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Multispecies (Co)migrations Across the Mediterranean and Cyprus: Elif Shafak and Christy Lefteri

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Abstract Drawing on the *Overlap* (2020) project, this paper examines how overlapping human and non-human migrations shape Mediterranean routes. Analyzing Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and Christy Lefteri's *Songbirds* (2021), the study uses a sympoietic framework (Haraway) to parallel gender inequality faced by Asian women workers and minorities with the victimization of songbirds in Cyprus. This intersection challenges borders, citizenship, and rights, focusing on exploitation and trauma. The analysis calls for response-ability toward social and environmental justice through a multidisciplinary approach.

Keywords Migrations. Mediterranean Sea. Cyprus. Gender. Sympoiesis. Human-non-human relationships.

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1 Introduction

The constant migrations that have characterised the end of the past century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century have had the effect of increasingly attracting media discourses towards descriptions of massive, menacing human flows. It is important to acknowledge the complexity of this mass movement with appropriate terms. And yet, more often than not, humans who are on the move follow and share trajectories with non-human beings, or, sometimes, because of non-human natural agents. Thus, speaking of human and non-human co-migration and bio-diverse co-evolution, or comparing patterns, cycles and routes of diverse migratory species does not mean diminishing the importance and impact of human migration flows. For instance, Amitav Ghosh claims that nowadays migrants' routes from East to West follow the same silk road routes as ancient merchants; similarly, the central Mediterranean route is used by both humans and non-human migratory birds.

The study by Canadian scholar Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination* (2023) is paramount in depicting non-human and human migration agency. She studies the behaviour of surging glaciers in the Gulf of Alaska, on the border between British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska. These glaciers have the specific peculiarity of advancing and retreating periodically and abruptly, thus causing clans' and moieties' migrations either to move away from their newly glaciated lands, or to move back and reclaim for themselves the newly uncovered lands, once freed from ice. Therefore, one might say that as glaciers migrate and travel, local people inevitably migrate, too, as a consequence. And all this contributes to the biological co-evolution of humans (society) and non-humans (geomorphology) in a specific region, facilitates or hinders encounters, and triggers mythical narratives and storytelling: "References to glaciers were embedded in larger stories about human migrations and connections among clans" (Cruikshank 2005, 48). It is evident that the same thing happens with volcanoes, whose eruptions and subsequent lava ejections and flows not only change the geomorphology of certain places, but might also determine the migration of local people who live on the slopes of volcanic cones, or around the active areas.

Moving from the glaciers of the North American continent to the Mediterranean Sea, another innovative and crucial Italian study promotes reflections on human and non-human migrations. The publication, entitled *Overlap* (2020), is the report of an international research group – Icemura – and its activities, and of the performances of a dance-theatre company – *Senza confine di pelle*, literally 'without skin border' – co-founded by Dario La Stella, a cultural anthropologist and ethnologist, but also art director, choreographer and performer,

together with Valentina Solinas, an investigative, forensic and criminal psychologist, but also co-director and playwright for the same dance-theatre company.

The volume is, among other things, a reflection on how the trajectories of migratory birds across the Mediterranean coincide with the trajectories of human migrant flows. This is a further instance of multispecies co-evolution, favoured by a specific ecosystem and by an almost unique body of water: the Mediterranean with its various archipelagos. *Overlap* results from a project involving researchers from different disciplines, students, and asylum seekers who converge to share their research. This project is possible thanks to the infrastructures of the Asinara National Park, where the international multidisciplinary research centre Icemura and the association of performing arts were operating:

> Icemura's background stems from field research, from experiencing the Asinara as a space of contemplation where social, cultural, and biological diversities find a place where they can live harmoniously. […]. A centre that could see this landscape as the seat of a shared and multifaceted methodology, one that could open up new ideas on issues concerning the relationship between man and the environment, discussing the relationship that exists between behaviour, regulations, architecture, the linguistic articulations of human beings, and the dynamics of mineral, plant and animal processes.
> From reflections on the Anthropocene and biodiversity to artistic and scientific results, Icemura investigates the implications of this continuous contamination between man and the environment. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 12-13)

One of the outstanding reflections produced by the Icemura research group involves migrations as a system of entangled dependencies:

> Human migration is first of all biological migration, where human beings are only one of the nodes of a vast network of relationships in continuous movement and not its centre. Indeed the systemic vision of social processes brings human behaviour back into a network in which all elements – social, cultural, biological – are an integral and integrated part of contemporary phenomenology. Splitting these elements and placing man above or outside the other elements of the system creates an anthropocentric vision that is too limiting when one wants to investigate the interdependencies of which the system we live in is composed. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 14)

Icemura configures itself as an inclusive and innovative research project operating along the horizon of Anthropocene studies, taking into consideration both environmental justice and human rights: in particular, the right to migrate. Moreover, *Overlap* – events at the crossroads between art and science and biodiversity and migration – investigates the overlapping of migratory routes of birds and those of humans, and specifically the routes that connect the Mediterranean Sea with Central Africa and Northern Europe (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 19):

> From the first reading, one can see how the maps developed by ISPRA (Higher Institute of Environmental Research) in use at the wildlife Observatory of the Asinara National Park depicting the routes of migratory birds between Africa and Europe almost completely coincide with the maps drawn up by Medu (Doctors of Human Rights) showing the routes of people moving from central Africa to Europe. This reveals much more than a simple graphic superimposition, highlighting a biological aspect of migration that completely goes beyond politics. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 19)

Such reflections on migration, on the one hand, and on biodiversity, on the other, allow for reconfigurations of the concept of 'residence'. With the help of scientists and artists from different fields of study such as anthropology, ornithology, architecture, urban planning, geography, photography, dance, literature, theatre, and visual arts the theme of residence is explored in its connection with "a behaviour that subjugates a space through presence" (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 20).

Thanks to the *Overlap* project and workshops, Siranding Mady Sissoko, a migrant himself but also a student in Italy and author of a chapter in the volume, says he has deepened his knowledge regarding the migration of men and birds. First of all, he detects the same interspecies reasons for moving: humans migrate with the aim of "improving living conditions by seeking stability", while "birds migrate in search of resources for their young" (La Stella Solinas 2020, 75). More importantly, he claims:

> I discovered that man may impose laws, borders, political conditions to fight immigration but that migration has really no borders because it is motivated by survival; it breaks all laws, all political regulations to impose itself as a 'natural condition'. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 75)

Moreover, Siranding Mady Sissoko studies the maps and the habits of migratory birds and notices how birds fly at night after accumulating enough energy during the day; similarly, migrants

like himself, travelling from Mali to Italy, had to wait sometimes for days, sometimes for years before undertaking the next stretch of the journey. While geographical factors are significant elements for human migrations, particularly areas that are the nearest, similarly, birds orientate themselves thanks to topographical elements. But there is, of course, a major difference between human and non-human migration; the former is due to geopolitical and economic factors, while the latter is regular, seasonal and cyclical, and is due to a change in the habitat or a decrease in food availability, but also to maximization of the possibility of reproduction (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 77).

The Mediterranean Sea is no exception, as migratory routes of humans and non-humans (birds) coincide, overlap and move from South to North or vice-versa; however, "it is not possible to understand the entire phenomenon of current migratory choices without recalling colonial history" (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 78). *Overlap* is an instance of *sympoiesis*, as Donna Haraway would say, a productive narrative experiment of co-participatory agencies, but, above all, it is an act of 'poesy', for it involves group work such as dancing, photographic workshops, observations and meditations, maps drawing and much more, as a shared experience on one of the smallest islands of the Italian Mediterranean, off the coast of Sardinia.

The issue of colonial history – raised by Sissoko – plunges the present discourse into the waters of the so-called black Mediterranean, a space not only reminiscent of the Black Atlantic and of the trade of those who had been enslaved, but also a space that has been defined as 'solid sea', because of the great number of corpses of drowned black migrants. However, migration across the Mediterranean is not necessarily only from Africa, for flows from Asia also meet in North Africa before crossing the Mediterranean to Europe, or simply move from east to west rather than from south to north, as the works discussed here will demonstrate. Moreover, 'Colonialism' is an important chapter in the essay by Suketu Mehta: *This Land is our Land. An Immigrant's Manifesto* (2019, 57-80), in which the author researches the causes and consequences of migration today: "People are not plants. Migration is a constant of human history. […]. And in recent years, as the legacies of colonialism, inequality, war and climate change have made it close to impossible for people in the poor countries to live a decent life, we've become a planet on the move" (Mehta 2019, 8).

2 *The Island of Missing Trees* and *Songbirds*

Numerous literary works might be quoted to prove that such a multispecies, co-migration narrative is a fruitful methodology that allows a more inclusive view of ecosystems and does not single out human migrants as unwanted intruders, disposable individuals, or even dangerous invaders. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) famously conjures a blue boat full of migrants guided by a woman Shaman and heading to Sicily, accompanied by pods of cetaceans among which are dolphins and whales, and a flock of fanning migratory birds. The turbulence of this multiple arrival is a way to celebrate the Mediterranean as a complex and multilayered ecosystem, quite different from the flattening, unidimensional portrait voiced by the news media (Concilio 2023). Not too differently, Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* (2019) combines a migration journey of refugees from war-torn Syria to northern England, with the re-introduction there of black bees, a species that was considered extinct. Thus, both the bees and the migrants hopefully find a new home and a new cooperative ecosystem in the UK.

In other literary works that tackle this idea of multispecies co-migration, as is the case for instance with Jane Urquhart's *Sanctuary Line* (2010) and with Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), two novels dealing with the migration of Mexican workers and Monarch butterflies from Mexico to the North American continent (Concilio 2025), the Mediterranean Sea is once more protagonist of similar narratives. Two other novels are also worth examining, as they too tackle multiple species co-migration: Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and Christy Lefteri's *Songbirds* (2021).

These two novels are two sides of the same coin. They are both set in Cyprus – firstly under military occupation from 1914 to 1925, and later a British colony from 1925 until 1960 – in the heart of the Mediterranean and of its central migration route, but on the two opposing sides of the island, the northern Turkish side and the southern Greek side, which still today are separated by a green line, once militarised, and now in complete decay with its still visible watch towers. The two novels significantly deal with human and non-human migrants, but also tackle gender, race, class, ethnicity, war, trauma, and murder; they both denounce violence against the Other, be it migrant women, migrant songbirds, trees, or newly constructed enemies.

Turkish writer Elif Shafak tells the story of a young Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot couple, Kostas Kazantzakis and Defne, and their daughter, Ada, aged sixteen, who migrated from Cyprus to London, bringing along a twig from a local Mediterranean fig tree, *Ficus carica*. Christy Lefteri, a British author, daughter of Cypriot migrants who left the island after the partition war in the Seventies, tells the story of Sri Lankan migrants in Cyprus, all female house workers

for middle-class families, and of the destiny of migrating songbirds, the victims of local poachers. The latter environmental issue is the element that connects the two novels, which seem to confirm that the island of Cyprus – definitely a central place for respite in the middle of the Mediterranean for both humans and non-humans – is a site where fragile ecosystems overlap with fragile social and geopolitical environments.

Elif Shafak's novel starts with a grieved reconstruction of the partition and of the new border that was cut into the soil and capital city of the Mediterranean island:

> For the island was riven into two pieces – the north and the south. A different language, a different script, a different memory prevailed in each, and when they prayed, the islanders, it was seldom to the same god.
> The capital was split by a partition which sliced right through it like a slash to the heart. Along the demarcation line – the frontier – were dilapidated houses riddled with bullet holes, empty courtyards scarred with grenade bursts, boarded stores gone to ruin, ornamented gates hanging at angles from broken hinges, luxury cars from another era rusting away under layers of dust… […].
> The partition that tore through Cyprus from one end to the other, a buffer zone patrolled by United Nations troops, was about one hundred and ten miles long, and as wide as four miles in places while merely a few yards in others. […]. But it was here, across and around the capital, that it became more visible, tangible, and thus haunting.
> Nicosia, the only divided capital in the world. […] The last divided city in Europe.
> My home town. (Shafak 2021, 2-3)

Borders are newly created and therefore they also redefine the concept of 'residence'. 'Borders' is also an important chapter in the *Overlap* project; under this rubric it is possible to read:

> Fifty of us crossed the Sahara in a vehicle that broke down during the trip and we stayed three days in the middle of the desert.
> I lost my mother between Libya and Algeria and I was in prison for five months. There are no words to explain it.
> Three women on that broken-down boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea were pregnant. Two of them died. […]
> What I went through between Algeria and Libya cannot be expressed in words. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 36)

Borders and Mediterranean crossings are ways of trespassing between one form of residence and another. For refugees and asylum

seekers no form of residence is less precarious than another. Elif Shafak, too, speaks of border crossings and trespassing, but she refers to non-humans:

> There are many things that a border – even one as clear-cut and well-guarded as this – cannot prevent from crossing. The Etesian wind, for instance, the softly named but surprisingly strong *meltemi* or *meltem*. The butterflies, grasshoppers and lizards. The snails, too, painfully slow though they are. Occasionally, a birthday balloon that escapes a child's grip drifts in the sky, strays into the other side – enemy territory.
> Then, the birds. Blue herons, black-headed buntings, honey buzzards, yellow wagtails, willow warblers, masked shrikes and, my favourites, golden orioles. All the way from the northern hemisphere, migrating mostly during the night, darkness gathering at the tips of their wings and etching red circles around their eyes, they stop here midway in their long journey, before continuing to Africa. The island for them is a resting place, a lacuna in the tale, an in-between-ness. (Shafak 2021, 3-4)

Cyprus represents a rich ecosystem and is a sanctuary for biodiversity as well; yet, its troubled history makes it a place of ghosts and mourning, too.

The first part of the novel is entitled "How to bury a tree" and it is the sad chronicle of Kostas's attempt to dig a trench in which to set his beloved fig tree to rest over winter, for the novel opens in present-day London, in the year of a heavy winter storm named Hera:

> This morning the radio had announced that, within no more than forty-eight hours, Britain would be hit by a polar vortex bringing in record-breaking lows, icy rains and blizzards. Water shortages, power cuts and burst mains were expected to paralyse large swathes of England and Scotland as well as parts of northern Europe. (Shafak 2021, 9)

In this atmosphere of extreme local weather conditions that are connected with global climate change, Ada observes her father interring the fig tree they have in their back garden, while whispering reassuring words to the plant: "No matter the time of the day, her father seemed to prefer the company of trees to the company of humans" (Shafak 2021, 11). The burial of the tree is narrated by the tree herself – "She, this tree is a female" (292) –, thus, the non-human is given voice and is represented as sentient (Raval 2024), endowed with fear, anxieties and doubts about this practice that is put to the test in northern and rigid climates: "Burying fig trees in trenches underground during the harshest winters and unearthing them in

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spring is a curious if well-established tradition. Italians settled in sub-zero towns in America and Canada are familiar with it" (Shafak 2021, 23).

Indeed, Kostas's practice and decalogue in ten steps on how to bury a fig tree is well known to Italian migrants. It is not by chance that Italian-Canadian photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo in his album *Toronto as Community. Fifty Years of Photographs* (2023) has a chapter entitled "Of Fig Trees and Burials" where he describes exactly the same practice Shafak lyrically elaborates on in her novel. Pietropaolo speaks of Toronto's private gardens:

> the fig […] simply cannot survive the brutally cold winters of eastern and central Canada. But with perseverance and tenacity, immigrants – such as my Italian neighbour Domenico Delduca, or Géorgios, the Greek gardener around the corner – have found a way to defy nature. Every November, after the fig's leaves have fallen, the gardener pulls the branches together and ties them into a tight bunch around the trunk. He digs a shallow trench beside the tree and loosens the soil around its base, taking care not to damage the roots. Slowly, he bends the entire tree downward into the trench until it lies flat in the shallow grave, as if laying it to eternal rest. (Pietropaolo 2023, 113)

In the month of April, the fig tree is disinterred and re-planted so as to allow new leaves to sprout and new fruits to ripen, in a stubborn affirmation of resilience and adaptability, not different from that of human migrants. Interestingly enough, it is the voice of the fig tree that recognises the affinity between human and non-human migrants:

> First generation immigrants are a species all their own. They wear a lot of beige, grey or brown. Colours that do not stand out. Colours that whisper, never shout. There is a tendency to formality in their mannerism, a wish to be treated with dignity. […]. First generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – when there are no other people nearby, that is. […] They are caring and tender towards their plants, especially those they have brought along with them from lost motherlands. They know, deep within, that when you save a fig tree from a storm, it is someone's memory you are saving. (Shafak 2021, 23-4)

The quoted passage highlights how kinship involves relations between humans and non-humans; the same kind of kinship Tlingit and Athapaskan had with their local glaciers is present in Shafak's novel, where the fig tree is bound to Kostas and to his dead wife, Defne. For that tree saw the birth of their love, while sheltering them in the tavern of "The Happy Fig", where the hosts were male partners,

one Greek and one Turkish; then she witnessed the destruction and murder brought by war, before being transplanted to the UK. It is not surprising that, particularly after the death of his beloved wife, Kostas resolves to talk to the tree.

While the first part of the novel is centred around the alternating voices of the various characters, including the fig tree, the second part of the novel is a painful reconstruction of the post-war years, when Kostas was a student in England, while Defne was part of an international team committed to establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the island, giving proper burials to the corpses found in mass graves or simply dispersed, and restituting them to their families:

> There are many of us – Greek and Turkish. Some excavate, others work in the lab. Then there are psychologists who go and talk to the families. Most of our volunteers are women. […] What we do here has nothing to do with politics or power. Our work is about grief – and memory. (Shafak 2021, 222)

Defne's secret, private wish is to find out what happened to the two tavern hosts, who had been targeted because of their homosexuality and interethnic union. Defne has been traumatised by the war, by the separation from Kostas and by the death of her friends:

> "Where were they found, do you know?"
> "In Nicosia." […]. "Inside a well."
> "That's right they had been chained to each other, neither could surface. […] I must say, we have never seen anything like that before. Usually it's a Greek Cypriot buried here, a Turkish Cypriot buried there. Killed separately. Buried separately. But never before a Greek and Turk murdered together."
> "So now they will be separated," said Defne. […].
> "It would have been better if they were never found … if they could have remained lost together." (Shafak 2021, 298)

Defne gives herself up to smoking and drinking, before Kostas comes back to reclaim her and their love and brings her to England, but she continues to be obsessed by 'human suffering' and 'justice', while Kostas believes that "human existence, though no doubt precious beyond words, had no special priority in the ecological chain" (Shafak 2021, 325).

In his short homecoming, and as a parallel to Defne's new commitment to forensic research on victims of war with the Committee on Missing Persons, Kostas experiences the death of others as non-human victims. Cyprus has always had a tradition of

hunting and cooking little migratory birds, but in the post-war period poachers seem to have become more and more aggressive:

> He saw, looming in front of him, fine-spun nets suspended in the air, and – strung from them like grisly bunting – trapped songbirds.
> "Oh, no! Oh, God!"
> Kostas began to run.
> The net was weighted with blackcaps, warblers, chaffinches, pipits, wagtails, wheatears and those brave merry skylarks, fine songsters, the first on every dawn chorus… They had been snarled in the depths of the night. Kostas stretched up and tugged down hard on the net, but, secured from all four sides, it would not give way. He could only tear one corner. […] Everywhere he looked he saw sticky lime spread on branches high and low. He was surrounded by dead songbirds, their wings spread out, tangled and motionless, their eyes glazed over, as if encased in glass. (Shafak 2021, 248-9)

Kostas pitifully tries to save the wild migrating birds that have been entrapped in the nets or have been cruelly glued to the branches of acacia trees, which have been planted on purpose to allure all these poor birds. Cyprus, which in the past was known as 'the green island' and might still be a sanctuary for species migrating across the Mediterranean – including turtles, for instance – is instead transformed into a deadly place. Kostas is even beaten up by the poachers for interfering with their business:

> A black market had sprung up – trafficking dead birds had become a profitable business for international gangs and their collaborators. The birds caught in Cyprus were smuggled into other countries where they would be sold for hefty prices. Italy, Romania, Malta, Spain, France, Russia, as far as Asia… Some restaurants displayed them on the menu; others served them on the sly at special rates. […] More than two million songbirds were slain in Cyprus every year. (Shafak 2021, 250)

In the passage mentioned here, it is quite evident how the language used to describe the international illegal cross-border trade in birds is similar to the one used for human migrants who cross the Mediterranean from Libya to southern Europe. Quite interestingly, from the project *Overlap*, one learns that:

> The French swallows migrate to Nigeria, the Spanish to Cameroon, the Italian to the Central African Republic, the English – which are the largest – to the South African Republic.

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> In the culture of the Soninke people (Mali, Ghana), there is a kind of initiation journey: at some point in their existence, young men must take this step to show that they can make it on their own.
> Travel is a continuous learning process.
> Migration is like a choreography, a behaviour adopted by the body to overcome obstacles by measuring space and time, a parkour of life. […].
> From Algeria to Libya, they folded me like a suitcase and put me in the trunk of a car. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 35-6)

Similarly, Shafak argues that "it wasn't only passerines: others, too, got caught in the nets – owls, nightingales, even hawks" (2021, 250); all fell victims to hunters and poachers, but this practice also says something about eating habits in the Anthropocene and wildlife migratory routes across the Mediterranean. Shafak's novel ends circularly, with a chapter entitled "How to Unbury a Fig Tree in Seven Steps". While the fig tree comes back to life in spring in a London back garden, Ada comes to terms with her own identity as a second-generation migrant in England, also thanks to a visit by her maternal aunt from Cyprus, who helps her to navigate the history of the island and the story of her parents' love. A final note by the author says: "I want to thank the islanders […] especially young Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots whose courage, vision and wisdom will hopefully build a better world than the one we have given them" (Shafak 2021, 354).

Christy Lefteri, too, weaves a most lyrical narrative around the destiny of women migrants in Greek Cyprus, who are all house workers. Some of them are young, some are mature women, some of them have children with them, others have left their children behind. They are employed by an agency they owe money to and for this reason they have to work hard. They come from Sri Lanka, from other parts of Asia and from eastern Europe.

The novel starts as a mystery and develops as crime fiction: Nisha vanishes, simply leaving no traces of her whereabouts. Her employer, a young chemist and single mother named Petra and her small daughter, Aliki, are desperate. Nisha was a pillar in their life: sweet, efficient, punctual, always present when needed. Her disappearance coincides with two strange events: Yiannis, Nisha's secret lover, sees a mouflon Ovis in the forest. Indeed, this is a very rare sight, particularly along the coast. Moreover, "on this day, in late October, there is a dead hare on the rocky terrain by the lake" (Lefteri 2021, 27). The red lake at Mitsero is a toxic lake and everybody knows the warnings that people and children should avoid it.

Thus, the story immediately includes non-humans as a sort of prediction, almost magical presences whose destiny is interwoven with that of Nisha and of other foreign migrant women. While race, class and gender stigmatize these women as foreigners, of colour,

underprivileged, almost enslaved to the agency that provides employment, and therefore representing examples of new slavery in our contemporary world, the novel does not limit itself to this kind of intersectionality, but also embraces the world of non-humans that are discriminated against (birds), whose story runs parallel to that of the *desaparecidas*. This choice shows a new *response-ability*, to use Haraway's definition, on the side of writers – as is the case also with Shafak – who feel the urgency not only to tackle social issues of injustice, gender inequality, systemic racism and structural violence, but also to face environmental issues, thus providing new strength to the discourse of environmental humanities.

Both Petra and Yiannis are extremely saddened by the loss of Nisha and they even join forces to look for her, following what few clues they have. The police are no help, they dismiss the case, refusing to investigate and claiming that these girls and women might have chosen to sneak into the North, the Turkish side, for better wages. This episode shows how these migrants are considered disposable, redundant, and how they are treated like waste (Bauman 2003). The story, although fictional, is based on real facts: "five migrant women domestic workers and two of their children disappeared", writes Lefteri in an open letter to the reader, added as an afterword at the end of the novel (Lefteri 2021, n.p.).

Vulnerability and precarity are the main categories that characterize both the women and the birds. While the hare slowly decomposes, the story proceeds step by step in the reconstruction of Nisha's life and possible destiny. Yet, the rotting and rotten hare looks like a bad omen. Petra is left to ponder:

> Nisha had lived here for nearly ten years and in that entire time, had only spent two days away from us. She had taken care of my daughter and loved her, she had scrubbed my floors and toilets, she had made us hot dinners and kept the garden looking beautiful. […] She had lost a husband, too. She gave us everything. In this generosity, she had been the heart of this house. And yet, I had no idea about her life. (Lefteri 2021, 113)

Nisha has a daughter back in Sri Lanka, Kumari, whom she sees only thanks to the Internet on the screen of Yiannis's tablet, once a week. She now has an "outstanding debt" (Lefteri 2021, 75) with the agency, which charges the workers a considerable amount of money to sign up for and secure a placement abroad. Nisha works hard both to reduce her debt and to send a remittance back home to support her daughter and family.

This condition is not necessarily a path to emancipation or to female empowerment; on the contrary, for many girls and women it turns

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into a condition of entrapment, slavery, sometimes prostitution, and constraint, as Lefteri claims:

> In Cyprus you do not have to be rich to have a domestic worker, just reasonably comfortable. So, the presence of these women, who run the households, look after children, walk the dogs, clean the restaurants/shops or whatever other businesses or properties their employers might own, is commonplace. Migrant domestic workers are a part of the fabric of Cypriot life.
> This story is not an attempt to represent the voices of migrant workers or to speak for them, it is an exploration of the ideologies, prejudices, circumstances and underlying belief systems that can lead to very sad and often catastrophic events. It is an exploration of the way in which a flawed system can trap people. (Lefteri 2021, n.p.)

The metaphor of the trap is particularly meaningful, for songbirds are trapped, too, in nets set overnight in the forests:

> I usually make more than 2,000 euros for each hanging, and this one was a good one – there were around two hundred blackcaps stuck on the lime sticks. […] Tiny songbirds migrating from Europe to Africa to escape the winter. They fly in from the west, over the mountains, stopping here on our island before heading out to sea, towards Egypt. In the spring, they make the return journey, coming from the southern coast. They are so small that we can't shoot them. (Lefteri 2021, 10)

Thus, the parallel is clear: migrant women house workers and small migrating birds are both a reality in Cyprus, fruit of the geolocalisation of the island and of its environmental and social history of middle-class prosperity in the post-war years. This sad story of multispecies migration across the Mediterranean once again produces a view of this body of water as a highly complex, multilayered and biodiverse environment, rather than only a huge and deadly highway for migrants.

Moreover, the parallel between murdered women and hunted songbirds evokes the myth of Philomela, as narrated by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (*Met*., VI. 578ff). Notoriously, the fable narrates the rape and violence the king and tyrant Tereus perpetrated against his sister-in-law, then cutting out her tongue so that she could not tell anyone what happened. Philomela then resorted to embroidery, in order to tell her story and let her sister, the queen and Tereus's wife, know her tragic condition. The two sisters planned a revenge against Tereus, killing his son and feeding the king the youth's body. However, the rage and fury of the tyrant could not express themselves, for he and the two women were transformed into birds.

Philomela in her metamorphosised form as a nightingale is allowed to sing her story loudly. T.S. Eliot, among others, quintessentially mentions the mythical plot:

> Above the antique mantel was displayed
> As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
> The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
> So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
> Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
> And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
> "Jug Jug" to dirty ears. (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, ll. 97-103; 8)

T.S. Eliot uses inversions to describe Philomela's resilience: while her woman's body had been violated, her voice as a nightingale is 'inviolable'. Her call and her cry are not melodious, however. In fact, they denounce the lascivious act upon her body with a lurid onomatopoeic repeated sound ("Jug jug"). Nisha's story in the novel by Christy Lefteri is reminiscent of Philomela, insofar as Nisha has no voice and cannot cry out; moreover, she will never again fly back to Sri Lanka to see her own daughter. Similarly, the songbirds of the novel's title will never be able to complete their migration across the Mediterranean.

Like Kostas in Shafak's novel, Yiannis experiences a fit of repulsion towards poaching, an activity he falls into because of financial problems after the 2008 economic crisis that hit Greece quite heavily. On one occasion he manages to salvage a little bird: "The bird lay there, breathing, its chest rising and falling more visibly now" (Lefteri 2021, 20). Yiannis manages to nourish the bird and keep it at home until it can fly again. This episode is in sharp contrast with the one where Kostas is the protagonist and finds "a robin glued upside down to a twig, its chest a soft ginger, its beak slightly open, lying inert, though still breathing. Gently, he tried to free the bird, but the adhesive was too strong. […] he realised the bird's heart had stopped" (Shafak 2021, 249).

The paradox is that, as regards non-humans, in both novels there is a character, a male hero, who interposes himself between the animal-prey and the hunter-predator. First Kostas, who pays a price in bruises and battered bones, and then Yiannis, who takes a bullet to the shoulder in order to prevent Seraphim – in fact, a tempting devil – from shooting a mouflon. In contrast, nobody stands between the five migrant women serially killed and their hunter and murderer, an ex-soldier who is eventually arrested for multiple killings.

It is a couple of tourists who first spot the corpse of a woman in the red lake at Mitsero, an abandoned polluted mining site, where the hare has completed its deadly decomposition cycle. While non-human beings enrich the narrative with a precise symbolism, both human and non-human victims of violence represent otherness, vulnerability,

discrimination and disposability. All these categories in Lefteri's novel apply to migrant women and migrant songbirds: the wasted lives of our modernity (Bauman 2003; Armiero 2021). The questions asked by Judith Butler: "Who counts as human?", "Whose lives count as lives?", "What makes for a grievable life?" (Butler 2004, 20), are exactly the questions that apply to Nisha and to the migrants killed by racism, misogyny and indifference towards the destiny of others. And Lefteri's answer is precisely that such lives are 'grievable', are worth remembering and need to be honoured.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, with Judith Butler and with Donna Haraway, one might say that writers nowadays – and certainly Shafak and Lefteri are examples of this – have taken *response-ability*, in so far as they denounce inter-ethnic violence, gender inequality, misogyny, homophobia, social traumas (Laheg 2024), but also environmental injustice. They look at reality as an entangled ecosystem and as a co-evolutionary and biodiverse environment. Another major achievement of such narratives is the multiple critical perspectives they promote. Not dissimilarly, Cruikshank emphasises the need to improve the dialogue between science – physical geography, glaciology, anthropology – local storytelling, and indigenous wise thought, now known as traditional ecological knowledge, TEK, or indigenous knowledge, IK (Cruikshank 2020, 10).

A similar approach is the methodology at the heart of the *Overlap* project, which has united scientists, academics, but also refugees, dancers, photographers, in order to create a different, inclusive and innovative kind of storytelling:

> Indeed, all stories are migrations that constantly face borders, obstacles, generating elements of diversity by adapting to the new context, to incessant change, to aging, and creating cultural biodiversity.
> Not only is migration a dance made through wings (if we think of birds) or gestures (if we think of people), but biodiversity can also be read as such. A dance of speciation. Migrating helps to create new kinds of thoughts and cultural biodiversity; the speciation of thought, a dance of neurons. Something fragile, as vulnerable as it is essential, like endangered species. (La Stella, Solinas 2020, 60)

Drawing upon different critical perspectives, comparing methodologies, and acquiring new ideas through team work, inclusivity and respectful, reciprocal hospitality are perhaps a new way to discuss multispecies co-existence, co-evolution and co-migration.

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