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On Translation: Surplus and Labor in Arabic Cultural Translation

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Having worked for many years in journalism, art, and culture, we have witnessed first-hand the gradual expansion of translation as a daily practice in the work of art, culture, and civil society institutions. We followed institutional and funding transformations as they made their way hand-in-hand with the tumultuous turns of politics and economy in the Arab world,[1] often indexing the frontal position translation occupies within the supply chains of cultural production. Our generation observed the evolution of the Arab cultural sector spawning its many intersections with notions of production, value, and capital, as it reinscribed us as service providers: wage laborers and contractors working in culture.

Despite the rapid growth of cultural production in Arabic, describing this growth and identifying its impact in accurate terms hinges on quantitative studies that are beyond the scope of this text. We have referred to this growth, however, in a previous extended study, vis-à-vis its relationship to the practices of cultural bridging, and more generally to cultural capitalization in Arab countries.[2] Certainly we do not wish to repeat ourselves here, but it is important to note that translation, its mere existence in and of itself, is the generator of surplus for the said capitalization, to such an extent that some may describe the Arab art and culture production in its entirety as an act of translation.[3] It is then that not only the position of the translated text is diminished, rather as well the position of the original text itself, in favor of the mirror-like symmetrical presence – again the mere presence of the original text accompanied by its translation. At some point either in the future or the past, every new cultural publication in Arabic is, or was, a translation project. We ask ourselves: if every cultural work in Arabic is in one way or another also a work of translation, what are we actually doing when we translate?

Walter Benjamin once wrote that "the essential substance of a literary work [is] what it contains in addition to information … the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic,' something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet?"[4] Contrary to the wide belief holding translation as of secondary degree or of derivative quality to the original, we think that for every reduction by translation there is also an excess; an excess that

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[1] Following some reservations about the use of the phrase "the Arab world," and in response to a dialogue between members of the editorial team and translators, it was decided to keep the phrase. The translators asserted the fact that "Arab world" indicates a degree of diversity (away from Arab nationalist ideology). Additionally, the translators use the word as talking about a particular view of the world from our local contexts, as in the "worldview" in English for example, rather than using it as reference to any sort of ethnicity as it is often popularly used in swayful knowledge production and public administration institutions. (Authors)
In this regard, we can add that destroying the exclusionary connotations with which identifiable terms and expressions have been saturated can only be through a comprehensive reformulation process that actively restores what was stolen from our language in the name of bourgeois national doctrines, new liberating meanings. We must not have to submit to the criteria of political correctness and minority discourse dictated and marketed as emancipatory language by liberal and left-claiming academia. We must plot our way out of our linguistic alienation towards a linguistic-self that clearly embodies the historicized becoming of our class and cultural narratives. (Translation Manager)

[2] Hamadeh, Dima. "Bridges, Hearts, Cash: Neoliberal Markets of Cultural Understanding." *The Contemporary Journal*, no. 1, 2018. https://doi.org/10.31411/tcj.01.01

[3] Davies, Clare. "Tarjama/Translation: Arteeast Exhibition at The Queens Museum of Art, New York, 10 May–27 September 2009." *Arab Studies Journal*, vol 18, no. 1, 2010, p. 342.

[4] Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings and Marcus Paul Bullock. Harvard University Press, 2004, pp. 253-255.

Benjamin describes as "poetic," and that we see as a *surplus* in the particular case of cultural capitalization. Yet, every text written in a given language is, by its very nature, ridden with gaps and losses, that in many cases translation is called upon to mend. What loss would the surplus of Arabic translation be the mending thereof?

Let us first consider what we translate. Cultural writings in Arab countries, conventionally referred to as *theory*, feature a distinct language born out of, on the one hand, the pressure to abide by the rules of the academic craft in the North, and on the other hand, the pressure to remain faithful to public opinion trends and report on the state of affairs in the South. The rhetoric forged between these two pressures engenders a kind of writing that emphasizes the contingent over the structural; the subjective over the objective; the ethical over the political, one which valorizes personal experience and individual suffering, especially when writing about gender and body.[5] This kind of writing is considered theory not only inasmuch as it is referential to, or intertextual with, previous canonical texts in other languages, but also by internalizing the readership of these said texts as imagined readers. We therefore translate texts that first manifested themselves, already translated, to their authors.

We also translate texts that were not written in their authors' mother languages, which might sometimes require the author to assume the role of local informant. Prompted by a zeal for specificity, or simply by the complexity of the phenomena they observe, many authors would rather opt for using transliterated terms, in ways similar to how early colonial ethnographers used ethnic jargon in their attempt to evidence their hands-on knowledge of specific contexts. Loanwords and latinized terms, used as independent signifiers, have become a staple to this kind of writing; a staple that too quickly runs out of steam and exoticism once rendered back to the original language. Thus, it falls upon translation to justify not only a particular choice of words, but rather also translation's own raison d'être.

These texts often identify, analyze, and observe phenomena pertaining to particular localities. Yet, labeling these phenomena as such, and even their mere emergence as subjects of research and scrutiny, is in itself a by-product of mobilized cultural capital in academic geographies elsewhere. Put differently, and by reverting to Benjamin, some texts possess a certain quality that calls for their translation. In the case of translated cultural writing, however, the drive for translation is in itself an effect of translation. In fact, translation produces what it appears to simply reproduce. It is what confers on the original text its originality; it bestows value thereon as a text coming from elsewhere alongside its translation. Translation here instantiates a swing back-and-forth between the self and the migratory identity. It reveals power relations commanding the freedom and equity of movement of both author and knowledge. Not to mention translation itself being complicit in establishing, disguising and normalizing this duality.

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[5] In accordance with the observation of Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek in their critique of the populist left-wing discourse. The same observation applies to any critique attempting to associate with the local and the current by adopting conceptual immediacy. For more on this, refer to: Srnicek, Nick, and Williams, Alex. *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*. Verso Books, 2016, pp. 10-11.

Would it be that this mirror-like symmetry of the text/translation is what, on the one hand, demarcates geographies of critical cultural production, while on the other hand, furnishes translation as a field that produces and reinforces positionalities within identity economies? As translators, therefore, we ask whether we could make room for a political practice that subverts market economy and cultural capital? Is it up to us, to begin with? This latter question is not driven by lazy criticism; rather, it stems from a deep awareness of our positions within a techno-economic and politico-cultural system accruing profit off our gigs all the while devising technologies to eventually replace us.