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Fauna as Storied Matter for Working Through Trauma in *My Beautiful Birds* (2017)

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ABSTRACT

The paradigm shift toward ecocentrism in children's literature calls for a reconsideration of how matter and nature participate in narratives about global crises, including armed conflict. While material ecocriticism has been applied across many literary contexts, no study has yet examined fauna as a material medium for trauma healing within contemporary children's war literature. This study analyzes fauna as storied matter mediating trauma recovery in the picture book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) by Suzanne Del Rizzo, focusing on Sami, a child Syrian war refugee. Employing a qualitative descriptive method grounded in material ecocriticism and Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, this research examines how birds are manifested as material agents in the narrative and how they function as a medium for the psychic mechanisms of acting out and working through. The findings show that birds manifest as powerful material agents through color, sound, and physical presence, entering Sami's body and consciousness as more than passive symbols. His attachment to absent birds initially traps him in a repetitive cycle of acting out, materialized in an unfillable food bowl and in black paint that overwhelms his attempt to paint them. Subsequent material interactions — a kite colored with his birds' feathers, an unplanned encounter with small birds in the camp, and a mural painted on the camp wall — facilitate his transition toward working through. This healing affirms trans-corporeality, showing that human psychological recovery is inseparable from ecological recognition and from matter's own capacity to co-produce narratives of hope amid destruction.

KEYWORDS

My Beautiful Birds, material ecocriticism, storied matter, acting out, working through

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INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism in children's literature requires a reconsideration of how materials and nature are represented, beyond their roles as settings or

as superficial didactic elements. This shift is intertwined with the major challenges facing today's world, which is mired in ecological crisis and armed conflict and is often overlooked in children's narratives. Several works of literature have begun to demonstrate this deconstruction by positioning the environment as a subject possessing agency and traumatic memory. In Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* (2001), a surreal material landscape combining organic and industrial elements is used to map children's psychological states and to function as both a mirror of trauma and a healing agent. Meanwhile, *Flush* (2005) presents nature through concrete ecological activism by highlighting the environmental crisis in Florida's waters caused by illegal waste dumping, thereby encouraging active engagement in ecological politics. The presence of material agency is also explored in *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (2006) through the physical vulnerability of a porcelain rabbit, which serves as a medium for processing suffering and teaching empathy and resilience. *The Underneath* (2008) positions the swamp ecosystem in Texas as *storied matter* that holds traces of past trauma and memories of violence through interspecies relationships. From these four works representing the early 2000s, it can be concluded that the environment and non-human objects can function as a mirror of complex psychological conditions, a space for concrete ecological activism, and a medium for processing human suffering through the physical vulnerability of their materials.

Children's literature occupies a particular position in this reconsideration of matter and trauma. Unlike literature written primarily for adults, picture books addressed to child readers must render difficult historical realities — displacement, violence, loss — through registers that remain legible and emotionally survivable for a young audience, often relying on visual and material metaphor rather than explicit exposition. This constraint, rather than limiting the genre's capacity for serious engagement with trauma, arguably sharpens it: picture books must find concrete, sensorily present vehicles — a color, a sound, a texture — through which abstract experiences of loss and recovery can be made available to a child's understanding. Fauna, as embodied, sensorily vivid, and narratively active presences, are well suited to this task, which is one further reason why their function as storied matter merits close attention.

What remains absent from this emerging body of work, however, is a sustained account of *fauna* specifically — living, moving, sounding creatures rather than inert landscapes or single objects — as a material medium through which a child protagonist processes the trauma of war and displacement. This research positions fauna as the central material analyzed to determine how living non-human bodies act as storied matter that helps mediate the trauma of war and displacement, and to understand how the passage between rupture and reconciliation is materially accomplished.

Material ecocriticism is a strand of literary studies fundamentally shaped by the broader framework of new materialism. This theoretical current, mapped comprehensively by Coole and Frost (2010) in their introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, aims to deconstruct the anthropocentric view by shifting attention from the mere representation of nature toward an understanding of the agency of matter itself — whether inanimate objects, biological bodies, or elements of the geosphere — as possessing a life force, meaning, and the capacity to narrate without relying entirely on human language. Central to this theory is the concept of *storied matter*, which defines matter as a physical substance that narrates by storing, carrying, or expressing content that actively shapes the meanings that influence human events and behavior (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 7). Storied matter operates through what Karen Barad (2007) calls *intra-action*: the idea that an entity's meaning and identity arise not from any essence it possesses in isolation, but from constant, reciprocal relationships with other bodies, human and non-human alike. Matter, in this framework, is not an isolated object but part of a web of life that can express and document events as material-semiotic nodes, positioning

matter as a co-narrator able to convey neglected stories, including traces of violence left on particular objects and bodies.

Jane Bennett (2010) extends this insight through her concept of *thing-power*: the capacity of objects and materials to "interrupt, retard, or alter human intentions and movements," pressing matter's vibrancy on human perception whether or not humans intend to notice it. Manuel DeLanda's (2006) assemblage theory adds a further dimension, describing how heterogeneous materials — human intentions, non-human bodies, objects, and environments — converge into formations that behave with an agency none of the individual components possesses alone. This study also draws on the concept of *trans-corporeality*, which describes how human bodies are never separate from the material environments and non-human bodies they move through and are moved by (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). Understood trans-corporeally, human psychological states are not sealed within an individual mind but are continuously shaped by — and capable of reshaping — the material world around that mind, including its living, non-human inhabitants. This premise underlies the central claim advanced in the discussion below: that Sami's movement from acting out toward working through is not solely an internal, psychological achievement, but one accomplished together with and through fauna as material co-participants in his healing.

On the psychological side of this study's framework, the trauma theory developed by historian Dominick LaCapra (2001) in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* distinguishes two principal psychic mechanisms through which a subject responds to traumatic events: *acting out* and *working through*. Acting out is a condition in which the subject remains trapped in a repetitive cycle of trauma, as the past resurfaces with the force of present reality, without critical distance or a coherent narrative understanding of what has happened. Working through, by contrast, is a transformative — though rarely linear — process in which the subject gradually integrates fragments of memory into a coherent narrative, builds critical distance from the trauma, and reconstructs a self-identity that acknowledges loss without being wholly defined by it. LaCapra emphasizes that acting out and working through are not sequential stages that a subject passes through once and for all; rather, a subject may oscillate between them, and it is often in acts of representation and creative practice that this oscillation becomes visible. This non-linear model matters for the analysis that follows, since Sami's movement between the two mechanisms, traced across the Result and Discussion section below, is neither smooth nor complete by the story's end.

Studies applying material ecocriticism have proliferated across a wide range of literary contexts, materials, and media over the past decade, though rarely, as this review shows, in relation to fauna, trauma, and war together. In the novel, material ecocriticism has been used to read flora as a site of resistance to patriarchal structures (Prieto, 2025) and as a vehicle for the transformation of memory (Dědinová, 2025); food has been read as a unifier of family bonds under strain (Liu, 2022); objects and urban landscapes have been analyzed as means of constructing a sense of belonging (Cavalcanti, 2025); and water has been read as a shaper of memory, historical trauma, migrant displacement, and colonial violence (Ağır, 2025; Jabar Mohammed et al., 2024; Jiang & Cui, 2024). Pollution and greenhouse gas emissions have been shown to store the historical narrative of industry and colonialism (AlSuhaibani & AlQahtani, 2023), while forests have been read as a destroyer of life in times of war (Zhao & Liao, 2025).

Beyond the novel, material ecocriticism has extended into film, tabletop gaming, and poetry: analyses of the human body in postmodern horror film (Rust, 2014), of tokens and peacock feathers shaping character dynamics on the gaming table (Baker, 2025), and of flora as a medium for recording history amid species destruction and colonization (Dawson, 2022) all demonstrate the theory's reach across media. Taken together, this body of scholarship confirms that material ecocriticism can illuminate an unusually broad range of materials and genres, from water and pollution to gaming tokens and poetic form. Despite this breadth, no

study to date has examined fauna as an *acting-out* and *working-through* mechanism, particularly within children's literature set against the backdrop of contemporary war.

This gap is significant because fauna occupy a distinctive material position relative to the other materials surveyed above: unlike a river, a forest, or an object on a game table, an animal is a bodily co-participant with its own movement, sound, and apparent will, and its approach to or absence from a human subject can register as something closer to relationship than to symbol. It is worth noting how the present study's object relates to the four works discussed at the outset of this Introduction. Where *The Red Tree* renders trauma through a surreal, largely inanimate landscape, and *The Underneath* embeds trauma in an ecosystem's accumulated memory, *My Beautiful Birds* differs in giving trauma a living, moving, willful material counterpart: birds that appear and disappear according to their own agency rather than the protagonist's design. This distinction is what makes fauna, rather than landscape or object alone, a productive and underexamined site for extending material ecocriticism into dialogue with trauma theory.

Methodologically, this study also departs from much existing material ecocriticism scholarship in a modest but consequential way. Many of the studies surveyed above analyze material ecocriticism in texts addressed to adult readers, where a scholarly apparatus of allusion, extended description, and explicit theorization is often available to the author and can be mined directly for evidence of matter's narrative agency. A picture book for young children affords no such apparatus: its text is necessarily spare, its exposition minimal, and a great deal of its meaning is distributed across image, color, and material medium rather than sentence-level argument. Reading fauna as storied matter in *My Beautiful Birds* therefore requires attending as closely to what the book *shows* — the sculpted texture of a feather, the placement of a single dab of black amid brighter colors — as to what it says, a methodological emphasis that is developed further in the Method section below.

This study therefore analyzes the fauna in the picture book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017) as *storied matter* that acts as a medium for the mechanisms of acting out and working through, as its child protagonist, Sami, seeks to survive displacement caused by the Syrian war. Two research questions guide this study: first, how is material in the form of fauna manifested within the narrative structure of the story; and second, how does fauna function as a medium for carrying out the psychic mechanisms of acting out and working through as forms of trauma healing.

METHOD

Corpus and Selection Criteria

The material object of this research is the picture book *My Beautiful Birds* (2017), written and illustrated by Suzanne Del Rizzo, who also functions as the primary data source for this study. Del Rizzo has described the book's origins in a news account of a boy who found comfort in a connection with wild birds at the Za'atari refugee camp; struck by the universality of a child's relationship with animals, she developed this account into a first-person narrative told from the perspective of Sami, a child fleeing the Syrian civil war. The work was selected for this study because it renders the war in Syria as its setting without resorting to a purely didactic mode, and because its illustrations are built from polymer clay, Plasticine, and other tactile media rather than flat paint or digital rendering.

This textured, three-dimensional illustrative technique gives the book an unusual double materiality: fauna are not only a textual and narrative presence within the story Del Rizzo tells, but are physically sculpted, dimensional presences on the printed page itself, a point taken up in detail in section 4.2 below. The book has received considerable recognition since its 2017 publication, including selection as a *New York Times* Notable Children's Book, the Malka Penn

Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature, an SCBWI Crystal Kite Award, and inclusion on the New York Public Library's Best Books for Kids list for 2018 (Murisco, 2018).

Research Design and Approach

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method with a material ecocriticism approach to identify and describe the agency of fauna as storied matter that mediates trauma and memory through narrative structure, thereby illuminating the psychological recovery of the story's child protagonist. This reading allows the material in the story to be understood not merely as setting or passive object but as an element holding a strategic, active position within the narrative. Correspondingly, the study of trauma and memory pursued here is directed not only toward the abstract or the purely psychological, but toward concrete, material objects and bodies as well.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded through repeated, in-depth readings of the picture book to understand its narrative as a whole — its characters, plot, and material elements — before any excerpting began. Every textual and illustrative instance in which fauna appeared, whether directly quoted, described, recalled, or depicted, was then noted, along with its surrounding narrative context. Because the book's meaning is distributed across text and image alike, each noted instance was also checked against its accompanying illustration where relevant, so that a purely textual reading would not inadvertently flatten details — such as the dimensional, sculpted quality of the birds' feathers — that are more fully available on the illustrated page than in the words alone.

Data Validation and Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two further stages, summarized in Table 1 below. First, the collected instances were mapped according to analytical categories developed from the research questions. Second, each mapped instance was read against the theoretical framework outlined in the Introduction — material ecocriticism's account of storied matter, intra-action, thing-power, and assemblage, together with LaCapra's model of acting out and working through — to examine how fauna functions materially, rather than merely symbolically, within Sami's narrative arc. Instances that resisted easy categorization, such as the wall mural discussed near the end of the Result and Discussion section, were treated as significant in their own right rather than forced into a single category, since LaCapra's model explicitly allows a subject's movement between acting out and working through to be non-linear.

Table 1. Analytical Categories Used in Data Analysis

Category	Description
Fauna as a medium for remembering home	Instances where birds recall or represent Sami's pre-displacement life and attachments
Fauna as an acting-out mechanism	Instances where fauna-related material triggers repetitive, unresolved trauma responses
Fauna as a working-through medium	Instances where fauna-related material facilitates critical distance and narrative integration of loss

Because this is a qualitative, interpretive study of a single literary text, its findings are not intended to be generalized beyond *My Beautiful Birds* itself; rather, they are offered as a close reading that tests the productivity of extending material ecocriticism into dialogue with trauma theory. To support the trustworthiness of this reading, all textual evidence is quoted

directly from the primary source, and all theoretical claims attributed to a named scholar are drawn from that scholar's own published work, cited in full in the References section.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Diversity of Fauna in the Story as Storied Matter

Fauna in *My Beautiful Birds* is dominated by birds and is mentioned repeatedly across the story's scenes. Sami, the main character, is shown leaving his home for a refugee camp while remembering the house where he interacted with his pet birds, and later encountering birds that approach him as he daydreams in the camp. The species named across the text are various: pigeons, canaries, doves, and rose finches. The narrative does not merely list these species; it also renders the color of each bird's feathers, both visually, through Del Rizzo's illustrations, and narratively, through the text itself, even where the accompanying description remains brief and impressionistic rather than naturalistically detailed:

> A canary, a dove, a rose finch, and a pigeon. Like feathered brushes, they paint the sky with promise and the hope of peace. Plumes of yellow, rose, shimmering turquoise, and white all in harmony.

This passage is worth pausing over from a material ecocritical standpoint. The birds are not simply named; they are figured as "feathered brushes" that "paint the sky" — an image that folds together the birds' literal, physical presence (feathers, flight, color) with an act of creative mark-making usually reserved for human agents. Read through Bennett's (2010) concept of thing-power, this metaphor does more than decorate the prose: it registers, at the level of language, an intuition that the birds' materiality is already doing representational work independent of Sami's own hand. Before Sami ever picks up a paintbrush later in the story, the birds themselves have already "painted" the sky with color, foreshadowing — and, this analysis will argue, materially enabling — his own eventual return to color and creative expression.

The birds that appear in the story are not confined to a single register of representation. They are depicted in physical, embodied form as Sami's memories and as creatures who visit him in the camp; they reappear transfigured in the paintings Sami makes, first as black wings rendered in a pigment that stains his hands and clothes, and later as the vividly colored feathers he paints onto a kite. This oscillation between embodied bird, painted bird, and material residue (paint, stain) across the narrative is itself a demonstration of storied matter's operation: the same material referent — birds — migrates across different physical supports (body, canvas, kite, wall) while carrying and transforming an accumulating charge of meaning.

Fauna in the story is also rendered acoustically. When Sami and his father sit together to enjoy the evening sky, birds are present as sound rather than sight:

> On bad days they know just what to say – Chitter, chitter cooo, cooo – and what to do – nuzzle, nibble, cuddle … and when it is best just to be.

Later, in the camp, this acoustic register recurs displaced from any literal bird, surfacing instead in the shapes Sami perceives in clouds:

> Now, when the smoky nightmares Boom, I watch the Clouds. Sometimes, fluffy cloud pigeons take shape. Spiraling. Soaring. Sharing the sky.

Here, fauna persists as storied matter even in the visual absence of any actual bird, carried forward by cloud-shapes and memory alike — a point taken up in more detail in section 4.4 below.

Each species named in the story carries with it a distinct material and ecological history that is not arbitrary to the narrative's concerns. Pigeons are ecologically known as strongly site-attached birds capable of navigating home across long distances by a homing instinct; in Sami's narrative, the attachment between pigeon and the concept of "home" is therefore not merely a conventional literary symbol but a real ecological resonance — the bird is, in a very literal sense, a creature whose defining trait is the capacity to return home, which sharpens by contrast the fact that Sami's own home cannot be returned to. Canaries carry a different set of material associations, historically kept as domestic companions and, notoriously, as sentinel animals in mining contexts, prized for a bodily sensitivity to danger in the surrounding air that exceeds human perception — an animal whose body registers threat before a human body can. Doves carry longstanding associations with peace and homecoming across many cultural traditions, associations that the narrative's own language ("the hope of peace") appears to invoke directly.

Read together, the diversity of species is not incidental detail but a deliberately assembled set of material histories, each contributing a different valence to the larger claim that birds, and not simply "nature" in the abstract, are what mediates Sami's relationship to home and loss. This diversity also anticipates the analytical categories introduced in Table 1: the pigeon anchors fauna's role as a medium for remembering home, while the canary's and dove's more culturally freighted associations prepare the ground for the acting-out and working-through analyses developed in sections 4.3 and 4.5.

The Tactile Register: Clay as Extra-Textual Storied Matter

A dimension of *My Beautiful Birds* that bears directly on its claims about matter concerns the book's own physical construction. Del Rizzo's illustrations are built from polymer clay, Plasticine, and other dimensional media rather than painted or digitally rendered, producing illustrations with visible texture, relief, and shadow on the printed page. From a material ecocritical standpoint, this production choice is not incidental to the story's thematic content but continuous with it: the book itself enacts, at the level of its own material construction, the claim its narrative makes about matter's capacity to carry and transmit meaning beyond language.

Where the written text describes birds as "feathered brushes" that paint the sky, the illustrated page presents birds whose feathers are literally built up in layered, sculpted clay, inviting a reading experience that is implicitly tactile even when the book is only seen rather than touched — the eye registers ridges, thickness, and shadow in a way flat illustration does not typically invite. This extra-textual materiality extends Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) claim that matter operates as a "network of active productive forces" beyond the level of narrated content into the level of the book-as-object: the physical medium of the illustration participates in "writing" the story's meaning alongside, and not merely in service of, the words on the page.

This observation also bears on the analysis of Sami's own material practice within the story. Sami's black paint, his kite, and his wall mural are all acts of material creation carried out by a child character inside a book whose own illustrations are, by the same token, acts of material creation carried out by its author-illustrator. The formal echo between what Sami does with paint and clay-like pigment inside the story and what Del Rizzo does with polymer clay and Plasticine to tell that story suggests a further, self-reflexive layer of storied matter: the book does not simply represent a child healing through material practice, it enacts that same principle in how it is made, extending trans-corporeal continuity from the level of the fictional world to the level of the physical object a reader holds.

Fauna as a Medium for Acting Out

The acting-out process in Sami's character begins as he recalls his habits at home before he and his family were forced to flee to a refugee camp. He remembers the warm, ordinary intimacy of that life by recalling how he fed his pet pigeons seeds:

> I remember filling my pigeons' food bowl, then — in a flash — my neighborhood, and all that was home … gone. And my beautiful birds?

Even after arriving at the refugee camp, Sami remains haunted by the memory of his pet birds as he looks at the sky from the roof of a camp building:

> Sometimes the dry wind wafts soft music through the camp. I shiver, remembering the songs I would hum to my birds. I wish it were like it used to be, just me and my pigeons up on our rooftop with the wind and the boundless sky. Happy. Free. If I close my eyes, sometimes I can see my birds, and sometimes I daydream that I hear them.

LaCapra (2001) explains that acting out often manifests as melancholia: a psychological condition characterized by the subject's inability to let go of a lost object and to engage in the more mobile, integrative work of mourning. In the narrative, the bird food bowl that Sami last filled before his environment was destroyed becomes, from a material ecocriticism perspective, a form of trauma-charged storied matter — a material object that holds the affective energy of loss and continually calls the subject back to the moment of rupture. This function is consistent with what Winnicott (1953) first described as the transitional object: an item invested with significance at the threshold between a subject's internal and external worlds. Whereas Winnicott's transitional objects typically support healthy development, precisely because a child eventually lets go of them, Sami's inability to let go of the memory attached to the food bowl illustrates the reverse dynamic: an attachment that has calcified into what LaCapra calls melancholia, because the object it is attached to can no longer be materially reached at all. The empty bowl in Sami's memory therefore functions as matter that refuses to become the past; it continues to draw Sami into a temporal loop in which loss always feels freshly present.

The most dramatic and materially significant manifestation of acting out occurs during a painting episode. When Sami attempts to represent his birds on canvas, black paint — originally intended as merely one visual element among others — overtakes the entire surface of the painting, staining his hands and clothes:

> Smoky black smears from edge to edge, swallowing everything underneath. I tear my painting piece by piece. Black paint stains my hands and my clothes …

In LaCapra's framework, this moment enacts a failure of representation that paradoxically becomes the most honest representation available of Sami's traumatic condition. Trauma, LaCapra (2001) argues, is something that resists symbolization — it refuses to be transformed cleanly into a coherent symbol or narrative. The black paint here is not only a metaphor for psychic failure; read through Bennett's (2010) thing-power, it is a material that agentically indicates Sami's trauma is not yet ready to be represented aesthetically, "interrupting" his own creative intention in exactly the sense Bennett describes matter interrupting human plans. This is a useful point of contrast with Rust's (2014) material ecocritical reading of the postmodern horror film, where the human body itself becomes a site at which matter refuses full narrative or ideological control; Sami's painting performs a structurally similar refusal, but within the register of a children's picture book rather than horror, redirecting the same basic insight — that matter resists the intentions projected onto it — toward a pedagogical rather than a frightening end.

Herman (1992) identifies intrusion — the uncontrolled resurfacing of traumatic memory into a subject's consciousness and actions — as one of the primary symptoms of trauma. The black paint stains on Sami's hands and clothes can be read as the material manifestation of this

intrusion: memories of destruction enter Sami's body through the paint itself, transforming what should be a creative act into a traumatic repetition. That Sami subsequently tears up his painting is significant in the same register: this destructive act is not a resolution but a further expression of acting out, in which the subject destroys a representation that cannot accommodate the truth of his experience. Read trans-corporeally (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), the episode also demonstrates that this failure is not simply psychological but material and reciprocal: paint, Sami's hands, and Sami's memory are caught in the same intra-active loop, each shaping what the others can do.

Sound as Storied Matter

Beyond color and physical presence, fauna in *My Beautiful Birds* also carries an important auditory register that operates according to its own material logic. The onomatopoeic rendering discussed in section 4.1 — "Chitter, chitter cooo, cooo" — is not simply a linguistic representation of a bird's call; it functions in the text as a kind of transcription of physical sound waves that once actually moved through the air and vibrated against Sami's eardrums. Krause's (2015) work on soundscape ecology offers a useful frame for this claim: Krause distinguishes *biophony* — the collective sound produced by living organisms in a given environment — from geophony (non-living environmental sound) and anthropophony (human-produced sound), arguing that a landscape's biophony is a form of environmental information available to careful listening, not incidental background noise. Read as biophony, the birdsong recorded in Sami's memory is a form of environmental information that has been internalized and now persists independently of any bird's actual presence.

Independent research on stress and memory lends further weight to this reading of sound's material effects, without requiring any claim that the picture book itself makes a scientific argument. McCullough et al. (2015) found that stress-induced cortisol responses have differential effects on recollection and familiarity-based recognition memory, indicating that emotionally significant sounds and events can become deeply, physiologically bound to memory in ways that are not purely voluntary. In the narrative, the sounds of birds recorded in Sami's memory function as what might be called *acoustic storied matter*: sound matter that stores and retells an experience of dwelling that has been forcibly interrupted. The fact that this sound returns to Sami on the wind in the refugee camp, making him shiver, and is not something he summons at will, illustrates precisely the point Iovino and Oppermann (2014) make when they describe matter as "a network of active productive forces" that co-produces meaning independently of human intention: the sound comes to Sami, rather than Sami voluntarily calling it forth.

The passage in which Sami watches "fluffy cloud pigeons" take shape, "Spiraling. Soaring. Sharing the sky," extends this acoustic analysis into the visual register without abandoning it: the passage begins from an explicitly auditory disturbance — "the smoky nightmares Boom" — before resolving into the visual, cloud-borne image of pigeons. Sound and sight are not separate channels here but part of a single material continuum through which Sami's environment continues to "speak" bird-shapes and bird-sounds to him whether or not any actual bird is present, underscoring the storied-matter claim that meaning is distributed across sensory registers rather than confined to a single symbolic channel.

It is worth noting, too, that silence functions as storied matter in this narrative by contrast. The camp scenes are repeatedly marked by the absence of the specific soundscape — pigeon coo, hummed song — that once structured Sami's days at home; this acoustic absence is itself a form of information, registering loss in a register that operates independently of, and prior to, anything Sami consciously narrates about his situation. The sound that eventually does return to him on the wind is thus doubly significant: it breaks a silence that has itself been functioning, throughout the camp scenes, as an auditory trace of everything the family has lost.

Fauna as a Medium for Working Through

The working-through process of Sami's character is expressed in various ways across the narrative, including flying kites, cooking familiar food, and attending school in the camp despite its limited facilities. Among these, the most materially significant expression of working through is Sami's decision to color the kite he flies with the same colors as his absent birds:

> I paint feathers of yellow, rose, and turquoise. Mixing my pigeon gray paint, I use just one dab of black.

LaCapra (2001) explains that working through is characterized by the subject's ability to maintain critical distance — a distance that allows acknowledgment of the past without total absorption by it. The single dab of black added amid otherwise bright colors is an apt material correlate of this concept: loss and sadness are acknowledged (one dab of black) but are no longer permitted to dominate the whole, in contrast to the painting episode discussed in section 4.3, where black paint "swallows everything."

From the perspective of material ecocriticism, the kite functions as an assemblage in DeLanda's (2006) sense: a material formation that emerges through the convergence of heterogeneous forces and materials — paint, paper, wind, string, and Sami's own imaginative attachment to his birds — none of which alone determines what the kite becomes. When the kite flies, it does not merely represent a bird; it materially becomes something that shares functional qualities with a bird, moving through air, responding to wind, and connecting Sami's body, via the kite string, to the sky in a way his memories alone cannot. A comparable dynamic appears in Baker's (2025) material ecocritical reading of tabletop role-playing play, where physical tokens and peacock feathers on a gaming table are shown to shape character dynamics in ways no single player fully controls; Sami's kite, similarly, is only partly his to direct once airborne, since wind and air currents co-author its movement. This is also where Coole and Frost's (2010) account of new materialism becomes useful: they argue that matter is "never fully subject to human control" but possesses what they describe as a kind of protean vitality that can exceed and redirect an actor's intentions. The working through the kite enables is, in this sense, a genuinely shared, trans-corporeal accomplishment rather than a purely internal, willed act.

It is also important to note that the working-through process in this narrative is not solely an internal achievement on Sami's part but is facilitated by the direct material agency of fauna itself. When small birds unexpectedly approach the daydreaming Sami in the refugee camp, the event constitutes a material interaction that is unplanned and beyond human control. Abram's (1996) account of phenomenological encounter with the "more-than-human world" is instructive here: Abram argues that human perception and self-understanding remain fundamentally entangled with, and dependent upon, reciprocal encounters with non-human bodies and environments — encounters that humans do not fully script or initiate. Read through this lens, the moment when birds choose to approach Sami, rather than being summoned by him, creates a relational space in which Sami can re-experience a more complete sense of belonging to a shared, living world. For a child who has been uprooted from his habitat, this material encounter functions as a form of ecological recognition: the recognition that he remains part of a wider network of life, that the non-human world still acknowledges his presence, and that the possibility of belonging persists even though his physical home has been destroyed.

The climax of the working-through process is realized through Sami's act of painting the walls of the refugee camp with images of birds, high-rise buildings, human figures flying in planes, and colorful heart shapes. In LaCapra's framework, this act of painting marks the temporal differentiation at the heart of working through: Sami no longer paints in an attempt to recover

a lost past, but to imagine a future that does not yet exist. The camp walls — previously a material boundary that confines and limits — are transformed into a storied surface: a material surface that receives and disseminates new narratives rather than merely enclosing Sami's present displacement. Van Alphen's (1997) study of art's role in mediating historical trauma is useful here: he argues that the most successful artistic practices in the aftermath of trauma are not those that most accurately reproduce the traumatic event, but those that most successfully create what he calls an experiential new frame, within which the subject can reposition himself in relation to his own past. Sami's mural does exactly this: fauna no longer appear as objects of loss that freeze Sami in melancholia, but as narrative agents that lead him toward the articulation of hope — an achievement that is only possible because the material of birds, from the beginning of the story, has carried the capacity to tell stories that exceed what a grieving child could put into words on his own.

Fauna, Displacement, and the Reconfiguration of Home

The material ecocritical reading developed above also illuminates a broader question raised by the narrative: what does "home" become for a displaced child once its original physical referent no longer exists? The pigeon's homing instinct, introduced in section 4.1, offers one answer by contrast: unlike a pigeon, which can be materially returned to a fixed location by evolved biological capacity, Sami cannot be returned to his original home by any comparable mechanism. Rather than treat this absence as a simple deficit, the narrative's material logic suggests a different resolution — home is reconfigured not as a place to which one returns, but as a relational capacity that can be reconstituted wherever storied matter, in the form of fauna, sound, and color, becomes newly available.

This reconfiguration of home differs instructively from the versions of displacement examined elsewhere in the material ecocriticism literature. Where Āğır (2025) reads water as a shaper of migrant displacement and historical trauma, and Zhao and Liao (2025) read the forest as a destroyer of life in times of war, both water and forest remain relatively fixed or slow-moving relative to the humans who are displaced from them; the loss they narrate is largely a loss of access to a place. Fauna, by contrast, are mobile in the same register as the humans who lose them: birds can leave, as Sami's birds seem to when his neighborhood is destroyed, but they can also unexpectedly return, as the small birds do when they approach him in the camp. This distinction matters, because it models for a child reader a version of home and belonging that does not depend on a fixed, unchangeable location, but on the ongoing possibility of relationship.

This reading resonates with, while also extending, the pattern identified in the four comparable works surveyed in the Introduction. Where *The Red Tree* uses a surreal, largely inanimate landscape as both mirror of trauma and healing agent, and *The Underneath* embeds trauma in an ecosystem's accumulated memory, *My Beautiful Birds* locates this same healing capacity in living, moving, willful non-human bodies whose comings and goings are never fully within the protagonist's control.

Trans-corporeally understood (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), this reconfiguration of home is neither purely psychological nor purely material, but both at once: Sami's changing relationship to loss is materially scaffolded by kites, paint, walls, and birds, even as his imaginative and emotional life gives those materials their significance in the first place. Neither side of this relationship — mind or matter — is sufficient on its own to account for the healing the narrative depicts; it is their intra-action, in Barad's (2007) sense, that produces the outcome.

This has a further consequence for how the refugee camp itself is read across the narrative. Early in the story the camp appears chiefly as a site of confinement and loss, defined by what it lacks relative to Sami's original home. By the time of the wall mural discussed in section 4.5,

however, the camp's own materials — its walls, its available paint, its dry wind — have themselves become resources through which Sami's working through is accomplished. The camp does not stop being a site of hardship, but the narrative's material logic shows it becoming, gradually, a site capable of hosting new storied matter of its own, rather than remaining merely a negative image of the home that was lost.

Fauna and the Human Body: Trans-Corporeal Continuity

The analysis developed across the preceding sections has repeatedly returned to a single underlying claim, which merits statement in its own right: that Sami's body and the material world he inhabits are not two separate domains linked only by perception or metaphor, but a single, trans-corporeal continuum (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010) in which color and sound do not merely represent his psychological state but actively participate in producing it. The birds' "plumes of yellow, rose, shimmering turquoise, and white," discussed in section 4.1, are not passively received by Sami's eye; following Bennett's (2010) account of thing-power, they are better understood as exerting a low-grade but real pressure on his perception and mood, interrupting — in the specific, non-metaphorical sense Bennett intends — the visual dominance of the refugee camp's grays and blacks. The same holds for sound, discussed in section 4.4: the chitter and coo that return to Sami on the camp wind physically enter his body as vibration before they are consciously recognized as memory, making his shiver a trans-corporeal event rather than a purely mental one.

This trans-corporeal continuity extends, finally, beyond the fictional world to the reading situation itself. A picture book's color and texture are not only narrated in words but are directly, sensorily available to the child reading or being read the book, whose own body receives Del Rizzo's sculpted clay feathers and bright pigments in a manner structurally analogous to how Sami's body receives his birds. This does not collapse the distinction between fictional character and reader, but it does suggest that the trans-corporeal healing traced in Sami's arc is not confined to the story's internal logic; it is, at least potentially, an experience the material book extends outward to whoever holds it.

Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Read together, the findings above support this study's central claim: that fauna in *My Beautiful Birds* function as storied matter with genuine material agency in Sami's psychological recovery from war trauma. The birds are not mere metaphors or literary decoration; through their spectrum of colors, sound vibrations, and physical presence, they interrupt Sami's acting-out condition and participate materially in his transition toward working through — a transition that, consistent with LaCapra's (2001) model, is neither linear nor complete, since it proceeds through a process of intra-action (Barad, 2007) with various material media, from the black paint that represents the intrusion of trauma to the kite and mural that function as creative assemblages (DeLanda, 2006), rather than through a single decisive event.

This reading extends material ecocriticism's existing engagements with flora, water, pollution, tabletop games, and film (Prieto, 2025; Dědinová, 2025; Ağır, 2025; AlSuhaibani & AlQahtani, 2023; Baker, 2025; Rust, 2014, among others) into an underexamined pairing: fauna as material agents of trauma healing specifically within children's war literature. It also extends trauma theory's own engagement with representation and materiality by showing that LaCapra's (2001) largely text- and image-focused account of acting out and working through can be productively read alongside an account of matter's own agency, drawn from Bennett (2010), Barad (2007), Coole and Frost (2010), and DeLanda (2006), without reducing either framework to the other.

For scholars and practitioners of children's literature, this reading also carries a modest pedagogical implication. If fauna and other concrete, sensorily available materials can function

as genuine agents of trauma processing within a narrative, rather than as mere illustrative decoration, then picture books that render war and displacement through such materials may offer child readers something beyond information or empathy alone: a model, however implicit, for how one's own relationship to loss might be materially and relationally, rather than purely internally, worked through.

This has a bearing, too, on how educators and caregivers might use a book such as *My Beautiful Birds* with child readers who have themselves experienced displacement or loss. Rather than approaching the book solely as a vehicle for empathic identification with a distant character, an adult reader attentive to its material logic might draw a child's attention to the birds' colors and sounds, or to the single dab of black amid the kite's brighter feathers, as concrete, shareable points of entry into a conversation about loss that need not proceed through direct verbal disclosure — an approach consistent with this study's broader claim that healing, in this narrative, is accomplished materially and relationally as much as it is narrated psychologically.

Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on a single primary text, read through a qualitative, interpretive method that does not claim generalizability beyond that text. Future research could extend this analysis comparatively, examining fauna's role as storied matter across a wider corpus of children's war literature — including graphic narratives such as Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, already read materially by Cavalcanti (2025) — to test whether the pattern identified here recurs, varies, or breaks down across different genres, media, and conflicts.

Empirical reader-response research with child readers of such texts would also usefully complement the present textual analysis, testing whether the material and trans-corporeal dynamics identified through close reading are in fact available to, or activated by, young readers themselves. A further avenue concerns illustration technique specifically: since section 4.2 argues that Del Rizzo's clay-based medium is itself a form of storied matter, comparative work across picture books that render trauma through different physical media — painted, collaged, digitally rendered — could help clarify how far a book's own material construction, and not only its narrated content, shapes the kind of trans-corporeal reading experience this study has traced in *My Beautiful Birds*.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer two questions: how fauna is manifested materially within the narrative of *My Beautiful Birds*, and how fauna functions as a medium for the acting-out and working-through mechanisms of trauma healing. In response to the first question, the analysis shows that fauna is manifested across multiple, interlocking material registers: as embodied, physically present birds; as color and visual pattern, rendered doubly through language and through Del Rizzo's dimensional, clay-based illustration technique; as sound, carried through onomatopoeia and memory; and as residue and trace, in the black paint, kite pigment, and wall mural into which bird-imagery migrates over the course of the story.

In response to the second question, the analysis shows that fauna functions as storied matter with genuine material agency across Sami's psychological arc. The birds are not mere metaphors or literary decoration; through their spectrum of colors, sound vibrations, and physical presence, they are able to interrupt Sami's acting-out condition, materialized above all in the empty food bowl and the black paint that "swallows everything" of his first attempt to paint his birds. Sami, initially trapped in a melancholic repetition of loss, is gradually released through a process of intra-action with a series of material media — from the black paint that indexes the intrusion of trauma, to the kite and wall mural that function as creative assemblages — allowing him to reach a working-through stage in which he builds critical

distance from his past without erasing the "black stain" of his experience. This psychophysical recovery affirms the concept of trans-corporeality: the healing of the human subject is intrinsically tied to ecological recognition, and to the capacity of matter itself to continue "writing" new narratives of life.

Theoretically, this study contributes to material ecocriticism by extending its existing engagements with flora, water, pollution, and other materials into an underexamined pairing with fauna, trauma, and contemporary children's war literature; it contributes to trauma theory by demonstrating that LaCapra's (2001) model of acting out and working through can be read productively alongside an account of matter's own agency, without reducing either framework to the other.

As a single-text, qualitative study, these findings are offered as an interpretive contribution rather than a generalizable claim; the comparative and empirical research directions outlined in section 4.9 above would help establish how far the pattern identified here extends across other works of children's war literature and other child readers.

Ultimately, matter and nature in *My Beautiful Birds* are shown to be not merely passive backdrops to a child's suffering, but narrative agents that performatively produce hope and help restore human identity amid the ruins of destruction — a claim that this study suggests deserves wider attention across the growing body of literature written for children who must make sense of a world still, urgently, at war.

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