“That hateful limit”: Narrative distancing and Palestinian subjectivity in the post-
sumud fiction of Adania Shibli

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that Adania Shibli’s fiction explores the limits of individual and collective Palestinian subjectivity in order to emphasize a profound sense of estrangement from representational systems, which strikes at the heart of the redemptive function of postcolonial literature. Through concerted acts of narrative distancing in her novellas, Touch, We Are All Equally Far from Love, and Minor Detail, Shibli pushes the reader into a suspended state of jarring alienation, which results in a foregrounding of tensions between empathy and the ethics of representation. In doing so, these works of fiction become performative of a Palestinian identity that has been evacuated by the processes of postmemory in addition to continued erasure as a result of an ongoing state of coloniality and present-day injustices. The article concludes that Shibli’s fiction hails a new era of Palestinian literature, a post-
sumud (steadfastness) sensibility, which is marked by unbearable fragmentation, futility, and melancholic despair.

KEYWORDS
Palestinian literature; empathy; postmemory; postcolonial trauma; ethics of representation; adania shibli

Introduction: Reading empathic unsettlement

This article argues that Adania Shibli’s novels – Touch (Shibli 2010), first published in 2003; We Are All Equally Far from Love (Shibli 2012), first published in 2004; and Minor Detail (Shibli 2020a) first published in 2017 – inaugurate a post-
sumud (steadfastness) era of Palestinian fiction, which explores the limits of Palestinian subjectivity in order to emphasize a profound sense of estrangement from representational systems. I argue that Shibli’s intentional narrative distancing pushes the reader into a state of jarring alienation, reminiscent of Sam Durrant’s (2004) notion of “abjection” or what Dominick LaCapra (1999) calls “empathic unsettlement” (722); through this distancing, she strikes at the heart of the so-called redemptive function of postcolonial literature. When read through the prism of postmemory (Hirsch 2012), Shibli’s texts become performative of a Palestinian individual identity suspended by the processes of postmemory as well as the continued erasure and colonialism that define present-day circumstances.

That Shibli’s novels fall under the paradigm of trauma narratives, in both form and content, is unquestionable. Literary trauma theory has exhaustively documented the prevalence of (post)modernist textual strategies and experimental devices as axiomatic

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modes of storytelling in trauma narratives, including literatures arising from postcolonial contexts. Such strategies include anti-linearity, compulsive repetition, resistance to closure, and the use of spectres to illustrate the eruption of past trauma into the present day (Whitehead 2004; Luckhurst 2008). Though replete with personal and political traumas, Arab literature has been largely neglected in applications of literary trauma theory, with only a few exceptions (Sayigh 2013; Gana 2014; Al-Samman 2015). I believe that reading Arab fiction through these frameworks can extend such theories in illuminating ways and yield productive energy in the reading of this literature. Shibli’s novels employ many trauma fiction strategies in order to articulate the intersectionality of Palestinian trauma, which is both individual and collective, personal and political, historical and very much in the present-day reality of the novels’ settings in the Occupied West Bank. However, my focus here is on the narrative distancing strategies she utilizes in order to reflect a fragmented Palestinian identity amid a fractured collective social reality. I argue that these devices aim to jar the reader into a sense of alienated suspension that mirrors the incoherence of her characters’ identities and disrupts conventional notions of empathy.

Complex and experimental, Shibli’s literature demands a great deal of effort from the reader to achieve narrative coherence. This is as true of the original texts as it is of the English translations. Touch comprises five chapters which, aside from the final one, are divided into eight subsections. Each section features vivid scenes, forming a rich mosaic of sense and affect. However, the plot resists coherence, moving laterally across the chapters as traumatic incidents are unveiled and compulsively re-examined. Michael Pritchard (2021) notes that “by deceiving the reader’s expectation of narrative closure, while simultaneously allowing states of relatedness to define structure, Shibli densely materializes the traumatic” (131). The protagonist is the unnamed, youngest daughter of a large Palestinian family residing in an unnamed village in the West Bank. A passing reference to the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre is the only indication of temporal setting.

We Are All Equally Far from Love also comprises vignettes, each dealing with an isolated protagonist. The “Beginning” and “End” chapters are relayed in the first person and possibly from the perspective of the same unnamed character. Between this frame are six chapters – what Shibli labels “Measures” – each with its own unnamed protagonist (except for Afaf in the first) struggling to cohere a sense of self. Though the characters remain isolated within their chapters, there are intimations of links between them that extend across the narrative. Consequently, as Nora Parr (2017) notes in her analysis of the novel, “to collapse [this fragmentation] a reader must reach across chapters and find the collective story” (59).

Minor Detail has the most straightforward structure of the three novels, being split into two discrete sections. The first half is a fictionalized account of a factual case, told in the third person from the perspective of an Israeli commander over four days in August 1949 in the Negev desert when a group of soldiers, tasked with “cleans[ing] it of any remaining Arabs” (Shibli 2020a, 4), massacres a Bedouin tribe, takes one of its daughters captive, and gang rapes and kills her. The second half of the novel shifts into first-person narration, told by an unnamed Palestinian woman in early 2000s Ramallah who becomes obsessed with uncovering more about the incident after reading about it in a newspaper article.
All three texts explore the limits of subjectivity and express a fragmented Palestinian identity that resists coherence. Narrative devices transfer this incoherence to the reader who must thereby confront the limits of empathy. If we assume coherence to be desirable, then Shibli’s strategy of eschewing identification markers such as character names can be seen as an intentional disruption of the twinned notions of subjectivity and reader empathy given that naming is the most direct mechanism for conferring subjectivity on literary characters. This subjectivity – augmented by unique characteristics, physical descriptions, and personal histories – then functions as a vehicle for reader empathy. In the case of postcolonial narratives, reader empathy has been critiqued for serving the putative function of promoting cross-cultural solidarity by allowing the reader to bring the Other into themselves (Durrant 2004; Craps and Buelens 2008; Dalley 2015). Consequently, the lack of names in Shibli’s texts becomes an act of resistance in what I contend is an attempt to guard against overidentification with the traumatized in addition to illustrating the transitory and futile nature of reader empathy itself.

In presenting readers with unnamed characters, not only does Shibli foreground a tension between empathy and ethics, but the work becomes illustrative of a fragmented subjectivity. When asked at the Edinburgh International Book Festival about the lack of character names in Minor Detail, Shibli stated that “naming is an act of power I don’t want to practise” (2002b). She noted that names become “indictments in the context of racism”, as revealing them can foreclose any possibility of communication by immediately bringing to the fore prejudices between the interlocutors. In fact, the Arabic language itself becomes a source of anxiety, as its use can manifest legitimate safety concerns: the narrator of the second section of Minor Detail notes that for people living in Area C of the West Bank, their “very existence constitutes a security threat if they utter a word of Arabic outside their areas” (Shibli 2002a, 52). Shibli added that the Israeli practice of “toponymicide” in Palestine/Israel imbues the act of naming with power imbalances. In his article on the renaming of Palestinian spaces, Nur Masalha (2015) illustrates how “Zionist-Hebrew renaming projects were critical to the ethnocisation of the European Jews and nationalisation of the Hebrew Bible” (2) and that such toponymic projects intensified following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. In that vein, Shibli sees the disclosure of names as an act of “playing into the dynamics of oppression” (2002b). It comes as no surprise, then, that the author eschews character identification in her fiction. There are no named characters in Minor Detail nor in Touch; and while We Are All Equally Far from Love features eight protagonists, only one is named.

LaCapra warns that trauma narratives carry a risk of appropriation, where the reader may position themselves as a “surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position” (1999, 722). Durrant notes this dilemma of empathic identification, arguing that to “transcend the other’s alterity is to efface that alterity, that the act of empathy is the attempt to imagine the other as the same, as another version of the self” (2004, 27). He argues that empathic identification is ultimately narcissistic: when the suffering of an Other is filtered through the lens of the reader’s own experiences, it results in an Other who ultimately remains subordinated to the reader. Such identification is fleeting and unlikely to affect lasting change, thereby debunking the “empathy–altruism” theory. Suzanne Keen’s (2007) Empathy and the Novel examines the “empathy–altruism” paradigm in the field of literary studies and concludes that “scant
evidence exists for active connections among novel reading, experiences of narrative empathy, and altruistic action on behalf of real people” (xiv). The question of empathy, then, remains a vital and dynamic one: what are the limits of reader empathy? What function does it serve and for whom? What tensions does it create or alleviate? Furthermore, these questions become exponentially more pertinent in cases such as the Palestinian context, where injustices and trauma are present and ongoing rather than residing in a closed historic event.

According to Durrant, a more ethical identification would not bring the Other into the self but rather aim to expel the self into the state of absolute alterity inhabited by the Other. He argues that “the possibility of reconciliation lies not in our ability to empathize with the other but rather in an experience of abjection” (Durrant 2004, 27). He goes on to define “abjection” as “a radical loss of subjectivity, an ‘experience’ [...] that approximates [...] the experience of being other” (27). In this way the other is not imagined as another version of the self; instead, the self experiences a jarring sense of evacuation. In other words, what is achieved is not “the traditional empathic identification with the other as same but an abject identification with the difference of the other, an antitranscendent encounter with the other as object, as that which has been relegated to the realm of the subhuman” (76). Durrant’s argument here centres on the novels of J.M. Coetzee, particularly Foe, Life & Times of Michael K, and Waiting for the Barbarians, where the narratives focus on subaltern characters whose subject position the author does not share. Consequently, Durrant sees these characters’ “invisibility as subjects” as indicative of “their extrinsic relation to the narrative’s symbolic order, to the sociolinguistic sign system that governs human relations” (26). However, this abjection is complicated when applied to Arabic-language literature in translation such as in the case of Shibli’s fiction. For if the translation maintains fidelity to the original, then the sense of abjection applies to both the English-language reader (who views the characters as subaltern and extrinsic to their sociolinguistic sign system) as well as to the Arab reader, for whom these characters are not Other.

Shibli shares the subject position of her characters, the only exception being the Israeli commander from whose perspective the first half of Minor Detail is narrated in the third person. Moreover, as her texts are originally composed in Arabic, Shibli’s characters exist within the narrative’s symbolic order as well as the sociolinguistic sign system of the intended audience. Consequently, her refusal to name characters cannot be attributed to the same respect for alterity that Coetzee practises. His narrative distancing serves to illustrate, as Molly Abel Travis (2010) argues, “the self’s inability to arrest the meaning of the other” (231). Shibli’s narratives go further to dramatize a loss of subjectivity, an abjection, in what I contend is expressive of the self’s inability to arrest its own meaning, particularly in contexts of ongoing trauma.

The protagonist in Touch is called “the girl” while family members are labelled as “the father”, “the mother”, “the third sister”, and so on. Minor characters are given only descriptive labels – “the neighbour”, “the shepherd boy”. In addition to a lack of names, no character is claimed in that possessive pronouns are not used when referring to them. They are “the sister” rather than “her sister”, “the mother” instead of “her mother”. In the original Arabic text, the lack of ownership even extends to the protagonist’s own body, with references to “the hand” rather than “her hand” (Shibli 2003, 12), for example. I argue that this distancing, both from the embodied self and the collective of the family,
exposes a uniquely Palestinian postmemory, whereby the burden of collective historic traumatic memory, coupled with ongoing injustice, has led to a fragmented sense of Palestinian self which is evident across Shibli’s fiction.

In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch (2012) argues that postmemory is “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but [... ] at a generational remove” (6; original emphases). Postmemory can lead to an individual identity constituted as a relationship “that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5). Though Hirsch focuses on the descendants of Holocaust survivors, she applies the concept to the Palestinian context, specifically to Ghassan Kanafani’s (2000) *Returning to Haifa*. Palestinian scholars have problematized this application, emphasizing that the 1948 Nakba cannot be formulated as an historic event but as a condition that persists to the present. Lila Abu-Lughod (2007) argues that “for Palestinians, both memory and postmemory have a special valence because the past has not yet passed” (79). Ihab Saloul (2012) goes further in stressing the suspended temporality of this condition, noting that the “second and third generation of post-Nakba Palestinians, although they have not experienced this originating moment in 1948, are still ‘inside’ the event itself living the catastrophe every day” (107). By reading postmemory through the lens of LaCapra’s theory of Loss and Absence, I argue that the historic traumatic loss of the 1948 Nakba has been transformed, via the structure of postmemory and the ongoing crises of the present, into a subtending state of absence for modern-day Palestinians. I contend that Shibli’s texts are performative of what I call a “postmemorial absence”, demonstrating melancholic despair and futility through personal portraits of incoherent selves vainly attempting to traverse a splintered traumascape and fractured collectivity.

These contestations and developments of collective identity have always been reflected in Palestinian literature. Nakba-era narratives, leading up to and beyond the 1967 Naksa were concerned with resistance, return, and the establishment of a just society, typified by the work of Kanafani. Bashir Abu-Manneh (2016), in *The Palestinian Novel*, likens the writer to Frantz Fanon, in that Kanafani views nationalist consciousness “in universal rather than particularist terms – as the self-determination of an oppressed people justified by democratic values” (71). Thus, his literature is characterized as “realist and emancipatory, plebeian, and participatory” (71) and marks what Abu-Manneh sees as “a shift from intellectual pessimism to self-generated anticipations and future possibilities” (72). Abu-Manneh argues that the political compromises of the late 1970s (culminating in the Egypt–Israel peace treaty of 1979), as well as the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, brought about a Palestinian Modernism, which he defines – with reference to the work of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Sahar Khalifeh – as “an aesthetic of defeat that both registers and resists the disintegration of praxis” (137). He goes on to assert that the defeats of the period and collapse of pan-Arab unity gave rise to “the diasporic novel form, ushering in the collapse of realism and the liquidation of the individual” (137). Consequently, Palestinian literature from the post-First Intifada period (1987) to the millennium focused on themes of exilic displacement, traumatic memory, and nostalgia. Moving into the 21st century, the contributors to *Post-Millennial Palestine: Literature, Memory, Resistance* (Fox and Qabaha 2021) argue that postmillennial Palestinian literature – such
as the work of Adania Shibli, Maya Abu al-Hayyat, Najwan Darwish, and others – seeks to articulate memories of traumatic history alongside a precarious present that continually generates new crises. In their introduction to the volume, Rachel Gregory Fox and Ahmad Qabaha (2021) contend that the articulation of memory in postmillennial Palestinian literature thus serves as “a means of resistance against official versions of history imposed by Israeli settler-colonialism”, while allowing Palestinian writers to “critically and creatively consider the possible future(s) of their nation” (9–10). While I agree that these works participate in the fashioning of a post-sumud aesthetic, particularly as it relates to perennial negotiations of Palestinian identity (both individual and collective), the emphasis on memory articulation as resistance in service of a future imaginary can obfuscate articulations of present entropy and the sense of incoherence and melancholic despair it breeds.

**Fragmented landscapes, fragmented selves**

The inextricable link between the self and the land is a common trope in Palestinian literature, often signifying belonging and community, heritage and claims of ownership, as well as resistance to erasure and colonial dispossession (Nashef 2018; Qabaha 2021). However, and in a manner perhaps more explicit than that of other writers, Shibli’s fiction maps the fractured self onto a fragmented landscape whereby the self’s inability to cohere with a larger collective is paralleled by a geography characterized by barriers and impediments. The first two novels were written at the turn of the millennium, when the author was living and working in Jerusalem. Parr, in her discussion of We Are All, notes how the novel “responds directly to the political period in which it was produced” (2017, 53). This is the post-Second Intifada period of heightened political violence which saw widespread escalation of Israeli occupation and enclosure of Palestinian cities, leading to an increased number of checkpoints and curfews, along with the onset of the construction of the (illegal) Separation Wall. Within the West Bank “the land under Palestinian control was often not contiguous, and a map of the West Bank looked more like a Rorschach test” (Pressman 2006, 120). This rigidly segmented geography solidifies the fragmented nature of Palestine as a “nation” and reveals a collective national imaginary which is itself fractured. Within this ruptured collective, individual identity becomes isolated, suspended, and scattered, no matter where in the world a Palestinian might find themselves. Parr asserts that for Palestinians within the occupied territories, “in what became Israel in 1948, in the refugee camps across the Arab world, and in the diaspora, [...] there is no operating logic that can bring them together and open the doors that separate them in either conceptual or physical terms” (2017, 54). That being said, there is space for dissenting opinion here as often a sense of shared Palestinian-ness (whatever that means at any given point in time) is precisely what unites Palestinians around the world. This transnational unity was brought into sharp relief during the recent social media-led protests following the campaign of forced evictions in Silwan as well as the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem (Baroud 2021; English 2021).

Indeed, Shibli’s characters spend an inordinate amount of time tracing the boundaries of their immobility and measuring distances they have no hope of negotiating. In Minor Detail, the narrator of the second section, a woman working in Ramallah, wants to travel
to Tel Aviv (a distance of just 60 km) in order to visit the archives which hold the case files regarding the rape and murder of the Bedouin girl. She exhaustively describes the hellish mechanisms she must go through in order to make what ought to be a relatively simple journey. Over three pages, the narrator describes how she needs to reach Area C, which she cannot do, saying: “the longest trip I can embark on with my green identity card, which shows I’m from Area A, is from my house to my new job” (Shibli 2020a, 52). She hardly ventures into Area B and ironically wonders: “so how can I even think of going to a place so far that it’s almost in Area D?” In the end she confides in a colleague about her desire to travel past Jerusalem and borrows her blue identity card while enlisting another acquaintance to rent a car with the correct coloured licence plate. So while these land divisions were initially part of a broader attempt to increase Palestinian autonomy, in actuality they have calcified a geographical fragmenting of the Palestinian nation, which in turn has saturated daily life with a sense of fracture, discontinuity, and dispersion – particularly for those living in the occupied territories. Edward Said (1999) points out that “Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time” (20). Parr shows how, in We Are All, this geographical segmentation is also rendered in starkly personal terms, whereby the novel “maps a period of Palestinian social fragmentation onto the world of the heart” (2017, 52). For not only is each protagonist isolated in their own chapter, but within the chapter their isolation is painfully measured, whether by the store clerk in the third measure walking towards a woman to whom he is attracted, or the six love letters the unnamed narrator of the “Beginning” writes to her beloved and which go unanswered, or the unnamed sick woman in the sixth measure who is separated from an uncaring family by closed doors, hallways, and separate floors.

In Shibli’s novels, the isolation and lack of coherence of individual selfhood also play out in gender and familial relations fraught with tension and an undercurrent of personal trauma. In Touch and We Are All, the lives depicted are marked by chronic, and often banal, violence. The protagonist in Touch processes visual cues in a way that speaks of past trauma – not many little girls would compare the peeling paint on a courtyard post with “a burned hand, swollen and inflamed” (Shibli 2010, 11). In another scene, when she is taken to a doctor for an ear infection, he inexplicably lifts the hem of her dress and she pushes “his hand back as hard as she could muster in her weakness” (17). Several of the chapters in We Are All showcase discordant relationships and traumatized psyches: abusive fathers and husbands in the first and second; a date rape in the sixth chapter, and a threat of rape and murder by an obsessed ex-lover in the fourth and fifth chapters. The reader learns in the sixth chapter that Afaf committed suicide. Thus, the lives of Shibli’s protagonists are marked by monotony, immobility, and a profoundly melancholic despair. As the narrator of the final chapter of We Are All states:

Nothing could prevent the thought of death. Those periods of time, six months or two years, that some people start to plan for as though this were so straightforward, have always seemed to me like an enormous expanse of nothingness. My whole life is shrinking, on its way to disappearance. (Shibli 2012, 134)
The inability of Shibli’s characters to connect with a collective identity reflects the gradual collapse of the Palestinian national imaginary where it is no longer clear what “being” Palestinian means. The uncompromising resolve and resistance of the post-Nakba era led to what Salah D. Hassan (2018) calls a period of “radical hope” and “a new Palestinian subjectivity oriented toward the future, one that accepted that historic Palestine had been irreversibly altered” (257). For Palestinians remaining in the territories, a policy of sumud, or steadfastness, arose in the 1980s which Raja Shehadeh describes as a consciously political activity that “develop[ed] from an all-encompassing form of life into a form of resistance that unites the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation” (quoted in Bernard 2018, 279). However, I contend that Shibli’s fiction hails a new era of Palestinian literature, a post-sumud sensibility, marked by fragmentation, loneliness, futility, and melancholic despair. Her novels move beyond Shehadeh’s assertion that sumud represents “a response to the Israeli occupation that refuses the choice between ‘mute submission’ and ‘blind-hate’” (quoted in Bernard 2018, 278). On the contrary, the woman at the end of We Are All revels in hatred, describing herself as “a lonesome shepherdess, who can do nothing to perfection except find pleasure in calmly hating” (Shibli 2012, 139). Hatred, she says, “is the only thing that still gives me the energy to act” (137), and she longs for a time when hatred achieves “sincerity and depth without the need to hide itself anymore; for us to surrender to it without hesitation, and without denial, so that the face may be at rest and no longer contracted” (143).

The dog’s howling

Thus far I have argued that Shibli employs narrative distancing strategies such as unnamed characters, fragmented narratives, and resistance to closure in her fiction in order to articulate the intersectionality of Palestinian trauma. This is trauma that is simultaneously historical and current, personal and political, individual, intergenerational, and collective in nature. In this final section I turn to Minor Detail, where Shibli confronts the ethics of representation and aims to push the reader into a state of “empathic unsettlement” by allowing them to take on the role of secondary witness.

There is an anguished dog in Minor Detail. A character in its own right, the dog witnesses the atrocities perpetrated by the soldiers over the four days of the narrative. The “distant howling of a dog” (Shibli 2020a, 6) registers for the commander in the days leading up to the massacre on August 12, 1949. He then encounters the animal at the Bedouin camp where it stands over the surviving girl after the soldiers open fire on the tribe: “The dog’s howling finally stopped, and a degree of calm settled over the place. Now the only sound was the muffled weeping of a girl who had curled up inside her black clothes like a beetle” (18). At the base, the dog is seen “lying with its head on its front paws, staring at the door of the second hut” (21) where the girl is being kept, and when the commander brings her out, strips her, and hoses her down in full view of the camp, the dog stands “tense and alert, its tongue trembled as it panted nervously” (24). The use of animal avatars in postcolonial narratives has been widely studied, particularly the function of the dog as a surrogate victim or medium for moral development in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace (Gal 2008; Li 2019; İbrişim 2021). In the Palestinian context, Rachel Kunert-Graf (2018) has argued that in the 2009 animated film Waltz with Bashir, which revolves around a former Israeli “Defense” Forces soldier’s memories of his participation
in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, “the use of animal avatars is superficially sympathetic to victims, moralizing the unjustness of their suffering, but this same trope unselfconsciously exemplifies the dehumanizing logic of persecution” (80). Kunert-Graf notes that the film begins with the protagonist’s “nightmare recollection of shooting dogs to silence them”, and consequently “these animals constitute absolutely voiceless victims, devoid of language” (85).

Minor Detail is a radical departure in the use of this trope; rather than standing in for an unnamed, voiceless victim, I contend that the dog functions as a reader – and, to an extent, author – proxy, standing apart from and outside the girl’s experience in a profoundly unsettling state of empathy. As the day and night progress, the dog howls at every sexual assault to which the girl is subjected, whether by soldiers coming in and out of the hut or their commander: “the bed’s squeaking drifted up over the stillness of dawn, then increased and intensified, accompanied again by the dog’s howling. And after the squeaking finally ceased, the loud howling outside the door continued for a long time” (Shibli 2020a, 34). Though the dog does not directly witness any of these assaults and is not present when the commander takes the girl into the desert and kills her, it nevertheless testifies to the trauma she suffers. Its howls serve as an ineffectual protest to her pain and degradation and, as a result, force the reader to confront the limits and putative function of the empathy these narratives elicit.

The Bedouin girl in Minor Detail is unnamed and is not given any dialogue; all the reader registers from her is screaming, sobbing, and “babbling incomprehensible fragments” (Shibli 2020a, 27). This is unsurprising as the narration is from the perspective of the commander who neither cares who the girl is nor speaks her language. As previously mentioned, the narrative fictionalizes a factual incident that was concealed by authorities, only coming to light 50 years later. Thus, the central tension of the novel concerns the official erasure of the girl’s story, and Shibli sustains this tension by recounting the incident from the perspective of the perpetrator. Indeed, the woman who narrates the second half of the novel speaks to this when she says: “There may in fact be nothing more important than this little detail, if one wants to arrive at the complete truth, which, by leaving out the girl’s story, the article does not reveal” (50–51). The second half of the novel becomes a futile attempt by the narrator to uncover the girl’s story, an attempt which is mirrored in the metacontext of the author composing the first half.

In not venturing into the girl’s psyche, Shibli chooses to represent her alterity in a way that speaks to a different and arguably more profound “truth”: the singularity of the girl’s experience and its untranslatability. Here, both author and reader are excluded from her subjectivity and have no access to how she might articulate her distress. Indeed, at one point the narrator, attempting to talk herself out of the risky endeavour of travelling to another area, says:

And the fact that the girl was killed twenty-five years to the day before I was born doesn’t necessarily mean that her death belongs to me, or that it should extend into my life, or that it should be my duty to retell her story. (Shibli 2020a, 54)

By suspending access to the girl’s psyche, Shibli models not only a refusal to reconcile self and Other, in the postcolonial sense, but also touches on Jacques Derrida’s (1996) maxim “tout autre est tout autre” (82; every other is totally other). According to
LaCapra, this statement can be configured as a paradox that signifies “both the transcendence (infinite distance) and the immanence (closest proximity) of the other” (1999, 706). This narrative technique casts both author and reader in the role of secondary witness, pushing them into a state of what LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement”, which he defines as “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (722).

This is to say that while Minor Detail foregrounds an historic tragedy against the backdrop of the ongoing besiegement of the Palestinian people – at one point the woman says, “it’s inevitable for the past to be forgotten, especially if the present is no less horrific” (Shibli 2020a, 50) – the novel also underscores a conviction that representation can only extend so far and that it is impossible to locate “the complete truth” (50). In other words, while the author, as a Palestinian living in the West Bank, shares the subject position of her characters, and consequently is in a position to aesthetically represent trauma that to a certain extent is her own, she chooses to respect the alterity of a Bedouin girl living in 1949 in what became the Negev desert. By not speaking for her, Shibli highlights that the girl’s voice cannot be materially retrieved, that what has been lost is lost forever and can never be restored – the girl “will forever remain a nobody whose voice nobody will hear” (54). Shibli here insists on her right to articulate the story in such a way as to cause, at best, “empathic unsettlement”. Such empathy does not seek to confirm the teleology of harmonious closure and triumph that is often mapped onto postcolonial narratives. In contrast, the purpose of such unsettlement is to keep alive the tensions by which the ethical question of our relation to the Other and the Other’s irreconcilable alterity may be respected.

In the second half of Minor Detail, the dog returns as a spectre. Unlike in the first section, where its physical presence is seen and acknowledged by the human characters, the narrator of the second section never sees the dog but only hears its cries. This section opens at midnight with the woman lying down in bed to sleep and observing that “at that moment, a dog on the opposite hill began to howl incessantly” (Shibli 2020a, 44). It haunts her over the next day and night – “the dog’s barking continues to echo in the air until the last hours of morning; sometimes the wind carries it closer to me, and sometimes further from me” (51) – eventually urging her to undertake the journey to discover more about the incident that took place a half-century before. However, it proves to be an aborted journey as the woman is killed in an absurd shooting before she can discover anything about the case. Consequently, in a context where true justice and restitution are impossible, the howls constitute a call for recognition, for the atrocity to be heard and remembered, but they are also the anguished cry of futility. They are a disconsolate acknowledgement, not only of a history that cannot be fully restored or recovered, but also of a “no less horrific” present that has proven resistant to change.

Conclusion: Fragmented subjectivity and the limits of empathy

This article has argued that Shibli’s novels explore the limits of a Palestinian subjectivity that is by turns fractured, scattered, and evacuated, both by collective traumatic history and by ongoing present injustices. By pushing the limits of subjectivity through conscious narrative distancing techniques, Shibli foregrounds the tension between the ethics
of representation and empathy. Her novels ask readers to inhabit a state of otherness or non-subjectivity rather than re-imagining the Other as an alternate version of themselves.

*Touch* eschews character names and possessive pronouns in an act that stylistically severs the inter- and transgenerational link of trauma that the structure of postmemory has transmitted to modern-day Palestinians. This device also showcases a negated personhood which highlights the well-intentioned but ultimately futile empathy that often greets the Palestinians and their cause – a transitory empathy where the Other remains subordinated. *We Are All* maps a fragmented landscape onto collapsed collective identity and the resulting fractured individuals who attempt to traverse this actual and abstract space. It is a condition where connection is impossible and the self remains incoherent, isolated, and dejected. With *Minor Detail*, Shibli confronts the ethics of representation and the impossibility of material recovery of lost and silenced histories of trauma. The Bedouin girl’s voice, her actual experience, can never be accessed, not by Shibli nor by her narrator who is killed before she can uncover “the complete truth” of the incident. In this novel, the role of secondary witness is brought to the fore; the dog, the reader, and the author are forced into a state of empathic unsettlement. The secondary witness is tasked with recognizing the trauma of another while resisting the impulse to overidentify with the victim, and thereby efface their alterity.

Shibli’s novels mark a turning point in Palestinian literature, moving from the steadfast texts of the *sumud* era and into an inert aesthetic of futility, unapologetic hate, and melancholic despair. Thus, her fiction repudiates the so-called redemptive function of postcolonial literature where narratives are often read in a fetishized manner that, according to LaCapra, “den[ies] the trauma that called them into existence by [ ... ] harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios” (1999, 723). Shibli’s novels resist such a reading at every stage, whether in form or content. They are experimental texts that demand a high degree of effort from the reader and do not seek facile closure. These novels keep the reader in a state of suspended alienation, like their protagonists, pressed up against what the final narrator of *We Are All* contends is “that hateful limit – the inability to endure any more” (Shibli 2012, 145).

**Notes**

1. Palestinian literature sits uncomfortably within the postcolonial designation. The departure of the British in 1948 was quickly followed by the creation of the State of Israel through the forced removal of Palestinians and settler occupation of their land. This contemporary colonialism places Palestinian literature within what Nora Parr (2017) calls “a not-yet postcolonial state”. That being said, Palestinian narratives touch upon many of the themes that characterize postcolonial literature, such as collective historic trauma, exile and displacement, and contestations of identity (see also Williams and Ball 2014).

2. The account of the 1949 rape and murder of the Bedouin girl was revealed in a 2003 article by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, which had obtained classified documents containing testimonies from soldiers involved in the case (see Lavie and Gorali 2003).
3. Following the 1993 Oslo Accords, the West Bank was divided into three sections: Area A, Area B, and Area C. Area C covers 63 percent of the total area of the West Bank and is under full civil and military control of the State of Israel. According to the World Bank Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Department (2013), Palestinians are largely restricted from development, construction, or other land uses within Area C.

4. LaCapra’s (1999) theory of Absence and Loss states that loss represents a specific, historic trauma or event to which not everyone is subject, while absence is an atemporal state or non-event which is transhistorical or structural in nature.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Lindsey Moore and Dr Anastasia Valassopoulos for their valuable feedback on drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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