Incorporating silence and haunting memories to autoethnography and oral history: reconstructing a journey as bicultural daughters out of Syria

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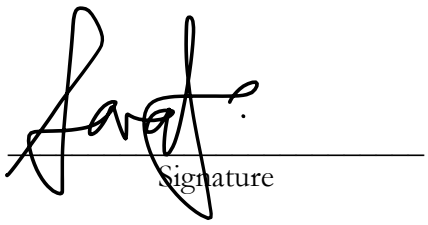
Abstract:

The aim of this research is to examine **the concepts of silence and haunting memories** as unspoken and often inaccessible dimensions of migratory experiences, using mainly memories of my sister and myself when leaving Syria (my father's country) with our (Mexican) mother in 2009. **T**his research engages with feminist debates on experience discussed by authors such as Joan Scott (1991), Sangster (1994), and Canning (1994), adding a cultural studies and psychoanalytical perspective on racial melancholia as articulated by Eng and Han (2000). Furthermore, this study addresses the methodological and theoretical challenges of working with personal experience, particularly from the perspective of bicultural daughters like my sister and me. It emphasizes the ambivalent and contradictory dimensions of identity and belonging, offering a more nuanced understanding of migrant experiences. In this context, experience will not be used as evidence per se, but to **analyze how it is shaped by but also negotiated within broader discourses on borders and identities that are commonly assumed as fixed and coherent.** Unlike the focus on migration experiences from a home country to a foreign one, commonly from south to north, this study seeks to address borders and identity, and migrants' experiences through a cross-cultural lens and from a south-to south approach, where belonging and the relationship with geographical and symbolic borders is ambivalent and hardly fits into constructed discursive dichotomies or opposites.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Sara Achik López**, candidate for the BA/MA/PhD degree in Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 06 _June2024



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Introduction

This research is a continuation of an autoethnographic exploration I began in 2021, inspired by Khosravi's (2010) autoethnography, "Illegal Traveler", in my case on the reconstruction of border transgression experiences and their effects on women, using my mother's, sister's, and my own experience fleeing Syria in 2009. Building on the previous research, this study addresses the methodological and theoretical challenges of working with personal experience, this time focusing on the position of bicultural daughters like my sister and me. It emphasizes the ambivalent and contradictory dimensions of identity and belonging, offering a more nuanced understanding of migrant experiences, and of experience as a tool for research in general. Furthermore, this research engages with feminist debates on experience discussed by authors such as Joan Scott (1991), Sangster (1994), and Canning (1994), adding a cultural studies and psychoanalytical perspective on racial melancholia as articulated by Eng and Han (2000). This includes a focus on the unspoken dimensions of experience, such as silence and haunting memories, and the challenges and contributions arising from them.

In 2009, my mother, my 11-year-old sister Nora, and I, 14 years old at the time, embarked on the journey of leaving Syria (my father's country). We were following my brother, who had traveled to Mexico (my mother's country) months earlier with the permission and support of our family. Unlike my brother, we (my mother, sister, and I) did not have permission to leave. My father, a passionate agronomist and scholar, was facing the ravages of an incurable disease that affects 1 in 300 people worldwide: schizophrenia.[1] At that time, neither we nor anyone around us realized that my father was struggling with the illness. As a result, we found ourselves in a complicated situation, subjected to the will of my father, who was internally battling his mind. Without any certainty about what would happen to us, and after my mother had sought support from relatives, legal, psychological, and specialized associations without any hope of being able to leave Syria, we secretly took some of our most valuable belongings and left Hama, the city where we were living at the time. The journey took us through several cities, including Damascus, Beirut, Sidon, and Cairo. Along the way, we randomly encountered people who helped us reach our final destination, Mexico, despite having no resources or a clear plan. Paradoxically, what brought us out of a difficult situation

[1] World Health Organization. (2022). Schizophrenia. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/schizophrenia

in Syria also led us to a long path of silence and haunting memories in Mexico. As daughters, this abrupt departure from Syria, followed by the war that started a few years later affecting everyone there, including our father, and the challenging conditions in la Laguna, our city in northern Mexico,[2] with the war against drug cartels and instability, left us little room to process what we had lived through.

Considering this preamble and situating our experience within the context of psychoanalytic theory and migration studies, this study aims to address questions such as: What is the contribution of focusing on the concepts of silence and haunting memories in autoethnography and oral history? Why is it relevant to study these concepts from the perspective of a bicultural daughter? To answer these questions, I explore the approach of Eng and Han (2000) on melancholia, which builds on Freud's (1917) definition as a psychic condition involving an unconscious internal conflict of ambivalence towards a loss. In this context, migration, when faced with significant losses or traumatic events, often results in absolute silence about what has been lived and lost. They also include that when what needs to be felt, mourned, and healed is not acknowledged, as Abraham and Torok (1994) argue, it finds other ways to manifest through the unconscious. From Freud's framework on melancholia and Abraham and Torok's contributions to the concept, Eng and Han (2000), propose racial melancholia as a depathologized structure of feeling that underlies everyday conflicts and struggles with experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization, which involves unconscious relations with loss, as it can happen in dreams and other unspoken psychic resources.

I argue that studying the concepts of silence and haunting memories, as unspoken inscriptions of trauma, allows us to broaden the use and understanding of experience as a resource for analysis within and outside feminist theory. Silence, understood as the absence of spoken and figurative language, and haunting memories, as the channel through which they find recognition and interpretation, relate to the psychic condition of melancholy. This provides

[2] La Laguna, a region in Northern Mexico that includes parts of the states of Coahuila and Durango, became a significant battleground in the Mexican Drug War. The intense period of violence in La Laguna lasted roughly from 2007 to 2013, although the impacts and sporadic violence have continued beyond these years. La Laguna's strategic location, with its transport links and economic importance, made it a coveted area for drug cartels. To read more about this I recommend "Reconquistando" la laguna: Los zetas, el estado y la sociedad organizada, 2007-2014 by Sergio Aguayo and Jacobo Dayán (2020).

insight into the complexity of working with the everyday conflicts and struggles inherent in migratory experiences, and in the different layers in experience in general.

Following the feminist call initiated by Sandra Harding's standpoint theory in the 1980s, and further developed by authors such as Adrienne Rich (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988), encouraging accountability and critical reflection on one's personal location and perspective in research, I adopt a personal and self-reflexive approach as a researcher on this matter. In this sense, to be accountable and critical of my position, this research aims to address not only the methodological and theoretical challenges of conducting autoethnography as a bicultural daughter but also to explore and acknowledge my personal and family history. This approach reflects on my location and the various intersections through which my sister and I, as bicultural daughters, navigate.

Given the centrality of feminists who have written about these questions and that have theorized about experience as a tool in research, this shift in focus address questions such as: What contributions can a study of one's own experience make to the fields of migration and gender studies? Can personal experience serve as valid research material? Is it possible to be simultaneously a subject of study and a researcher? And more specifically, considering that I am conducting a form of collaborative autoethnography, what is the difference between self-introspection and research on the experience of someone else?

By combining a feminist methodology with theories on migration and psychoanalysis and analyzing the experiences of my sister and me as bicultural daughters, I propose that silences and haunting memories are useful tools for analysis as they act as unspoken bodily inscriptions that allow us to approach experience from a dimension that considers, in addition to its discursive construction (Scott, 1991; Sangster, 1994) and agency (Canning, 1994)—, its internal and external complexity. I argue that using experience as a resource for critical analysis must account for tacit dimensions, especially in the case of cross-border and cross-cultural identities. This consideration is crucial because as Abraham and Torok (1994) and Eng and Han (2000) would argue, encrypted experiences of ambivalence and in-betweenness, common when dealing with loss in migration, often do not find a place in interpretation through language (Abraham and Torok, 1994; Eng and Han, 2000).

This research will be divided into four parts. The introduction covering the research problem and the justification. Chapter 1 providing a literature review on the use of oral history and autoethnography as feminist methods and the methods and methodology of this thesis. Chapter 2, the analysis section, is divided into: 1) discussion on fractured identities, 2)

reflections on conducting an autoethnography as a bicultural daughter, and 3) application of the approach to our case as bicultural daughters and 4) Conclusions and bibliography.

CHAPTER 1.- LITERATURE REVIEW, METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Oral history and autoethnography: feminist methodologies for researching on lived experiences outside the categories and margins of migration

This literature review as it was mentioned in the introduction, addresses the challenge of using experience both as construction and as agency, particularly through the practices of autoethnography and oral history. For this purpose, the origins of both approaches in feminist studies, their initial applications, and their usefulness for investigating migration histories that are traversed by various analytical sections are reviewed. To achieve this, I seek to answer how feminist methodologies, specifically oral history and autoethnography, address the challenges of researching gender and women's history within the context of migration. Additionally, I explore why and how oral history and autoethnography started to be used as feminist methods for addressing experiences of migration.

Subsequently, I delve into the practical aspects of these methods, examining their differences and similarities, the sources they use, the outcomes they produce, and their applicability. Finally, I consider the relevance of these methods for the case of my sister and me as bicultural daughters. Furthermore, besides highlighting the importance of feminist methodologies for capturing and analyzing complex and often overlooked aspects of migration, the need to study the non-verbal aspects of migratory experiences within the intersection of feminist theory, migration studies, and psychoanalytic theories is also emphasized.

The contribution of this section to the thesis in general addresses how feminist methodologies, specifically oral history and autoethnography, can enhance our understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of migration on women from bicultural and multicultural backgrounds, particularly through the exploration of 'silence' and 'haunting memories.' This chapter is divided into three parts: First, a literature review on oral history and autoethnography in Women's and Gender studies; second, the practicalities and limitations of using oral history and autoethnography; and third, the application of feminist methods in

researching my topic, Ambivalent Belonging: Silence and Haunting Memories in South-South Migrant Narratives from Syria to Mexico.

Part I: Literature Review on Oral history and Autoethnography within Women's and Gender Studies

Women's studies began to develop formally in the 1970s as a result of the second-wave feminist movement, challenging the patriarchal structures and gender inequalities in society and academia. One of the first women's studies programs was established at San Diego State College (now San Diego State University) in 1970 (Stimpson, Burstyn, Stanton, & Whisler, 1975). This development was quickly followed by the creation of numerous similar programs at universities in the United States and other countries. Gender studies, which evolved from women's studies, began to expand to include not only research on women but also on the social constructions of gender, sexuality, and the intersection of different identities (Wiegman, 2002). In both fields, experience was at the core of the sources for analysis, generating debates about what is scientific research, and what are the sources for analysis, especially in history and anthropology through the use of oral history and autoethnography. This has led to a break with traditional and positivist ideas about what is considered knowledge, opening new avenues for understanding and studying social phenomenas.

On one hand, oral history advocated for the stories of 'ordinary people' after World War II to capture narratives often excluded from conventional historical records (Abrams, 2010, p. 4). Autoethnography on the other hand, emphasized the significance of the researcher's vulnerability and challenged the supposedly objective but inherently subjective practices of early ethnographers like Levi-Strauss and Malinowski (Behar, 1996, p. 14). Both in addition to being specific techniques for data collection and analysis, became also research methodologies in feminist studies.

Oral history as part of feminist studies was driven by feminist movements seeking to reclaim the historical roles of women, overshadowed by the traditional focus on "great men" (Bennett, 2006; Bornat & Diamond, 2007). By uncovering the past and preserving the present, oral history has been instrumental in revealing the "hidden realities" of women and politically challenging established historical "truths" (Anderson et al., 1987). Historians like Sherna Berger Gluck were pivotal in integrating feminist perspectives with oral history, notably through projects like Rosie the Riveter, where she interviewed women who worked in defense industries during World War II. This challenged prevailing gendered narratives about the war

and addressed the interpretive challenges of working with memory (Gluck & Patai, 1991). In this way, oral history provided women with a platform to share their stories, revealing experiences often confined to private spaces and excluded from traditional historical narratives (Kelly-Gadol, 1976). Thus, it not only brings to light underrepresented narratives but also redefines historical truth, ensuring a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of the past, and critiques traditional methodologies by advocating for a broader, more inclusive understanding of history.

The emergence of autoethnography in feminist studies came from anthropology and the attempts to recognize subjectivity for a better and more "objective" science (Behar, 1996). In this context, autoethnography emerged as a hybrid form of analysis that transcends traditional research methods by merging 'auto' (self) with 'ethnography' (the study of culture) and incorporating personal narratives (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008; Ettorre, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011). The role of the autoethnographer is to act as both narrator and analyst, using personal stories to explore how individuals and societies are shaped by cultural narratives. Feminist ethnographers like Carolyn Ellis, Laurel Richardson, and Ruth Behar embraced subjectivity in anthropology, using their personal experiences as opportunities for more reflective ethnographic work. They advocated for a self-reflexive approach, being subject-researchers embedded in the cultures they analyze (Ellis et al., 2011; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). In this sense, the autoethnographer aims to construct a more intricate and dynamic understanding of social actors within social relationships (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008).

Oral history and autoethnography offer complementary approaches for using experience as an analytical resource in historical and anthropological research. Although autoethnography and oral history follow different trajectories, both significantly contributed to reformulating what counts as primary source in Women's and Gender studies. In her essay "The Evidence of Experience," Joan W. Scott (1991) critically examines the use of experience as evidence, arguing that this approach can be limiting because it often reproduces traditional historical frameworks. Scott argues that using experience uncritically tends to naturalize the differences and identities of those documented and overlooking the constructed nature of these experiences and the broader historical and discursive contexts in which they are formed. For this reason, experience should not be the starting point of our analysis but what we aim to explain (Scott, 1991, p. 797). In other words, it is not simply about collecting experiences and taking them at face value, but about understanding how these experiences are formed and what factors condition them.

Similar to Scott, Joan Sangster (1994) in her text "Telling Our Stories", explores the use of experience within feminist historiography, underscoring the intricate challenges associated with using it for historical research. For Sangster, experience is complex and multifaceted, it is not a straightforward reflection of reality but is constructed through cultural, social, and political contexts. She points out that experiences are shaped by dominant ideologies, and thus, understanding them requires a nuanced approach that considers these broader influences (Sangster, 1994). But at the same time, the diversity of women's embodied experiences requires a more nuanced analysis that respects individual agency while also situates them within broader socio-political frameworks (Sangster, 1994, p. 23).

The discussions initiated by Scott, and later adopted by Sangster, constitute a break with the traditional use of experience as unmediated truth. They also placed at the center of the debate the power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, the influence of interviewer biases, and the cultural frameworks that shape storytelling (Sangster, 1994). To this analysis, Kathleen Canning (1994) adds that people are not merely passive subjects of historical forces, but active agents who actively interpret and shape their own experiences, mediating between discourses and their lived realities. In this sense, experience beyond a simple product of discourse is also a locus of agency.

Together, Scott, Sangster, and Canning contribute to the theorization and practical use of experience as an analytical tool within feminist methodologies. They call for careful consideration of how experiences are constructed, the power relations involved in this construction, and the role of individual agency. By integrating these insights, feminist methodologies enhance our understanding of historical and antropological narratives, providing a richer, more complex picture of the present and the past. This requires moving beyond viewing experience as mere evidence to exploring the broader contexts that shape these experiences and acknowledging the active role individuals play in interpreting and shaping their own narratives. This integration contributes to a more nuanced and critical feminist historiography.

Building on Scott’s analysis, along with the complementary perspectives of Sangster (1994) and Canning (1994), I argue that oral history and autoethnography are useful feminist methodologies for investigating experiences outside the conventional categories of migration. These feminist methodologies and practical tools help in understanding lived experiences as both constructed by discourse and as forms of agency and negotiation within discourses. In the following section, we will delve into how oral history and autoethnography have been used as feminist methodologies for migration studies.

Oral history and autoethnography in the context of migration studies

In the mid-20th century, migration studies emerged in the United States and Europe as a product of the world wars. These studies typically focused on large-scale migrations and their economic and political contexts, overlooking other motivations such as family dynamics and gender (Donato et al., 2006). In the United States, migration studies, closely linked to sociology and anthropology, examined how immigrants adapted to urban life. Meanwhile, in Europe, the focus was on labor migrations from Southern to Northern Europe and from former colonies to colonial powers, such as from North Africa to France. In both cases, women were not considered active subjects of migration and were often characterized as 'dependent migrants' (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994), which is why oral history and autoethnography were essential tools for collecting the experiences of migrant women in the present and recovering forgotten histories of the past.

In the United States, Friedensohn and Rubin (1987), professors of women's studies, were pioneers in bringing women's stories to the forefront of migration studies. Their article 'Count These Women In' is one of the first records of using oral history in migration studies. In the text, they explain how they guided their students in using oral history and photo-history to recover the stories of women immigrants within their own families. Unlike its use in traditional history, the oral interviews conducted captured the emotional and subjective dimensions of immigration, revealing personal challenges and a vast array of experiences. The use of photographs served as complementary tools to trigger memories and provide tangible evidence of the past, offering contextual details that enriched the oral and written records. Through this exercise of oral and photographic memory, Friedensohn and Rubin transformed the way the history of immigration in the United States was approached, positioning personal narratives and focusing on the recovery of women's stories (p. 217).

Regarding autoethnography, conventional migration studies used ethnography to explore the experiences of migrants (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mahler and Pessar, 2006). However, autoethnography complemented this approach by involving the researcher's reflexive writing about their personal experiences of leaving or creating their home country, adjusting to a new culture, or facing challenges related to identity, belonging, and displacement. Ruth Behar (1996), an anthropologist and migrant from Cuba to the United States, in her book 'The Vulnerable Observer,' elaborates a reflexive account of her position as a migrant. By arguing for the inclusion of the anthropologist's own stories and vulnerabilities in fieldwork, Behar

advocated for a more intimate form of engaging with ethnographic work, where the observer is not an invisible, unfeeling recorder of facts. Her vulnerable and personal approach to ethnography, where experiences and emotions enrich the understanding of culture, fosters a more responsible representation of both the subject of study and the anthropologist themselves. Although Behar's work at that time was not labeled as autoethnography, it is crucial for the development of the method and can be considered an initial attempt at integrating this with ethnography and migration studies.

Approaches like those of Friedensohn and Rubin (1987) and Behar (1996) in migration studies facilitated access to experiences often omitted from mainstream narratives and created "in-between" spaces. These qualities are particularly valuable for capturing the complex interplay of identity, culture, and power relations that shape the experiences of those outside national-ethnic-religious categories and geographic margins.

Part II: Practicalities and limitations of Oral history and Autoethnography

Oral history focuses on the experiences of others, adopting an outward-looking perspective to contribute to historical records. Its practice involves interviewing others, recording their testimonies, and analyzing these narratives. The data or content for oral history is obtained from the spoken testimonies of participants, collected through interviews that are often recorded and then transcribed. As mentioned in the first section, its main purpose is to recover or preserve historical memories, give voice to underrepresented groups, and contribute to the public understanding of history. According to Abrams (2010), the challenges and limitations of oral history are deeply intertwined with its main characteristics. Orality can introduce variations due to the ephemeral nature of speech, affecting precision and consistency (p. 19). The narrative nature depends on the narrator's ability and the subjective interpretation of the listener (p. 21). The performative aspect, with non-verbal cues, adds complexity and may be lost in transcriptions (p. 22). Subjectivity reflects viewpoints, making it difficult to separate factual content from interpretative content (p. 22). Its unfinished nature implies potential alterations before being archived, highlighting its fluidity and instability (p. 24). Finally, power dynamics between historian and narrator can introduce biases (p. 24).

Autoethnography, however, is introspective and focuses on the researcher's own experiences. It uses the self as the primary subject to explore broader cultural phenomena through self-observation and introspection, making the researcher both subject and object of study. Data in autoethnography includes personal journals, diaries, letters, and the researcher's

analytical texts. This method is used to explore personal-cultural intersections and challenge dominant narratives through the lens of personal experience. According to Ellis et al. (2011), the main challenges of autoethnography stem from the researcher's dual position as analyst and narrator. Maintaining the balance between rigorous analysis and the personal nature of the narrative can lead to criticisms of excessive subjectivity or lack of analysis (p. 283). This raises questions about the reliability and generalizability of the findings (pp. 274-275). Ethical considerations are complex due to the intimacy of the narratives, which may involve others and affect relationships (p. 281). These limitations require autoethnographers to balance personal expression and academic inquiry, improving the method's credibility and impact (p. 282).

Part III. The Relevance of Oral History and Autoethnography to My Research

When we talk about experience, often we define it in terms of spoken narratives, but what about the experiences we struggle to put into words? The encrypted experiences of ambivalence and being in-between, common when dealing with loss in migration, often don't find a place in language interpretation (Abraham and Torok, 1994; Eng and Han, 2000). Spectral memories and dreams are fundamental parts of the experiences of immigration, assimilation, and racialization (Eng and Han, 2000). These elements are valuable for understanding experience in its intricate, ambivalent, and often confusing nature. For this reason, I propose combining autoethnography and oral history to address experience from a dimension that considers its internal and external complexity, both conscious and unconscious.

Experience, embedded in broader discourses on borders and the nation-state, and negotiating with what is assumed to be fixed and coherent about belonging, allows us to address contradictions and ambivalences through often encrypted bodily inscriptions, such as spectral memories and silences.

Using experience from this perspective, combining migration and psychoanalysis theories with unspoken experiences like silences and spectral memories, raises questions about whether it is ethical and possible to handle these topics outside of psychological purposes. However, even if these elements are not considered or ignored, they exist and impact the subjects studied and, therefore, the elements we can access through experience as resource in migration studies. Comparatively, a critical feminist perspective would argue that even if subjectivity and reflexivity are not considered in anthropology and oral history, partiality and the impact of the personal in knowledge creation are present, and that being perfectly reflexive

more than an attainable goal, is a necessary and ongoing exercise. Considering this, I argue that when using experience as a central element in autoethnography and oral history in migration studies, it is essential to be aware of the different levels of access to language and interpretation that exist.

In conclusion, the continuing evolution of feminist methodologies, with their emphasis on reflexivity, adaptability and critical engagement, makes them useful tools for exploring the complexities of lived experiences. Oral history and autoethnography provide a rich and nuanced framework for understanding the emotional and psychological impact of migration, contributing to more inclusive and comprehensive historical and cultural narratives. By emphasizing the importance of personal accounts and addressing the nonverbal dimensions of these experiences, researchers are more likely to capture the complex, often overlooked aspects of migration experiences. In this sense, autoethnography and oral history allow us to address the challenges of working with experience from an approach in which the intricate dynamics of memory, loss, and ambivalent belonging, as experienced by my sister and me as bicultural daughters (Syria-Mexico), take center stage. Both methodologies are crucial to study ambivalence and identity conflicts from the non-verbal dimensions of South-South migration experiences. Moreover, situating them at the intersection of feminist theory, migration studies and psychological analysis helps to consider the emotional and psychological impacts on women on the move, traversed by diverse identity intersections.

Methods and Methodology

Conventional research methods in history and anthropology traditionally struggled to access women's experiences (Morokvasic, 1984; Friedensohn and Rubin, 1987; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Donato et al., 2006), especially with capturing the intersection of their different sexual, national, ethnic, and religious identities. As I mentioned before, when I decided to use my mother's, my sister's and my own experience, I encountered many limitations that prevented me from defining or positioning them in broader discussions about migration and gender. To address these difficulties, I turn to oral history and autoethnography for methodological and practical solutions. In this context, oral history and autoethnography are not just methods; they form the methodology that guides this research.

I argue that migration studies often fail to adequately capture and represent the nuanced, emotional, and psychological experiences of migrating women from bicultural or multicultural backgrounds (Heikkilä & Rauhut, 2005; Nawyn, 2010). The use of feminist methods and

methodologies such as oral history and autoethnography is critical in addressing this gap. Both autoethnography and oral history facilitate the exploration of less tangible dimensions of migration experiences, such as 'silence' and 'haunting memories,' which are essential for a better understanding of migration experiences. By integrating personal narratives and lived experiences, these feminist approaches challenge the epistemological norms of traditional, objective paradigms that tend to overlook or undervalue subjective experiences. Thus, they provide a more comprehensive and empathetic framework that acknowledges and centers the complex realities faced by migrating women.

The current thesis emphasizes "experience" as a central source of research, a contested topic commonly approached in the foundations of gender studies and women's history (Sangster, 1994, p. 3). I specifically use autoethnography and oral history as both methods and methodology to work with the narratives of my sister and myself as Syrian-Mexican daughters. I aim to situate the shifting boundaries of our perceptions and identities, exploring the methodological contributions and challenges of deriving knowledge from this dynamic position as a bicultural daughter. This exploration aims primarily to address the feminist epistemological question of "how do we know what we know?" (Ettorre, 2016, p. 2) and how we create knowledge from there. In using feminist approach, I look for a comprehensive integration of the theoretical and practical challenges of the present research. This allowing to explore not only the "how" but also the "why" behind, aligning the research with feminist epistemological concerns about the nature of knowledge and knowledge processes.

This thesis situates autoethnography and oral history within feminist research methods and methodologies to illuminate the lived experiences of women on the margins of migratory narratives. The focus on "silence" and "haunting memories" is used to examine the fragmented and ambivalent experiences of belonging that my sister and I have lived through as bicultural daughters, and which are the case under analysis in this research. From a micro and personal approach, this study responds to feminist debates about the construction of knowledge in the social sciences, questioning and expanding the ways in which we study and represent migratory experiences.

Methods

Using oral history and autoethnography together is a deliberate choice to delve into the complex interplay of memory, loss, and the fragmented sense of belonging. These methods allow for a multidimensional exploration of something so deeply personal and yet so necessary

in academia, challenging the rigidity of categories and identities. By integrating oral history within an autoethnographic approach, I aim to analyze recorded conversations with my sister in order to navigate and build upon our identities. Together, we reconstruct our memories as Syrian-Mexican daughters and we address, after a long silence, the effects of our abrupt departure from Syria in 2009. This primary focus is on the silence surrounding this event and the haunting memories that followed. I contend these two elements serve as inscriptions of experience embedded in our bodies that help to deepen the negotiation between experience as agency but also as impacted by discourse.

In addition to the co-constructed exercise of memory with my mother and sister, I took a trip in April 2024 to Beirut to prompt and collect additional reflections and material for this research. Beirut, besides being an important place in our memories of leaving Syria in 2009 as the first point of our border crossing, is the only one of the different places that was practical and accessible for the purposes of this dissertation. During this short trip of 3 days,[3] a series of photographs and travel notes were taken, motivated by some of the places mentioned in conversations with my sister, for example, Beirut's port, a building where we took a photo in 2009, and the sea. The people I interacted with during the trip were mainly my partner, who was visiting an Arabic-speaking country for the first time and found everything new, the hotel receptionist with whom we communicated in English, and various individuals on the street with whom I exchanged a few words in either Arabic or English. The material from this trip is used as an accompaniment to the excerpts selected from the conversations and in general as inspiration for the analysis and order of this thesis.

Oral history connects us to the broader cultural analysis, allowing for an outside perspective that not only contributes to the historical record, but also emphasizes the process of transcription, translation, and the interviewer-interviewee relationship between my sister and myself (Abrams, 2010). I argue it also serves to validate and contextualize the highly subjective information derived from autoethnography, providing a platform to scrutinize, negotiate, and even reinterpret personal narratives influenced by present objectives, thus offering a more nuanced perspective of experiences that might otherwise be viewed myopically by myself. By intertwining oral history and autoethnography, I attempt to navigate the dual roles of narrator and analyst, and the power relationship between observed and observer, sharing these insights

[3] The trip lasted only three days because, a few weeks before the tickets were purchased, Israel bombed southern Lebanon, specifically targeting Sidon, one of the cities we had considered visiting. Just one day after our departure from Beirut, Iran launched missiles towards Israel, leading to the closure of the Beirut airport.

through interviews and a collaborative form of autoethnography with my sister. But recognizing my authority as a researcher in directing and selecting information. In this sense, oral history as part of collaborative autoethnography helps balance these ethical considerations by fostering a dialogic space that affects us both.

The elaboration of information, from oral source to written narratives, plays a crucial role in the construction of the storytelling. My position in this research is both as a researcher and as one of the subjects of the research. This composed role is a major challenge, especially considering the ethical responsibilities involved in dealing not only with my own experience, but also that of my sister and my mom. The accounts of both my sister and my mother were crucial for reconstructing our journey and provided great support as I navigated my own emotions. For all three of us, discussing this topic meant talking about an experience we had each kept to ourselves. This prompted many memories and feelings as we talked, read, or listened to each other's narratives. I kept the conversations with each of them separate but shared excerpts or thoughts from these discussions with the other, always asking for permission beforehand. While I hold the position of power as the researcher, deciding what to include and the direction of the research, I also occupy the role of a subject who shares the same journey as the interviewees—as a daughter (when I was 14 years old) and as a sister. Nevertheless, for this research, although I use some excerpts from conversations with my mother recorded between 2022 and 2023, the emphasis is on the perspectives of my sister and me.

The materials used for this thesis, collected through autoethnography and oral history methods, include recorded conversations in Spanish with my sister and mother, where we reconstruct our last journey out of Syria and specifically address and identify the subsequent silence. This material was transcribed and translated by me with the help of DeepL, and later curated by me. The parameters for what I would use in the final piece varied throughout the research process and were finally defined after analyzing the material from the trip to Beirut in April 2024. During this trip, field notes and photographs were taken, of which only some were selected to best exemplify the central theme of this thesis: ambivalence and contradictions in silence and haunting memories.

Regarding the selected content, I chose to use two textual excerpts from my mother where she narrates the events as we left Syria.[4] I use them primarily to provide context and

[4] Some of the material used in this thesis, like these excerpts and some of my sister and myself, has been previously included in another thesis. However, it is essential for this research, so it has been incorporated again but curated and analyzed from a different perspective.

details that help immerse us in her perspective of our experiences. I also consider it important to use my mother's voice because it offers the narrative of the only adult with us and ultimately represents the authoritative voice that accompanied us in the years following our departure from Syria. As for the content selected from my sister, I make a more integral and interwoven use of the thoughts, dreams, and memories she shares in the recorded conversations with me. I attempted to use her narratives verbatim, although on some occasions I chose to paraphrase them in the analysis for greater text flow.

In terms of the auto part of this research, I primarily accessed my own memories and feelings by listening to those of my mother and sister. Before talking with them, I brainstormed in a notebook about how to start the conversations without knowing much about how or what I felt. But by listening to them, I started to have spontaneous reactions that were shared during the calls or sometimes in the next encounter. Therefore, the conversations are not only for digging into my sister and my mother memories but for navigating my own. Having them throughout the process was undoubtedly indispensable for my own exploration, whereas for them having me was also necessary for their own. Additionally, occasional calls with my father and brother, although are not integrated into the analysis, provided practical details such as dates, and in general motivation to write about this subject.

About the locations, all the calls took place via video call except for the first one with my mother physically in Paris. My location was constantly changing, mostly between Malta and Naples, while they were in Mexico. The last round of calls with my sister occurred while she was in Barcelona and I was in Austria, and when I was in Beirut, and she was in Barcelona. My father on the other hand is still leaving in Syria and my brother in Mexico. Mobility and distance during the calls was central to maintaining a connection to experiences with borders, customs crossings, and cross-cultural families.

CHAPTER 2.- Silence and Haunting memories in Migration Narratives: Melancholia and unspoken dimensions of experience in autoethnography and oral history

One random day I might start picking my nose and remember that I was picking my nose in Syria, looking out the window, feeling the wind. No matter what I am doing, I get a flashback, deja vu, or whatever... I ask myself how is it possible that it has been so long since we left and I have not been able to move on? Body sensations take me back to very specific moments from the past. Sometimes I feel like I'm never going to get over it until I see my Dad again at some point in life. You know, I mean, it's been a long time, more than half of my life, and yet I remember vividly. It should be part of the past, but no, the wound is still completely open, but with a scab.

- Nora in a conversation with me

This chapter continues the previous discussion on the use of experience as a resource for analysis, this time analyzing it through its unspoken and often inaccessible dimensions of migratory experiences. I argue that exploring these dimensions allows us to delve into ambivalent and contradictory aspects of migration, especially in cross-border and cross-cultural identities and belongings, such as those of bicultural daughters. Addressing experience from this intersection is crucial to illuminate the encrypted experiences of ambivalence and in-betweenness, which are common in migration-related loss and often cannot be fully interpreted through language (Abraham and Torok, 1994; Eng and Han, 2000). Considering this, this chapter addresses the limits of Narrative and Language within migratory experiences through the theorization of silence and haunting memories as crucial in this research.

For Eng and Han (2003), unstable migration and suspended assimilation processes complicate establishing a stable identity often leading to melancholia. This condition emerges as they struggle with the dual pressures of retaining their cultural heritage and conforming to the new societal norms, often leading to a sense of split identity. This unresolved grief and sense of loss may not be fully expressible or recognized by the surrounding society, contributing to the internalization of these feelings—incorporation—rather than their expression and resolution. These ongoing processes reinforce feelings of exclusion and 'otherness,' and hinder the development of a unified identity. To maintain a connection to

culture and heritage, individuals may incorporate aspects of their identity into their psyche as a defense mechanism against the loss of the loved one and/or their cultural roots.

From a decolonial feminist perspective, Sinclair and Newton (2021) draw on Anzaldúa's (1987) spiritual thought, to position memories and dreams as manifestations of a past self that encounters the present. Sinclair and Newton interpret haunting subjects as containers for describing the experience of disconnection with the perception of different selves, while at the same time unconsciously communicating with them. Like spirits, which often mean to convey a message from the past, haunting memories serve as reminders. They represent the encounter of different versions of ourselves as complex individuals in the process of change and transformation. For Sinclair and Newton, the presence of haunting figures help with the interpretation of experiences that cannot easily be explained. In Anzaldua's text, an example of this is the Malinche, an important element in the Chicano identity that symbolizes the pain of the Spanish colonialism and the creation of a new cultural identity: the mestizo. The complex and multifaceted nature of Anzaldua by transcending multiple identity and geographical borders, like indigenous and colonizer and later the borders betweeen the United States and Mexico, incorporates her multiple parts through the haunting presence of figures such as the malinche.

Akhtar and O'Neil (2011) on the other hand, from a psychoanalytic perspective of trauma and migration, suggests that silence can be a manifestation of trauma, where the inexpressible aspects of a person's experiences are held in the unconscious, often emerging in dreams or as haunting memories. This underscores the depth of internalized pain that can influence identity formation and expression. They explore the concept of trauma in the context of immigration and cultural displacement, delving into the profound impact of unexpressed grief and unresolved loss on the individual and communal level. Akhtar and O'Neil offer insight into the ways in which unprocessed traumatic experiences can persist within the psyche, shaping dreams and impacting sense of self and interaction with the world. In this same line of thought, from a clinical psychoanalytic perspective, Abraham and Torok (1994) attribute to language and symbolization the possibility of dealing with loss. They call intrapsychic crypt the mechanism that prevent the individual from expressing their grief and locking them in a state of melancholy, where not only the lost object, but also the traumas and secrets associated with the loss are harbored, exacerbating the complexity of grief and its expression. For Abraham and Torok, when this happens, the individual fantasizes about literally

"incorporating" the lost object, rejecting the consequences of the loss. In this way, the person keeps intact a part of itself that would otherwise be generating pain.

Just as Anzaldua (1987) and her cultural specters (Sinclair y Newton, 2021, p. 54), and the psychoanalytical approaches to migration and loss. I argue that my sister and I came across different sorts of haunting memories from our unstable migration and suspended assimilation processes complicate establishing a stable identity and expressing it through the resources of language and symbolizations. In our context, haunting memories are a reminder of our past selves encountering the margins of our embodied borders. While, unlike Anzaldua (1987), we do not belong to the Chicana or mestiza identity within the specific context of the Chicano movement in the United States, her experience resonates with our border experiences. Cultural specters in this sense act as a portal through which our past versions are conjured, being memory the borderland where our various selves converge (Sinclair y Newton, 2021, p. 54).

I. Application of theories on mourning and melancholia to migration

Just a few seconds before starting to record, my sister was in tears watching a movie she said it reminded her of our father and our life in Syria. This also recalled her of the recurrent dreams she had since we left Syria. She explained that she finds quite peculiar how these types of dreams persist. Sometimes she wonders why they occur, especially when she hasn't experienced anything to trigger them. She added, “I mean, occasionally I would recall something, and then at night, I would dream about it. It is as if these dreams or memories emerge out of nowhere, you know? I haven't done anything, yet these very specific memories about Syria still come to me”. I find what my sister said particularly compelling to reflect on to what extent we have access to experiences and personal narratives as researchers, considering that there are things that seem to have no logical explanation.

As researchers, when we work on migration experiences—whether our own or others'—we should not ignore the tacit and bodily inscriptions of these experiences. I argue that it is necessary to integrate approaches by considering the debates previously discussed on the concept of experience by Joan Scott (1991), Sangster (1994) and Canning (1994), which address language, discourse and agency, along with psychoanalytic theories of mourning and melancholia and their psychic and bodily inscriptions of loss following complex processes of unstable migration and assimilation.

Following these discussions and attending to the importance of silence in the reconstruction of memories of our departure from Syria and the haunting recollections, I

address the concept of incorporation proposed by Abraham and Torok (1994). Also, inspired by the importance of symbolic representation for accomplishing a mourning process (Abraham and Torok, 1994) and the appearance of dreams and unspoken experiences of loss in Eng and Han's article on racial melancholia, I bridge a connection of incorporation with fantasy, primarily focusing on the 'mouth-work' as a metaphor and the intrapsychic tomb as an antimetaphor of grieving.

Mourning and melancholia in experiences of migration

Mourning and melancholia as central concepts within psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 2007; Klein, 1994) for studying migration and its impact on people's lives (Eng and Han, 200) influence our understanding of mourning processes at the individual and collective level within migration experiences of loss. In 1917 Sigmund Freud's work *Mourning and Melancholia* set the framework for theories of loss that were later used to theorize beyond the individual experience, to a more social and collective experience, such racial and national melancholia (Eng and Han, 2003). These theories are quite useful for complexifying the use of migration experiences as a resource for analysis, as they offer a framework for understanding the impact of migration beyond what is symbolized through language. For example, as form of silences and haunted or unwanted memories and dreams. In this sense, I argue that beyond a clinical-psychological use, these theories are crucial for studying the repercussions on the individual's relationships with oneself and with others and therefore provide useful insights that are worth applying in theoretical and methodological practice in anthropology and cultural studies. For this section, I will integrate the analysis of the materials I collected through autoethnography and oral history, such as recorded conversations about the reconstructions of our last journey out of Syria, fieldnotes from my trip to Lebanon and a co-analysis of my experience there with my sister.

Following Freud's interpretation, mourning involves letting go the lost object and reinvesting emotional energy in new relationships (Freud, 2007). However, mourning can be complicated in cases of conflict and ambivalence (Ibid., p.256) such as unstable migration and suspended assimilation (Eng and Han, 2003, p. 345), leading to a melancholic state that remains encrypted and can be transferred intergenerationally through often unspoken forms (Ibid). Mourning, by involving the process of letting go and moving on after a loss, emphasises the importance of symbolic resources such as language (Abraham and Torok, 1994), while melancholia represents a more complex and unresolved form of grief that may lead to other

non-symbolised (unspoken) ways of coping with a significant loss, such as the psychic incorporation of the loved object (Abraham and Torok, 1994). For Eng and Han (2003), racial, or in other cases, also national melancholia is more a recurrent effect of migration under certain complex circumstances that lead to ambivalence, than a mere pathological outcome. In the case of my sister and myself, what we lost when we left Syria was not clear to us and moving on was something we had to do but that also came with an internal grief that we struggled to acknowledge. As a result, references to silence, haunting memories, and dreams are crucial elements in our migratory experience that serve as material for analysis.

Finding what is lost in south-to-south ambivalences

I don't regret leaving because in the end, that is, it was the life of the three of us, that is, the destiny that awaited us, if we had stayed, we would have had a completely different life, we would have experienced the war. And thousands of things... But in a certain way, yes, it was something that I was very young, but I did decide, I told my mom "I do want to leave". Of course, I wanted to leave because I was suffering from what we were going through. And well, something that I just kind of think about.... I mean, in the end I was the one who decided to leave and when I did, I abandoned him (my dad). I mean, I... I made a very big decision when I was very young. But now... I mean, I don't regret it either, but I do feel that guilt exists, it is something I have in my mind every time I remember. That's why I don't like to talk about it too.

- Nora in a recorded conversation

In the above excerpt from a conversation, my sister addresses the duality she feels about the decision to leave Syria, which although she feels was a necessary decision, she is haunted by a sense of guilt. Eng and Han (2003) used the concepts of unstable migration and suspended assimilation in the context of Asian–American experiences of racial melancholia to conceptualize on it as a psychic condition that arises from the unresolved processes of assimilation and racialization. This condition involves a "psychic splitting" where individuals often experience a disjunction between their desire to assimilate into the dominant culture and their simultaneous recognition of their exclusion from it. In such situations, unstable migration refers to the complicated (ambivalent) and ongoing process of migration, which does not necessarily lead to a stable resettlement or integration into the new society. In connection with unstable migration, suspended assimilation refers to a state in which immigrants or their descendants are neither fully integrated into the host culture nor able to maintain their original cultural identity, resulting in a sense of being caught in between belonging.

The case of Asian Americans used by Eng and Han provide a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze migration experiences such as the one of my sister. However, considering my sister's narrative in the cases they analyze there is still room to reflect on the way in which migration experiences that may not fall into the dichotomies of dominant-non-dominant culture, or south to north, experience the loss of a family member or a culture. I consider that the ambivalence and identity conflict in cases that go beyond these dichotomies add complexity to the analysis of mourning and melancholia in migration, particularly putting into perspective the access to symbolization from there.

Fantasy and dreams in the context of racial melancholia are explained as internal mechanisms that maintain a connection to lost objects or ideals, even despite an inability to express or resolve these losses toward the outside. Dreams can become a space where loss is articulated and experienced, acting as an unconscious avenue for the continuation of unresolved grief. The crypt, as mentioned by Abraham and Torok (1994) keeps what is lost unconsciously alive. This leads to the creation of the 'intrapsychic tomb,' a hidden enclave within the psyche where the unassimilated loss resides.

Similar to racial melancholia, Eng and Han suggest that other ways of melancholia beyond the racial scope are possible, such as national melancholia. This type of melancholia shares core elements with melancholia as explained by Freud and others but incorporates into the analysis a collective sense of loss and exclusion by marginalized groups within a nation. This often emerges from historical and other forms of exclusions that certain racial and ethnic groups face, such as legal exclusion acts and institutionalized racism. These forms of exclusions create a national psyche that is haunted by the inability to fully integrate all its members, leading to a collective, unresolved grief.

Both concepts, racial and national melancholia coincide with the fact that there are elements that are desired to build a sense of belonging but that are unattainable, leading to a state of suspense and ambivalence. Both cases also explore power dynamics in which there is a clear dividing line. But what comes into question with the case of my sister, is what happens when there is not a clear dividing line between dominant and non-dominant? Or when migration is not purely for economic reasons. In this research I argue that precisely the difficulty of drawing this line and trying to fit the lived experience into existing categories and discourses regarding migration generates greater ambivalence in cases like my sister's and mine, and thus greater difficulty in symbolizing and mourning.

Incorporation and the crypt in melancholia

One of the biggest challenges of melancholia, as mentioned by Freud (2007), is that with the passing of time does not leave traces of any gross changes, but internally there is still work going on (p.252). In the case of mourning “time is crucial for the command of reality testing to be carried out in detail” and once the work is completed, the ego will have succeeded in freeing itself from the lost object, and therefore the person will feel relief (Ibid, p.252). Nevertheless, melancholia enacts as an “open wound” that empties the ego until it is totally impoverished, showing the ego’s wish improve the condition (Ibid., 253). In the excerpt from the conversation with my sister at the beginning of the chapter, she mentions that, despite time, unexpected memories in the form of flashbacks and déjà vu bring her back to Syria. She calls this a scabbed wound. By "wound," she means something that hurts but she is not very clear about what it is. By "scab," she implies that everything seems to be fine with her life, but haunting memories pop up from time to time.

Abraham and Torok (1994) introduced the concept of "incorporation" and "introjection", emphasizing the symbolic representation of lost objects within the psyche. They proposed that individuals may incorporate aspects of lost objects into their own identity, leading to a complex interplay between internal and external realities. This explanation of symbolic representation expanded Freud's understanding of mourning and melancholia by highlighting the role of unconscious fantasies and mouth-work. This is useful for explaining how individuals deal with a lost object through symbolization of speech and language.

Introjection, a concept proposed by Sándor Ferenczi (1981), plays a central role in explaining the process of dealing with loss (Abraham and Torok, 1994, p. 127). This process first appears in early childhood after the infant’s call to be nurtured. As a form of language, the child cries and sobs exploring the empty cavity with the tongue in response to external sounds (Ibid., p. 127). This behaviour reflects the influence of the social world outside the self, shaping the child's sounds. The satisfaction of a full mouth is metaphorically replaced by words in the absence of the loved object, the nurturer. In this sense, language substitutes absence by “giving figurative shape to presence” (Ibid., p. 128). In this psychoanalytical interpretation, this early process functions to interpret and create connection with others. According to Abraham and Torok (1994), learning to fill the emptiness of the mouth with words serves as the foundational model for introjection, where absence is acknowledged and symbolized with words.

On the other hand, when there is a failure to transition from 'mouth-work' to symbolic representation, melancholia arises through the incorporation of the loss. According to Abraham

and Torok (1994), the person resorts to fantasy to cope with the loss when the capacity for symbolization is lacking (Ibid., p. 132). In this sense, fantasy acts as a double-edged sword, revealing both the subject's intrapsychic state and the metapsychological reality that needs change (Ibid., p. 132). This suggests that while fantasy can be a useful temporary measure to handle loss, it also indicates the necessity for a transformation in how the individual deals with grief, seeking a resolution of the melancholic state.

For Abraham and Torok (1994), this suppressed grief then creates a hidden 'crypt' within the person's psyche, where the unprocessed emotions and memories related to the loss are stored. This storage is not just an abstract concept, but it becomes a 'living' presence of the loved object within the individual. Within this crypt, unconscious fantasies take place, existing separately from the person's conscious life. Loss-fantasies, looking for symbolic existence, occasionally and unexpectedly emerge in dreams, particularly at times when the person's defences are down, leading to inexplicable emotions, urges, or behaviours that are difficult to understand or control (Ibid., p.130). This can be likened to an idea of haunting ghost, or fantasy, the 'cemetery guard' of the mind, that emerges with strange signals and actions that are driven by the concealed grief.

Fantasy instead of helping us process and adapt to new realities, seeks to maintain the status quo within our minds, keeping things internally unchanged (Ibid., p. 125). The representation of unprocessed loss as a crypt created with fantasy resources leads to a non-consciously expressed mourning where no thought of speaking to someone about the grief is possible. In this sense, "words cannot be uttered, scenes cannot be recalled, tears cannot be shed" (Abraham and Torok, 1994, p.130). Instead, emerges a secret tomb inside the person, where everything will be preserved along with the trauma that led to the loss. This internal crypt, in the form silence, serves as a space where the loss is both denied and preserved, leading to recreating memories of words, scenes, and affections to memories that are deeply private and inexpressible (Ibid., p.130).

II. Approaching the challenge with a complementary method

In this section, I have argued that melancholia, unlike mourning, involves an internal, ongoing process where unprocessed grief creates a hidden "crypt" within the psyche. This leads to haunting memories and emotional distress that are managed through fantasy rather than symbolic representation and verbal expression. This raises the question: how can we approach the challenge of silences and haunting memories in research? Feminist epistemologies

acknowledge that all scholars work from our own geographical, identity, and temporal positions (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Rich, 1984), and thus from our own traumas, ambivalences, and contradictions. These personal factors influence how we conduct research, yet we often struggle to acknowledge and critically reflect on them. This oversight is similar to what hooks (1991) criticizes the traditional approach to knowledge, where theory is seen as disembodied and separate from practice (p.2). Instead, when reflection and action work together, with theory guiding practice and practice informing theory in a continuous cycle, it leads to healing, liberation, and significant change (Ibid). In dialogue with feminist epistemologies and Abraham and Torok's (1994) theories of mouth-work, symbolization, and language, I identify three key moments for engaging with a more gendered, intimate, and embodied approach to research experience.

1. **Breaking Point: Discovering My Crypt**. The concept of a "crypt," as defined by Abraham and Torok (1994), represents a hidden space within the psyche where unprocessed grief and unresolved emotions are stored. Recognizing the existence of this crypt within my own story allowed me to understand how my own silences and contradictions were influencing my research. This realization was crucial in acknowledging the deep-seated traumas that were previously unspoken and unexplored. It encouraged me to look beyond surface narratives and consider deeper psychic realities, prompting the exploration of non-verbal expressions of experiences. Haunting memories, as manifestations of the grief stored in the crypt, surface unexpectedly in dreams or thoughts, while silences represent unprocessed experiences.
2. **Starting Point: Questioning Our Identities and Sensing Deeply**. Ruth Behar's (1996) concept of the vulnerable observer advocates for integrating personal and emotional dimensions into scholarly work, enriching the understanding and representation of social realities. By including the anthropologist's own stories and vulnerabilities in fieldwork, Behar promotes a more intimate engagement with ethnographic work, where the observer is not an invisible, unfeeling recorder of facts. Like hooks (1992), I came to theory wanting to comprehend what was happening around and within me. I saw researching my own experience as a location for healing (hooks, 1991, p. 1). By taking such a personal approach, I aim to acknowledge and navigate my family history.
3. **Fulfilling Point: From Haunting Memories to Integrated Memories.** Rather than seeing myself as divided or in opposition, writing from a perspective that acknowledges the continuous process of situating and understanding the multiplicity of my identities

redefines my haunting and ambivalent memories, recognizing them as parts of a whole. This is achieved by creating space to reconstruct, revisit, and share these memories with those I experienced them with, particularly my sister. This process transforms haunting memories into an integral part of my identity as a bicultural daughter. It also led me to question what prompts achieving critically reflect into our experience and how this can be applied as a research method into autoethnography and oral history?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that melancholia, unlike mourning, involves an internal, ongoing process where unprocessed grief creates a hidden "crypt" within the psyche. This leads to haunting memories and emotional distress that are managed through fantasy rather than symbolic representation and verbal expression. This raises the question: how can we approach the challenge of silences and haunting memories in research? Feminist epistemologies acknowledge that all scholars work from our own geographical, identity, and temporal positions (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Rich, 1984), and thus from our own traumas, ambivalences, and contradictions. These personal factors influence how we conduct research, yet we often struggle to acknowledge and critically reflect on them. This oversight is similar to what hooks (1991) criticizes the traditional approach to knowledge, where theory is seen as disembodied and separate from practice (p.2). Instead, when reflection and action work together, with theory guiding practice and practice informing theory in a continuous cycle, it leads to healing, liberation, and significant change (Ibid).

In dialogue with feminist epistemologies and Abraham and Torok's (1994) theories of mouth-work, symbolization, and language, I identify three key moments for engaging with a more gendered, intimate, and embodied approach to research experience. This approach ensures that insights gained from personal experiences are leveraged to benefit both academic and personal healing. I contend that methodologies focused on researching on experience can better reflect on the personal and emotional aspects of research while answering to the feminist call on critically engage with the own geographical, identity, and temporal occasions. This approach ensures that insights gained from personal experiences are leveraged to benefit both academic and personal healing.

CHAPTER 3.- Application of the approach to our case as bicultural daughters

In this chapter I explore the application of the approach of silence and haunting memories to autoethnography and oral history in the perspective of bicultural daughters, using recollections of memories, dreams, and excerpts from conversations between my sister, myself, and occasionally our mother. The primary focus will be on analyzing and questioning how silences and haunting memories, which I define as inscriptions of experience embedded in our bodies, serve as critical sources for navigating the complex interactions between personal experience and broader socio-cultural discourses. As it has been argued, these elements are essential for understanding the interplay between experience as agency and as shaped by discourse (Canning, 1994, p. 397).

This analysis integrates the work of cultural and border studies scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Ruth Behar, and Lila Abu-Lughod with psychoanalytical theories that have been applied in migration studies, like melancholia and encryption and incorporation of loss (Abraham and Torok, 1994; Eng and Han, 2003). Building on the literature review, I aim to explore the complexities of experience as a resource for analysis, focusing on oral history and autoethnography as feminist methods in migration studies. To illustrate these points, I specifically examine the journey of my sister and me leaving Syria in 2009 with our mother, when my sister and I were 11 and 14 years old, respectively. Drawing on insights from the literature review and the material I collected, this chapter incorporates visual supports, quotes from recorded conversations, and field notes taken during my trip to Lebanon in April 2024, our first exit point after Syria.

Furthermore, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of migration, highlighting the importance of personal narratives and the often unspoken dimensions of migratory experiences. Through this approach, I argue for an understanding of borders and migration histories that is more gendered, intimate, and embodied and that transcends fixed categories of identity.

I. Fractured Identities: defining being a bicultural daughter

For years, I have struggled with defining my identity as Syrian-Mexican and my position my position in pursuing a career in Middle Eastern studies. Inspired by the intimate approaches of

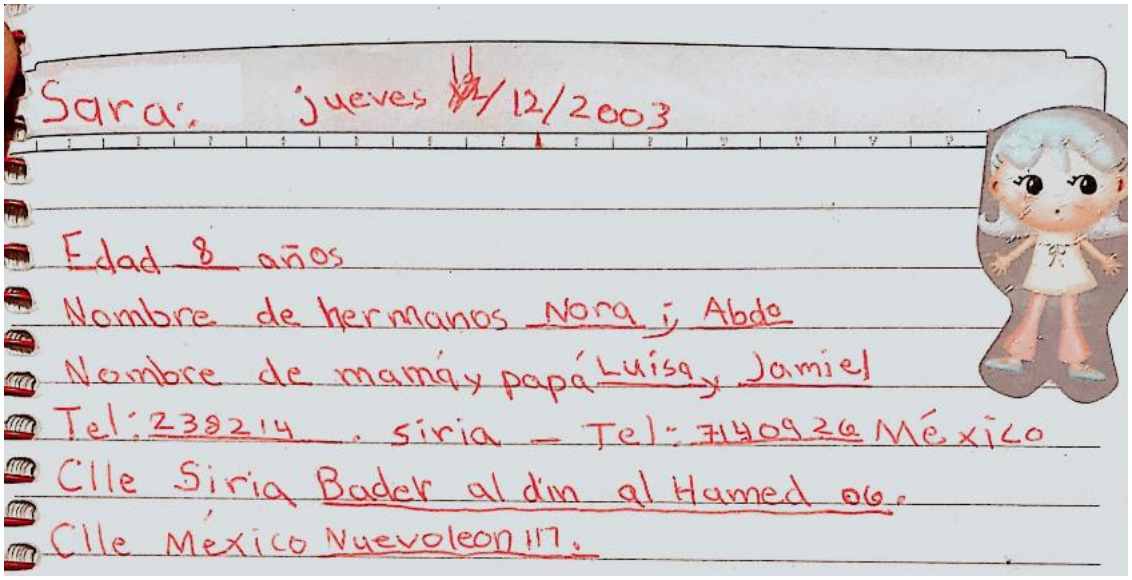
Behar and Anzaldúa, and referring to myself as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), a 'halfie ethnographer,' I argue that we all find ourselves between different types of identity borders because there is no coherent identity or experience that defines us (Scott, 1992). Therefore, I argue that the figure of halfies and bicultural daughters serves as a parallax that allows us to understand experience and migration in all their complexity and fluidity. In this sense, looking back at our own migration histories and experiences reveals the emotional and subjective dimensions of immigration, showing personal challenges and a vast array of experiences (Friedensohn and Rubin, 1987, p. 217). I argue that non-verbal inscriptions of experience, such as dreams, spectral memories, and silences, can shed light on the contradictions that live within us. These forms of experience show the constructiveness of identities, and as Scott argues, we cannot take them for granted but should see them as a field for exploration.

Ruth Behar (1996), in *The Vulnerable Observer*, describes herself as a "woman of the border: between places, between identities, between languages, between cultures, between longings and illusions, one foot in the academy and one foot out" (p. 100). For Gloria Anzaldúa (1991), in *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, the future depends on breaking paradigms and living in two or more cultures. We cannot and should not cling to understanding and studying the world from inflexible and often exclusive categories, such as nation-state approaches and the illusion of pure and fixed national identities (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 79). The future will belong to the mestiza, and from there a new consciousness will be created. The work of this new consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show, through her flesh and the images in her work, how duality is transcended (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 80).

What does it mean to be bicultural or halfie? What does it mean to be Syrian or Mexican? To answer this, it is inevitable not to start from constructed and imaginary notions of what a concrete nation is (Anderson, 2006), such as being Arab-Syrian-Muslim, or Mexican-Catholic-Mestizo. However, calling oneself bicultural by trying to combine both can fall into the same trap. The construction of an identity based on belonging to one state or two or more should not be taken for granted, since there is no such thing as a coherent identity (Scott, 1991). So where does our experience fit in? Our story is not part of the diaspora studies, which include Mexicans or Latin Americans who emigrate to the United States and maintain their communities there, as in the case of Anzaldúa or Behar. Or descendants of the different migratory waves from the Middle East to Latin America or the United States, as in the case of Lila-Abu Lughod.

Where does our status as migrants start and where does it end? Following the bloody 27-day assault on Hama in 1982,[5] where the government killed thousands of innocent people,[6] including my grandfather, my father, who was 21 years old at the time, managed to get a visa to study abroad. He lived in France for several years, where he met my mother, who also moved from Mexico to study in France. My migration story begins there, but fluctuated between Mexico and Syria until we left Syria for the last time in 2009.

Locating the self across borders and categories



English translation of the first page of my diary: "Sara: Thursday 11/12/2003
Age 8 years old
Names of siblings: Nora and Abdo
Mother and father's name: Luisa and Jamiel
Tel: 238214 (Syria) Tel: 7140926 Mexico
Street (Syria): Bader al din al Hamed 06.
Street (Mexico): Nuevoleon 117".

I believe the silences started since a very young age as I couldn't argue nor understand for myself how I fit in bordered categories. When I was a child, defining my identity revolved around describing my geographical locations: writing down my two countries, two addresses, and two phone numbers in my diary—like two different parts of me that were inevitably

[5] https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2012/02/syria-years-hama-survivors-recount-horror/#:~:text=

[6] See Syria Unmasked: The Suppression of Human Rights by the Asad Regime (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 20.

different and apart, yet essential to who I thought I was. I felt the need to perceive myself as separate rather than as a combination of both.

As I grew older, I began to understand that rigid categories existed, categories into which I did not entirely fit. For example, when I identified myself as a woman with one of my nationalities, people inferred more information from it, like my language or my religion, as part of fitting my national identity into a category or box. As an answer to such assumptions, I attempted to hide or highlight parts of myself in order to contradict such assumptions.

I remember that in 2001, after the 9/11 attack, I wanted to hide being an Arab with a Muslim father in Mexico as I felt embarrassed when my elementary school peers associated me and my father with the 'Arab-Muslims' depicted on television. The understanding of my classmates at that time was without doubts fed with mainstream stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims but it also had huge impact of myself perception. I identified myself as partially Arab Muslim and most of the time I was proud of that, but I did not want to be related to what this mainstream media said.

These stereotypes not only created a “coherent” and “homogeneous” category of Middle Eastern people, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, class, or racial identities but also gendered versions, like what Mohanty (1984) describes of the category of “Third World Woman”. In this gendered version of the categorization of Middle Eastern people, women were depicted as backwards, dependent on men, and forced to wear a veil (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Similar to my experience in Mexico, I remember facing countless stereotypes in Syria about Mexico, along with generalizations on how Mexican women were. These experiences made me feel that my sense of belonging and identity as either Syrian or Mexican or both was like a tea that was diluted or concentrated depending on how well I fitted into the categories of gender and respective national location. What it meant to be a woman to me was traversed by various identity categories, which sometimes even seemed to contradict each other, such as being simultaneously Catholic and Muslim.

At the end of 2009, in search of a more stable environment amid growing social tensions in the country and my deteriorating father's health issues, we had to flee Syria without him, crossing the Syrian-Lebanese border with no certainty about what would happen to my family in the future. My father was experiencing some of his worst psychotic episodes, and we, especially my mother, were socially blamed for it. Hama, my family's city, was under the memory, rumours, and emotions of the paralyzing ghost of the massacre. Additional to that environment, growing with a sense of belonging as Syrian-Mexicans was not easy. In Mexico, there was a stigma against Middle Eastern men depicted as irredeemably violent, and on the

other hand, in Syria, my parents' non-traditional marriage and our foreignness (skin color and inter-religious family) were wrongly identified as the main causes of my father's mental illness. Even though as children, our parents tried to build a home for us in both countries, hoping to contribute to our cultural and national belonging, for my siblings and for me, a fully sense of belonging was never achieved.

My exploratory journey of being a "Mexican-Syrian woman" highlights the complexity and multiplicity of identities that can intersect when locating gender historically and geographically. If I try to understand my experience as an Arab woman, or as a Latina woman only, as fixed categories in space and time, I would hardly be able to understand the intricate layers of historical, social, and cultural factors embedded in my experience.

I began my academic journey with a bachelor's degree in international relations, studying the experiences of stateless Kurds in Syria, hoping to find a bit of myself in them, as they were also part of Syria without fitting entirely into the categories of Syrianness. Struggling to understand the structural, and historical background behind the experiences of marginalization of the Kurds, I did a specialization in Middle Eastern studies, focusing on the construction of the Syrian national identity within the schoolbooks I used during my elementary education in Syria. Specifically, I aimed to explore how the state education portrayed Syrian women and consequently shaped societal expectations regarding their behaviour.

My books and experiences within the Syrian educational system were helpful in this endeavour, as was my partial location as a Syrian. Embracing Rich’s (1984) idea of locating myself not only made me accountable for my perspective but also enabled me to envision myself as the subject of my study. Acknowledging my partial perspective, as Haraway (1988) describes, helped me reconcile the different aspects of my identity and appreciate the richness of the multiple identities that cross within me.

How to theorize without detaching from practical, lived, embodied and diverse realities is a question that many feminist scholars have addressed. For Haraway (1988) and Rich (1984), it is a matter of situating bodily experiences to address this question. For hooks (1991), theorizing is a way of making sense of lived experiences, which, unlike theory in its traditional sense, is an active, dynamic, and continuous process. Theory, in contrast to its conventional understanding as opposed to practice, is not only something that should be 'somewhere outside of us,' but the result of an ongoing process of making sense of what is happening to us to encourage change. In the coexistence of reflection and action, where theory informs practice

and practice informs theory in a continuous cycle of learning and engagement, healing, liberation, and revolutionary change take place (hooks, 1991, p. 2).

Similar to hooks (1991), Haraway (1988) and Rich (1984), I see in the unity between theory and practice the opportunity to change the way in which knowledge has been produced in academia. In my academic journey, I seek to write from the recognition of an ongoing process of situating and locating the multiplicity of my identities, instead of understanding myself as divided in half, or as an opposition of one thing over the other. I also see writing and research from my location as an opportunity to contribute to making sense of this continuous process of situating and locating myself through the multiple identities that part of me, accepting that this process will always be changing.

As a daughter I have two countries

When I talk about my gender, I say I am a woman, but what kind of woman? I look at myself in the mirror and try to say, 'well, any woman.' But such unlocated, timeless and ahistorical category does not exist (Rich, 1984: Najmabadi, 1991); I am marked in many forms, such as by age, but also by the places and lineages of those who brought me into life—my parents. As a woman, I have a country (Rich, 1984, p. 212). So, I look at my geographical location that has transited between two countries, the one of my mother and the one of my father, and say, I am from Mexico but also from Syria. Therefore, I am a woman who has two countries, as I was marked by them not only because I descend from my parents who are from those countries, but also because I grew up in them at specific historical times.

So, when I say I am a Mexican-Syrian woman, I am speaking of historical and geographical specificity. My gender, in that sense, navigates across these two territories that have been shaped as nation-states and therefore carry not only a specific concept of nation but also a 'modern and binary understanding of gender' (Najmabadi, 1991) inside those nations. Therefore, when I refer to myself as a Syrian or Mexican woman, I am not speaking of any Syrian or Mexican woman from any ethnicity or any religion; I am referring to the Mexican-Spanish-speaking-Catholic-middle-class woman in which my 'Mexicanness' takes place, and the Arab-Sunni-Muslim-old family kinship in which I discovered my 'Syrianness.' In both cases, my identification as a woman cannot be understood without the frameworks in which my notions of womanhood have been built and the multiple categories that lie within. Therefore, when trying to locate myself geographically, I seek to understand how my places on the map are also a place in history (Rich, 1984, p. 212).

II. Doing autoethnography as bicultural daughter

In this subsection I reflect on the practice of conducting oral history and autoethnography from the perspective of this journey as bicultural daughters. I argue that this approach contributes significantly to feminist discussions on situated knowledges (Harding, 1991), partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988), and the politics of location (Rich, 1984), which are central to feminist methodologies and its use of experience. Specifically, I explore the unique insights that bicultural daughters can bring to these discussions.

Building on Susan E. Schwartz's (2021) concept of using the daughter figure as a parallax,[7] pivot, and intentional shift in psychology to heal intergenerational losses, I contend that the bicultural daughter, as mestiza[8] and halfie ethnographer,[9] plays a crucial role in expanding conversations about migration and experience. Historically overlooked in psychoanalytic analyses of loss and melancholia, the daughter figure represents a feminine archetype that warrants deeper exploration (Porterfield, Polette, & Baumlin, 2009, p. 4). This exploration supports both individual and collective healing (Schwartz, 2021, p. 1).

Moreover, the bicultural or multicultural daughter, shaped by multiple identities, develops a tolerance for the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in her existence (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 79). When faced with intense, often painful emotional events such as sudden migration or symbolic losses, she transforms these contradictions into a new form of consciousness

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[7] A parallax is a term used to describe how the position of something seems to change when you look at it from different places. That is, the simple act of focusing on the perspective of a particular person provides insight into things that are otherwise difficult or impossible to see. For example, in oral history, shifting the focus to the stories of ordinary people brought to light things that were not considered in history as an official discipline, or focusing on women in the history of large migratory waves after the wars.

[8] The term mestiza is commonly used in the context of Spanish colonization in the Americas to refer to mixed race people, but Gloria Anzaldúa defines "mestiza" not just as a person of mixed racial heritage, but as a complex, multifaceted identity that transcends traditional boundaries. She views the mestiza as embodying a unique consciousness born from the blending and intersection of different cultures, races, and identities.

[9] Lila Abu-Lughod, in her work, particularly in the essay "Writing Against Culture," defines "halfies" as individuals whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage. These individuals often find themselves straddling two or more cultural worlds, embodying the tensions and contradictions inherent in their hybrid identities. For her, a halfie ethnographer can bring a critical, reflexive, and nuanced perspective to the study of cultures, enriching the field of anthropology with their unique positionality.

(Ibid).[10] Focusing on the ambivalent experiences of the bicultural, halfie, and mestiza daughter, and her relationship to belonging and loss, provides a more gendered, intimate, and embodied perspective on borders and migration histories.

This approach transcends the narratives of fixed and normative national identities and categories that dominate the field of migration studies. It broadens our understanding of experience as a complex construct within various discourses and agency.

Sensing borders

Within the processes and structures of power that shape national identities and categories there is still room for agency like the (at least partially rational) attempt to construct an identity (Scott, 1986, p. 1067). However, doing so is not enough. In this section, I focus on the contradictory feelings that came across reconstructing and revisiting our journey leaving Syria in 2009. To achieve this, I use field notes, memories and short excerpts from conversations with my sister and my mother that help to build a narrative conflicting things we kept and did not know we shared. I argue that these contradictions are useful for studying the complexity of working with the everyday conflicts and struggles inherent in migratory experiences. Also, that the perspective of a bicultural daughter contributes to visualizing the ambivalent and contradictory dimensions of identity and belonging, offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of migratory experiences.

> *When we arrived at the port, there in Lebanon, we were in a very beautiful place, you remember that just walking a bit we could see the sea? my mom asked me. There I went to the public telephone, and I called the priest. I told him, priest, we are already here in Beirut, it is very hot, and the sea is very beautiful. I immediately started to cry, to cry next to the public phone. You both were standing there with me. Then he told me to leave and never come back again. God be with you, he said.*
>
> Transcript of recorded conversation with my mother

[10] This consciousness, which she calls the "mestiza consciousness," is characterized by its ability to navigate and reconcile the conflicts and contradictions inherent in a multicultural existence.

Each of us has our own way of remembering. While Nora recalls the last stage of the bus route that took us from Damascus to Lebanon with the song "it's my life" by Bon Jovi, as she remembers hearing it at some point in the background. Also, as the bus rushed forward, powerful currents of air streamed through the open windows, causing her hair to sway and dance with the wind. Instead, I remember crossing bridges demolished by the war a few years earlier and realizing the giant roadside billboards went from having the face of Bashar al Assad to the face of the Lebanese president. Most of all, I remember my terrible stomachache that started days before we decided to finally leave Hama and the few tears falling down my cheeks as I tried with all my heart to repress them so no one would suspect what we had just accomplished.

For both of us, it was a moment we remember as liberating and hopeful, but that instantly turned into our most guarded secret. Paradoxically, this event that brought us out of a very difficult situation was the beginning of an overwhelming feeling of guilt and sadness that we kept hidden for more than 13 years. The silence we maintained is the unspoken record of our duality and ambivalence between Syria and Mexico. Reconstructing it for this work is an attempt to create something beyond dualities and conflict. Instead, it is an autoethnographic exercise in which, as Anzaldúa says of the new mestiza consciousness, we navigate and reconcile the conflicts and contradictions inherent in a multicultural existence.

Facing the mediterranean sea

'Papi, I have the sea in front of me, guess where I am?' Surrounded by families celebrating Eid and with the sea in front of me, I called my dad, as I have done all these years. He, with his always kind voice but with a tone between emotion and sadness knowing where I told him I would be, responded: 'ahla w sahla' (read with a chanting tone).[11] *'I hope you are enjoying the food,' he said. 'Every single thing,' I laughed.*

Excerpt from my fieldnotes in Beirut 2024.

Fourteen years ago, I saw the sea from this same angle, thinking I would never return physically, nor feel belonging or love for anything related to this side of the world. But all my

[11] "Ahla wa sahla" is the Syrian colloquial Arabic transliteration of "أهلا وسهلا" "Ahlan wa sahlan" which means "Welcome" in English.

curiosities and passions brought me back. Deep down, they were always an excuse to feel my dad close.

At 14, I lacked the age and resources to understand or help him with the internal battle he was fighting, continues to fight, and will fight for the rest of his life—schizophrenia. Although I still can't see him, and maybe won't be able to while he lives, this short trip made me feel close to him, and to the immense love, nostalgia, and respect I feel for this part of the hemisphere, its history, its resilience, and how it interconnects with mine and that of many people I admire.

The feelings that emanate from experiencing the Mediterranean are those of ambivalence and duality. On the one hand, they remind us of the ability to leave a difficult situation we were living in and the possibility of having options for our future. On the other hand, there is the feeling of sadness and guilt for leaving Syria and our dad.

In our reconstruction of memories, the sea in Lebanon symbolizes a duality: Feelings of guilt about abandoning our father, our other culture, and bittersweet memories of our life there. Also, represents the possibility of getting out of Syria and from the situation we were in. Nora recalls waking up one day from a dream in which she saw our father return home to find that we had left, leaving behind the skates he had bought for her. Together, we remember developing a sense of dread every time we boarded a plane or bus to travel somewhere new, deeply aware of the feeling that we might never return or that our lives would change completely.

My sister shares that to this day, she feels an overwhelming sadness every time she says goodbye to someone she loves, often unable to hold back tears. In these conversations, we also talked about our father's illness, the feeling of having left so abruptly, and the helplessness of not being able to see him since then because of the war. We both agree on how difficult it is to talk about this after keeping it to ourselves for so many years. We were surprised to learn that neither of us had shared this with anyone for a long time.

With these recorded conversations in mind and the shared dream of returning to Syria to see our dad again, I intended to make this journey together. However, for many reasons, this was not possible. As a result, only I, accompanied by my partner, was able to travel to Beirut (without being able to enter Syria). During the trip, my partner frequently asked me how I felt about being there, but I struggled to articulate my emotions. It wasn't until we decided to visit the Beirut seafront that a flood of images and feelings came over me.

At that moment, with the sea in front of me, I decided to call my dad to wish him a happy Eid and let him know that I had arrived in Beirut. Immediately, several memories came

to mind: when we left, it was Ramadan, and somehow, many years later and without realizing it, I was back for Eid. The call that once informed my dad that we had made it through the migration checkpoint and into Lebanon was now to let him know that I was close. The Mediterranean Sea, from my perspective, came to symbolize the duality of familiarity, closeness, and belonging, alongside loss, sadness, and guilt. What separated one part of me from the other became one in the sea.

III. Fantasy and reality in experience

> *Your name is Mary, like the Virgin Mary and she is going to take you by the hand, the priest said. You are going to go by the Virgin's hand, she is going to help you. And you will see that at noon you will be in Beirut with your daughters, with the sea in front of you, and you will call me to say: priest, the weather is very hot, but Beirut is very beautiful. And so it was, I called him and that's what I told him.*
>
> Transcript of recorded conversation with my mother

Although my sister and I are not practitioners of any religion, listening to my mother's account of what the priest told her evoked feelings and memories that reminded us of things that were beyond logical explanation. When I was 7 years old, I started making altars with rose petals that I collected from my father's land on the Syrian countryside of Hama to offer them to a Virgin Mary that I felt a strong connection with because she appeared in a book that my Mexican grandmother gave me as a gift. In the book there were different versions of the Virgin Mary in a variety of cultures, among them, one called the Virgin of the East. This virgin touched me very much and made me feel a connection between Mexico and Syria; the virgin, which originally came from the Middle East, and my mother's religion, Catholicism, which I related to Mexico.

One early morning, taking advantage of the empty streets during Ramadan, we secretly took some of our most valuable belongings and began a journey that we did not know would lead us out of Syria. The day we set off for Damascus, instead of going to an aunt's house as we had last minute planned, we ended up in a church because someone along the way told there would be a mass in Spanish. After the mass, my mother approached the priest, of Chilean origin, to ask for spiritual help. What followed were a series of unexpected events, like people that we remember appeared out of nowhere and helped us, the mass in Spanish, the priest’s words.

In April 2024, I returned to Beirut with my partner. Throughout my time there, I experienced a strange mix of happiness and sadness that I couldn't quite articulate. At the start of the trip, I had intended to revisit specific places my sister and I had discussed in our conversations or that I had captured in photos over 14 years ago. However, given that some of those places were in the south and considering the current situation in Lebanon with the constant attacks from Israel, it was not a good idea. As a result, I had to adapt to the conditions and improvise.

While my mom was talking on the phone with the priest, I took a picture of Nora in front of the building where she was standing. This photo up to this day has served as a reminder that what we experienced was real and that the events we had long kept to ourselves had a material proof. Interestingly, it is also the only photo I kept from that time that features anything other than scenery or random objects. Given the limited places I could visit for this research, I showed the photo to the receptionist at our hotel and explained that I needed to find this building but had no idea where it could be. With the help of Nora's, my mom's, and my own memories, I provided several details in the hope that it might help. I gave her my WhatsApp number and asked her to message me if she found anything. A few hours later, I received a message that left me perplexed. Of all the possible names, the building had a Spanish name: Bella Rosa. This might seem insignificant but considering that the building I had captured with my camera many years ago had a name in Spanish, rather than in Arabic, English, or French as is more common in Lebanon today, left my sister, my mother and me stunned. The language, the figure of the Virgin, the roses—all these elements together are a haunting representation of the ambivalent and often contradictory components in our identities, memories, and sense of belonging as daughters traversed by multiple cultural and geographical borders.

Nora in front of the Bella Rosa Building in Beirut Lebanon, Ramlet I Bayda Area Street. September 2009 and me, Sara, in April 2024

Final thoughts

Reflecting on how the micro helps us understand the macro, this focused study of my family provides valuable insights into broader social and cultural phenomena. By examining the intimate, personal experiences of a single family, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex, often hidden dynamics that shape migration, identity, and belonging. This close study reveals the nuanced ways in which individual and collective histories intersect, highlighting the intricate web of emotions, memories, and relationships that influence the migrant experience. Such detailed, personal narratives allow us to extrapolate broader patterns and themes, offering a lens through which to understand the experiences of many other families divided across space and time. This micro-level analysis thus enriches our comprehension of the macro-level processes, contributing to a more empathetic and comprehensive understanding of migration and its impacts on individuals and communities.

Our experience with multiple identity borders did not start when we left Syria but was a constant throughout our lives. The day-to-day coexistence between us has depended on long distance calls, e-mails, time zones, passports, phone calls, border crossings, encounters and goodbyes. Nevertheless, our abrupt exit from Syria made our relationship with such familiar

diversity, and the impossibility of returning after the war that started in 2011 the one of unresolved grief, as we did not have the words or the spaces to process what we experienced, then aggravated by the political situation in the country, hindering our process of reformulating our relationship with Syria, our father and his illness. This leading us to completely repress our often unclear and contradictory emotions about belonging and identity, impeding externalizing or symbolizing it. Feelings of ambivalence about what we could or should feel throughout our lives as bicultural daughters is an ongoing process that navigates multiple narratives and structures of power.

Experiences like ours are the everyday experiences of other cross-cultural families that are also divided across time and space. Focusing this time on ours allows to document and make visible the complex conscious and unconscious layers in people whose identities are crossed by more than one identity and cultural border. However, it also allows us to understand the experience, migrant or not, as a changing dynamic compound across time and space that is nourished by the diversity that makes up any person beyond their national origin. It also allows us to delve into the way in which we shape our experiences from what surrounds us, and at the same time how, from our agency, we can contribute directly or indirectly to shape it.

Conclusion

This research builds upon an autoethnographic exploration I began in 2021, inspired by Khosravi's (2010) "Illegal Traveler." My focus is on reconstructing the experiences of border transgression and their effects on women, specifically using my mother's, sister's, and my own experience fleeing Syria in 2009. Building on this earlier research, this study delves into the methodological and theoretical challenges of using personal experiences, particularly from the perspective of bicultural daughters like my sister and me. It highlights the ambivalent and contradictory dimensions of identity and belonging, offering a nuanced understanding of migrant experiences and demonstrating how personal narratives can be valuable tools for research. Additionally, this work engages with feminist debates on experience as articulated by scholars like Joan Scott (1991), Sangster (1994), and Canning (1994), integrating cultural studies and psychoanalytical perspectives on racial melancholia from Eng and Han (2000). This includes examining unspoken dimensions of experience, such as silence and haunting memories, and addressing the associated challenges and insights.

Methodological Challenges

A significant methodological challenge was justifying the micro focus on my sister's and my own experiences. This arose from difficulties in accessing other experiences within the limited time for this work and questions about the selection and delimitation when considering including others. For example, I struggled with whether to focus exclusively on bicultural women in the Middle East or Latin America, or from any region as long as it fits within the South-South framework.

Another related issue was whether to position this research within Middle Eastern or Latin American area studies, considering that our experience does not fit existing and predominant literature on Middle Eastern diaspora in Latin America (Shohat & Alsultany, 2013) or of Mexican diaspora in the United States, nor the predominantly orientalist studies on women from the global north in marriages with Arab or Muslim men (De Hart, 2001, p. 52), or the more recent studies of Syrian women fleeing the country. Both challenges were central to my analysis, forming part of the personal and theoretical debates we face when positioning our identity as bicultural daughters of Syria and Mexico, where ambivalence is central.

Theoretical Challenges

One of the main theoretical challenges was choosing the concepts to define our experience within the terms used in migration studies. For example, what defines our belonging and identity? Are we part of a diaspora? Are we migrants or citizens? These questions illustrate the difficulty of fitting our experience as bicultural daughters into the migration flows of Syrians or Mexicans, making it hard to understand ourselves within categories defined by national belonging or derivatives. Our dual and ambivalent position as migrants and citizens, which did not remain fixed until our departure from Syria in 2009, is part of the complexity of our ongoing relationship with loss, belonging, and assimilation.

Additionally, many existing studies focus on the migration of women from the Global South to the Global North, often centered on the pursuit of better economic and labor opportunities. Unlike these studies, our case cannot be understood without a South-to-South approach, where the sense of belonging and the relationship with geographical and symbolic borders do not fit neatly into dominant-dominated dichotomies. Memory functions as a space where we can delve into the effects of borders and complexify their meaning. Haunting memories are useful for working with the limitations of language in capturing a more complete spectrum of our experiences. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the unspoken and inaccessible aspects of identities and belonging, particularly ambivalence and contradictions.

Contributions and Insights

This research demonstrates that the intricate and multifaceted experiences of cross-cultural families, like ours, reveal the layers that shape identities intersected by multiple sorts of borders. By focusing on personal narratives and autoethnography, this study highlights how experiences are not static but dynamic and evolving, influenced by time, space, and diverse cultural interactions. It shows how identity and belonging are fluid constructs, continuously reshaped by external influences and personal agency.

Final comments

Unstable migration often involves leaving one's homeland under distressing or traumatic circumstances, resulting in unresolved grief. Suspended assimilation occurs when immigrants or their descendants are unable to fully integrate into the new society, perpetuating a sense of loss and non-belonging. This unresolved grief and sense of loss may not be fully expressible

or recognized by the surrounding society, contributing to the internalization of these feelings—incorporation—rather than their expression and resolution. Silence that derives from a loss or painful experience is a sign or indicator of a state of melancholy, and the dreams or unconscious effects derived from fantasy are the symbolizations through the unconscious of what cannot be processed.

What I found for addressing the concepts of silence and haunting memories in response to challenging migratory experiences is that ambivalence often leads to unspoken ways of dealing with losses. The lack of capacity for symbolization of loss leads to metaphorically incorporating the lost object and anti-metaphorically building a tomb inside the body. Therefore, it is the body, tired of doing endless work, that looks to fantasy resources not only to protect the internal state and keep the loved object alive but also to resolve or alleviate the melancholic state.

Although this work is not a psychoanalytic study, and my approach does not seek to interpret dreams and haunting memories from that perspective, the theoretical framework on mourning and melancholia proposed by Freud and developed by the authors I mention bridges psychoanalysis—a field traditionally aimed at clinical treatment—and social sciences, especially cultural and migration studies. The concepts of melancholia, incorporation, and the utilization of fantasy within these theories enable the meaningful interpretation of experiences such as dreams or silences, situating them within the social contexts from which they arise, and the metaphors or anti-metaphors they embody. This makes it possible to enrich our understanding of social dynamics by exploring the internal worlds of individuals and examining how these internal experiences shape broader phenomena.

Lastly, although this thesis has focused on analyzing the unspoken dimensions of experience within migration, these insights can potentially be applied to other areas of study that deal with experience. Through this approach, it highlights the emotional and psychological dimensions necessary for studying migratory experiences like those of my sister and me, emphasizing that without these aspects, a more integral and sensitive approach to the experience would not be possible.

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