MULTILINGUALISM, TRAUMA, AND LIMINALITY IN *THE BULLET COLLECTION*: CONTACT ZONES, CHECKPOINTS, AND LIMINAL POINTS

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Abstract: Informed by theories of code-switching, memory, and trauma, my reading of Lebanese American Patricia Sarrafian Ward's diasporic novel *The Bullet Collection* (2003) centers on its multilingual usages to demonstrate how language play makes visible states of liminality or in-betweenness: between Lebanon and the US, the past and the present, the present and the future, childhood and adulthood, and trauma and recovery. I argue that this liminality, laid bare by a creative interpretation of the (mis)- and (dis)uses of multilingualism, is a concept that ties trauma, nostalgia, and homeness together and is fleshed out in three psychodynamic spaces: social contact zones, checkpoints, and liminal points. I zero in on code-switched materials, both overt and covert, to reveal how they are deeply, if often inconspicuously, connected to expressing traumas and (re)negotiating identities. By adopting this approach, I contribute, first, to the field of literary linguistics, relatively under-explored in connection with Arab American and Anglophone Arab fiction, and, second, chart a new pathway towards decolonizing trauma studies by examining its relationships with multilingualism, war, and nostalgia.

Keywords: code-switching, multilingualism, Lebanese civil war, trauma, nostalgia, Patricia Sarrafian Ward

> I used to lie to people I met about where I was from; it was just easier. For years, I felt utterly out of place, like I had no real home. Those first days in the States, I was scared to go outside *because everyone spoke English* . . . We'd been forced to leave under such terrible circumstances, and we all thought this was temporary, a kind of crazy dream we just had to get through, and then we'd go home. But we never did. (Patricia Sarrafian Ward, 2016, emphasis added)

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> Mummy lit a cigarette and explained that indeed I might never understand everything, which angered me. —You have to pick a few things, she explained. Just a few, and work on them a long time. (Patricia Sarrafian Ward, 2003: 125)

In the second quotation, from *The Bullet Collection*, sometime in the early years of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), twelve-year-old Marianna feels frustrated by her inability to understand the truth underlying a love affair between her older sister Alaine and Michel – a Swede who speaks English with a "North European accent" (2003: 95). Instead of divulging what she believes has taken place, the mother, Ani, prescribes for her daughter a general method for gaining greater knowledge in order to have an informed opinion: selecting then deciphering the salient features of an issue to be able to see the larger picture. In this article, I heed Ani's advice by focusing on the deployment of multilingual items in this novel with the aim of uncovering a web that links these items not only to personal identity – as many studies of code-switching have done – but also to war-induced trauma embedded in nostalgia for a lost home(land) when experienced from an exilic viewpoint (in the United States). Broadly speaking, code-switching is the alternative use of two languages in the same stretch of discourse by a bilingual speaker (Bullock and Toribio, 2009).

Published in 2003, *The Bullet Collection* by Lebanese American Patricia Sarrafian Ward is a semi-autobiographical trauma account – divided into three parts titled "Autumn," "Summer," and "Winter" – of her harrowing experiences growing up in war-time Lebanon and of her brief and equally traumatizing sojourn in the US (as reflected in the first quotation). Like Marianna, born of a Lebanese Armenian mother and an American father, she too relocated with her family at seventeen in the late 1980s to the US. In the few analyses of this novel, critics have categorized it either as a postwar English-language Lebanese novel produced in the diaspora or as an Arab American text. In *Breaking Broken English*, Michelle Hartman points out that while studies of Arab American writings are burgeoning, few of them "study language use in any depth or engage language as a primary site of investigation" (2019: 51). She also states that even within literary postcolonial studies, which do examine language uses and especially multilingualism, "Arab and Arab American writers are glaringly absent" (51). Therefore, she considers any language-centered approach to this corpus innovative because it "can also help us think more about English, the multiple englishes that exist and can exist, and American writing more generally" (51). This is fortunately beginning to change, as seen, for example, in Sirène Harb's *Articulations of Resistance: Transformative Practices in Contemporary Arab-American Poetry* (2019). Additionally, there are a few language-focused articles dealing with Arab North American fictional prose – Rabih Alameddine's 1998 *Koolaids: The Art of War* (Hout, 2018a), Randa Jarrar's

2008 *A Map of Home* (Hartman, 2019), and Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (Hout, 2018b). Further afield, Egyptian British Ahdaf Soueif's fiction has received the lion's share of scholarly interest in code-switching (Ayad, 2016; Albakry and Hancock, 2008; Hassan, 2006).

Carol Fadda-Conrey writes that Randa Jarrar is keen on "transforming the Arab-American as well as mainstream US landscapes by highlighting multiple nodes of experience and memory, particularly the pain and war trauma that are lived and relived within the US space" (quoted in Hartman, 2019: 178). Like *A Map of Home, The Bullet Collection* is steeped in trauma, displacements, both physical and emotional, and war; and like the former's protagonist Nidali, Marianna exhibits what Fadda-Conrey calls a "translocal consciousness" (178), a concept that I explore in connection with multilingualism, specifically code-switching, nostalgia, and war-generated trauma. Like Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003), and Sahar Delijani's *Children of the Jacaranda Tree* (2013), *The Bullet Collection* addresses "the struggle for survival, physical and cultural, within contexts of injustice and violence, emigration, and transnationality" (Carosso, 2014: 202). Although it does not address the post-9/11 backlash against Arabs in America (since its events end in 1989), as a novel published in the wake of this cataclysmic event, it joins other 21st-century Arab American texts in eschewing narrow definitions of "nationality, ethnicity, or genre," focusing instead on "the predicament of disidentification as well as social and political exclusion" (Carosso, 2014: 202).

Parallel to Hartman's concern about the dearth of language-minded approaches to Arab American works is another one about the "complex and contested relationship between trauma studies and postcolonial criticism," whose aim is to produce "a decolonized trauma theory that attends to and accounts for the suffering of minority groups and non-Western cultures" (Andermahr, 2015: 500). In 2003, Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy advocated the transformation of trauma-related studies from a Eurocentric field to another that would be better suited to tackle "the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture" (2003: 5). Five years later, this appeal was supported by similar critiques advanced by Roger Luckhurst, Michael Rothberg, Stef Craps, and Gert Buelens. Since 2008, as Irene Visser aptly puts it, "trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies have been uneasy bedfellows" (2015: 250). All of them contend that the improved model should be mindful of the social, historical, religious, and spiritual contexts of non-western trauma writings rather than indiscriminately imposing on them the narrow dictates of either psychoanalysis or deconstruction. Despite mounting theoretical attention to historicized expressions of trauma, Craps argued, as late as 2015, that scholars have remained less preoccupied with the development of practical alternatives to the dominant trauma discourse; for this to happen there needs to be a

"specialized knowledge of other *cultures and languages*, of the different media and forms of expression they use, and of local beliefs about suffering and healing" (2015, emphasis added). Sonya Andermahr remarks that "the challenge now is to apply [new] insights" (2015: 503) to literary texts in which culturally dependent responses to trauma are quite evident (Visser, 2018: 129). Notwithstanding the conceptual awareness of the importance of language in trauma narratives, "very little has been done [so far] in relation to the study of the linguistic patterns of traumatized characters' speech" (Ben Amara and Omar, 2018: 118). Like numerous (multilingual) authors invested in the political and poetic representations of the Lebanese conflict and its psychological ramifications, Sarrafian Ward (as her compound surname signifies) is ethnically, racially, culturally, and linguistically mixed, exhibiting different allegiances that, depending on context, may or may not be in conflict or competition with one another, as her novel shows. Similar to Hanadi al-Samman's argument in *Anxiety of Erasure* (2015), but without delving into biographical criticism, mine is predicated upon viewing Patricia Sarrafian Ward as using her personal trauma as an instrument to investigate the psychological effects of exile via/on Marianna.

Bill Ashcroft argues that the postcolonial text is "a heterotopic space in which the boundary between self and other blurs" and "meaning is negotiated" (2015: 2). He locates the postcolonial aesthetic "in the materiality of [the text's] language," or mix of languages I would add, because it is "the space of contact between cultures" (6). Didem Başak Ergün states that "[a]rguably, Lebanese history belongs to this group of non-western trauma experiences that has been long ignored by such theories despite having connections to British and French colonial and postcolonial legacies" (2018: 157). But as Lindsey Moore explains, Lebanon is not a postcolonial nation in the classical sense, like Algeria or Egypt, because it "has been and remains a site of competing influences that extend beyond Western powers and clients" (2018: 132). Therefore, while a radically different approach to quintessentially non-western trauma writing is called for, interpreting a culturally hybrid one like *The Bullet Collection*[1] with focus on its multilingual practices as part and parcel of its very traumatic/nostalgic nature and identity politics would be equally innovative and a step in that direction.

Informed by theories of literary linguistics (code-switching), memory, and trauma, as appropriate, my close reading of *The Bullet Collection* centers on its multilingual usages to demonstrate how language play makes visible what I perceive as a liminal voice, whether that be Marianna's or other characters', in specific situations. By 'liminal' I mean being in or signifying a state of in-betweenness: between Lebanon and the US, the past and the present, the present and the future, childhood and adulthood, and trauma and recovery. To do so, I zero in on code-switching, both visible (overt) and invisible (covert or implied), in narrated

passages as well as in dialogues. My aim is to reveal how certain code-switches are strategically inserted in the text and are deeply, if often inconspicuously, connected to expressing traumas and to (re)negotiating complex personal and collective identities within the discourses of nostalgia and homeness. By adopting this approach, I will be, first, contributing to the budding field of literary linguistics, still relatively under-explored in connection with both Arab American and Anglophone Arab fiction, and, second, charting a new pathway towards decolonizing trauma theory by examining its layered relationships with multilingualism, war, nostalgia, and feelings of belonging and not belonging.

One of the early trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth (1996) stresses the unspeakable nature of traumatic experiences, i.e., the manner in which they exceed the boundaries of language. Although many postcolonial critics have contested her Eurocentric approach, I make use of some of her observations relevant to language use. From this perspective, attention should be directed as much to what texts explicitly say as to, if not more, to their gaps, breaks, and silences. Caruth's approach has been adopted to mark out the persistent themes of recollecting memories of home and of the pangs of exile that pervade many diasporic feminist narratives. Many critics continue to insist on the importance of "how language operates, because it introduces to them the cracks and crevices of victims' speech through which the full impact of trauma is likely to be visible" (Ben Amara and Omar, 2018: 123). Waïl Hassan defines 'translational literature' as "performances of interlinguistic, cross-cultural communication, operating on several levels of mediation and contestation" (2006: 755). While *The Bullet Collection* does not go as far as Ahdaf Soueif's 1999 novel *The Map of Love* (Hassan's focus) in doing so, Marianna reveals a sense of agency as a trilingual first-person narrator and translator that assists monolingual characters, but not always monolingual readers, in comprehending foreign speech. Linking Arabic and, to a lesser extent, French code-switching to trauma and/or the negotiation of personal and collective identities in the contexts of the civil war as well as the family's exilic sojourn in the US, I contend specifically – in connection to my larger argument about the ways in which code-switching uncovers different types of liminality – that many of the code-switches are found in psychodynamic spaces that are fleshed out in three areas: social contact zones, checkpoints, and what I see as liminal points. A liminal point is defined in physiology, psychology, or psychophysics as a threshold at which a stimulus is strong enough to produce a physiological or psychological response. It is also the boundary of perception because on one side of a threshold a stimulus is perceivable but on the other side it is not. Furthermore, I show that while the first two types of spaces are (more) visible in dialogues that involve different interlocutors and a mix of languages, the third is introspective and dream-like, centered on specific images that are triggered by certain emotions and/or memories. All three types feature the cooperation, but

sometimes also the clash, between the three languages that Marianna employs and inhabits, as do several other characters with whom she interacts and describes. In locating code-switches in these three spaces and tracing them throughout the text but also along chronological time – both severely fragmented in trauma fiction (Whitehead, 2004: 3) – I reveal how code-switching itself, towards the end, switches into a code that is more visual than verbal and therefore in need of a decoding that could serve as a conclusion to the novel.

Contact Zones: Flirting in French and Succumbing to Silence

In many instances, a trauma narrative, "by nature autobiographical, also means a return to the language in which the past was experienced—a language that is at times different from the one in which the (autobiographical) narrative unfolds" (Haragos, 2016: 310). This claim cannot apply unequivocally to *The Bullet Collection* because Marianna is originally bicultural and bilingual (and educationally trilingual). So she does not have a mother tongue per se but has her memories encoded instead in the languages of the context and the characters involved. Her familiarity with three languages is stressed. Eager to prove her Arab-ness despite her "blond hair and blue eyes," a young Marianna explains to Lebanese workmen that her "baba's American" (20). Although left untranslated and typographically unmarked, 'baba' clearly means 'my dad.' To stress her bilingualism even more, Marianna tells us: "They asked questions *in Arabic* [a covert code-switching technique called 'tagging'], testing me, and I answered without mistakes even though we always spoke English at home, so they gave me sweets as a reward" (21, emphasis added). Nonetheless, she was "too shy" to play with Alaine and the neighbors' children "because [she] looked so different from everyone else with [her] pale hair and eyes" (167). By contrast, Alaine's greater ability to blend in is signaled by two food items – one western, the other eastern – in the same sentence when we learn that, before meeting up with the other kids, she always brings with her "cookies or fatayer" (167). Like 'baba,' 'fatayer' (pies) is neither translated nor marked but left this time for the monolingual reader to look up. Unlike Alaine, Marianna crosses over socially with much greater caution and self-awareness. Years later – while staying with her sister at her mother's cousin's (Vartan's) apartment in Rome, she realizes that she "wasn't even truly Lebanese, but part Egyptian, Armenian, American. [She] wasn't anything" (159). Her looks – contrasted with Alaine's "dark hair" (37) and "*pearly*" (149, emphasis in original) Armenian skin – reflect neither her Armenian nor her Arab ancestry.

Trying to be useful, Marianna visits the sick and the injured at the American Univerity Hospital, where she meets Paul and her trilingualism proves advantageous. To begin with, Paul, a young French paratrooper, is a liminal figure: he is

only himself at the moment of "stepping from the plane, [and] taking pictures of the world as he falls, of the *tilting line between sky and earth* (201, emphass added). He is injured by a bomb when standing on the balcony (i.e., between the outside and the inside of a building), and soon confesses to Marianna and the medical team that he is from two countries because he was "adopted when he was very young and could barely recall his [biological Lebanese] mother and father" (204). After the news is out that he is originally Lebanese, a group of men and women show up at the hospital and introduce themselves "in Arabic" as his new "family in Lebanon" (206). At this point, Paul looks to Marianna for translation before a journalist steps forward and speaks first. Then we read that "[t]here was a silence as Paul digested this strange offer" (206). When told that he should stay because Lebanon casts a magical spell from afar, he remains unconvinced and attributes his temporary presence to chance; Marianna, however, shakes her head, "insisting on the truth of the spell that had him in its thrall" (207). No story makes sense to Marianna unless it reveals a deep connection to Lebanon. And no person will she emotionally tie herself to unless he or she is also connected to it in an almost organic way. Before Paul's departure, when the French chaplain whispers in French that he "can marry [them] two now," Marianna is thrown into "a state of alarm," not because she is a minor who would need parental approval first, but because such a move might take her away from Lebanon. Her fear is expressed indirectly when the chaplain touches her "hair with the tips of his fingers, saying [again in French] he had not meant to frighten [her]" (207). As discussed earlier, for others but mostly for Marianna, her hair is the very symbol of her foreignness within the Lebanese Arab context. It is a delicate part of her being, so when a foreign person touches it, she feels as if her foreign half is being highlighted at the expense of her Arab one. Interestingly, while the French being spoken remains invisible, the reader is invited to think of what hearing it – whether through knowledge of French or simply imagining it as a foreign tongue – might cause Marianna to feel.

Through Marianna, Ward opts for what Meir Sternberg, in a 1981 article, identified as 'selective reproduction,' i.e., the intermittent insertion of items belonging to a foreign language in order to show that a character is speaking in it, as opposed to the much more radical 'vehicular matching,' which displays such items wherever and whenever it is linguistically required. Ward/Marianna uses purposefully a unique version of selective reproduction: one that chooses to express the exact same word/phrase, spoken by the same character, in two different languages depending on the context, namely the original French and the text's English. Her doing so invites more creative interpretations of both characters and situations. My interpretation of the following two multilingual contexts exemplifies Angela Kershaw's statement that the "analysis of literary multilingualism requires the reader to pay attention to narrative strategies that often go unnoticed in the normal

reading experience" (2019: 235). Marianna stays in touch with Paul through "*half*-drunk letters" (208, emphasis added) she writes – i.e., in a liminal state between alertness and inebriation – and "telegrams" he sends in which he invites the "*little flea*" to "*escape*" (209) Lebanon by joining him in France. In this trauma-free moment, the author/Marianna pseudo-translates what he wrote in the telegram – i.e., a fictional source text (Kershaw, 2019: 237) – in French (as indicated by the italics) into English. 'Little flea' is an odd-sounding and possibly inaccurate pseudo-translation of '*ma puce*,' a common term of endearment meaning sweetie pie, sweetheart, honey, baby, and others. But unlike these human-related terms, a flea can fly (away from Lebanon), and this is not what Marianna desires at this moment in her life (and the text).

Further proof that Paul used his native tongue in the telegram appears in a later scene, when Marianna reproduces an untranslated code-switched sentence, containing the same word (*puce*), in a restaurant scene in Greece. While celebrating her birthday with Paul over wine, strawberries, and cream, she learns accidentally – from a discarded newspaper's upside-down and "blurred photograph" – that her father's best friend Uncle Bernie, an American who had been kidnapped, was found dead on a road in Lebanon. Immediately following this moment, in which an image confirms her old suspicion about a possible gruesome death, we read that Paul kept repeating "*Quoi, puce, quoi?*" (234) through the restaurant's bathroom door. Although he eventually breaks it down – a liminal object separating a public area from a more private one – it is obvious that he cannot *reach* her: neither a third language (French, following her two primary ones), nor a romance in a 'third space' (Greece) – in-between Lebanon and the US, her two homelands – can either shield or distract her from manifesting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) triggered by the photo that spoke volumes and brought back a particular memory, encoded in English, into full force into the present. As Visser notes, symptoms of PTSD may appear almost "immediately or many years after the event" (2011: 272). In short, using the foreign word selectively, thus showcasing a poetic rather than a mimetic choice for code-switching, reveals how such a practice to represent a polylingual reality can unveil significant psychological effects – apart from the aesthetic, ethical, and political ones usually stressed by critics (Delabastita and Grutman, 2005: 12–13). The restaurant scene contrasts with a later one – both in chronological and narrative terms – that reflects a sense of genuine emotional closeness: in it, Marianna's friend Amer, whom she meets at seventeen, "sang *Arabic* love songs to [her] off-key through the [bathroom] door" in her family's Beirut apartment (283, emphasis added). Discordant Arabic singing, made less harmonious and less audible by shells raining on Beirut, is heard better than Paul's screaming in French. As will be discussed later, Marianna can only truly love in Arabic.

In addition to hospitals and restaurants, where Marianna as both narrator and interlocutor reproduces selectively items from other languages in order to navigate multiple, and at times conflicting, linguistic demands and emotional realities, the road offers intriguing encounters and provokes self-questioning. Upon seeing Syrian soldiers, Marianna writes:

> I, too, ignored them, although I knew no one seeing me do this would appreciate it, because I looked foreign, and the Syrians themselves likely did not even notice my coldness. I was not unaware of the irony, that I was bonded to them through this twisted route, their foreign faces and mine, our separateness, and I despised them for it. (282–283)

This paragraph shows Marianna's unabated awareness of her foreignness. People see her as a "trespasser" (224) or, worse, as someone who "dropped in from the sky" (286). The real irony, however, is that, unlike her, Syrians do not look different from Lebanese nationals. So what she means is that they are treated as different judging by their military uniforms and accents; and, as has been shown, "[m]emory clings to an accent, this supralinguistic trace" that reveals "much about the speaker it permanently marks" (Haragos, 2016: 325).

While Marianna sounds like a native in both English and Arabic, it is her exterior that intervenes in multilingual situations. As Yasemin Yildiz maintains, multilingualism is not "a straightforward expression of multiplicity," but rather "a *malleable form* that can be put to different, (sic) and contradictory uses" (2012: 24, emphasis in original). The following passage is worth quoting at length to tease out complex usages of code-switching. Marianna tells us:

> I can recall the day I first dreamed of leaving Beirut . . . I was walking to the beach . . . Everyone's eyes were on me, the fair one, the foreigner. I stared hard at every crack in the sidewalk, my feet going forward step by step, each footstep saying, *This is my home, I have always walked here* . . . I beckoned a taxi and climbed in. The driver's eyes pinned me in the rearview mirror, and he chastised that I . . . shouldn't get into any old taxi. I didn't answer. I stared out the window . . . as if his words had not even registered. Then another passenger got in front. Where is she going? he asked in surprise, assuming I did not know Arabic. The driver said, The beach, and his eyes found me again. This was when I conceived of leaving . . . And in the haze of waking, someone's eyes on me asking, *What are you doing here*? I opened the door before the car came to a stop. The passenger exclaimed in annoyance, Where is she going so quickly? *Going, going, gone*, I thought, and ran. (272–273, emphasis in original)

In the above, nostalgia for Lebanon-as-home is not only mixed with regret felt in exile for having wished to leave Lebanon but also finds expression in "a *malleable* [and creative] form" (Yildiz, 2012: 24) of multilingualism. Instead of staring back at the people, Marianna lowers her eyes to the ground – an act that gives her a sense of physical as well as emotional *ground*ing in an increasingly uncertain social environment – and lets her feet, not her mouth, express her attachment and entitlement to (this part of) the city. The assertion "*This is my home, I have always walked here*" (273) is italicized to stress the importance of Marianna's private thought but also to suggest that she might have had it in Arabic. When she refuses to respond to the taxi driver's chastisement, which we neither read nor hear but have to assume was in Arabic, she pretends to not understand the local language, relying on her looks as proof of her foreignness. Here, silence protects Marianna from verbal interaction. When the other passenger asks, "Where is she going?" we read that he said so "in surprise" and not, as might be expected, 'in Arabic' because he assumes she does "not know Arabic" (273). The driver's answer "The beach" (273) remains also in English and without italics. Silence allows Marianna to play 'dumb' and eavesdrop on their conversation without having to react or participate. While all readers understand this scene exclusively rendered in English, only bilingual ones can translate these short dialogues and mentally 'hear' them (back) in Arabic or even in Lebanese dialect. Interestingly, when Marianna imagines the driver's piercing eyes, in the rearview mirror, asking *What are you doing here*? because she looks like "a stranger" (273), if not a spy, with "white blond hair" (300) in their midst, the author chooses to italicize this question to underscore its being heard (in Marianna's mind) in Arabic. The passenger's question, "Where is she going so quickly?," said in Arabic, is again delivered in English without italics, unlike Marianna's unuttered yet italicized response *Going, going, gone*, to suggest both her urgency for departure and the possibility that she had this thought either in Arabic or in English. I interpret this scene's typographical peculiarity as an invitation to read (into) this (or a similar) bilingual situation creatively: specifically, the text refrains from delivering mimetic code-switching (or even consistently italicizing English translations of Arabic speech) in favor of a studied invisible or implied form thereof; one that is loyal not to the letter but to the spirit of the situation, i.e., one that is far more invested in depicting psychological rather than socio-linguistic realities. Marianna's emotional/cognitive disquiet and conflicted identities/languages can be uncovered through a scrutiny of linguistic and orthographic surface features.

Checkpoints: Multilingual Checks and Balances

While Marianna can argue like a *shitaneh* (191), a word left for the monolingual reader to look up (devil), silence becomes mandatory in overtly political and psychologically more intense situations. While driving with Amer in his car, he

suddenly pulls her arm and tells her: "You don't speak Arabic" (285) – a sentence (neither italicized nor placed between quotation marks) whose literal meaning is false but whose figurative one she quickly understands upon seeing a checkpoint ahead manned by Hizbullah, a political militia determined to resist American military presence and foreign policy in Lebanon and the Middle East. During this emotionally taxing time, Marianna's hands "held each other in [her] lap in fear" (286) as they drove through. Judith Butler coined the phrase 'linguistic vulnerability' to describe a situation in which an individual (or character) is exposed to betrayal or violence through and via language (2005: 1–2). Thus, Marianna's silence curbs the ability of Arabic to injure her.

Furthermore, she interrupts her own recalling of this anxiety-filled moment:

> I see that it is not a coincidence that this area was also where the butcher shop with my silent childhood friend was located; this is how you realize the truth of things, that a road and a person can be the same, that a land and a face can speak the same language. I did not belong here anymore. (285)

It is noteworthy that Marianna matches her *momentary* silence at the checkpoint – by pretending neither to speak nor to understand Arabic to dodge the possible politicization of her identity – with a more enduring silence attributed to the butcher boy whom she observed but never talked to *throughout* her childhood and *throughout* the text. He was the boy – a former classmate from a lower socio-economic stratum – with whom she shared a secret, namely their silent mutual admiration. He was the one she thought she "would marry" (17), as she tells us early on, because he was "her first love" (267), as she reminds us towards the end. Although PTSD can be seen as "fundamentally a disorder of memory" (Leys, 2000: 2) – with temporal disorientation being a criterion of trauma writings (Whitehead, 2004: 3) – in the following I demonstrate how Marianna's use of her imagination helps illustrate the disorderly process of recollecting a painful memory while also mitigating this pain; far more important than what is being remembered of the past is how and why it is recalled.

Jacques Derrida links mourning for lost loved ones (here, the butcher boy) with mourning for a lost language: "'Displaced persons', exiles, those who are deported, expelled, rootless, nomads, all share two sources of sighs, two nostalgias: their dead ones and their language" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000: 87). This is illustrated in this scene. Towards the end of the memoir, attempting to allay the trauma of loss, Marianna switches to the third-person singular – a form of narrative indirection and a hallmark of trauma writing (Whitehead, 2004: 3) – by referring to herself as the nine-year-old "girl" (267) eying the boy, while he cleans the floors and his father, the butcher, grinds meat to prepare *kibbeh nayyeh*. The Arabic meat item is neither explained further – namely as raw kibbeh, or minced

lamb mixed with bulgur and spices, a main dish of Lebanese mezze – nor really placed in italics, seeing as how the entire scene is italicized to bracket it off as a distinctly pre-war and pre-traumatic memory. Thus, this particular food item, as used by Marianna-the-narrator, now double her age and feeling displaced in the US, is part of a seamless chunk of a long-term memory – stretching from the (narrative) present into several layers of the past – characterized by both silence and/or Arabic, the local language spoken "cautiously, with silences" about "grown-up matters" (267) by the customers at the butcher's shop. Indeed, as has been argued, the relationships among language, trauma, and displacement are highly unstable (Kershaw, 2019: 234). By reusing this pre-traumatic subplot, and even going beyond its memories to "invent now" the "butcher boy's imaginary [and older] face" (286), Marianna manages to narrate fully a (potentially even more) traumatic and disruptive event, hinted at by Hizbullah militiaman's "eyes flat with disdain" (286), as he finally waves them through. Before he does though, she wonders if her beloved, whom she imagines to have remained in the shop, could spot her sitting like a lame duck in Amer's car. In so doing, she indirectly turns him into a witness to her traumatizing incident and apologizes to him for being in another man's company. Generally, a mental "return to the site of trauma implies that healing becomes possible through a more or less successful integration of the traumatic past into a narrative," and that "[s]uch a narrative, by nature autobiographical, also means a return to the language in which the past was experienced—a language that is at times different from the one in which the (autobiographical) narrative unfolds" (Haragos, 2016: 310). In this case, although the unnamed butcher's boy may not be actually dead, Marianna is able to mentally revisit the site of trauma (the checkpoint) by rescuing him from death-like oblivion so that he may, in turn, rescue her from reliving intensely this war-related memory and help her transform it into a relatable narrative memory. Nostalgia for him through Arabic, the only language, apart from silence, in which he was always shrouded, helps counter the otherwise much more negative memory.

Language matters and manners are crucial when driving through checkpoints, often drawing the line between life and death. Ani tells Marianna a story about Uncle Ara who, "depending on the militia" while driving in the city during the Israeli invasion in 1982, was able to play all soldiers by saying "he was such-and-such, a name common to the[ir] religion" (162). In his case, lying about one's real name and sect and/or using different languages if need be – as opposed to remaining silent – is what guarantees one's survival. For example, he speaks in English, a lingua franca (since he does not speak Hebrew), with Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint in order to pass himself off as a "crazy old man so they leave him alone," when in fact "[t]hey don't understand that he's mocking them" (192) and let him through. Coming home late, Ani hears Israelis' "voices become more distinct," "but no

matter how much closer she gets, she cannot understand, she does not know this language" (165). Lack of knowledge of Hebrew here cannot be overcome or used to one's advantage by switching to another language. Instead, we read that before she "knows what this signifies, she experiences the sensation of having been lifted out of her place in the world" (165). When they ask her questions, "she only stares, enraged, *refusing to understand* the interrogation she knows so well and that is common to all soldiers" because "their language, and each sound, each syllable, has only one meaning" (165, emphasis added). Albeit not stated explicitly, it stands to reason that they switch from Hebrew to English, or to Arabic, in order to question her in a language familiar to her. Nonetheless, Ani refuses the principle of being interrogated in her own city by any foreign invader. The language of coercion, therefore, is a "common" (165) one, overriding all linguistic specificities. While Ara uses English to seemingly collaborate with yet fool Israeli soldiers, Ani faces them with utter silence and disdain. Both, however, exemplify resistance – one armed with the creative (dis)uses of multilingualism. Sometimes, linguistically befuddling the source of potential trauma can also prevent it. When Ani tells a Syrian colonel that she does not fear him because she is Protestant, he repeats it as "Brodesdan" in the Arabic-accented version; not knowing what it means, he "thinks it is an insult in dialect" (244), but then she directs him to the Protestant church in the village – a speech act that for some reason scares him and ends the scene.

Liminal Points: Telling Foods and Transforming Horses

The Bullet Collection inserts strategically six Arabic food items[2] to allude to particular types of liminality, i.e., states between different geographical, temporal, and/or psychological realities. When Marianna eats her favorite dish *malfouf mehsheh* (italicized and translated as stuffed cabbage) that her mother prepares in the US, she refuses to humor her family by pretending it tastes as deliciously as it did back home. Its "lemony mint smell" (14) proves insufficient in reproducing the happy memory of a home-cooked meal because the cabbage is hard as "wood" and "there's something off about the filling;" it "tastes *almost* like it should, but only *almost*, not enough, like everything else here" (15, emphasis added). The word 'almost' resembles an asymptote, defined in geometry as a straight line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance. No matter how hard Ani and Marianna try, they (like an asymptote) can never quite meet the expectations of home by bringing back, via a dish (like a curve), its memories. The gap between here (and now) and there (and then) remains unbridgeable. In another scene, recalling her mother's own memory, i.e., a second-hand or what Marianne Hirsch (1997) calls a post-memory, of visiting her friend Muna in Beirut, Marianna says: Ani "smelled the *kaak* that ten years

later she would buy for me, wiping the crumbs from my chin as we walked to visit Téta and Jiddo" (grandma and grandpa) (69). Here, *kaak*, also left untranslated (thyme-filled biscuit-like street bread), runs through two persons' memories, spans more than a decade, and connects the memory of the dead (Muna) with the living, if only because it is eaten in the same place.

Another Arabic food is used to signal, paradoxically, both gaps and connectedness. In a third scene, a local dish, *mujeddara*, explained as one that involves boiling lentils, rice, and frying chopped onions, becomes an analogy for constantly changing the details of a story, during each telling, in order to preserve (ironically) its kernel of truth. While preparing this meal, a mentally unstable Sabha (the cook) leaves the apartment minutes before "the *mujeddara* slipped *past that delicate moment* and began to burn in the pot" (41, emphasis added). She does so to start walking towards Palestine, her homeland, about which she told stories nostalgically but "each time [also] differently" (41). Similar to the ways in which Sabha keeps changing the details of her sister Amina's death, Marianna thinks that Sabha "would have to make new food" and start "a new pot" (42), akin to starting a new plot or introducing a plot twist to maintain the essential flavor of any story. As Marianna puts it, "Sabha wandered around and around Amina's death, which seemed to have been the most important event of her life, and each time the story changed so that the truth was stronger," and so "what was most true would never change" (41).

In a fourth scene, a well-known Levantine sweet, *baqlawa*, explained as "flaky croissants" "with honey and nuts" (56), is clearly a liminal point. Mrs. Awad, a neighbor made "a little crazy" by the disappearance of her husband Najib, "especially mentioned him in the context of food," convinced that "if she would stop cooking the foods he liked so much, then certainly he would be gone" (97). Since *baqlawa* used to stick to his teeth and annoy him, she simply stops making it, afraid to discourage "his possible footsteps" (97) behind their apartment door. Just smelling *baqlawa*, in her mind, would turn him away. In a fifth scene, Marianna uses another local dish as a liminal point to indicate, by contrast, not a possible return but a possible departure: "I gave myself over to this idea of leaving, yearning for more than this routine of the beach, of *mloukhieh* on Thursdays and of playing trump games I could not master" (274–275). Unlike other Arabic food items, this one, albeit less known than *baqlawa* to the western reader, remains untranslated, perhaps to stress the taken-for-granted and special nature of home. Leaving home would mean abandoning home-grown *mloukhieh* (Jew's mallow, Nalta jute, or tossa jute), usually cooked with meat and rice on the side, as is popular in Middle Eastern, East African, and North African countries.

Finally, a particular dish signals yet another fine line, this time between innocence and experience. During a meal with friends and family, Marianna looks forward to eating the "food [she] relished the most," namely *bayd ghanam*,

translated as "sheep testicles" that are "grilled in lemon juice and garnished with parsley" (115). For the reader to understand what Marianna does not, a translation is necessary; for when she expresses her love for this item, the "men shook their heads and made jokes about how [she] was starting so young," to which Ani responds: "Never mind, you don't need to understand everything" (115). Unlike in the case of *mloukhieh*, Marianna, not the western reader, is excluded. However, while she may have been sexually still innocent at twelve, inserting this food item in the paragraph immediately preceding the arrival of Ziad into her life is not: he is the young man whom she will love at first sight and sigh for nostalgically until the end (of the text), long after he dies mysteriously due to a gunshot to the head. The link between her sexual awakening, upon meeting Ziad, and *bayd ghanam* is established thus: "my face burned as it did when I bent over the grill" (115).

Marianna's romantic and sexual feelings for Ziad are remembered and/or imagined with much nostalgia. These memories/imaginings are textually embedded within an evolving description of horses. Horses, like Ziad, are mostly invoked in Arabic. In the US, Marianna sees a horse that "comes" to her "when [she] call[s]," and so she explains: "it seems to like the sound of Arabic," adding that she has "always spoken Arabic with horses, which belong to villages, to stablemen who know no English or French;" she continues: "I call the horse *Ahsan*, and it responds by walking towards me. This simple word for *horse*, so far away from its country, sounds precious and full of meaning, like a real name," like Ziad's, and like him, it shows her "a sign of love" (16). Margaret Morse clarifies that sentiments and memories "linked to home are highly charged, if not with meaning, then with sense memories that began in childhood" (1999: 63). Sense memories include smells, tastes, textures, sounds, voices, and colors. The horse's "dark smell" (in the US) brings back a familiar one from childhood: home-made "water-soaked cracked wheat" (16). Ziad-related trauma starts with Ani's announcing his death by saying "his first name and then his last name [which the reader never learns but all present characters hear], pronouncing the words as if [Marianna] would not possibly remember" (215). Marianna adds: "The name looked wrong on her lips. It settled in my ears in the slow syllables" (215). Here, I uncover a semantic similarity between the proper name and the generic one: 'Ziad' means more (usually of goodness) and better, and *Ahsan* – the colloquial (and childish) version of *al-hisan* (both pronounced with a sharp guttural "h" –/ħ/–) – means not only 'horse' but also 'better.' Their centrality – and several intersections – in Marianna's psyche and the text are further corroborated by numbers: Ziad (or Ziad's) appears 86 and horse(s) 49 times; and excessive repetition at the levels of language, imagery, and/or plot is a criterion of trauma narratives (Whitehead, 2004: 86).

Before examining these connections, introducing the horse as a leitmotif is necessary. Infusing her mother's "best story" – one about her own childhood's donkey called Saisaban[3] – with imagination, Marianna transforms the donkey into

a white, winged, and talking horse with "eyes black as *mazoot*" (not translated; diesel) and "hooves sharp as the tips of bullets" (28). This (transformed) story originates "from the time [Marianna] could understand language" (27), meaning Arabic here. The (transformed) horse appears at three junctures: first, she tells us he "carried" (28) her as a child to the Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, where she picked up flowers for her mother, before bringing her back to Beirut; second, he "circles all of Lebanon" (56) by himself; third, he "will gaze with forgiveness on [her] remembering, and his hooves, sharp as bullets, will pierce the frozen air as he gallops towards [her]" (307) in the US. Three observations here: not only does Saisaban extend his flying – from one route within Lebanon to hovering above the entire country to reaching the US – but the incremental distances accompany a movement also across time: from the past to the present to the future, as respectively indicated by the three grammatical tenses. Also, he goes from being with her to being alone to being with her again. An image whose 'growth' draws an arc, Saisaban joins a few dots in an otherwise fragmentary trauma tale strewn with scattered memories. Simultaneously, it embodies Marianna's own liminality or state of in-betweenness: hovering between Lebanon and the US, Arabic and English, the past and the present, the present and the future, her childhood and adulthood, and trauma and recovery. She even compares her depressed self – in the US, where she continues to cut herself to let out her emotional pain but also attempts suicide with sleeping pills – to an "old horse clopping uphill" (88).

Before meeting Ziad, Marianna spots "a man on a white horse" (114), the latter described as "ghostlike" (127), who appears at his lover's door. Holding "poppies and thyme and *ah-ya-seedi*," Marianna taps on the back of her hand to read her future in the yellow pollen, "dying for love" (114). While *ah-ya-seedi* is obviously a flower, only the bilingual reader may detect the second meaning hinted at in its literal translation, namely 'oh-my-master,' in reference to Ziad, soon to dominate much of her mental/emotional life as well as her narrative. Wearing a "belt buckle [showing] a cowboy twirling a lasso on a galloping horse" (117), Ziad announces his dream to "build a disco in his barn that once had been filled with horses" (116). Another connection to horses lies in his eyes "black like jewels," reminiscent of Saisaban's "eyes black as *mazoot*" (28). However, Ziad's are further compared to opals, making her wonder "[w]hat color is an opal" (116), a mental exercise that causes a jamming of words in her head. Like opal (same word in Arabic) – a semi-transparent gemstone showing small points of shifting color against a pale or dark ground – the stories about how Ziad died keep shifting. Opal is also associated with love and passion, as well as desire and eroticism. Marianna confesses her love for him only to Sitt Julie, their housekeeper who only knows Arabic, by whispering[4] it in this language. The last time Marianna sees him is when he comes, wearing a "cowboy hat" (174), and fills up their living room "like a god" (175). Towards the

end the link between him and Saisaban strengthens when, in Marianna's imagination, his horse develops "folded white wings" (294). The only way to metaphorically bring Ziad back, and not only from the dead but back to her, is to make Saisaban, who gallops towards her on the last page, embody his very spirit. Thus, the man and the horse she loves the most, both of whose memories and imaginings are steeped in Arabic, become one. The "noise of [the] hooves galloping in [the] air" transmutes into "a slight and perfect sound" (213), namely "the sound of Arabic" (16).

Cracking the Code: From the Sound of Arabic to a Silent Language

Despite the expansion of trauma theory since 2008 to better address non-western texts and contexts, what remains undisputed, as Visser explains, is Caruth's notion of the lasting, unknowable, and inexpressible nature of traumatic wounding, adding that the latter's focus on the impossibility of exact knowing "does not oppose or contradict the notion that narrative is curative, and that trauma victims may come to terms with their traumatic experiences" (2015: 255). In *The Bullet Collection*, we find a total of ten references to 'codes' (eight) and 'encoded' writings (two). The father (Stephen), a historian, insists that the "past is a code that may or may not be broken" (41). Alaine challenges all to decipher what she writes "in code" (79) on her cast. Mrs. Awad believes that Michel's clothesline bespeaks "a hidden language" meant for his "clandestine counterparts" (96), one that "no matter what code she devised, could not understand" (98). And Marianna loves the "decipherment" of "hidden codes" (103). So what if the novel contains a code of its own, decipherable to some?

Caruth argues that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1996: 4–5), and Anne Whitehead states that "what is a non-experience at its moment of occurrence" (2004: 5) only becomes "an *event* at some later point of intense emotional crisis" (6, emphasis in original). Both states of mind would lead to a trauma text in which narrative memory tries to impose some order on the chaotic traumatic memory. While these critical observations apply to *The Bullet Collection* in some parts, as shown earlier, I raise the question about how surpassing or at least minimizing verbal language might at some point, perhaps even ironically, also help achieve greater clarity. In the US, Marianna sees an "old white horse" through some trees with "the almost leafless branches a shimmering *puzzle* on the hide, the suggestion of wings" (128, emphasis added). This puzzle, I contend, extends to include a chain of letters – one of which signifies 'wings' – whose meaning is decipherable if re-arranged in a particular sequence. In her 2000 memoir, Rumanian American Anca Vlasopolos ponders the inherent contradiction between telling the truth and the specific language used to tell it:

> But how can I write without distorting the truth, even if I reproduce accurately, without regard for rhetorical effects, what I remember, now that so many of them are no longer able to tell their own stories? . . . Is silence the only path to truth? (97)

Along the same lines, Szidonia Haragos remarks that silence is perhaps "the only ethical response to misremembering and mistranslating, but while it would perhaps respect the integrity of the past, it would prevent any writing about it" (2016: 329). Marianna, I believe, finds a solution to this predicament by stripping language to its bare essentials: a few letters in the Latin alphabet, the visual appearance of each evoking a particular concept/object/person.

In discussing geocriticism as a novel method for critical literary analysis, Robert Tally writes: "if writers map the real and imagined spaces of their world in various ways through literary means, then it follows that readers are also engaged in this broader mapping project" (quoted in Rice, 2017: 146). Mapping takes on a literal meaning when Marianna resorts to six letters to construct a story with images.

She writes:

> Only the fear, the search for language, a code that does not exist, it cannot, a way to read, to decipher, translate the alphabet of these images, the s of the road, the o of the sea, the endless m of the wave-trails in the sand, the z of the crippled body, the l of the soldier on the ground, the u of Saisaban's wings in the sky, the alphabet of the universe. (301–302)

These images, signaled by the letters s, o, m, z, l, u, "repeat themselves" and deserve, she believes, to be etched into "the eternal stone of paper" (301). Roads, seas, wave-trails, and wings represent (potential for) movement and life, whereas the crippled body and the soldier on the ground represent paralysis and death. Another contrast surfaces when Marianna states that "[t]here is hatred for feeling and remembering and hatred for not feeling and not remembering" (302). I believe that a compromise for this moral/emotional quandary, born of the pain of trauma, lies in the textual order of these letters: if taken at face value, they amount to no more than the scattered images/entities that Marianna 'sees' them as representing, i.e., as pieces of a puzzle (akin to half-feeling and half-remembering) that may, however, reach completeness with some effort. This effort lies in handling these letters as an anagram that can be rearranged to s, o, u, l, m, z, or 'soul' followed by m (for Marianna) and z (for Ziad). In the novel, Marianna uses the word 'soul' six times (the same number as the letters): twice in general, once in reference to Alaine, twice to herself, and once to Ziad (15, 31, 76, 131, 169, and 212). From this perspective, she would be stressing the emotional fact that they share

one soul – one that enables her, slowly but surely (wave-like), to resurrect Ziad (the crippled body) via Saisaban (wings) who rises above soldiers' dead bodies in Lebanon and soars into the air above its roads before flying across the seas to reach her in the US. Similar to Saisaban's movement, this over-arching image rises above language specificities, as it connects two worlds and embraces silence as Marianna's "only ethical response to misremembering and mistranslating" (Haragos, 2016: 329) her own trauma and those of others – the only response she can muster to end her trauma memoir.

Conclusion

If "traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies" (Craps and Buelens, 2008: 5), then examining code-switching as an innovative form of multilingual experimentation in a post-modernist trauma memoir like *The Bullet Collection* contributes to the discussion of literary trauma by outlining a new and "differentiated approach" (Rothberg, 2008: 232) and delivering a fresh interpretation not only of this novel but also of a constellation of themes – multilingualism, exile, nostalgia, identity – sometimes treated separately in studies of diasporic trauma narratives. Furthermore, I took a further step towards a decolonized trauma theory by unveiling the ways in which multilingualism helps express, and even resolve, trauma and identity crises in the contexts of nostalgia and exile. The (mis)- and (dis)uses of multilingualism showcased different types of liminality, a core concept that I argued tied these themes together in three distinct psychodynamic spaces. Part of the novel's creativity results from authorial and/or editorial decisions about typography as well as about when to translate non-English speech, if at all. Bilingual readers enjoy an advantage over monolingual ones, one that I thought was significant enough to deliver a thick(er) interpretation of *The Bullet Collection*. In so doing, I demonstrated how this novel proved to be a potent resource that theorizes, wittingly or not, the very possibilities, and limits, of literary multilingualism.

Notes

1. For a stylistic and psychological study, see Chapter 3 in Syrine Hout's *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* (2012).
2. Other Arabic food items – *labneh* (79, 113), *bizir* (47, 53), *kousa mehsheh* (82), *tabbouli* (96), *laban ummu* (96), *kousa* (96), *batenjan* (96), *hummus*, and *kafta* (231) – stress the uniqueness of Lebanese/Levantine cuisine.
3. Saisaban or Sesbania is a flowering plant.
4. Variations of 'whisper' appear 50 times.

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