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“Devious Silence”: Refugee Art, Memory Activism, and the Unspeakability of Loss among Syrians in Turkey

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Abstract
In the past few years, and especially since the start of the “refugee crisis”, a number of research, NGO, and policy initiatives have channelled resources to representing refugees through artistic endeavours. The underlying assumption in such projects is that art offers refugees a significant avenue to tell their story and acquire a “voice” that is otherwise restricted in contexts of limited rights. In this article we aim to complicate some of the straight-forward assumptions underlying the connections between art and the representation of displacement and loss through ethnographic research conducted with professional Syrian artists in Istanbul. With an emphasis on “refugee art”, such artistic projects force artists to conform and identify with this category, silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic aspirations and expressions. The article demonstrates that the aestheticisation of displacement and loss produces an “unspeakability” (Weller 2017) of personal experience and trauma, and, in some cases, a permanent withdrawal from artistic production. As much as artists experience this as a form of imposed silencing, they also articulate their withdrawal as a tactic of agentive creativity. We, therefore, argue that unlike in the modern art practices described by Sontag (1983 [1982]), this “permanent silence” is not an elitist, individualistic and dehistoricising strategy. This context of conflict and protracted displacement reveals multifarious silences that are both results of unequal politics of representation but also tactics of reclaiming identity and artistic integrity, and of maintaining continuities between past, present and future.

Keywords: silence; refugees; art; loss; Syrian; Turkey
Since the artist can’t embrace silence literally and remain an artist, what the rhetoric of silence indicates is a determination to pursue his activity more deviously than ever before.

Susan Sontag 1983 [1982]

Introduction

Arthere is a well-known artist collective run by displaced Syrian artists in Kadıköy, Istanbul. It sits atop a long collection of hilly winding streets populated by cafés, shops and apartments some distance from one of the main ferry ports. Founded in 2014, it is housed in a two-floor building that includes an exhibition room and small café on the ground floor as well as a number of studios and work spaces, which various artists use during the day. In the main, its purpose is to bring together international (mainly) visual-artists, and to form national and international networks and connections to other artist initiatives and projects. As a space of artistic work in exile it has come to form a particular locus of engagement for us in our broader research project on labour politics and Syrian refugees in Turkey (Murphy and Chatzipanagiotidou 2020).

In one of our most recent visits to Arthere, in February 2020, we discussed with Nabil, the founder, the possibility of co-organising an exhibition that could take the work of Syrian artists to the UK and Ireland. “As long as it’s not another refugee exhibition. Otherwise, I prefer not to do it all” was Nabil’s exasperated response to our collective brainstorming for ideas. This was an unsurprising reaction, as Nabil had voiced many times before his objection to how the category of “refugee art” restricted displaced artists creatively and thematically, by valorizing predominantly artistic projects that dealt with displacement, conflict and loss. Such categorisations and discursive constructions force artists to produce art “on demand” to respond to particular thematic expectations or value their existing work through hierarchies of authenticity embedded in the category of
“refugee art”. Moreover, according to Nabil and his colleagues, the categorisation both essentialises loss and displacement, and degrades the aesthetic and commercial value of their labour. “The minute you call an artist a ‘refugee artist’ and an exhibition a ‘refugee exhibition’, people think this is charity and they are not willing to pay for your art. They don’t think of you as a professional”, Nabil affirmed.

Such critical interventions on the production and categorisation of “refugee art” stem from and link closely to broader ethico-political concerns with how refugee experiences, stories and voices have become on one hand erased, conflated, or even silenced through public, media and academic representation; and on the other hand, fetishized. We argue in this article that the risk of fetishization poses a serious challenge to an anthropological commitment to give “voice” to research participants, and refugees more specifically, especially when particular experiences are privileged and prioritised and others are rendered silenced and even unspeakable.

Without denying the broader role of art in expressing and processing experience, we aim to complicate some of the straight-forward assumptions underlying the connections between art, silence and the representation of displacement and loss. We do this by presenting research conducted with Syrian professional artists in Istanbul, and by paying attention to the broader socio-political and economic spheres, in which these artists operate. In the past few years, and especially since the start of the war in Syria and what is commonly referred to as the “refugee crisis” (but what we prefer to describe as a border crisis)iii, a number of research, NGO, and policy initiatives in European and non-European contexts have channelled efforts and resources to engaging refugees in artistic projects. This has particularly proliferated in refugee camps with notable and much cited examples being the Za’atari project in Jordan (https://joelartista.com/syrian-refugees-the-zaatari-project-jordan/) and the UNHCR-funded “Artists for Refugees” in Kenya
This “agency empowerment” art (Arda 2019) has been organised either around the work of professional displaced artists or by engaging non-artist refugees in creative work. Many examples exist in Istanbul alone, such as the Syrian Refugee Mural project (https://www.vetsalley.org/syrian-refugee-mural-project) led by American artist Amos Gregory and supported by the Turkish Ministry of Education and Turkey-based NGOs. The initiative engages non-professional refugees, and mainly children by giving them the tools to paint murals in their school, in order to tell their stories and “heal the wounds of war” (https://www.vetsalley.org/syrian-refugee-mural-project). Other refugee art exhibitions held in different spaces in Istanbul are aimed at including professional artists. For instance, the exhibition “Living” (2016), part of a wider NGO project called “Art from Exile”, was supported by the US Embassy in Ankara and the US Consulate in Istanbul, and presented the work of seven Syrian artists. The artists were asked to engage with the exhibition’s theme by reflecting on how life and living become possible after war and displacement (https://tr.usembassy.gov/art-exile-syrian-refugees-find-voices-art/).

The putative aim of many of these endeavours, and especially those funded by humanitarian agents and NGOs, is to break public silences and give refugees a “voice”, which they are perceived to lack in the public sphere of “host countries” due to restrictions of citizenship and socio-cultural and political inclusion. Such projects also attempt to engage national and international audiences in the “refugee experience” and foster understanding and empathy. Some professional artists, we show here, assume such opportunities, overcome levels of political silencing that they experienced in Syria, and produce artistic counter-narratives “in exile” which ultimately work against the Syrian regime’s official accounts of the conflict. In so doing, they become “memory activists” (Gluck 2007) of a kind; artists who break silences and change the boundaries between
what can and cannot be said, while at the same time challenging ethical and political pre-dispositions.

On the other hand, we argue here that, with an emphasis on “refugee art”, such artistic projects force artists to conform and identify with this category, silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic endeavours and labour demands. Embedded, therefore, in the creative lives of Syrians living in Istanbul are multifaceted cleavages of silence as strategic (political, ethical and instrumental) and silence as the “unspeakability” and unknowability (Weller 2017) of loss, absence, and suffering. These multiple and particular silences are produced and reinforced in the interplays between the individual and the social, subjectivities and collectivities, interiorities and exteriorities.

In being sensitive to the marriage of silence to issues of representation, loss and displacement, we are also opening an ameliorative discussion in refugee studies on the need to recognise historical continuities and “complex personhoods” (Gordon 2008) in the story of being a refugee. We start by outlining the conditions, in which Syrian artists live and work in Istanbul, as well as the methodological approaches and challenges of ethnographic undertaking in such context. We then anchor this research endeavour in anthropological and interdisciplinary preoccupations with “refugeeness”, “voice” and “silence”. In so doing, we present a number of ethnographic encounters with artistic lives in Istanbul in order to trouble notions of artistic silence/s, loss and displacement and its links to the category of the “refugee”. Using silence as an interpretive lens throughout this article serves to understand the challenges of living creative lives in exile and the broader intersections of art and politics in constructing (refugee) subjectivities.
Art(ists) in Exile in Turkey

All artists who participated in this research arrived in Istanbul at various stages after the onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011 in order to flee violence and conflict. The conflict and subsequent move to Turkey constituted a caesura in many of our research participants’ artistic lives, one which marked out a new space of artistic reflection and engagement for them. The material presented herein arises from ethnographic research conducted by the authors in the context of a larger British Academy research project which utilised both qualitative and quantitative approaches on labour politics and Syrians in Istanbul, Turkey (with a very specific focus on social entrepreneurship). Our specific objective for the ethnographic part of the project was to examine the effects of displacement on the artistic practice and labour opportunities of Syrians living in Istanbul.

Working together in what could be described as a “team ethnography” (Erickson and Stull 1998; Clerke and Hopwood 2014) approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a core group of 9 artists, and engaged in informal conversations with a...
larger group of artists, who work in private studios or in partnerships\textsuperscript{vii}. Although we did not originally delimit to any specific category of artistic practice in our research, through the process of snowballing, however, we tended to encounter mainly visual artists and musicians. Most artists are in their 30s and 40s, and they were professional or semi-professional artists in Syria. Most have received university qualifications, including Art degrees. There is a strong gender dynamic to this too with more male artists dominating the scene in Istanbul than female artists. So, while we interviewed both male and female artists, the majority of our research participants are male. Our research practice was conducted in the spirit of a mode of following through multiple sites and multiple ways of being an artist, a Syrian artist, and a refugee artist in Istanbul. Our following through extended to an examination of the intersections that these artists occupy in their everyday practice/s. Our fieldsite exchanges were also complemented by follow-up virtual interviews and interactions. We also conducted interviews with a number of NGOs and civil society advocates, who work with or commission artistic work by refugees.

The complexities and political sensitivities of the context in which we are researching have also shaped the ethnographic endeavour. Since 2014 and the introduction of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), displaced Syrians have been provided with the status of “temporary protection”. LFIP has been conceived as a step towards the relative harmonisation of Turkish law with EU legislation, and outlines provisions for foreigners in need of international protection (including “temporary protection”), when they are forced out of their country and could not return (İçduygu and Şimşek 2016, 61). However, “this particular legislation makes it clear that granting temporary protection does not entail providing ‘residency permits’ or any specific time frame of living in Turkey that may lead to achieving permanent status” (Rygiel, Baban and Ilcan 2016, 9). Syrian refugees, therefore, and even more so those
residing in urban centres as opposed to camps, face significant challenges in accessing education, employment, and economic support (Erdoğan and Uyan Semerci 2018).

Due to the temporary legal status and the precarious living conditions, “some Syrians are anticipating resettlement in a third country or repatriation once the war comes to an end, and others are travelling or hoping to travel to Europe in an effort to receive a more secure life, one that leads to permanent residency or full citizenship” (2). Many of our research participants lived elsewhere before settling in Istanbul, others view their residency in the city as merely a temporary one, with some already having departed for the USA and the UK at the time of writing.

Particular power hierarchies, struggles and contestations, became apparent to us, when we focused on art as work for refugees living in Istanbul. For some Syrians, art was not only an expressive and creative tool, but also a way of making a living, and, more crucially, a potential “passport” for further mobility, at least for those who hoped to achieve some international recognition and audiences. In a broader neoliberal context, however, artistic work comes with experiences of income instability, insecurity and anxiety that precarity engenders (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016). These conditions are often internalized and normalized through processes of “self-precarization” (Lorey 2011), through which artists “seem able to tolerate their living and working conditions with infinite patience because of the belief in their own freedoms and autonomies, and because of fantasies of self-realization” (Lorey 2011, 87).

When it comes to refugee artists, however, such precarity is further aggravated by limited access to citizenship and labour rights, as is very much the case in Turkey (Erdogan and Uyan Semerci 2018). While artistic practice may appear as a self-imposed “choice” in other cases, for some Syrians in Istanbul it becomes one of the very few work avenues available. To deal with economic anxiety, some artists respond to calls by NGOs,
academics, policy-makers or galleries for artistic projects that focus on the “Syrian perspective”. As already highlighted, some artists participate in this genre of artistic creation that expects a focus on articulations of displacement, war, and loss, some times reluctantly, and other times through processes of self-essentializing and commodification. A number of refugee artists, however, abstain from such initiatives, which they deem to be both creatively limiting and economically exploitative. Herein, we choose to focus on the narratives of four of our research participants specifically due to their anchoring in these very particular intersections (and critical spaces) of loss, displacement, refugeeness and silence.

Much of the extant research examining issues of representation and refugeeness has tended towards media analyses (see El-Enany 2016; Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017; Mortensen & Trenz 2016; Prøitz 2018), and less on the everyday implementation and political role of artistic projects for and by the displaced (see however Arda 2019), which this article explores. In this project, we focus on the urban landscape of Istanbul, where, unlike the camps in which most art projects take the form of charitable events, artists engage in creative practice as a major means to employment and generating income. This qualitatively different context opens up a space for tracing critical perspectives on “refugee art”, as articulated by Nabil in the opening vignette. We seek thus to extend such analyses by engaging ethnographically with artists and their art, and moving beyond preoccupations with merely the visual, textual and discursive. We examine how artists engage or not in “refugee” projects, how displacement affects their artistic production, and the politics of “refugee art” as labour more broadly. This is not done on the pretence of offering artists an unmediated “voice”. Quite the contrary, we approach the anthropological fixation on giving voice to research participants with caution and hesitation, as such epistemic engagements are also embedded within hierarchies and
power inequalities. Such methodological approach recognises the ethical responsibility to both unravel silences and to respect that some gaps and erasures maintained by our research participants cannot and should not be documented and/or ethnographically represented (Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy forthcoming).

**From losing “voice” to finding silence: anthropological shifts**

Ahmad, a young Syrian man in his 20s living in Turkey, who used to play and teach music in Syria, had no idea that this would become his main profession in Istanbul. When he first arrived in Turkey in 2014, the only job he could secure was in a restaurant as a guitarist for live music performances. He found the environment hostile towards him as a Syrian, and he eventually quit. After a couple of failed attempts to leave Turkey for Europe, he joined a band of street musicians in Istiklal street. That was the start of forming a band that included other Syrian and American musicians and combines Arabic and country music. “Music became my way of life and mode of survival, and helped me connect to networks and get work”, Ahmad said. But he also described a transformation in the music styles in which he engaged:

> When I was in Syria, music was just about expressing my feelings and I was only interested in classical music. But when I came to Turkey I had to become interested in Arabic music because this is what people were expecting. And this is how I started learning more about Arabic music. Even for my band I have to know Arabic music better, since it combines Arabic music with country, Turkish and other types of music (Interview 2018).

Ahmad’s band quite quickly started playing in different venues across the city, and in “refugee events” organised by charities and NGOs. For Ahmad, therefore, music became a way of acquiring a “voice” and “space” as a displaced person in the challenging socio-political and economic landscape of Istanbul, even though he had to redefine himself as an “Arabic musician” in order to respond to particular cultural expectations.
Refugee “voices”, the ability of displaced people to articulate and express their unique and complex experiences, as well as associated silences imposed by legal and humanitarian structures, have been scrutinised in critical anthropological debates for some time now. In most contexts, the socio-legal and political category of the refugee often operates on abstractions that overlook historical trajectories before displacement. As Malkii argues, “[f]orced population movements have extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes and include people who, while all displaced, find themselves in qualitatively different situations and predicaments” (1995, 496). However, policy, political and humanitarian interventions constitute the refugee in a dehistoricizing manner and render the displaced into “speechless emissaries” (Malkki 1996). The refugee becomes, therefore, a timeless and voiceless entity that is defined by the very act of mobility, and whose experiences of loss, abandonment and absence are either silenced, or have to be shaped and told in particular ways in order to be recognised as authentic and legitimised as valid (Fassin 2005; Johnson 2011; Cabot 2013, 2016).

Broader research on testimonies and transitional justice (see Hastrup 2003; Ross 2003; Wilson 2003; Das 2003; 2007) has also demonstrated that narrating one’s traumatic experience to fit bureaucratic and legal categorisations in the process of claiming rights or striving for recovery may actually result in re-traumatising victims. As victims’ experience is constructed inter-subjectively through narrative, the constrained discursive boundaries and authoritative contexts in which testimonies take place result in feelings of alienation from one’s own past (Ross 2003). The very act of “speaking out”, privileged in western psychoanalysis as a means of therapy and trauma recovery (Kleinman et al. 1997), ultimately produces conditions of silencing.

In spite of anthropological efforts to transcend narrow, simplistic approaches to refugee trajectories and histories, anthropologists too have engaged in the fetishization of
refugee voice and epistemic violence (Cabot 2016), through a methodological over-emphasis on storytelling and narrative. The ethnographic documentation of narrative is admittedly stylistically, politically, and motivationally different to that of NGOs or state agents, but ethnographers also construct discursive parameters according to which their research participants are expected to reflect on their life histories and trajectories. The anthropological preoccupation with “refugee voice”, therefore, although perhaps done with more sensitivity and awareness, does not necessarily overcome the issues of representational authenticity and power imbalances (ibid.). Moreover, such fixation on “voices” relies heavily on liberal constructions of experience as located in psychological interiorities that can be externalised and expressed through coherent and linear narrativizations. As Desjarlais (1994, 2018) has argued, however, such approaches to experience become challenged across different socio-cultural environments or in sensorial contexts of illness, pain and suffering. Experience in these instances is characterised less by interiority and more by embodied and bodily reactions, incoherencies, and gaps.

It is due to such critiques, that an emphasis on silence(s) and absence has emerged as a move away from the primacy of the orality in narrative production and articulation of subjectivity (Good 2012). Such a shift of emphasis diverts attention from the spoken to the unspoken and unspeakable paying attention to everyday affective, bodily, and material interactions (see Kidron 2009; Navaro 2012; Dragojlovic 2015).

In line with such non-linear articulations of experience, art, and creative expression more broadly, emerge as significant tools to transcend the confining and oppressive limits of structured speech (Abu-Lughod 1986; Hogan and Pink 2010; Tello 2016). It is on this premise that “refugee art” has emerged not only as a therapeutic way of engaging with loss, but also as a form of “counter-memorial aesthetics” (Tello 2016)
with the power to disrupt and challenge dominant and essentialising accounts of refugeeness.

Susan Sontag (1983 [1982]) treats “aesthetic silence” as an inherent quality of modern art: “[m]odern art’s chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience can be regarded as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a major standard of ‘seriousness’ in contemporary aesthetics” (187-188). In this sense, the modern artist is never literally silent but uses various forms of silence to resist audience demands and established patterns of interpretation. This silence takes the form of abstraction, deduction, and, requires de-historicisation in order to break away from artistic canons. Rarely do artists fully withdraw from their artistic endeavours. And even if they do, all these engagements with silence are presented by Sontag as an individual act and decision. While we draw on Sontag’s analysis of silence as a powerful act of mediation with the potential to disrupt and alter, in order to understand some of the work of our research participants, we also highlight here significantly different uses of silence to the Western commercial environments that she describes. In this context of displacement and war, aesthetic silence, both as artistic abstraction and literal withdrawal, is a way of historicising rather than de-historicising. It is about community-building as opposed to just an individualistic act. And, it is not always a “devious” choice, but its deviousness stems from imposed conditions of broader political hierarchies.

Silence beyond just the act of not speaking is socially constructed and produced within particular dynamics. In this sense, as Jay Winter (2010) remarks, silence should be analysed as focused, purposeful, and directed, and not as the absence of sound. Both speech and silence can be deployed in morally defensible and in morally deplorable ways. In his work on the Northern Ireland conflict and literature, Ronan McDonald (2005, 253) points out that silence is “a symptom of a colonial condition” but also an important
“aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition”. This has strong resonances with the complex “silences” and “voices”, in which artists in Istanbul like Ahmad have responded to the Syrian conflict and their subsequent displacement.

We remain cognisant, however, that, “the spoken and the silent are not opposites, not ontologically different from each other. One is not the power to the other one’s resistance” (Weller 2017). It is with this awareness that we posit that aesthetic silences have (at least in some contexts) an inherent “political functionality” (Ferguson 2003, 58). The artistic endeavours documented herein also point to the different forms of “subjugation, resistance, or motivation” (50) that artistic silence evokes. These silences, as Ferguson (ibid.) suggests, work to engender certain kinds of political identities and communities whilst also working to rupture or disrupt particular kinds of organisations or “organising”. Silence (when coupled with expressions of loss and displacement) in artistic projects often assumes wildly divergent forms and structures, but critically its polysemy has a political potentiality that serves to either disrupt or support. Ahmad’s reinvention of artistic self evinces some of these striking complexities of positionality, voice and intention. Music becomes voiced as survival, by Ahmed, whilst in the same moment existing as a kind of resonating node which builds new sustenances from the interweave of silence and the feeling of being silenced. It does so in the grip of the political complexitity of being in refuge from Syria in Turkey.
Vibrant and visceral blues, greys, blacks and red; Abdulatief’s (Abd Allatif Aljeemo on Facebook) painting is one that is indecipherable at first glance. Flashes of white, nimbus and cirrus, perhaps? Oceans of mist hurtling towards a raw keel of blue and red. Still indecipherable. A glance at the artist’s name, Syrian - is his intention clearer? The painting pulses with an energetic unknowability, a menagerie of colour and meaning. With no title, there are few clues as to what this map of colour and intensity might signify. The viewer must shift position, move closer, stand back in order to do the work of interpretation for this is a piece of art that blurs the boundaries between (un)speakability and (un)knowability.

To the din of clinking coffee cups, chatter and laughter, we sit together with Abdulatief in the spring of 2018, in a buzzy side street café in Cihangir, the arty neighbourhood of Istanbul, where he lives and works. Abdulatief, in his late thirties, is both an abstract artist and graphic designer trained in a fine art school in Syria. He worked
as a professional artist in Damascus, and continued to work professionally as a visual artist in Turkey after his arrival in 2013 in his own studio. He has had his art exhibited mainly outside Turkey, in places like Lebanon and France, but due to travel restrictions he has never been able to attend those exhibitions. It is mainly through international networks outside Turkey that most of his work gets commissioned for or sold, and Abdulatief prefers such arrangements over limited opportunities for employment offered to artists in Turkey, restricted mainly in the domain of NGO activity. The touchstone of our conversation is how the Syrian conflict has irrevocably changed Abdulatief as a person and an artist:

The war has had a huge impact. I was a different person before the war and now I am a different person. (...) It changed my art in a positive way. Before the war I was anxious in front of a canvas, worried about what others would think of my art. But now I am fearless, I don’t care what people think of my art. Now I will just go and make it. People have lost so much, we are now out there, we have lost so much there is nothing more to lose, we are just going to do it. (...) It has also changed the way I physically approach the canvas, now I throw the paint with force—more fearless. I think this is the same for many Syrian artists who before the war derived more pleasure from much simpler forms. My art is now more developed into postmodern forms -deconstruction and reconstruction. (Interview, April 2018).

Abdulatief explains how his most recent project on detention has been directly influenced by the impact of civil conflict, violence and ruination. For his afore-mentioned work, he uses mixed artistic methods to produce colourful air maps of built landscapes. These paintings are aesthetically striking in their jumble of colour and spirit. It is, however, only upon closer examination that the viewer of this work realises that what we see is, in fact, from the perspective of a jet-fighter who is about to strike and kill people on the ground. Abdulatief contrasts the actual pleasure and satisfaction that the jetfighter receives out of finding his target with the impending destruction and death. He articulates it thus:

The view from the jetfighter and how he is striking and killing people, it is colourful because the jetfighter feels pleasure, that was my aim, there
is pleasure for such people in killing. If someone is going to look at the piece it is colourful and then they realise what they are seeing (Interview, April 2018).

Abdulatief’s idea for the aerial perspective emerged on his way to Turkey to seek refuge and while looking through the plane window at the war-tormented landscape that he was leaving behind. Abdulatif is an abstract artist who refuses to be bound up with categorical thinking. He collects the shards of conflict and displacement, however, he reshapes them within an ethico-political and universalistic project that seeks to break silences by disrupting established patterns of representing war and loss.

His image of the jetfighter is anchored in aesthetic surprise and deep emotion, one which forcefully demands an ethical response. This work conveys a complex affective landscape for viewers who find themselves moving from enjoying the colourful mapping to realising the horror implied in the depiction, often with a provoked sense of guilt for having momentarily felt pleasure comparable to that of the jet-fighter. This is akin to the kind of “sense-memory” of which the art theorist Jill Bennett (2003) writes about in her analysis of visitor responses to Dennis Del Favero and Justin Kramer’s exhibition on child sexual abuse, and Marina Abramovic’s performances of self-mutilation. Bennett argues that this kind of memory works to communicate bodily, sensorial ways of knowing, feeling, and understanding. Bennett suggests that viewers of these installations connect to their own sense-memories because “the image incites mimetic contagion acted out in the body of the spectator, which must continue to separate itself from the body of the other” (2003, 37). Abdulatief’s work functions in a similar fashion anchoring imaginings of violence, suffering and pain in bodily, sensorial and affective ways. However, unlike Del Favero’s and Abramovic’s work, his art manages this through much more subtle and indirect provocations and images, that divert from raw depictions of trauma.
In many ways then, Abdulatief’s air maps, named after Syrian cities, are “cartographies of silence” (Rich 2000 [1978]), which work to complexify the emotionality of conflict experiences in their shifting of perspectives and interpretations. By choosing the jetfighter’s view, the paintings both reveal and conceal the different kinds of violence and power relations at play thereby dancing at the margins of un/speakability. This work ultimately functions, in its mottling of colour and clarity, to both obscure and enlighten, to silence but to also endeavour to speak about the contradictions of conflict. As such Abdulatief’s jetfighter work is “coded in esoteric symbolic productions aimed at hiding as well as revealing” (Good et al. 2008, 15). There is both a political and ethical potentiality in this kind of “symbolic production”, one which Abdulatief’s work achieves through its revealing of the Syrian conflict’s “poisonous knowledge” (Veena Das cited in Good et al. 2008, 15). In the mix of viewpoints and emotions from jetfighter to his victims, there is a heterogeneity of positionality, an attempt to grapple with a multiplicity of perspective not to legitimise but to push against the pleasure that some draw from conflict. There is also an inherent reckoning with notions of complicity in forcing the viewer into understanding the kinds of violence that the artwork depicts. In this agentive moment of creating discomfort, Abdulatief’s work constitutes a form of “counter-memorial aesthetics” (Tello 2016), which as Tello argues is a struggle:

[…]for historical consciousness (…) through an embeddedness in and willingness to work through the profound heterogeneity of a world wherein the source of power and conflict is constantly shifting, mutating and reappearing in the most unexpected of forms (2).

As such, Abdulatief’s work and personal narrative captures the complexities, even contradictions of being an artist from Syria in the current moment-bound as they are with conflict and displacement—whether visible or not in one’s artistic production. As a memory activist, a broker of silence and an artist cognisant of the multisensual nature of
memory and imagination, Abdulatief produces work which allows “the pain of memory as it is directly experienced” to articulate “a level of bodily affect” (Bennett 2003, 29), which is both a mode of shattering certain silences whilst carving out new ones. Such modalities of “seeing” through memory fragments and incumbent silences in Abdulatief’s work refashions its consumers into witnesses thereby urging us all, through its radical poetics, into a space of political and ethical response/ibility.

For Abdulatief, the context in Turkey enhances the opportunity to engage in this kind of counter-memorial aesthetics and offers more freedom for the expression of humanistic, ethico-political and critical positions compared to Syria where some artists faced persecution, control and censorship. This is an interwined political and artistic freedom, that produces a socio-political critique of the Syrian regime, war, and displacement through the aspiration to expand and internationalise creativity in ways that were not possible in Syria. Abdulatief does this, not as a “refugee artist”, but as a professional artist cognisant of how experience and context shapes his practice in an ongoing way. His projects on detention and conflict evince his positionality as a memory activist par excellence-wherein he pushes the boundaries of an aesthetics of silence and unspeakability in ways which form an oeuvre of resistance and survival. It is therefore understandable that artists, like Abdulatief, as “frustrated cosmopolitans” (Tsioulakis 2011) become uneasy by requests that push them in to the categories of the “Syrian artist” and “refugee art”.

According to artists like Abdulatief and Nabil, whose words featured at the start of the article, such projects do not only de-professionalise and devalue their work, but also restrict their “cosmopolitan imaginaries” (ibid.) that transcend the confining aesthetic limits of refugee art “on demand”. In order to overcome these professional and creative restrictions, artists mobilise international networks that may take their work -and crucially
them too- to different countries and settings. A year after our first meeting, in the summer of 2019, Abdulatief, over coffee once again, shared that he had just submitted his paperwork to seek entry into France. Even more exasperated than the year before about the “protracted uncertainty” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 2) of displacement and employment in Turkey, Abdulatief said in a breathy voice: “If I don’t get to leave Turkey this time, I will not paint again. This situation is killing my creativity. If I stay here, I will stop”. This was a staggering statement coming from an artist who had just excitedly described to us his new project and plans for international exhibitions. The constant hardening of European borders in combination with a lack of status recognition and full refugee rights in Turkey produce therefore further cycles of silencing and silences, both as imposed permanent artistic ruptures and self-preservation tactics to deal with exile.

However, Abdulatief is not alone in contemplating this very act of literal silence. As the next section documents, strategic silences and even literal withdrawal emerge as the main options of maintaining creative and moral integrity for some displaced artists.

**Tactical and Permanent Silences**

Jamal’s music rises and falls like an external heartbeat evoking tradition and complex form. Its rhythmical sequence is alluring and exposing of a cultural and personal history of performance and diverse musical training. Jamal is a Syrian pianist, who is also a practising lawyer. Having first lived in Jordan, then Istanbul since 2016, he has now moved to London (at the time of writing). Our conversations with him are ones which crisscross his work as an artist and his work as a lawyer. His layered, diverse professional life perfectly situates him to provide expert commentary on both the role of artistic production for Syrians and the complexities of “refugeeness” in the Turkish State. Further, his long familial history with music and performance in Syria gives him a unique
perspective on how different kinds of music and art forms have flourished, or indeed, have failed under the Syrian regime.

Like Abdulatief, Jamal struggles with the kind of reductionism which abstracts artists from their previous careers as performers in Syria and shapes their art into cultural artefacts of refugeeeness. Although he recognises that some artists choose to become “Syrian artists” or “refugee artists” in order to survive, build careers, or indeed, become more mobile, Jamal raises a different approach: “it is not an obligation for artists from Syria to respond artistically to what has been happening in Syria.” He also believes that the deployment of the title “Syrian refugee musician” is detrimental to Syrian artistic culture. He describes the artistic scene in Turkey as “refugee related, as an artist you get to go to certain organisations who get funding for refugee related projects”. For Jamal, like a number of the other artists we interviewed, adopting a refugee identity is seen as diminishing of one’s creative abilities and value: “Many Syrian musicians want to be treated as performers, not go to the level of the cultural all the time.” (Interview 2018).

Within this context, some artists choose actual silence, and prefer to articulate experiences of loss and suffering in the private sphere, without releasing such artistic work for public consumption. Jamal’s brother was arrested, detained and executed by the Syrian government, and, as Jamal commented: “that was the trigger for me to make my album. I felt like I needed to do something to tell his story especially the horror he went through when he was detained”. However, although Jamal composes music and participates in public performances, he decided not to make the album publicly available to respect the memory of his brother and protect his own sense of loss from processes of appropriation and commodification until he has the funding to do it in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Jamal sums it up by saying, “If I do release it, it will be for all detainees.” Like Abdulatief, and many other Syrians, the issue of detention and torture
figures large in Jamal’s relationship to the Syrian conflict. Much of their recent artistic work stands sentry at the edges of the detention space-attempting to capture and evoke the wounds, losses and silences of the individual lives purloined therein.

Jamal’s memory activism is differently articulated to Abdulatief’s and is one tempered by a particular kind of reservation with respect to articulating suffering publicly. He nonetheless engages in private, personal and familial forms of memorialisation. Jamal’s response is a strategic form of self-protection from publicising trauma, the kind of “restive silence” that Toni Johnson (2011, 57) describes in relation to how asylum seekers deploy silence as a tactical device in asylum hearings in the UK. It is also a “liturgical” silence (Winter 2010) that is demanded by respect for the loss of his brother’s life, his family’s pain and the suffering of all victims of the Syrian conflict.

This is a different form of silence to the one critically described by Sontag (1983 [1982]) as a characteristic element of modern art, by which artists detract and detach themselves from their audiences and broader socio-political contexts. If the latter is seen by Sontag as a process of individualisation, elitism, and distancing from “communities”, the former is a practice of community-building and maintenance against processes of essentialisation and historical decontextualization. For Jamal and Abdulatief (and many others), recognition as an artist is the sine qua non of their very existence, and they were very clear that producing art about the Syrian conflict and displacement experience should be their own personal choice. When they do so, it reflects a type of “critical rage” (Laing 2020) that remains in the grip of their personal artistic practice and approach, not then a relinquishment of a long nurtured artistic voice in favour of refugee representation.

It is for these reasons that initiatives like Arthere provide an important space for Syrian artists and indeed, others to produce their own artistic endeavours unencumbered by the dictates of “refugee” funding. While Arthere is a dedicated space for Syrian artists
(as well as a space of collaboration with Turkish and international artists), themes of conflict and displacement are not necessarily central to the work produced there. As Nabil, the founder of Arthere, told us, one of the ideals of this particular collective of artists was to “build from the outside until we can go back inside” and to allow Syrian artists to meet and develop their art, regardless of style or subject matter, whilst building international connections.

Like Jamal and Abdulatief, Nabil also highlighted how art spaces within Syria were often perceived either as unnecessary or suspicious. To be an artist of any kind was to potentially pose a threat under the Syrian regime and so many were confined and silenced in different kinds of ways. Artistic endeavours, as such, remained underfunded in Syria unless they fell into particular non-threatening kinds of categories. As Nabil put it, “that’s the way they kill you, they kill any kind of art or creativity.” Now in Turkey, collectives like Arthere are reaching out in an attempt to enable artists from Syria to build sustainable, mobile careers unfettered from the silencing of the Syrian regime.

However, there is an acknowledgement and understanding by many artists that access to most funds in Turkey is linked to refugee-related projects, and even Arthere often have to participate in such endeavours in order to secure financial sustainability and visibility. For artists new to the country and coming from a context in Syria where certain kinds of artistic endeavours were deemed a threat, navigating the artistic funding and support landscape in Turkey can be a challenge. Further, dealing with particular kinds of expectations as to the kind of artistic practice one might produce as a Syrian (as Ahmad’s story evidences) is very challenging. Both Jamal and Abdulatief were very clear that the market and appetite for certain kinds of artistic endeavours is not present in Turkey.

The broader politics of displacement and development in Turkey create, therefore, certain kinds of conditions through which artists are challenged to shape their art in order
to conform to particular expectations. This process of “strategic essentialism” becomes one of very few available avenues to survive materially, to progress with one’s career, and, really importantly, to be able to move, as further mobility to a Northern European destination is a desirable objective for a large number of refugees. Although treated as authentic representatives of the refugee experience in the artistic and social scenes, this memory activism produces a privileged category of those who have the right to speak and break silences. Even though such refugee artists are often treated as having direct experience of displacement and suffering, and therefore, more legitimacy to “represent”, competitive scales of authenticity produce further hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion and processes of silencing of those who are not deemed eligible to represent — who can also be other refugees.

Conclusion

The shifting complexities and concerns embedded in Ahmad, Abdulatief, Jamal and Nabil’s narratives and their unpacking of life as a Syrian artist in Turkey points to the ways in which conflict, loss and displacement reconfigure ways of being and ways of relating in one’s everyday artistic practice. As artists in exile, their self definitions are wrapped up in the silences, absences, and wounds of their experience as well as the expectations of what it means to be a contemporary Syrian artist. These confinements of the self, however, find very different expression in their artistic choices — as only can be expected in lives lived creatively.

Core to many displaced artists’ concerns is a problematisation of the discourses and funding regimes of refugee art projects. This, however, is always presented through a deep awareness of the challenges of funding and support for artists generally in Turkey with a nod to the empowering potential of at least some of these endeavours.
However, in spite of such empowering potential, or actually in order to have this empowering potential, artistic projects of this kind produce further conditions of silencing and silences at the public, private and inter-subjective levels. With an emphasis on “refugee art”, they force artists to conform and identify with this category, silencing more complex processes of identification and subjectivity, communal historical continuities and personal loss, as well as artistic endeavours and expressions. The category of the “refugee” is therefore once again abstracted, essentialised and even fetishized. In the cases of humanitarian-led projects, this is a result of how funding becomes available and channelled. In the case of private galleries, agents and commissioners, it is normally guided by market-led demands for “authentic refugee art” that is deemed current, fashionable and commercial.

As a response, Syrian artists are (self-)fashioned into “refugee artists”, who are expected to document and represent themes connected to displacement and loss. Our ethnographic engagement herein illuminates the ways in which such artists shape their work to fit such expectations, but also highlights their strategies of negotiation and opposition. In some cases, artists engage in the process strategically and self-essentialise in order to acquire access to rights, work, and potentially opportunities for further mobility. However, “aesthetic silence”, as an element of modern art’s abstraction and the intention to disturb and provoke (Sontag 1983 [1982], 187), allows artists to articulate the “refugee experience” in more subversive and nuanced ways than those expected from funders and advocates. At the same time, for others, this aestheticisation of displacement and loss produces an “unspeakability” (Weller 2017) of personal experience and trauma, and a permanent withdrawal from artistic production. Instead of giving “voice” to refugee artists, therefore, demands for “refugee art” in these cases have the opposite effect of disempowering and hindering. As much as artists experience this as a form of imposed
silencing, they also articulate this withdrawal as a tactic of agentive creativity. The deviousness of being silenced is therefore tramped by literal silence, a tactic of self-protection from trauma, of reclaiming identity and professional integrity, and of maintaining historical continuity between past, present and future.

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References


Notes

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ii This was a follow-up and last visit to the field just before the escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic and connected lockdowns in Turkey and across the world. Although the pandemic has had and will be having immense impact on the lives of our research participants, all the material in this article was collected in and reflects a ‘pre-Covid’ era.

iii The language of “crisis” is central in biopolitics that normalise and legitimise states of exception, hierarchies of power, and denial of human rights (Agamben 1998; Athanasiou 2012; Redfield 2013; Roitman 2014). A focus on borders and the crisis produced around them shifts attention to states’ and suprastates’ role in constructing regimes of control and exclusion and implementing business models of profit through bordering (De Genova 2002, 2017; Coutin 2003; Andersson 2014).

iv Although Syrians started fleeing to Turkey in 2011, the numbers peaked after 2013.

v According to UNHCR, Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the region with more than 3.6 million registered Syrians in the country, and almost a fifth of these living in Istanbul (UNHCR, 2018). However, their legal status has been ambiguous, especially in the first years of the war when Syrian refugees were accepted in Turkey as “guests”. Due to its limited ratification of the 1951 Geneva Convention, Turkey does not grant refugee status to non-European refugees, and displaced Syrians have not therefore been recognised as refugees through the existing legal framework (Rygiel, Baban and Içcan 2016, 1). However, in this article, we refer to our research participants as “refugees”, as the term “refugee” is used by our participants and in everyday discourses as a socio-political category.

vi For the broader project and in conjunction with a team of researchers based at the Centre for Migration Research in Istanbul Bilgi University, we conducted collaborative team-based research which focused on Syrian refugees and the politics of labour in Turkey. This mixed-methods research was conducted in 2017-2019 and comprised of a Turkey-wide quantitative survey, semi-structured interviews with refugee groups, NGOs, and social enterprises, and participant observation in Istanbul.
Most interviews were conducted in English as the artists are fluent speakers, with the exception of one interview that was conducted in Arabic, with synchronous translation by one of the project researchers for the authors who were also present.

One of these artists, Nabil, is the founder and main member of Arthere. The other artists work independently, and through different networks.