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On the Eastern Woman's Body: Ethnic Stigma and Complex Trauma in Giuseppe Tornatore's La sconosciuta (2006)

Torunn Haaland

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Résumé de l'article

This essay discusses the construction of a post-traumatic subjectivity in Tornatore's La sconosciuta. Following a sex-trafficking survivor's struggle against ghosts of the past as well as present forms of offences and vulnerabilities, the narrative unfolds through flashbacks and dramatizations of the victim's precariousness as an Eastern European, irregular, immigrant woman. The nexus that emerges between traumatization and stigmatization circles around the woman's body and the contrast it personifies between her perceived cultural inferiority and physical desirability. Just as this character exposes the prejudice and discriminatory behaviour that perpetuate exclusion of ethnic minorities as well as systems and structures of injustice and exploitation, the ambivalences she embodies as a diligent and caring but also deceptive and violent nanny questions the victim/criminal paradigm typically present in public discourses concerning irregular immigrants and trafficking victims, especially. The critique of essentialist perceptions and practices merges with a focus on retraumatizing re-experiences that are triggered by sensory impressions and distressful interactions. Critical perspectives on complex trauma will illuminate possible correlations between the acute and protracted abuse represented and the susceptibility the character shows toward revictimization as well as the self-destructive and partly violent tendencies she exhibits. When she eventually starts to articulate past events and acquires a gradual control over her memories, it is largely for the presence of listeners who communicate empathy and detachment. Finally, it is this critical attitude that spectators are encouraged to assume to consider interconnections between essentialist exclusion, acute and protracted exploitation, and structures and systems of global injustice.

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Abstract: This essay discusses the construction of a post-traumatic subjectivity in Tornatore's *La sconosciuta.* Following a sex-trafficking survivor's struggle against ghosts of the past as well as present forms of offences and vulnerabilities, the narrative unfolds through flashbacks and dramatizations of the victim's precariousness as an Eastern European, irregular, immigrant woman. The nexus that emerges between traumatization and stigmatization circles around the woman's body and the contrast it personifies between her perceived cultural inferiority and physical desirability. Just as this character exposes the prejudice and discriminatory behaviour that perpetuate exclusion of ethnic minorities as well as systems and structures of injustice and exploitation, the ambivalences she embodies as a diligent and caring but also deceptive and violent nanny questions the victim/criminal paradigm typically present in public discourses concerning irregular immigrants and trafficking victims, especially. The critique of essentialist perceptions and practices merges with a focus on retraumatizing re-experiences that are triggered by sensory impressions and distressful interactions. Critical perspectives on complex trauma will illuminate possible correlations between the acute and protracted abuse represented and the susceptibility the character shows toward revictimization as well as the self-destructive and partly violent tendencies she exhibits. When she eventually starts to articulate past events and acquires a gradual control over her memories, it is largely for the presence of listeners who communicate empathy and detachment. Finally, it is this critical attitude that spectators are encouraged to assume to consider interconnections between essentialist exclusion, acute and protracted exploitation, and structures and systems of global injustice.

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To spectators who associate Giuseppe Tornatore with languid melancholy and past-time idyll of isolated Sicilian towns, *La sconosciuta* will present a generic and narrative novelty. Instead of Mediterranean beauties in hazy sunlight, we follow a Ukrainian woman into a winter-grey northern city marked in its geopolitical specificity by interethnic encounters and transnational criminal networks. While this departure from the realm of the romance has been seen to avenge the "nostalgic sentimentalism" of *Cinema paradiso*, *L'uomo delle stele*, and, especially, *Melania* (Ponzanesi 90), Tornatore himself refers the rational of *La sconosciuta* to the idea of a woman, who, "having undergone the most ruthless form of violence, knows only that type of language, the code of ferocity" ("avendo subito la violenza più spietata, conosce solo quel tipo di linguaggio, il codice della ferocia"; qtd. in Giordano et al. 231; my trans.). This preliminary sketch has modelled a suspicious character of deceiving and increasingly disquieting tendencies that invest the diegetic world with a destabilizing quality and the narrative with the suspense of a thriller. Irena, as she is called, also encompasses, however, a caring and gentle attitude that operates alongside patterns of retraumatization and revictimization to create a troublingly ambivalent and profoundly shattered rather than essentially ferocious character. More than having caused a loss of language, therefore, the protracted violations she recalls would have resulted in functional impairments that severely obstruct the inner and interpersonal liberation she seeks.

Sex trafficking, the post-traumatic flashback, and complex trauma

To contextualize the subjective narrative of a severely exploited immigrant woman, *La sconosciuta* dramatizes Italy's position as a major point of transit and destination within transnational sex-trafficking networks (Castelli 100). In the early 1990s, when African and Eastern European migrants started to reach Italian shores and borders, criminal organizations quickly transformed these waves into zones of exploitation and the Italian sex market was, accordingly, fundamentally reconfigured (Cauduro et al. 33–34). That the expanding supply of migrant prostitutes was dominated by Eastern European women[1] would partly

[1] The first wave of sex trafficking into Italy predominantly involved women from Eastern Europe, especially Albania, and from Nigeria (Cauduro et al. 34). While women from Nigeria, Albania, and Romania still prevail among Italy's sex-trafficking victims, extensive national data from 2012 indicate that women from post-Soviet states such as Ukraine and Moldova have

have reflected the accessibility of Italy's extensive coastline and northern borders, but a more determining factor was the financial collapse endured in the recently dissolved USSR (32). In Ukraine, the economic cost of national independence was encapsulated in the 500,000 Ukrainians who were trafficked between 1990 and 1998 (Kara 27). While many would have believed in promises of well-paid jobs and Western standards of living, others may have intuited the deception (85, 7) or been aware of going into prostitution without necessarily knowing under what conditions they would work (Andrijasevic 261).[2] Extreme destitution, lack of opportunities, and responsibility for family members would, in either case, have made them susceptible to trafficking.

La sconosciuta never addresses pre-migratory circumstances, as Irena's story alternates between her recollections of the violence she ended up in and her present attempt to start anew in an unfamiliar ambiance. While this omission of the Ukrainian woman's background reinforces the tensions she inspires as a secretive, conflicted, and increasingly destabilizing character, it also usefully decentralizes certain trends in public discourse on human trafficking. Within the anti-trafficking policies and awareness campaigns that developed following the adoption in 2000 of the United Nations Palermo Protocol,[3] a tendency took form to centralize the victims' passage from their point of origin to their destination. The supply chain behind the massively profitable business of sex trafficking was, accordingly, emphasized over the systematic exploitation (Kara 4–5) promoted by systems of global injustice, including physical and legislative barriers to migration.[4] In

given way to an increasing number of minors as well as to women of Brazilian, Moroccan, and Chinese origins (Castelli 34).

[2] More recent research indicates that trafficked women to Italy are increasingly aware of the work awaiting them (Cauduro et al. 33).

[3] The "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children" was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Palermo in 2000 as a supplement to the "United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime" (OHCHR).

[4] Rutvica Andrijasevic observes indicatively that borders and restrictive regulations in the EU aimed at combatting trafficking favour "the third parties who organize trafficking, whether individuals and agencies, because they become a kind of supplementary migration system or even an alternative to the EU regulated migration" (262). Among the sex-trafficked Eastern European women she interviewed in Italy in 1999–2000, several had relied on traffickers as their only means of migration, thus developing a dependency that is reinforced in-country

addition to potentially weakening anti-trafficking measures (12), this approach has absolved Western states of fundamental responsibilities and perpetuated ideas of an uncivilized and inferior Global South (Kempadoo 10–15; Jobe 944–47). A related narrative about deceived and coerced women has, furthermore, fostered hierarchies between deserving and underserving victims (Jobe 938–43; Crowhurst) while also obscuring women's agency and the function that trafficking has as their only means of migration (Andrijasevic 256–57). *La sconosciuta*, by contrast, turns the focus toward a woman who escapes what she experiences as a life-threatening captivity only to fall into a new cycle of victimization and self-destruction. What obstructs her claim to freedom is, however, not a lack of agency but her stigmatized and unprotected status and, it will be argued, severe aftereffects of acute and protracted abuse.

This decentralizing approach follows a twofold-narrative perspective. While Irena's trafficking experiences are related to her intersectional disadvantage of being a female and an Eastern European immigrant, the memories she carries are represented as a source of inner turbulence and detrimental behavioural patterns. Herein we recognize the increasing attention that mental trauma has acquired in contemporary arts, media, and public discourse. In the cinema, this topos emerged, as Maureen Turim originally identified, with the interest certain modernist filmmakers took in "the memory flashes and disjointed or distorted images" that are part of mental processes (190). Following the innovative representation of such mnemonic images in Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1957), the intrusive flashback[5] developed within and beyond the 1960s modernist film to capture what a handful of therapists and researchers following the Second World War and the Holocaust spoke of as "combat fatigue," "concentration camp syndrome," and "survivor syndrome" (Leys 5). Daytime re-experiences of mental traumas typically originate in an associative connection between a present sensory stimulus and the event recalled and tend to present recurrent images or sensations that give a sense

by barriers to regularisation. Fear of being caught and deported does, accordingly, aggravate trafficked women's state of confinement (260, 262).

[5] Tentative forms of the post-traumatic flashbacks appeared, Turim (210–11) shows, already in Resnais's short-films and, before that, Joshua Hirsch (95) observes, in Jean Benoît-Lévy and Marie Epstein's *La maternelle* (1932), before it was developed (Hirsch 101–09) in Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1962). See also Luckhurst (180–81).

of reliving the trauma as if it occurred in the present.[6] What Resnais intuited so emblematically was the exigency to represent not only the mnemonic content but also the triggering association and psychological and physiological symptoms of the distress such memories produce (Rubin et al. 304). Hence, whereas classical cinema would integrate flashbacks into the logic of continuity editing to engage spectators in an efficient storytelling, the post-traumatic flashback may be unannounced or signalled by graphic or auditive cues that lead via jump cuts to an analogous yet graphically contrasting and often brief image (see Hirsch 92–94, 98–99).[7]

How suggestive these experimentations with the cinematic medium were in representing mnemonic experiences is, as Robert Luckhurst details, indicated by the consolidation in the 1970s of the traumatized subject and the diagnostic affirmation of post-traumatic stress in 1980 (Luckhurst 59–62). The definition of this syndrome resulted from multilateral and integrated calls for a recognition of the mental struggles facing Vietnam veterans, as well as women and children, African Americans, and LGBTQ+ members whose histories of abuse were affronted through activism and identity politics (Leys 5; Luckhurst 61–62). However, just as these clinical and socio-political developments reflected filmic responses to the mental aftermath of twentieth-century catastrophes, especially the Vietnam War, so did the diagnostic affirmation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Luckhurst 182–85). Indicatively, while "flashback" was defined in *The Oxford English Dictionary* already in 1906 and the term has circulated in

[6] Ruth Leys argues convincingly against the tendency in certain neurobiological and cultural studies of trauma to consider such re-experiences as "the literal return of disassociated memories" (241), suggesting, as does Richard J. McNelly (818), that "the term flashback implies the cinematic possibility of literal reproducing or cutting back to a scene from the past and hence expresses the idea that the trauma victim's experiences are exact 'returns' or 'replays' of the traumatic incident" (Leys 241). See note 19.

[7] In a study conducted from the viewpoint of film noir, Paolo Russo questions the critical tendency to consider the non-linear narrative of *La sconosciuta* as a "flashback structure," suggesting that only three of the twenty-seven interruptions of the main narrative are "proper flashbacks" (381–82). The others, being out of order and triggered associatively by Irena's subjective memory rather than narrative situations, constitute, he claims, "memory flashes" (381–82). This view seemingly presupposes that a "proper flashback" always has the extended narrative function it acquired in classical Hollywood cinema and film noir, especially, without considering the reappropriation and reformulation this device has undergone as a means to represent post-traumatic subjectivities.

film criticism since 1916 (Hirsch 89), not until 1987 were flashbacks diagnostically categorized as a symptom of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-III*, 250). The interconnectivity between disenfranchised identities, PTSD symptoms, and cinematic subjectivity is encapsulated in *La sconosciuta* wherein the audio-visual construction of psychosomatic disturbances is interrelated with a dramatization of sex-trafficking and adverse identity experiences. Indicatively, the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-V*) includes "threatened or actual physical assault" as well as sexual violence and trafficking as traumatic factors and notes that some of the higher rates of PTSD appear among rape survivors (American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-V*274, 276). Women are, furthermore, at increased risk of PTSD, in part for their more frequent exposure to gender-based violence, and female gender as well as racial and ethnic minority status are identified as pretraumatic factors (278, 277). The *DSM-V* implies, therefore, possible correlations between discriminatory experiences and trauma symptoms.

This usefully contextualizes the activism and research that increasingly is being conducted around the "multiple, lower-level" and cumulatively harmful forms of oppression minority members undergo in the everyday (Watson et al. 656). Such repeated offences may be insidiously traumatizing in that they remind discriminated subjects of their disenfranchisement and risk of threat in relation to the majority culture (656–57). More direct causes to trauma reside in the identity-motivated oppression that occurs in familial or interpersonal contexts, especially in cases of repeated or protracted violations. Fundamentally embedded in social circumstances and power relations, such acute and protracted traumas involve forms of dependency and captivity and tend to cause personality disturbances beyond PTSD (Herman, Foreword xiv). To account for these aggravating circumstances, researchers and practitioners have over the past decades called for a diagnostic recognition of "complex trauma" (Maercker 3).[8] According to the *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (*ICD-11*), this condition typically presents the core elements of PTSD—re-experiences, avoidance of traumatic reminders, and a sense of a current threat—but also distinct

[8] The diagnosis, which does not figure in the *DSM-V*, was developed in preparation for the 2018 edition of the *ICD-11* within a World Health Organization working group that adopted several field studies and a clinical differentiation from borderline personality disorder (Maercker 3–4).

symptoms including relationship difficulties, negative self-image, and disturbances in self-organization such as difficulties in emotion regulation.[9] While the condition prevalently involves abused, neglected, or abandoned children, as their brains are rapidly developing and their personality and sense of self are more fragile (Courtois and Ford, "Defining" 13 and *Treatment* 10), complex traumas may also affect disadvantaged adults who, for instance, are trapped in harmful interpersonal relationships and exposed to degrading activities and oppression of bodily functions (Brown 166–67; Herman, Foreword xiii–xiv). Both scenarios highlight powers and privileges that create and recreate abusive relationships as well as the effect such situations may have of aggravating vulnerabilities and susceptibility to revictimization (Curtois and Ford, *Treatment* 10).

These notes on sex trafficking, the post-traumatic flashback, and complex trauma will serve to examine the representation in *La sconosciuta* of past abuse, disorienting re-experiences, tender desires, personality impairments, and retraumatization. By privileging a contradictory character apt to problematize essentialist perceptions of ethnic belonging and migratory status, the narrative exposes stigmatizing practices and structural injustices that foster everyday oppression and systematic exploitation. The interconnections we discover between profitable exploitation and adverse identity experiences circles around Irena's body which personifies both the stigma that leaves her perennially marginalized and unprotected and the trauma she relives in the form of psychosomatic turbulence and relational dysfunctions. When the detrimental symptoms she displays eventually seem to recede, it is as an effect of the testimony she delivers to representatives of the very host culture in which she has been discriminated and oppressed. The transformative force of such exchanges resides in the occasion they offer to reconstruct the past in front of witnesses and rebuild the selfhood and sense of the world that trauma tends to disintegrate (LaCapra xxi; Brison 69). The ethical dimension that emerges implicates spectators as well: inviting neither sympathy for the character's ambivalences nor identification with her experiences, the narrative ultimately compels a critical reflection that moves from the subjective experiences with victimhood to the structures of global injustice they denounce.

[9] The theoretical and terminological affirmation of complex trauma was, as Andreas Maercker (2) observes, launched by the research with female victims of domestic and sexualized violence that Judith Herman presented in *Trauma and Recovery*.

Temporal and moral complexities

The strategies *La sconosciuta* will adopt to convey a temporalized subjectivity are anticipated in the prologue, which opens in Irena's past. In a dark, undefined building, three bikini-dressed and masked women appear in a coordinated exhibition before they are replaced by a new group of women. A man, Muffa, then orders all to leave except a tall, platinum blond woman we will learn is Irena. When she undresses entirely and turns around on Muffa's command, a jump cut brings forth a transient image of a forest viewed from the window of a moving vehicle, before another jump cut leads back to Irena's exposed body. The camera then isolates an eye that is peeking through a crack in the wall to signal that the exhibition has a hidden spectator who, after some contemplation, whispers that Irena will do. A wave of tension runs through her shoulders before a jump cut produces an image of a woman travelling on a bus, her body crouched in one of the seats and her eyes filled with tension. As the narrative returns to the first setting, Irena unmasks herself to reveal a pale and anguished face we see is identical to that of the woman on the bus. In this setting, however, she is dressed in winter clothes and her now long brown hair suggests that some time has gone by. The visual intercutting of the event recalled and the present moment of remembering is reinforced by an intense percussive sound that conveys the violent force of the mnemonic images. In addition to anticipating the focus on human exploitation as the basis of post-traumatic stress, this inverted representation of intrusive memories and present subjective experiences also prepares spectators for an intermittent narrative that will allude to and gradually unravel the past in relation to current events and circumstances.

The journey this woman has undertaken leads to Velarchi, a fictional, autumn-grey, and cold city in northeast Italy.[10] Aided by a map, Irena navigates unfamiliar streets with puzzling determination, choosing the noisiest and priciest of two apartments and inquiring about possible housekeeping work in an upscale

[10] The actual setting of Trieste has been described as a "non-Italian […] mimic-city" that disorients and presents a "menace" to spectators (Nathan 277) or elaborates the film's elements of "instability" and "atmosphere of disorientation" in so far as it is unfamiliar to "the average Italian viewer" (Faleschini Lerner 12). Such an understanding of spectatorial engagement with the film's diegesis would, however, not only exclude all those who are directly or indirectly familiar with Trieste's nineteenth-century buildings and city centre generally, but it also assumes that all other spectators will experience unfamiliarity as disorienting.

condominium across the street. The porter, Mateo, dismisses her request at first, when she reveals her Ukrainian origins. Solicited by her beauty and her promise to give him 20 and then 30 percent of the income, he pretends to be offended but asks her, nevertheless, to return. From the apartment she selected, Irena can look across to the condominium and into the home of Valeria Adacher; her estranged husband, Donato; their four-year-old daughter, Tea; and the housekeeper, Gina. One day, Irena intercepts Valeria at the hairdresser and enters to have her hair done too; later, when Gina takes out the garbage, Irena collects it to inspect the family's culinary leftovers. Meanwhile, Irena executes assiduously the chores Mateo assigns to her in this building while reiterating that she needs more hours. As Gina applauds her work and shows interest in her, Irena responds with gentle deference while also surreptitiously making a copy of Gina's keys when the opportunity arises. One evening, when she has seen the Adachers go out, she enters their apartment, but rather than searching the wealthy couple's valuables, she visits Tea's room, browses photos, and rummages through documents.

While the tensions this character causes in the world prepare the viewer for a thriller, the suspense and uncertainty established serve prevalently to draw spectatorial attention to her psychological development. That the generic conventions engaged in part are pretextual becomes gradually clearer following an episode in which Irena is cleaning the stairway and Gina stops to chat. Once the elderly maid resumes her descent and comes closer, Irena looks anxiously away while furtively causing Gina to tumble and roll down the stairs. Since Gina has previously complained about exhaustion from the stairs, the incident Irena stages appears partly contemplated in consideration of Gina's frail physique. The facial expression she makes as Gina rolls down the stairs and the alarming look and scream of terror with which she reacts to Gina's immobile and bleeding body indicate, however, that she has not assessed the consequences of her actions. What Irena has anticipated is the position that would become available—not that Gina would end up mute and paralyzed in a nursing home—and, subsequently, that she could persuade Valeria to reject a dozen other aspiring housekeepers and hire her. During the interview, Irena presents a stay permit, claims having experience caring for children and as a driver, and declares to be married in Ukraine, while also listing the foods identified in the family's garbage as her specialities. She soon proves to be a meticulous domestic, an excellent cook, and a devoted nanny, and takes night-time driving lessons so that she may accompany Tea to school. We also understand that her only romantic connection is a past lover who Muffa

killed, just as we suspect her identification documents[11] have been clandestinely produced.[12]

Insidious trauma and psychosomatic re-experiencing

Against these deceptive and ruthless tendencies, Irena's character also displays a gentle and subservient attitude that partly reflects her awareness of being an undesired Other. Even before Mateo affirms that things are difficult for "someone" like her,[13] she knows how unlikely Italian upper-middle class people are to hire Eastern Europeans and offers him, accordingly, a share of her income. When Mateo starts to seek her attention, insinuating that she should be more grateful for his recommendation, Irena increases his quota to 50 percent provided he leave her alone. While these concessions confirm the view that the work of immigrants is substandard and that she, consequently, must accept to be exploited, Irena also negotiates discriminatory practices to reach objectives that are clearly not financial, or she would not categorically have rejected two full-time opportunities that present no intermediary commissions. A sympathetic woman who informs Irena about one position observes how fortunate she has been to find work, since people in the area are all rich, like the Adachers, and do not want foreigners in

[11] Our suspicions appear confirmed when Muffa traces Irena in Velarchi and she rediscovers the ramifications of legal and civic non-existence. While her choice not to contact either hospital or police when he attacks her fiercely and she goes into hiding would reflect a fear of being removed from Tea, it also illustrates Kara's (xiii) observation that sex-trafficking victims dread deportation in addition to retaliations from the traffickers. At the time, Irena might have found protection under the "Articolo 18 del TU immigrazione," which was established in 1998 to emancipate and empower sex-trafficking victims by means of social protection, stay permits on humanitarian grounds, and programs of integration. Ambiguities regarding who identifies as victim and, as such, are entitled to assistance as well as regarding the programs' objectives have, however, implied that the apparently limited application of this framework has depended on the discretion of the local police (Cardi 103–12; Crowhurst 496–97).

[12] The flow of sex-trafficking victims within Europe is facilitated not only by the proximity of Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe but also by frequent use of false documents, the production of which has exploded as more countries from this region have joined the European Union (Kara 11).

[13] In addition to being "racially inflected," as Parvulescu observes (74), Mateo's comments also communicate the role he establishes for himself as a gatekeeper on whom, presumedly, Irena would depend to be hired.

their homes. Irena looks at her, quietly, and a close-up of her pensive expression suggests that she senses the implications of the woman's euphemistic comment. Only theoretically does the descriptor "foreigners" eliminate differences: within a given context, the non-citizens referred to are typically signalled as welcome or unwelcome, privileged, or disenfranchised, and the pragmatism Irena may employ to surpass exclusionary practices does evidently not make her insensitive to this nuance.

What an impact such interactions with members of the majority culture may have is partly what the narrative's second mnemonic episode aims to dramatize. Upon exiting a supermarket, Irena is stopped by the alarm and two security guards inspect her ID, purse, and groceries. The tension she displays only increases as she is exposed to a body scan, and while she raises her arms, the guard taps the surfaces of her coat. Suddenly, she re-evokes an episode when she was abused and the images of her naked and bundled body flow so quickly as to undermine the nature of the past episode. An associative analogy to the present scene does, however, emerge as she remembers being tapped and grabbed increasingly fiercely. The intercutting between the two scenes visualizes both oppositions and sensory parallels between the guard's methodical touch and the violent attack as well as the disorienting and physically distressing impact the mnemonic images have. Susan Brison observes that memories of intentional abuse tend to provoke a second, often somatically felt, trauma (69), and the close-ups and medium close-ups that accentuate the stiffness and shivering in Irena's face and body illustrate this point, as does the lingering intensity of the mental re-experience. At first, the flashbacks seem to end once the guards complete the scan and they apologize for the defective alarm. Her mind makes, however, a last return to the past episode and only now do we realize that she was tied up in ropes and thrown to the floor by a half-naked man.

To fully appreciate the psychosomatic impact of this re-experience we must consider the circumstances in which it occurs. At first, as Irena finds herself caught between the two men who are clearly intent on preventing her escape, she insists on the pronunciation of her family name as the guard has difficulty reading. However, against insisting questioning and the sceptical looks the men exchange as they find some banknotes in her pocket that Irena describes as savings, the affirmative impulse she initially assumed fades, in response to the men's intimidating behaviours and the tacit association they make between her ethnic identity and possible criminal tendencies. If, as Watson et al. suggest, repeated exposure to sexist and racist messages is correlated with increased trauma symptoms as well

as low self-esteem—a symptom that, in itself, correlates with more trauma symptoms (661)—such a confrontation with men of the dominant culture would be detrimental even without the physical intimidations she suffers. The tacit prejudice with which the guards as well as Mateo and the sympathetic woman perceive Irena manifests itself by her capacity to deny their reductive or negative expectations, whether she cleans exceptionally well or gains access to a rich Italian family or is proven innocent. Notwithstanding the acknowledgments and excuses she receives, however, the interactions would, to a varying degree, intensify the fears she carries as a stigmatized and exploited minority woman. As the last episode emphasizes, such reminders of her extreme precariousness and unwelcome presence may, under given circumstances, also aggravate the mental and somatic aftereffects of her trauma as well as the impact they appear to have had on her confidence and sense of self.

Stigmatization, traumatization, and the body

The function this marginalized but also unwavering character has of problematizing ethnically essentializing tropes develops, symptomatically, through incongruities surrounding her acknowledged qualities. The diligence Irena shows in executing the ungrateful tasks Mateo assigns her is a means to access the Adachers' home, and her strategy to be hired is, as we have seen, deceptive and violent. Furthermore, the guards have a point in being suspicious, as the money Irena carries belongs to a larger sum she stole from Muffa when she escaped. Besides the narrative purpose of creating unease among spectators and, increasingly also, within the diegetic world, the deceptive vein the character personifies serves to superficially confirm and severely question the prejudice of those who exclude certain foreigners from their homes. Within this critical operation, Irena's body acquires a discursive purpose as another basis for ambivalence. Whereas the barriers that exclude her from civic participation and socio-cultural belonging are absolute and irrevocable, the aesthetic limits to her inclusion are contextual. The appeal of Irena's features and complexion strikes not only Muffa and his clients but also Mateo, who exploits her precariousness while also confessing his love for her. Donato Adacher, as well, seems to nurture affection for Irena although his tender looks and friendliness are not narratively developed. Had she looked more un-Mediterranean,[14] she may, as

[14] Irena's skin colour is highlighted by the platinum-blond and straight hair she wore in the past and, in the present, by her long dark-blond curls. To what extent her perceived otherness

Mateo's initially negative reaction suggests, have been refused work, the security guards may have been even more disparaging, and the homeowner who vainly suggests Irena choose a more convenient apartment may have rejected her. She may, finally, not have been employed.

A central representational objective of the employment process this character facilitates for herself consists, exactly, in the dramatization of a stratified racial hierarchy that places her in-between Western and non-Western physiognomies. When she arrives for the interview appointment, numerous candidates have already gathered around the entrance to the Adachers' apartment, so she remains, instead, in a spot halfway down in the stairway. This spatial isolation is reinforced by chiaroscuro tones whereby the mystery surrounding Irena's intentions are juxtaposed to the innocence connoted by her pale skin, her light brown hair and gently reserved expression. When Valeria comes out and starts to observe the candidates slowly—several of whom are women of colour, some signalling a hostile or sullen attitude—her gaze falls on Irena whom she recognizes as the housekeeper Gina and Mateo have both lauded. While her attitude acknowledges Irena's presentable and reassuring appearance, this "positive racialisation" (Parvulescu 76) does not lead beyond a professional recognition. Irena is categorically excluded from Valeria's studio; she eats alone in the kitchen except when Tea insists that Irena sits with Donato and herself and, while Irena is trusted to stay with Tea when Valeria is on vacation, only after Valeria is killed does Irena move in with Tea and her father. This affirms the unbiased appreciation Donato has shown for her and may create transient expectations regarding a future union between the two. Nevertheless, her inclusion into their privileged domestic sphere has a compensatory purpose that was not associated with Gina's live-in agreement. Class differences contribute to Irena's marginalization but her status as an Eastern European woman with, we assume, fake documents is more decisive, in that a neutralization of these characteristics would imply not merely a redistribution of resources she is exploited or tasked to reproduce, but, more critically still, an ethnic affinity

is physically visible depends, assumedly, on the eye that sees: whereas Faleschini Lerner suggests that the Russian actress Ksenia Rappoport's body presents a "normality" and "indistinctness from the Italian national body" that makes her challenge "the possibility of clearly defining Italianness" (5, 12), Anka Parvulescu observes that Irena is "white enough" in certain contexts and not in others (74).

between her and the host population.[15] The latter's claim to authority, superiority, and exclusive privileges would, accordingly, be severely challenged.

To the extent that Irena's character, as has been suggested, is perceived as a menace to hegemonic ideas of ethnic and cultural distinction,[16] this sense of symbolic threat is largely inferable at a level of abstraction; as subconscious motivations for racializing discourses and discriminatory or exploitative practices that recreate her incompatible difference and destroy her physical and mental integrity. More vital, it seems, to the narrative's meaning-making practices are the interconnectivities developed between processes of stigmatization and traumatization. The function Irena's body acquires as a tangible anchorage of this nexus and an objective correlative of the sensations it stirs in her can be seen, especially, in the episode in which she waits to be interviewed for Gina's position. When she looks up from her place in the stairway, the view of the peephole in the Adachers' door triggers a flashback to the eye she could see in the wall during the selection she recalled in the prologue. From that flashback, it is not clear that the camera reproduces her perspective, but the analogy established with the present subjective shot emphasizes that she saw the hidden client. This reinforces the significance of

[15] Faleschini Lerner suggests that the women Rappoport portraits in *La sconosciuta* and other Italian films "appear fully integrated into Italian society" (9) but such a view is questioned by the processes of othering that, as we have seen, to a various degree mark Irena as an undesired foreigner.

[16] According to Vetri Nathan, Irena represents the type of "hybridity" and "menace" Homi Bhabha would associate with the colonized subject's "mimicry" of the colonizer and the effect it has of forcing "the colonizer to see traces of himself in the colonized" (269, 271–72, 274). Nathan's discussion of the ambivalent sensation Irena allegedly would stir in spectators of fear and allegiance fails, however, to clarify in what ways her diegetic development would fuse identities between "'colonizer' and 'colonized'" and therefore threaten the colonizing culture's exclusionary narratives. The former claim rests partly on the notion of a "mysterious biological" link between Tea and Irena that, according to Nathan, is never resolved (276). As we will see, however, the narrative excludes that Tea is Irena's daughter. At a diegetic level, Irena presents a threat to Valeria, who assumes that she intends to reclaim Tea, and Mateo, who in one instance fears she might attack him with some scissors and who, like Valeria, observes the effects of Muffa's stratagem without understanding where the threatening circumstances associated with Irena originate. However, to the extent that Irena may destabilize "notions of *italianità*" in spectators' eyes (Falschini Lerner 9), this would rather relate to her mothering of children that are adopted by Italian parents. One may, however, argue, as Parvulescu does, that while Irena is "not quite white," these children will be and the racial continuity of the Italian family will, therefore, continue (74).

her shivering when he whispered to confirm her selection and of the disconcerting expression she uncovered beneath her mask. The association Irena perceives between the two events is elaborated when Valeria appears in the doorway with a candidate: as the interviewed woman descends the stairs to leave, Irena re-evokes an image of herself preparing to exhibit herself while some of Muffa's other victims come backstage. Finally, as Valeria observes the women and her look stops to linger on Irena, the sensation of her evaluating gaze makes Irena recall her masked face and, once again, the voyeuristic eye. Now, however, she also recalls the external noise she heard at the time and the client's approval ("Lei va bene") with the difference that the voice she re-experiences is female and the wording is slightly modified ("Si, va bene questa").[17] A second after, Valeria calls on her and invites her in.

[17] This representation of a memory that is refashioned by present subjective experiences recalls, by way of contrast, the notion that traumatic memories, as Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart argue, are not "altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience" (172). Disassociated from normal processes of encoding that enable a linguistic and symbolic organization of memories, traumatic experiences cause, it is argued, a "speechless terror" that can only be retrieved "on a somatosensory and iconic level" through post-traumatic symptoms (172). Catherine Caruth's cultural perspective explicitly presupposes and reinforces this neurobiological theory, suggesting that trauma consist not of the "overwhelming occurrence" itself, in as much as this is not "assimilated or experienced fully at the time," but of its possessive, literal and delayed return, a "belatedness" by which the event refuses spatiotemporal localisation (4–5, 9). However, whereas van der Kolk and van der Hart concedes that traumatic memories may be "transformed into narrative language" therapeutically with the effect of possibly causing a "sacrilege of the traumatic experience" (176, 179), Caruth argues that, in addition to being "absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning," post-traumatic symptoms are also resistant to "cure" and "theoretical analysis and understanding" and can, as such, only be transmitted through the contagiousness its "impossibility" has among listeners (5–6, 10). The theses of "traumatic dissociative amnesia" and unrepresentable literality are disputed among critics such as McNelly (818–21) who argues that explicit memories of traumatic events coexist with somatic symptoms and are not more literal, unalterable, or forgotten than other memories, a view Brison (69–70) shares, suggesting that the frequently somatic quality of traumatic memories does not give them a privileged epidemiological status. Leys, following a minutely documented critique of the cognitive and the postmodern theories, finally objects that, by "making victimhood unlocatable in any particular person or place" to further an idea of contagion that implicates listeners and readers in others' trauma, Caruth potentially transforms everyone "in the post-Holocaust period" into "victim and witness" with the risk of turning "perpetrators into victims too" (Leys 296–97). Anne Rothe similarly considers "nonsensical and irresponsible" the entire discourse of a postmodern theory which, among other "epistemological

Whereas, in the prologue, the traumatic selection served to introduce the temporal subjectivity that structures and informs the characterial development, when the narrative returns to this moment it is to convey the sense Irena has of being displayed, like one object among others, and subjected to a physical evaluation. Herein resides the significance of the ocular imageries that interconnect the past and present subjective shots, and the analogy Irena draws between the scrutiny of Valeria and the client. The auditory flashbacks by which his enunciation is readapted as a wishful thinking to anticipate Valeria's selection suggest, however, the difference she sees in the two situations: whereas in the past, the appeal of her body implied a condemnation, now, her agreeable appearance represents access to an exclusive sphere. The positive prospect of realizing her objectives may explain why the present recollection is less elaborate and seemingly less violent than the previous ones: only three different images are evoked, and they do not provoke either the tense expression or the percussive sounds Irena experienced in the prologue. This relative ability to distance herself from the past event and its post-traumatic effects does not, however, eliminate the impact the racialized selection would have in recalling and reiterating the objectifying and abusive practices to which her body has been subjected.

Victim, victimizer, and revictimization

We shall return to the question of how trauma-related memories may be controlled; for now, the unravelling of this charater's past will be examined in relation to her ambivalent qualities and contact with Tea. The affectionate dedication Irena shows toward her is paralleled by a sincere concern as Tea suffers from a pathological lack of reflexes that hinders her in reacting protectively when she falls or is pushed. Irena proposes, accordingly, to exercise her defensive functions during the week when the two are alone. At first, she ties Tea's legs and arms and places her on a large bed where she pushes her down gently while encouraging and helping her to get on her feet. As she intensifies the pushes and gets more impatient, Tea gives up and cries until Irena finally unties the ropes. She then applauds the girl who, screaming at and slapping her nanny, displays the very responsiveness

and ethical flaws," deprives victims of a witness status that is relegated to "those who know how to listen for the silences and paradoxes not only in immediate survivor speech but also and especially in literary texts and films that supposedly constitute representations of trauma in its literality" (193, 191).

she otherwise lacks. Some days later, they repeat the procedure, this time on a parquet floor, where Irena pushes Tea so fiercely that when she orders her to get up and hit her like she did last time, Tea can barely enunciate her laments. She nonetheless shoves the child again, but now, the combined sensory impact of her own movements and of Tea who, broken and bleeding, begs her to stop, triggers a flashback to the assault Irena re-experienced in the supermarket. Two slightly more enduring images convey her memory of being not only bound, bleeding, and repeatedly thrown to the floor but also crouched in a foetal position like Tea and imploring her attacker for mercy. When Irena finally unties and cuddles Tea, her weary gestures and tormented expression convey all the pain the physical replication and mental re-experience have caused her.

The fusion in these scenes of educative intensions, atrociously retraumatizing execution, and remorseful affection consolidates the integration Irena's character is constructed to embody of an apprehensive and marginalized survivor, a skilled and devoted nanny, and a deceiving and ruthless abuser. This tripartite characterization recalls the essentialist perceptions with which Eastern European women have been met since they started to arrive in Italy as either socially useful domestic workers (Parvulescu 42; Crowhurst 495) or distraught trafficking victims or, conversely, as irregular and possibly criminal immigrants (Crowhurst 496–98). To what extent this binary configuration has infused the collective imaginary is suggested by migrant prostitutes who, depending on discretional conceptualizations of what qualifies as victimization, have been assigned or refused protection under expressly designed assistance programs (496–98). An understanding of the challenge Irena presents to the victim/criminal paradigm cannot, clearly, start from the director's own affirmation that violence is her only language, but neither can we stop at the description Russo ventures of a "good-bad-girl" caught between the "femme fatale" and "the ambivalent mother" (385). On this view, the trauma Irena has endured manifests itself in "confusion," "paranoia," and a "wilful cynicism" (384–85), but such a description ignores not only the nature of her re-experiences and the complexity of her ambivalences but also the impact her trafficking history may have had on her personality.

To appreciate the filmic representation of the latter aspect, we may start from the reflections Irena articulates when she visits Gina at the nursing home. At one point, she mentions that monster ("mostro") over whom she feels no guilt, and this reflection evokes nocturnal images from a vast bedroom where she gets dressed and closes the windows. She then recalls sitting down in front of Muffa who is naked and asleep. After some moments of reflection, she attacks him with

some enormous scissors, justifying each blood-spattering stab in reference to his violations, while finally filling a bag with bundles of banknotes stored in his freezer. This is, therefore, the moment when she escaped, before eventually getting on the bus to Velarchi. What most urgently motivates her resolute claim to freedom transpires from a later flashback that represents an earlier point of the same episode. Aware that Muffa increasingly has come to consider her a bother, Irena asks him how he intends to kill her, and he responds that there still is time, adding that they could have gone far together if she had not become so "extravagant." Herein we discern a reference to the troubled attitude she has developed after he removed both her lover and, as we shall see, the child she expected. Then, while urging Muffa to get some champagne to distract him, she discovers that he has placed the scissors underneath his pillow and slips these under the bed. The associative power of this improvised weapon is, in part, what makes her recall the event: in the present moment, Mateo grabs her by her shoulders and declares his love for her while stating that, together, the two of them could go far. As she leans her body—frozen by tension—toward a table, a pair of scissors falls to the floor, and this triggers the flashback. In the present scene, a low-angle shot accentuates Irena's irresponsive posture and anxious look as she fixates on the scissors while telling Mateo to keep his hands off her.

Like the incident in the supermarket, this episode dramatizes perceptive stimuli that re-evoke physical and interpersonal circumstances Irena experiences as central to her trauma. Mateo's undesired affection is, however, seen to have amplified retraumatizing ramifications in that it confronts her with the tangible threat Muffa represented to her life and the thought she had of having finally escaped. Instead, as Muffa—miraculously resurrected—has come to reclaim the money she stole, she finds herself entangled in a metaphysical captivity of intimidating phone-calls, vandalism, and extreme violence . Finally, after he has driven Irena to lose her job and reach the extremes of mental exhaustion, she hits him with a spade so that he falls and is mortally wounded. Whereas the memory she has of the first attempt at his life emphasizes that she pondered the act she was about to commit, the second attempt, which she re-evokes through a flashback while watching the police uncover Muffa's body, appears as a desperate reaction to an immediate threat but also to twelve years of sadistic victimization and recent persecution. The impression we get of these murderous revenges as involving a qualitatively different violence compared to the one she inflicts on Gina and Tea is accentuated by the sensitivity she shows toward the latter two. Seeing Gina motionless and incommunicative, Irena promises, remorsefully, to atone for the

harm she had to provoke and the idea she has of making Gina sign depository slips so that the stolen funds may be transferred into the account Gina has opened for Tea reflects this determination.[18] After she has been fired, Irena also goes to see the girl at school: on one occasion, Donato surprises them without at all objecting to their encounter. Later, unaware that Valeria is spying on her, Irena laughs joyfully at the view of Tea getting up and fighting firmly after a schoolmate has pushed her to the ground.

The motivational force Tea is seen to constitute is unravelled in the narrative's dramatic climax. Just when Irena has returned home to find Muffa waiting, Valeria has discovered where Irena lives, and knocks on her door. While Muffa hides, a confrontation breaks out between Irena and Valeria whose suspicions toward the nanny are reinforced by the drawings and pictures she keeps on the wall of Tea. Like Irena herself, Valeria is convinced that she is Tea's biological mother and affirms her rights as the adoptive parent by offering money Irena refuses and threatening her to stay away from Tea. These revelations illuminate most of the enigma Irena presents, including her rummaging through documents in the Adachers' safe. The basis for the presumed motherhood is, however, not clarified until she is arrested over Valeria's murder. The testimony Irena gives allows us to see that the hidden client was not purchasing her sexual services but rather her reproductive capacity and that she mothered nine children of which Tea, she states, is the last. At this observation, the narrative transitions into an extended flashback composed of quickly intercut images from two nocturnal and spatially adjacent scenes: one sees Irena giving birth in the presence of Muffa and an obstetrician in a house located in the outskirts; the other represents the exterior circumstances of that scene and evokes the tremendous noise Irena could hear inside of techno music, cars, and load male voices. This clarifies a previous episode in which the sound of a car makes Irena re-evoke that exterior scene: the somatic impact of that auditorily trigged memory almost makes her fall. Only now, however, when she also recalls the birth and the agony of seeing the child being taken away, do we understand why that recollection causes such distress.

[18] Contrary to the suggestion that Irena forges Gina's signature to take money from her, thus betraying supposed "criminal traits" in her otherwise sympathetic character (Dunkan), the sequence in the bank clearly shows that the clerk receives rather than hands out the funds. When Irena speaks to Tea about a gift that will be ready when she has grown up, she alludes, as Tornatore himself notes, to these savings (Giordano et al. 224).

The essential role this last childbirth has in the construction of Irena's character rests on her awareness that the father was the lover Muffa killed and, as we learn from another flashback, that she is now infertile. While her belief that the adoptive parents were named Adacher will prove unfounded and a DNA test will exclude any biological affinity with Tea, the thought of a deprived maternity would authentically have mobilized her to escape, just as it resonates in the quiet anguish she displays during the last confrontation with Valeria over Tea. It has been suggested that Irena has come "to claim Tea back" (Ponzanezi 86) but this was, she reflects aloud while visiting Gina, not her objective and nothing in her behaviour denies the insistence she makes on simply having wanted to see Tea grow up and observe in what ways she would resemble her father. After Irena arrives in Velarchi and discovers that Tea has a condition that the Adachers confront with resignation, she identifies a second objective that is both resolute and efficient, as Tea herself realizes: when Valeria asks about her bruised arms, she protects her nanny in a veil of recognition and complicity and says she fell. Besides the maternal sentiments that would motivate Irena, her determination to help Tea also illuminates a parallel between the two characters. When the effect of seeing the agony Tea suffers makes Irena relive her own, almost identical, reaction to the same violence, it would partly be for the analogy Tea's pathological condition represents to the qualitatively different subjugation and confinement Irena endured.

Complex trauma and narrative reconstruction of self

If a sense of identification may explain why Irena determines to pass on the contentious sentiments and strategies she has acquired, the methods by which she proceeds requires further analysis. A preliminary observation would lead to the difficulty trauma victims often have in anticipating the consequences of their behaviour (Bloom and Farragher 78). A lack of foresight and control, especially, seems to determine not only her ferocious treatment of Tea, but also the injury she causes Gina and to which she herself reacts with horror. More essential, still, is the type of trauma her re-experiences and verbal account reconstruct. Besides a total subjugation to a victimizer who exercised complete and denigrating control of her sexuality and reproductive capacity, the intentionally dehumanizing violations Irena recalls involved psychosocial, contextual, political, and cultural circumstances that still expose her a to revictimization and everyday oppression. Finally, she would have been severely affected by the sense she developed being

caught in an endless and increasingly life-threatening captivity as well as by the deprivation of hope and self-worth associated with the loss of her child and its father. These symptoms are diagnostically related to complex trauma and to the effect this syndrome may have of compromising capacities of self-regulation and autonomy (Herman, Foreword xiv; Brown 167). The notion of an interpersonally induced personality disturbance leads us, finally, to consider what subjectively emerges about her trafficking history.

In a recent study of psychological symptoms in human-trafficking survivors, Elizabeth Hopper and Laura Gonzales detected both depression and symptoms of PTSD, such as re-experiences, as well as several categories associated with complex trauma. Among sex-trafficking victims, especially, alterations in self-perceptions and interpersonal relationships, involving mistrust, revictimization, and an impaired sense of self-worth, were found to be common, and so were disassociation, which is understood as "alteration in attention and consciousness," and affect dysregulation, which may present impulsivity, anger, and aggression (182–84).[19] Another, correlated, symptom of Complex-PTSD (CPTSD) that appears relevant to the present analysis is relational re-enactment (Herman, Foreword xvi), which indicates a replication of traumatic experiences that may have detrimental and retraumatizing consequences (Courtois and Ford, *Treatment* 95). If, notwithstanding the intrinsically subjective representation *La sconosciuta* constructs of sex-trafficking victims and their post-traumatic experiences, we may accept that the portrait amounts to acute and protracted trauma, then a consideration of the CPTSD symptoms indicated above may illuminate behaviours that considerably compromise the character's interpersonal relations and social existence. Both the incident she causes in the stairway without being prepared for its ramifications, and the increasing aggressiveness and atrocious force she employs to empower a child she believes is hers indicate forms of affect dysregulation and dissociation. These conditions imply impulsivity and emotional volatility as well as depersonalization and misperceptions of one's surroundings.[20] The partly uncontrolled force with which she handles Tea and her delayed recognition to the child's distress

[19] Among the labour and sex-trafficking subjects examined, 86 percent reported one symptom of PTSD; 66 percent met criteria for multiple categories of PTSD; and sex-trafficking victims did so with increased frequency (Hopper and Gonzales 183).

[20] The 8-item Dissociative Symptoms Scale specifies dissociation as consisting of derealization/depersonalization, cognitive behavioural re-experiencing, gaps in memory and awareness, and sensory misperceptions (Hyland et al. 64).

appears, additionally, as a matter of re-enactment in that Irena replicates particularly dehumanizing and fundamentally interpersonal violation she endured. As an effect, she causes herself the twofold stress of reliving her victimization and realizing the suffering she herself provokes.

In cases of complex trauma, dissociative and re-enacting tendencies often betray an inability to handle trauma constructively and convey, therefore, an indirect call for assistance (Bloom and Farragher 76). However, since the victims' perceptions and actions are misconceived in relation to their intentions and needs, witnesses will likely not comprehend these requests (78). This communicative glitch resonates in the self-destructiveness that prevents Irena from seeking support and protection within a sphere in which she has found relative stability. While the ease with which she succumbs again to the very abuse she escaped is the extreme consequence of her stigmatized and unprotected identity, the perceptions and behaviours that cause her interpersonal difficulties also create a detrimental pattern that culminates when she finally frees herself from Muffa only to be tied by institutional chains.

When, in the company of Gina, Irena expresses a feeling of walking through a labyrinth without finding an exit, it is, exactly, such a cycle of self-destructivity that she describes, and she relates it to the error she committed in thinking that "someone" like her could have a future. When Mateo invoked those terms, he alluded to her ethnic difference, but Irena would, most evidently, refer to the chain of injustice in which she is entrapped and, more latently perhaps, a sensation of what an obstacle her detrimental behaviours and susceptibility to revictimization constitute. This regards, especially, the ability to establish the relations of trust she would need in order to reconstitute her functioning as a social being. Victims who are reduced to objects of their perpetrator will, Brison explains, feel deprived of their old selves and disconnect from their surroundings (68). Since selfhood is always socially constituted and can only be reconstituted within a social dimension, the restoration of victims' identities will require "speech acts" of witness bearing and transformation that are socially received within a community of others (68, 72). By "working through" traumas in ways that engage the "empathic unsettlement" of witnesses, victims may, Dominick LaCapra suggests, gradually control tendencies to "act out" post-traumatic syndromes and remember the past as separate from the present and the future it indexes (21–22, 46–47). Although a performative mode is necessary for victims to take gradual control of their memories and re-integrate ethically into humanity (Brison 71), compulsive repetitions will never

be fully transcended but may be necessary for a reconstructive narrativization that solicits a critical empathy among listeners (LaCapra xxiii, 22, 47).

This description of two opposed but parallel and complementary forms of remembering illuminates nuances in the post-traumatic subjectivity constructed in *La sconosciuta*. How recollections associated with trauma may have divergent impact and be engaged differently is dramatized in relation to memories the character has of her last child's father. Her conviction that he was killed per Muffa's orders epitomizes in mnemonic images of a landfill where she sees herself walking searchingly until she unearths the man's head. Whereas these, rather surreal scenes, are triggered by spontaneous sensory associations—respectively when she inspects the Adachers garbage, sings a Ukrainian lullaby for Tea, and watches as Muffa's body is unburried—the moments of furtive happiness the two shared are deliberately reproduced: to relive their first encounter and a pastoral rendezvous, respectively, Irena eats strawberries and lays down on the Adachers' bed with Donato's suit at her side. None of these memories stir visible somatic reactions and unless they would be imagined—the macabre and idyllic fragments could, conceivably, both represent another layer of her subjectivity[21]—they evidence various degrees of control and intentionality in post-traumtic re-experiences and reconstruction. Similar variations shape the flashbacks to the night Irena escaped. Whereas the one representing how she stabbed Muffa is triggered, as we saw, by the sensory and somatically distressful impact of Mateo's embrace and the falling scissors, the conclusion of that episode is intentionally re-evoked and cued, like traditional flashbacks, by the narrative Irena starts at the nursing home. The monologuous confession she delivers on the presumption that the mute Gina is also unaware illustrates the significance a detached listener may have in unleashing an "open and self-questioning process" by which to gradually establish order among and resist the detrimental effects of recurrent memories (LaCapra xxiii).

Conclusion and outlook

The transformative potential such a verbalization of interpersonal abuse may have epitomizes, during the investigation into the character's death. These closing sections of the narrative have been described both as the only moment in which

[21] Parvulescu wonders whether Irena's "dreamlike" flashbacks about lost love might not, in fact, be dreams (76). Likewise, the memories from the landfill could be reshaped or completely imagined without disclaiming the man's concrete presence in her past.

the character's story is told from her own perspective and as putting her "at the mercy of her Italian hosts," among whom is her lawyer who is said to "spin tales of victimhood" to free her of charges (Ponzanesi 85–86).[22] Such an understanding is questioned, first, by its contradictory nature and, secondly, by the subjectivized perspective that shapes the narrative from the opening sequences. Furthermore, the actual representation of the lawyer highlights her efforts to prove Irena's innocence in an accident Muffa orchestrated to incriminate her and, more prevalently, to guide her testimony toward attenuating as well as aggravating factors, including her responsibility in Muffa's death. Arguably, however, the representational value of the investigation resides not in the acute victimization reconstructed but in the relational process that unfolds. That the act of giving testimony has a restorative effect on Irena seems corroborated by the synchronization between her account and her flashbacks and the impression this gives of an ability to overcome the intrusive and violent effect of recurrent memories. The calmness she starts to display in front of Gina is seen to be reinforced after the trial, despite the decade-long imprisonment awaiting her, and in the epilogue, which pictures Tea welcoming Irena as she is released from jail. The serenity Irena finally seems to have acquired will be vital to integrate into her social world and foster supportive and protective relationships.

The degree to which the articulatory process represented may serve to reconstruct the sense of stability and selfhood required to assume an "ethically responsible behaviour" and consideration of others depends considerably on the reactions it stirs (LaCapra xxi). The relative ease with which Irena faces the investigation reflects the ability of her interlocutors to engage her suffering not with identification and "surrogate" victimization but rather with empathy and sensitivity toward her specific positioning (78). Their detached attitude implicates spectators as well: given the estranging and disturbing qualities of the traumatic memories represented and the psychosomatic reactions most cause, an identification with the character would be excluded for most spectators. Likewise, the initial wariness and increasingly troubling ambivalence Irena exhibits as a character caught between

[22] Irena is not, in fact, left "off the hook from the police" (Ponzanesi 86), nor does her jail sentence assume any "implications in the death of Valeria Adacher" (Nathan 277). When the lawyer anticipates that the judge will not be able to overlook too many things, she would be alluding to the death of Muffa, whose body Irena hid; her attack on Gina does not seem to come up during the investigations.

victimhood and victimization are, arguably, not intended to stir sympathy[23] but a detached reflection on the nature and circumstances of her traumatization. Such a critical attitude is encouraged by the ability she gradually exhibits to organize her memories with a clear sense of the events' chronology and completion in the past. As witnesses, our role is, ultimately, to move beyond the specificity of the subjectivized narrative and reflect on its extended implications. This includes considering the interconnections that exist between essentialist exclusion, acute and protracted exploitation, and the structures and systems of global injustice that perpetuate minority members' otherness while also criminalizing unprotected victims rather than their abusers.

Gonzaga University

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[23] Against Derek Dunkan's suggestion that subjective shots, specifically when Irena rummages through the Adachers' apartment, encourage an identification with and sympathy for her character that clashes with the "disapproval" one would develop of her "reprehensible behaviour" (00), I would argue that the film's narrative composition and visual poetics are constructed with alienating intensions precisely to encourage critical attention to the origins and implications of the characters' contrasting behaviours.

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