteller might be able to take up territory in one zone of the discursive landscape on displacement over another.

Yet still, the worthiness of transmitting the refugee voice to an academic audience has been widely assumed (Day, 2009; Marshood, 2010; Moos, 2015; Chatty, 2016; Pearlman, 2018).

As opposed to visual representation, the project of reproducing the words of refugee participants has had greater longevity and received less open critique. Issues of translation, editing and interpretation aside, seeking authenticity and (arguably) ‘truth’ in refugee voice has been shown to be problematic and politicised, especially regarding gender, sexuality, race and place (Spivak, 1988; Good, 2011; Fobear, 2014, 2016, 2017; Murray, 2014, 2015; Giordano, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Tamas, 2019). Some narrators may place a similar emphasis on the possession of ‘voice’ as an end in itself but this is mostly contextualised by an assessment of the scenarios in which they choose to speak, Maya, for instance, describes giving speeches to the Children’s Society as ‘my chance to do something worthwhile again, to raise awareness about the barriers facing young refugees like me; to be a voice that people could hear for all the refugees that are struggling to speak for themselves’ (Ghazai, 2017).

While Maya’s claim on her own voice is built on her opportunity to speak directly to an audience, she also reproduces tropes common to humanitarian and development discourse. In the references to ‘rais[ing] awareness’ and giving voice to those who cannot speak as an end goal, her narrative demonstrates a fluidity between engaging with a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure, as she narrativizes struggles related to her refugee identity in the U.K., and a ‘humanitarian-witness’ role, as she makes a claim on representing the experiences of wider communities including Syrians and young refugees specifically.

In academia, policy and NGO literature, an earnest search for ‘refugee voice’ is too often homogenising and understands the refugee as a speaker on a limited set of questions, often as a depoliticised, feminised victim, an exoticised (racialised) knower of suffering beyond the global North experience and imagination and a product of presumably inevitable chaos emanating from certain geographical zones of danger. This can be understood as a partially related to of the peculiar legacy and condition of anthropology and the consequent reproduction of colonial logics and tropes in research on refugees such as representations of refugees as feminised, helpless and voiceless as well as an understanding of the global South as a space which requires ethnographic study to understand orientalised states of disorder, war, repression and violence (Malkki, 1996; Hyndman and Giles, 2011). Another consequence is the excessive focus in much contemporary anthropological or refugee studies research on ‘integration’ and ‘identity’, with little interrogation of the essentialising risks of

these concepts (Kumsa, 2006; Healey, 2014; Redclift, 2016; Murray and Longo, 2018; Meissner and Heil, 2020; Rahbari, 2020).

When integration is assumed as an implicit end-goal for refugees and asylum seekers, instances of refugee subjects refusing to integrate or placing responsibility for adjustment onto a host society (for instance, by learning to pronounce refugee's names) are often presented as extraordinary and receive scholarly attention as such (Pennesi, 2016). Shahram Khosravi (2012) and Roda Madziva (2018) are among those examining this further; they pay attention to how white Europeans are produced and act as racialised subjects and how various actors, including refugees of various origins, interact with whiteness, as an identity in general. In regard to the moral imperative to survive in order to witness, in the case of refugees, the dynamic between the 'host' state and those granted asylum is laced with expectations of gratitude as discussed above, as well as integration (Bennett, 2018; Meissner and Heil, 2020).

These expectations then shape what kind of (morality) tale a refugee narrator's witnessing might come to be. Safiya\* describes how requests to narrativize her memories provoke a conflict between emotional self-preservation and a sense of duty to inform: 'I feel sad because I talk about Syria and what I miss but [it is] better that everyone knows about Syria and the government' (August 2019). Kassem also narrativizes a tension between a sense of responsibility to deliver testimony on suffering in Syria to a Western audience and the acute physical and psychological impact storytelling has upon him. It is a tension which plays out upon his body and mind as he describes 'run[ning] to a bathroom to throw up and return to the lectern to resume my talk [and] while I was speaking, my head would fill with feelings of guilt, homesickness and shame' (Eid, 2018, p. 187).

Trauma is acknowledged by many narrators and it is possible that a strategic citation or use of a 'survivor-witness-messenger' role is one of many ways of reconciling the acknowledgement of trauma within the narrative while still continuing it (Spivak, 2006; Chakraborty, 2010; Fanon, 2017; Liu, 2017). The duty to witness and then give testimony in these frameworks of identity, space and knowledge offers meaning to a phenomenon that is

disruptive in its very nature and which is still slippery to most forms of knowledge, be that medical, psychological, philosophical or otherwise (LaCapra, 1994, 2014; BenEzer, 1999; Dawson, Lacy Rogers and Leydesdorff, 1999; Alexander *et al.*, 2004; Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Hunt, 2010; Alexander, 2012). In response to Safiya's statement, we might ask who 'everyone' denotes; considering her story in dialogue with Kassem's narrative, it might be inferred that most narrators refer to a Western audience, understood as equivalent to the international community and containing those actors who claim the capacity and responsibility to make humanitarian interventions. But when, in Kassem's case, a narrator has been disillusioned as to the motives and competence of such interventions, to what end do they still feel the duty to inform readers and listeners about suffering in Syria and along the refugee path?

For Marwan, there is no comparison between the experience of joining protests in order to enact his anger at being silenced and made invisible, at being limited in his aspirations and constantly under surveillance, and the offer of being 'the sort of boy you could feed some freedomspeak and parade on the conference scene' (Hisham, 2018, pp. 3–7, 180). It is notable that he uses the language of public address when he tells the story of joining the demonstrations as a moment of demanding to be seen and heard; he implies that the space of the text is where he makes an alternative speech to that he would be giving 'on the conference scene':

Ladies and gentlemen, it was forbidden to chase a stray beam of light. It was forbidden to aspire. My father, his father, their father, same father, was watching me, was watching us all. I hated that I had no voice. I hated that I was unseen [...] my generation had to do what was done. And so I joined a ruthless stream. (2018, p. 39)

Thus, in bringing the persistent dilemma of voice to bear on this analysis of Syrian refugee narrators, I carry out a reading which distinguishes between the use of 'voice' for its own sake and the moments in which narrators can, and choose to, navigate discursive landscapes in order to carry out analysis of discourses and practices relevant to their knowledge and experiences. Ultimately, the implications of the scholarship's search for voice include a

connection between storytelling and an appeal to a Western, or international, humanitarian audience. Furthermore, the methods and methodologies of research has come to produce stories from participants, including refugees, as a matter of raw data which other actors, such as researchers, editors and so on, make valuable (in terms of culture and capital) through their interpretation and analysis. Hence, refugee narrators tell stories in a context where they are most often positioned as localised sources of information, not international producers of knowledge.

However, the interventions by scholars which identify a preoccupation with voice and the many assumptions that are associated with such a search may offer a corroboration of narrator's own critique of international political economies of knowledge and narrative. In regard to academic research specifically, the production of a status of exceptionality for Syrian refugees means that many will be familiar with the hyperfocus on this population and may have knowledge built from previous interactions with researchers. In this project, I have also attempted to place this existing literature within the space of the interviews by opening up questions of representation, translation, interpretation and analysis into the discussion with interviewees. This has led to a deeper examination of the place of nuance and interpretative uncertainty in the study of narrative and other texts produced by marginalised and over-studied populations such as refugees. In particular, Chapter Four, considers the analytic work done by Syrian refugee women on gendered violence in the context of persistent discursive efforts to produce these actors as either victimised by barbaric patriarchies or as misrepresented by Islamophobic understandings of gender in Arab and Muslim societies.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has surveyed the academia literature relevant to this thesis as a means of connecting the narratives the scholarship has produced around displacement and refugees to the discursive background which is in intertextual relation to narrative work which is done by Syrian refugees themselves. I have characterised this interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary body of scholarship as roughly grouped around the three frameworks of the refugee 'problem', 'figure' and 'voice'. Each section has given an account of how the existing literature can be interpreted to see such, often loose and fluid, divisions and has suggested the

implications of the framework and its associated narratives for Syrian refugee storytellers, from a perspective of intertextuality.

Needless to say, there has also been extensive scholarly intervention which carries out critical analysis of tendencies in the literature for this preoccupations to set limitations upon understandings of displacement and refugees, more generally and originating from Syria specifically. Scholars such as, Jennifer Allsopp (2017; 2019), Ruben Andersson (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2016b, 2019), Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010, 2014, 2020), Lucy Mayblin (2016, 2017) have responded to the predominance of literature which reifies the mobility of certain subjects as a gendered and racialised ‘problem’, with research understood as a part of finding its solution.

While I still contend that even critical interventions on the meaning of the refugee as a figure risk contributing to a process of abstraction which elides the temporal and spatial specificity of subjects’ experiences and material conditions, there is a significant section of literature which connects the ways that such figures in various refugee regime discourses are constructed and the implications for the lives of the subjects associated with these figures. Examples of such scholars, upon whose work this thesis builds, include miriam cooke (2007), Nicholas de Genova (2016, 2017, 2018), Nevzat Soguk (1996, 1999, 2015), Fatima el-Tayeb (2008, 2011, 2012) and Cynthia Weber (2016).

This is the body of work which I wish to build upon and contribute to, in that this approach produces knowledge by articulating observations of cross-cutting processes which have not yet been described holistically in a way which can make connections between discourses and practices around subjects such as Syrian refugees. I emphasise my above use of ‘risk’; scholars might consider a practice of consistent reflection on what kind of assumptions or tropes they may be reifying but this does not mean that categorising phenomena, as this thesis attempts to do with the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ cannot be useful and necessary in drawing maps of relations of power.

These scholars’ research has analysed the homogenising work done by discursive conflation of Arab and Muslim identities in securitising discourses around the refugee figure, specifically regarding gendered figures of subdued women and terrorist men. It has also made

arguments for the foundational role of orientalised threatening figures in maintaining the ‘project’ of Europe (El-Tayeb, 2008; de Genova, 2016; Weber, 2016). Overall, these scholars have offered future researchers an opportunity to build on these critical analyses of practice and discourse and, thus, to contribute nuanced and complex interpretations of political subjectivity within relations of power to otherwise widely reductive narratives on displacement and refugees.

In regard to the contentious questions surrounding ‘voice’ and the narratives which have been produced in the scholarship’s quest for its conveyance, this thesis owes most to those who have turned their analytical gaze back onto the political economies of research itself as well as the politics of methodology (Razack, 1998; Chatty, 2007b, 2014, 2016, 2017b; Gemignani, 2011a, 2017; Chatty and Marfleet, 2013; Fassin, 2013; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Rozakou, 2017, 2019; Andersson, 2018; Khosravi, 2018, 2019; Cabot, 2019). This includes the identification of what is at risk of fetishization within studies of refugees, analyses of the researcher’s own positionality and discursive productivity within the work, and the exploration of methods and methodologies blurring the presumed distinction between researcher and their topic, such as autoethnography.

Other research has made the politics of voice in other spaces related to displacement its focus, such as Didier Fassin and Carolina Kobelinsky’s work, both together and individually, on asylum-seekers’ narrativization of their suffering in asylum courts or in ‘public debate’ texts which are then open to judgement by state institutions and ‘native’ subjects (Fassin, 2001; Fassin and Rechtman, 2009; Fassin and Kobelinsky, 2012; Kobelinsky, 2013, 2015, 2016). Similarly, although not explicitly focused on refugee subjects, Sara Ahmed (2004, 2012, 2013), Gloria Wekker (2016), Sherene H. Razack (1998) and many others have carried out analyses of teaching and research institutions, based on their own experiences, to read for the systems of gender, race, class and (dis)ability maintaining certain relations of power.

I make a case for the relevance of this scholarship to this thesis on the basis that by connecting the knowledge-production of the academy to the discursive landscape into which Syrian refugee narrators send their own stories, I have set this research up to continuously

return focus to an understanding of myself, other researchers and our institutions as international economic and political actors who are in relations of intersubjectivity with refugee research participants. With an argument for the preoccupations with refugee ‘problems’, ‘figure’ and ‘voice’ established in this chapter, I move forward with the aim of contributing to not only the literature on refugees and displacement, but also, more specifically, knowledge on the industry formed around their study in the spirit of Ahmed, Wekker and Razack’s investigations.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Telling tales on storytelling**

[...] the young man couldn't stop talking as if pus was oozing out of his heart  
(Yazbek, 2012, p. 121)

Eventually our deaths would become old news. The world would scroll down  
and move on. (Hisham, 2018, p. 40)

In placing these fragments from Marwan and Samar's narratives side-by-side, I wish to highlight the tension between a representation of storytelling as a compulsive release of traumatizing memories and a depiction of gradual international disinterest in mass tragedy as a process, through overexposure, of making death banal. In Marwan's observation, he frames the conflict and displacement endured by Syrians as merely one of the world's long list of problems, a list which observers will inevitably 'scroll down' and lose interest. The insurmountable desire to be heard sits uneasily beside a screen- and empathy-fatigued audience which demands novelty in exchange for attention (Dean, 2003; Ritivoi, 2016).

The previous chapter argued for a rough division of the discursive landscape on displacement into narratives on 'problem', 'figure' and 'voice'. This chapter begins from the contradictory production of the movement of refugees such as Marwan and Samar as 'crisis' and yet also 'old news'. The spaces in which sharing the 'pus' of traumatic memories, such as those told

to Samar, is encouraged, or indeed required, involve discursive production of Syrian refugee narrators as the embodiment, rather than the victims, of the problem of displacement. This chapter considers the relevance of the ‘problem’ framework in academic research (in close relation to policy and media discourses) to the numerous scenarios in which Syrian refugees narrativize their experiences in contexts in which their presence and movement is framed as problematic.

The chapter makes an argument for a relationship between the problem framework and narrators’ interactions with the expression of gratitude, or a pressure to perform such gratitude, in exchange for humanitarian aid or asylum. There is, therefore, a strong link between this analysis and existing work on both the colonial and gendered politics of gratitude and the phenomenon of fetishization of racialised subjects’ suffering (Spillers, 1987; Dean, 2003, 2017; D’Cruz, 2014; von Engelhardt, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Thiruselvam, 2019). It also examines narratives which draw a connection between coercions and pressures to narrativize from a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ position as an expression of said gratitude. To do so, the texts have been read for stories on asylum interviews, journalist interviews, other media storytelling, the narrative work done by the body in medical assessments before travel and the way the interviewee narrators might connect these stories to my research and our interview encounters.

Other themes explored include audience, listener and/or reader preoccupations with terrorism and sexual violence as phenomena with apparent double causal relationships to displacement; that is to say, the context of existing discourses suggests that these violences provoke displacement and are further exacerbated by the movement of refugees from Syria and the Middle East (Talmazan, Cheikh Omar and NBC News, 2016; Boulila and Carri, 2017a; Abbas, 2019). Thus, these types of violence and suffering are discursively fixed to certain subjects and spaces based on racialised, gendered and colonial narratives which Syrian refugee narrators are likely to be navigating when coerced or pressured to tell stories.

### **The asylum interview encounter and ‘problem’ violences**

This section argues that these narrators’ stories of asylum interviews acknowledge the coercive element of their storytelling encounter with the interviewer and other officials. In

doing so, they report the effect of language and spatial experiences to produce a sense that they are suspected of being deceptive and fraudulent (Rountree and Tilli, 2019). This atmosphere of scepticism and suspicion, which is reproduced in the narratives, suggests how the refugee subject is produced within the various encounters constituting asylum application not as a victim of global problems such as war and displacement but rather a problem in and of themselves. I also argue that narrators position their own narratives in relation to existing discourses which are preoccupied with terrorism and sexual violence as types of threats and suffering associated with the space of Syria and with its population, as refugees move towards Europe and the West.

In the narrators' explicit accounts of the hyperfocus on these violences as well as their narrativization of the processes of crafting a story for the asylum encounter, I read for an intervention on the extensive labour required to tell stories that allow for successful navigation of hostile bureaucracies which aim to produce applicants as racialised subjects carrying the 'problems' of sexual violence and terrorism into a host state (Innes, 2010). In Pearlman's collection, Iman\*, describes the demand to narrativize the events before and during her journey in the UN asylum interview as an experience of 'a lot of psychological pressure' (2018, p. 262). Separation of family members is commonly described by the various narrators, a strategy signposted as causing distress and fear about stories being assessed as false or not relevant to the asylum application due to a failure to exactly mirror other family members' stories.

Iman's anecdote emphasises this assessment of unreliable or diverging memories as psychologically distressing, in that she feels implicitly accused of deceiving the officials and being a fraudulent asylum seeker:

The [UN] interviewing and security vetting lasted two years. They asked us everything that ever happened to us, getting every detail of our lives with complete accuracy. They'd interview my husband and me in two separate rooms. It was a lot of psychological pressure. We were really afraid that we might forget and say different things. Especially when it came to dates. Most of us don't remember dates

so precisely. My husband said that we fled our house at the beginning of July, but I remember it as the end of July, which was when the shelling had become daily. After the interviews came the waiting period. I was on the edge of my nerves. You didn't know if you were going to have a future or not. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 262)

Their potential failure to narrate 'every detail of [their] lives with complete accuracy [...] especially when it came to dates' (2018, p. 262) risks negative consequences for their asylum application. This echoes the accounts given to Anthony Good (2011) in his research with British asylum lawyers in which his participants told him that they remind their clients that while they 'have a real and genuine story [...] you have to produce it, and direct it, and present it [...] like a really good movie' (2011, p. 81). I also join other scholars in arguing that the demand for such an invasive amount of information from asylum applicants does not produce fear and anxiety as a side-effect but rather by intent (Brittle, 2019; Wardle and Obermuller, 2019; Bowling and Westenra, 2020). This is not to argue that all UN or state interviewers are unkind individuals, but instead that the bureaucratic systems of asylum and the environment(s), in various spatial senses, are experienced as challenging and intimidating by design, in order to indirectly deter refugees from applying for asylum or making other demands upon international organisations and state governments.

In Yusra's narrative, this environment manifests in spaces of neglect and abandonment; even the rooms in which asylum applicants must wait are 'miserable' as they are 'hit with a sharp stench' upon entering because 'someone has thrown up in a corner' (2018, p. 219). The presence of her swimming coach and new friend, Sven, works to provide the reactions of shock and outrage which will also be provoked from a reader. He is 'horrified' and, tellingly, must be reassured and calmed by Yusra's sister Sara who explains the process to him. Sara's familiarity with the conditions in which refugees are kept waiting is a demonstration of her previous endurance of worse environments and her present resilience. But it also hints at how she is required to focus on the emotional reaction of the German citizen who will never have to endure the endless waits in reception rooms to secure the right to reside. In this particular passage, the sisters realise they have only reached the registration period when they believed they would be asked about 'why [they] left Syria'; in fact there is 'another three to five months until the interview stage' (2018, p. 219).

Demonstrating the penetration of gendered and racialised relations of (emotional) care into seemingly benign social relations, Sara's soothing of Sven's distress dominates the scene. While not explicitly commented on by Yusra, the inclusion of this contrast between Sara's calm endurance and Sven's sympathetic panic cites wider critiques of the ways in which women of colour<sup>9</sup> have, in numerous times and locations, been produced as naturally resilient and insensitive to their own suffering and thus all the better suited to care for the more delicate emotions of more materially secure white subjects (Hartman, 1997; Hill Collins, 1998, 2009; Ahmed, 2004; Wekker, 2016; Applebaum, 2017; Gaines, 2017).

The narrative of Sven's emotional reaction to the asylum office is similar to Safiya\*'s description of her interviewer at the UNHCR building in Lebanon<sup>10</sup>; after Safiya describes why she and her family have fled Syria (including the destruction of their house by air missiles), the interviewer 'was crying a lot when I spoke' (May 2019). Safiya frames her connection with the interviewer as positive ('the lady [...] was lovely'), valuing how her story has resonated emotionally with a listener and believing the interviewer's suggestion that such an empathetic response will engender a concerted effort to secure permission to travel for her family. In a scenario in which the interviewer is officially charged with discerning the level of intervention and care which Safiya requires, 'the lady' becomes the emotional focus

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<sup>9</sup> I use 'women of colour' to describe a group of people who share common intersectional experiences of economic and political relations of care which are shaped by race and gender, most often resulting in the re-centring of the needs of white subjects. In using this term, I do not intend to homogenise non-white subjects and communities, erasing specificities and difference. Furthermore, citation of Black feminist theory does not imply a conflation of Sara's emotional labour as an Arab woman, who also might be considered 'white-passing', with the history of Black women's care and emotional labour. Nonetheless there are connections in these theories, especially in how the wellbeing of the white subject is centred despite the greater insecurity of other subjects.

<sup>10</sup> In the original interviews held for the purpose of this project, all but one interviewee acquired permission to travel to their host-state remotely, so these narrators did not experience this disjuncture between the sense of relief felt upon arrival and the shock felt in response to the extent of bureaucracy and waiting which many were met with. The one narrator who did travel independently, requesting asylum upon arrival in a UK airport, was well aware of the procedures which he would be subject to as his communication with his fiancée throughout the journey kept him well-informed. Despite this divergence in routes, the narrators who applied for asylum from Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq share with other Syrian refugees the centrality of waiting and disinformation in the asylum process (Betts, 2006; Andersson, 2014b; Oka, 2014; Pinelli, 2018; Steigemann and Misselwitz, 2020).

of the encounter in a manner reminiscent of Dean's contrast between the traumatised 'humanitarian witness' and the silenced victims of suffering (2019, pp. 170, 179).

Safiya does tell us, however, that UNHCR then 'stopped contact for seven months', before suddenly approving her travel to Britain once Safiya went to the office of her own accord with her new-born son. The departure of other families who attended asylum interviews after Safiya is presented as a provocation to her husband who assumes that the delay means certain states 'don't want us' (August 2019). These are similar anecdotes to those recorded by Matilde Skov Danstrom and Zachary Whyte in their study of asylum narratives: they characterise discussion of strategies to hasten or bolster applications as 'asylum talk' largely imbued with frustration and anger (2005, p. 187). It is noteworthy that in the interviews which shifted into dialogues and co-produced narratives (with the interpreter or other interviewees), the mechanisms of this UN office and its criteria for travel still provoked a great deal of discussion even when it had been many years since the interviewee had travelled to the U.K..

What is also clear is the imbalance of information exchange involved in these interactions, which is unsurprising given the weighted power relations between the asylum-granting state and the individual refugee (Fassin and Kobelinsky, 2012; Kobelinsky, 2015, 2016). However, the dearth of information about the status of applications, which state an application has been accepted in, where within a state refugees will be settled and whether families will be able to stay together is presented as surprising to the narrators, largely forming part of general disillusionment with Europe and its international identity as a protector of rights and leader in civilizational progress (Freedman, 2010b; Gottwald, 2014; Orchard, Miller and Refugee Studies Centre, 2014; Amnesty International, 2016; Kirkwood, 2019). In regard to asylum interviews which occurred outside of the host-state, largely carried out by UNHCR representatives, most narrators shared common knowledge of the type of circumstances which would increase the likelihood of their application being approved.

Despite working on behalf of an international humanitarian organisation neither the existing literature nor my data suggests that these interviewers are likely to be more sympathetic or

more likely to recommend approval of an application than their state-mandated counterparts (Fassin and Kobelinsky, 2012, p. 464; Gill and Good, 2019, p. 14). Therefore, knowledge of these categories of vulnerability is very valuable between refugees and remains crucial to their stories after they travel abroad, as they wait to see if family and friends might be accepted on similar grounds (Baines, 2004; Myrntinen, Khattab and Maydaa, 2017). Summarised in later interviews by the interpreter as the three most important criteria, interviewees reported that having a disability or illness, being bereaved or being actively wanted by the Assad regime or another hostile actor in Syria were the circumstances most likely to secure an applicant asylum in Europe or North America.

Asya\*, for instance, told her interviewer that she was a widow and in danger of violence from her deceased husband's family, who had previously attempted to forcibly remove her children from her custody (August 2019). Zaynab's husband was disappeared by ISIS and is presumed dead but she believes that the information she provided about her eleven-year-old son working 'seven am to seven pm' in a bakery was the cause of a positive decision by UNHCR and the U.K. in her case (January 2019). Amira\* narrativizes her asylum interview and recalls that her 'two girls had asthma so that was a big part of the application' (May 2019). All three narrators, along with other interviewees, understand their own interpretation of an urgent case for asylum as defined against priorities distinct from those of UNHCR.

For example, reflecting on how acquaintances who were financially secure in Iraq were granted asylum on the basis of a bereavement which occurred before 2011 compared to others who were impoverished in Lebanon after state missiles destroyed their Syrian home, Amira firmly states that 'The UN doesn't make the right decision' (August 2019). Other scholars have discovered similar opinions about institutional decision-making among refugees applying for asylum in the UK, often with the added threat of immigration detention as a possible consequence of asylum officials' distrust or incompetence (Griffiths, 2012, p. 10). Nujeen seems to playfully contest this need to align with state or UN definitions of danger or crisis through youth naivety. She frames her German interviewer's questions as amusing in their ignorance. As a minor she was interviewed by her government-appointed German guardian, again blurring the responsibilities of care and surveillance (Whyte, 2011; Qato, 2017; Bentley, 2018).

In her story of this interview, Nujeen reports that her guardian asked her ‘about the journey and why I left Syria, if I had seen horrific things and whether I had any proof of the difficulties in my homeland’ (2017, p. 261). The emphasis Nujeen places on the interviewer’s request for ‘proof’ and the witnessing of ‘horrific things’ suggests that she detects an automatic connection made by the interviewer between leaving Syria and bearing direct witness to extreme violence. While it is more than probable that her guardian is well aware of the conflict in Syria, Nujeen does not acknowledge the likelihood that this individual is nonetheless procedurally required to feign ignorance and ask what Nujeen has witnessed to collect and assess evidence for her application for asylum.

Instead she tells her reader that she and her sister ‘laughed afterwards’, asking themselves ‘doesn’t she watch the news?’ (2017, p. 261). It is in fact the interviewers’ knowledge of ‘the news’ about Syria which Nujeen’s story will be tested against based on ‘the ideological expectations of what someone who claims to be from a certain place should know about that place and [...] how [s]he should express this knowledge’ (Spotti, 2005, p. 87). In another example of a narrator working to communicate a previous connection between storyteller and listener, Wael\* (Pearlman’s volume), frames an encounter with a Swedish police officer after losing his temporary ID card as a disorienting reversal of the dynamics of demanded narration. After being pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to apply for a replacement card, Wael shares an anecdote about the more intimidating process of deference and bribery he experienced in Syria:

‘He said, “I’m very sorry to hear that, but this is all we need from you. If you want to talk about it more, however, feel free.”’ (2018, p. 255)

The invitation to tell stories about his experiences is offered as almost a favour, an opportunity for Wael to engage in a therapeutic exercise (Garrick, 1994; Rickard, 1998). The policeman’s language also frames the narrative encounter as a matter of singular benefit; he suggests that Wael’s desire to narrate is a natural response to trauma which he is happy to accommodate. The idea that he, as an agent of the state, might benefit from learning from

Wael's narrative - for instance to better understand Syrian refugee's fears of the police and other state representatives - is not implied. The question of what is necessary, what is 'needed' from an asylum applicant interacting with the host-state is one which constantly follows the refugee subject, imbued with the politics of gratitude and shifting with each step the subject makes towards an end to bureaucracy.

In Iman's narrative, the implication of what the interviewer is searching for in her and her husband's stories is implicit, mostly suggested by the reader's existing understanding of the discursive landscape around Syrian refugees. Imad\*, however, is more explicit about his understanding of asylum interviewers' agendas and the other discourses they are shaped by:

Media has tied the revolution to terrorism. If a Syrian asking for asylum says he was with the revolution, European authorities ask for details: Did you see any killing? Did you interact with any terrorists? Who? You feel like you're being accused of something. People just want to get their residency cards. They're afraid of getting sent back. It's easier to say that you're simply running away from war. It's easier not to mention the revolution, or even the regime. And in this way, the truth of the revolution gets buried. It's getting lost without our intention or without even knowing we're doing it. And that alone is a crime against everything that has happened in Syria. (Pearlman, 2018, pp. 249–250)

Echoing Akkad (Adams and The Guardian, 2020), Imad demonstrates how even when a Syrian refugee subject is coerced into a narrator role, the paths available to the narrative are already partially shaped by existing discourses on Syria as a space of danger and Syrian refugees as agents, 'carriers', or at least witnesses, of racialised and gendered distant type of violence (terrorist, sectarian, ethnic, patriarchal, homophobic) (Razack, 2004, 2008; Andersson, 2016b, 2019; Abbas, 2019; Adams and The Guardian, 2020). Even in the presumably neutral role of bearing witness to 'terrorist' activity or violence, Imad characterises a detection of accusation as common to the asylum interview experience (Shapiro, 2007; Martin, 2018).

My reading of the narratives suggests that the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role is deployed, or at least intertextually engaged with, by many of these narrators. This speaks to Syrian refugee narrators’ understandings of genre and the varying demands of different storytelling contexts. The impact of listeners’ or readers’ presumptions that Syrian refugee narrators must be able to tell stories about witnessing ‘killing’ or interacting with ‘terrorists’ is profoundly reductive. This is especially clear when narrators recount interviewers and other authority agents’ specific interest in the location of their male relatives. Zaynab tells of how she was required to give her narrative legal fixity by signing an agreement which granted asylum on the basis that her story about her husband’s death was true and which withdrew any rights to family unification if he was found to be alive. Recounting how ‘they asked [her], are you sure he is dead? [...] have you made sure he’s not in ISIS? And did you see his grave?’, she communicates the pressure she felt to produce a specific narrative in a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role, providing the details of her grief for assessment where the apparent feasibility of her story determines her mobility.

Crucially, Zaynab narrativizes this interaction between herself and UNHCR representatives as an investigation into her husband’s categorisation as either terrorist or civilian; she explains the constant questions about whether her husband might have joined ISIS as matter of UNHCR and host-states ‘looking for innocent people [...] to accept for travel’ (August 2019). In fact, the seeking is two-fold in this story as ‘they are [also] looking for people who were connected or related to Daesh’ (August 2019). UNHCR’s double, almost duplicitous, role as aid and intelligence provider is signalled here and Zaynab shows how knowledge of this Janus-faced interlocuter shapes narratives by demanding focus on the identity and location of Syrian men whose presence and absence are both loaded with implications of criminality and deviance (Freedman, 2016a; Szanto, 2016; Allsopp, 2017; Rountree and Tilli, 2019).

Marwan identifies the same preoccupation in his readers when he anticipates that they ‘might think that this story is about ISIS’ before asserting ‘it is not’ when recounting an acquaintance’s heartbreak after his son joins Daesh against their wishes and is still estranged from the family when the father dies (2018, p. 267). By refocusing on presumed universal themes such as paternal heartbreak and disappointment, rather than the exoticised topic of Daesh, Marwan corroborates research which warns against ‘stories of the trauma of forced

migration' overshadowing 'co-existing stories which [...] emphasize something very different about what a person [...] really identifies with' (Marlowe, 2010, p. 183). To directly contest the reductive effect of international discourses on Syria which fetishise the tropes of fanaticism and sexual violence by Daesh, Marwan makes this a radical and defiant point in his narrative and its placement is particularly intentional.

The anecdote is inserted as an interruption of his account of an encounter with Turkish guards at the border who threaten to "[...] send you back to Daesh to have your heads chopped off" (2018, p. 266). The weariness of Marwan's tone is evident in the bookends of this section but even as he protests against the incessant association of Syrian identity with the bogeyman of ISIS, he leaves the interpretation of what this story *is* about as a matter for his readers to discern without his guidance. A gentle suggestion is provided in the words of the final speaker, the mother of the Daesh runaway and one of the few named female characters to appear in the narrative. Maryam, standing over her husband's grave and awaiting the arrival of her son's body any day, tells Marwan that "Syrians have become soil," and he retrospectively interprets that 'she probably meant that we were already dead' (2018, p. 268).

When Marwan returns to the 'present' of his narrative at the close of this anecdote, he tells of doing 'a terrible thing': crossing the border into Turkey abandoning the elderly couple he has promised to help and even their bags which he has carried this far. The death both Maryam and Marwan consider is perhaps not only the condition of being inevitably marked for death by the unending circumstances of war, but also a philosophical death of compassion and self-sacrifice as qualities unsustainable in the type of space and time that is understood to have transformed Syria into a zone occupied only by those waiting for death. This is a sentiment which Samar also arrives at in her narrative, when she claims that the fundamentals of humanity [...] have been eviscerated from the heart of many people here [because] State television destroys human compassion' (2012, p. 63)

But, significantly, Marwan does not return to his previous warning about presumptively linking Syrian refugee stories to ISIS in order to definitely explain what his anecdote is 'about'; leaving interpretative possibilities open does more to resist the implicit curiosity and

consumption of Western readers and the coercive effect this can have upon narratives. Similarly, Zaynab's story produces the effect of being aware of how the existing discursive landscape shapes the types of narratives available to her. She describes instances in the UNHCR interview encounters when her story lacked the tropes interviewers were looking for, such as sexual violence. Demonstrating her awareness of the risks of possible omission and inaccuracy for the security of herself and her children, Zaynab, when asked, firmly emphasises that 'she didn't hide anything from them' (May 2019).

In her account of the interviews, she senses that my question about 'leaving anything out' hints towards memories of trauma that she might be reluctant, or even, in the case of sexual violence, ashamed to narrativize to a listener:

They asked about sexual offences because it was a mess in Syria and men were sexually offending women because their husbands were dead and there were no men in the family. But that didn't happen to [me] and if it did, [I] would tell them.  
(May 2019)

In a later interview, however, Zaynab does relate, second-hand, the story of a friend (and a potential interviewee) who has experienced sexual violence and seems unclear on whether this was incorporated in the woman's application for asylum in the U.K.:

So, she applied in Lebanon and they helped her to travel because of her story. But [actually] I'm not sure if she mentioned that story to the UN in Lebanon. But she told them about her husband's death and her sisters'. (August 2019)

This aside illustrates the violence done by the coercion to narrativize traumatic experiences, even when the cadence of trauma can elide critique of a host-state, or the international community, which might jeopardise an application. In this dynamic between Zaynab's friend and the UNHCR interviewer, her memories of suffering sexual violence become reductively equivocated with the deaths of her husband and sisters as merely another claim on

vulnerability and helplessness needed to secure survival and security via relocation (Moussa, 1991; Carpenter, 2005; Sözer, 2019).

While the specifically gendered insecurities of displacement have needed further illumination in the history of refugee studies (rectified by the likes of Freedman (2010a, 2010a, 2012, 2015, 2016a; 2017) and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014, 2014, 2020)), less critical scholarship still tends to lump women refugees into categories of gendered vulnerability along with children (Enloe, 1989; Malkki, 1996; Charles and Denman, 2013). This not only means that these Syrian women narrators are always navigating a suspicion that their audience presumes them to have been a victim to sexual violence. It also reduces such violence to a phenomenon which inevitably happens to non-Western mobile women rather understanding it as a product of numerous specific conditions and relations in spaces beyond Syria, ‘the camp’ or ‘the path’ and by actors other than the figure of the misogynist Islamic extremist.

Even Zaynab’s explanation for the interviewers’ interest demonstrates the blinkered understanding of how insecurity is produced by gendered and racialised subjects’ interactions with spaces other than that of a warzone: ‘they asked about sexual offences because it was a mess in Syria’. A hostile host-state, for example, such as Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey, adds economic precarity, ethno-racism and the loss of care networks to Syrian women’s vulnerabilities and only compounds the risk of violence from an increased cast of actors, including UNHCR and humanitarian officials themselves (Kivilcim, 2016, 2017; Abouarab, 2020). Similarly, the other half of Zaynab’s logic, that ‘there were no men in the family’ to protect Syrian women from sexual assault, is no less true of many (sometimes bereaved) Syrian women in both Middle Eastern and European states where patriarchal ideologies produce women without husbands or other male guardians as targets for sexual violence without consequences (Hammerstad, 2000, 2014; Young, 2003; Davies and True, 2015; Mourad and Norman, 2020; Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby, 2021).

In Fatima El-Tayeb’s words, the discursive and bordered fixing of sexual violence against women onto exclusively Arab and/or Muslim men or Middle Eastern spaces, transforms such violence ‘from a global phenomenon fed by interactive structures in which Western nations

are centrally involved into a by-product of premodern Muslim culture' (2011, p. 97). Furthermore, when understanding the process of applying for asylum as a series of narrative encounters, with those done remotely also including a final biological search for narrative omissions or contradictions, the hyper-focus of the UN, national asylum offices and other relevant agents on sexual violence means Syrian women girls are specifically understood as capable of being betrayed in their narrative claims by their body. In the final stage of remote asylum applications, one last narrative required from the Syrian refugee subject is non-verbal and beyond their authorial control. For example, either the absence or presence of physical 'evidence' of sexual violence, as well as pregnancy, is understood by the narrators as a potential risk for their security and mobility (Jamila\*, August 2019; Zaynab, February 2020).

There is also the further risk of injuries which do not line up with previous narratives inferring guilt by association or distance from undesirables such as Daesh or even the Kurdish forces. If a subject does not have injuries or health conditions consistent with sarin gas poisoning, for example, or shrapnel injuries, a doctor's report might cast doubt on previous claims to have been the victim of such an attack. Equally, the presence of injuries when a Syrian refugee man claims to have never joined an armed group might similarly undermine his claims and produce him as a hyper-masculine, religious fanatic capable of carrying violent ideologies and practices into the host-state (El-Tayeb, 2011, p. 102; Weber, 2016).

Safiya\* tells of being 'checked to see [...] if she had serious health problems, especially anything from the war, any serious health [problems....and] they checked if she was pregnant or not [...]' (May 2019). Safiya's pre-teen daughter was also tested for pregnancy and after checks for illness, the family were all given 'blood tests and X-rays as well' (May 2019). The comprehensive nature of these health assessments mean they cannot be described as healthcare; treatment or investigation of symptoms surely cannot be made necessary only by the granting of asylum in Europe and such interest in injuries 'from the war' has not been expressed by the UN prior to this appointment. These stories of UN-mandated hospital visits prior to international travel, shared among all original interviewees and by a few of Pearlman's sources, emphasise how the narrator's own knowledge of their body and health is irrelevant to the process: 'The doctors do try! They do their job as doctors, they don't care about your story' (Safiya, May 2019).

Ultimately, these health assessments are discursively produced by narrators as encounters defined by uncertainty, coercion, and indignity. They are also produced as a further obstacle to being understood as a legitimate refugee subject; through the medical assessment, the body becomes a separate storyteller capable of casting doubt on the subject's narrative. The biopolitical international relations of displacement are heavily laced into narratives of asylum-related health appointments, in ways already considered through the concepts of contagion, racialised eugenics and fertility (Fassin, 2001; Weheliye, 2014; Jacobsen, 2015; Baar, 2017; Lowe, 2019; Tazzioli, 2019).

The story told by a medical examination might produce a subject as an illegitimate asylum seeker or undesirable future citizen through the intermeshing of capitalist and medical-pathologising discourses and practices which shape subjects as valuable or burdensome based on notions of (gendered) capacity and debility (Puar, 2017; Rajaram, 2018). These narratives also sit within wider discourses and enquiries about the relationship between state sovereignty, narrative and the dis(abled) body as a collection of practices and discourses which produce concepts of objective truth, the body as fixable in time and space and the unstable binary of consent and coercion prevalent in so many liberal political discourses (Roberts, 2000; Harris, 2003; Baines, 2004; Fassin, 2011; Gunaratnam, 2013; Wilcox, 2014, 2015; Duda-Mikulín, Scullion and Currie, 2019; Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020).

These stories of reading the body for corroboration of narrative align with scholarship that has shown how 'the [asylum] applicant's body becomes [...] a surface on which asylum politics with its knowledge practices are inscribed' (Kynsilehto and Puumala, 2015, p. 460), with discourses of empirical objectivity transforming medical data on the body as a 'marker of "truth"' (Madziva, 2018, p. 949). In an inversion of this relationship between body and story, Samar characterises her collected narratives from interviewees as bodies retrieved from stories: 'I am going home with documents [...] of flesh and blood [...] and the faces of murderers' (2012, p. 21). In a context where Syrian refugee narrators must tell stories to secure asylum, distancing themselves from the 'problem' framework, which are then subject to hostile scepticism, claiming the solidity of 'flesh and blood' evidence for textual accounts is an intervention on the politics of knowledge on violence and subsequent displacement in Syria.

This section has argued that the connection between a subjects' production as an embodiment of the 'problem' of displacement and a narrative judged to be unconvincing (or contradicted by the story of the body) accounts for the hostility from officials and anxiety in applicants which is described in these narratives. It has also suggested that narrators use a variety of strategies to respond to the hyperfocus on sexual violence and terrorism or Islamic extremism in Syria which results from the 'problem' framework. These include acknowledgement of the functional nature of the interview and knowledge-sharing between Syrian refugees on what genre of story is required as well as contestation through emphasis on other themes or the performance of naivety in the face of reductive questioning. The next section considers how the same expectation of gratitude for conditional release from the category of problematic refugees is present in less institutional and formal narrative encounters such as those with journalists and researchers.

### **A politics of gratitude and informal narrative coercions**

Beyond the directly transactional encounter of the asylum interview, which offers the status of legal resident (and perhaps eventually citizen) in exchange for convincing and qualifying life (hi)stories, other relevant narrative interactions include narrators' meetings with journalists, new non-refugee friends and academic researchers such as myself. This section argues that these encounters are also laced, if not as explicitly, with the treacherous assumptions of gratitude from Syrian refugee narrators, even if only gratitude for less hostile treatment than they received from asylum officials.

Shared among many narratives, especially the memoir texts, are scenarios in which a Syrian refugee narrator is solicited for their stories on the basis of their perceived bravery, idiosyncrasies or (apparently) surprising level of education. Most of these categories can be understood as the discursive framing by media actors of the Syrian refugee narrator's ability to speak English, their supposed vulnerability due to age, gender and (dis)ability and the very fact of their survival. Through this framing, those requesting narrative imply that their perception of the potential narrator is flattering, implicitly invoking gendered and racialised understandings of qualities such as articulacy and self-sufficiency. In being associated with these categories, even in a tone of surprise, these Syrian refugee subjects are offered an

opportunity to discursively distance themselves from fellow refugees who constitute the ‘problem’ of the refugee crisis.

Two examples which resonate with each other most strongly are Yusra and Nujeen’s parallel experiences with the media while they are still travelling across Europe. The former catches the attention of ‘Steven’ from a Belgian news channel not only because she is an enthusiastic English-speaker but, more importantly, because she can provide a unique story about swimming alongside the boat that should have carried her from Turkey to Greece. Her throwaway comment on this experience provokes the journalist to ‘raise his eyebrows and [shake] his head in disbelief’ before calling ‘urgently to his camera man [...to] do the interview again’ (Mardini, 2018, p. 143).

The journalists who are following refugees through Europe draw attention to Nujeen with less tact. She hears a media crew-member shout ““Hey, there’s a Syrian girl in a wheelchair here who speaks English!”” before the journalists collective ‘descended’ upon her, ‘astonished’ and wanting to ‘know how [she] knew English’ (2017, p. 184). Her notable characteristics from the perspective of the journalists signal what kind of narratives they plan to craft from the ‘raw data’ of her stories, which are not seen as her own labour or craft. The production of co-existing disability and language proficiency as both surprising and fodder for valuable narrative cannot be separated from interlocking discourses on racialised, gendered and (dis)abled identities and their ties to particular global spaces.

Similarly, for Yusra, the opportunity to compete in the 2016 Olympic Games, about which she is already ambivalent, is inextricably tied to exposure to ‘soft’ coercion to narrate from journalists pursuing her ‘human interest’ story. Her mentor, coach and friend presents this scenario as a zero-sum game, telling her that ‘it’s too late for second thoughts [...] the journalists have already found [them] [...] he’s received eight interview requests from journalists wanting to talk to [her]’ (2018, p. 223). The expectation that Yusra feel flattered and grateful relies on this sticky bond between her future professional swimming career and her new identity as a Syrian refugee in Europe, which she presents as occurring seemingly without her agency. It is an overlap which also equivocates her very attendance of the Games

with a consent to narrativize her own life, in the genre that this thesis aims to identify as that of the resilient refugee turned ‘survivor-witness-messenger’, to an international audience.

Implicit in her and Nujeen’s multiple accounts of their encounters with narrative-solicitors is that these actors (mostly journalists) use the language of their dialogue and their subsequent narrative framing of the girls’ life stories to produce them as *surprisingly* educated, capable and resilient. The tension between the presumed expectation of the audiences of these media outlets and the content of the stories solicited from Nujeen and Yusra reveals the heavy weight of existing discourses, not only on the gendered understandings of refugees as a vulnerable population, but also on the interaction between gendered and (dis)abled subjects and the space of a totalised ‘Middle East’ understood as insular, hostile to the English-speaking world and dangerous for subjects marginalised by gender, sexuality or (dis)ability.

If Nujeen and Yusra are produced as shockingly resilient, articulate and capable despite their gendered, racialised and (dis)abled identities as understood by those seeking their stories, then Marwan predicts how actors seeking refugee narratives would similarly shape his story to equally gendered tropes such as the figure of the masculine ‘Brave Activist’ or ‘a Hero from This Terrible War’ (Hisham, 2018, p. 180). In a divergence which might be attributed to the genre of the memoir (that of a young man made cynical by war and hypocrisy), Marwan is much more explicit about the types of essentialised roles he feels as pressed upon him by international media actors soliciting his storytelling. In doing so, he can also make apparent his awareness of how these figures are rooted in existing discourses which map certain racialised and gendered understandings of security, identity and culture onto space.

The production of Syria as a container for inevitable and unending violence devoid of political meaning (i.e. amounting only to the violence of ethnic tribalism or religious fundamentalism) both shapes and is maintained by these narrative figures such as the ‘Brave Activist’ (Taylor, 1994; Charteris-Black, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Ward, 2020). Therefore, Marwan demonstrates a radical departure from the dominant expectation to express gratitude for the opportunity to share one’s story or flattered naivety at the interest of international

actors in one's narrative. He also rejects this as a personal path for his own future, just as Kassem was unimpressed by Syrian-American friends' suggestion that the opportunity to write a book about Syria would be evidence of his success in the USA (2018, p. 189).

While Marwan structures a turning point at this part of the narrative through his discovery of a 'purpose [...] to tell a story], this is positioned in opposition to being 'the sort of boy you could feed some freedomspeak and parade on the conference scene' (2018, p. 180). Instead, Marwan suggests a much more individual motivation for narrativizing his experiences, one which still focuses heavily on his visual witnessing ('the Yazidi woman's red woollen shawl, the dust of what had once been buildings') but emphasises getting 'those memories out' in order to 'be free' rather than to produce an effect upon an external listener or reader (2018, p. 180). Nonetheless, he paints a communicative picture of the pressure enacted upon him through his social media followers and the flattering messages received from journalists.

Similar to Nujeen's 'vulture' imagery, Marwan tells how 'every major newspaper followed me now [with] journalists from as far as China scrambl[ing] into my mentions, all wanting interviews, all persistent, wheedling, jostling' (Hisham, 2018, p. 180; Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 183). Just as interviewees in Edinburgh compared their interviews with border agents or asylum offices to our current encounter, Marwan draws the parallel between journalistic interviews and 'another sort of interrogator' who he was 'concocting answers for' in the event that his photography and notes were to be found in a raid by Daesh (2018, p. 180). This is a refusal to be grateful for international attention and by extension for invitations to share narrative. Similarly, Yusra is 'thrilled, but also a little appalled' (2018, p. 223) when Sven tells her about the refugee Olympic team and all the journalists who now want to hear her story.

Personal relationships with actors like journalists are complicated and fruitful areas of storytelling for many narrators, especially since at least three narrators went on to collaborate with a journalist to produce their memoir. For most, there are a rotating and recurring cast of

journalist characters who also operate to demonstrate the malleability of space and time depending on access to these much-desired categories of citizen, European or ‘legal’. Journalists and photographers Steven, Lam and Magdalena disappear and reappear along Yusra’s journey, moving in a way dictating by logics completely distinct from those governing her and Sara’s mobility. Equally so, Nujeen fleshes out the characters of some journalists who are distinguished from the crowd of ‘vultures’; BBC news footage of a five-year reunion with Fergal Keane in Germany is presented as a meeting of long-lost friends (*What happened to Nujeen Mustafa?*, 2020).

But Yusra also dwells on the troubling dynamics of their relationships; she tells of Lam and Magdalena arriving in Germany to ‘interview us and take photos for a magazine story’ and reflects that ‘it’s good to see them but they make remind me of our nightmare in Hungary just when I’m trying not to worry about my family’ (2018, p. 224). For collectors and editors of Syrian refugee narratives, that parallel between the journeys taken by mother and daughter is all too tempting and so the safest path for Yusra’s wellbeing (the postponement of the storytelling to a more appropriate time) is not offered to her. Instead, the minimal assistance which the journalists provided along the journey weighs on this latter story, suggesting the relations of obligation which might push Yusra to narrativize reluctantly as reciprocation.

There are also certain conversations with Steven which she flags as uncomfortable or surprising. One significant example is when Steven ‘asks me how I’m preparing to adapt to life in Europe’ (2018, p. 192). The presumption of a gulf of difference between Yusra and Europeans, as well as the homogenisation of the conditions of life across Europe all constitute discursive work which ultimately cites the state and populist discourses which securitise a failure to integrate as a threat to ‘native’ European culture. Yusra admits that:

The question takes me by surprise. I haven’t really thought about it before. I know it’ll be a culture shock, that they’ll do things different in Germany than in Syria but I’m not sure how exactly. I tell Steven it won’t be easy but I’ll manage. I’ll have to. (Mardini, 2018, p. 192)

Although Steven is named and given substantial descriptions so as to distinguish him from other journalists similar to Nujeen's 'vultures', Yusra's inclusion of this question as a notable memory for her, coloured by emotions of surprise, serves as a reminder of the dangers of presuming innocence for even friendly and comparatively sympathetic interviewers. By eliciting and thus shaping the narratives told by narrators, these journalists have political and economic roles within a refugee regime that has discursively powerful and entrenched narratives about the meaning of journeys such as Yusra's. Escaping the framing of that movement as inherently problematic in a narrative which is intertextually linked to the existing discourses around 'refugee crisis'.

Such an observation must lead to an analysis of my own role in the encounters which produced the interview texts. As my interviews with participants in this research became multiple, the relationships that we developed became part of this process as well; building trust and fondness also develops bonds of obligation and willingness to expose or share more than a narrator might have expected or, in retrospect, wanted to (Jones, 1998; Rickard, 1998). The adoption of co-authoring methods such as collaborative re-reading and editing aimed to provide further opportunities to reassess what was included in the transcripts and to make clear my own stance of the 'ownership' of the stories as that of participants. This has limits; once written or submitted, removing interview content from my thesis is beyond my control and does little to counter the ways which the politics of gratitude colour our relations as described above.

However, I also credit my participants with understanding the academic process once provided with sufficient information and I also suspect that it may cause more discomfort for some narrators to cause 'inconvenience' by requesting such a removal than it would to decline to answer a question or avoid a topic in the interview encounter. The 'soft' coercive elements of requesting stories cannot be resolved but the numerous types of encounter (memoir, researcher interview, anonymous media interview) do perhaps allow narrators to choose a scenario with which they are comfortable and confident in meeting their own narrative aims, knowing that none can be disentangled from political relations with other

actors. Also at play, however, is the relationship my interactions with interviewees have with their previous experiences of comparatively more distressing experiences.

For example, Hevi\* narrativizes the interview she attended with her sister at the UN offices in Iraqi-Kurdistan. She explains that as the interviewer asked if they had family members in Europe, Hevi assumed they would be sent to Sweden, where her mother and two other siblings had already been granted asylum. In a joint-narrativization with Muna\*, she describes receiving news from the UN that they were approved to travel:

Hevi	We didn't know that it was Britain for the last minute. For the last minute, I didn't know that it was Britain.
Muna	And even, I didn't know after after they told that it's Britain, they didn't say it's Scotland. So Scotland, I've heard it at the airport

(August 2019)

In a further example of the imbalanced dynamic of information-exchange between herself and the asylum officials, Hevi draws connections between the interview encounter ongoing between us and the asylum application interview. She tells me that 'they recorded us without asking if it was okay or not' (August 2019). Fresh in her mind is our discussion before the interview about what methods she is comfortable with and the consent form confirming she has agreed to be recorded.

Zaynab makes a similar comment on her lack of agency in the storage of information about her: 'sometimes notes, sometimes data on the computer [... I'm] not sure [...] if [I] was recorded or not. [pause] because [I] was quite far away from the UN offices, for the first time

[I] received a phone call and [I] had a bad network' (August 2019). Details such as these in the interviewees' narratives highlight the relationship between these past narrative encounters and their present one with me as an interviewer. My requests for permission to record or acquiescence to their preference for notes stand in relation to and, in comparison with, these previous instances of narrativization.

In fact, Tariq\* makes links with multiple narrative scenarios, having been required to narrativize his experiences in order to justify his movements at the border between Turkey and Greece, as well as upon arriving to the U.K. by plane. When we are discussing his decisions in the present to accept or decline requests to tell his stories, he expresses approval of our present interview by observing that '[...] maybe another person won't write everything down like you do [...] they wouldn't care about writing down everything' and telling me that he has 'a story like in Greece' about his experience narrativizing his journey, via an interpreter to a Greek police officer (February 2020). He recounts how 'the translator knew [I] came by the river but that was obvious' and so he suspects that the interpreter did not translate parts of Tariq's narrative which he had already guessed at.

Tariq narrativizes an experience of feeling out of control of the story which is relayed between the three subjects and upon which his chance to successfully cite a 'survivor-witness-messenger' figure rests. With the fraudulent arrest of his cousin weighing on him, alongside his need to justify his border-crossing, Tariq believes that the interpreter 'wrote down what he wants, not [my] feelings' and so implies that his observation of my note-taking has led him to characterise me as granting him greater interest and respect than previous listeners (February 2020). When Tariq and the other interviewees make this comparison, it not only demonstrates how I continue to benefit from the increased access to and trust from the participants as a result of the previous mistreatment they have received from those pressing them from narrative but also how none of these encounters are hermeneutically sealed, either within memoir or within the fabric of social relations between Syrian refugees and their listeners.

No one can request stories from these narrators without bringing to bear the weight and the meaning-making of all previous narrative encounters. As a researcher, I am benefitted by the greater trust and confidence which comes from a comparison between narrative encounters which favours me by default. Without the explicit coercive dynamic of the asylum process, my interview requests appear much more favourable and the procedures required for academic research imply greater respect for the interviewees' privacy and agency than the structure of the asylum interview. But rather than reading these as hierarchical comparisons, it is more informative to understand these numerous story-telling scenarios as interlinked narrative moments, with none hermeneutically sealed in the memories of the narrator nor insulated from 'leaking' dangerous information to threatening actors.

This section has used methodologies of intertextuality in order to illuminate these interconnections between narrative encounters and to argue for an interpretation of stories about storytelling which is sensitive to the politics of gratitude as produced and maintained in these encounters, even when narrators identify actors as benign. Beginning with narrators' stories of encounters with journalists and then turning to the ties of goodwill and friendship which produce a politics of gratitude, I ultimately argue that a view of Syrian refugee narrative encounters as intertextually imbricated, in a non-linear and overlapping manner, facilitates insight on the relations between the problem framework, gratitude for relative respect and ownership during narrativization and a 'soft' coercion to tell (sometimes traumatic) stories. I now turn to the types of storytelling which might be shaped by such a complex politics of gratitude in narrative encounters.

### **The cumulative impact of 'survivor-witness-messenger' storytelling**

The section concerns the way in which gratitude as a component of relations between actors such as interviewers and refugee narrators makes demands for storytelling in 'survivor-witness-messenger' mode. I argue that the coercion to narrativize memory and experience to specific scripts in order to secure survival can enact a violence on subjects' relationship to their own narratives and identities. The focus on psychological distress and disconnection from self and place upon arrival in a 'host' state in many narratives, especially interviewees, gives testimony on this type of violence and contests linear narratives which chart refugee

journeys from spaces of regressive irrational violence to those of progressive freedom and safety.

It is useful to think of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ as an articulation of overlapping and intertextual discursive processes working to make (Syrian) refugee subjectivity ‘culturally legible’ in specific ways (Dean, 2017, p. 629). Through analysis, we can come to see how these efforts to produce meaning around Syrian refugee subjects and their experiences reflect current and historical relations between refugee subjects and other actors. This, then, opens up an opportunity to not only chart these processes but also to acknowledge and begin to explore Syrian refugee narrators’ own awareness and strategic citation of the accompanying genre and tropes, in modes of alignment, critique or both.

For instance, in Pearlman’s volume, Marcell\* identifies her present moment as one of collective and individual crisis for refugee Syrians. She diagnoses a community-wide ‘sense of guilt’ but simultaneously asserts her desire to sustain identity and reasons to live, beyond the cause of revolution and reform in Syria (2018, p. 277). Most relevantly, she connects this personal crisis to the practice of storytelling as she describes her dismay as finding herself sometimes ‘writing ‘she’ when I should be writing ‘I’ [...] as if I’m telling someone else’s story’ (2018, p. 278). Ironically, the constant demand to engage in both the retrospective narratives and the future-focused discourses on the Syrian revolution and civil war leaves Marcell unable to understand herself within a first-person narrative.

Focusing on the diffusion of what she labels the ‘political’ into her relationships, hobbies and work, she suggests that a space distanced from this particular notion of the political (related to conflict in Syria) will allow her to ‘laugh, tell jokes, enjoy music [...] and] heal’ (2018, p. 278). The intersection of Marcell’s equivocation of personhood with a subject’s interactions with both space and storytelling is communicated in this narrative to suggest that Syrian refugees are subject to a discursive reductivity which is experienced as spatially stifling. With similar implications about the dangers of excessive focus on stories of violence in Syria, Kassem, instead, seems to be thrust into continuous motion by the demands on him to repeatedly act in a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role for both Syrian diaspora and American publics.

In a passage partially quoted in Chapter One, he contextualises his physical and psychological symptoms against a guilt which compels him to keep exposing his trauma for the sake of telling stories of Syrian suffering:

Some Syrian-American activists also organized a tour from me to speak at universities and other venues across the United States. This tour was extremely difficult for me because all of my experiences still felt so raw. I would get nauseous in the middle of speeches, run to a bathroom to throw up and return to the lectern to resume my talk. While I was speaking, my head would fill with feelings of guilt, homesickness and shame. I knew that I had to speak out. I knew that if I stopped speaking out I could no longer justify my new life to myself. But I also knew that the tour was preventing me from healing; every time I stepped up to the lectern, I reopened old wounds. (Eid, 2018, p. 187)

He is explicit about his motivations for agreeing to continue narrativizing his experiences and about the physical and psychological impact which telling stories about traumatic events had upon him. The obligation to ‘speak out’ is tied, in his memoir narrative, to his right to reside in the United States and, implicitly, to live a life free from the types of violence on which his stories dwell. This is an example of a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role occupied as a result of discursive forces from multiple directions. Kassem feels the eyes of Syrians abroad and at home upon him, as well as the weight of expectations from U.S. ‘natives’ that he legitimates his claim to asylum.

He frames this as a matter of personal conscience, a justification of his present life ‘to myself’, which clashes with a desire to psychologically heal which he sees as expressed in his bodily resistance to these story-telling events. Yusra M. echoes such a description of the physical and mental experience of narrativizing her experiences; symptoms such as disassociation and memory difficulties can be identified, even by lay-people, as typical of trauma but these narrators highlight how the specific context of the storytelling plays a significant role in whether and how this trauma affects the narrator: ‘it’s the first time I’ve told the story out loud to someone else. I struggle to remember the details, it feels faraway and unreal, like a bad dream that fades after waking’ (2018, p. 143).

Hadia\*, interviewed by Pearlman, understands herself as an atypical refugee, similar to Kassem: she was already in the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship when the protests first began and helped her brother and mother to quickly claim asylum after arriving on visas intended to cover a trip to her graduation ceremony. She considers her spatial location in the U.S. as a mirror of her place as ‘different from people on the inside [of Syria]’. Despite the frustration at not witnessing these unprecedented events Hadia still makes a claim on a type of ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role by proxy, taking on ‘a responsibility to tell the story [...] about what is happening on the other side of the world’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 268).

Kassem’s trajectory in this section of his memoir follows the same plot as his earlier disillusionment regarding humanitarian intervention by the international community. Just like his media role in Moadamiya, his storytelling and activism is compelled by his duty to seek aid for Syria, but he ultimately concludes that his efforts at communication are futile and the suffering he has endured for this goal has all been in vain:

I participated in interviews, connected reporters with activists in Syria and wrote articles about my experiences. I was determined to personalize the conflict. I thought that if I described what I and my friends had actually experienced, this would inspire ordinary Americans to take up our cause. Despite, the frustration and mental pain I felt each time I recalled Assad’s atrocities, I made a conscious effort to spread my own story – within the wider story of the Syrian revolution – across the media and within the American government. Many people were generous to me, and many people were touched by my stories, but at the end of the day I just couldn’t get through. (Eid, 2018, pp. 187–8)

Indeed, the risks posed to the storyteller as a result of the narrative encounter are not often fully acknowledged by those requesting or collecting stories. In an NBC news article with Hiba\*, the authors quote her stories of being pursued to Turkey by family members in order to force an end to her relationship with another woman. Hiba has reached Turkey once again, interviewed ‘in tears’ in Mersin, but neither Cheik Omar and Talmazan nor the paratext dwell on how they will attempt to counter the risks of such a scenario repeating as a result of this exposure in the press. Although Hiba ‘spoke on the condition that only her first name be used

out of fear for her safety’, the addition of detailed descriptions of her physical appearance, the first name of her former partner and the name of her most recent home in a small village in Syria possibly endangers her anonymity (Talmazan, Cheikh Omar and NBC News, 2016).

Similarly, Marwan’s narrative is laced with a much greater tension once he has accepted a more public persona, especially when his collaboration with Vanity Fair raises his profile. It is an insecurity which Marwan frames as paradoxically constraining him and promising mobility. ‘Attention was dangerous,’ he recalls, ‘even when it could grant [him] a future’ as his work for Western media transforms spaces as newly dangerous for him if he is detected by ISIS soldiers while also offering relationships which could assist his seemingly inevitable flight towards Europe (2018, p. 180). Acknowledging the disparity in risk between story-producer and story-collator or -editor, Marwan describes his first collaboration with Molly Crabapple, who illustrates his memoir, as an ‘art crime’ that he agreed to ‘knowing the danger’ (2018, p. 174). In his telling of it, Crabapple’s proposal is tempting, almost seductive in its flattery: ‘We’d create this for history, she said. Only we could do this, no one else.’ (2018, p. 174).

Her expression of concern for his safety, as an undercover reporter and photographer for a Western magazine in a town considered the capital of Daesh’s territory, are easily dismissed: ‘You better be safe, she worried. I will be, I lied’ (2018, p. 174). As an interviewer who is equally imperilled by the activity, living alone as an Alawite ‘traitor’ and single mother in Damascus, Samar identifies stronger instincts for self-preservation in those she pursues for stories as well as a gendered and sectarian assessment of her political role:

‘I ask people what happened. They are reticent [...] they refuse to look me in the face [...] I understand now what my presence as an unveiled woman means: an agitator’ (Yazbek, 2012, p. 19)

The ambivalent relations between those facilitating Syrian refugees’ storytelling and the narrators themselves are seen to be cut through with simultaneous and shifting feelings of distrust and gratitude. Marwan’s worries that he will be a ‘traumatized easy source’ for

journalists seeking to mine traumatic memories for content, are echoed in Yusra, Nujeen and other narrator's depiction of these actors as predatory (Hisham, 2018, p. 269). Yusra depicts herself as youthfully optimistic, maybe even naïve, when she contrasts her attitude to Steven with that of the 'adults' she is travelling with, who are 'worried about going on camera [because] it might bring problems later' (Mardini, 2018, p. 142).

Yusra instead recounts seeing that 'the sun is shining' and thinking 'we've made it this far [...] what harm can it do' (2018, p. 142). Nujeen offers a more cynical interpretation of the intentions of the, mostly Western, journalists and photographers who make the same journey through Europe as the refugees, only to document them. She recalls witnessing how 'a photographer stuck his camera' too close to a Syrian refugee woman breastfeeding an infant child, until 'she pulled her veil over her face' (2017, p. 183). As she often does in this text, Nujeen acts as cultural mediator; she posits the need for journalists to 'do their job of telling the world what was happening' against a preference for privacy by the woman which is culturally and religiously specific to her identity: 'I guess they don't know that our culture is different' (2017, p. 183).

Observations such as these in Nujeen's narrative echo the type of emotional labour I interpret in Yusra's story of Sara calming Sven in the government waiting room. In offering journalists who follow refugees through Europe the benefit of the doubt, she suggests very generous and open-ended interpretations of behaviour which in other contexts (such as critiques of paparazzi in the West) would likely be framed as invasive and exploitative. The repetition of this kind of interpretative generosity suggests limited capacity in the genre of Nujeen's memoir for the type of explicitly political critique found in Kassem and Marwan's stories, especially of Western actors often associated with 'humanitarian-witness' roles (Dean, 2019). If all narrators produce their stories in the context of strong expectations of expressions of gratitude, as a young Middle Eastern and Muslim woman, who also acknowledges the superior accommodations for her disability in Germany, there are also gendered pressures to discursively perform appreciation and grace for a Western readership (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, pp. 245, 273).

Nujeen, along with many other narrators, also seems to strive to demonstrate to her readers that she empathises with the fears of European ‘natives’ to some extent. She relays the explanation of the Egyptian taxi driver who she and her sister encounter in Austria; he tells them the arrival of refugees is ‘as if foreign plants had suddenly growing: everything they did was different’ (2017, p. 210). Later, more explicitly, Nujeen describes telling her teachers in Germany that she ‘understand[s] some German people might feel we brought with us something the never had in their country’, referring to terrorism. This anecdote ends with her teachers and fellow students demonstrating their support and aligning with the ‘*Keine Angst* or Don’t Be Afraid of Refugees’ campaign (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 276).

Thus, the invasion of an intimate and functional moment between mother and child escapes as a matter of well-meaning cultural misunderstanding rather than a violation of privacy which would be straightforwardly perceived as so in most other spaces. Nujeen also notes, of course, the gendered dangers of exposure for the young men ‘fleeing conscription’, not only to them but to their more vulnerable family members who would be fodder for retaliation ‘back in Syria’ (2017, p. 183). As mentioned above, the media accompaniment along the refugee path in Europe are ‘vultures closing in on prey’ to Nujeen, with only a select few given names and descriptions as merited by the more personal trust and respect she develops with them in the course of the narrative (2017, p. 184).

There is a tension, then, between the manner in which narrators such as Nujeen, Marwan and Yusra gained the fame necessary for their co-authors to pitch a memoir and the gratitude they express towards said co-authors within and outside the text. Nujeen, in the paratext, thanks Christina Lamb for ‘putting words to my story’, on the same page as she notes that she ‘can never express enough gratitude to Mrs Merkel and Germany for giving me a home (2017, p. 286). The constant pressure for Syrian refugees to express gratitude for being permitted to remain in Europe uncomfortably overlaps with the knowledge that Nujeen cannot access opportunities to voice and shape her own narrative without assistance from a Western English-speaking facilitator such as Lamb.

Marwan bluntly and disdainfully undercuts the presumption, based on colonial and racialised mappings of security, civilization and ‘progress’ onto certain spaces, that all Syrians would be so grateful for admission into a European country that they would then accept the obligation to narrativize their life as a fair exchange. At the point in his narrative when he first observes neighbours and friends setting off for Europe, he posits that only the ‘members of the underprivileged masses, poor under the old order as well as the disordered present, [would be] thankful for the opportunity to seek asylum in Stockholm and Berlin’ (2018, p. 121). It is rare that a narrator fully articulates how the one-sided nature of both the politics of gratitude experienced by asylum seekers, and the subsequent practices of narrative extraction, is a key constitutive part of the relations between the refugees and the story-seekers as gendered and racialised subjects.

Muna\* raises this when narrativizing her experiences as a refugee in the U.K.. She has already recounted how her stories were, and continue to be, requested, either formally by Home Office representatives and social workers or informally by British friends and acquaintances she had made since arriving. The following exchange demonstrates her narrative process in producing a cultural distinction between her own community, and indeed a generalised Middle Eastern community and these British subjects in terms of attitudes to sharing personal information:

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Muna        | Uh sometimes you feel like, is it only for Syrian people or all the people in the same situation?   |
| Interviewer | Yeah yeah. And it’s very difficult to know isn’t it?  |
| M           | Yeah. And the other people [lowers voice] what I’ve noticed here, even our friends, our English-speaking friends [pause] don’t give you their life details.                   |
| I           | Oh really?  |
| M           | We talk about everything for them because [pause] nothing to worry about. I’m happy to help. They say okay – they help you – they say, okay you can do this and this and this |

but I want to learn from your experience, what you've done. But they don't talk about themselves.

I            Yeah

M            They just build uh walls to me.

I            That's interesting, yeah.

M            That's completely different to our friends [pause] in Middle East. You make a friend, this means you share everything. You tell them what experience you've had, teach the others, talk about yourself. But they don't, they help you, they say go there and there and there and this and this and this but they don't go: oh yes when I had the same situation, you can... so you can learn from them, no.

This dialogue comes in the context of Muna's stories about navigating bureaucracy around housing, ID, employment, further education and other such matters in the U.K. while always feeling unsure as to whether resistant or unhelpful British state actors or acquaintances are acting in such a way due to racism and Islamophobia or if this is an experience of the system experienced by all, regardless of racialised identity.

Her lowered voice and pauses signal some caution and discomfort about characterising 'native' subjects as deliberately ungenerous or impersonal. Furthermore, her reliance on tropes of cultural differences in socialising might suggest a pressure to propose an uncontroversial explanation, especially given her knowledge of myself as a white British citizen. Crucially, Muna identifies mutual sharing of life histories as a process of relationship and community building; in her narratives of encounters with British citizens, their failure to 'talk about yourself [... and] go, oh yes, when I had the same situation [...] is a 'wall' which produces feelings of unease and stigmatisation for Muna. Of course, Syrian story-collectors like Khawla can also encounter the complex relations between the narrators they interview, their own gendered, ethnic and classed identity which they discursively produce and are shaped by.

In her diary narrative, Khawla builds a picture of Syria as a space filled with traumatised subjects, placing herself also as a receptacle for others' stories of violence and their intertextual relation to each other: 'I hear a lot of stories and a lot of reactions to them as well' (Dunia, 2013, p. 191). By embedding her summaries of these stories in her own narrativization of witnessed violence and tension across Syria, Khawla positions her text between the genres of 'survivor-witness-messenger' and 'humanitarian witness'. Alongside her own stories, she bears those she has received and recorded from other 'survivor-witnesses' who seemingly cannot fulfil the role of 'messenger'.

Her access to publication in a volume such as *Diaries* is shaped by numerous facets of her identity and circumstances, including class and education, and so she can characterise these second hand stories as 'attempts to mollify, then attempts to terrify' without their narratorial voice to confirm or contest (2013, p. 191). Establishing the presence of exceptional violence in the space of Syria is carried out in this depiction of rumour, fear and chaos infecting all conversation and storytelling across the territory. The framing of the text within a volume focused on the Arab Spring uprisings, which obviously did not all result in the refugee-producing situation that occurred in Syria, puts emphasis on the events preceding civil war and what a future with popular politics might look like in Syria.

But the ubiquity of representations of Syrian refugees as emblematic of the European 'refugee crisis' means the text cannot help but speak to the asylum cases of these subjects. Therefore the accounts of violence in the narrative participate in the discourses of justification for displacement on the basis of exceptional experiences of danger which is rooted in specific spaces (Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck and Spencer, 2019; Rountree and Tilli, 2019). Tariq refers to this awareness among Syrian refugees that they have been positioned as exceptional among other asylum seekers when he expresses his opinion that 'that Syria refugees are um have been treated nicer than others [...] in terms of documents, how fast you get them [...] that is compared with other refugees from other countries' (September 2019). Tariq clarifies that he means to compare the treatment of refugees of different nationalities by the UK state; it is implied that I might have interpreted his first statement as a comparison

between Syrian refugees and a more generic ‘others’, such as all other residents (including citizens) of the UK.

On the basis of this acknowledgement, he contests such a status of exceptionalism, arguing that ‘it’s not just about Syria [...] any countries with war need help’ (September 2019). In another clarification, Tariq explains that he is ‘comparing with Iraq’. Given that Tariq has also lived in Iraqi-Kurdistan, this is the most relevant example that he is likely to call to mind. But this reference also nods to his focus on crises of displacement in the Middle East rather than in other regions. This is similar to how Nujeen specifically identifies fellow Middle Eastern passengers on the boat by their nationalities (presumably guessed at from their Arabic dialect and accent) but describes other refugees encountered along the path only as ‘some really black-skinned people who I guess had come from Africa’ (2017, p. 216)

These gaps in the narrators’ characterisations of displacement as a global phenomenon suggest how hierarchies of racialised spaces and subjects shape media and political discourses’ production of Syrians as exceptionally legitimate refugees and sometimes as comparatively more desirable future Western citizens. This is perhaps another product of storytelling which emphasises the witnessing of exceptional suffering; this genre demands a focus on individual linear stories which justify one’s own movement rather than an account of large-scale forces causing displacement and the varying experiences of refugees of multiple nationalities.

While explicit or implicit demands for narrativization and the predominant discourses producing a genre of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ can be understood as processes of coercion laden with gendered and racialised power relations, they also highlight, by comparison, the process of elision and silencing enacted upon refugees, inevitably those furthest from the normative white Western subjects, who are not sought out for such storytelling work. This section has examined narratives of physical and psychological insecurity caused by telling stories in a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ mode. This has meant considering the implications of narrativizing in the context of being produced as problematic and threatening to host states, the psychological risks of recalling traumatic events and the unequal risk of exposure to retributive violence from actors such as the Assad regime or Daesh taken on by narrators as opposed to their co-authors, interviewers and editors. I have

also argued for the role played by this type of storytelling in constituting expectations that Syrian refugees produce narratives for Western audiences as expressions of gratitude for their status of exception, in comparison to other refugees who are in greater danger of being labelled fraudulent.

## Conclusion

And now you have read my story I hope you see I am not a number –  
none of us are.’ (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 268)

Dina Nayeri, in her article for *The Guardian* entitled ‘The Ungrateful Refugee’ that, writes that, as an Iranian refugee in the U.S., the word ‘grateful’ ‘hinted and threatened [...] that] if I failed to stir up in myself enough gratefulness, or if I failed to properly display it, I would lose [...] this western freedom, the promise of secular schools and uncensored books’ (Nayeri and The Guardian, 2017). Nayeri understands the display of gratitude that was required was that ‘we owed them [Americans] our previous identity [...] had to lay it at their door like an offering and gleefully deny it’ (2017). For Nujeen, the task implied as the necessary expression of gratitude is in fact the offering of her story, for the sake of making a claim on similitude with her Western readers to justify embodying the ‘problem’ of displacement.

In this chapter I have argued that Syrian refugee narrators tell stories about narrative encounters in the asylum process which focus on the scepticism imbricated in the hostility of asylum officials and environments, on interviewers’ preoccupation with terrorism and specific types of sexual violence as well as their feeling that many listeners are surprising by their seeming ‘articulacy’, ‘resilience’ and indeed, their survival. When considering coercive forces which shape narrativization, these storytellers describe a fine line they are treading between a sense of duty to inform an international audience about suffering occurring in Syria and along the refugee path and a knowledge of the psychological damage which narrativizing to justify embodying a ‘problem’ for the international community wreaks upon an individual. This is not the identification of a new phenomenon but rather an examination one specific manifestation of the types of strategic work done by racialised subjects in various situation of marginalisation within sticky discourses and practices of integration, gratitude, fetishization and, ultimately, hierarchised difference (Hajdukowski-Ahmed *et al.*,

2009; D’Cruz, 2014; Healey, 2014; Malkki, 2015; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Wekker, 2016; Dean, 2017, 2019; Fanon, 2017; Mayblin, 2017; Meissner and Heil, 2020; Rahbari, 2020).

Further colouring this narrative navigation is the politics of gratitude which not only consistently reproduces refugee subjects as feminised victims but also positions them in relation to a benevolent Western host, an identity open to claim by any individual ‘native’, offering conditional generosity. The entitlement to Syrian refugee narrative can be found not only in the formal scenario of the asylum interview but also in reported dialogue with journalists, researchers and even friends. Yusra’s account of Sven’s persistent interest in her story narrativizes a gentle rebuke of his orientalisising and homogenising production of Syria and the Middle East as a space he is simultaneously comfortably ignorant of but also frames as an exotic and alien place to experience:

Sven asks about Syria. I don’t know where to start. “I’ve never been to the Middle East,” says Sven. “I don’t know anything about it. Tell me what it was like.” “I don’t know,” I say. “Should I give you some facts? Damascus is one of the oldest capitals in the world. Syria is big on cotton exports? That kind of thing?” “No, ok. I get it,” says Sven, laughing. “So tell me about the journey.” (Mardini, 2018, p. 208)

Yusra is made strange as a Syrian and then, once she produces Syria as a banal compilation of ‘facts’ on cities and exports, she is once again produced as an oddity with a refocus on her refugee experiences. I argue that this is an example of a pressure to narrativize in a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ mode, like the numerous instances provided in this chapter, in that the narrator’s survival and their witnessing of spaces and experiences beyond that of the Eurocentric normative subject is implicit expected to be readily handed over to audiences such as Sven.

But Yusra has experienced much less sympathetic listeners, and she maintains a formative friendship with her swimming coach. This reflects the chapter’s argument for an

understanding of various narrative encounters as intertextually linked. In another context, this means seeing the interview between myself and this project's participants as implicated in these citations of gratitude as a result of the comparison between encounters producing refugee narrators as a 'problem' in need of justification and the relative comfort and informality of our interview (Sylvester *et al.*, 2011; Rozakou, 2017, 2019; Cabot, 2019). This analysis leads on to the next chapter, in which the coercions to demonstrate legitimacy and a disavowal of deviant refuge identities can be connected to stories which make desperate claims on the category of humanity through the narrativization of dehumanising experiences of space and time.

**Chapter Three**  
**The Prison, the Path and the Void:**  
**Spatial and Temporal Dehumanising of the Refugee**

Leaving Syria means death and nothing else. It means shedding my skin, casting away my heart and everything I ever wanted to do [...] To become whatever I want – such a simple phrase but it can limit one’s life: who among us is actually what we want to be? (Yazbek, 2012, p. 257)

In an example of literature which aims to sketch out the significance of the ‘refugee figure’ for the international systems of organising and categorising political subjects, Soguk examines UN discourses on humanitarian intervention. She suggests that subjects are never ‘human-beings’ alone, without further classification (1996, p. 25). In producing the ‘human being as refugee’, rather than ‘as victim’, this particular UN resolution, Soguk argues, demonstrates that the drive to secure ‘human-beings’, ostensibly based on their ‘humanity’, makes humanity a condition inextricable from citizenship. In this analysis, securing the human being, and thus the value of shared humanity, demands the reincorporation of the ‘human-being as refugee’ into the category of citizenship, more so for the stability of the international state system than for the end of preserving human life. But what then of subjects

who are continuously maintained in their status as ‘human-beings as refugees’ by self-declared humanitarian actors?

This chapter argues for an interpretation of prison narratives, an established Syrian genre, as making specific interventions on ontological understandings of humanity. By producing the prison as space in which humanity is both meaningless and systemically destroyed in the subjects of prisoners and guards, narrators highlight the paradoxical and shifting grasp which numerous international discourses hold on this oft-deployed concept. Telling stories which represent the experience of the prison as spilling over into public spaces in Syria, until the territory itself is positioned as a prison in relation to the freedom of Europe and the West can be read for numerous layers of testimony on abandonment, space and subjectivity.

Stories on the refugee path make similar associations between material conditions (over-exposure, restriction, hypervisibility, gendered and racialised violence) and a dehumanising of refugee subjects. The structure of the journey, presumed as a linear experience, in fact allows for narrative to demonstrate how warped experiences of time and space contribute to a detachment from the category of human which then must be identified and contested.

Finally, focus turns to narrators’ deployment of ‘the void’ (or equivalent terms) as a trope to describe understandings of Syria as space and nation-state and of the experience of displacement. This includes a return to the theme of abandonment by the international community (or ‘humanity’) in productions of Syria as empty of life and meaning (only a playground or chessboard for other players) as well as of refugees’ containment in spaces unsuitable for sustaining life. In fact, Puar reminds us that all ‘human-beings’ produced by rights discourses are not equally ‘vested with futurity’ (2017, p. 15).

Thus, where Soguk describes refugee subjects who are kept, by the discursive work of the UN and others, from a fully realised humanity by their lack of citizenship, Puar contends that the futurity of the citizen-human is predicated on the genocide, ‘slow death’ or at least the availability for injury of other not-fully-realised human-beings such as the refugee-human (Berlant, 2007, 2011; Puar, 2017, p. 149). In the case of the displaced Syrian population, experiences of violent political repression, of the life-threatening conditions deliberately maintained by states along the refugee path(s) and of prolonged deprivation as a tactic of

asylum policies all suggest a similar relationship between the non-aberrant citizen-human and the aberrant refugee-human.

The production of a population available for injury, endangerment, debilitation and death not only attempts to preserve the international state system from the presumed destabilising effect of displaced peoples, it also, in doing so, reaffirms the citizen-humans' 'unfettered' claim on futurity through the curtailing of that temporal capacity in the refugee-human (Puar, 2017, pp. 129, 149). Puar's intervention on the imbrication of humanity and futurity has informed my readings of Syrian refugee narrators' treatment of humanity in the texts analysed in this chapter. Building on her theoretical work has led this chapter to argue that when these storytellers shape narratives around their experiences of abandonment in space to 'dehumanising' violence, this also describes an abandonment in time, along racialised logics of temporality.

By narrativizing this experience of being spatially and temporally forgotten as either a cause or a product of displacement, the narrators emphasise how they have been produced within a population without futurity and therefore, have had access to only a truncated category of humanity. Evidence for this occupation of a 'not-fully-realised' humanity is, paradoxically, most clear in both refugees' and liberal activists' loudest claims on humanity for non-citizens, as a means of advocating for refugee rights and protections. There is significant work at play in claims upon humanity and, I argue, it most often signals a population that has been produced as 'not-fully-realised' humans, perhaps due to their position outside the category of citizen but also due to the deliberate constraints and containments put in place to label them populations available for injury, debilitation and death (Puar, 2017, pp. 64, 129). In the excerpts that follow, narrators focus on the prison, the (refugee) path and unknown spaces, or the void, in their discursive navigation of the interaction between humanity and their categorisation as 'citizens gone aberrant' (Soguk, 1996, p. 25). In these I have read for the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role, including where I suggest that narrators might be interacting with the figure by refusing to inhabit it or implicitly questioning its purpose and value (asking, for example, what is the point of giving testimony if 'humankind' is intent on not listening?).

Overall, I argue that even when the figure is present in how it is avoided, the 'survivor-witness-messenger' genre works to, firstly, establish the exceptionality of the violence (via

the trope of dehumanisation) which provoked movement in order to justify ‘aberrant’ mobility and subsequent applications for asylum. Secondly, and more significantly, the way in which the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ is deployed by some narrators creates tension within dominant discursive productions of ‘humanity’. This is carried out through the extensive narrative work that these storytellers put into engaging with spatiality and temporality which results in stories connecting the category of fully realised humanity to futurity. The narrative drive, or plot, in many of these texts, is derived from a desiring movement towards a ‘full’ realisation of humanity, contrasted against the narrativized examples of its violation.

Ultimately, these narratives have been produced in the context of audience demand, in academia and the political sphere, for stories focused on the interaction between the narrators’ identity as refugees and the space they have moved through. Despite the pressures that may be felt from the intertextuality between their own narratives and other discourses on their subjectivity, these story-tellers, sometimes explicitly and sometimes less so, contribute to theories of truncated or not-fully-realised humanities which are not vested with futurity in order to secure the futures of those considered ‘fully’ human. The logics by which some subjects (and bodies) are produced with or without futurity to different extents are, as Puar has established, shaped by the work of racing/racializing, gendering, (dis)abling and sexualising human-beings as subjects of capitalism, patriarchy and (neo)coloniality.

The narrators’ analysis of their own memories and subsequent narrativization allow us to build on Puar’s theory by emphasising spatiality and temporality not just in the outcome of de/humanising but in its processes as specific to discursive production of the ‘not-fully-realised’ subjects in the contexts of political repression, war and subsequent displacement. The following sections approach these narratives through the frames of the prison, the path and the void in order to suggest an interpretation of narrators’ interactions with the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role as a simultaneous discursive untangling of the troubled category of humanity in the context of refugee-producing situations in a Middle Eastern nation-state such as Syria and that of the refugee path and the precarious future hoped for at the end.

By focusing on narrator's citation of humanity as a universally understood category of personhood but also a set of ethical expectations (such as solidarity or the inherent value of life), I aim to suggest that these narratives in fact come to move from critiques of their dehumanising treatment by Syrian and European state actors towards new interpretations of 'fully realised humanity' as a historically and culturally specific concept that is not easily extricable from existing global systems of race, gender, empire and sovereignty.

### **The prison: 'survivor-witness-messengers' report dehumanisation**

This section asks to what end do narratives focus on the experience of being kept in spaces that suspend or truncate humanity? From their position as (former) citizens displaced by violence, now aware of how they are perceived as aberrant figures, many narrators explicitly address their disappointment in the failure of Western states and international organisations such as the UN to act on the basis of supposed norms of humanitarianism and a sacred status for human life. At times accepting their mobility as problematic within the logics of the state system, Syrian refugee narrators respond to discourses that figure them as aberrant by attributing blame to external state actors for allowing them to become so.

Themes of abandonment and isolation from an international community further emphasise the use of testimony on violence as an indictment of this very community, especially Western states known to have previously intervened in the MENA region supposedly on humanitarian grounds (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Glanville, 2013; Malkki, 2015; Palladino and Woolley, 2019) . For instance, Pearlman's interviewee Tayseer\* describes his time imprisoned by the Assad regime for opposition activism and focuses on the effects of alienation from humanity writ large:

Prisons in Syria are among the most terrifying on the planet. The reason is simple: human life means nothing to them [...] we were completely disconnected from the rest of the world. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 18)

While analysing this narrative fragment, I want to emphasise that Tayseer's statement is knowledge produced from experience, from material bodily experience of violence and the way that violence shaped his life (whether he lives or dies or suffers) and his humanity (a category of his sacredness, belonging, existence) as worthless in this space. Nonetheless, while emphasising the sense of being forgotten upon entering a space demarcated solely for the facilitation of various forms of violence, Tayseer, in this passage, also reifies a global hierarchy of spaces, implying that valuing humanity as a category inures other prison guards, supposedly in less 'terrifying' nation-states, from inflicting this level of violence onto their charges.

Through disconnection from 'the rest of the world' (perhaps other activists in Syria or perhaps the presumably watchful and just eyes of the international community) the value of the prisoner's humanity is suspended making more extreme forms of violence and terror possible. The association of a valued humanity with protection from extrajudicial violence not only suggests that certain spaces can possess a greater respect for humanity than others, it also reifies the logics that allow for the state's power to grant or suspend the subject's humanity given its right to legitimate certain violences (Arendt, 1951; Haraway, 1991; Agamben, 1998; Hayden, 2007; Owens, 2009; Braidotti, 2013; Ensor, 2020).

I would suggest, drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Hortense Spillers (1987), as Puar does, but also on Saidiya Hartman that instead of narrativizing an experience of being 'non-human', Tayseer is exploring the meaning of a status as an(other) form of humanity, humanity not fully or only partially recognised (Hartman, 1997, pp. 62, 95; see also Puar, 2017, pp. 28–29, 81). In this theorisation, Hartman and others have observed that there is more social and political work at play in 'dehumanising' violence directed at certain bodies, namely in her examples the slaves and later Black Americans, than in an interaction that would be understood as between a human subject and a non-human subject (such as an animal) (Hartman, 1997, pp. 19, 78). The two contexts are not directly comparable but analysis of how humanity is discursively produced and contested in these narratives benefits from drawing on this body of thought. Hartman's contribution to knowledge on how the very claims made on humanity on behalf of certain subjects can signal their exclusion from 'full' humanity are greatly significant to this analysis.

Tayseer's narrative, contextualised by an established genre of Syrian prison literature, produces zones of imprisonment in Syria as spaces which uniquely exact a dehumanising transformation on the imprisoned subject via specific violences (cooke, 2011; Taleghani, 2017, 2021). In the same vein, Samar identifies the detachment of the body from subjectivity via torture and mutilation as that act that transforms the prison space into 'Hell': 'it was like human beings were just pieces of flesh on display, an exhibition of the art of murder and torture' (2012, pp. 86–7). She then presents the trajectory of the nation-state from regressive regime to civil war is one which charts the spilling of this transformative effect from the prison into public spaces to encompass the territory of Syria as a whole.

Samar contends that before the protest 'everybody knows' that there 'was not a natural kind of calm since nobody could challenge the power of the security forces' (Yazbek, 2012, p. 3). It is the unlimited cruelty against other human subjects which she identifies as the shift, with the city 'transformed into a carnival of horror' (2012, p. 3). All subjects in the narratives come to experience the conditions similar to that of the prison, from arbitrary violence to the effects of confinement. Another of Pearlman's narrators Kareem\*, represents his young son's life as one completely defined by imprisonment and isolation once war has begun: 'My son spent the first years of his life in Homs stuck inside because of the curfew and the bombing.' (Pearlman, 2018, p. 246).

The impact of this isolation, in Kareem's narrative, is to leave the child without an understanding of his place in a wider humanity: 'He was two years old when he saw another child for the first time; he went up to him and touched his eyes, because he thought that he was a doll.' (Pearlman, 2018, p. 246). By choosing to include this anecdote within his narrative, Kareem delivers a message on isolation as a separation from a humanity that is produced by interaction and an understanding of belonging. Kareem's son, in this narrative fragment, is shown to not understand himself as one of many children; the point that is meant to deliver emotional impact is his ignorance of the danger of touching another's eyes directly, his ignorance of the principles of respecting other's bodies.

Kareem suggests that his child has suffered more than a medicalised psychological injury via his isolation but rather a more significant symbolic loss of understanding of his own belonging in wider humanity. However, the narrative of a sudden release of the experience of imprisonment into spaces outside the prison as a result of the protests and civil war is countered in some narratives. Khawla Dunia also highlights the expansion of the violent logics of the prison into public spaces as a turning point in the narrative of the uprisings in Syria and her personal role in then.

She deploys the language of exposure and proof, suggesting an international judge and jury, when she describes ‘the marks of the beatings were still visible on [my husband’s] body [... and] the evidence of [...] corpses on State television speaking eloquently of what they had suffered in the cellars of State security’ (2013, p. 202). The previous chapter has touched on the ways in which practices and discourses of the refugee regime produce the body as narrative. Here I consider to whom Khawla intends to display the evidence of violence in this part of her narrative. Beyond the sovereign authority of the state, Khawla can only hope to appeal to an international legal community in her invocation of ‘evidence’ of violence in this passage. In its nature as a literary publication, this text recognises the supplementary role of an international public and media in the operations of international law.

She implies a belief that narrativizing in a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ mode, even with second-hand reports of violence, plays a role in the process of international justice and an indictment of a regime which, by the nature of its status as the sovereign power, cannot be held accountable solely ‘within’ the state of Syria. Nujeen similarly witnesses, second-hand, instances of violence, presented as exceptional, which seems to have escaped spaces which previously contained and concealed the types of violence understood as dehumanising. In the episodes which she chooses to relate, the violence is also shaped by the interaction between ethnic identity, space and security. One particular passage narrativizes the experience of watching the evacuation of Kobane on YouTube, as Nujeen emphasises that ‘Kobane was a Kurdish city and always had been, so it was an awful feeling to have Daesh trying to capture it’ (2017, p. 118).

Even if the witnessing is second hand, aspects of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ are detectable in Nujeen’s effort to communicate to her reader the implication of this footage for her, as a result of her shared Kurdish ethnicity with those being filmed and the likelihood that she had family or friends among the displaced. The exceptionality of the violence is further underlined when Nujeen describes her and her family speaking ‘on the phone to people there who said it felt like Doomsday’ (2017, p. 118). This is again relevant to Puar’s framework; the visiting of apocalyptic conditions upon one’s home is not arbitrary but rather certain spaces, and their occupants, can become accepted as lost to time (Puar, 2017, pp. 85, 102, 139, 149–152).

Nujeen’s narrative plays a sleight of hand; from one reading seeming to reify dominant discourses which produce ‘the West’ as a place and project of modernity (and thus futurity) and security but from another, implicitly pointing to the ways in which ‘Western’ subjects are secured and guaranteed futures *because of* the containment of future-destroying violence in certain spaces, determined along racialised and colonial lines. Ultimately, Nujeen communicates her feelings of helplessness and underlines a key tension in the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role: the cultural value which has been invested into witnessing (and surviving in order to witness) and giving testimony (delivering messages) can greatly overestimate the impact of these acts and leaves those occupying the role with little agency other than to hope for intervention by their listeners.

Similar to Tayseer’s equivocation of losing contact with the outside world with losing full humanity, Kassem frames his blog, his memoir and indeed his survival, as a cry for help to international actors external to Syria (2018, pp. 180, 188). He does this along the same logics that proof of belonging to the category of human can make his suffering meaningful to actors with the power to intervene. He is however, ultimately, left disappointed and disillusioned. This only makes clear the great contrast between his prior understandings of state actors such as the U.S., the U.K. and France and his reproachful representations of their leaders as shamefully reluctant to come to civilians’ aid in defiance of another state sovereign.

The U.S., the U.K. and France become equivalent to ‘humankind’ for Kassem; Obama’s agreement with Russia in September 2013, allowing Assad immunity in exchange for his

chemical weapons, is understood to mean that ‘the world has forgotten [us]’ (2018, p. 110). Just like Tayseer, Kassem’s narrative produces the state of being forgotten or ignored by a Western-centric international community as a loss of humanity, or a degradation of humanity’s presumed intrinsic value:

we waited for the world to give its verdict on the importance of our suffering, the value of our lives [...] Obama consulted Congress, the British parliament debated, and the French prevaricated (Eid, 2018, pp. 107–8)

This part of Kassem’s narrative, framed as a moment of total disillusionment not just in the morality of these Western states, but in humanity itself, is a critique of international structures which determine which violences, and against whom, are legitimate. But it also subscribes, even in its realisation of their inadequacy, to an understanding of Western state actors as the pinnacle of civilizational and ethical practice.

There is also a utilisation of the narrative arc of hope to disappointment which arguably deploys the ‘survivor’ component of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role. This challenges readers to question how these racialised geographies of safety and danger which allow Syrian civilians to die with little outrage and no action are in fact produced by these existing international power relations which are known to be continuing colonial relations between the West and formerly colonised spaces. Kareem, who eventually fled bombardment in Homs, echoes Kassem’s direct reproach: ‘why does this world have such little sympathy for people dying in Syria? [...] it’s as if the blood that circulates in our veins is of lesser value’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 245). Paradoxically, this is a sentiment which can sit side-by-side in a narrative with a geographical imaginer which maps the potential for full humanity onto the ‘host-states’ of refugees, such as the U.K.

For instance, Muna\*, an interviewee, refers to her particular experiences as a Kurdish woman in Syria when she brings her narrative to a close by reflecting on her positionality in the present moment:

I'm a refugee in a country that respects me, comparing with the country who looked at me down, who put me down like an animal, without nationality, without documents. Nothing. (September 2019)

Again, the implicit reference to dehumanisation ('like an animal') is tied to a lack of formal citizenship status. For Muna, her narrative arc moves spatially and temporally towards a respect for her life which is demonstrated through the opportunity for 'documents' and 'nationality' which would constitute movement towards fully realised humanity. This part of the story points to one of the binds of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role. Muna's comparison of the U.K. and Syria reproduces racialised geographies which map dehumanising strategies exclusively onto spaces such as the Middle East rather than Europe or 'the West. But she also has lived experience of the consequences of being without these markers of full humanity, such as citizenship, which essentially vests fully realised humans with futurity.

In some sense this is immediately material; Kurdish Syrians have been restricted from certain educational and career pursuits and subject to explicit persecution and discrimination directly based on their ethnicity (McGee, 2014; Muna, September 2019). In others, there is greater symbolic resonance; this community has been focused on a nation seemingly without a future which is constantly threatened territorially by actors such as Turkey (Soguk, 2015; Tatari, 2016; BBC News, 2019). Rather than simply reading Muna's comparison as an observation informed by colonial understandings of which actors and spaces have civilised respect for humanity, we can draw on Puar to read for an additional critique of how the international structures of citizenship have been imbued with the power to vest a subject with full humanity and thus leave those without formalised proof of belonging at risk of becoming debilitated populations whose futurity is curtailed through their living conditions and access to care whether that be in Syria, as a Kurd, or in Europe, as a refugee (Puar, 2017, pp. 157, 161).

Kassem's story might also be read to expose how sovereignty, as an organizing principle and set of ideological practices including citizenship, is imbricated in the conceptualisation and categorisation of humanity especially in relation to displaced peoples. His admonishment of other states' failure to intervene against Assad's violence in Syria relies on his initial presumption that proof of the suffering of human beings motivates humanitarian intervention. Soguk, instead, would suggest that it is the stability of international peace and security which is the primary motivation for humanitarian multilateral action (1996, p. 25). She suggests that the refugee is understood as the aberrant figure within this international discourse rather than the sovereign power which has violated the bounds of its social contract (Soguk, 1996, p. 26). But even in this framework, in the case of Syria, the transformation of Syrian subjects from persecuted citizens to invasive refugees would provoke states and actors such as the UN to intervene in the Syrian conflict.

Puar's approach has greater explanatory force, not in a realist analysis of interest which would simply point fingers at Russia and China's vetoes and other similar events, but rather in allowing us to perceive how the debilitating conditions of the refugee path have functioned as an alternative action against the destabilising effect of 'citizens gone aberrant' in place of military intervention (2017, pp. 76–79, 136). The next section builds on the analysis of storytelling on abandonment in prisons, and indeed the territory of Syria, which has been carried out above to turn attention to this path and the ways in which relations between time, space and subjectivity are seen to shape refugee journeys.

### **The path: 'survivor-witness-messengers' claim humanity**

In this section, I argue that the narratives analysed here engage with the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role to question why certain bodies are subject to the debilitation and death that will likely come from the overexposure and containment along the refugee path and why this path is maintained as a space which inflicts debilitation and death so frequently. Some narrators approach this question implicitly, perhaps aware of the need to gently guide a presumed Western or European reader towards a critique of the border regime at large. Nujeen, for instance, who organises her chapters spatially, separating narratives based on each country she passes through, admits that she 'was a bit scared entering Austria' (2017, p.

203). She attributes this to the nation being ‘where Hitler was born, the man who caused Europe’s last really big refugee crisis’ (2017, p. 203).

Here Nujeen reminds European reader about periods of large-scale global displacement pre-dating the ‘refugee crisis’ of the 2010s, as well as a dictatorial genocidal sovereign actor always taken as exceptional, never representative of the region, unlike Assad. It is skilfully delivered in the innocent voice of a teenage narrator as to somewhat disguise the critique. To further underline the sentiment, this sentence is immediately followed by the information that Austria ‘was where seventy-one refugees had died the previous month, suffocated inside a truck meant for transporting frozen chickens’ (2017, p. 203). By associating her fear with the territory of Austria itself, rather than the space of the van, or the figure of the smuggler who abandoned the refugees, Nujeen reverses the rhetorical trick of dominant political discourses which produce racialised geographies of safety and danger which map violence onto spaces like her homeland as a naturalised characteristic.

It is a canny use of the mode of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’, via the ‘close shave’ trope rather than direct account from memory, to unsettle readers through the reversal of the status-quo mapping. One crucial narrative mechanism for discursive mapping establishes distance or proximity between subjects and spaces of danger. The proximity of danger is discursively produced and shaped through the deployment of tropes of physical closeness, familial, religious or ethnic links and essentialised cultural characteristics. In an example of the first, some narrators were very specific about the distance between their home and the location where violence had taken place.

The ‘close shave’ trope is also used by Nujeen when she reports that the boat which left Turkey just after the one that she and her sister travelled on sank, with the passengers presumed drowned. The danger presented by the space of the ocean is made more immediate by both the physical proximity of the sunken boat, only a few kilometres behind their own, and the narrative of Nujeen’s brief friendly conversations with the Moroccan family she knows to have been on that boat (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, pp. 143, 151). Familial relation also recurs in most narratives to emphasise proximity to danger; it is also a trope of witnessing and reliable story-telling. For example, Tariq\*’s cousin, in his narrative, becomes

a shadow or double of the narrator in his representation of dangers that could have also befallen Tariq.

In this story, the cousin is taken to Athens by the Greek police where he is accused and convicted of being a smuggler. Tariq emphasises multiple times that there is ‘no evidence, no proof’ (September 2019). There is evident reluctance to move the narrative away from Athens, where the cousin remains imprisoned, in order to finish recounting the rest of Tariq’s journey. He utilises the connection and similarity between himself and the other man to highlight the arbitrary nature of the border regimes encounter with each refugee subject: ‘this cousin was just like [me], a refugee’.

Returning to Nujeen’s narrative, confessing a fear which makes little ‘sense’ in a conventional way (there is no great danger posed by Hitler and incidents similar to this have occurred in other vehicles across Europe), works to undermine the ‘sense’ of these existing discourses on space and danger. However, she also delivers a straightforward message about the disproportionate dangers of the journey on the refugee path towards and across Europe. Her description of the suffocation incident is graphic; she reproduces information presumably acquired either through media sources or refugee information networks to tell her readers that the van ‘was spotted by the Austrian police because it had liquid seeping out of the back of it [and...] when they opened it up, the smell of death was overpowering for it was piled up with rotting corpses including eight women, three children and a baby of just eighteen months’ (2017, p. 203).

Not only does this section of the narrative emphasise how the conditions along this path have robbed futures from these individual subjects, but it also demonstrates this to be an omnipresent violence diffused across the space, felt only by those who risk being marked as illegal entrants to a state by perceived racial, ethnic and religious identity. The van then, along with other modes of transport such as the boat or even the open road, becomes a space that threatens not only death or debilitating injury but also a dehumanising effect. Referring to the intended purpose of most vehicles like the van in Austria, many narrators deploy the trope of being treated like animals in the denial of basic bodily needs.

Interviewed for this project, Zaynab\* emphasises how the capital which can be extracted from moving displaced people is inextricable from this treatment as ‘not fully’ human:

It was very difficult on the bus, a lot of people exploiting to take money. Eighty people on the bus. [My] daughter had no oxygen, no air, wanted to get out for an air and they wouldn’t accept that. We were like sheep on the bus, being exploited to take money. (January 2019)

Similarly, interviewee Jamila\* emphasises the dangers, physical suffering and fear involved in her and her family’s journey through the desert in Sudan, largely due to her understanding that neither the smugglers nor the police would view their lives as valuable or indeed as fully human. She fulfils the tropes of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ genre by supporting this suggestion with narrativization of acts she saw and considered evidence of a devaluing of her and the other refugees’ humanity:

Some people [were] dead on the street because the driver couldn’t stop in case of the police because they were going illegally. People were pushed out. They stopped for two days in the desert. She can’t forget this journey. No one in her family can forget it. It was June and it was boiling, like fifty degrees in Sudan. It wasn’t easy at all to sleep in the desert for two days [...] After they ran away, they stopped far away, observing the police. When they leave, they come back and collect the families. Then twenty hours in the van, breaks every three, four, five hours. They had a storm, very dusty, so they couldn’t see each other. Travelling over the sea was really hard, but she found out that travelling over the desert was more difficult. (August 2019)

In dialogue with each other, Nujeen and Jamila’s narratives illuminate the ambivalent role of actors such as ‘the police’ or border officers who enforce the attempted containment of certain subjects. Especially in many Western European state discourses, police and border officers are produced as protectors who search for refugees in order to prevent them from

endangering themselves in the inherently dangerous modes of transport which constitute the refugee path (Andersson, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a; Bigo, 2014).

Of course, as Nujeen and Jamila imply, these actors, and the policies which instruct them, in fact create the environments which require refugees to travel in illicit and thus life-threatening conditions. But both these narrators produce their stories with an awareness of the dominant discourses on legitimate movement along racialised logics of (inter)national security. Therefore, the audiences which might be expected to feel shock and horror in reading or hearing the testimony of Nujeen and Jamila in ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ mode on the implications for refugees’ humanity along the path are only subtly invited to critique the border and refugee regimes; the smugglers are available as much more convenient, shadowy villains of the refugees’ suffering (Mountz, 2003; Pope, 2017; Achilli, 2018).

Smugglers appear in many narratives with little demographic information or personal details provided. They are described as ‘armed, chaotic agents that might provide life-changing security or life-ending danger’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 240). Abdul Rahman’s \* story depicts smugglers’ treatment of refugees as like that of animals: ‘they took everything we owned and locked us in the stable for the night’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 240). And yet, so many narratives tell of moments in which Syrian refugees are forced to put enormous trust into the smugglers they already know, through community wisdom, to be unreliable. Tariq confidently draws on an assumed shared understanding of this characteristic, prefacing his story with the statement: ‘you know how smugglers are [...] they lie’ (September 2019).

Nujeen’s story similarly dwells on moments of unnecessary delay as warping the travellers’ experience of time: ‘we ended up under that bridge for five hours. That might not seem a lot of time after all those weeks of travel and the years of Assad or Taliban or whatever monsters we were fleeing but it was hard to be so close to the end and then get stuck for no reason we could see’ (2017, p. 215). Other narrators, such as Jamila, challenge the language of crisis and emergency that they have navigated as refugees, claiming terms such as ‘urgent’ are unmoored from their meanings and never provoke the action they call for: ‘even though it was an urgent file, [the UN] waited a year after the interviews and the hospital appointment [...] even though it was an urgent application’ (August 2019). This is an example of narrators engaging in discourses of international responsibility, utilising the existing concepts and

norms to critique actors such as the UN and use the narrative encounter to enter into dialogue with these discourses of refugee rights and international problem solving (Loescher, 1996; Bellamy, 2009, 2015; Bhabha, 2018; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2018; Palladino and Woolley, 2019).

The theme of abandonment also returns when Jamila pinpoints the fear experienced when ‘the drivers [saw] the police coming, they ran away [...] they left the family and ran away’ as a particular moment of trauma. The use of shocking or traumatising images or emotions in these narratives can make a space to bear witness to this violence without risking any negative consequences of critiquing the systems of states, borders and citizenship which produce these conditions of violence in order to hold refugees like Jamila, Zaynab and Nujeen in place, away from Western states. Having arrived in a space promising fully realised humanity, through the structures of citizenship and thus sovereignty, they will be aware that contesting the dominant discourses demanding gratitude from refugees (by indicting their host-state in the process of truncating their humanity along the path) might undermine their claim on that status.

Other narrators are more explicit, perhaps negotiating the scenario of the interview and assessing the encounter as low risk: Tariq, for instance, in a second interview, produces a narrative straightforwardly assigning blame for violence against himself and other refugees to both Turkish and Greek state agents at the border between these two states. Beginning with the forceful removal of him and others back to the other side of the border, he goes on to narrativize how border officials ‘took their phones in a bag and threw it, for thieves to get it and most were gone or broken’ (September 2019). This is a tactic that could only be intended to increase the vulnerability of these refugee subjects and reduce their capacity to organise another crossing.

Here Tariq frames his story as giving testimony with the implication that he is revealing illegitimate behaviour by these border agents. These actors’ entitlement to certain violence is produced as unethically undefined and arbitrary in his narrative: it is perhaps expected to be forcefully turned away from a state border but Tariq questions the authority under which

these actors confiscate belongings and perpetrate violence beyond the simple act of bodily removal. Finally, Tariq tells us that ‘there were seventy people and they took one and beat them in front of the seventy to scare them not to try again’ (September 2019). He explains the reasoning behind the border agents arbitrary and public violence against one border-crosser, explicitly identifying physical beating and intimidation of witnesses as a strategy of the Greek state to prevent the movement of refugees into Europe.

Nujeen also deploys the same tropes of lamenting a truncated category of humanity for refugees when citing the notorious images of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee whose body was photographed washed up on a beach in Turkey. Her narrativization of hearing about the photograph comes at the mid-point in the narrative; positioning this here is purposeful and knowing. This image became central to numerous competing discourses on displacement, asylum and border control, discourses always coached in the language of crisis (Olesen, 2018; Prøitz, 2018; Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen, 2020). While some media dialogues contested the ethics of creating and publishing these images, liberal narratives dominant in activist discourses promoting the safe passage and welcome reception of refugees deployed this image as a morality lesson to admonish proponents of stricter border control and deportation (Heinrichs, 2017; Mortensen, 2017).

Nujeen provides a brief description of learning about Kurdi while charging her phone at Pipka camp, Lesbos but deciding not to view the images: ‘I refused to look at the photograph as I knew it would be bad for my psychology’ (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 156). In referring to this image, Nujeen assumes the reader’s knowledge of and sympathy for Kurdi and through this knowledge replicates the effect of the image itself. The passage works to poke the presumed liberal white Western reader’s conscience while Nujeen’s journey, parallel to Kurdi’s, serves as a reminder that the danger posed by the spaces of transit (sea, lorry, border, camp) are ongoing and current insecurities, not past anecdotes fixed as exceptional moments of tragedy.

It is also a moment which highlights the narrator’s awareness of her story’s position within extensive existing narratives and discourses on, not just general refugee movement into

Europe, but specifically Syrian displacement as part of the ‘refugee crisis’. As a subject so often captured in photographic and video media along her journey, Nujeen’s reference to the images of Kurdi also implicitly cites the discourses which came to surround them and focused so heavily on ‘humanity’ as a thick signifier of value, morality, deservingness and thus attempted to produce Kurdi as an object of humanitarian obligation. Blurring the roles of object and viewer, often presumed to be distinct, of images of Syrian refugees, Nujeen, in her refusal to view or further analyse the images, seems ambivalent on the discourses which claimed Kurdi’s death as a stark reminder of refugees’ humanity.

The act of *not viewing*, of not witnessing is perhaps narrativized in order to implicitly ask who needed to be reminded of Syrian refugees’ humanity by viewing a child’s corpse and to what end? If Nujeen is still required, throughout the rest of the memoir, to admonish European citizens for their apathy towards Syrian death and debilitation, she seems to suggest that a claim on the category of humanity via the image of apparently dehumanising death does not seem to be a meaningful or successful humanitarian strategy. Therefore, perhaps we must consider that certain audiences accustomed to viewing images of racialised bodies, which are so rarely white and never white ‘Westerners’, in conditions of death, injury or suffering (starvation, destitution, bereavement) cannot be mobilised to critique the border and refugee regimes as processes of debilitation by invoking the sanctity of shared humanity.

Approaching Nujeen’s dilemma through Puar’s framework, we might conclude that this mobilisation to critique cannot be achieved because the racialised subjects endangered by these border regimes have never been fully included in the historical and contemporary production of this category. Furthermore, the maintenance of a refugee path which deliberately causes death and debilitation serves the purpose of securing the futures of the ‘fully realised’ human beings who are not contained in spaces delineated for the types of violence occurring in Syria and enacted against subjects who leave by the conditions of their movement itself. In this instance, the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role might be deployed for the function of pointing to its futility; given all that a Syrian refugee subject might suffer for the purpose of delivering a message, many narrators suggest that the ‘humanity’ to whom they would give testimony are not only apathetic but also already defined by racialised

geographical relations which mean the refugee's containment and debilitation are understood to be necessary for humanity's futurity.

### **The void**

This section of the chapter addresses instances in which narrators refer to displacement as a movement into a spatial and temporal 'void'. Continuing in the vein of the previous sections, I argue here that this figuring of refugee movement is one in which this mobility is produced as a peculiar non-normative experience by originating *from* a space made meaningless by violence *towards* a space made blank and empty by the threat of even greater insecurity and the likelihood of a future cut short. Some narrators depict the journey from place of origin towards a potential host state as a matter of compelled forward movement with the void both behind and before them; the longer they go on, the more impossible it is to return and in front of them, uncertainty and danger only increases.

Contingency and chance are highlighted as narrative turning points which underline precarity as a defining feature of 'the journey': for instance, Muna tells of finding a border closed which had been open to her sister only weeks before while Tariq's fake passport gets him onto a plane only on the third time, despite no change in circumstances (February 2020, September 2019). And where there is precarity, there is the threat of failure and a loss of futurity (Puar, 2017, p. 15). Beginning with the impetus for the journey, or the impossibility of return, some narrators produce Syria as an empty space, lost to the void. Other narratives introduce the trope of the void as spaces in which refugees are contained or dumped. In an example of the former trope, many interviewees produced two distinct Syrias in their narrative; Syria-past and Syria-present with the conditions of contemporary Syria obliterating any imagining of a Syria-future.

Zaynab makes such distinctions very clear; reality and memory are figured as two separate realms. The 'mess', which precludes a vision for Zaynab of a country which she can love, is understood to subsume Syria as space and as nation:

That country [I] love inside doesn't exist anymore, in the reality. [pause] Even when [I] miss [my] country, [I don't] miss this country now because that country

now is a mess. Now, it's not [my] country. [I] miss the one in [my] memory, in the past. (January 2019)

Zaynab centres this understanding of Syria as futureless on the absence of civilians, subjects other than ISIS, Assad or other fighters: 'the village is completely empty of the population and the nearest ten towns and the nearest city; empty too' (May 2019). She is left, then, with a longing towards something which no longer exists, citing existing discourses on exile which theorise the effect of such a truncated relationship with time, space and identity on subjectivity (Malkki, 1995; Allan, 2013; Chatty, 2013; Ayoub, 2017). Furthermore, Zaynab, speaking of her village, distinguishes the 'population' of Syria from ISIS or other military groups when describing a place empty of 'the people' who should be living in their houses. Military actors, in their exclusion from 'the population' and their dehumanising and 'emptying' effect on their surroundings through illegitimate violence, are produced as possessing neither personhood nor humanity.

Safiya\* links violence, specifically state repression, to the head of state and produces Arab nation-states in general as places associated with failed and despotic rule: '[I] want to go there and kill [...] all Arab presidents, not just Assad' (May 2019). In contrast, some narrators use their stories to draw attention to territorialised danger which does not neatly map onto the binary geographies produced by dominant national and international discourses on displacement. Tariq conveys surprise when describing how he lived in Holland with 'sixteen people in the house [...] just to [be able to] pay [the rent] and it was a bad area [...] there is someone dealing drugs right in front of me' (September 2019). Criminality, drug use, overcrowding and unaffordable housing are produced as out of place in a Western European country.

These tropes might destabilise expectations of a refugee narrative; a journey meant to move from danger to safety, from regression to civilization, instead finds inequality and undesirable actors (such as drug-dealers). This is the narrative structure that seems familiar in Jamila's story. Straightforwardly tying criminality and an increased vulnerability for refugees to space, she tells her listeners that 'we relaxed when we come here [to the U.K.] because in Egypt there was theft, kidnapping' (August 2019). Khawla, even in 2011, considers futurity for Syria as 'terrifying and obscure' (2013, p. 205). In her language, the nation itself possesses

the capacity for movement but risks following the wrong path: ‘Where is the country heading?’ (2013, p. 205). Without a clear destination, this entity as nation project, as occupied space, as international actor, as cohesive collective identity becomes one with the void that it heads towards.

Kassem, however, seems to understand this depiction of Syria as a pathologisation of the space and the people by American or European observers who are all too quick to surrender Syria to emptiness. In his narrative, these observers, with whom he discusses his intention to return to Syria, also pathologise him for this very desire:

When I told people that I wanted to go back to Syria, they said I was crazy. Why, they asked, would I want to return to a war zone that millions had fled? [...] They told me I had post-traumatic stress disorder and advised me to see a psychiatrist. They told me I had a bright future ahead of me in which I would publish a book and attend university. (Eid, 2018, p. 189)

These speakers seem to represent the widespread understanding foundational to many discourses around displacement in general and the specific scenario of the Syrian civil war that fleeing conflict is a one-way movement.

Kassem suggests that by contrasting a ‘bright future’ and the ‘war-zone’, these speakers align with discourses on which spaces can offer fully realised humanity that ultimately surrender certain racialised spaces and their associated nation-states to the void. His framing of their interventions, in his repetition of ‘they told me’, suggests his disagreement and his resentment of the reductive equivocation both of futurity with literary and academic success and of desire to travel to the space of Syria, in the present not the past, with a mental health disorder. His ultimate attempt to return to his first home later in the narrative confirms the foreshadowing of his discontent with the future offered to him in the U.S. and his wider discomfort with dominant geographical imaginaries defining which spaces are meaningful and secure and which are not.

For stories focused on moments of rupture early in period in which significant Syrian refugee movement began, the citation of ‘home’ deploys recognisable gendered tropes for radical ends such as opposition to the Assad regime. Recognising her own insecurity at the protests in 2011, Khawla decides to:

[...] go home. Home is the sanctuary of the upright citizen. Home is the woman’s kingdom. That’s what they used to say. Now it’s the kingdom of everyone who has no stake in the game being played out by the powerful (2013, p. 196)

Khawla refers to traditional knowledge about gendered divisions of space but suggests sudden social change brought on by the protests. This particular trope of gendered spaces frames the division as co-existence of two kingdoms (public and private) rather than a hierarchy of spaces. If the domestic space is now ‘the kingdom of everyone’, this should be understood as a retreat, a reference to the ways in which repressive government causes citizenship to rest precariously on norms of non-interference in public life and deference to the political status quo.

A subdued and thus feminised Syrian society, in Khawla’s language, is individualised by the mapping of safety and danger in a binary across home and public spaces. This is identified as a structural mechanism for maintaining the Assad regime and thwarting the collective coordination of demonstrations and revolution:

Are we to be [...] fragmented, divided and marginalized, like chess pieces unable to leave their square without the player’s helping hand? I had no idea how cut off in my square I was until these last few terrible days. [...] Standing at the limits of my chess-square I stopped and returned to the centre. (2013, p. 196)

The chessboard metaphor reappears in other narratives. In Wendy Pearlman’s collection of anonymised stories from Syrian refugees, one narrator, Kareem\* observes that ‘Syria [...] is just a chessboard for great powers to settle their accounts.’ (2018, p. 246). It is a critique of a

status quo of geopolitics (which realist IR would sustain through reification) but both Kareem and Khawla analyse this state of affairs not as inevitable but, rather, as a product of deliberate manipulation.

On a state-level, Khawla reports that the Syrian authorities ‘have sought to divide Syria into its constituent parts leaving it as chequered as a chessboard [...] phone lines, water and electricity have all been cut off from the besieged areas [in order to] turn the country into an archipelago of disconnected islands, to prevent Syrians from sympathizing with one another’ (2013, p. 201). Moving up the scale, Adam\* narrates the civil war while reluctantly acknowledging nation-states as the only meaningful actors: ‘the conflict doesn’t belong to us anymore [...] Syria has become an arena for other countries to settle scores. Bashar is a puppet in Russia’s hands and we are puppets in the other side’s hands [...] who have taken over the game now’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 284).

The tropes of chess pieces and puppets are commonplace in media and policy discourses, reflecting a realpolitik theory of international relations (Kopper, 2017). For these narrators to develop these tropes as devices for critique suggests an acknowledgement that a collaborative movement with egalitarian ideals in relation to gender, class and ethnicity has been defeated by the more entrenched power of the ‘big players’ of the chess game, the ‘puppet masters’. But this is not a reluctant admission of the ‘real rules of the game’ along the lines of masculinist realist theories. Instead, this is an indictment of the international community allowing a space that protesters had hoped to claim for Syrians in collectivity to become stripped of any meaning in relation to identity, now merely a neutral playing field for external actors.

Samar’s prognosis for the Assad regime similarly produces the nation and the space of the territory as at risk of being consumed by death, or even stubborn self-destruction, and the loss of meaning: ‘they’re going to fight till their last breath, even if they have to turn Syria into one big grave, for them and for the people’ (Yazbek, 2012, p. 109). Another way in which the void features heavily as a way to frame certain spaces delineated along the racialised logics of border regimes, is through narrators’ treatment of the barren and empty spaces in which they have been abandoned or contained because of their categorisation as refugees.

For instance, Pearlman's interviewee Abdel-Aziz\* gives testimony on his and others abandonment by the Jordanian state (or 'they') in a camp strategically located in Zaatari, 'a dead area' (Pearlman, 2018, p. 220). He assigns decisive agency to government actors in Jordan in the causal logics of his narrative:

They found a place in the desert where not even a tree or an animal can live, and they put the Syrian people there. The other day we saw a butterfly in the camp. Everyone got so excited, we were all shouting at each other to come and look at it. It must have really lost its way if it wound up here. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 220)

This framing of the processes through which the location of refugee camps is decided aligns with Puar's theoretical understanding of how certain subjects are marked out as available for debilitation and then these debilitating conditions maintained in order to secure futurity for others.

In her example of the conditions in which Palestinians are living due to Israeli warfare and other strategies such as limiting access to food and healthcare, she suggests that the state's efforts to not directly end life is not 'a humanitarian sparing of death [...but] a biopolitical usage and articulation of the right to maim' (2017, p. 108). The ways in which containing environments wreak damage upon a subject, including the psychological debilitation caused by isolation and neglect, should be appreciated in order to expand on literature which has already established how the European refugee regime maintains its 'security' through the deliberate endangerment of lives of refugees at sea, on land and in camps (Gunaratnam, 2013; Pickering and Cochrane, 2013; Rygiel, 2016; Pickering and Powell, 2017).

Tariq, in his story about his cousin's trial and imprisonment in Greece, ends on a point of surrender: he has had to keep moving towards some promise of futurity while his cousin, falsely accused of smuggling, is held in space and time at the wrong point in the journey. In Abdel-Aziz's story, he implicitly accuses the Jordanian state of securing the lives and the futures of native citizens *through* the assignation of refugees to a space without the capacity

to support life. The butterfly is included in Abdel-Aziz's narrative as an aberration in its misplaced vibrancy. It is suggested that the Syrian refugees too have lost their way; full colourful life, not necessarily humanity, but simply a life-force alongside trees and animals, might be achievable but is a matter of moving to a space with the capacity to support life rather than to facilitate slow death (Berlant, 2007, 2011).

While many of the narratives analysed can be said to produce 'the refugee journey' as inherently risky and a matter of the unknown, I do not mean to represent that as a universal feature of the narrators' production of this movement from Syria onwards. Nabil\*, in Pearlman's volume, instead focuses on the wealth of information available to would-be travellers, emphasising the networks built over time that allow for routes to be planned well in advance: 'after two or three years of people making these journeys, there's no pieces of information you can't find' (2018, p. 227). But even when well-equipped with information, these storytellers emphasise how each journey is unique, subject to the ever-shifting policies enacted by the EU and individual nation-states. Furthermore, possessing access to these banks of information is an attribute shaped by socio-economic, gendered and (dis)abled identities.

Imad\*, depicting herself as almost cationic when leaving Syria after numerous imprisonments, moves through her own narrative without a sense of destination or intent: 'I didn't even know where I was going until halfway through the journey. I simply moved along with the crowd.' (Pearlman, 2018, p. 249). Pearlman interviews Imad in Berlin, where she seems to still look ahead towards a void: 'I don't have dreams or plans for the future, I hardly think an hour ahead' (2018, p. 249). Recognising trauma as both a slippery concept at work in discourses on displacement and a material debilitation of the kind Puar describes, means reading Imad's narrative for the ways in which she carries the injuries she has received even when she is no longer contained in the spaces of the prison or the path.

For Samar, her brief visits to prison in Damascus constitute the close encounter with a vacuum in space and time which eventually, through repeated exposure as a kind of psychological torture by the security services, drive her to flee Syria. Worse than threats

made against her life, in person and over the phone, this arbitrary submersion in a space experienced as unreal and borderless pushes her into the further uncertainty of starting a new life abroad:

I almost felt it wasn't a real place, just some kind of void inside my head that was sick from too much writing [...] I looked behind me but couldn't see anything. In front of me...pitch black. A corridor with no end and no beginning, suspended in the void.' (Yazbek, 2012, p. 86)

Putting the texts in dialogue, it appears that movement into the void is imagery particularly common to narratives on the need to leave a home, or Syria in general, not towards a definite destination but simply because existence in one's current location is impossible. This might be due to the material destruction of a dwelling or simply the certainty that staying will result in indefinite imprisonment at the very least. Khawla, who eventually travelled to Lebanon, deploys a modality which fits within the 'survivor-witness-messenger' genre in her diary extracts by connecting her flight to a danger felt by a certain cohort of Syrian activists and journalists who make claims on the right to free speech and enquiry: 'I was forced to leave my house in fear of being arrested [...] many others have also left their homes, especially activists and those who have appeared on Arab and foreign satellite channels to talk about the events in Syria.' (2013, p. 205).

For those without the luxury of time to plan their routes because the existential threat is too pressing, movement from home and from Syria will constitute a leap into the unknown more so than for those considering flight over a relatively long period of time. Furthermore, in Tariq's narrative, some subjects made a much starker decision to move into emptiness rather than suffer further violence in the space of the prison:

When [I] was going to the accommodation and [...] protestors and the police as usual came, and [they] put [people] in prison, beating some. And some people because they were scared, they throw themselves from the high buildings.  
(September 2019)

Death might be understood as the ultimate expression of the void; its presence blots out the future for the travelling refugee as the path in these narratives only offers increasing uncertainty and danger in either direction. Thus, the void, in these narratives, is not only an understanding of the unknown but of the presence and reminders of death infused throughout the journey. Pearlman's interviewee, Wael\*, describes hiding in a smuggler's truck to get from Turkey to Greece: 'there were four of us and we all lay flat in a narrow compartment like a coffin' (2018, p. 253). The experience and the possible end point are laid against each other in the narrative as Wael demonstrates to his listener and future readers that the suffering of the enclosed space is most unbearable in its mimicry of the death from which escape will be very fortunate.

Hakem\* depicts a discursive immersion in the death of Syrian and other refugees along the journey as a further facet of the suffocation of waiting for one's chance to travel or receive residency rights in Turkey:

The next day we wake up and wait again. Every day we hear the same news of death. The only difference is the numbers who die. If I'd known this was life here, I would have stayed in Syria and handed myself over to ISIS. It's better to die once than die slowly every day. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 252)

The 'slow death' produced by waiting and by Turkey's refusal to offer futurity to refugees intermingles with the news of other refugees' deaths, all to underline that being categorised within a 'not fully realised' humanity means choosing between different versions of empty and dangerous spaces which all threaten death and/or debilitation (Berlant, 2007, 2011). In *The Right to Maim*, Puar uses the terms 'inhuman', 'nonhuman' alongside the commonly used 'dehumanised' but to apply here what she refers to as 'not let die' policies of debilitation, I use 'not fully realised humanity' to gesture at the entrapment of ambiguous categorisation which enables dehumanising conditions while simultaneously producing a demand to prove the refugee subjects' right to be admitted into the category of humanity (Puar, 2017, pp. 141, 150).

Narratives such as these emphasise the low odds of surviving and thus the relief and gratitude felt when arriving in Europe. In addition, the intertextual relation between the narrators' stories and these dominant political discourses is made clear in the reported speech of the smugglers who take Maher\* across the Mediterranean Sea. The last smuggler onboard parrots discourses which figure the ideal refugee as resilient and self-sufficient rather than a traumatised burden:

Our boat had about 180 people aboard. The lower deck was all people from Africa and the top deck all Syrians. They told us that we should head toward a star in the sky. The Libyan smuggler left and a young Tunisian took charge of the boat. Then the Tunisian left, too. He told us, "You guys need to take care of yourselves." (Pearlman, 2018, p. 224)

Maher conveys the implicit irony of actors who make profit from the illegal and dangerous transportation of refugees choosing to frame these same subjects as inappropriately dependent and in need of care. He also gestures to the further hierarchies within the refugee category: similarly to Nujeen, he identifies the subjects on the top deck as sharing his nationality, perhaps aiming to emphasise the comparative number of Syrian refugees among the globally displaced, but the lower deck refugees are homogenised Africans.

Only the smugglers are distinguished as Libyan and Tunisian, nationalities included in the MENA region. It is a reminder that even if displacement as a phenomenon continuously maintained by border regimes can be seen to produce a racialised category of 'not fully realised' humanity, there are further distinctions made between who might be able to more successfully deploy the types of testimony on suffering which offer an opportunity to reach a greater realisation of humanity. For the African refugees depicted here, the specifics of their journey and the impetus of their flight has not been narrativized to the extent that the Syrian civil war and subsequent Syrian displacement has been.

There are colonial and racialised logics at work in discourses both around Syria and the refugee-producing states in Africa, but they are distinct historically and in their contemporary

manifestations (Bolliger, 2011; Branch, 2012; Bohrer, 2017; Chatty, 2017a; de Genova, 2017; Holohan, 2019). If these narrators aim to deliver a certain message by depicting Syria as transformed into a void through dehumanising violence, the comparative lack of knowledge about or citation of narratives on the causes and experiences of displacement from some African states suggests that the absence of story-telling is another form of void which restricts subjects' claims on fully realised humanity.

But these Syrian refugee narrators do make implicit claims for some elements of a universal refugee experience along the journey (towards Europe), nationality aside: the continuous thread is the imagery of being unable to cease momentum once the movement has started. The very act of leaving one's home is understood as a one-way movement into the refugee category and condition; existing in this new 'not fully realised' category of humanity produces particular insecurity at the intersection of space and identity and demands movement until either obstacle or destination is discovered.

Nur\*, in Pearlman's volume, summarises this condition of being propelled forward by pursuant violence when she describes her and her family's journey through Europe:

'Getting on [the dinghy] was like throwing yourself into a deep, dark hole. My husband looked at me and said, "Should we go back?" I responded, "To where?" In Greece, we started walking [...] Everyone along the way tried to make profits at our expense. My feet bled and all I wanted to do was sleep. Every step we took, we found ourselves longing for the one we'd just taken. When we slept on the street, we'd say, "How beautiful the dinghy was." [...] But once we started, we couldn't go back. It's as if we were walking on a thread that kept getting cut behind us as we moved forward. Like in the cartoons, when characters cross a bridge that crumbles beneath them as they run. (Pearlman, 2018, pp. 228–9)

This is a powerful and original intervention on the experience of time and space while moving through a 'refugee path'. It produces the concept of a void as a way to understand a space into which a subject moves purposefully but cautiously, aware that increasing violence will be endured as the refugee category they must inhabit continues to interact with new spaces and insecurities.

The reference to cartoons and the ‘disappearance’ of space behind them produces the experience of a ‘refugee path’ as a place outside the space and time of ‘real life’. If the ‘survivor-witness’ in Dean’s terms is a figure understood to hold sacred knowledge of a place beyond normal human experience via unimaginable suffering, this passage illustrates the same discursive phenomenon with the detachment from space as understood by a ‘natural’, static citizen being the experience ‘unimaginable’ to the presumed normative listener or reader. And in the effort made to deliver this message, to communicate an experience at the intersection of identity, space and security produced as always exceptional, often beyond imagination, the value of communicating to the subject presumed to be normative (Western, citizen, static, white) is reified.

Just as Kassem’s admonishment of the U.K., the U.S. and France revealed his prior understanding of Western states as an international conscience and exemplar of global moral codes, the efforts made by Nur\*, and Pearlman in her research, editing and publication, to deliver the message on the experience of displacement demonstrates the presence in the text and its context of a presumed reader (likely white, liberal, Western or European and a legal citizen) who understands themselves as belonging to a group tasked with the rescue and moral regulation of racialised populations in other spaces. In comparison, the refugee subject, relegated to alternative spaces and truncated categories of humanity, is only made a further object of fascination by their journey through spaces understood as voids. Nujeen, in Germany, reflects on being aware of how she is perceived as not only out of place in the logics of nationality but also in the logics of which experiences shape the normative human: ‘I wanted to go into space and find an alien, but here sometimes I feel like one.’ (2017, p. 267).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the narrators cite humanity in their stories about exceptional violence in order to critique the geographical distribution of humanitarian authority to intervene as well as the status of ‘not-fully-realised’ humanity held by the refugee (Bellamy and McDonald, 2002; Berlant, 2011; Braidotti, 2013; Weheliye, 2014; Dean, 2017; Puar, 2017, pp. 109, 141, 150; Ramsay, 2018). But, going further, it has also suggested that by

questioning concepts presumed absolute in international humanitarian discourses such as the value of life and humanity for certain subjects, the narrators make claims on a status as human which only more forcefully demonstrates how they have already been produced as a *type* of humanity for whom debilitation and durational death can be tolerated to secure the futurity of ‘fully realised’ humanity. In making this argument, I apply Puar’s notion, relying on Berlant’s ‘slow death’, of ‘will not let die’ (Berlant, 2007; Puar, 2017, p. 139) to build our understanding of what kind of status a subject can claim or be produced as when continuing to exist despite being held in place or pushed on in unliveable conditions.

The ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role is a crucial element of this argument as these narratives are overwhelming structured around delivering the message that Syrian refugees have been failed by ‘humanity’ through their spatial and temporal abandonment. The narrators’ troubled movements through space and time are both a factor in why actors such as ‘destination-states’ and their agents produce them as a population available for debilitating violence *and* a mechanism by which this regulation to a ‘not-fully-realised’ humanity with a curtailed futurity is achieved. I have shown how the narrators have had to navigate the intertextual links between their stories and existing narratives mapping safety and danger along racialised geographies and ultimately mapping time-past onto certain spaces in line with colonial logics.

This is present, for example, in Nujeen’s frustrated dismissal of former Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s aspirations for conquest across the Middle East and Europe:

I mean there hasn’t been a caliphate for a thousand years. Move on, Baghdadi!  
And if you are going to take us back in time, ditch the Rolex watch!  
(Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, pp. 102–3)

It is not only al-Baghdadi’s geographical imaginary (not to mention his hypocritical penchant for luxury timepieces) which Nujeen understands as anachronistic and of the past; implicitly the ethical assessment of his version of Islamic society and values cannot be separated from linear narratives of time, progress and the racialised and gendered

civilization-barbarism binary which Nujeen's narrative is inevitably intertextually immersed in. It is rarer that a narrative, such as Kassem's, is explicitly critical of the abandonment of Syria to the void of dehumanising violence and 'regressive' gendered, ethnic and sectarian social relations.

Nevertheless, the implication of these citations of 'humanity' in these narratives, building on Puar's theories of debility and futurity, is a critique of humanity as pre-existing, self-evident and in solidarity with itself. Most originally, however, these narrators demonstrate how space and time are at play in the efforts taken to demarcate, and thus bring into being, certain subjects as 'not-fully-realised humans' through the paradox of maintaining them as populations available for debilitation and death (abandoned in the prison, contained on the path or coerced into the void) while still verbally claiming humanity on their behalf. Taking Puar forward into this specific context, in conversation with the narrators' treatments of 'humanity', I argue that the 'survivor-witness-messenger' is cited and, sometimes, even deployed as a genre in these texts to delivery messages which demonstrate that once it becomes necessary to make a claim on humanity or lament the failure to value it, these refugee subjects have already been produced as not-fully-realised humans.

Furthermore, a fully realised humanity becomes theorised as a spatialised material condition, sought through movement towards spaces associated with the 'discovery' and veneration of humanity in line with deep-rooted Eurocentric Enlightenment narratives even as that movement threatens the subject's status as human. But the moments of most radical challenge to this overarching narrative about where valued humanity lies comes from the most mundane of narratorial tones: even as other narrators depict a void in place of the territory of Syria, Hevi\* explains that she wants to 'go back to Syria because [she] think[s] [she] will have a better life there' (September 2019).

These questions of how life, whether understood as a passage of time to be endured or as an illusively defined constitutive piece of global humanity degraded by international moral apathy, can be valued are central philosophical and political through-lines in these narrators' stories. The trajectory of many narratives which come to lose faith in any tangible human

solidarity is through the prison, along the refugee path and finally to a void of despair in which hope for a future for Syria as state and as peoples is irretrievably lost along with hope for a humanity understood as whole and absolute, rather than fragmented and hierarchised. The next chapter will continue with an analysis of such a gendered and racialised relation between space, violence and meaning-making in turning to examples of use of metaphorical violence towards feminised representations of the state (of Syria) in narratives.

### Chapter Four

“I’m trying to be frank with you and tell you the truth”:

Voice, gendered violence and analytical agency

Alas, poor country!  
 Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot  
 Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where  
 nothing,  
 But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile

*Macbeth, IV.III.188-192*

The female embodiment of the nation is almost unremarkable in her ubiquity. Studies specifically focused on gendered representations of these ‘imagined communities’ in text and image have been far from numerous (Anderson, 2006). Mitra and König’s (2013) comparative work still constitutes the most in-depth research on this form of cultural production, with a strong focus on the trope’s use in identity-formation and -consolidation. Their case studies, the pluralistic and contested figures of Marianne (France) and Bharat Mata (India) are among the most commonly examined examples of this form of cultural production which also includes Britannia and, to an extent, both Lady Justice and the Statue of Liberty in the U.S. (Heseltine, 1999; Yeatman, 2013; Nielson, 2016; Haq, 2018).

This chapter does not aim to follow this strand of research by looking for a Syrian equivalent to these gendered iconisations, which have been linked to practices of state- and national-identity building (Mitra and König, 2013, p. 370). Rather, I focus on the ways in which these narratives from Syrian refugees draw upon the proliferation of such iconisations in international political discourses to use gendered imagery centred on a female body as representative of the Syrian population at large under the oppression of regime violence. Within such a metaphor, the representation of a domestic violence victim, and of the Syrian nation, as a woman or a feminised child is produced as a natural association. Furthermore, the use of extended metaphor creates distance between the narrator and immediate material experiences of both gendered violence in domestic settings and the various violences constituting the Assads' repressive rule in Syria.

During analysis of the memoir texts, the recurrence of this metaphor, in various guises, across numerous texts called for further examination. The intersection of gendered and racialised discourses around violence in certain global spaces through narrative strategies dependent on symbolic and abstracted female bodies provides a crucial point of intervention for a feminist and postcolonial study concerned with narrators carrying out 'refugee storytelling'. This chapter strives to provide possible answers to the question of how narratives strategies such as this metaphor are produced, and simultaneously constitute, certain areas of international relations concerning the mapping of gendered violence onto specific spaces and subjects. Thus, consideration of feminised anthropomorphising of states like Mitra and König's is put into conversation with the extensive scholarly engagement with the voice and agency of subjects marginalised in colonial systems of gender and race, most famously and pithily encapsulated by Spivak (1988; Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Vintges, 2012; Sigona, 2014; Hobson and Sajed, 2017)

Investigating how these metaphors produce distinctions between the state and a collective, identifiable Syrian 'people' through the type of gendered metaphorical iconisation meant to 'enliven an abstract idea and transform the nation into an intensely human place, a home- and motherland' contributes to our understanding of how Syrian refugees, international institutions and the Syrian state are produced as political actors in relation to each other (Mitra and König, 2013, p. 370). Furthermore, inclusion of other narrators' engagement with

these texts (via raising the metaphor for discussion in interviews) pluralises the analysis of such representational work around collective (national) identity and aims for a collaborative building of knowledge about the role of certain narratives (and their strategies) in the discursive landscape navigated by Syrian refugees. In this, I refer to interviewees' possible vigilance for a Western preoccupation with Syria, and the Middle East, as a space in which cultural or religious gendered violence exclusively occurs.

In using the female body as metaphor, or allegory for 'the people' of Syria, some narrators cite established discourses which anthropomorphise an imagined nation, separate from the state or government actors such as Assad or the Syrian military, and do so in order to rely on readers' familiarity with both such a trope and the phenomenon of domestic violence. Such gendered relations of dependency and victimhood have also been identified in many discourses which produce the relations between agents and objects of humanitarianism (such as 'the international community' and Syria or other spaces of armed conflict) as a matter of paternal care (Malkki, 1996, 2015; Soguk, 1996; Bellamy, 2015; Palladino and Woolley, 2019). This chapter opens with a brief description of how anthropomorphised representations of nation-states as female subjects or bodies might be found in the narratives and then focuses on the recurrence of a domestic violence metaphor in narratives, deployed in order to describe the repression of the Syrian population by the Assad regime.

Firstly, the use of the metaphor is evidenced and these analysed for possible interpretations of how narrators are citing discourses on gendered violence enacted individually and in a systemic fashion. Then, these metaphors are brought into dialogue with the stories of gendered violence delivered as testimony in a 'survivor-witness-messenger' mode to demonstrate the tension between this allegorical violence and the material experiences of women in Assad's Syria. Finally, this chapter returns to Chapter One's identification of 'voice' as a major site of contestation in feminist and gender studies in general, but also in much of the multidisciplinary research on refugees and displacement.

This closing section uses interviewees' engagement with examples of these domestic violence metaphors to consider how Syrian refugee narrators, especially women, can be positioned in reductive roles within racialised discourses on gender, space, culture and

violence. Through readings of Syrian refugee interviewees' analysis, from a global perspective, on questions of gendered violence and who is expected to deliver narrative on it in a 'survivor-witness-messenger' mode, the chapter makes an argument for researchers tolerating uncertainty and open interpretations which appreciate marginalised participants' own interpretive capacity and analytical labour.

I argue that interviewee narrators navigate intertextuality in their own stories and go on to debate and analyse phenomena such as intra-familial and intra-community gendered violence with only context-dependent reference to a 'survivor-witness-messenger' role. Additionally, I argue that while producing stories linked to precarious discursive landscapes on gendered violence and racialised interactions between religious or cultural identity and space, including such metaphors as these, Syrian refugee narrators' contributions to analysis of social and political relations of power, between and within communities, should not be understood reductively as either purely resistance or self-orientalising (Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2002, 2002; Razack, 2004; El-Tayeb, 2012; Vintges, 2012; Chapman, 2016; Liu, 2017).

The interviewees' responses to questions about this recurring metaphor allow for a move into a discursive space for analysis and theorising on gendered violence and gendered power relation which facilitates the understanding of numerous facets of experience as Syrian refugee woman. This shift, incidentally, involves specific utilisation of roles existing within the 'survivor-witness-messenger' genre for communicating knowledge on these questions through lived experience. Ultimately, I argue that the analysis and subsequent narrative work of the interviewees highlight a series of false distinctions implied in the metaphor but also rampant in the wider discourses it draws on (Puar and Rai, 2002; Razack, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Weber, 2016).

These unfounded oppositions include discursive divisions made between state and familial perpetrators of gendered violence, the reification of both the national government and 'the people' as unified actors experiencing this violence in the same way as an individual, the hyper-focus on racialised Arab and/or Muslim men as perpetrators of gendered violence and the presumption that the violence of the state against civilians is not shaped by gender in

ways other than the discursive production of ‘the people’ as a feminised victim betrayed by its patriarchal protector (Bassel, 2012; El-Tayeb, 2012, 2013; Mitra and König, 2013). The observation of these false distinctions, made by Syrian refugee narrators in interviews, is built on to argue that that the narratives produced in response to questions about the metaphor utilise this, often reductive, constructed figure of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ to instead deliver messages about the intersectionality of gendered violence both in the context of intra-familial or intra-community relations and in racialised anti-immigrant discourses and practice in the U.K. and ‘the West’. I suggest that narrators might deploy the tropes of this figure to different ends.

In these interviews, some narrators affirm the mapping of a gendered violence peculiar to Arab or Muslim culture and religion onto Middle Eastern spaces or persons. In other narratives, such as the memoirs, I suggest this same mode is utilised to displace associations of regressive patriarchy or misogyny onto other groups (for example, Alia attributes many structural gender inequalities to Saudi cultural influence in Syria (Malek, 2018, p. 70)). Most importantly, many Syrian refugee women who debate and tell stories in response to these questions about the domestic violence metaphor highlight the modes of knowledge by which both women, across seemingly discrete identity groups, understand ‘types of men’ and types of gendered vulnerability, and non-white subjects understand types of racist ‘native’ actors and their own subsequent vulnerability as racialised subjects discursively produced as regressive and submissive (Gandsman, 2013; Kynsilehto and Puumala, 2015; Boulila and Carri, 2017b).

In discussing previous story-telling experiences as well as the dynamics of the current interview, these narrators reflect on negotiating these encounters to establish the parameters for discussion and debate on the structures producing gendered violence and the appropriateness of comparisons such as the recurring extended metaphor focused on here. Following on from the previous chapter which considered narrators’ pre-emption of expectations to narrativize experiences of sexual violence or to give testimony on acts of Islamic terrorism or extremism, I argue here that some interviewees’ stories on the topic of domestic violence, in response to the metaphor discussion, can bear the weight of simultaneous interpretations about narrative permissibility and narrator-audience relations.

By remaining open to multiplicity and uncertainty, this chapter's readings of interviewee discussion and storytelling in relation to the domestic violence metaphor make an argument for processes of intertextual narrativization of Syrian refugee subjectivities which are contextual, complicated and coexistent.

### **Syrian state oppression figured as domestic violence**

The anthropomorphising imagery in international and domestic political discourses most commonly produces the quality of feminised and infantilised helplessness as simultaneously a characteristic of civilizational regression or stagnation (Lugones, 2016). The violent conflicts which provoke the image of a nation-state under masculine attack are understood as a result of the 'nature' of the societies in non-Western spaces (Hyndman and Giles, 2004; Lischer, 2014). In these stories, some narrators risk reaffirming such understandings by citing these existing discourses in their use of anthropomorphised female iconisations of Syria while others, such as Nujeen, implicitly suggest alternative imagery.

With no official national iconised figure comparable to Marianne and her ilk, Nujeen's suggestion of Zenobia deviates from the abstraction of those figures by settling on a historical figure. Her role as teacher to Western readers, as discussed in Chapter Two, is called for again as she ponders Syria's need for 'a mighty queen' or, of all historical families to choose from, 'a Romanov' to resolve its conflicts:

Oh we might need a mighty queen or a Romanov to deal with all the problems in Syria. You might not know, but many years ago we did have a powerful queen in Syria: she is on our 500-pound banknotes. Her name was Zenobia and she was a descendant of Cleopatra [...] She was so audacious she took on the might of Rome, the world's greatest empire, and conquered Egypt and much of what is today Turkey. A woman doing that. Daesh hate her! (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, pp. 116–7)

Any assignation of radical implications to a nomination of Zenobia as a national icon should be cautious. She is positioned, in the text, in cultural and political opposition to the group

already understood as villainously misogynist in the Western global imaginary while pre-civil war life in Syria saw her embraced by institutions through her inclusion on banknotes (Zisser, 2006; Burns, 2017; Andrade, 2018).

Furthermore, connecting Zenobia to a classical figure such as Cleopatra and presenting her as a military ruler equal to the Roman Empire does more to appeal for Syria's historical and contemporary integration into the sphere of historical prestige reserved largely for Europeans than it does to suggest new imaginaries of cultural productions to represent and produce collective identity. Such a suspicion is only reinforced by Nujeen's later observation, framed as a reaction to her first viewing of Angela Merkel in a press conference calling for EU acceptance of refugees: 'I like that woman. Maybe she will be our Queen Zenobia' (2017, p. 137).

Marwan also references Zenobia and heavily links the symbolism of this historic figure to the equal representative power of spaces associated with her such as 'Palmyra, the heart of [her] Syrian Kingdom [...] the Pearl of the Desert'. He uses a common foreshadowing strategy of contrasting one space across two points in time to depict the civil war as a downfall of Zenobia after 'two millennia'. He does not delight in the idea of a European replacement for the Queen but instead contrasts an anecdote about his friend working on a film-set in Palmyra with the tragic scene of a once proud Syria reduced to 'a war-torn scrap of land from which its children' instead of being equal to its greatest generals 'march in defeat and humiliation to beg at the gates of Rome', in a direct reference to the movement of refugees towards Europe (2018, p. 34).

Just as a woman's body is made equivalent to the land in iconisations like Marianne and Bharat Mata, the symbolism is made circular by Marwan's description of the destruction of Palmyra that is to come. In the desecration of ancient buildings which symbolised the height of Syrian pride on the international stage, Marwan sees a 'Zenobia [...] not surrendered to the mighty Caesar, but [...] killed [...] exiled' by traitors within Syria itself (2018, p. 34). The language Marwan uses to equivocate the violence against the city and its monuments with violence against Zenobia herself has echoes of the metaphors used to represent national

humiliation as violation of the feminine iconised figure: ‘Her vanity would be broken twice. Her capital would be vandalized again, and her god’s temples would be wrecked for the pleasure of another’ (2018, p. 34).

A feminised, victimised personification of a nation-state, or alternatively its ‘people’, undeniably does certain citational and discursive work, intertextually contributing to gendered understandings of the relations between a sovereign state and its citizens. The contrast between ‘empowering’ or victorious female anthropomorphised figures and the passive, often sexually humiliated iconised women as representations of nation-states is a site for the intersection of gendered, racialised and colonial logics conflating bodies, territory and sovereignty (Hansen, 2000; Young, 2003; Kirby, 2013).

But some narrators deploy language to much more explicitly produce an anthropomorphised Syria through a matrix of existing discourses of gender, sovereign power and collective identity. This trope is cited so as to build an allegory or a metaphor into the narratives which compares the repression of Syrians by the Assad regime with domestic violence which is enacted against women and children by a patriarchal family member. While connecting these relations of violence can be seen to make an argument for an explanatory through-line of masculine sovereign power, the use of this extended metaphor also creates tension within and between the narratives as they relate intertextually to existing discourses on gender, race, religion and violence in different global spaces.

Khawla Dunia’s narrative includes the most extensive deployment of the domestic violence metaphor, with dialogue provided by the imagined abusive father and husband addressed to his family as well as ‘neighbour’ figures, who suggest the ‘watching’ international community which cannot shame the Assad regime into ceasing its campaign of terror. She presents this extended metaphor as the narrative work of Syrians themselves, implying that she is summarising a comparison collectively produced by her associates and interviewees:

The authorities' stubbornness, their lack of desire to enter into dialogue or make concessions, has prompted Syrians to come up with their own hilarious interpretations of events. The regime's attitude towards foreign intervention is like that of a man who beats his family. He flogs his kids while his eyes shoot sparks at disapproving neighbours. Furious, he screams: "Feeling their pain are you? Your hearts bleeding for them? Why? It's because they're your little agents, isn't it? You've left your prayers to come goggle at me and my family. Well I'm free to do as I like: I hope they die and there's nothing you can do about it! Get out of here!"

Then he turns to the mother who is weeping and pleading with someone to come and help. "Asking strangers to get involved, you traitor?" he roars. "I'll burn them alive and break your heart, and when they're done I'll burn you, too! Traitors! Dogs!" (Dunia, 2013, pp. 203–4)

The overlap between the absolute logics of sovereign power and that of the patriarch's freedom to 'do as I like' is made very clear in this part of Khawla's story. It is possible that she aims to critique the masculinist logics of the relations between government and governed, not just in Syria but as an international system of power (Hooper, 2012). The allegorical roles of father, mother, children and neighbours are easily filled by the Assad regime, Syrian civilians, Syrian protestors or opposition and global 'humanitarian-witnesses' respectively. In this example, however, rather than a suggested indictment of the failure of other states or international bodies to intervene in Syria against the Assad regime, this extended metaphor produces these actors as 'disapproving' but ultimately helpless in the face of the father's undeniable authority over his family.

The imagined encounter is understood as a recognisable abuse of patriarchal relations common to many societies and spaces; the use of this trope is perhaps a further effort to communicate the ways in which Syrians understand the violence that is being enacted upon them through the citation of a presumed 'universal' scenario. But with the neighbours' passivity so unexamined, so too are the structures (such as the state system and indeed the very discourse and practice of sovereignty) which endow the man (or the Assad regime) with such power to abuse and which maintain the conditions which keep his family (or his citizens) trapped by his violence.

Furthermore, in the context of publication in an English-speaking market with demand for Syrian refugee stories, this extended metaphor is less a universally recognised scenario and more at risk of suggesting a socio-spatial specificity to this type of gendered violence. With knowledge of extensive and dominant Western political, media and humanitarian discourses which produce a homogenised Muslim-Arab man as a racialised figure of uniquely regressive misogyny, this metaphorical work not only aligns with this in the case of individual Syrian men but also suggests that this discursive association has explanatory relevance to the repressive Syrian state and the civil war itself (Razack, 1995, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2013; Cramer, 2003; El-Tayeb, 2011; Weber, 2016).

In a further example, Kassem's personification of Syria as an iconised woman, explicitly signalled as a mother, cites a domestic violence scenario by equivocating the protests for regime change with the attempts of 'a free lady [to choose her] own lover' (Eid, 2018, p. 145). The agency in this passage is left vague by Kassem, making it unclear which actors in Syria he casts as the abuser. He asks the anthropomorphised 'darling Syria, [...] what have they done to you?' before listing the material, not symbolic violence that has been done against individual Syrian citizens and ending the sentence with 'your sons and daughters, just because they didn't want to see you a free lady choosing your own lover' (2018, p. 145). Are the perpetrators of murder and sexual violence the 'sons and daughters' referred to, given the 'they' that follows? Or is it the 'sons and daughters' who are facing this violence which is then metaphorically assigned to the one imagined female body of iconised Syria, with the 'they' of the perpetrators left nameless and shadowy?

In the context of other narratives positioned among this genre of Syrian civil war or refugee memoirs, Alia's story also utilises the metaphor of domestic abuse to suggest that the infantilisation of Syrian citizens and their feminised acceptance of masculine violence is the end result of complex processes enacted by the regime to consolidate its power. Like Khawla, she presents this observation as if on behalf of Syrians collectively, characterising their understanding of the power relations within their state as shared by all, even supporters of the regime:

[Syrians] had (whether consciously or subconsciously) understood that the regime would, like an abusive parent, punish them severely for their misbehaviour – as if Syrians demanding reforms were just children. Really, the regime had survived for years on an intricate architecture that made children out of adults. (Malek, 2018, p. 191)

In another passage of the narrative, the metaphor is extended to the point where the imaginary abuser is implicitly praised for at least offering tokens of apology to his victim whereas the Assad regime only doubles down on its violence:

[...] others seemed to need relief from the simultaneous shame of living under such a regime and looking away – of being both a victim and a bystander. In some ways, the interaction between the regime and its citizens seemed similar to the dynamics of domestic violence. Except that instead of giving us flowers or a box of chocolates after blackening our eyes, the regime had given us the twisted absolution of chaos. (Malek, 2018, p. 230)

In the finer points of a such a comparison such as this, the association between the two scenarios (one produced as generalised and universal, the other as incredibly temporally and spatially specific to Assad's Syria) becomes taut with tension and discomfort, for myself as a reader and for the interviewees with whom I discussed the use of a domestic violence metaphor in reference to Syria. This device has the capacity to, at once, produce gendered abuse within families as banal and to produce the particular way in which violence by the Assad regime and associated *shabiha* is shaped by the gendered identity of the victim (as well as the intersection of that identity with sect and ethnicity) as merely symbolic.

In example of a story of such material gendered violence sitting in intertextual tension with this metaphor, Bilal\*, narrativizing his experiences in prison to Pearlman, relates witnessing targeted sexual violence enacted upon a young woman by the prison guards. His account gives testimony on a violence which is both systematic and at the whim of the guard, as he bases his knowledge of what was happening to the woman on the fact that 'they always took

her during the shift of a particular officer' (2018, p. 135). Her age, and physical condition ('sick and miserable') are also highlighted to underline the perversion and brutality of the guards as well as their further humiliation of her through the violation of her practices of religious covering: 'she wore a headscarf, but they would rip it off'. (2018, p. 135).

Aziza\*, another of Pearlman's interviewees, in fact sets up the gendered vulnerability of women in Syria as a narrative turning point for the arming of the previously peaceful rebellion. In an example of the tension created by using the female body as a metaphorical victim of regime violence, when Syrian women and girls were in fact materially targeted for gendered violence, Aziza tells stories of young women kidnapped by 'shabeeha [...] in front of their parents' as a deliberate tactic of the regime. Generalising his conversations with protestors deciding to arm themselves, he relays them as saying, "we have been patient. We've endured and endured but they have ripped our women from our hands. How can we sit by and do nothing?" (2018, pp. 146–7).

In a similar demonstration of how observers in Syria saw violence against female protesters as a violation of gendered norms of protectionist masculinity, Samar's taxi driver asks her "why are you getting involved in all this? They don't treat women any better than men?" (Yazbek, 2012, p. 11). Later, Samar notes that the security services have started 'targeting women' and thus infers that 'this policy is an obvious declaration of war' (2012, p. 56). Similarly, Abu Firas\* depicts sexual violence against a female relative as the ultimate violation against *him*, one which would inure him from guilt over inflicting revenge against the rest of the world indiscriminately:

I swear to God that I have nothing but respect for you regardless of your ethnicity, religion or nationality. But when my sister is arrested and they rape her, I have no problem entering any place in the world with a car strapped with explosives. Because no country in the world is paying attention to me. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 160)

As opposed to the imagined symbolic female body representing Syria collectively, Abu Firas considers the immediately apparent sexual violence targeted at his female relatives as a strategy of state repression designed to provoke male relatives to retaliate (Young, 2003). He also signals this specific type of gendered violence as a material crime with symbolic resonance which should not go unpunished by ‘the world’.

Hevi\* also charts how the different types of violences feared by men and women travellers within Syria were widely understood as the conflict went on and other military actors emerged: ‘after five minutes driving, err we change our way because we were told that there is Jabhat al-Nusra on our way and [...] they take men who are ready for military service and women as well to make them their wives.’ (September 2019). The latter reference also implies the sexual violence and other domestic violence likely arising from such forced marriages. This explanation of immediate and likely threats mapped out onto space in Syria which determines how different gendered subjects move sits uncomfortably in intertextual relation to the imagined scenarios of the hypothetical violated wife or daughter conjured by other narrators.

Notably, Nujeen frames violence against feminised and infantilised ‘womenandchildren’ as a turning point for public perceptions of the regime and thus for the trajectory of the protests towards more organised rebellion (Enloe, 1989). In her narrative, the shadowy truth of violence against feminised subjects negates the ‘heroism’ of the Syrian army: ‘we all knew that joining Assad’s army would mean killing women and children’ (2017, p. 67). This observation produces an ethical line regarding legitimate killing, which others might draw between soldiers and civilians or between men and women, regardless of their status or involvement in the revolution (Jones, 2000; Dean, 2019). Public, state-inflicted, female death, then, is the act which pushes Assad past the pale of legitimate sovereign violence, making a representation of violence against the female body as only symbolic of the repression enacted on Syria a troubled metaphor.

When narrators such as these emphasise violence against Syrian women as a specific violating strategy of the Assad regime, the co-option of the female body as part of an allegory of Syria’s collective experience of oppression is seen as part of many discourses which overlay metaphor onto material experiences of gendered violence. Yet some narrators who

focus on their own or others' experiences of sexual and other forms of violence specifically directed at Syrian women avoid overarching narratives of national humiliation figured as an anonymous, symbolic, violated woman. Instead, I suggest that they lean further into the implied roles of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' genre so as to give testimony on the specificities of gendered insecurity and to narrativize these stories into their wider critiques of the Assad regime or the international community. In highlighting violence against women as particularly horrific and a part of the impetus to flee Syria, these narrators contribute to productions of legitimate and illegitimate violence by the state.

The extensive and innumerable accounts of sexual, familial and other gendered violence against woman and girls, in both the texts containing the domestic violence metaphors and the others studied in this project, make the comparison between this type of violence and that of the Assad regime against its people (citizens and the rest) a fraught one. By conflating the victims of material violences shaped by gender, ethnic identity, sexuality, age and class with the victims of symbol violences by the government unto 'the people', the hypervisibility of the female iconised 'body' of Syria distracts from the minutiae and specificity of the experiences of various women living under the Assad regime and then under the ruling forces that emerged during the civil war such as Daesh and Jabat al-Nusra.

In a strategy that he uses throughout his story, Marwan flags his own observation of gendered divergences in vulnerability to coercion and violence during the Syrian civil war, addressing his singular reader as he explains the significance of his semantic choices. Despite his own ability to live relatively freely under the new rulers of Raqqa, Marwan confesses he feels an obligation to consider how the other half live, so to speak:

Notice, reader, the italics with which I weighted the word *guys*. I must speak here about women. My mother is a famer [...] Women were workers in this city. What did we know of face veils? Under the rebels, in that brief daylight between the regime and the Islamic State, girls with uncovered hair walked in the street after midnight. But ISIS cleaved men from women [...] They ruled that women had to wear not only the face-concealing niqab, but also gloves and the floor-length black abaya. Even their eyes must disappear behind black gauze. How would they be

able to pick out fruit at the market? How would they see the sun? In June's heat, these new coverings smothered women like tombs of nylon. ISIS set up workshops to meet the demand, and traders grew rich selling the cheap fabric at a mark-up. On the streets, they stumbled by, these invisible, too-visible women who constituted half of humanity – their individuality gone, replaced by the overwhelming awareness of their sex.' (Hisham, 2018, p. 130)

It is, however, a passage mostly defined by questions rather than answers. Despite emphasising his mother's strength and independence as a farmer, her voice does not appear to give testimony on her experiences unlike other family and friend characters (Shepherd, 2006; Abu-Assab, 2017).

Neither does Marwan strive to retrieve the individuality he perceives to have been 'smothered' by the fabric of the niqab and the abaya by including the stories of individual women. who were suddenly much more vulnerable to gendered coercion and violence. In contrast, male characters, including Daesh soldiers, are named and fleshed out as three-dimensional characters. Despite his later critique of Western fascination with the perverse violences of Daesh, Marwan obscures the stories of these women through rhetorical questions and laments the restriction of their freedoms in a way which makes this oppressive practice a collective violence against the city rather than against the individual women as agential, vocal subjects.

Another effect of the iconised representation of Syria, as nation and population, as a cowed female victim of domestic abuse is to elide the very active participation of women in the actual events of the protests and the later armed conflict with the regime and also of some women's complicity with the regime (MacKenzie, 2009; Haddad, 2014; Loken and Zelenz, 2018). In Kassem's narrative, this participation is first signposted in his narrativization a demonstration at which protestors were first inspired to chant by the shouts of a woman. He explains the explosive response through a backhanded compliment for the lone female voice: 'Syrians always feel affected by the bravery of a woman. A woman is not braver than me, [they think] so I'll join' (Eid, 2018, pp. 58–9).

Two of Pearlman's interviewees, Ibrahim\* and Ghayth\*, comment on the involvement of women in the protests against the Assad regime. Ibrahim represents this as a gradual process with traditionally feminine tasks such as sewing flags being his main examples of women's roles in protests in Hama (2018, pp. 112–3). In contrast, referring to demonstrations at the University of Aleppo, Ghayth lists much more extensive positions filled by women in the organisation of demonstrations, ones defined by the different possibilities facilitated by their gendered identities:

[...] women played a huge role. Women who wore headscarves would hide papers and signs in their long coats because they wouldn't get searched [...] only female dorms remained open, so women took charge of organizing and then would pass information on to the guys. If the security forces attacked male demonstrators, women would stand in their way; at that time, security officers saw touching women as a red line. A lot of women really came to the rescue. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 123)

Despite this prominence in the early days of the revolution, Marcell\* charts a narrative towards greater restrictions for her as a female activist the longer the conflict with the regime went on. She had hoped that revolution would provide new opportunities for her and other women to engage with fellow male demonstrators, and later rebel fighters, on equal footing.

Instead, she is made to feel unwelcome among the organised resistance and targeted for not conforming to traditional gendered codes of behaviour, even by her supposed allies:

It was a harsh year. Especially with regard to women's issues [...] It was the fight with your friends because they don't want you to go alone in the street. You consider yourself a feminist and say, "C'mon do you really need to accompany me to buy a kilo of potatoes?" [...] If the armed groups called for a meeting, I'd be the only woman there. Everyone was shocked [...] I would say, "We're equals, let's talk." (Pearlman, 2018, pp. 198–9)

Marcell's experiences of exclusion from revolutionary organisation and of gendered insecurity in rebel-held sections of Aleppo are necessary disruptions of narratives which reproduce traditional associations of military resistance with masculinity and the passive endurance of war-time suffering with 'womenandchildren' (Enloe, 1989, 2000; Malkki, 1996; Gissi, 2021).

But she also recounts the struggles of contesting these associations and the depth of their hold on the society she moves through, even in the context of revolutionary groups and radically disrupted social orders. Ultimately, she inhabits a reluctant 'survivor-witness-messenger' type by the end of her narrative, when she pinpoints a realisation of her gendered insecurity as the provocation for her movement away from Syria:

The first time I recognised the problem was when a Jordanian fighter gathered children in the street and said he'd pay a dollar to every child who threw a rock at me because I wasn't wearing a headscarf and I was walking with men who weren't my brothers [... then] five or six of my friends [were] kidnapped by ISIS. They were going to kidnap me too. If that happened, I wouldn't be brave. I'd be stupid [...] So I left for Turkey, and I was crying like a baby the whole way. (Pearlman, 2018, pp. 199–200)

Narrators' tendency to highlight that many actors perpetuating gendered systems of control and violence are not native Syrians (whether Jordanian rebel fighters or Chechen Daesh members) contextualises gendered repression as common to many nation-state societies. But for many Syrian women, and especially those who also felt targeted based on their non-Arab ethnicities, this might read as a deflection of accountability which provokes correction through their own testimony on the gendered violence they have witnessed and endured from their own communities and the wider society.

In an example of the violence of coerced marriage, Marwan narrativizes the experience of 'a woman from Homs who had called her father wishing him a life in hell because he had forced her to marry a fighter she described as a boorish lout' (2018, p. 165). Marwan encounters the woman after she has been taken from this marriage into 'the Sisters', a community of

fighters' wives and female relatives of Daesh considered in need of constant supervision. This group's visits to his internet café also facilitates Marwan's meeting with a Yazidi woman and her teenage daughter after they have been kidnapped by Daesh. Marwan then presents the narrative which he first believed to have been ludicrous rumour; the undeniable presence of the distraught and brightly dressed women standing out from the other 'Sisters' forces him to believe the story.

He reports that 'ISIS fighters murdered every Yazidi man they could, kidnapped every Yazidi woman and child [...] Women and girls were transported throughout the caliphate, where they were sold as slaves and raped [...] It was an act so fast and incomprehensible that even the fighters with whom I talked could neither digest it nor justify it' (2018, p. 170). This story echoes Nujeen's account of watching media reports about these attacks which eventually provoked Western intervention (2017, p. 117). As an ethnic group not included in either the Muslim community or the Arab ethnic nationality of Syria, the Yazidi people occupy a unique place in narratives of Daesh's violence against women. Marwan's insistence that the enslavement and sexual violence of Yazidi women and girls was 'incomprehensible' even to the fighters who assisted and witnessed it identifies this practice as a complete break with the moral codes and norms of his community.

It seems rather than excusing the violence, the intersection of the Yazidi women's gender and ethnicity intensifies the crime for Marwan and other commentators in the city as they categorise the murder of ethnically marginalised men and the sexual violence against Yazidi women as a strategy of genocide. Therefore, in the image of the iconised Syrian women abused at Assad's hands, the specific vulnerability of women from other ethnicities or religious sects is either not yet imagined (because publication predates news of these attacks) or is obscured in favour of a normative understanding of Syrian national identity. The same is applicable to other varying facets of Syrian women's identity and lived experiences such as sexuality.

For instance, Amira\*, in an interview with NBC, seems to inhabit the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role through the conventional tropes of knowledge through suffering and

racialised and gendered spatialisation of danger but also suggests that the crisis of civil war is not always the best frame through which to understand the insecurity of a displaced woman (Puar and Rai, 2002; Weber, 2016; Dean, 2017). Approached by these journalists for stories specifically about her sexuality, Amira ‘said on the phone from Lebanon [that] women who reveal their non-traditional sexual orientation to their families often get beaten for “bringing shame on the family,”’ (Talmazan, Cheikh Omar and NBC News, 2016). The limitations of a journalistic text which includes Amira’s story, largely in the third person, mean that the intersections between Amira’s sexuality, identity as a woman and a refugee, her ethnicity and her religious background are only superficially explored.<sup>11</sup>

The article informs readers that Amira has been an LGBTQ activist since 2004; she tells her interviewer that ‘while all LGBTQ individuals face discrimination in Syria, the social stigma is worse for women because they symbolize “dignity of the home”’ and that ‘fleeing Syria is dangerous in general, but escaping as an LGBTQ individual can be especially perilous’ (Talmazan, Cheikh Omar and NBC News, 2016). However, the fact that Amira’s activism predates the demonstrations and the civil war, which are understood as the refugee-producing phenomenon in Syria, suggests that some LGBTQ+ Syrian women hoped for increased security and freedom for non-heteronormative subjects in Syria as a result of reform or revolution, rather than the opportunity to ‘escape’ to the West which the NBC writers presume they were waiting for.

Furthermore, this brief story undermines the heteronormativity of the domestic violence scenario depicted in these metaphors which reproduces the nuclear family and heterosexual relationships as the only possible frame for domestic life or inter-personal violence (El-Tayeb, 2012, 2013; Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi, 2018). Syrians as gendered subjects faced and continue to face specific types of gendered violences from both other individuals *and* other actors such as the Assad state and the subsequent military groups who assumed

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<sup>11</sup> The politics of production and dissemination of narratives (in media, literature, academia and beyond) narrows the variety of stories available from LGBTQ+ Syrian refugee narrators. The ones found and analysed in this dissertation do not stray far from the narratives which map danger for non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities onto non-Western spaces while producing European and North American states as exceptional spaces of tolerance and progressiveness. In future research, a priority should be seeking out the kind of interviews carried out in this study or unabridged first-person narratives from LGBTQ+ participants which make more nuanced narratives on patriarchal and heteronormative violence possible.

sovereignty over some territory in his wake. The symbolic appropriation of Syrian women's bodies in these metaphors elides this and takes up an easy familiarity with the scene of a violent patriarch that does little to connect these systems of gender, sexuality and even class and ethnicity together to better understand both violent phenomena. In narratives which otherwise strive to highlight the complexities of varying experiences of Syrian society under Assad, of the civil war and of the refugee journey, these metaphors sit uneasily in intertextual relation with stories of violence experienced and navigated by Syrian refugee women.

### **Violence, metaphor, intertextuality: Syrian refugee interpretation and analysis**

As a result of conversations between myself and Layla, we developed an interest in exploring the tension between deploying this particular metaphor to describe the actions of the Syrian state, and the precarious material positionality of Syrian (refugee) women in all the spaces which a narrative might move through. Outside of the interviews, we talked about the way the metaphor strips time and space away from the abstracted abused woman in comparison to the temporally and spatially shaped interactions between gender and violence in Syrian homes, streets and prisons, the refugee path(s) and 'host' states on the basis of racialised, religious, ethnic and classed identities.

Discourses which associate gendered violence, which includes domestic violence but also other forms of oppression, with conflated Arab-Muslim spaces and cultures have already gained strong foundation with use of such anthropomorphised national imagery. For example, Mitra and König refer to a 1985 French magazine cover depicting a veiled bust of Marianne and posing the question 'will we still be French in thirty years?' as the headline of an article predicting a demographic takeover by Arab Muslim immigrants (2013, p. 362). It is due to such dominant discourses, and visual communication such as the veiled Marianne, that Syrian refugee narrators, particularly those who are (Muslim) women, are often pushed, directly or indirectly, to address gendered violence in family and community (Freedman, 2017; Nasser-Eddin, 2017). This discursively produces the phenomenon as a monolithic topic of which all Arab and/or Muslim women have shared knowledge.

This means that raising such a topic in these interview encounters risks reifying this as a ‘problem’ of Syria, the Middle East and Islam, even as such an association is refuted or attempted to be made nuanced. Thus while myself, Layla and interviewees might come together to question, consider and sometimes critique the deployment of domestic violence metaphors in other Syrian refugee narratives, I know that I, as researcher in my own gendered, classed and racialised relation to other subjects, have played and continue to play a role in creating discursive pressure on Syrian refugee women to shape their narratives around certain subjects presumed to be of peculiar relevance to them because of their ethnic and religious identities.

In general, the Syrian refugee women narrators with whom Layla and I discussed this comparison understand its relevance and sometimes express agreement to a certain extent, but they often came to emphasise the differences between the two scenarios. In all cases, they ultimately move on to tell stories on gendered violence or relations of control in Syria or within Syrian refugee communities. Zaynab\*, for example, responds to questions about her opinion on these metaphorical citations of domestic violence by saying that she understands the metaphor, ‘but they are two different ways of treating people badly: the president is killing people [... men] beat [their wives], they don’t let them finish their education but [at] the same time, it’s not the same’ (February 2020).

Once the narrative moved towards anecdotes related to individual instances of domestic violence, the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role quickly becomes a relevant figure. Zaynab makes it explicit that she understands how citing her experience and extensive witnessing enhances her authority and status as a narrator on material instances of gendered violence. She reminds us, ‘I lived in that environment, when men misuse the power in the family’ (February 2020). She also, just like many of the memoirists, has her own collected stories from friends and family members to draw on and to form the basis of her analysis of the domestic violence metaphor that we discuss. Other interviewees reflected more directly on their own lives within their narratives, in some stories producing systems of gender as forces which shaped the trajectories of their life-stories negatively.

For instance, referring to a narrative produced in a previous interview, Asya\* begins her own story with the assertion that ‘if I was a man in my country, my life wouldn’t be like this: all the difficulty, you know about [my] family’ (February 2020). She is citing the specific violence she endured as a widow from her deceased husband’s family. Upon his death, her brothers-in-law attempted to remove her children from her custody multiple times, using violence against her and her sister on more than one occasion. Forced to use covert means to take her children to join her own family in Iraqi-Kurdistan, Asya felt her particular gendered vulnerability at every stage: from fearing violence from her brothers-in-law if caught taking her children to giving the impression to smugglers that her children had a father waiting for them on the other side of the border (September 2019).

Discussion of the domestic violence metaphor facilitated the production of narratives about how gender shaped narrator’s life experiences in Syria but also how those events have determined subjects’ trajectories even as they move to new spaces. Although she has made journeys to Kurdistan and to the U.K., Asya is still wary of her husband’s family, especially given a brother-in-law did arrive in Kurdistan looking for her after she had left. Furthermore her current economic circumstances are partially the result of the control and financial insecurity she lived under as a widow (September 2019). In a later interview with Asya, Muna\* differentiates between the public and private sphere when she acknowledges an imbalance of power in gendered relations in wider Syrian society but argues for an improvement in relations between spouses in Syrian families:

Men are more valuable in our country. I don’t like it. I’m not satisfied.  
But in terms of married life, it’s different now. They respect their  
wives. (February 2020)

When asked for an explanation for the change in marital relations which she perceives, she attributes such a shift to exposure to Western norms: ‘they see films, they learn but before it was a very closed country: no TV to watch European TV’ (February 2020). Yet, she still contests essentialising discourses by asserting that Western cultures were never free of violent systems of gender, even if the past tense does too generously imply that this has been relegated to history: ‘it was the same in European countries, men were more valuable’

(February 2020).

The same teleological linearity is evident in her conclusion that ‘we’re quite slow compared to the West, who are like [clicks fingers]’ (February 2020). Similarly, Zaynab suggests disappointment with the slow pace at which she has witnessed a change in Syrian men’s attitudes towards women and gendered relations is evident when she reports that ‘some people have changed but some men still are like that and treat the family very badly, behave badly’ (Zaynab, February 2020). The apparent disappearance, or at least diminishment, of gendered violence and social inequality is understood by Muna and Zaynab in a way which aligns with much of the dominant Western political and media discourses and indeed in those of liberal feminisms: if complete eradication of the aspects of gender which produce violence and inequity is the end goal, Western societies are produced as ahead in the race for that goal and therefore also further ahead in time itself.

If the West, as one entity of space, society and subjects, moves forward in time via cumulative gains of rights (and freedom from violence) for women at the speed of a finger-snap, it is implied that Syria, and the Middle Eastern region, is sluggish or even regressive. These are very old and established tropes which racialise subjects and spaces as inevitably distant from modernity and with tendencies towards temporal-cultural indolence by virtue of their racial difference from the white enlightened-colonial rational-masculine subject and his society (Razack, 1995, 2004; El-Tayeb, 2011; Boulila and Carri, 2017b; de Genova, 2017).

Hevi narrativizes making her decision to seek asylum in Europe rather than remain in Iraqi-Kurdistan or another neighbouring Middle Eastern state as a reproduction of an internal monologue. Initially, this seems to be another example of a tight imagined mapping of freedoms from gendered violence onto the discrete space and societies of ‘European countries’:

But then [I] said, “okay my dad is lost and now and he died and my mum’s in Sweden and [it is us] only, you know the girls’ position in the Middle East”. So, [I] said, “we are two sisters, single. European countries might be good for us to live and see our future there.” (September 2019)

Hevi assumes a universal understanding of the Middle East as a space of specific gendered vulnerability, emphasising her and her sister's status as unmarried and their lack of parental guardians as further causes of insecurity. She also makes similar associations between different categories of temporality and certain international spaces. Europe, as a region, is produced as providing the capacity for 'our future', again suggesting associations with modernity and forward-motion by merit of a perceived improvement in gendered security and freedoms.

However, this is an account of Hevi's past assessment of the spaces in which she might choose to seek futurity; in the same interview, she expresses a wish and a long-term intention to return to Syria on the basis that she has a more extensive network of friends and family there (September 2019). Although her narrative, like some other interviewees, contains details about living as a Kurdish woman in Syria, she seems to suggest that her experiences of racialised categorisation by 'native' British subjects produced a more uncomfortable encounter with interactions between identity, space and security than any prior to arrival (McGee, 2014; Cretton, 2018). For example, in a moment of contestation in a shared narrative between sisters Muna and Hevi, the former expresses understanding of hostile reactions towards them when perceived as 'the foreigner' (September 2019).

This story concerns an incident in which a native British woman refused to let Muna and a friend view her house, which the friend would be occupying as the next tenant. Muna finishes the story with the assertion that she does not 'blame them', presumably native British subjects, for being wary: 'it's not safe when you hear, people hear about the foreigner, like you and me' (September 2019). She cites discourses that produce subjects on the move as those carrying danger into previously safe spaces and also, in the use of 'hear', acknowledges that narrative forms such as political discourses, gossip, news and other media are formative in representing subjects such as herself and Hevi as recognisably out of place and therefore a threat to safety. Hevi disagrees, citing suspicions of racism and Islamophobia, and bases her argument upon a rejection of difference between herself and the native British woman in the longer anecdote: 'if I was her, I'd let [you] in' (September 2019). These discourses are also in co-constitutive relation with the practices of bordering and citizenship, especially, in this

case, those specific to the U.K., from ‘hostile environment’ policies to the exceptionalism of the Syrian Resettlement Programme which demands Syrians embody the ‘good refugee’ (Pathe, 2015; Rygiel, 2016; de Genova, 2017; Weir, Wilson and Gorman, 2018; Armbruster, 2019; Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck and Spencer, 2019).

Hevi’s shifting framing of her own security as a gendered subject as well as one perceived as threatening through a conflated racialised religious identity, is another example of how Syrian women narrators wishing to analyse gendered and racialised identities communicate their knowledge of intersecting vulnerabilities and precarious positions. There are few models available within Western discourses for framing a narrative that analyses gendered violence, such as domestic abuse, in the Middle East without reproducing orientalist and racist tropes and plotlines. Furthermore, stories which counter homogenising discursive forces by narrativizing gendered experiences specific to certain spaces or subjectivities (such as Samar’s dangerous position as traitor to the family-cult authoritarianism of the Alawite Assads Syria or the how exclusion of Kurds from citizenship and society compounds obstacles to education for Kurdish women) are always pushing against the tide.

Muna and Zaynab’s reliance on these familiar spatio-cultural explanations for gendered violence which they have experienced and witnessed might be a matter of a narratorial path of least resistance, especially when discussing this topic with an interviewer from outside their identity-groups. The pressures to discursively align with the dominant narratives may curtail meaningful exploration of the intricate connections and divergences between the macho-military violence of the Assad regime and the structures of gendered control and coercion which facilitate(d) domestic violence in the same society. However, this cannot be definitely interpreted as such; these narrators should be understood as self-aware and agential enough to make their own analytical choices in how they understand the interactions between gendered violence, space, culture and time and to what extent they choose to discuss them

When Nujeen’s narrative turns to the arrival of Daesh groups to her home village, after she and her family have fled Aleppo, the pressure of public interest in the religious extremism of this group is evident in the efforts she makes to explain Daesh’s success in implementing their gendered rules. Introducing her causal analysis through her brother’s observations, she reports that ‘Bland said the problem was that Manbji was an uneducated town and people

were afraid of not being seen as Islamic [...] He was right – Manbji is a backward place, where women never had rights anyway’ (2017, p. 94).

It is in narrative moments such as these, when one of the main military actors in Syria enacts control over the bodies of gendered subjects through traditionally patriarchal networks of ownership by commanding that ‘everyone must cover their wife and daughters and [...] beating women who didn’t’ (2017, p. 93), that the distinction that the domestic violence metaphors make between violence directed at the ‘people’ and that directed at female bodies seems a clumsy one. But again, the logics of spatio-cultural distributions of gendered violence are reproduced as Nujeen, in her own voice and that of her brother, works to tie religious-based gendered coercion to certain ‘backward’ spaces and the regressive state of being ‘uneducated’.

Alia goes one step further in her account of gendered relations in Syria, narrativizing an accidental import of foreign ‘ideas’ on gender from Wahabism in Saudi Arabia:

Syrians had to comply with edicts that governed facets of public life that they were unaccustomed to. [...] Wahhabism [...] demanded strict gender segregation in public and sneered at equality for its female citizens. Once Syrians were of retirement age, or left or lost their jobs, they had to leave the Gulf; thus many of these ideas would accompany returning Syrians home (Malek, 2018, p. 70).

An understanding of the audience for their texts and the self-perception of their potential readers is reflected in these passages; Nujeen and Alia likely perceive the demand among Western English-speaking readers to have what they understand as a vast cultural and societal gulf on the matter of gender equality explained by a Syrian narrator. The analysis they can offer is curtailed somewhat by what mappings of discourses and practices around modernity and gender are already produced in dominant narratives; even as they contest an assumption, it is allowed to shape their narratives.

In Pearlman's study, Sami\* suggests that feminist critique of one's own community and society must tread carefully since she feels that speaking on gendered violence risks being perceived as treacherously confirming racist characterisations of Arab and Islamic cultures:

I'm not a traitor. I love Syria. I believe in human rights and I can't feel like I belong to a society that oppresses women or children or people from other ethnic backgrounds. The oppressiveness is a part of Christianity, not just Islam [...] (Pearlman, 2018, p. 275)

Sami is concerned here with correcting revisionist Islamophobic narratives on identity-based oppression by highlighting how Christianity also includes doctrines legitimating gendered violence and inequality. In doing so, she contests the exclusive claim of Western politics and cultures on 'human rights' as a principle of ethics and social organisation invented and defended in Europe. In her attempts to resolve what dominant Western discourses have produced as antithetical - believing in human rights and loving Syria - Sami must deny being a 'traitor' to a Syrian and Islamic identity (al-Natour, 2013; Redclift, 2016; Chatty, 2017b; Çelebi, Verkuyten and Bağcı, 2017).

In the seemingly self-evident need to defend Islam against the charge of being the root of all gendered and ethnic marginalisation, and to defend herself against possible accusations of national and cultural treachery, Sami demonstrates the competing pressures shaping her narrative. This is especially the care for her historical framing of the relations between systems of identity, gender, religion and national belonging. She delivers testimony on sectarian, gendered and other political violence from a position of ambivalence, desiring neither the role of 'traitor' to her country by reinforcing racialised Islamophobic discourses nor to belong to any other society or religion which will not recognise its part in oppression.

Similarly, Talia\*, in Pearlman's volume, takes time in her narrative to tackle the dominant reductive discourses around 'freedom' for Arab and Muslim women in discourses which homogenise the two categories and are especially hyper-focused on the headscarf as a presumably straightforward symbol and practice of gendered oppression. Instead of

narrativizing the social positionality of women in Syria as an inevitable product of Islamic religious cultures, she makes causal connection between the Assad regime and the gendered relations between subjects under his rule:

Some women ask themselves, “If I take off my headscarf, will I be free? If I change my religion, will I be free?” In my opinion, that’s not what freedom is about. For me, freedom is living in a society that respects me. Freedom is being able to express myself. Freedom is the chance to do something for which people will remember me [...] In Syria, women were dependent on men. The root of the problem was our failed government. There weren’t any laws to protect women. They didn’t know their rights or their worth. (Pearlman, 2018, p. 280)

Talia focuses on legal and economic structures which facilitated gendered social inequality and vulnerability to violence; in this narrative, she produces ‘rights’ as a protection for women which existed even without knowledge or practice (Bhabha, 1996; Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Nasser-Eddin, Abu-Assab and Greatrick, 2018). She also understands government as an exercise in cultivating security and equality within society, via its sovereign authority. The failure of the Syrian government to carry out this task is produced as self-evident through lack of legislation on gendered violence and freedoms.

But she also intertwines these structures which produce gendered relations with her own personal and psychological experiences. Leaving Syria for Turkey not only provides her with security from the political oppression of the Assad regime but it also, in the logic of her narrative, takes her from ‘rock bottom’ psychologically to being ‘stronger’ and ‘financially stable’ enough to separate from her husband, taking her children, after years of delay. She makes a direct contrast between the two nations, tying gendered relations to space through legalistic frameworks, rather than cultural or religious. She credits the change to living ‘in a country where the law defended me’ despite her narrative also detailing that she had to leave their shared house and start ‘again from zero’ (2018, pp. 280–1).

Given that Talia aligns herself with the ‘revolution’ (2018, p. 280), it is likely that she would also connect the absence of democratic process and the ills of corruption and cronyism as causal factors in the failure of the state as an adequate guardian of subjects made vulnerable by their gendered identity. In this way, she implicitly echoes the logic of the domestic violence metaphors, suggesting that there is both a patriarchal authority and obligation vested in the sovereign powers of the state (Hoffman, 2001). In the metaphors in question, and in Talia’s explanation of structural gendered inequality in Syria, it is not the state’s right to this authority that is critiqued but rather its perceived abuse of this power (Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Krasner, 1999; Weber, 2009).

The distinct concepts of abused and illegitimate authorities also arise in in discussion with Tariq\*, the only Syrian refugee man with whom we were able to discuss this metaphor. His narrative of the Assad regime’s repression as a violation of a social contract aligns with other interviewees but his understanding of the occurrence and causes of domestic violence diverges:

[I] wouldn’t agree. [I see] it like a very different example. There is no comparison between both. Because the president is a monster more than abusing the power he has. But a husband, yes he doesn’t treat the wife well but they eat, they still look like a family [...I don’t] agree that the husband abuses the power [...] the problems come from poverty and other stresses [...] sometimes wives exaggerate, overexpress their feelings. (February 2020)

While some of these assertions might be challenging to listen to and to discuss for myself and Layla, who share a feminist perspective and personal experiences of gendered violence, it is also necessary to read for the discourses with which Tariq might be engaging as he navigates this framing of the regime’s violence.

His comment that in situations of domestic abuse, ‘they still look like a family’ implicitly seems to hierarchise types of violence based on the functionality of crucial social units: the family and the state. While it does seem that Tariq critiques this metaphor through the

perspective of ‘scale’ (that is the extent and the severity of Assad’s violence is understood as greater than that of individual instances of domestic violence), he also contributes his knowledge of what may exacerbate gendered violence within families and suggests that these are systematic forces rather than individualised instances of conflict between spouses. He also directly contrasts the imaginary figure of the abusive husband with Bashar al-Assad himself; the latter is a ‘monster’, to whom there is ‘no comparison’, whereas ‘the husband’ is considered in the context of ‘poverty’ and ‘stresses’ and the pressure of his gendered responsibility to provide for the family (‘but they eat’).

While many feminist scholars across disciplines have understood the family as a unit of organisation upholding patriarchal relations between gendered subjects, black feminist and queer theory scholars have simultaneously argued for the radical potential of family (sometimes chosen) as refuge. This is especially the case when systems of capitalist and imperial white supremacy deliberately work to dismantle families of oppressed racialised subjects with this trauma as a tool of subjugation (Hartman, 1997; Berger, 2006; Hill Collins, 2009; McFadden, 2015; Karpman, Ruppel and Torres, 2018). There is a relevant connection to be drawn between these theorists’ examples of the separation of Black American families through racist systems of imprisonment, poverty and social services and the same fragmentation of immigrant families of multiple racialised identities through the functions of borders, detention centres and the refusal of rights to family reunification (Kraus, Sauer and Wenzel, 2019).

From this perspective, Tariq’s analysis does not have to be solely interpreted as a defence of the traditional family unit but might also be explored for its contrast of the potential for care and safety among a family compared to the impossibility of the Assad state fulfilling its social contract to protect and provide for its citizens. In the context of family separation (or the ending of family reunification) as a deliberate strategy of Western border regimes, there are possibilities for the production of family as a relation and space of safety to be a more radical narrative for those subjects most at risk from being precluded from its benefits.

Other interviewees also approach understandings of domestic and other gendered violences in Syria and in Syrian refugee communities as a matter of multiple interpretations and dialogue. In raising the role of Islamic teachings in the perpetration of domestic violence, is possible

that these Layla and Zaynab have in mind the hyper-focus on the relationship between religion and gendered violence in dominant narratives which produce Muslim and Arab spaces and subjectivities as regressive. But numerous analyses of patriarchal societies have identified religious institutions, actors and discourses as constitutive of the specific historical and cultural conditions under which gendered subjects live. Furthermore, these narrators are well placed to carry out analysis of their own experiences and observations.

In the interview extract below, Layla recounts what she and the interviewee have said in a debate which develops between them about the influence of Islamic doctrine in present-day ideologies on gendered relations within marriage:

Um, we're discussing about Islam. When I ask her why [there is domestic violence], she says, uneducated people they misunderstand Islam. But I say, in Islam it gives men the right to beat their wives. And she says, no, only if she does something wrong, he tries to talk to her and then he beats her. Okay, but I said, but if he sees in Islam that he has this right, he doesn't misunderstand. But she says [pause] Actually, she was telling a story and I stopped her to translate. (Layla and Zaynab, February 2020)

This quotation from the interview highlights the friction created by a need for translation, only one manifestation of how my presence can have an intrusive effect upon this dialogue. Nonetheless it is appropriate that the interview allows for a self-contained conversation between two Syrian women who can discuss the material violence that these metaphors symbolically utilise. As opposed to bearing witness in order to establish legitimating identities as subjects distant from regressive gendered relations or as refugees in need of rescue from religious extremists, Zaynab and Layla deliver testimony to each other not in the cadence of the other-worldly, traumatised 'survivor-witness-messenger' but rather as invested analysts of societal discourses and practices around gender and religion.

Doing so in Arabic for many minutes without regular translation also means that the interview dynamic has shifted and my role in shaping the narrative has become less

significant (Temple, 2013; Fobear, 2016). The engagement is now between Layla (becoming interpreter-as-interviewer) and Zaynab's relation to each other through age and ethnicity differences which may shape their diverging approaches to this causal analysis of Islam and domestic violence, which seems to be consistently provoked when introducing the metaphors to the interview. Given this slippery dynamic between the three roles, interviewees, Layla and I also discuss the potential difficulties of producing narratives on gendered violence in different contexts. This refers to narrativizing experiences outside of story-telling spaces which the narrator has assessed as safe from ungenerous interpretation, well-meaning liberal reductivism or, at worse, racist and Islamophobic stereotypes.

In conversation with Muna and Asya, despite them previously narrativizing timelines of progress diverging between the West and the Middle East as a space-culture monolith, they quickly agree with the suggestion that 'the West' is hypocritical about systems of sexualised and gendered inequality and violence, with Muna immediately offering causal explanations.

- Interviewer** Okay but also, some people say, well the West criticises other countries but doesn't look at its own homophobia or sexism
- Asya** Yes
- Muna** Yeah because they have a much stronger media
- Asya** Yes

(Asya & Muna, February 2020)

This sentiment is echoed in Marwan's memoir narrative, in which he has already thoroughly critiqued the audacity of media analysts who make comment on Syria's protests and civil war with very few credentials and little knowledge specific to Syria. Using Daesh's preferred Arabic name, he recounts reviewing Western media coverage of their violence against Arab and Yazidi Syrian women with great scepticism: 'Al-Dawlah offered enough perversion and evil for any tabloid, but outlets still outdid themselves in inventing kinky new crimes [...] Pictures of chained up, abaya-swathed women [...] were] actually Shia women in southern Lebanon who were taking part in a play' (Hisham, 2018, p. 289).

He identifies the fetishization of gendered violence, especially that which involves sexual violence or humiliation, in media discourses mired in orientalism and colonial-humanitarianism which produces Middle Eastern women as perpetual victims of perverse Muslim men (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 2013; Razack, 2004; Vintges, 2012; Weber, 2016)). Similarly, Muna's assignment of these spatial imaginaries of the West as a haven from gendered violence to 'a much stronger media' depicts the realm of discourse as co-constitutive of how Syrian refugee narrators experience orientalising representations of their subjectivities and relations.

On the topic of fearing that one might confirm associations of culturally and religiously embedded gender inequity with the Syrian refugee community, Zaynab echoes what scholars of interview methodologies have suggested about the unique navigation of each story-telling encounter by a narrator (Kvale, 2006; Roulston, 2010; Gemignani, 2014; Pearlman, 2017). She tells us that 'it depends' on the exact nature of her relationship with a listener: 'If it's like any person from public, [I don't] have to talk frankly to represent [my] country but because you are a student, doing your project, [I'm] trying to be frank with you and tell you the truth' (Zaynab, February 2020). A dual sense of duty, or even obligation, is referenced here; Zaynab implies a wish to assist me, personally, to honour the social agreement of her acceptance of an interview by being 'frank' with me specifically.

But another principle which Zaynab respects, and which shapes her aims in her narrative, is my role and identity as a student (notably from a renowned university) and the value of an academic project as a record of information which she believes should be 'truthful' rather than tactful. This might be understood as a part of the coercive expectations of narrative which were examined in the second chapter, in which the politics of gratitude shape an expectation that Syrian refugees be open to providing data and to being analysed. However, there is also capacity for Zaynab's explanation to be simultaneously interpreted as an assessment of narrative contexts and differing socio-political relations between subjects; therefore she makes a useful methodological intervention by identifying the differing political meanings which might be assigned to participation in a scholarly project.

Zaynab's framing of what she does or does not 'have to' do in relation to me, as a student, or 'any person from the public' may also rely on the logic of an individualised social contract between us once she has agreed to participate in the project ([see discussions of the dynamics of power and identity in interview-based research in Jones, 1998; Rickard, 1998; Day, 2008; Pearlman, 2017](#)). Similar to her stories of asylum interviews cited in Chapter Two, Zaynab's comparison of listeners who deserve a 'frank' representation of 'my country' suggest a functional logic: once she begins an asylum application, she has agreed to the conditions of complete transparency as to avoid being labelled fraudulent and once she agrees to a research interview, she has similarly interpreted the dynamic and the motives of the interview encounter to shape her decision on what it is appropriate to share with a researcher.

In summary, by deeming the comparison unhelpful and moving towards the theme of gendered violence rather than authoritarian repression, these interviewees' narratives may have been guided by the discursive pressure of existing narratives fixated on gendered violence as perpetrated by the conflated imagined category of Arab Muslim men. However, they may also have been addressing the concerns that seem most immediate and relevant to them, such as the situations of their friends and family members who experienced domestic violence or their own experiences navigating Syrian and British society as women with varying ethnic, religious and class identities and mutating relations to categories such as citizen, refugee, wife and mother.

These narratives are also the result of relations between myself, sometimes Layla, and the interviewees (sometimes multiple) which likely shaped the ease and appropriateness of speaking on domestic violence as a familiar phenomenon. In comparison, commenting on the process of oppression enacted by the Assad regime poses much more immediate political risk than a generalised analysis of gendered relations within families. In terms of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role, focusing on this topic complicates core tropes of the genre which differentiate a narrator by categorising their suffering as unknowable and strongly tied to their spatialised identity. Instead, with certain terms of engagement and understandings negotiated between myself and the participants, we can attempt to engage with each other as both testimony-givers and analysts with shared but substantially different knowledges of familial and localised societal gendered relations.

In the wake of reading these narrative interactions between myself, Layla and the interviewees I wish to return to the implications of the first chapter's argument for a troubled preoccupation with 'refugee voice' in the multidisciplinary scholarship. If aiming to mitigate the possible essentialisations connected to reductive understandings of marginalised voices, I argue that an approach which recognises the complications of Syrian refugee narrators' navigation of the discourses on gender, violence and Muslim or Arab identity as well as narrators' analytical labour must be prioritised. This refers to a need to allow for nuance and contradiction in readings of narratives which give testimony on experienced and witnessed gendered violence. But beyond this, in the wake of scholars who have already noted the disparity in which subjects are considered valuable producers of knowledge, I also argue for a textual treatment of these stories which values their analytical labour and consequent insight as equivalent to that of actors such as researchers and journalists (Spivak, 1988; Schmidt, 2007; Cabot, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has made a deep exploration of the politics of metaphor and the intertextuality of Syrian refugee narratives with each other and the wider discourses around refugee and specifically Muslim and Arab refugee mobility, identity and relationship to space and violence.

I have used the analysis of the recurring domestic violence metaphor and the narratives which are produced by theorising on gender and violence in the interview context to argue that the negotiation of story-telling encounters is crucial to building knowledge on violence produced by international structures of gender and race partly through the assessment of what kinds of language and narrative strategy are most useful or appropriate for building descriptions of these violences and their processes.

In these instances, citation of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' is a slippery tool; sometimes it might be seen to be deployed to affirm the types of discursive productions of space, identity and time which map the Middle Eastern region as a discrete space of regressive Muslim or Arab gendered and sexualised violence. Other times it might instead be a common tool for emphasising the value of lived experience for facilitating nuanced analysis of how matrices

of gendered and racialised violence intersect and dissolve the barriers between private, public, national and international spaces. The use by some narrators of domestic violence analogies and extended metaphors sits in tension with their own and others' narrativization of material (as opposed to figurative) gendered violence.

One main source of such tension is the precarious positionality of Syrian refugees wishing to critique patriarchal power relations and gendered violence in their own communities (and in groups such as the Assad regime or Daesh soldiers who they do not wish to be affiliated with) without affirming dominant existing discourses which produce violence against women and non-heterosexual/normative subjects as exclusively territorially tied to spaces such as the Middle East. Aligning with these narratives informed by racializing discourses on space, security and identity may both offer narrators potential benefits and potential risks: the former by condemning violence associated with facets of their identity to create distance between this and their own subjectivity and the latter by strengthening the logics which inform racist violences against themselves or perhaps risking retaliation from the patriarchal figures they are critiquing.

Ultimately, these extended metaphors, and interviewees' responses to them, produce a dialogue on gendered violence across space and time which can be read through the framework of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' figure. This is the case, firstly, because the mode of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' is inextricable from the discourses on legitimate gendered asylum claims (i.e., by those fleeing 'uncivilised' patriarchal cultures) which these narratives on violence against Syrian women can never fully be intertextually extricated from (Indra, 1989, 1999; Razack, 1995; Mirchandani, 2006).

But it is also evident in how Syrian refugee narrators place value on their experiences of witnessing and their ability to bear testimony as the foundations of their knowledge and analysis on the specific topic of gendered violence in Syrian spaces and between Syrian subjects. The implication of this dialogue between varying Syrian refugee narrators and the contribution to knowledge on the narrativization of gendered experiences of conflict and displacement is that tropes such as this domestic violence extended metaphor can offer a slippery slope of comparing violences as if discrete forces. The analysis by the Syrian women

participants and the analysis of the other texts by myself both argue that this analogy elides the fact that certain subjects always face greater vulnerability to both state and interpersonal violence without the luxury of using one type as metaphorical or experiencing them as unconnected.

Containing anecdotes and longer narrative arcs, these are dialogic texts on gendered violence that cite collectively produced knowledge on divorce, domestic violence and shifting (not new) participation of women in the workforce, activism and other public spaces. They acknowledge the totalizing nature of dominant discourses producing gendered violence as a behaviour that is inherent to certain racialised mobile Muslim male subjects and that is extremely exceptional in white native European men. They also identify the types of story-telling scenarios which allow for knowledgeable and secure analysis of structures of gender, class and ethnicity within Syria, along the refugee path and in refugee communities in 'host' states, which produce the types of gendered violence and coercion gestured at in these domestic violence metaphors.

The narrators' emphasis on the particularity and negotiation of each story-telling encounter aligns with existing theories on the lived experiences of and discursive battles over Arab and Muslim subjectivities in Europe but it also reasserts the narrators' own agency to direct narratives towards the political questions relevant to their positionality with which they wish to engage (El-Tayeb, 2011, 2012; Vintges, 2012; Chapman, 2016; Keddie, 2018). While the presumptions and pressures of the interviewer should always be acknowledged and examined, the analysis of gendered violence as a global phenomenon by these narrators reminds us, as researchers aiming for reflexivity, not to foreclose the possibility that interviewees exercise their agency in the interview encounter and can choose to address the question they find the most urgent and relevant by assessing the risks of the discursive landscape and choosing what to speak on.

In partially taking on the 'survivor-witness-messenger' role, these interviewee participants establish authority in their intervention on the question of patriarchal violence while addressing dominant discourses that produce Muslim men as culturally misogynistic, depraved and out of place in Western society (Razack, 2004, 2008; Weber, 2016). I have established in the previous two chapters how this figure, conceptualised from Dean's

‘survivor-witness’, has been produced in relation to dominant discourses which demand justification for global mobility and use racialised and gendered logics rooted in colonialism about identity, security and space. However, these interviews may be examples of how the role can be inhabited for the purposes of complicated and sometimes contradictory analytical labour and theory-building on gendered identity, space and security rather than straightforward contestation or submission for survival.

### **Chapter Five:**

#### **Genre, Authorship and Narrative Labour:**

#### **An International Political Economy Analysis of Syrian Refugee Storytelling**

Refugee literature is not (only) a literature of despair that dwells on the moral hypocrisy of the west. Nor is it only a form of testimonial literature depicting traumatic events and an urgent intervention to respond to a fictional “crisis”. In other words, its temporality reaches beyond the past, nostalgia, and trauma, but also beyond the present and its many urgencies. It is a literature where seminal experimentations with forms, genres, languages, and national literary constructions occur, thereby indicating, especially in its ecological vein, directions for postcolonial futures. (Gallien, 2018, p. 725)

Claire Gallien situates refugee literature as uniquely placed in relation to traumatic pasts and uncertain but hopeful futures; it is such a quality is what makes this corpus so suitable for the generation of postcolonial reflection, theory and analysis. But what should not be lost is an inclusion of the processes by which refugee literature is produced, disseminated and consumed as sites of postcolonial politics also, in which interactions between narrators and actors such as co-authors, editors, researchers and journalists are still embedded in the same systems of empire, race and gender explored in the context of the stories.

Indeed, many actors who work with the narratives produced by Syrian refugees accumulate capital, boost their professional status and gain moral currency from applying their interpretative authority to the product of marginalised subjects' storytelling labour. This includes journalists, Western co-authors, editors and researchers such as myself. My understanding of this relationship of exploitation had a large role in shifts that occurred in my research questions, my methodologies and my arguments. In light of the work carried out in the previous chapters, my focus now turns to the ways in which the navigations of discourses on (Syrian) refugees and displacement mapped so far can be understood in relation to the contexts of narrative production, dissemination and consumption.

This chapter builds on the previous three which have connected the dominant preoccupations with displacement as 'problem', the refugee as a theoretical 'figure' and a need to search out authentic refugee 'voice' to narrative treatments of gratitude, humanity and analytical agency. The analysis aims to put reflexivity about this project into dialogue with the substantial international political economy of refugee storytelling, including the relations between actors involved in the production of other narratives. This is carried out in the context of relevant cross-cutting literature which brushes the edges of these concerns, and make for crucial foundations, but do not fully address the questions which I wish to raise in this chapter to move forward an investigation of Syrian refugee experiences and their commodification (Ahmed, 2012; Jelodar *et al.*, 2013; Gibb, 2014; Gemignani, 2017; Andersson, 2018; Berents, 2019; Cabot, 2019; Lozenski and Chinang, 2019; Tsourapas, 2019; Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke, 2020)

. Firstly, the memoirs analysed are roughly divided into three genres, shaped by gender, age, class and (dis)ability. These are ‘Brave Man Activist’, ‘Resilient Girls’ and ‘World-Weary Women’. The grounding for these characterisations is provided through readings of the texts but also the paratexts and associated publications as well as cover images.

The next section considers the treatment of ownership and the troubled relations between Syrian refugee narrators, editors, journalists, co-authors and researchers, all as political and economic actors. In this the chapter returns to the question of ‘gratitude’ as a significant and ‘sticky’ affect and practice involved in interactions between Syrian refugee storytellers and other actors.

Thirdly, the chapter makes an initial intervention on the necessary work of turning focus onto actors such as journalists, researchers and co-authors and the discursive work they do to produce refugees and themselves as certain political subjects in specific positionalities. This is to say, that within the Syrian refugee narratives and other related texts, the narrators can be produced as limited and localised producers of knowledge, while other, Western, actors in ‘humanitarian witness’ modes, can occupy authoritative roles as global travellers and rational observers. And finally, I argue for the ways in which these ‘humanitarian-witnesses’ interventions in narratives shape the type of identity (such as law-abiding, useful or resilient) which Syrian refugee narrators might make claims upon.

### **Brave Man Activists, Resilient Girls and World-Weary Women**

The discursive landscape and economic networks shape the genres chosen for publication and thus the gendered modes in which narrators occupy or cite a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role. I characterise the memoirs and other narrative texts analysed here as divided into genres associated with either ‘brave man activists’ (from Hisham’s phrasing but includes Kassem), ‘resilient girls’ (such as Yusra and Nujeen) or ‘world-weary women’ (such as Samar Yazbek, Khawla Dunia). This section will describe these figures and demonstrate how they are produced through the content, paratexts and contexts of production of the narratives.

Firstly, the ‘brave man activist’ acknowledges the gendered facet of the figure Marwan sees as dominant in Western narratives of the Syrian civil war and displacement while pliable

under the hands of actors promoting certain discourses ('freedom speak') as universal social goods:

They had expected a Brave Activist – ISIS bad! Very bad! – the sort of boy you could feed some freedom speak and parade on the conference scene. A Hero from This Terrible War. I knew these sorts of heroes well from following the news cycles. Their fame grew and collapsed, and they disappeared. Attention was dangerous, even when it could grant me a future. I had no interest of posturing. I had a purpose now: to tell a story. (Hisham, 2018, p. 180)

Despite Marwan's disavowal of this identity, ironically capitalised to make clear his opinion on the clichés and misunderstandings inherent in this character produced under the Western gaze, his discovery of a 'purpose' does eventually lead him to a career which certainly involves the same risks as (brave) activism in Raqqa. Building on his term, I argue that this figure, even when contesting the type of message they might deliver (such as Marwan's contempt for 'freedom speak'), is produced in the model of a masculine hero, with the twists and turns of a narrative which dodges numerous villains such as Daesh soldiers and regime agents.

It is in the cynical tone of narrators such as Marwan and Kassem alongside their critique of violence by multiple, often opposing international actors, that their stories are elevated from a war-time adventure to a journey of conscience towards courageous resistance against injustice. After all, the latter half of Marwan's narrative builds tension largely through the numerous encounters with hostile actors (both Daesh and the Free Syrian Army) whose threats he must (bravely) withstand in order to continue with the illicit journalistic work he has committed to, for goals which included personal development and security but also a sense of greater good in communicating to an external audience (2018, p. 174).

For Kassem, his bravery is equally framed within traditional masculinist logics of militaristic duties of protection, his initial reluctance to take up arms notwithstanding. His simultaneous 'media' duties mean he mirrors Marwan in taking on risks for the sake of countering the enforced isolation of the Syrian population, while they endure numerous forms of violent

repression. Both narrators also share a plot trajectory which transforms them from cautiously optimistic to cynically disillusioned regarding notions such as international community or international practices such as humanitarian intervention. The centrality of ‘bravery’ to this characterisation is crucial to taking on a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role; the readers of Kassem and Marwan’s stories are implicitly invited to marvel at their courage in the face of regressive and barbaric violence which their Western audiences cannot imagine themselves enduring.

In turn, the fascination with Nujeen’s disability and the Yusra’s physical abilities and talents in swimming has shared antecedents in so far as intense scrutiny on bodies for sports or entertainment has a long history embedded in racialised and gendered discourses (Hartman, 1997; St Louis, 2003). In conjunction with their youth and the tone of feminised naivety struck in their memoirs, these apparent idiosyncrasies play a part in positioning them as ‘good example’ Syrian refugees in Europe (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2010; Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck and Spencer, 2019). Their physical resilience (whether striving for physical peak or to ‘overcome’ disability) is meant to mirror an internal resilience compatible with modern patriarchal and racial capitalist expectations of self-reliance, ambition and the discovery of self-esteem in hard work, especially in ‘good immigrant/refugee’ communities.

In contrast, Kassem and Marwan's bodies, and their appearances overall, come under much less inspection; their book covers feature abstract art or illustrations unlike the photos of Nujeen and Yusra which dominate the jackets of their memoirs (see Figures 1 – 6). The cover of *Butterfly* (Figure 6), in particular, in which a close-up of Yusra’s face is overlaid with an image of light reflections on water is reminiscent of fantasy or romantic young adult fiction. Meanwhile, Nujeen’s book bears a recommendation from television presenter and ‘survivalist’ Bear Grylls, in which he addresses her directly (‘proud of you’ (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017)) and implicitly associates her journey with his own connotations as a public figure of exciting, but ultimately low-stakes, adventure.

The changes made in between the two editions of Nujeen’s memoir are also significant. Switching from a colourful waist-up portrait (Figure 2) to an image taken of Nujeen in her wheelchair, seemingly unaware of the cameras as Nasrine pushes her against a bleak

landscape (Figure 1), suggest a deliberate re-direction to a more specific contextualisation of the narrator. By making her disability visible once again and choosing a photograph from the period in which she first gained fame, the cover conveys the intersection between experiences of displacement and disability which journalists and publishers first found so unique and compelling. Meanwhile, despite also gaining access to storytelling opportunities via viral fame, Kassem and Marwan's anonymous methods of sharing narrative (through phone interviews and Twitter respectively) do not require them to agree to using their own image so prominently to promote their memoirs.

The cover of the first edition of *My Country* (Figure 4) and Crabapple's artwork for *Brothers* (Figure 5) share an interest in mixing symbols of art (a violin) or nature (olive branch) which commonly signify peace and beauty with icons of specifically modern warfare such as grenades or machine guns. The messages communicated through these images are not necessarily subtle in their symbolism but the way in which these covers position the texts within certain genres of Syrian (and arguably Middle Eastern) refugee storytelling is more sophisticated, hinting at a more adult audience than Yusra and Nujeen's. While still framed as individual and deeply personal accounts, this material around Kassem and Marwan's texts signals a maturity and levity which is avoided in the presentation, and indeed the tone, of Yusra and Nujeen's memoirs.

The shaping of Nujeen and Yusra, as narrators and as characters in their narratives, into 'resilient girl' figures can be understood as branding within the economic and political spheres of refugee storytelling, international liberal activism and international organisations' campaigns. This is most demonstrable in their incorporation into certain texts in children's literary publishing which aim to promote internationalism and gender 'empowerment' as necessary in recreational and educational reading. *The Girl Who Rode a Shark*<sup>12</sup>: *And Other Stories of Daring Women* (Ross, 2019 also see figures 14 & 15) and *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli, 2017 also see figure 16) feature Nujeen and Yusra respectively as well as in their associated products such as calendars and diaries (see figures 14-16). The incorporation of the young women's images and versions of their stories into products marketed under a global 'brand' of 'girl empowerment' place them in a milieu of

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<sup>12</sup> Also titled *The Woman who Rode a Shark* in some international editions.

internationally famous children and young adults like Malala Yousafzai, whose guarantee that Nujeen ‘will inspire you’ endorses the front cover of *The Girl from Aleppo*.

Yusra and Nujeen, similarly to Yousafzai, have been included in lists of the ‘people of the year’ genre across European media, with very few discursive interventions warning against the transformation of these young women into ‘media-age saint[s]’ (Oltermann and The Guardian, 2016; also O’Connor, 2015; BBC News, 2018). These narrators also keep company with another Syrian storyteller whose age made them a subject of particular media fascination; Bana Alabed began writing posts for Twitter, which were then translated into English by her mother, about the siege of Aleppo when she was only seven years old which have now been published as a memoir entitled *Dear World* and an unauthorised colouring book (Alabed, 2017; Lorraine, 2017; Douglas, 2020, see also figure 13 cover image, with recommendation from children’s author J.K. Rowling).

Scholars have considered how the narratives of figures such as Yousafzai can reproduce tropes of Muslim women as universally oppressed by Muslim men, in line with a genre of stories which produce a linear journey from barbaric misogyny to enlightened gendered freedoms as mapped onto the spaces of the Middle East and the West (Abu-Lughod, 1998, 2002, 2013; Khoja-Moolji, 2015). The particularities of emphasising the child or young person’s voice have also been theorised as a narrative strategy which positions narrators like Malala, Bana, Yusra and Nujeen as possessing a quality of innocent truth-telling which appeals directly to an international community for rescue from spaces troubled by uncivilised and chaotic violence (Douglas, 2017). Subtitles such as ‘A Syrian Girl’s [...] Plea for Peace’ (Alabed, 2017) and ‘My Story of Rescue, Hope and Triumph’ (Mardini, 2018) further compound such an effect.

Contextualising Yusra and Nujeen’s narratives, as well as their subsequent storytelling in interviews and the reproduction of their images in popular culture and children’s media, is necessary in order to begin theorising what kind of ‘messages’, such as calls for ‘hope’ or ‘peace’, are depoliticised as a result of the narrators’ production as feminised and often infantilised. This shares similarities with tropes such as more sympathetic or ‘sentimental’ treatment of fictionalised female Middle Eastern terrorists in Western literature as opposed to in Syrian texts (McManus, 2013)

Marwan and Kassem's professional platforms, in stark contrast, have been exclusively directed towards adult audiences, allowing for politicised writing and messages such as explicit critiques of Obama's foreign policy or political analyses of military strategies in Syria (Eid, 2015; Hisham, 2017). Rather than fulfilling an expectation to embody values of resilience, and indeed victory over physical obstacles, such as Nujeen and her disability or Yusra and the trials of competitive swimming, Marwan and Kassem's appeal as narrators, and later political commentators, lies in their belonging among 'ordinary' or average Syrian men who protested or resisted repressive forces. Hence, they are perceived as equipped with a mature knowledge of lived experience in Syria and of the nature of actors such as Daesh whose deviance is almost guaranteed to attract the attention of a Western audience, in policy, media and academia.

Writing under titles such as 'What's It Like to Live Under the Capital of the "Caliphate"' (Hisham, 2017), 'I Survived a Sarin Gas Attack' (Eid, 2017), 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to Islamic State' (Hisham, 2016) or '[...] Trump: I Want to Buy You a Beer' (CNN, Fonan and Eid, 2018), Marwan and Kassem, in their post-memoir careers, lean in to a genre of an 'average guy' experiencing an extraordinary event. In contrast, Nujeen and Yusra are produced as already extraordinary, particularly in their relation as gendered subjects to the space of Middle Eastern Syria. They continuously meet the expectation of having survived via their remarkable resilience in order to deliver generalised universal messages of united humanity and 'never-give-up moxie', in the words of Afghan-American novelist Khaled Hosseini in his recommendation on the cover of *Butterfly* (Mardini, 2018).

Meanwhile, at the forefront of more subversive forms of pro-refugee activism, as mentioned in Chapter One, Yusra's sister Sara has been arrested and charged with people smuggling for assisting asylum-seekers in Greece since the memoir's publication (Campana, 2018; Smith, 2018b). In fact, both 'resilient girl' narratives feature a sister whose possible contributions to the narrative are consistently overlooked. In her acknowledgements, Nujeen addresses thanks to 'my sister Nasrine for pushing me all across Europe and putting up with all my information even if she didn't always listen' (2017, p. 286). Nasrine is an almost silent presence in the narrative and this characterisation in the acknowledgements replicates how Nujeen presents

her sister in the text as uncurious in her quiet fearfulness and duty.

In fact, Nujeen is shocked when she notices her sister has been brought to tears by a boat ride in Berlin which recalls the traumatic memory of the crossing to Greece. In another citation of gendered ethics of care in which, as an older and able-bodied daughter, Nasrine uncharacteristically expresses resentment about having been entrusted with prioritising Nujeen's care above all else: "It was all right for you, you didn't have the responsibility," she said' (2017, p. 262). Very particular forms of resilience seem to have caught the eyes of those with the capacity to 'gift' huge international public profiles to certain refugee subjects. Nujeen, with a visible disability, attracts media attention and is framed as more resilient than her sister who has pushed and cared for her alone through the journey (2017, pp. 130, 190, 263). Yusra's success story at the Olympics provides a more satisfying narrative arc than Sara's experiences of pushing through repeated swimming injuries to help pull their boat to safety and then accepting the loss of her athletic career to focus on assisting those still making those sea crossings (2018, p. 207).

Samar and Khawla, however, while professionally renowned and having more authorial ownership over their narrative, fit more comfortably alongside the exhausted tone of fellow Syrian refugee mothers and middle-aged women interviewees who do not express the optimism of the 'resilient girl' genre nor the sudden fiery disillusionment of the Brave Man Activists. Many of the gendered, ethnic and class injustices and imbalances among Syrians and between them and non-refugees are narrativized with much less surprise by these narrators. Additionally, they treat the notion of telling stories about displacement and Syria as an end in itself with much more ambivalence. Kassem and Marwan might express pessimism but in Samar's admission of exhaustion her longstanding and ongoing commitment to a duty of documentation as resistance produces her as a more cautious opponent to global injustice, aged and made vulnerable by her struggle: 'I never knew that apathy could turn me into such a grim and fragile woman' (2012, p. 2)

Samar also writes the introduction to the *Diaries* volume, in which Khawla's chapter appears. This textual arrangement speaks to the dynamic between the two writers in which Samar holds a seniority and larger public profile which Khawla and her fellow contributors are positioned to seek such professional accolades, following her path. They also share a form in

the use of the diary format, a structural choice which produces senses of immediacy and tension for their readers. As opposed to the other memoirs which were published between five and nine years after the beginning of the protests, these narrators cover a shorter time period and were published much earlier in the 2010s. Both Samar and Khawla aim to convey the sense of a political moment, stretching across weeks and months, of the greatest uncertainty and possibility. This is a narrative strategy which cannot be given as much room to breathe, so to speak, in the memoirs with longer time periods to cover and which are much more explicitly a response to viral fame and an explanation of the narrator's arrival in Europe.

Both record prescient encounters with danger as a result of their journalistic work, which is always a much more collective endeavour than Marwan's messages to Crabapple or Kassem's interviews with news networks (Eid, 2018, p. 86; Hisham, 2018, pp. 174, 185, 246). A focus is maintained, in both narratives, on the necessity of travelling to collect stories, based on the conviction that 'truth' cannot move unimpeded across Syria while the media is known to be controlled by the state (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 6, 9, 23, 129, 145; Dunia, 2013, p. 184, 186, 188). Their gendered vulnerability is also emphasised, with Samar's identity as a single mother increasing suspicion from family and neighbours and also providing a weak spot in her armour for the security services to exploit when they wish to scare her away (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 178–9). Both derive hope from the female protestors, with Khawla expressing how she 'was proud to be a woman' when witnessing women exploit the gendered protectionist logics of the first wave of soldiers to shield male protestors from physical harm and Samar labelling her attendance at the women's organised protests as 'absolutely imperative' (Dunia, 2013, p. 190; Yazbek, 2012, p. 51).

The 'world-weary women' memoir covers share similarities with Marwan and Kassem's, but interestingly they lack the somewhat trite imagery described above which aims for emotive symbolic play with tropes of war and peace. The second, and more widely distributed, *Diaries* collection cover (Figure 8, see also Figure 9 for the first cover) is more abstract due to its nature as a collection of narratives from numerous Arab writers. The image mimics the graphics and texture of a poster with an upraised fist outlined in red, 'revolution' written on the wrist in Arabic while sunbeams reminiscent of communist propaganda imagery burst from between the fingers and across the background. The cover of *A Woman* wastes no time with intricate symbolic imagery or characterful portraiture; two Syrian flags dominate the

photographic image of protestors against a blue sky, situating Samar's narrative in space and time with absolute clarity (Figure 7).

These women are mature enough to know exactly why and how they are vulnerable and to be unsurprised when let down by Syrian intellectuals, political opponents of Assad or indeed the international community (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 104, 130, 131, 137, 160, 179; Dunia, 2013, pp. 200, 207). Their existing professional experience is also clear; there is no need to narrativize hesitation or fear before they deploy themselves into the field on earnest truth-seeking missions. It is also evident in the established relations between them and the interviewees they approach. For Khawla, her benign disdain for the woman on the bus complaining about the protestors is apparent, as is her implicit sense of romanticised ownership over 'my peasant' who she imagines as an archetype of an uneducated but dignified rural Syrian who will also join the revolution, in place of fickle intellectuals (2013, pp. 190, 197).

Similarly, Samar labels interviewees in villages as 'simple and poor and panicky.' (2012, p. 26) She also projects her own acceptance of personal insecurity in exchange for 'truth' onto those from whom she requests stories. She dwells on how she may have endangered them in only retrospect and from the perspective of adding guilt to her suffering, such as when she reflects that 'it would have been hard for me to deal with someone getting arrested on my account' (2012, p. 111). Indeed, as collectors of stories which then come to structure their own narratives, Samar and Khawla utilise the 'world-weary women' trope to propose narratives of Syrian experiences of displacement, even when citing a 'survivor-witness-messenger' role, as always collectively produced and authorial ownership as a matter always in contestation.

Despite the manner in which these narrators describe how their minds and bodies are ground down by the exhaustion of seeking storytellers and avoiding regime agents, the compulsion to continue writing about their own memories and those of their interviewees is presented as a matter of duty (Yazbek, 2012, pp. 92, 110, 126; Dunia, 2013, pp. 188, 190). But additionally, for Samar, 'these diaries were helping me stay alive, they were my walking stick' (2012, p. 50). The effect of witnessing suffering in Syria upon Samar is communicated through the image of her heart turning 'into a hunk of scrap metal in the face of my impotence' because

‘Dar’a is slowly dying for all to see, while the world watches’ (2012, p. 30). This is the same critique of international inattention and inaction as Kassem’s indictment of the Western states but in the differing emphasis on the effect of heartbreak and paralysis rather than on that of rage and frenetic action, the distinct genres which these narrators occupy is made clear.

In characterising these three genres of Syrian refugee narrative, this section argues that in a dialogic relationship between identity and discourse, the narrators of these memoirs are shaped into specific types of cultural figures for international, but largely Western and liberal audience based on their positioning in relation to each other through understandings on gender and age. This positioning is in co-constitutive relation with the contents of the ‘message’ a narrator might deliver to their audience: as young female narrators, with particular stories of (dis)ability, Nujeen and Yusra’s affirmations on hope and resilience depoliticise their narratives but the identities produced for them also make this type of testimony much more permissible than the type of bold political critique made by Kassem and Marwan.

Conversely, Samar and Khawla narrativize their experiences with the perspective of experienced and qualified knowledge on oppressive systems of gender, race, class, sect and ethnicity. But, I argue, the consequent nuance of their analysis which comes from this knowledge produces a limited set of paths for their narratives in the discursive landscape of Syrian refugee storytelling as their testimony is not so readily packaged into a ‘Brave Activist’ soundbite or headline as Kassem and Marwan’s cynical rage or Nujeen and Yusra’s grateful promotion of empathy. The following section takes these characterisations and their implications as the context for an examination of the politics of ownership over Syrian refugee narratives, including the unequal distribution of physical and psychological risk between all actors involved in producing and disseminating these stories.

#### **Authorship and ownership: ‘putting words to my story’**

Marwan and Crabapple, in a conversation published online to promote the memoir, describe themselves as ‘equal creators’ of *Brothers of the Gun*, which only features Marwan as a narrator (2018). Crabapple goes on to recall their joint predictions that readers and critics (‘people’) would assume either that the narrative had been ‘ghost-written’ by native English-speaker Crabapple or that Marwan had written entirely alone and ‘nicely gave’ Crabapple co-

author credit ‘just [...] for some pictures’ (2018). I will admit that the latter was my own understanding until reading more of the promotional materials outside of the narrative text and the necessity of Crabapple’s involvement in the narrative is still not extensively explained, given Marwan’s fluency in English and the relatively small proportion of the story in which she features (as ‘the artist’).

Meanwhile, without the benefit of an established public profile but with more professional journalism experience, interviewee Muna\* found herself misled and ignored at various stages of a collaboration with a major British television network despite having worked as a journalist in Iraqi Kurdistan prior to travelling to the U.K.. Comparing these two examples of contested ownership over instances of narrative production facilitates an analysis of the role of gratitude as discourse, practice and affect in the international political economy of Syrian refugee storytelling. Having been initially recruited as an intern and then a freelance journalist to collaborate on video interviews of Syrian refugees living in the local area, Muna discovered that many potential interviewees were not enthusiastic, and she suspected that her lack of status from their perspective, as a young Kurdish woman and fellow refugee, played a role in their refusals (August 2019).

In an effort to placate producers, who were disappointed that few Syrians agreed to be interviewed by her, Muna offered to step in as an interviewee herself<sup>13</sup>. The plot of her narrative of this working relationship is one of unrewarded labour ending in exclusion from the creative and editorial decision-making processes, echoing Akkad’s complaints in the opening of this thesis:

Muna	And they asked me to spend, like, hours finding music, like Kurdish, finding, picking Kurdish music. And they said they wouldn’t use it and they didn’t.
Interviewer	They didn’t. Yeah.

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<sup>13</sup> I have not watched the interview Muna described to me. As she felt so negatively about the experience, I did not wish to seek out the footage and further invade the privacy and dignity which she felt were violated. While this video interview is an intertextually linked source which is tied into this research project, I did not wish to undermine Muna’s generosity in agreeing to a similar narrative encounter with me or to contradict our consensus that the treatment to which she had been subjected was unethical.

M I mean they didn't care about it and even they didn't apologise [pause] for not putting Kurdish music on it. [...] And I wanted to be there at the editing, I thought it was my right. But they said no. (Muna, August 2019)

The focus on her experiences of loss, before and during the civil war suggest that while qualified for an interviewer-editor role, Muna was positioned to reproduce the tropes of a 'survivor-witness-messenger' genre of Syrian refugee storytelling. This is especially clear in the editing choices which she recalls we used in the video to produce close-up shots of Muna's tears which she did not wish to be used and which made her feel emotionally over-exposed (August 2019). The producers' ability to refuse Muna access to the editing room or approval of the final version means that not only was she moved by certain socio-political relations into a status as traumatised victim but the complexities of any pain or trauma she was experiencing are lost in favour of dominant narratives of interest. This is demonstrable when, looking back at the beginning of our conversation, we see that Muna opens her story with the statement that 'it's really painful being a journalist being interviewed by a journalist' (Muna, August 2019).

In contrast, Crabapple and Marwan's professional relationship seems much more mutually beneficial. However, it is necessary to be sensitive to the similarities between the two situations in how each set of actors are positioned in relation to each other as co-creators inevitably shaped by the politics of race, class and geography which constitute the context of the text's production. The scenarios they describe in their 'Conversation' are plausible dynamics for such actors in the industry of producing (Syrian) refugee narratives for consumption, each laced with citations of gendered and racialised discourses. For instance, we can read for the association of merely decorative 'pictures' as a feminised type of labour, only recognised to be 'nice' as well as the racialised logics underpinning an assumption that as a British professional journalist, Crabapple is a more likely ghost-writer than Marwan is a memoirist (Hisham and Crabapple, 2018).

The presence of the latter scenario is suggested as a relevant possibility haunting the text and its promotion, when the stark difference between Crabapple's much more extensive professional biography on the cover, and Marwan's sparse acknowledgements and short list of accolades is noted. Furthermore, her acknowledgements are lengthy, ticking off the requisite thanks to editors and agents. In one passage, as seen below, she suggests, that these actors were needed to make the narrative 'much more' than its origins:

Lydia Wills [...] no one else could have seen this through, against all odds and in defiance of everything. Thank you, Lydia. This is yours too [...] Chris Jackson [...] editor in the truest sense who made this book so much more than its scattered beginnings.'

(Hisham, 2018, pp. 299–300)

These actors do indeed play such a role and, in their labour, produce a text such as this with added value to the narrative as a commodity, as well as from a less commercial, literary perspective. However, in this case the presence, across all books, of a paratext dedicated to the expression of gratitude has a very specific relationship to the text; its authors and editors and its reception all operate in a context of powerfully proliferating discourses on refugees which expect and demand performances of gratitude towards Western states and subjects from successful asylum seekers.

Returning to Muna's less amiable relationship with co-collaborators in the production of a narrative encounter, the authority to acknowledge and, importantly, remunerate certain labour from certain subjects can be seen to be shaped by the differing aspects of Muna and Crabapple's racialised and classed positionalities. The fact that ownership over a narrative can be gifted or withheld by the television network producers might be a matter of diverging industry norms, as some professionals would be unsurprised to hear that Muna was excluded from editing. But Muna, who worked as a journalist and interviewer throughout her residency in Iraqi-Kurdistan, was obviously greatly surprised and affronted. Muna is young in comparison to female Syrian journalists such as Yazbek who are venerated as the voice(s) of the Syrian journalist and intellectual class in exile (Edemariam and The Guardian, 2012; Yazbek and Philips, 2012; Yazbek, 2013). While she chose not to speak on overtly political

matters related to the Syrian regime, Muna still took on the risk of a non-anonymised narrativization of her experiences but received none of the privileges of authorial ownership granted to those such as Samar who has already established her profile with Western audiences.

In one crucial part of her story, Muna tells of having ‘tears in [her] eyes’ as she ‘was remembering how [she] used to ask interviewees questions’ (Muna, August 2019). Instead of Muna having agency over whether physical signs of distress such as tears are highlighted in the cinematography, or even included in the final cut, these media actors demonstrate that by understanding and relating to her as an interviewee rather than a journalist they do not expect to have to defer any editorial authority over to her. As a result, tears which Muna retrospectively accounts for as caused by a mourning a lost or diminished professional identity are contextualised only by the editing from which she was excluded. Thus, in dialogue with intertextually linked narratives of (Syrian) refugees, both the producers and the audience are likely to assume that the tears are provoked by what presumably typical causes of grief in existing discourses: familial bereavement, suffering as a result of displacement or the witnessing of war-time atrocities.

In his acknowledgements, Marwan expresses gratitude for Crabapple’s offer to co-author a memoir ( ‘I will always be indebted to Molly for offering me this amazing partnership against all odds when I was still in Raqqa’ (2018, p. 299)) in a manner that positions them in a hierarchy of generosity and gratitude. Only Crabapple holds the capacity to offer the equal partnership and Marwan’s decision on accepting is, as he notes, greatly shaped by his need to assess his prospects in an increasingly insecure Syrian city ruled by Daesh. Neither author dwells on what implication such a relationship might have on the question of voice (and authorial ownership) in the narrative.

Crabapple produces both as educated intellectual equals when she figures the writing process as a unique opportunity to combine their two voices which diverge in inspiration and style:

As writers, we’re opposites in so many ways. You translated *Waiting for Godot* in college and studied *Ulysses*, two books I can’t pretend to have finished.

I'm an Orwell girl. In my own writing, I'd always sought the detailed, specific, direct. "Be complex!" you'd chide me. "Be mysterious." I like to think that in this book, which fuses our very different voices, we killed what was worst about our own styles while keeping what was ours. (Hisham and Crabapple, 2018)

Marwan's reference to indebtedness is far from unique; the sticky matter of gratitude is weaved through much of the text and paratext which covers the processes by which Syrian refugee's narratives have been shaped for their audiences by other actors. The pressure to express gratitude that is enacted upon refugee subjects as a result of dominant discourses which demand that the mobility of certain groups must be exceptional has already been considered in this thesis, mostly in regard to gratitude for security, economic stability and acceptance into a culturally divergent society despite embodying the 'problem' of displacement.

In Nujeen's acknowledgements, her gratitude for asylum in Germany and for Lamb's assistance in writing the memoir are equally weighted and echo each other in the explicit naming of 'gratitude' and use of superlatives:

'I can never express enough gratitude to Mrs Merkel and Germany for giving me a home and my first ever experience of school [...] I'm incredibly grateful to Christina for putting words to my story and her family Paulo and Lourenco for their support.' (2017, p. 286)

Maya's narrative, in a Huffington Post article, strikes a similar tone, emphasising gratitude as a matter of debt when she states that she will 'never leave the Children's Society after all they did for me in the dark times' (Ghazai, 2017). She describes herself as 'voiceless' before being approached to train with the Children's Society to give speeches on her 'message [...] that refugees [...] can contribute to British society' (Ghazai, 2017). Those who facilitate 'giving voice' to the narrators are suggested to simultaneously have assisted in their very survival, from Nujeen's bracketing of Merkel and Lamb together to Maya's testimony that the Children's Society helped her out of 'dark times' which were threatening to overwhelm her.

These particular statements of gratitude, then, contribute to the production of a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure, and to the cyclical nature of the concept. Not only surviving in order to deliver a message, these narrators also give testimony on what they have witnessed in order to overcome the further existential threats of trauma and voicelessness, as well as to pay off their debt to those who have helped them to survive. The force which the feeling of gratitude, and discursive pressures to publicly express it, have upon Syrian refugees decisions on narrativizing their experiences give their references to ‘debt’ a different implication to Pearlman’s when she writes in her acknowledgements that her ‘greatest debt is to the hundreds of Syrians who selflessly welcomed me into their lives’ (2018, p. 287). The debt owed by researchers like myself and Pearlman, as well as by co-authors and journalists, to the narrators telling the stories of their own lives, not analysing or editing another’s, does not carry the same bonds of structural social, economic and political (international) relations requiring us to work against the debt.

But the compulsion to narrativize out of gratitude can never be a singular cause of storytelling. Across memoirs, original interviews and first-person news media narratives, processes of comparison, contestation and commiseration can be seen as reasons given or implied which not only consider multiple motives for knowingly citing or inhabiting a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role but also the various audiences a narrator can hold in mind simultaneously. For instance, Maya makes her intended reader apparent when she addresses them directly as a subject who hears (or reads) stories of Syrians being displaced rather than experience the events themselves. In addition, she gestures to an existing body of literature on such journeys as part of a common discursive landscape between her and her reader while distinguishing her own narrative from the dominant genre: ‘You’re used to hearing dramatic stories about the journey of Syrian refugees to Europe but I was one of the lucky ones’ (Ghazai, 2017)’.

In labelling herself as ‘lucky’ not to be the protagonist of one of the more common ‘dramatic stories’, Maya compares her narrative to fellow Syrian refugees she perceives as less fortunate (which she largely attributes to the timing of choices to leave Syria rather than other attributes). She also contests the presumption that the ‘dramatic stories’ represent the totality of the Syrian refugee experience and commiserates those whose father couldn’t make ‘the dangerous journey’ first so that they ‘wouldn’t have to’ (Ghazai, 2017). These engagements

with existing stories demonstrate the intertextual links between Syrian refugee narratives in numerous media and also mirror interviewees accounts of their focus when reading this literature themselves.

Asya\*, for example, explains that she feels a strong desire to read Syrian refugee stories in their entirety because she ‘wants to know if they arrived to the place, where the journey ended’ (February 2020). She also describes looking for similarities between her own journey and that of the narrator to discover if ‘we have the same situation, the same trip’ (February 2020). Zaynab\* gives a similar account of a comparative approach to stories by Syrian refugees, notably stating that she will read ‘even stories stronger than [my] story’ (February 2020). In referencing how she assesses narratives as ‘stronger’, and so more traumatic or emotionally affective, than her own experiences, Zaynab acknowledges that she or other Syrian refugees might be expected to avoid reading such stories in order to protect themselves psychologically.

In Pearlman’s volume, narrators figure the psychological effects of reading the news as a constitutive part of the deterioration of their sense of identity and their physical health. Abdul Rahman\*, who first travelled to Algeria before eventually settling in Denmark, describes a typical day in the former location as ‘ten hours a day reading the news on the Internet, six hours studying and four hours attending university’ (2018, p. 239). He suggests that the ‘stress’ of reading stories of suffering in Syria caused him to develop ‘alopecia [and] a stress reaction disease [...that] started to disfigure my face’ (2018, p. 239). With similar references to psychological distress, Osama\* instead identifies a turning point in the fall of al-Qusayr to Assad’s army, after which he ‘stopped listening to the news or following events’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 189).

Where once he had sought out stories from Syria via news outlets and other sources such as social media looking for hope for the revolution, Osama marks this moment as a total loss of ‘hope’ and, significantly, the moment in which he first ‘felt that I became a refugee’ (2018, p. 189). Seeking to compare stories from the early years of the civil war is produced as an activity only producing trauma and guilt in other Syrian refugee readers but the intertextual links between narratives during this period were perhaps the strongest, as the contents of new stories defined escaping Syrians’ new categorisations within the international system of

states.

Almost nine years after the starting point for most of these narratives, Zaynab admits that sometimes reading a ‘stronger’ story provides her with a sense of relief and gratitude, recounting that after reading such texts she had said to herself ‘Alhamdulillah my story is better than these stories’ (February 2020). For Muna, however, finding either similarity or a need to commiserate a less fortunate Syrian refugee in a narrative, leads her to the conviction that ‘my story won’t make a difference’ (September 2019). Her justification, in stories of previous refusals to narrativize, is greatly insightful in suggesting what many actors, Syrian refugee narrators and the facilitators of their public narratives alike, might understand as a core purpose for telling stories about displacement:

Yes, I’m sad. I didn’t want to come here. I had to for my family. I lost my job, my friends. My family is scattered all over the world. But there isn’t anything to learn [pause] Maybe my patience. (Muna, August 2019)

Although Muna eventually suggests a possible positive characteristic which an audience might be inspired to embody in light of her story, overall, she seems to contest the presumption, propagated by much pro-refugee activist discourse, that narrative work by Syrian refugees is necessary in order to produce a knowledge accessed by suffering, one of the defining qualities of Dean’s ‘survivor-witness’ (Dean, 2017, pp. 629, 631, 632, 2019, p. 168,173). By refusing to assign meaning to her sadness, her separation from her family, the loss of her professional identity and her preferred home in Kurdistan, Muna refuses the labour of teaching a profound lesson to a Western audience who has not shared in these experiences.

This is a notable departure from many Syrian refugee narratives and is likely shaped by the particularities of this narrative encounter. For example, in a VICE interview, without any protection of anonymisation, Ammar’s contrasting story of deciding to ‘turn a negative into a positive by working as a translator/fixer for journalists that were coming to the [Turkish refugee] camp’ replicates the cheerful tone of resilience and self-sufficiency which cites discourses producing the ideal refugee as a successful Western capitalist subject with these characteristics (White, Bertrand-Webb and Head, 2018). But in describing the opportunity

available to him, when looking to make such a positive transformation of being stranded at the Greek-Turkish border, Ammar gives a descriptive account of the enormous market for Syrian refugee narratives and thus the demand for various actors who can facilitate storytelling encounters (Gallien, 2018; Cabot, 2019).

As well as referring to the absorption of Syrian refugees with certain skills or training into the network of international economic and political actors involved in producing this body of narrative work, the citation of this trope of making a narrative product from experiences of ‘displacement suffering’ echoes a trope of the universally felt benefits of making art from pain (Dixon, 2006; Bell, 2011; Gemignani, 2011b; Fobear, 2017). This notion is most explicitly referenced by Crabapple who, in her acknowledgements, thanks Marwan for ‘trusting me and letting me work alongside you to create art out of the blood and hell of this world’ (2018, pp. 299–300). But when the artistic product made is published and distributed not only outside of the state(s) embroiled in the conflict but also towards an audience not imagined to be the participants or victims of the war, the suggestion that creating art out of ‘blood and hell’ can aim for such cathartic purposes might be less plausible.

Even in Samar’s journal pages, where she seems focused on preserving memories of the uprisings for the sake of building a record for future Syrians and their diaspora, she reflects on the deeply complicated relationship between any kind of creative production and the material violence it makes its subject. Without taking a stance of ethical authority, she writes that her ‘diaries turn death into canvas for painting, a darkened mysterious canvas that appears before me on the chests of unarmed men going out to die’ (2012, p. 13). Here, Samar asks readers to ruminate on the opaque nature both of death and the motives of seemingly doomed protestors but also the ways in which the transformation of these subjects’ deaths into a ‘canvas’ might co-opt interpretive authority over their lives and the inscription of meaning to their deaths.

So, in such a context, what navigations are Syrian refugee narrators making when they consent to the assistance of a journalist, researcher or co-author to ‘put words to their story’? What calculations about existing displacement narratives and political discourses do these narrators cite when explaining their reasons for accepting or declining an ‘opportunity’ to narrativize in a public sphere such as journalism or non-fiction literature? While these

narrators are undeniably enmeshed in entrenched networks of socio-economic and political relations which constitute the literary, journalistic and policy markets, this does not mean that their subjectivities are defined solely by exploitative relations. Rather, their own agential discursive work, through contestation, citation and knowledge-production, requires further study to better document and theorise how Syrian refugee narrators, well aware of their own positionality, choose their engagements with actors invested in their storytelling.

### **Global and local knowledge-producers: professional and painful storytelling**

This section returns to the figure of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’, which has guided much of the analysis in this thesis, in order to consider how the actors involved in the industries described above make claims on roles that exist in relation to this figure. For instance, Dean also presents a narrative in which the 1990s saw the ‘humanitarian witness’ eclipse the ‘survivor-witness’, thus necessitating the production of a silent ‘global victim’ (2017, p. 632, 2019, p. 151). Doubt has been cast in this project, and in the relevant literature, on the self-declared detachment and objectivity of those positioning themselves as ‘humanitarian witness’ types. Therefore, this section begins a necessary analysis of how indeed these actors are both shaped by and co-constitute an international politics of displacement.

While this research has never departed from regarding participants as agential and capable of individual choices about and within storytelling, the act of requesting storytelling labour from a marginalised and maligned community cannot be fully understood outside of knowledge on how labour, of all kinds, is extracted from those subjects most marginalised within hierarchised systems of race, gender, (dis)ability, class and capital. Referencing these questions of ownership and value-creation which emerge in much of the Syrian refugee life-writing narrative industry-complex, Muna focuses on the ‘life’ or afterlives of a narrative, reminding me that the goals connected to my research such as professional progress, come at the cost of others’ labour through painful storytelling:

This conversation here, you might hurt me with your questions  
but it will die here and no one will look at me in pity, you know.  
(Muna, August 2019)

Muna also expresses another sentiment which recurred throughout the interview narratives; she demonstrates a keen desire to avoid being viewed as an object of pity. Connecting this to her story about being interviewed for television, it can be seen that Muna speaks from experience; having been looked at ‘in pity’ has been an experience of exposure to an othering and orientalisering (white) gaze (Dean, 2003; Partridge, 2016; Ritivoi, 2016).

But Muna’s acknowledgement of my capacity to hurt her through this narrative encounter is also a statement of her terms: that the pain of such questions is discrete and finite and she cannot be continuously viewed as a victim beyond her control. A power to harm is met with a capacity to avoid or agree, to restrict and review. Many interviewees foreground the risk of emotional harm that accompanies agreeing to narrativize and from Safiya’s humorous assertion that she doesn’t ‘want to be famous’ (August 2019) to Zaynab’s comment that ‘here [I] could choose to accept you [...] so [I’ll] share more detail with you’ (August 2019) the undignified experiences of over-exposure and coercion are of central concern.

Other interviewees connect the matter of personal risk to violence or insecurity, rather than psychological harm, in the event that their words reach hostile actors, here named as the British Home Office, the Assad regime or Daesh. Tariq\* refers to all three when he asserts that he ‘will know the danger, understand the danger’ of speaking to journalists or researchers, before identifying his motivation to accept that risk as the hope that ‘they will understand’ (February 2020). In the context of our dialogue, he most likely refers to the interviewer as the primary listener and audience, but wider audiences are still present in ‘they’, if left shadowy and ambiguous. To be understood is at once less ambitious and wildly more so than hopes we have previously seen from Syrian narrators to be viewed and valued as ‘human’ on an equal footing to (Western) citizens.

Marcell\*’s desire to communicate effectively with other subjects leads her to publish her own narrative online while in Syria. She also produces identity as the core component that is

necessary to be understood to achieve such communication, especially in conjunction with the identities which emerged from decisions to support or oppose the Assad regime. Explaining that she ‘never wrote under a fake name [even though...] that was risky’, she places great importance on subverting expectations that as ‘a woman’ and ‘a Christian’ she would not openly condemn Assad’s government (Pearlman, 2018, p. 92). In fact, not only does she express a belief that ‘this regime should go’, but she also underlines this conviction with citation of her gendered and ethno-religious vulnerability to repressive violence, suggesting that the greatest gain and the greatest loss of public narrative are one and the same: to be seen as who you are (2018, p. 92).

Marcell is an example of how the context of almost immediate means of communication and information-sharing through the internet is, as was observed during and after the Arab Spring, inseparable from a change in dynamic, not only between protestors and the governments but also between dominant (and largely Western) media actors and independent ‘citizen journalists’ who have a relatively new capacity to shape discourses on global events (Seib, 2003; Boyd-Barrett, 2011; Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Ahva and Hellman, 2015; Kohn, 2016; Hoxha and Hanitzsch, 2018; Murrell, 2018).

In the narratives collected in Pearlman’s volume, trajectories of growth, albeit fragmented by the collection’s structure, towards professional reporting can be read or are explicitly signposted. What begins as documenting events (whether those framed as inspiring such as protests or deplorable such as regime violence) seems to expand beyond the, sometimes passive, act of witnessing and even recording. Narrators like Jalal\*, who, with friends, first ‘filmed protests on our phones’, tells of then arranging for ‘more advanced cameras [which] we taught ourselves how to use’ (2018, p. 179). Crucially, as with Marwan’s path towards professional and remunerated labour, it is the arrival of ‘foreign journalists’ that provides an opportunity for Jalal to be ‘working with news agencies as a photographer myself’ by ‘2013’ (2018, p. 179).

Similarly, Ammar figures his work facilitating interviews for major news networks in a refugee camp as a means towards the end of ‘sav[ing] the money I needed to buy a fake passport and achieve my dream of coming to London’ (White, Bertrand-Webb and Head, 2018). Shafiq\*, similarly to Kassem, takes on a vague ‘media’ title while roles in the

revolutionary effort are shared out informally between friends (Pearlman, 2018, p. 58). The structure of Pearlman's work plays a role in subverting the expectation that Shafiq's anecdote will form part of a 'coming of age' or 'coming of (cour)age' plotline. Shafiq narrativizes an experience of being too afraid to film a protest, despite having a camera set up under his jacket, ready to film discreetly (2018, pp. 58–9); but without the long-form structure of a memoir or uninterrupted collected narratives, Shafiq's moment of cowardice, in his own assessment, is left unredeemed.

It is surprising, perhaps, to a reader drawn to contemporary Syrian stories by an overarching narrative of brave and self-sacrificing revolutionaries against an anachronistic Middle Eastern dictator, for the fearful failure of a protagonist to be left unjustified or not cited in a final moment of triumph or freedom. In contrast, Khawla's production of herself as an undeterred heroine meets such expectations of a responsibility felt especially by Middle Eastern subjects to distinguish oneself from acts of repression and disinformation. The very selection of her narrative for the volume of stories from Arab Spring uprisings (which was translated for an Anglophone audience) insinuates that Khawla as a narrator will be aligned with supposed cornerstones of an enlightened international community such as democracy, a free press and 'truth' as empirical, objective and obscured by nefarious anti-democratic actors tied to spaces beyond Western civilization.

In her narrative, she describes her motivations, not only to 'go find out the truth myself' by witnessing events and collecting stories across Syria but also to record and narrativize the truth-seeking process (Dunia, 2013, pp. 188, 202). In doing so, Khawla as narrator makes a double justification: firstly, of her inclusion in the *Diaries* collection and secondly of her identity and position in the context of the wider discursive landscape around Syria as space and nation in this period, as a determined and experienced member of a press with universal and international respected codes and aims.

This thesis, as has been explained, takes a methodological approach to these narratives as intertextually in dialogue with each other and the numerous contexts of narrative production and proliferation, the media platforms and the actors involved in telling stories about Syrian civil war and displacement. Thus, from this perspective, Khawla seizing on the opportunity to seek truth with the same as tenacity as the 'iron grip' she describes Assad as having on the

‘local media’ can be read as an effort to align herself with the ideal of a free press implicitly associated with Western values (Dunia, 2013, pp. 187–8). In this way, she makes a case for herself as a member of those ranks rather than the compromised ‘local media’ who are too imbricated in the clutches of provinciality as backwards and corrupt to be counted among journalists as truth-seekers.

The narrative momentum towards this claimed identity must also be understood in relation to dominant existing discourses questioning the integrity of press storytelling outside of Western media institutions (Boyd-Barrett, 2011; Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Arceneaux, 2018). Jalal’s reliance on association with foreign journalists and Shafiq’s perceived failure to embody the fearless, objective war journalist should be contextualised within the same discursive landscape. These are all sections of narrative which contest, confirm and complicate understandings of which actors have the capacity, and the right or duty, to witness in a manner meaningful to a Western (coded as international) audience. This also raises the multiplicity contained within the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ genre in that, like all storytelling, it can emphasise different facets of a narrative depending on the external demands made on the narrative. Reminiscent of Dean’s distinction between the ‘survivor-witness’ and the ‘humanitarian-witness’, these stories produce ‘foreign journalists’ as international, implicitly Western, actors who are understood by their audiences as both trusted witnesses and respected analysts, with narrators such as Khawla aiming for such a status.

The positioning of Jalal and Shafiq, however, as anonymised narrators among many whose stories are collected under Pearlman’s title as author and editor, suggests, through narrative organisation and publication context, that their narratives are ‘raw’ and thus more authentic but less knowledgeable through their assignment to the ‘local’ and apparent lack of large-scale ‘objective’ analysis. This is an effect which is also produced in Yusra’s and Nujeen’s narratives through the maintenance of tones and language suggesting youth and naivety. Such efforts foreground the narrator who better embodies the figure of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ over the professionalism and objectivity associated with the adult, journalist co-authors, who are more similar to the ‘humanitarian-witness’. But, despite appearing to privilege the narratorial authority of the first-hand witness, this strategy leans heavily on simplistic elevations of ‘voice’ to diminish readers’ perceptions of the co-author’s presence in

the text and thus, I argue, to make a claim on a truth of innocence.

Suggesting that innocent youth makes Yusra and Nujeen incapable of being analytical or politicised narrators instead positions readers, as well as the authors of other connected texts such as reviews and commentary, to wield this interpretative power. This should be understood as a phenomenon not only of marketing a narrative to an international audience but a matter of international relations between subjects which include the Syrian refugee narrators, other Syrian refugees, non-Syrian refugees, Western citizen readers, Western state and international policymakers, journalists reporting on ‘foreign’ states and peoples, military actors as well as citizens in Syria and other warzones. These are processes of knowledge-production carried out across borders and about borders, mediated by the gendered, racialised and classed relations between the actors involved as well as along the intersections of (dis)ability and age. For those involved in these processes, there is also, as has been mentioned above, a significantly greater acceptance of risk by those ‘localised’ narrators striving to exert their interpretative authority over the events they witness and, if able to, record.

For example, Pearlman’s volume, in particular, devotes a significant section to experiences of surveillance before, during and after the 2011 protests. Tayseer attributes the ‘surveillance’ to which he, ‘[his] house, [his] phone [and his] contacts’ were subject to his involvement in ‘oppositional politics and human rights organizations’ (2018, p. 18). For Marwan, in contrast, making a record of any act of witnessing, even one not directly oppositional to a ruling power, is a matter of great personal risk, shouldered entirely by him and not his overseas Anglophone collaborators. When his apartment is searched by Daesh on a tip from a neighbour, Marwan figures his phone, hidden in a backpack, as a ‘bomb [...]so dangerous was that small device, filled with my notes, and my emails with the artist and other journalists’ (2018, p. 246). The irony of this image of hiding a bomb in a backpack from members of the group currently most notorious throughout the West for inflicting violence through such means is daring for a book in this body of literature.

But more than a dark joke, Marwan’s choice to use this metaphor aims to distinguish mundane reality from hyperbolic panic while playing up his awareness of the fears projected

onto Syria as a space. The passage also highlights how Marwan's identity places him in a precarious relationship with the spaces of both Syria and Europe (writ large) as he, as an Arab man, might be subject to suspicions of carrying such a bomb on behalf of the men currently terrorising him. By making clear how the insecurity imposed by groups such as Daesh is felt, sometimes exclusively, by the local populations in Syria, on an everyday basis due to everyday items like mobile phones, Marwan undercuts, without directly citing, Western preoccupations with Islamic terrorism as an apparent existential threat primarily and most significantly directed at the West.

Earlier in his story, in the ambivalent tale of his early Twitter notoriety, he makes a further critique of the lack of recognition by foreign journalists that requesting further narrative is equivalent to a demand that Marwan directly endanger himself for news organisations' profit: 'attention was dangerous' (2018, p. 180). In these relationships, it is the subject remaining in Syria who will have to 'concoct [...] answers for another sort of interrogator' if his anonymity is somehow compromised (2018, p. 180). Such a stark reminder might have been a feature of Yusra's stories on interactions with journalists along the path through Europe. Instead, the imbalance in mobility, knowledge and security between herself and characters such as Steven, Lam and Magdalena is never fully articulated or expanded on. Numerous times in the narrative, almost teasing a *deus ex machina*, Yusra tells of remembering Steven's existence just as she and her fellow travellers are met with a new obstacle to their progress.

In one example, deploying a tone of youthful naivety, she explains her conviction that he will be 'able to help us get out of here' as based on her impression that 'he must have a lot of life experience' (2018, p. 166). As is the case on the following occasions, Steven's advice is ultimately anticlimactic: 'stay in touch and [...] be careful' (2018, p. 166). Yusra similarly is repeatedly reassured by Lam and Magdalena's presence alongside them while travelling, despite their continual failure to intervene when they are mistreated by actors such as the police or to follow through on threats to immediately expose such mistreatment to the European public (2018, pp. 163, 171, 173–6 188). But such characters exist in relation to the contrasting 'villain' journalists who either align themselves with the police, such as the reporter Nujeen recalls was caught on camera deliberately tripping a refugee in Hungary<sup>14</sup>, or

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<sup>14</sup> Nujeen gives a relatively generous account of this incident. Petra Lazlo was filmed not only tripping a refugee who was carrying a child, and kicking a second child, but doing so in order to aid their capture by the police. She lost her job but her

otherwise show a dehumanising disregard for refugees' privacy or dignity (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, pp. 183–4).

This first story, a matter of rumour or second-hand witnessing for Nujeen, sits alongside her detailed citation of Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán writings and speeches during the period that Nujeen travels through Europe. Orbán's language is deliberately Islamophobic and populist, relying on a narrative of a coherent European *Christian* identity and making a claim that 'keep[ing] Europe Christian' is a natural and shared goal among Europeans, only achievable by 'defend[ing] our borders' (2017, pp. 179–180). This is also the part of the narrative in which Nujeen makes the most fervent pleas to her readers to perceive her as a potential contributor to Europe, not a potential threat. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the work of 'cultural mediation' done in the stories of the young women narrators is notable for its absence in the narratives by slightly older men like Kassem or Marwan or mature professional women like Khawla and Samar.

The great lengths gone to, especially by Nujeen, to placate a reader who might share the fears of Orbán or other critics of 'welcoming' refugee policies in Europe does so mostly by omitting any identification, or critique, of racist, xenophobic and specifically Islamophobic ideologies. This effort to spare white European feelings sits uncomfortably alongside Nujeen's insightful and knowledgeable critique of ethnic and religious discrimination which she experienced, witnessed and was comprehensively taught about in regard to the status and treatment of Kurds within Syria (2017, pp. 15–19, 53; see also Wekker, 2016; Applebaum, 2017). This narrator demonstrates a familiarity with the tactics of denying citizenship and equal access to education and healthcare, of representing a racialised community as an internal threat to the nation-state, of pushing to legislate for compulsory use of the official language and of geographically segregating populations. It is thus indicative of certain authorial and editorial choices that Nujeen, as a narrator, is presented as optimistically unaware of the roots and extent of hostility towards Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees

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2017 sentence to three years' probation was overturned by the Hungarian supreme court which found her actions morally incorrect but not criminal. She had previously attempted to sue the man she tripped, Osama Abdul Mohsem, for assault. (Francis, 2015; Agence France-Presse, 2016; France-Presse, 2018)

specifically.

In addition, such coyness around subjects such as xenophobia and racism might aim to avoid a production of Syrian narrators as incapable of impartial narrativization but it also undermines such actors analytical capacities and narrative labour. The opacity around co-authoring, editing and so on restrict our understanding of how concerns about the text as a product for consumer-readers shapes the permissibility of addressing these topics.

Furthermore, in the academic context, the financial and social obstacles to engagement with the outcomes of research focusing on Syrian refugees' own experiences, and even their storytelling work, compound the unbalanced relations of ownership and interpretive authority between the narrative, the narrator and the researcher (Pirie, 2009; Biesta, 2012; Besteman, 2013; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Vaughan *et al.*, 2019; Pfoser and de Jong, 2020).

Journalists and similar actors are present in many memoirs as wise, learned and powerful figures, able to move as they please and aid the refugee travellers on a whim (Boyd-Barrett, 2011; Paasche, 2016; Tazzioli, 2018). This mobility echoes colonial tropes of white rational masculine travellers outside of the West. The racialised logics central to understandings of who can act in such a position of authoritative observation is demonstrable when Yusra and her travel companions presume Lam, who is from Laos, (described as 'a little man' and categorised as of non-Arab Asian ethnicity by his 'almond eyes') cannot be a journalist but must be begging ('want money') (2018, p. 147). This first impression of Lam might be contextualised by Samar's inclusion of a typical scene in Damascus of 'cheap products along the edge of the sidewalk [...and] the funny Chinese woman who chat to their customers in broken Arabic' which might explain a stereotypical understanding by Syrians of East Asian subjects as visually and aurally racially distinct from Arab Syrians as well as positioned within an economic subclass (2012, p. 62).

In contrast, Fergal Keane of the BBC is, in Nujeen's narrative, the picture of sophisticated charm: he skilfully secures his interview by meeting Nasrine 'on the top deck of the ferry in Athens when she went up to see the sunrise' and his characterisation largely rests on Nujeen's description of his 'lovely voice like honey spreading on bread' (2017, p. 184).

When Nujeen recounts how ‘he laughed a lot’ when she outlines her dreams of being ‘an astronaut’ and going ‘to London to meet the Queen’, she sketches a world-wise but benevolent listener humouring a naïve girl with ideas unfitting of her circumstance (2017, p. 184). In Alia’s narrative, her American citizenship allows her to take the same steps as the Syrian refugees crossing Europe, but with completely different meaning, given her claim to be making the journey ‘as a journalist’ apart from the Syrians, among the ranks of the international observers (2018, p. 315).

In inverse logic, Lam tells Yusra that his identity as a former refugee trumps his professional identity as a journalist meaning that ‘it’s ok for me to take photos’ of ‘the desperate queue for tickets’ as refugees try to leave Hungary by train (2018, p. 163). Yusra tells of being ‘surprised’ by his justification, reiterating those common references to the ‘world’ bearing witness to events as an end in itself: ‘I hadn’t thought anything of his taking photos of us. It’s a bizarre situation. The world should see it’ (2018, p. 164). Cycling through different impressions of Lam, Yusra first judges him to more likely be a beggar than a journalist. Then, later, she understands him as a holder of professional status and privileges which can aid her in her journey and finally, with surprise, as a fellow occupier of that roomy signifier, ‘that word, refugee’ and thus the recipient of much more of her ‘respect and admiration’ as she wonders why ‘he would come back here to live through it again with us’ (Mardini, 2018, p. 164). But while Yusra sees Lam’s return to the fray as selfless and heroic, central to Kassem’s disillusionment plot is the placement of journalists alongside the Western states as failing in an international humanitarian responsibility.

In fact, his narrative implies that in their (economic) assessment of certain suffering in Syria as not newsworthy, they bear responsibility for the failure of states to intervene and thus for the displacement itself which then generates further news stories for these actors. His righteous anger is most explicit when he speculates on alternative timelines in which he would have predicted the flighty interest of journalists in the suffering of Syrian people at the hands of the Assad regime:

If we had known then that the world would be so deaf to our cries, we might have spent more time learning how to fight – how to establish supply lines, how to

create bomb shelters, how to store supplies for an extended siege – but we would still have taken up arms.’ (Eid, 2018, pp. 73–4)

In this passage, Kassem makes a claim on agency for those resisting Assad in Syria while claiming he parallel truth that the choice of ‘the world’ (international organisations, media outlets, heads of state) to refuse requests for meaningful aid, or even attention, to the Free Syrian Army undermined much of the optimism of ‘the best days of the Syrian revolution [when] we believed that we would soon unseat Assad, end the war, free all the regime’s prisoners and rebuild Syria as a democracy’ (2018, p. 86). Kassem invokes tropes of inevitable tragedy when considering the sacrifices he would make all over again but he also points to the specificities of the interactions between various international actors which gave these fighters false hope which left them unprepared for the brutality of the siege which was to come.

As ever, Marwan’s wry observations also provide commentary on this imbrication of the so-called observers in the economic and political processes at play; his statement refers to foreign journalists and others within Syria, but the point is equally applicable to other spaces attractive to ‘humanitarian witnesses’ such as the camp or the path. Recounting his own ‘first journalistic trip’, Marwan inserts a short aside to contend that ‘war tourism and freelance journalism were perfect twins’ (2018, p. 186). The accusation is so subtle it might almost be missed, and so self-reflexive on the matter of his own activities that it might pass as purely self-critique. However, in the context of the rest of the narrative and Marwan’s overall tone throughout, it is most likely that this is in fact suggests that the travels of (foreign) journalists already active in Syria are identical to a type of voyeuristic, almost consumerist tourist travel through space which even their presence acts to produce as Orientalised and dangerous (Saxon, 2013; Paasche, 2016).

Sections of Marwan’s narrative also highlights the role of the scandalised but enthusiastic Western audience for stories (and videos) of Daesh violence in Syria. This is in essence a market demand for content feature violence produced as orientalised, racialised, sectarian and regressive. Groups such as this survive on the drive of threatening the overspill of such violence and insecurity into the Western world, and Europe especially in this time period, as

well as the sponsorship of states and other actors who require them to be effective disruptive forces in the region. Therefore, the extensive coverage by media outlets and the voracious consumption of this violence, which is understood as peculiarly anti-Western, sectarian, misogynistic, homophobic, antidemocratic and barbaric, creates further motive for the publication of such narratives and video evidence of destruction and executions.

It is with an ironic reference to this market for 'ISIS horror' that Marwan acknowledges the lack of real protection his journalistic contacts in the Western world afford him, predicting that:

if the checkpoint Brothers found a problem, they'd yank me off the bus, throw me in jail, and systematically torture me before offering me the star role in a propaganda film, which would end with me getting shot in the head. American journalists would no doubt praise it as "slickly produced". (Hisham, 2018, p. 254)

This cynicism about the good intentions of Western journalists covering Syrian warfare and displacement is a particular feature of Marwan and Kassem's narratorial voices and not suited for the undertones of universal similitude and optimism maintained in Yusra and Nujeen's works. Marwan also notes how the power and influence of 'American journalists' and the like means they should be understood as participants, not observers, in the chaotic wartime landscape in Syria through their role in the discursive productions of space and subjects. And for Samar, her realisation of the inability to extricate oneself as a participant in the events of the demonstrations and the responding regime crackdowns comes from her growing awareness of her particularly gendered and ethnic vulnerabilities. Perceived as an Alawite 'traitor' by both sides and more vulnerable to intimidation as a single mother to a young daughter, she reflects that "I used to believe there was a simple sideline from which I could watch what was happening before my very eyes or follow people as they mobilized for the demonstrations but what had happened to me recently has made me stop" (Yazbek, 2012, p. 106).

Referring to previous instances of partial or misinformed stories from these sources, he cites a notorious moment in coverage of the conflict also referenced by interviewee Zaynab as infamous: the discovery of genocide and kidnapping of Yazidi men and women, respectively.

He recalls that ‘the Western media had been circulating news about the arrival of Yazidi women to our city, but none of those reports sounded credible to locals, for their sheer monstrosity staggered belief’, just before giving his own account of meeting a Yazidi mother and daughter undeniably held in captivity (2018, p. 171). Similarly, Kassem emphasises the power held by news corporations to shape the series of events leading to victory or defeat for the Free Syrian Army, telling how they could not ‘admit to such a low number’ of members in Moadamiya (three hundred) when speaking with international press because their survival depended on ‘attract[ing] money from overseas supporters’ (2018, p. 89).

This section has instead of understanding journalists and researchers and their ilk as rational observers insulated from the specificities and localities of place and identity which are discursively placed upon mobile subjects from non-Western spaces, analysis of these narratives and their contexts allow for a reading of their role in guiding, and often limiting, the contributions it is possible for refugees to make towards knowledge on their own condition, identities and desires. Journalists, researchers and others who produce observational stories about or collect narratives from refugees have roles as producers and shapers of discourse around political practices related to displacement which constitute biopolitical international systems of borders, citizenship and humanitarianism.

They are also part of the multiple relationships of international political economy between numerous actors: refugees of various places of origin, border and police officers, state policymakers, NGO and humanitarian workers, literary and journalistic audiences, international organisations such as the UN and its agencies, media and literary corporations, members of diaspora, social and state welfare workers in contact with refugees and so on. So too are Syrians working as journalists, of course. The following section considers the implications of these positionings of ‘citizen’ and professional journalists for the Syrian narrators and their stories.

### **Co-constitutive relations between ‘humanitarian-witnesses’ and Syrian refugee narrators**

This section explores the implications of the previous section’s arguments on how ‘professional’ storytellers, or collectors of stories, are produced in narratives and through

their relations with narrators outside of the text. In doing so, I examine how meaning-making around the identity and movement of Syrian refugees is shaped by interactions with these actors, such as journalists, even when they are not the narrator of a story. In one example, Nujeen's first encounter with a journalist in which she is asked to narrativize her experiences comes when she has just arrived onto the shore of Lesbos.

The two questions which bookend the interview are greatly telling as to the 'Spanish photojournalist's' understandings of his European audience and of the motivations for Syrians such as Nujeen to make the journey she has just completed from Turkey to Greece: "Is it the first time you have seen the sea?" he said [...] "What do you expect from Europe?" was his last question.' (2017, p. 150). From the production of Nujeen, and by implication most other Syrian refugees, as previously isolated and unexposed to a wider world to the presumption that a young disabled person, fresh out of a dinghy on the shores of Lesbos after hours at sea, is able to represent Syrians at large and articulate their expectations of Europe (which always signifies more than a geographical region in this context), the quick discursive work is clear and its possible reverberations and citations endless once the interview is broadcast (El-Tayeb, 2008, 2011; de Genova, 2017).

In fact, Nujeen signposts the encounter as deeply significant, as if she perceives a weight of responsibility upon her to speak on behalf of all subjects whose mobility is understood to constitute a crisis *for* Europe at this time. She tells her readers that she 'thought for a moment as this was important' and her answer, similar to elsewhere in the text, makes a claim upon universal values and the category, not only of equality, but of 'sameness' with European subjects: ' "I expect freedom like a normal person," I replied.' (2017, p. 150). Both the original utterance and the reproduction in the memoir can be understood as simultaneously a contestation of the possible implications of dependence or incapacity in the interviewer's question and a reification of his and presumably his audience's understanding of relations between refugee populations in Europe and the 'native' citizens.

Nujeen's aspiration towards normality, towards sameness supports an implicit production of Syria, and by association, the Middle East, as a space devoid of values such as 'freedom'. Therefore, while still working to contradict suggestions that Syrian refugees cannot be

‘normal’, the exchange continues the positioning of Europe as a monolithic space and community which benevolently offers social goods to less fortunate non-Western subjects who can successfully assimilate (Andreassen and Ahmed-Andresen, 2014; Paz and Kook, 2020). It is with this mind that we must assess memoirs in the genre of *Nujeen/The Girl from Aleppo* and *Butterfly* as intertextually linked and more than the sum of their parts; the combination of the narratives themselves and their afterlives (including the narrators’ post-publication public careers) can be said to operate as a marketing campaign for the ‘ambassadors’ for ‘good refugees’, a category formed at the intersection of racialised, gendered and (dis)abled logics (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 277).

The passage in Nujeen’s narrative which most explicitly demonstrates this aim comes towards the end, when she can give some account of her experiences of and contributions to Germany so far:

So here’s the thing as I see it. Yes, I know we are expensive. Looking after migrants in 2015 cost German taxpayers more than \$23 billion, according to the Economic Research Institute in Munich. But give us a chance and we can contribute. If you don’t want to let refugees in for humanitarian reasons, what about the benefit they bring to the economy? You actually have to be quite resilient and resourceful to navigate all the way here, through all those people wanting to rob and cheat you or close off the way. Most of us who have fled are skilled or educated. I know I didn’t go to school but I speak fluent soap-opera English. (Mustafa and Lamb, 2017, p. 265)

This is Nujeen’s attempt to meet those she understands as her discursive opponents where they stand, abandoning the claims on shared humanity for a pitch on the economic boons of allowing entry into a European society to ‘resilient and resourceful’ refugees who, despite false preconceptions, are ‘skilled or educated’.

In these and other narratives, another facet of the enthusiastic promotion of the macro benefits of admitting refugees contributes to the already existing practices and discourses of Syrian exceptionalism in European asylum policy, doing so by citing racialised tropes of civilization and advanced nationalism. For example, Pearlman’s contributor Sami\*, bemoans

the Syrian civil war, and other Middle Eastern conflicts as a stain on a pan-Arab reputation: ‘Arabs used to produce science and algebra and now we’re famous for killing [...] we should take responsibility to improve ourselves (2018, p. 276). The themes of self-reliance and collective contributions to a host, through civilized and rational knowledge-production and industry, are familiar and reiterated throughout many narratives. Ayham\* makes a similar statement, although tying the question of collective reputation to Syrian nationalist identity specifically, claiming that ‘when you said “I’m Syrian,” it carried respect’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 279).

This is similar to Lana\*’s feelings of shock at suddenly being treated with disdain in Lebanese or Jordanian airports which were cited in Chapter One. The guards’ behaviour towards Lana is reminiscent of how Palestinian travellers were treated in Syrian airports (Pearlman, 2018, p. 257). Kassem also narrativizes how his Palestinian heritage provoked ‘profanities’ labelling Syrian-Palestinians ‘worst of all’ from staff at a Lebanese airport (2018, p. 182). This is a description of a disjuncture between a former collective self-image of Syria as a stable *host*-state to refugees and a new series of events in which ‘just an hour by car [from Damascus], there is a calamity taking place that seems more like the stories we read about in the papers, one we cannot believe is happening here’ (Yazbek, 2012, p. 30). To reside and be identified with a space in which such events happen, rather than reading about violence in narratives such as those analysed here, is re-emphasised as unimaginable in pre-civil war Syria.

Furthermore, Ayham’s definition of ‘Syrian pride’ also seems a depiction of ‘the good life’, or an aspiration to middle-class lifestyles, already outlined as a co-constitutional part of system of capitalist-patriarchal nation-states: ‘We work hard. Even the poor enjoyed life. You know, everybody had picnics. They tried to buy decent cars. They gave their kids the chance for education’ (Pearlman, 2018, p. 279). Just as ‘good’ Syrian refugees aspire to economic self-reliance and a positive collective reputation, narrators are also seen to align with being ‘law-abiding’. This is a characteristic complicated by narrator’s (sometimes traumatic) experiences of the arbitrary application and avoidance of law in Syria as a result of corruption and cronyism.

For example, for narrators in Pearlman's volume such as Ahmed\* and Abdul Rahman\*, occupying a status of stable legality such as 'always waiting for the [green] arrow' at traffic lights or being 'trusted [by the company] even though I [...have] an Arabic, Muslim name' is a matter of pride but also an experience of new security (2018, pp. 242, 266). Wael echoes Yusra, concluding his narrative of a new life in Sweden with the assertion that 'here, [...] if you work hard, you can reach the highest positions of government [...] all that matters are your qualifications and capabilities' (Pearlman, 2018, p. 253). The familiar assertion of similitude and the understanding of European states, such as Sweden, as providing a type of meritocracy unavailable in Syria-past seems optimistic, perhaps willingly naïve, given the same narrators also give accounts of experiencing sometimes violent hostility.

I argue that these claims on being law-abiding, trustworthy, self-reliant and economically successful are in dialogue with existing discourses which have and continue to produce the figure of the refugee, particularly during the 'crisis' period, as essentially in opposition to these qualities, along racialised and gendered logics. Notably, Wael\* narrativizes a memory in which 'an old lady saw [his] wife's headscarf and said, "Why are you wearing that? Go back to your country!"' and explicitly claims that 'her behaviour is racist', citing legal freedoms to wear expressions of religious faith in Sweden (Pearlman, 2018, p. 254). By claiming the apparently exclusively European value of religious tolerance, Wael reverses the logics of assimilation discourses to position himself as a more successful subject of Europe than the woman demanding they leave. This demonstrates Syrian refugee narrators' navigation of the discursive landscape built up around them as political subjects and the possibility of deploying narratives often utilised against refugees, such as the undeniable desirability of Europe within international space, against those who react with hostility to their presence.

Yusra's message 'for all the people in Belgium and all over the world' which she sends out through Belgian journalist Steven, seems to aim to champion such resiliency and to distil this characteristic as one which she can inspire even non-refugees to aspire towards: "Don't you ever give up on something you want. [...] try and if you fail you have to try again and fight to the last breath you have." (2018, p. 224). While the context is not specified or might be assumed to relate to Yusra's Olympic swimming dreams, this choice of message as uniquely universal, for people 'all over the world', seems to cite existing discourses which task marginalised subjects, such as refugees, with bettering themselves and their economic

circumstances in a ‘self-help’ economy and society.

Such a message, which avoids categorisation as political by characterising obstacles to ‘something you want’ as surmountable with enough personal perseverance, might be interpreted as a diluted version of the type of ‘freedom speak’ which Marwan wishes to avoid parroting. She also, to an extent, overlooks her own personal history, in which even her best physical and mental exertions could not move her career past a coach who did not take the national girls’ team seriously, sending swimmers to international competitions by turn, rather than based on their fastest times as the boys were selected (Mardini, 2018, p. 49). However, given the incident around which the entire memoir is framed, the time spent pulling the dinghy to shore, Yusra’s message, based on surviving and witnessing, might indeed speak to her own critique of neglectful international actors: ‘fight to the last breath’ she advises, because no one cares that you could drown, and nobody is coming to save you.

## **Conclusion**

Aeham makes an analysis of the international dynamics of interpretation and knowledge-production but focuses on the connection between photography, a medium presumed to be a raw, empirical and objective method of witnessing, and his opportunity to narrativize around a single moment captured in an image. He contests the former’s reputation as a product for self-evidently readable consumption:

A photo can never really tell you what happened before or what came after. Like that picture of me sitting at a piano, singing a song amid the rubble of my neighbourhood. It was reprinted by newspapers all over the world, and some people said it’s one of the photos that will help us remember the Syrian Civil War. An image larger than the war. (Ahmad, 2019, p. 1)

The meaning of an image of Aeham himself slips through his and the photographer’s fingers the more and the further it proliferates, until it is not only assigned with more and different meanings to that which Aeham assigns to the moment but becomes ‘an image larger than the war’ itself. Paradoxically, the foundational role of this image in facilitating Aeham’s opportunity to narrativize his experience of the moment is made abundantly clear in how

prominently it features in the covers of all three versions of his memoir (see figures 10-12).

I have argued that in framing certain narrators, and thus their narratives, along gendered and racialised logics as local, subjective, naïve and inexperienced, editorial decisions, paratexts and other contextual communications such as cover-art and marketing campaigns all combine to produce certain storytelling texts as raw and authentic data, in the nature that photographs are understood. In both cases, the reader and the wider audience for the text is granted the capacity for interpretation or analysis; paradoxically, the stories of local innocents are both open to interpretation and self-evident just as the image is presumed to ‘speak’ a thousand words in the common idiom.

In this chapter, I have built on the analysis of the previous four chapters to make an argument for how narrators’ storytelling around refugee problems, figures and voices which re-focus on the troubled politics of gratitude, the unstable category of ‘human’ and the demonstration of analytical labour fit into an international political economy of Syrian refugee storytelling. I believe that this is a broad and rich area of study and, in this chapter, I have begun only an initial responses to research questions on this topic which warrants much more extensive investigation. What this chapter does offer is an overview of the relations between the texts at the forefront of the body of literature which partially constitutes a corpus of Syrian refugee storytelling including film, documentary television, comics and graphic novels, academic research, digital resources and much more. I have argued for a categorisation of the Syrian refugee memoirs analysed in this thesis on the basis of how their narrators, and the ‘messages’ associated with them, are produced as gendered figures of either a ‘Brave Man Activist’, a ‘Resilient Girl’ or a ‘World-Weary-Woman’.

I have also argued for further examination of imbalances in the extent of ownership over a narrative (constituted by editorial control, compensation and other methods of recognition) and the extent of personal risk endured by Syrian refugee narrators as a result of sharing stories with international audiences. I have connected such weighted relations between Syrian refugee narrators and other actors involved in storytelling to the positioning of those such as journalists as the ‘humanitarian witness’ to the Syrian refugee’s ‘survivor-witness-messenger’. I further contend that this is a role which allows for ‘humanitarian-witness’

figures to be discursively imbued with greater interpretative authority and a gendered and racialised notion of rational detachment than the narrator who contributes their testimony to the formation of a consumable product such as a memoir or a news article.

Finally, I have argued that one implication of this relationship is the role which actors such as journalists (and myself as a researcher) have in shaping the types of narratives produced around Syrian refugee identity. For example, I suggest that questions which imply worries about integration, or which produce the narrator as not sufficiently modern or worldly enough to adjust to life in Europe, play an intertextual role in shaping Syrian refugee claims, in certain narratives, on collective characteristics such as being law-abiding, productive and resilient capitalist subjects. This builds on existing problematisations of the politics of research encounters and knowledge production but makes an intervention on the specifics of Syrian refugee narratives and the context of humanitarian response to 'the refugee crisis', with applicability to storytelling by other refugees and to other genres of marginalised subjects giving testimony on suffering to Western audiences.

**Chapter Five: Images (Figures 1 – 16)**<sup>15</sup>

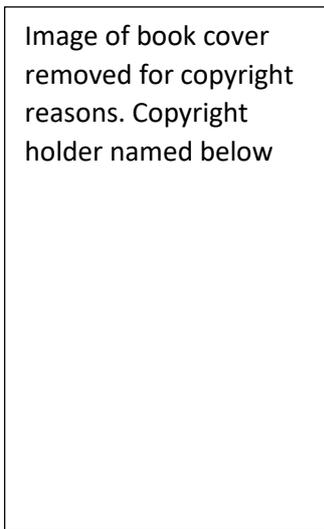


Figure 1: *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom* (2017) Cover, © STR/AFP/Getty Images

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<sup>15</sup> Creators and image copyright are reproduced where information was retrievable. Otherwise publisher information can be found in the thesis bibliography.

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copyright reasons.  
Source named  
below; copyright  
holder not declared.

Figure 2: Promotional photograph of *Nujeen* (2016), the first edition of the narrative published under a different title, shared from Nujeen Mustafa's Twitter account:  
<https://twitter.com/nujeenmustafa/status/728222041267113984>

Figure 3: *My Country* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2019) cover. Jacket design by Tree Abraham, photograph by Moises Saman/Magnum Photos. A version with a red background in place of blue behind the title was also released simultaneously.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holders named below.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holders named below.

Figure 4: *My Country* (2018) cover, Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Artists and copyright holders named below.

Figure 5: *Brothers of the Gun* (2018) cover, illustration by Molly Crabapple, jacket design: Anna Kochman, art direction: Greg Mollica. One World/Penguin Randomhouse.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holder named below.

Figure 6: *Butterfly* (2018) cover. Yusra portrait ©Thomas Duffé, Yusra swimming © Alexander Hassenstein/Getty Images, Water © Shutterstock

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holders named below.

Figure 7: *A Woman in the Crossfire* (2012) cover. Haus Publishing.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Artists and copyright holders named below.

Figure 8: *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus* (2013) cover. Cover design and art by Nick Misani. Penguin Books.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holder and source named below.

Figure 9: *Writing Revolution: The Voices from Tunis to Damascus* (2013) cover in a promotional image from EnglishPEN. *Diaries* was first published under this title and this cover in the U.K.. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holder named below.

Figure 10: *Und die vögel werden singen* (2017) cover – the first edition of Ahmad’s memoir, released in German. Published by Fischer Taschenbuch.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Copyright holder named below.

Figure 11: *The Pianist from Syria* cover, the 2019 US edition of Ahmad's memoir. Published by Atria Books.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Artists and copyright holders named below.

Figure 12: *The Pianist of Yarmouk* (2019), UK edition. Landscape image © Andy Spyra/LAIF, Camera Press, London and © Shutterstock, man at piano © Getty Images and © Shutterstock

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Artists and copyright holders named below.

Figure 13: *Dear World* (2017) cover image. Design by Pip Watkins. Illustration by Jill Tytherleigh. Photograph by Fatemah al-Shiha. Published by Simon and Schuster.

Image of book cover removed for copyright reasons. Artist and copyright holder named below.

Figure 14: *The Girl Who Rode A Shark: And Other Stories of Daring Women* cover image. Illustrated by Amy Blackwell. Published by Pyjama Press.

Image from book removed for copyright reasons. Artist and copyright holder named below.

Figure 15 – Image from *The Girl Who Rode a Shark* – illustration of Nujeen Mustafa by Amy Blackwell. Published by Pyjama Press.

Image and text from book removed for copyright reasons. Artist, writer and copyright holders named below.

Figure 16 – Text and image from *Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls*. Text written by Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo; Illustration by Jessica Cooper. Published by Penguin Books.

### Conclusion

‘If I ever write a book about this, I’ll call it *How to Spark a Revolution in One Week*.’ - Abu Tha’ir\* (Pearlman, 2018, p. 66)

Which readers would read *How to Spark a Revolution over Butterfly? A Woman in the Crossfire over Nujeen? Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution* instead of *The Pianist of Yarmouk*? How do the interviewees I spoke to imagine the afterlife of their narrative work? How many of Pearlman’s contributors have held a copy of *We Cross a Bridge and It Trembled*? Alia Malek reports that most members of her extended family in Damascus have praised her book in their congratulations messages, but, to her knowledge, fear of regime retribution means it has not been taken inside Syria (2018, p. 331).

The context of Abu Tha’ir’s suggested book title reveals his wry humour; prior to this sentence he lists the ways in which the regime’s actions all but guaranteed nation-wide demonstrations, describing the knock-on effect of funerals, protests, security forces’ crackdowns and thus more funerals (2018, p. 66). Thus, his suggestion is a satire of an instruction manual for a government perversely determined to push their citizens into rising up against them, rather than an earnest guide for would-be protestors who are barely present, let alone active in his narrative.

I have argued that the narratives analysed in this thesis are shaped by the contexts of their production and anticipation of their audiences, for instance in the strong branding within and outside the text of Yusra and Nujeen's memoirs which produces these narrators as figures of 'girl empowerment' alongside subjects like Malala Yousafzai. However, I have also argued that these texts are capacious and, with a variety of strategies including citation of a 'survivor-witness-messenger' figure, narrators demonstrate the productive potential of their intertextually positioned discursive work to make their own analytical interventions on the meanings of displacement and refugee subjectivity.

This conclusion will briefly survey these arguments as they have been made in the previous chapters, connecting them to summarise the overall contributions this thesis has made to a multidisciplinary body of literature concerned with meaning-making around Syrian and other refugee subjectivities and the narratives produced at numerous sites of knowledge-production.

### **Tracing the survivor-witness-messenger**

This thesis has explored possible interpretations of the texts which read for citations of this figure, whether through occupying the role, explicitly rejecting it or engaging with it ambivalently, while also examining such citations produce the narrators as international political subjects. The application of the 'survivor-witness-messenger' to readings of these narratives has facilitated insight on varying coercions to narrativize which Syrian refugees tell stories about and make intertextual connections between. I have suggested that such formal coercions produce relations laced with a politics of gratitude between narrators and, comparatively less hostile, interviewers. For example, reading the passage of Yusra's narrative which tells of her anxiety and reluctance to produce narrative for Lam and Magdalena again in Berlin in Chapter Two, with this figure in mind, provided an opportunity to examine the political complexity of these relationships.

The numerous strands of identity which both bind and separate Yusra and the journalists can be better understood through a theorisation of a figure through which a Western audience understands the function of narrative for a subject who needs to claim legitimacy, suffering and resilience. As has been referenced already, in Chapter Five, Lam justifies his journalistic

writing and photography focusing on the ‘refugee crisis’ to Yusra on the basis of his own experience of displacement from Laos (Mardini, 2018, pp. 163–4). The claim on similitude despite the different contexts of their experiences might be seen to amplify the pressures to demonstrate gratitude, which have been seen to be tied to any opportunity to narrativize offered to a subject occupying a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role. Furthermore, as the pair have been shown to aid Yusra and her group in their movement through Europe, sometimes strategically deploying their status as legitimate internationally mobile subjects to do so, there is an implication that Yusra owes Lam and Magdalena further narrative which they can present to consumer-readers, even if this labour may compound her symptoms of trauma.

As the journalists have aided in her survival of conditions deliberately produced by European border regimes to deter, debilitate or cause death, this sticky matter of gratitude is seen to involve a claim on access to whatever else Yusra has witnessed, implicitly seen as a mutually beneficial encounter. Given Yusra’s earnest enthusiasm to relay universalising messages of hope and resilience through other journalists like Steven (2018, p. 224), it might be inferred that Lam and Magdalena similarly presume she would be thankful for an exchange which benefits her friends and provides her an opportunity to deliver a message on the ‘problems’ of the Syrian civil war and the ‘refugee crisis’.

Elsewhere in this thesis, it has been seen how the mode of ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ storytelling is dominant in narratives aiming to communicate the dehumanisation of Syrian refugees as a matter of both an international humanitarian failure and a demonstration of universal truths about the troubled relations between figures of the refugee, the citizen and the human. For example, in Chapter Three, this figure helps to entangle the narrators’ production of a paradoxical relationship between a subject desperate to deliver testimony on how they have been dehumanised in the prison or on the refugee path, and their only potential audience: the (Western) international community who have already lost their humanity by failing to intervene in Syria (Eid, 2018, p. 110; Hisham, 2018, pp. 211, 265; Pearlman, 2018, pp. 18, 137, 160, 205–6, 218, 245). This sets up a contradictory framework for understanding, not only ‘humanity’ (at once reified and undermined) but also all that invoking this concept implies, such as shared community, solidarity and moral obligations of assistance across borders.

The outraged claims on humanity, and the associated holding of human rights (Arendt, 1951; Indra, 1989; Stonebridge, 2011; Cuttitta, 2018; Holohan, 2019) produce the urgency of the ‘messenger’ which is presumed, within the logics of the figure, to both motivate and legitimise the movement across borders which otherwise place a refugee subject in the shadow of figures of deviance like the terrorist, the economic fraud and the cultural invader (Puar and Rai, 2002; Puar, 2008; Weber, 2016; Qato, 2017; Martin, 2018; Rountree and Tilli, 2019). This figure, just like Dean’s ‘survivor-witness’, should be understood through the way in which its production makes a subject’s experiences meaningful and comprehensible to a specific audience, in this case, again, a sceptical Western public. However, the risks of reifying racialised geographies of safety and danger do not preclude the deployment of this role for the purposes of critiquing international abandonment and irresponsibility in the face of a violence categorised by narrators as dehumanising and thus beyond the pale.

Similarly, while this thesis makes a case for the deployment or citation of this figure as a method of storytelling which is shaped by existing discourses on their production as racialised and gendered mobile subjects, Syrian refugee narrators speaking on domestic violence, covered in Chapter Four, demonstrate that such a mode of narrativization can be held in a relation of ambivalence in the text. The cultural potency of framing narrative as testimony and of claiming an identity as a survivor forms an important context for these storytellers and an appreciation of how narrators can be playful with dominant tropes and forms of narrative allows for insight on complicated and nuanced interventions on gendered violence through testimony for a chosen audience.

Bringing these readings together in the context of an international political economy of refugee storytelling in Chapter Five, the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ is presented as an amorphous figure, capable of containing genres of narrative which engage in different types of discursive production around understandings of Syrian refugees. I have argued for this figure as a way of gaining insight into the ways that the international political economy of Syrian refugee storytelling shapes sub-genres based on gendered, (dis)abled and classed identities. I have argued that theorising narrativizing Syrian refugee experiences in relation to a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure can be used to perceive the way in which the narrative as commodity and the identities of narrators interact to produce diverging genres: in similar methods of delivering testimony, Kassem and Marwan can be associated with masculine understandings of courage and daring against a cruel inhumane world, Nujeen and Yusra with

a specific ‘girl empowerment’ version of female resilience in the face of suffering and Samar and Khawla with a similar cynicism to the Brave Man Activists but a different gendered relation to the duties of producing and collecting narrative as well as to responsibilities of care.

Thus the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ offers, as charted in the narrative I have produced between the first and the fifth chapter, an initial possibility for how to put words to the unspoken understandings we have of certain discursive work visible under a critical lens. This is a discursive productivity at play between Syrian refugee narratives and associated texts by other refugee regime actors which positions ‘we readers’ and ‘them (refugee) narrators’ in specific political relations to each other. The political and economic ties between the actors involved in production and consumption of these narratives (including in restricted public domains such as academia) can be understood as a product of the cultural relevancy of a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure and as a part of its construction.

Therefore, it is this nexus of political relations, and the ways in which it produces subjectivities, which informs the implications of being a ‘survivor’ as a Syrian refugee; will a narrative emphasise the Syrian refugee’s close escape from a failed postcolonial Arab state ruled by a dictator produced as racialised figure of inevitable corruption or from regressive and irrationally violent Islamist fundamentalists who, if not contained, will infiltrate European societies? Or will the narrative also or alternatively focus on the difficulty of surviving the refugee path in Europe or the ‘slow death’ of waiting in camps, detention centres and temporary housing?

In terms of what the narrator bears witness to, is the narrative centred on giving testimony about the violent repression of the Arab Spring and the human rights violations experienced and seen in the spaces of the prison, the streets and even the home? Or is there also capacity in their genre for their testimony to counter official narratives on the experiences of refugees abandoned by European coastguards to drown, subject to violence at borders and in camps, such as how Nujeen steps into a role as eye-witness to contradict reports of refugees attack the police in Hungary with weapons? Of what value is the witnessing, and the naming, of xenophobia and racism and their violences as narrators tell stories of moving through Europe and of settling? Do the discourses demanding gratitude allow for Syrian refugees to

acknowledge the exceptional status granted to them, as Tariq\* does, but also to bear witness to the racial hierarchies which produce divergence in their experiences and those of black African refugees sharing their boats?

The interweaving of the securitisation of mobility as a ‘problem’ and the consecration of ‘voice’ as the solution to all feminist and decolonising dilemmas within the word ‘messenger’ aims to provide a tool with which to more closely examine the place of gender, race, class and (dis)ability in the effect which understandings of gratitude, humanity and analytical agency have upon the types of narratives produced and the subjectivities they have a role in constituting. From studies of how women are produced as sites of identity borders through surveillance of how their bodies, clothes and behaviours are taken to indicate cultural difference, to knowledge on racial tokenism as a hierarchising and pacifying tool of white capitalist imperialism, discourses on who bears messages on behalf of an identity-based collectivity have been seen to be a matter of intersectional experiences of gendered and colonial political power (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006; Sigona, 2014; Chapman, 2016).

In a similar manner, the work of the ‘messenger’ for narrators deploying or citing this role, is not a straightforward matter of welcome access to ‘voice’ to correct the historic silencing of marginalised subjects along gendered, racialised, classed and (dis)abled lines. Just as Marwan cringes at the thought of a future as a famous Syrian refugee ‘parade[d] on the conference scene’ that ‘you could feed some freedomspeak’ (2018, p. 180), many narrators display some reluctance or ambivalence to ‘make sense’ from the violence and trauma of their experiences for the benefit of providing knowledge which confirms Western discourses on the location and possession of liberal values and practices, like democracy and the vaguer ‘freedom’.

In Chapter Four, Talia\* is quoted at length as she distances herself from the Western fetishization of the ‘veil’ as a symbol and practice of gendered inequality and repression but also makes an admission of the power of this narrative to make Syrian women question whether they need to take off the headscarf to participate in a movement for democracy. This is a gesture to the discourses in which the exclusive right to define freedom is repeatedly claimed by co-existing brands of European Christian-secularist nationalism and internationalism. Here, when Talia counters that ‘that’s not what freedom is about [...] freedom is living in a society that respects me [...] being free to express myself’, is the

location of distinction between Marwan's 'freedom speak' and a description for the liberty he ultimately cannot find in Raqqa under Daesh (2018, p. 280).

To further illustrate the contribution that theorising this figure makes to multidisciplinary studies of refugees and displacement, but particularly critical IR and feminist postcolonial research, I wish to suggest future possible applications of this theorisation to other research topics and expanded research on Syrian refugee storytelling. In terms of other contexts for narrative production, returning to Dean's original setting of an international court appears to me to be a fruitful starting point. Especially for those subjects who, after internal or external displacement, are required to travel to an international court in Europe, the 'survivor-witness-messenger' adds the analytic of movement and geography to Dean's 'survivor-witness' for an examination of the spatial politics of processes of international justice. Furthermore, this term acknowledges the predominance of overlapping experiences of human rights violations and war crimes with that of displacement, as well as the way in which the latter is produced in the discourses of humanitarianism and international governance as the primary 'problem' which demands policy and academic attention.

Furthermore, the 'survivor-witness-messenger' would provide a useful framework for examining different narratives of victimhood via displacement through the lens of gender and race. For instance, racialised and gendered identities play a significant role in the narratives produced to distinguish human trafficking from illegal immigration. The place of the international political economy of storytelling in how victim or criminal narratives are sought out, disseminated and consumed would benefit from including the 'survivor-witness-messenger' figure, theorised as a discursive device for drawing on existing discourses which support the narrative work utilised to produce political subjects with (anti)trafficking regimes.

### **Building a study of storytelling as significant discursive practice within IR and IPE**

This thesis has done broad descriptive work in developing a study of Syrian refugee storytelling as a heterogeneous body of narrative with gendered, classed, ethnic, age and (dis)abled politics shaping its subgenres and the differing practices around them as well as the implication of these stories for the life experiences and positionality of their narrators. Of course, narrative research is a well-established sector of, not only refugee studies, but the

social and political sciences at large. However, I would contend that there is, at present, an exclusion of the contexts and histories of production, publication and consumption of narratives from assessments of significant practices and discursive engage within international relations or other global studies of displacement.

Furthermore, where such studies have been carried out, there has not been a substantial attempt, as there is in this thesis, to bring these analyses of international political economies of storytelling into dialogue with the texts themselves and their own intertextual citations (Liddington and Smith, 2005; Colvin, 2006; Biesta, 2012; Fassin, 2013; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Dell'Orto and Wetzstein, 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019). This project has established grounds for investigating the particularity of certain international narrative methods, such as the memoir, the anonymised collection of stories and the journalistic interview, as significant practices of knowledge-production, meaning-making and producing political subjects. Thus, this thesis has contributed to existing bodies of research with Foucauldian and Arendtian bases by identifying sites of power relations, and thus the production of certain subjectivities, both within Syrian refugee narratives and in the contexts of their production (Arendt, 1951; Foucault, 1980, 2008, 2019). This also adds to a growing collection of work beginning to include the refugee research complex in analysis of (Syrian) refugee experiences, which do not end at camps or borders.

Specifically, within the study of refugee storytelling, an analysis of the manner in which labour is carried out, capital is produced and exchanged and narrative is packaged as commodity is overdue and essential to understanding the extensive network of actors involved in producing discourse on refugees and displacement, beyond policy-makers, media and humanitarian organisations. This thesis has only begun to examine how these economic relations are imbricated in the same logics of gratitude, truncated humanity and selectively recognised analytical labour which are narrativized in the text themselves. Further study would look to how these track with relations of remuneration and status which are ongoing and productive of subjects understood as international experts or localised sources of data (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019; Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke, 2020).

It is also important to note that this research is matter of theorising the commodification not just of refugee experiences but specifically of traumatic memories, as demanded by the

frameworks, described in Chapter One, of ‘problem’, ‘figure’ and ‘voice’ as well as the ‘cultural valence’ of a ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ mode of storytelling (Dean, 2017, p. 635). I have aimed to avoid an essentialised and superficially psychological theorisation of trauma and any fixing of what telling stories of violence and suffering means for each Syrian narrator. But I also rely on an existing foundation of feminist methodology which does not shy away from an ethic of care as a politics which can be claimed in research and beyond (Ackerly and True, 2008; Robinson, 2011). I have balanced this with an understanding that a researcher, co-author or interviewer rarely, if ever, holds the capacity to assess the benefit or damage to a narrator who shares a traumatic story and such a storyteller need not be infantilised by an assumption of incapacity to exercise agency over their choices to narrativize.

But what little consensus on trauma there is acknowledges that harm is likely and unpredictable in scenarios not equipped for prioritising the wellbeing and safe treatment of a person who has suffered or witnessed violence and other traumas. The demonstrable market which demands further narratives from refugees, especially Syrians based on the infamy of the civil war and the ‘refugee crisis’, poses questions which require pause and methodological reflexivity from feminist postcolonial researchers. Seeking (white) innocence through an avoidance of such troubled relations is not possible or desirable (Hill, 1997; Ahmed, 2004; Thomlinson, 2014; Wekker, 2016; Applebaum, 2017; Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke, 2020). But with analysis, and reassessment, of our participation and complicity in an industry which places value on narrative-products that provide voyeurism on displacement trauma for consumer-readers, working to put such a feminist ethic of care into practice in research design, analysis and dissemination might be a first step.

Therefore, a core element of this effort to build a study of storytelling as an international discursive practice co-constituting political subjects involves a turn to the (often white Western) audiences and readers of Syrian refugee narratives as objects of study. From the recommendation paratexts which figure consumption of these stories as ‘necessary’ for those who desire, or need, to better understand the experiences of contemporary refugees, it is then important to ask who are the audiences that read these narratives as a practice of their own self-improvement or as a stand-in for political activism? Additionally, in academic scholarship which results in the production of original narrative texts, I would ask: who are

the researchers benefiting economically and professionally from the storytelling labour contained in this research?

When Syrian refugee narrators are seen to make desperate claims in their stories on belonging within humanity, it is necessary to ask how static subjects and citizens have claimed normative categorisation as naturally and undoubtably human through discourses of race, gender, capital and (dis)ability (or capacity (Puar, 2017))? If these readings through the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ figure have shown the coercive work of gratitude which demands narrativization, how have the systems of citizenship, asylum and borders produced states and their populations as ‘generous’? How have Western humanitarian actors and sympathetic researchers produced subjects, including the overlapping groups of Syrian refugees and Muslim women, as emissaries of a limited type of voice?

This thesis has aimed to build the foundation necessary to ask these types of research questions. It has also begun an initial foray in an analysis of the actors involved in narrative production, including myself as a researcher, as racialised, gendered, classed and (dis)abled political and economic subjects produced through shifting relations of power.

### **Looking forward**

In terms of further avenues for research which expand upon this thesis, I suggest two possible paths forward. The first involves a ‘study up’ of the international academic research industry and its recruitment, paid and otherwise, of subjects who have experienced particular marginalisations and vulnerabilities, who then face further institutional barriers to carrying out academic work themselves and whose narrative labour is not recognised or rewarded as the interpretative work of the researcher will be. This would mean an expansion of focus to include participants and objects of study other than refugees; relations between researchers and undocumented immigrants, drug users, sex workers, those living in poverty and others across numerous categories are gendered, racialised, classed and (dis)abled in a manner which positions this subjects in unequal political and economic relation to research institutions and researchers themselves.

I would consider this a multidisciplinary area of study of the academy in the vein of Gloria Wekker (2016) and Sara Ahmed's (2012) work which deploys the methods and methodologies of autoethnography and sociology through a feminist and critical race studies lens. This proposed research topic would be differentiated somewhat by claiming space, also, within IR, with the intent of resisting the production of the industry of social and political science as an invisible or detached observer to the events and relationships which constitute international relations. Following Wekker and Ahmed's direction, this research would investigate the politics of silencing or simply of not listening which keeps many such protests from those who are made objects of study from generating change in research.

There is of course extensive feminist and postcolonial work which critiques the presumption of rational and unbiased methodologies in IR and which theorises the researcher as a co-producer of any data. But even this scholarship often leaves the wider political and economic network of their institution, funding, professional collaboration, teaching and other knowledge-production practice such as conferences unexamined as an international political economy with significant implications for the policies brought to bear on the participants in its research. Katerina Rozakou (2017, 2019) and Heath Cabot (2017, 2019) are notable exceptions to this and provide a useful blueprint for how to begin formulating research questions around the ways in which discourses and practices produced by academic institutions and actors are involved in reifying much of the gendering and racialising productions of subjectivity which they critique.

A second option for building upon this thesis would involve data collection from multi-media sources which constitute the wider field of refugee storytelling, not limited to one nationality as I have limited this project to Syrian refugees. Analysing multi-media source would require including video and digital forms of storytelling, such as social media applications and interactive websites purpose-made for refugee storytelling. Such an investigation might also undertake archival work in an effort to give a genealogical account of refugee storytelling and the growth of an international political economy.

For example, charting trends in publishing, marketing and sales of self-declared refugee memoirs across the last seventy or eighty years would facilitate research questions looking to

contribute knowledge on the ways in which refugee narrators have come to be recognised as a comprehensible figure with certain meaning-making work to do in their narrative. Just as Dean (2017, 2019) gives an account of the discursive shifts over time as a possible interpretation of the waning relevance of a ‘survivor-witness’ figure in favour of a ‘humanitarian witness’, such research would provide an opportunity to historically and geographically ground the theorisation of the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ and suggest alternative ways refugee narrators have been understood at different points in time.

In spheres of policy and activism, this research could be applied to make a case for prioritising support during refugee encounters with actors requesting their storytelling work. Such assistance might be modelled on organisations such as On Road Media which offer legal advice, third-party representation and expert or peer-support networks to subjects approached by media and other actors looking to produce narrative based on their experiences specifically as a marginalised person.

This project facilitates recognition of the aspects of displacement which shape refugees’ capacities to make the most informed decision possible about agreeing to storytelling work as well as to maintain a confident feeling of ownership over the narrative. Communicating this to non-academic actors interacting with displaced populations would be valuable in suggesting that actors who take responsibility for other aspects of refugees’ security include this phenomenon of demand for refugee narrative in that duty of care. Furthermore, those within organisations that offer direct assistance but also collect and publish narratives (such as CARE, Amnesty International, UNHCR and more) might benefit from considering the politics of such interactions with their service users and even implementing structures of accountability to guide decisions on the role of narrative in their work.

In summary, this thesis is a product of sometimes contradictory needs to complicate that which appears simple, and then to produce a narrative which applies a necessary amount of simplicity to that which I have insisted is deeply nuanced, complex and sometimes unreachable. In a Twitter thread, posted on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021, Dr Ammar Azzouz<sup>16</sup> wrote that

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<sup>16</sup> Azzouz is an analyst at Arup and Research Associate at the University of Oxford, holding a PhD in architecture from the University of Bath. He has published his academic research on plans for post-war reconstruction in Syria (Azzouz, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) as well as journalist and policy writing on more wide-ranging topics related to the Syrian civil war and displacement. (Katz and Azzouz, 2018; Azzouz, 2019c)

‘some UK-based academics turned our pain and trauma into an opportunity for them, [they] saw in us a funding opportunity’ (2021). While understanding this text as one of many narrative fragments making up the discursive landscape that has been explored in this thesis, I acknowledge that this assessment, seen earlier in other forms, is one I came to agree with rapidly upon beginning my doctoral project.

Incorporating this perspective into my research did not necessitate a great departure from my intention of investigating how Syrian refugees as capable and agential actors navigate the immense weight of discourse about their identity placed upon them. However, in acknowledgement of this analysis, I did formulate new research questions which examined how indeed various actors, including myself, have enjoyed opportunities on the basis of experiences of suffering made notorious through the production of ‘crisis’ and the subsequent self-perpetuating power of trends in literary and academic publishing to create greater economic incentive.

Furthermore, I integrated this into the discourse analysis of the interview texts and of the other narratives as a constitutive part of the examination of the stories through the ‘survivor-witness-messenger’ role. This means that the arguments that have been presented on the politics of gratitude, humanity and analytical authority are made from an approach which understands the textual treatment of these themes as inseparable from the political and economic relations surrounding their production. So, as the power of gratitude politics to coerce narrative from Syrian refugees has been argued for, I have analysed the dynamics of my own relation to interviewees and the limits of collaborative methodologies in light of our positionalities as racialised, classed and gendered subjects.

The relevance of the politics of gratitude and its insidious place in numerous aspects of refugee experience is echoed when Azzouz notes the irony of occasions he has witnessed when:

[...] they invite us to be on the table, then maybe it’s time to take photos to show they did have a Syrian voice [and] we should be enormously grateful [and] thankful to be allowed to the table [...]

How many times have we attended a talk on Syria without a Syrian in it? It felt like going to Pride without any gay marching. Or like International Women's Day with all men panels. But it's fine. They are all Syria experts. And we are not. (Azzouz, 2021)

The global systems of power which preclude Syrians from being experts on Syria is not new nor unique to this population of refugees and marginalised subjects. But an analysis of the discourses and the practices by which this international political economy of storytelling *and* interpretation is maintained is urgent and this thesis has aimed to begin such work. I have also shaped my work in response to my reflexivity to acknowledge the implications this international political economy of storytelling has for Syrian refugee subjects' own production and dissemination of knowledge on these structures which are designed to restrict access to research and recognition. I believe that the intervention made in this thesis might form a useful foundation for building knowledge on how to shape strategies to redistribute the benefits and authority of expertise.

Thus, the overarching aims of this thesis have been to contribute an analysis of Syrian refugee storytelling and its contexts of production, dissemination and consumption, to critical multidisciplinary academic research and to any other relevant arenas of knowledge-building. The inclusion of critiques such as Azzouz's in the discursive landscape considered is both necessary and belated. But his words also provide a timely echo of the core arguments of this thesis which has charted how a role based on making suffering linked to displacement 'culturally legible' can illuminate Syrian refugee narrators' interventions on Western discursive production of their subjectivity as aberrant 'problem', abstracted 'figure' and fetishised 'voice' through their own narratives on the gendered and racialised politics of gratitude, humanity and the selective recognition of analytical labour.

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