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Shatila as a *Campscape*: The Transformation of Bare Lives into "Agent Lives" in *Shatila Stories*

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Abstract: Shatila camp in Beirut was founded in 1949 and now houses up to 40,000 refugees. In 2017, the Peirene Press publisher Meike Ziervogel and London-based Syrian editor Suhir Hedal travelled to the camp to hold a three-day creative writing workshop in which nine Syrian and Palestinian refugees participated. The result is *Shatila* Stories (2018), a brilliant piece of collaborative fiction translated from Arabic to English by Naswa Gowanlock. It is a hybrid between a novel and a short story collection, in which refugee voices are given the chance to speak up, share their stories, and negotiate their identities. This article examines *Shatila* Stories (2018) as a book that highlights Shatila as a *campscape* (Diana Martín). These stories show that the camp, as Adam Ramadan argues, is not empty of law and political life, but rather it is a meaningful space produced by who and what is in it, and how they interrelate and interact. *Shatila Stories* is, indeed, an effective platform that allows readers to understand how refugees' conflicts and thoughts are processed and the ways in which refugees in Shatila accept and embody the camp's liminality and their border subject identity to gain agency and resist the restrained passivity to which they are often relegated. Ultimately, my analysis pays attention to how these stories encourage the renegotiation of the refugees' selfhood and counter Agamben's perception of refugees as "bare lives" by portraying them as autonomous, active and humanized individuals in the eyes of the international reader.

Keywords: refugees; Shatila; refugee narrative; bare lives; *campscape*

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1. Introduction

Shatila Stories is a communal literary project published by Peirene in 2018 and made up of nine fictional stories written by refugees from Shatila, a camp in Beirut founded in 1949 and currently housing up to 40,000 displaced people following the Syrian crisis. In 2017, the Peirene Press publisher Meike Ziervogel and London-based Syrian editor Suhir Hedal organized a three-day creative writing workshop in the camp. They wanted to gather stories written by Shatila Syrian and Palestinian people who did not just share flight stories, but talked about their everyday lives in the camp and addressed "the power of collaborative imagination" (Ziervogel 2018, p. 13). *Shatila Stories* follows in the wake of other similar short story collections published in recent years and which have resulted from the exchange of professional editors or writers with refugees who have experienced asylum, detention, and life in the camps. Holmes and Popoola's (2016) *Breach* or the four volumes to date of the *Refugee Tales* projects (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) are outstanding examples of books that have sprung out of workshops or similar initiatives that seek to impact our understanding of exile and political asylum by shedding light on refugees' personal testimonies. *Shatila Stories* shares with these other anthologies the community of narrative voices and the humanization of the refugee, but differentiates itself in the interconnection between the stories when it comes to characters, setting, and plot, and the prominence given to the refugee camp instead of the refugees' flight and journey. Moreover, unlike *Refugee Tales* or *Breach*, the narratives in *Shatila Stories* were produced by non-professional writers and directly translated from Arabic to English by Naswa Gowanlock, a UK-based Egyptian

writer and translator. As the publisher mentions in the introduction to the book, the fact that participants were not writers was one of the major obstacles when carrying out this project. Despite the difficulties, they eventually managed to shape an extraordinary piece of collaborative fiction formed by eleven short sections, told by its different protagonists, and adopting a variety of perspectives. Another striking difference between *Shatila Stories* and other similar projects is that the former constitutes a hybrid between a novella and short story collection that presents a series of interlinked narratives set in Shatila, and which provides Palestinian and Syrian refugees with the chance to speak about their experiences as refugees from their own point of view.

On 29 November 1947, the General Assembly of the United Nations issued the Partition Resolution, which proposed the termination of the British Mandate in Palestine and the division of the country into three parts: one for the establishment of the Arab state, another part for the Jewish state, and the third composed of the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding territories. This Resolution was understood by Arab Palestinians as unfair, since they had been the ones who had resisted the British mandate over three decades, endeavoring to create a single democratic Palestinian state based on their historical and political links to such territory (Ḥūt 2004). The issuing of the Partition Resolution led to bloody strikes and war in the country, which resulted finally in the Jewish army gaining control over a large part of Palestine and in the expulsion or flight of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and villages (UNRWA 2014).

With the creation of the state of Israel, Palestinian society was fragmented and dispersed. About 100,000 of these Palestinian refugees fled to Lebanon and were relocated in various camps, where many of them and their offspring have remained ever since (Martín 2015). Shatila was founded in 1949 in Beirut as a result of the first Arab–Israeli conflict between 1947 and 1948, and remains today as one of the twelve camps established in Lebanon. Even though refugees initially suffered violence, discrimination, and control by the Lebanese authorities, things improved temporarily in 1969 when the Lebanese government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Cairo Agreements. These agreements gave the Palestinians the right to train in Lebanon for the liberation of their homeland and allowed them to self-administer their spaces. Thus, as the government lifted the ban on refugees expanding their camps and building, Shatila and other refugee camps in Lebanon began to grow beyond their limits. The year 1969 marked, therefore, the moment that Shatila started meeting the informal settlements and the currently so-called "misery belt", "an axis of low-income and informal settlements surrounding Beirut's city center" (Martín 2015, p. 10). As Ḥūt puts it, "one result of this expansion of Palestinian refugees, and of mutual interaction [. . .], was the transformation of the Sabra and Shatila Camps district into a place attracting labourers and families from many countries, the common factor being poverty" (Ḥūt 2004, p. 1). He adds that this meant that Shatila's residents were not just Palestinian or Lebanese, but also began to include Egyptians, Pakistanis, Syrians, or Jordanians, among other nationalities (Ḥūt 2004). Thus, Shatila is no longer the refugee camp that was established far from the city center in 1949, but it has become "part of the urban texture of metropolitan Beirut" (Martín 2015, p. 10).

On 18 September 1982, the Shatila district gained unfortunate international prominence with the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. This bloody event took place in the frame of the 1982 Israeli invasion and consisted of a massacre of Palestinian refugees residing in the Sabra and Shatila neighborhoods, in West Beirut. The militia of the Lebanese Forces carried out the atrocity as a response to the previous assassination of the president-elect Bachir Gemayel, a Lebanese militia commander who allied with Israel and fought the Palestine Liberation Organization. Most recently, with the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the population of Lebanon has experienced a significant increase due to the arrival of thousands of Syrian refugees. Shatila camp has also swollen with Syrian refugees, mostly receiving poor Syrians. The latest UNRWA report on Shatila, produced in March 2023, gave an account of 11,458 registered people living in the camp (UNRWA 2023), while the

unofficial figure, when considering those unregistered by UNRWA, many of them being Syrians, rises to 40,000 (Ziervogel 2018, p. 13).

Although based on some camp dwellers' real experiences, the situations and characters depicted in *Shatila Stories* are fictional (or fictionalized) and are explicitly referred to as such by the editor of the book in the Introduction. However, this fictionality does not diminish the political and cultural force of the book. Rather, it adds power to the refugees' testimonies because, unlike most journalistic writing, fictional stories constitute an effective vehicle to represent complex human relations and ideas in a simplified and clarifying way by emphasizing the most relevant elements of someone's story to elicit strong emotions in the audience (Mar and Oatley 2008, p. 177). Also, the relevance of storytelling lies in its power to tackle trauma as a communal and identitarian experience while promoting personal and communal healing (Woodrow 2017). Thus, the book is a platform of expression through which refugee writers use literature as a therapeutic tool to express their points of view, fears, dreams, and first-person experiences. Drawing on the idea that fictional stories can encourage empathetic growth (Nussbaum 1995) and transmit social knowledge more persuasively (Carroll 1999; Mayer 2014), I argue that *Shatila Stories* ultimately brings readers closer to the complex reality of the refugee by delving into, and making public, the traumatic experiences of refugeehood. In addition, the short story collection critically engages with philosopher Giorgio Agamben's depiction of refugees as "bare lives" (Agamben 1998), that is, ultimate biopolitical subjects who can be regulated in a permanent state of exception. Agamben draws on the work of Hannah Arendt to claim that refugees are reduced to "bare lives" because nation-states treat them as animals in nature without political freedom, and that they are often stripped from legal and political recognition (Agamben 1998, p. 77). The nation-state tends to marginalize refugees because they represent "a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state" (p. 77), exposing the fiction of national sovereignty and traditional categories of citizenship. Agamben places the bare lives of refugees or migrants in spaces whose boundaries are defined very strictly and often with brutal violence. Even though Shatila's boundaries are more fluid and permeable because of the absence of walls or fences separating the camp from surrounding neighborhoods in Beirut, its inhabitants do lack legal and political recognition, and thus fall into Agamben's categorization of "bare lives". However, as Adam Ramadan puts it, "studies of real-world refugee camps cannot be reduced to a formulaic reading of spaces of exception filled with silenced and disempowered *hominis sacri*" (Ramadan 2013, p. 68); this is because such readings risk overlooking the complex sovereignty of refugee camps, and "the possibilities of agency on the part of refugees themselves" (p. 68).

Shatila Stories constitutes an outstanding literary and sociopolitical document because it provides refugees in Shatila with a political voice. Instead of portraying disempowered and silenced "bare lives" in Agamben's terms, these stories prove Shatila to be an arena of agency in which its dwellers resist their dehumanization in the camp while embracing the fluid and mutable nature of the space they inhabit to become border subjects. This article draws on Agnes Woolley's (2014, 2017) or Gillian Whitlock's (2015) idea that literary representations of refugees can add to current debates about asylum seeking, which are often dominated by socio-political and law studies. Likewise, this article shares a common goal with other recently published papers such as "Novel(istic) Realities in/of *An Unsafe Haven*: Crossroads for Refugees and Scholar (Hout 2019), in which Syrine Hout focuses on the novel *An Unsafe Haven* (Jarrar 2016) by Nada Awar Jarrar to argue that fiction represents the refugee more faithfully. Hout concludes that Jarrar's fictional novel offers, interestingly, a very realistic picture of refugees in Lebanon, as contrasted with the passive and voiceless representations of refugees usually found in media (Lenette and Miskovic 2016), which reinforce the demarcation between "us" and "them" (Mannik 2012).

Shatila Stories demonstrates that the camp is, as Adam Ramadan puts it, "much more than a void of law and political life" and is produced by "who and what is in the camp, how they interrelate and interact" (Ramadan 2013, p. 70). This article argues that *Shatila Stories* is an effective platform that allows readers to understand how refugees' conflicts and

thoughts are processed and the ways in which refugees in Shatila endure and embody the camp's liminality and their border subject identity to gain agency and resist the restrained passivity to which they are often relegated. Ultimately, my analysis pays attention to how these stories encourage the renegotiation of the refugees' selfhood and counter Agamben's perception of refugees as "bare lives" by portraying them as powerful and humanized individuals in the eyes of the international reader.

2. Shatila's Exceptionality: The *Campscape*

Current conceptualizations of the border are sensitive to the fact that borders "can be fluid, generative, and culturally productive" (Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2019, pp. 3–4). In this context, the border "becomes far more than simply a line in the sand (or sea). It is an actual place where law is suspended, rights are denied, and migrants are held in a static temporariness that concretizes exclusion into a permanent state" (L. Johnson 2014, p. 127). In this light, the phenomenon of forced migration and refugeehood has widely been studied through the lens of liminality (Menjivar 2013; Hartonen et al. 2022). Refugees and asylum seekers are often categorized in the light of the anthropological concepts of limbo and liminality (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969) because they live "outside the natural order of things" (Malkki 1995, p. 513) and often lack legal recognition. The refugee category fits well into these two notions because both refer to "an uncertain situation or immediate state or condition"; this is an "in-between" site in which individuals embody threshold positions marked by political and social indetermination, simultaneously existing within and outside the nation state (Hartonen et al. 2022). In addition, understood as transition and transgression, "liminality becomes a valuable tool for the interpretation of literature "(Bergmann 2017, p. 479). Scholars such as Jennifer Flemming (2020) or Jopi Nyman (2021) have explored how refugee narratives evince the liminal and *borderscape* nature of refugee camps. While the former concludes that narratives from those in Lesvos camp offer revealing accounts manifesting their liminal state and expressing it as a political act, the latter asserts, in a more specific vein, that the short story composite *Breach* (2016) builds fictional spaces that take the form of *borderscapes*, where identities are questioned, re-formed, and negotiated (Nyman 2021, p. 187).

Recent studies on the concept of liminality challenge the view of borders as exclusively negative phenomena by stressing them as dynamic spaces where identity synergies are generated, thus highlighting the aesthetic and cultural potential of borders and liminal spaces (Nyman and Schimanski 2021, p. 4). Refugee camps in Lebanon have been approached as complex enclaves "in which the state, non-state, and international actors all exercise power and contribute to the suspension of law" (Ramadan 2013, p. 69). Nevertheless, scholars such as Adam Ramadan (2013) and Diana Martín (2015) have argued the need to address the specificities of Shatila and other camps in Lebanon in that, unlike similar spaces in other parts of the world, they challenge Agamben's notion of refugee camps as clearly limited "spaces of exception" constituted by "bare lives" (see Agamben 1998). Rather, these scholars argue that Shatila can turn into a productive and positive space of political agency (see also Sanyal 2011; Ramadan 2013) due to "the context, circumstances and the people acting on, inhabiting or surrounding it" (Martín 2015, p. 14). This is possible because space, as Nigel Thrift (2006) reminds us, can be understood as a process, always in continuous motion and fluid, and not as static.

The model of refugee camps as visibly differentiated areas characterized by the perpetual spatialization of the exception does not fit Shatila and other camps in Lebanon. This is firstly because the distinction between Shatila and its outside is now barely perceptible, as many refugees live outside the camp's official boundaries. Shatila has no fence or wall surrounding it and most of the camp's limits are represented by streets that are wider than the narrow alleys within it (Martín 2015). This is a direct consequence of the camp's physical development and its construction from concrete and not tents, as well as of the increase in refugees, immigrants from various countries, and even worse-off Lebanese people who have been settling in Shatila and its surroundings in recent decades. Secondly,

as Diana Martín points out, the fluid status of the camp is additionally caused by the similarity of the living conditions between Shatila and other areas surrounding it (Martín 2015). They are characterized by overcrowding, the absence of adequate services, poverty, and low levels of education (UN-Habitat and UNDP 2010). Thus, Martín asserts that "those inhabiting the camp are not worse-off compared to those living outside legally or squatting it". The refugee population is "more dispersed than sociologists or biopolitics theorists would expect them to be" and life in the camp is not necessarily the norm (Martín 2015, p. 10). This situation causes a tension between Shatila's exceptionality as a refugee camp (both geographically and demographically) and a city center that insists on its exclusion (Martín 2015, p. 15).

Based on these specificalities, Diana Martín proposes the term *campscape* to address Shatila as a "new spatial model of exception" due to "the impossibility of identifying this space solely within the camp boundaries" (Martín 2015, p. 10) and as a space in which the citizen, the refugee, and other outcasts meet. Contrary to the usual representation of refugees as passive and static individuals in media outlets, Martín borrows the suffix "-scape" and the notion of *borderscape* from Appadurai (1996) to consider Shatila camp as a fluid and mutable place that is replete with agents responding to, and resisting, the discourses and practices that envision the refugee camp as a dehumanized and static place. Indeed, the concept of *borderscape* has gradually acquired relevance in border studies and cognate fields (see Harbers 2003; Dell'Agenese and Szary 2015; Krichker 2021), serving as the basis for the conceptualization of the *campscape*. Martín's term borrows from the idea of the *borderscape* as a site of "pathological regimes of 'invisibility' in which people are made 'publicly invisible' and excluded from politics" (Nyman and Schimanski 2021, p. 4), but also considers the *borderscape*'s liminality and transformative power, as both types of sites are areas of exception that allow for a study of borders as mobile, relational, and processual.

Indeed, as Adam Ramadan contends, many refugee camps have become meaningful places for many people who have known no other place to call home", and "spatializing the camp, understanding how it is constituted and functions spatially, is a way of grounding geopolitics in the everyday" (Ramadan 2013, p. 67). Therefore, the importance of *Shatila Stories* lies in that it relates specific moments and events taking place in the daily life of camp dwellers, and by doing so, the stories construct broader geopolitical architectures regarding the image of the refugee. Thus, the book represents the camp space as always in process and as "a simultaneity of stories-so-far", in Doreen Massey's (2005, p. 9) words; this contributes to an understanding of Shatila and its inhabitants as more productive and humanized entities.

However, the adverse conditions and the identity crisis the refugee characters suffer in the camp are, to a large degree, the consequence of Shatila being this space of exception that Diana Martín describes, "in which the law is suspended, and state sovereignty is ruptured" (Ramadan 2013, p. 67). Inhabiting this *campscape*, where political borders and identities are problematized, automatically transforms refugees into resistant subjects. More specifically, the absence of proper security in "Palestinian" camps within Lebanon's unstable and turbulent political context has led to continuous violence. These spaces, including Shatila, are "under-protected, vilified, and hated by some, always at risk of attack and erasure" (Ramadan 2013, p. 67). They are marginal and poor areas in which people often live in filthy and unhealthy conditions (Ramadan 2013).

3. Shatila's Physical and Mental Borders

Physical and mental borders constitute central axes in *Shatila Stories* because the collection revolves around the depiction of Shatila as a *campscape* and of its inhabitants as border subjects who embody the camp's liminality. First, the book provides critical attention to the limitrophe not only in its plot, but also at a structural level, as the narratives that make up the collection were written in Shatila and by people who were inhabiting this *campspace* when the writing workshop took place. Second, the book being a hybrid between a novel and short story collection highlights its liminality and blurs the borders

between both genres; this is another allusion to the enhancement of collaborative imagination across physical or mental limitations. This testifies to the border-crossing quality of the collection. The chapters in the book are not closed and constrained spaces, but the lightness of their boundaries allows them to interact with each other, sharing plots, settings, themes, and characters who seem to travel and flow between the sections. This narrative organization results in a set of different points of view that converge in a collective identity amalgam. This collectivity is based on the characters' common experiences of refugeehood that aesthetically embody the mobile, mutable, and relational nature of the *campscape*. *Shatila Stories* stresses the interconnectedness between the short story and liminality, and demonstrates that "the poetics of the short story reveals itself as a poetics of liminality" (Achilles and Bergmann 2014, p. 4). The genre does not simply develop liminal forms in its transgressive plots, elusive characters, and shifting settings. The short story "also occupies an in-between position in many aspects because it develops out of, and mediates between, essay and sketch, poem and novel, narration and discourse, and elitist and popular culture" (Bergmann 2017, pp. 479–80).

Thus, when it comes to the stories, the different narrators are continuously highlighting the mental and physical boundaries that make up Shatila and how they overcome or adapt to these borders to survive within the camp. Likewise, characters are depicted as physically and mentally entrapped in a liminal status as a consequence of their refugee condition. In the first chapter, which is entitled "Shatila Alleys" and only takes up one page, the camp is described as a constraining space and the narrator refers to Shatila's physical appearance to evoke this entrapment. The place is compared to a maze in which refugees are stuck while "concrete buildings huddle in mismatched rows" (Helal 2018, p. 21) and alleys "snake [their] way through" (Helal 2018, p. 21). The camp's restrictive and immobile nature is further alluded to in the sentences "above our head electric cables tangle with themselves" and "beneath our feet the rain turns streets to mud", (Helal 2018, p. 21) which conveys a claustrophobic feeling of entrapment as both sky and earth are obstructed. In the following section, "The Arrival", the narrative voice, whose name is Reham, adopts an anxious tone to tell the story of her journey from Damascus to Beirut together with some members of her family. She starts uttering some short sentences such as "chaos everywhere", "I blink and blink again", or "racing feet, dragging feet" (Helal 2018, p. 23) to transmit her feeling of uneasiness, while using words like "worry", "fear" or "desperate eyes" to evoke a series of images related to the act of physical border crossing; this concretely depicts the moment in which she and her family remain "waiting at the closed gate, paperwork in hand, hoping to pass through" (Helal 2018, p. 23). Thus, the narrator's intentions are clearly stated from the beginning: she wants to leave Syria and the war behind, so she embarks on a journey to Beirut, specifically Shatila, because her husband "has worked on a number of restoration projects in the Lebanese capital so he knows people who live in Shatila" who can help them settle in (Helal 2018, p. 25). Interestingly, this whole section contains numerous words and images alluding to border crossing and the characters' feeling of displacement while travelling. The narrator mentions that first they drive to the Hermel border region and employs its geography, that is, the surrounding mountains and the river Asi that runs through it, to highlight the region's liminal elements and to continue evoking borders. Leaving their native land creates a sense of displacement for Reham, who feels the urge to "drape Marwan's black jacket around [her], hoping it will form a barrier between [her] ears and the pounding of [her] heart" (Helal 2018, p. 24). The desire for a barrier that protects her is a consequence of the character's new in-betweenness and dislocation once they set off on their journey. Their liminality is further conveyed through the narrator's state between the dream and the conscious world. Suddenly, even though "scenes of shooting and shouting and panic and fear" (Helal 2018, p. 25) take over Reham's mind, she manages to fall asleep and "succumb to oblivion" in the search for peace. These warlike images that assail her contribute to forging her chronic border identity once she leaves her country, since they are part of a near past that contaminates her present; these are traces

of consciousness that intermingle with the unconsciousness of her sleep, in between her memory and oblivion, her past experiences and her present post-traumatic shock.

When Reham reveals that their destination is Shatila, she hopes that it will be a pleasant refuge, their new home, and adds that although most of the population in this camp is Palestinian, she is convinced that both they and the rest of Syrians will be welcomed and will not feel as strangers. This statement hints at Reham's suspicion that Shatila will force them to remain in a liminal space, alien to Syria, to Lebanon, to Beirut, and to Shatila, thus anticipating what they will feel like at first in the camp and the adoption of this eternal border state as part of their new identity. Her hopeful attitude disseminates when they are unable to convince their taxi driver to take them inside Shatila and are eventually dropped at the camp entrance. This constitutes the first indication of Shatila's dangerousness and its state of exception. The camp is then depicted negatively as the narrator refers to its "dim, muddy alleyways where hardly light penetrates" (Helal 2018, p. 26) and the "tangled electrical cables" (Helal 2018, p. 26) that run above the refugees' heads and "wrap themselves around water pipes, climbing up the precariously assembled buildings that look like giant matchboxes" (Helal 2018, p. 27). The narrator's hope fades as she realizes that, rather than representing liberation, Shatila works as an extension of the violence and entrapment she and her family have experienced before and during their journey. The electrical cables, pipes, walls, and matchboxes shaping the camp stress its border nature and depict it as a cage where, far from finding peace, characters are kept in an in-between changing environment, and in which Reham "struggle[s] to breathe" as if "there was no oxygen left in these alleyways" (Helal 2018, p. 27). Both the narrator and her family seem to embody the border and conflicting nature of the *campscape* once they access Shatila. They are described as walking with difficulty through the mud, staring down and trying not to slip, among walls covered with graffiti. Every element evokes the characters' never-ending walk through the odds, and their continuous act of border crossing is symbolized with the "three big fat rats" that cut across the pathway, "scurrying from one side alley to another" (Helal 2018, p. 27); this clearly establishes a parallelism between the characters and the rats based on the refugees' denigration and conversion into "bare lives" after leaving their countries and while in Shatila.

The allusion to Shatila's physical limitations is further developed in other sections of the book. Adam, Reham's sister, claims at one point that in the camp he feels "buried alive" and "bricked in", as a consequence of the buildings around him that "grow higher by the day, unsafe and unregulated" (Helal 2018, p. 61). He refers to Shatila's ambivalent nature when mentioning that, even though the camp provides shelter for many refugees, it also constrains him somehow as "the sky appears smaller than the previous day" (Helal 2018, p. 61), a statement that is reminiscent of other references to the Shatila/sky dichotomy, such as Reham's description of alleyways as dark and where "hardly light penetrates" (Helal 2018, p. 26). This accentuates the liberating character of the sky and the imprisonment that Shatila symbolizes. Adam also states how he feels mocked by the birds whose excrement falls from the sky, getting through the wires and cables that roove the alleys and managing to reach the refugees' heads. Birds here further contribute to forging the image of Shatila as a prison, since they are presented as opposing elements to the inhabitants of the camp in that these animals can move more freely than Adam and the other refugees. Also, the fact that these birds fly and pour their excrements on Adam's head symbolizes Shatila inhabitants' lack of dignity and humanity, since the freedom of movement that these birds enjoy contrasts dramatically with Adam's underprivileged status and "bare life" condition. Similarly, Shatha, Adam's friend, conveys the restrictive nature of the camp due to the physical border structures that surround refugees. In the chapter titled "Shatha", she explains how "the days roll into each other in our tiny home, where the rooms are locked in a tight embrace and the weary walls support one another" (Helal 2018, p. 79). These negative references to her house, rooms, and walls transmit a feeling of claustrophobia that contributes to Shatila's oppressive depiction because of the arrangement and characteristics of its physical elements. In fact, Shatha goes above and beyond by being the only character

who explicitly verbalizes that the people of Shatila are not only bounded by physical boundaries, but also embody them. When mentioning that in the camp "[they] are the ones who have to support [their] walls and not the other way around" (Helal 2018, p. 79), she is stressing that these physical limitations end up penetrating the characters' skin until they become liminal beings with borderline identities. Although the adoption of the border identities that result from inhabiting a *campscape* or liminal space, as I will argue later, can have a positive impact on the characters, it also brings vexation and problematizes their identity because Shatila is, in essence, a place of exception that is "under-protected, vilified, and hated by some, always at risk of attack and erasure" (Ramadan 2013, p. 67).

This physical entrapment seems to act as an extension, or projection, of much more powerful mental restrictions that are built on social and cultural borders. These psychological limitations, which are exposed through sexist conventions, toxic families and national bonds within the camp, or the unexpected death of Shatha, prevent characters, especially women, from exerting their agency and overcoming socio-cultural constraints. Shatha, Reham, and Latifa are female characters who suffer the patriarchal system that limits and constrains their free will and decision-making power. In the third chapter of the book, Reham reveals the reason why she, as most women in Syria, did not choose to marry Marwan, her husband. She says that, back in Syria, she lived in a very conservative society in which "men and women weren't allowed to mix" (Helal 2018, p. 29) and "the mother of the groom would choose the bride for her son, as if the girl was just an object" (Helal 2018, p. 29). Even though her marriage to Marwan is idyllic at first, he soon becomes overprotective, and life with him turns suffocating because he tries to control every aspect of his wife's life, not even allowing Reham to go and visit her parents during her pregnancy. Things get worse when Reham gives birth to a girl with Down's Syndrome, and her husband, Marwan, refuses to acknowledge the baby as his because he does not want a "disabled child". At this moment, Reham begins an arduous fight against her husband in search of more decision-making capacity and autonomy to allow her to protect her daughter and keep her by her side.

In the chapter "An Angel by my Side", Reham claims that Shatila's inhabitants are deprived of their privacy because of the poorly constructed walls between houses. She also adds that the only way to exert control in the camp is to turn rebellious and even cruel. Reham establishes a link between the constraining physical walls of her house and her restrictive marriage, and laments being unable to cross any of these limitations. She herself becomes a victim of Shatila's violence when she communicates to Marwan her desire for divorce, and he answers back by beating her until the neighbors come to her aid and stop Marwan from killing her. This episode depicts the camp not as a new territory you access when Shatila's gates are crossed, but as an extension of the sexism and violence these women were already experiencing in their lands of origin. In this sense, Shatila encompasses the characteristics of the *campscape* because these new inhabitants do not really cross a border when arriving in Shatila. Rather, they keep their border identities when carrying with them their liminality, precariousness, and displacement beyond the mutable and porous boundaries of the camp. Indeed, the limits between Shatila and the rest of Beirut or Syria are shifting, blurred, and barely perceptible.

This deeply patriarchal system also draws mental borders around Latifa. She feels helpless when she is not able to prevent the marriage of her underage daughter to an older man. Latifa's husband encourages this wedding because he thinks it will fix the economic problems that her family is experiencing as a consequence of his alcoholism. In the chapter "The Dinner", Ahmad and Latifa have dinner with Abu Mahmoud, the old man who is going to marry his daughter, so that he can meet his young suitor in person. The narrator reveals that Ahmad is willing to sell his child for the dowry money he needs to pay his debts and fund his vices. Women's helplessness within this fierce patriarchal system is portrayed at the end of the chapter, when Mahmoud and her husband have left and Latifa buries her nose in her daughter's long hair in resignation. Then, she wishes her child was still a tiny tot "whom she could protect with her own hands, her own power", but

acknowledges that she cannot shield her anymore. Latifa also wishes that her husband would die soon so that she can have her daughter back, while trying, unsuccessfully, to find solace in the rumors that Mahmoud is not a violent man with his wives and is unlikely to beat her child. The last lines of the chapter refer to Latifa's frustration and powerlessness, as they depict how "silent tears" stream across her cheeks "and there is no way she can stop them" (Helal 2018, p. 78). As in the case of Reham, marriage ends up being a prison for Latifa, a trap built on social and gender boundaries that she is unable to trespass.

Family and national identity are likewise sources of constriction for refugees in Shatila. For instance, Shatha claims that her Palestinian nationality is an obstacle when it comes to finding a job and adds that, in Syria, "the subject of [her] nationality has always made [her] feel like a pariah" (Helal 2018, p. 81). She eventually gets a scholarship to study in Canada; this is not well received by her father, since he thinks that leaving Shatila in search of a better life implies a betrayal of his family and the Palestinian cause. In the chapter "Canada Calling", when Shatha reveals that she wants to apply for the grant, her father replies that "only cowards leave [. . .] only cowards long for a life of luxury and abandon the Palestinian cause" (Helal 2018, p. 96). He reproaches Shatha and says that abandoning the camp is selfish because their family has always been part of the Palestinian resistance and have defended and protected the people at the camp for decades. Thus, Shatha feels restrained by her father, who becomes an epitome of the patriarchal system, exerting its power by means of family and heritage bonds. Her inability to leave the camp emerges from powerful mental and cultural borders, which she struggles to overcome; these are limitations based on her Palestinian identity both outside and within the camp, as well as sexist conventions, as she herself explains in the previous chapter "Shatha": "in our culture, 'a boy can do no wrong', as they say. [. . .] Yet if a girl says the wrong thing in passing, it could tarnish her reputation for ever".

National identity is another pillar upon which social and political borders are built both outside and within Shatila. Since its construction in 1949, Shatila has undergone changes in its demographics. Currently, it is home to an amalgam of people with different nationalities who reside in the camp for different reasons, ranging from being the descendants of the founding Palestinians or Syrian refuges escaping from war, to some low-income Lebanese and immigrants from Egypt or Bangladesh seeking cheap housing. The characters in the book represent some of the majority members in the camp. For instance, Jafra is the daughter of a Palestinian woman who arrived in Shatila "from the village of Sha'at, whereas her dad's family are town folks from Haifa, and they used to be rich when they still lived in their homeland" (Helal 2018, p. 53). Jafra is named after "the martyred hero", the Palestinian fighter "who was killed in an Israeli air strike over Beirut in 1976" and who became a national symbol (Helal 2018, p. 52). Also, Reham and Marwan arrive at Shatila from Syria, while Shatha represents those young Palestinians who have been raised in the camp and have inherited the refugee status; in addition, Latifa is a survivor of the Shatila and Sabra massacre. Indeed, these differences are often conflicting. For example, Adam refers to the divisive environment that exists in his school when claiming that everyone in his class is Palestinian and, while some are Lebanese Palestinian, others, like him, are Palestinians who fled the war in Syria. He tells us that one day during break time, a guy called Muneef approaches him and, while patting Adam arrogantly on the shoulder, he calls him Syrian in a patronizing way. Then, the schoolyard turns into "a battlefield" (Helal 2018, p. 62), implying that there is no safe space free of struggle within the camp, as well as showing that becoming violent is the only defense against brutality. Among all these hostilities and national divisions, Adam is unable to feel at home. Rather, he remains in a liminal space full of divisive lines that entrap him and manifest physically through the claustrophobic layout of the camp: he feels "bricked in" (Helal 2018, p. 61) within its narrow alleyways, electrical cables and increasing edifications that prevent the sunlight from reaching him. Likewise, there is a moment in which he throws back the shutters to "let some fresh air in" but immediately finds himself "facing another window, less than one meter away" that "belongs to an apartment in the building next door" (Helal

2018, p. 59). The depiction of physical elements as reflections of national and mental constraints is also evident when Adam claims that "the accumulation of electrical cables, often entangled with numerous water pipes less than two metres off the ground has turned the camp into a series of terrifying chaotic alleys, half of which are two narrow to allow two people to pass through" (Helal 2018, p. 60). The fact that it is difficult for more than one person to pass through some alleys seems to allude to the complexity of crossing over national distinctions and Adam's struggle to establish bonds with other camp dwellers because of his Syrian origin. In this same chapter, he expresses that "the lack of friends and loneliness are overwhelming" (Helal 2018, p. 61) in Shatila, and once again, he connects his isolation to the bordering structures around him: buildings that grow higher by the day and that slowly cover the sky making him feel, as the rest of the characters, physically and mentally entrapped.

4. The Conversion of "Bare Lives" into "Agent Lives"

Our identities are directly affected by the territory we inhabit (Agnew 2008, p. 179) because spaces become "a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them" (Rose 1995, p. 88). Therefore, even though the refugee characters in *Shatila Stories* absorb the negative features of the *campscape* (such as its anarchic and exceptional state), they also embody its permeability, fluidity, and relationality. While its characters are influenced by the conflicting and liminal nature of the state of exception that the camp represents, *Shatila Stories* works as a cathartic device that makes use of the *campscape*'s fluid and shifting essence to transform "bare lives" into "agent lives". Even though the state of in-betweenness and the threshold that the *campscape* represents (Martín 2015) brings vexation and hostility, it also "points up the immense freedoms which come out when contradictions are synthesized and overrun in the Third Space" (Kalua 2009, p. 25).

Turning the buildings that constrain Shatila's residents into spaces in which they can express themselves freely is a resilient action that promotes their agency. Faced with the impossibility of stripping off these walls, the inhabitants of the camp use them, curiously, as a means to express themselves without restrictions. Upon her arrival at the camp, Reham is struck by the "walls covered in graffiti" and "posters of former camp residents who were killed in the 1982 massacre" (Helal 2018, p. 27). These walls have maps of Palestine "and slogans speaking of the heartfelt desire to return to the homeland", among which Reham observes "the huge, freshly painted slogan *Don't talk about the camp unless you know it*" (Helal 2018, p. 27). Thus, even though the walls of the camp's alleys represent Shatila's division into different factions and symbolize the conflicts among its inhabitants, physical constructions also work as a canvas via which refugees can vent their feelings. In fact, among all the buildings in the camp, there is only one whose walls, doors, and windows do not cause discomfort to Shatila's inhabitants: the public cultural center. Rather, this space allows some characters to find relief and peace, and it is also here that Adam and Shatha meet and begin their love story. When Adam is feeling lonely and depressed, it is the melody of "The Breeze is Upon Us" from the Lebanese singer Fairuz, which comes from the cultural center, that rescues him from his brooding. It is in the center's bathroom that he manages to get rid of the bird excrement; this is a symbolic act through which the cultural center is pointed out as an oasis of peace that contrasts with the hostility of other spaces in the camp. The permeability of Shatila's borders and the convergence of its multiple spaces allows the protagonists of these stories to move in search of freedom and relief. The continuous crossing of the physical and mental boundaries that the cultural center marks makes Shatha and Adam hold a double identity that is mutable and manifests itself in different ways depending on whether they are inside or outside the building. For example, while in the rest of the camp, they hide their love because "love is something to be ashamed of" in Shatila (Helal 2018, p. 88); in the cultural center, they can develop and enjoy it away from the judgmental eyes of others. In fact, Shatha claims that, in the camp, she is "bombarded by Auntie Faten's orders and the multitude of voices around [her]", and that she is "truly [herself] if [she] manages to find an empty room in the cultural

centre to practice, so that with the help of a nay [she] can dissolve into the music and shut everything else out" (Helal 2018, p. 83). Likewise, she reveals that her aunt does not permit her to play the *nay* at home because she hates Shatha practicing that music, which she calls "noise" (Helal 2018, p. 82). Like the walls of the camp, the cultural center is also a place of expression where Shatha and Adam can connect with their feelings through music and where "thoughts truly belong to [them]" (Helal 2018, p. 83). Adam writes the lyrics to songs and Shatha composes the music, giving rise to an artistic collaboration and a love relationship that energizes both characters and contrasts with the violence they face outside the cultural center.

In addition to love, playing music enhances these characters' agency and becomes an essential act in their transformation from bare lives to "agent lives". While they perform in front of other members of the camp, they feel enthusiastic and fulfilled:

The second I start singing, the audience [. . .] begin to roar with excitement. I see the proud faces of my parents beaming in the third row, right in the middle. A burst of love and warmth emanates from the crowd [. . .] Glancing over at Shatha, I can see that she too has picked up on the amazing vibe (Helal 2018, p. 70).

This excerpt depicts the moment in which both Adam and Shatha feel valued for the first time since their arrival in Shatila, and it is through music that they acquire an active and respected role in their community. This artistic expression also allows them to fulfill themselves and to establish intercommunal emotional bonds that break down many of the boundaries that separate them inside the camp. Accepting and embodying the *campscape*'s liminality, shifting nature, and energetic behavior constitutes the only way to overcome their condition as bare lives. In this sense, the cultural center in Shatila represents a safe place in which Shatha and Adam can trespass physical and mental boundaries. While performing on the center's stage, "Shatha and [Adam's] hands touch briefly as the crowd encircles [them]" (Helal 2018, p. 85). This points to music (and art) as a powerful means of physical and emotional connection between human beings. Shatha reckons that working as a singer in the cultural center allows her "to transcend this grim reality and leave it all behind" (Helal 2018, p. 85), and adds that when she plays with Adam, they seem to "create a magic bubble" (Helal 2018, p. 86), which constitutes a political act through which these characters take advantage of the mutability of the *campscape* and the fluidity of its borders to reshape a space where they become active human beings.

Artistic production and the imaginative burden that it entails are, indeed, effective means to trespass mental borders. Shatha recounts in her homonymous chapter that once they graduate, young people in the camp discover that all their professional dreams cannot be fulfilled and that they "will only be hired for a job that suits [their] nationality" (Helal 2018, p. 81). Shatha feels "like a pariah" within the camp (Helal 2018, p. 81) because, as a Palestinian, there are many jobs she is not allowed to do, consequently feeling the urge to overcome those social hurdles that hold her back in this bare life condition. Shatha claims that, despite holding a degree in media studies, she is constantly turned down because of her nationality. She then reproduces the words her mother used to tell her as a mechanism to combat the pain and despair of the camp:

Something my mother used to always tell me when I was feeling particularly down about our camp wafts through my mind: 'Think of this dump as a work of art and you'll soon learn to appreciate it, for after destruction comes restoration' (Helal 2018, p. 82).

Being in one of her lowest moments, Shatha follows her mother's advice and embarks on a mental journey across the camp's alleyways, trespassing their walls and creating "infinite paintings of the future in [her] mind" (Helal 2018, p. 82). Thus, she overcomes the constraining borders within the camp by using her imagination to repaint a more colorful and hopeful version of Shatila through a mental artistic expression. It is precisely her mental activity that provides her with the agency to project Shatila as she would prefer it, borderless and united. Her desire for agency and for crossing the cultural and physical limitations of the camp is reflected when she decides to look for a job or apply for the Canadian scholarship, thus defying her aunt and her father in search of her own autonomy.

However, both accomplishments are eventually interrupted with her sudden death at the end of the book, when she is found dead, presumably, after being electrocuted by touching one of the barbed wire walls. Her death symbolizes a failed attempt to complete her transformative process into an agent subject and represents the dangers these refugees assume if they rebel against social and physical constrictions.

In a similar fashion, Latifa rebels against the constraining patriarchal system. In the chapter "The Dinner", she tells her husband how inhuman and cowardly he is in wanting to marry his underage daughter to old Mahmoud in exchange for money:

'You are inhuman. You're sacrificing your daughter, selling her to an old man, like a piece of cattle'. She didn't know where she found the courage. She had never spoken to her husband like this before. 'It's all your fault. The drinking. The gambling'. She raised both hands to her mouth. He would hit her now. Beat her to death. She had gone too far. But tonight, Ahmad didn't beat her (Helal 2018, p. 76).

Latifa crosses the line by confronting her husband in this way. She knows "she had gone too far" because she dares to trespass social and cultural boundaries when adopting an active role in her marriage. Her agency is not only evident in her words but also in her behavior, since when Ahmad later tries to hold her hands, Latifa violently pushes them away as a sign of disapproval. This authoritarian way of acting contrasts with her husband's, who sobs and cries, "wailing like an old woman" (Helal 2018, p. 76), and loses his temper several times throughout this conversation. Nevertheless, even though Latifa, like Shatha, adopts a defiant attitude and undergoes a transformation from a bare to an agent life, she is ultimately incapable of defeating the patriarchal system, which is deeply rooted in both the outside and inside of Shatila, so she is forced to marry off her daughter.

Unlike Shatha and Latifa, Reham manages to successfully cross some of the cultural boundaries marked by patriarchy. After the death of her baby, she signs up for a computer course and is determined to find a job because she wants to be financially independent and divorce Marwan. Even though her husband refuses to grant her a work permit, he eventually agrees. Thus, Reham starts working as a cook and cleaner in a drug rehabilitation center, a job Palestinians are allowed to do and that, coincidentally, is the same job Shatha used to do before her death. Working makes Reham feel useful and fosters her conversion into an agent subject because she "can stand on [her] own two feet" without the economic help of Marwan or her parents. She then decides to ask her husband for divorce. He reacts violently, beating her, and when she looks for her parents' help, they try to convince Reham not to leave her husband. Finally, she goes to the Sharia court, and when the judge tries to persuade her to not destroy her marriage, she replies that she is determined to leave her husband and is willing to give up all her rights, including returning her dowry, so the judge is forced to demand that Marwan delivers the divorce declaration. Reham's transformation from a "bare life" into an "agent live" is completed at the end of the chapter, when she leaves the court "hugging the divorce certificate like a trophy" (Helal 2018, p. 116) and feeling that Malaak, her dead baby, is smiling down at her.

Therefore, these characters take advantage of the liminal and shifting nature of the *campscape* to overcome the condition of passive entities imposed by many media outlets and institutions around the world. Instead of remaining static, they cross physical and mental barriers, developing love relationships, rebelling against those who restrict their autonomy, fulfilling themselves through music and work, defining themselves as thinking subjects, and humanizing themselves while challenging the identification of these refugees as passive and dehumanized individuals. *Shatila Stories* constitutes a space where they can extol their humanization and agency, and where, despite the hostility of the camp, they manage to embody the infinite opportunities that the changing nature of the *campscape* also offers. As Shatha mentions, "the camp is a treasure trove of secrets" (Helal 2018, p. 88), which drives these characters to adapt and look for light amid so much darkness.

5. Conclusions

This article examines how *Shatila* Stories (2018) highlights Shatila's status as a *campscape* (Diana Martín) which, although causing distress to its inhabitants, also provides them with the opportunity to become active subjects. These stories portray camp dwellers who undergo an identity transformation from bare lives (Agamben) to "agent lives". Instead of rejecting Shatila's borderline nature, they accept and embody its liminality to cross physical and mental boundaries in search of a more empowered and autonomous identity.

In this way, these stories do not perpetuate the refugee's victimized and dehumanized depiction often found in media outlets. Rather, they help them express their thoughts and emotions from their own perspective and without the filters of media outlets. In this context, *Shatila Stories* constitutes an outstanding contribution because it focuses on the refugees' lives in the camp rather than their flight journeys, as is often the case in other writings framed within the refugee literature category.

In line with other refugee narratives, *Shatila Stories* meets the need to represent the refugee in a fairer and more "humane" way, making it a key literary work that adds to the "growing attention to the particularities of asylum and refugee subjectivity" in current postcolonial studies (Woolley 2017, p. 379) and to the understanding of postcolonial fiction as an influential socio-political document (Harlow 1987; Ashcroft et al. 2006) where the subaltern subject can speak and be heard.

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