

Exchanging Words: Thematizations of Translation in Arabic Writing from Israel¹

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When two languages meet, one of them is necessarily linked to animality. Speak like me or you are an animal.

Abdelfattah Kilito, "Dog Words."

I lived in the outside world...for twenty years, unable to breathe no matter how hard I tried, like a man who is drowning. But I did not die. I wanted to get free but could not; I was a prisoner unable to escape. But I did remain unchained.

How often I yelled at those about me, "Please, everyone!...Please help me!" But all that came from beneath my moustache was a meowing sound, like that of a cat.

Emile Habiby, *The Pessimist*.

One time, when I was a little boy in a *disbdashab*, I was walking on the outskirts [of town] and ran into a group of bullies. 'A Jew, a Jew, come on, let's beat him up!' They surrounded me. 'Hey, I'm not Jewish, I swear!' They said to me: *gammad*, you pimp, if you don't even know how to speak Muslim, if you're speaking Jewish, how are you not a Jew?²

Samir Naqqash, *I, They, and the Split*.

In a brilliant lecture delivered in French at a conference on bilingualism held in Rabat (November 1981), the Moroccan literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito introduced his audience to the figure of the *mustanbib*—the Bedouin lost at night who imitates the barking of dogs.³ The *mustanbib* appropriates this "canine idiom" only in order to induce the "real" dogs on the fringes of campsites to bark back, thereby guiding him back to human society. But *what if*—muses Kilito—if, upon his return, the *mustanbib* finds that he cannot re-appropriate human language—that try as he might, he can only continue barking? This question quickly proliferates into a veritable labyrinth of the hypothetical, a dizzying trajectory of possibilities. What if the mimic begins to *identify* with dogs, to take on the full range of canine behaviors? How does the tribe deal with him then? What if our mimic is in fact neither dog nor human but a *monkey* pretending to be a human pretending to be a dog? And underscoring all these "dog words," the unstated but pivotal question: Where do we draw the line between mimicry and transfiguration—between *pretending* and *becoming*?

"'Like' does not make an identity," Kilito asserts. It is the grotesqueness of mimicry, its kinship to bestiality, that surfaces from these allegorical, fable-like ruminations—a reading of the postcolonial mimic that quite

diverges from the later postulations of Homi Bhabha.⁴ We find here not a redeeming or recuperating hybridity, but the threat of an impending and irreversible defeat: "The state of bilingualism does not evoke the image of two adversaries approaching one another, armed with nets and tridents. In this case, one of the gladiators is already on the ground and getting ready to receive the death blow."⁵

But what matters, for our purposes, is that he has not yet received it. The fates have not yet been closed. Is bilingualism, then, an indefinite wait for a coup de grâce that never comes? In the (artificially prolonged) intervening moment that still separates the triumph of one gladiator from the annihilation of the other, I will consider other possibilities for the meeting of languages in colonial and post-colonial contexts. These possibilities arise from the prose of two writers who have chosen not to adopt the language of the Other (i.e., not to bark in the dark), but rather, to enfold the Other within their own idiom, to incorporate the life-and-death struggle between the two gladiators into the story they tell. Emile Habiby and Samir Naqqash, both native speakers of Arabic, both writing in Israel, both drawing on what are essentially vanished histories in Palestine and Iraq, both using language to insist on an identity that has been rendered impossible by the logic of the State of Is-

rael—and more broadly, by the tortured logic of the (post)colonial Middle East with its unassailable binarisms of Hebrew and Arabic, Arab and Jew—engage translation inside their texts as a creative alternative to barking, as a mode of resistance to the authority that has displaced them from their pasts and their homes. My reading of their work will probe the relationship of language to authority in both external (institutional) and internal (linguistic) forms. Along the way, I will consider the implications of their writing for how we think about translation, literary bilingualism, and the colonial paradigm of Israel/Palestine.

Translation Theory and the Bilingual Text

Kilito's emphasis on the power differential that *must already exist* in any situation of bilingualism is corroborated by an emerging body of work on translation in post-colonial contexts, generally between "Third World" and "metropolitan" languages.⁶ These studies have radically re-evaluated the relationship between text and translation, interrogating the standard metaphors of fidelity and equivalence and opening the field up to consideration of the empirical power relations imbricated in any linguistic or cultural exchange. For instance, Tejaswini Niranjana⁷ and Samia Mehrez⁸ point out in their respective studies that George Steiner and critics like him, who locate translation within the ostensibly universal tradition of "humanism," overlook the inequities of exchange in colonial paradigms, in which translation operates to the material benefit of the dominant (colonial or imperial) power.⁹ If Walter Benjamin's classic 1923 essay situated translation in the lofty realm of the metaphysical, emphasizing the always fragmentary nature of any one language in relation to the "greater" or "pure" language,¹⁰ these recent works are much more concerned with the gritty relations between those different fragments, the here-and-now of social, economic, and political uses and functions of language. Language in this body of scholarship is never distant from the dialectic of authority and resistance: the meeting (or clash) of languages in colonial and post-colonial conditions has been widely credited with producing hybridized literature that breaks down the "monologized" discourse of nationalism and cracks its authority.

Those researches, however, focus on the politics of translation as a process applied *to* a text rather than a process that takes place *within* it. Some readings of Benjamin's essay have stressed that any act of writing is already a translation. In this sense, "translation" implies the transfer of an "Ur-text"—a discrete body of thought that exists in an abstract, meta-linguistic state (à la Benjamin's "pure thought")—into an actual (and therefore only approximate) written code.¹¹ This approach moves the "original" text one step further back in the creative process, but without fundamentally modi-

fying the concept of translation as the transposition of one internally homogenous symbolic system into another. On the other hand, studies of hybrid texts, which focus on the "impure" language of the source text, have not generally utilized the concept of translation to talk about narrative. The many studies of the "hybridized" language of postcolonial texts (the writings of Salman Rushdie and the various North African *beur* writers being oft-cited examples) analyze their impact on the "major" language and its literary culture, while assuming that language inside the narrative (i.e., language as used and perceived by the narrator and characters) maintains its normal mimetic of a transparent medium. Thus we find that the linguistic innovations and transgressions of these Francophone and Anglophone writers are usually either celebrated or criticized as the contamination, infiltration, bastardization, or hybridization of one language—the *receiving* ("host" or "major") language—rather than viewed as explicit and conscious negotiation *between* distinct languages taking place within the writing of the text.¹²

Samia Mehrez insightfully draws attention to the intra-textual role of translation in Arab Francophone writing, asserting that "by drawing on more than one culture, more than one language, more than one world experience, within the confines of the same text, post-colonial anglophone and francophone literature very often defies our notions of an 'original' work and its translation."¹³ To describe such works she proposes the notion of the "double" text, one that can be decoded only by the bilingual reader conversant in both cultures and traditions, and whose reading can therefore be "none but a perpetual translation."¹⁴ But while Mehrez adduces the translation process as essential to the *decoding* of the "double" text, she does not identify translation as an integral dynamic of the narrative code itself.

It is at this point—with the internal dynamics of the "code"—that my study picks up the thread. Our point of departure is that colonial and post-colonial contexts produce narratives that may self-consciously engage and problematize their own linguistic hybridity by explicitly *thematizing* the negotiation between different linguistic strands. In such texts, the relationship of the language(s) to the colonial structures of power not only informs the narrative implicitly, but also comes to the fore in the narrative as part of its thematic material. Translation then operates inside the narrative both in the traditional, pragmatic sense (in terms of the conversion of language) and in a derivative, metaphorical sense, as the narrative symbolically "converts" the contested structures of power through strategic, intentional moments of linguistic or communicative slippage. In the latter case, translation is less a discrete operation and more a continuous state of mind in which the elbow room be-

tween two languages, or between the message intended by the speaker and the message received by the listener, becomes a space of maneuver and of latent resistance.

This study will focus on these thematic functions of translation and code-switching within two heteroglossic Arabic works, where they appear in the narrative as literary topoi and in the meta-narrative as ideological subtexts. We will see how deliberate textual applications of translation and interlinguistic tensions serve as 1) a vehicle for disrupting the dominant/colonizing state discourse and ideology, inverting their truth value; and 2) a means of contesting history both as event and as narrative. Finally, by making so much of their meaning contingent on communicative *failure*—in other words, by intentionally obstructing the transparency of language within the narrative—these texts also demonstrate how the referential or mimetic function of language in the narrative may be meaningfully destabilized in contexts where languages (and language choice) are fraught with ideological import and tension.

Habiby and Naqqash in a Colonial Context

The two texts in question and the proximity of the languages being thematized within them diverge from the typological relationship between hegemonic and indigenous languages found in many colonial and post-colonial contexts. Most studies of translation in (post)colonial contexts examine the interaction of indigenous non-European languages with those of the colonizing powers. Likewise, scholarship on the bilingual text has drawn primarily on Anglophone and Francophone literatures and, to a lesser degree, on minority writing in the Americas and the Caribbean. These proclivities would seem to indicate a degree of institutionalization of the discourse, and ironically enough, a certain Eurocentrism (in the literal sense of the word) of its conceptual outlook.¹⁵ This study of Emile Habiby and Samir Naqqash will consider translation strategies, and particularly the subversive potential of translation and mis-translation, between two non-metropolitan languages and even between “standardized” literary Arabic and a minority Arabic dialect.¹⁶ As we shall see, the relationships particular to these languages—Hebrew and Arabic in Habiby, the Iraqi Jewish dialect and literary Arabic in Naqqash—lend themselves to thematic manipulation in ways that the more typical models do not. The history and nature of interaction between the languages in question also diverges from the dominant model in that their contact does not originate with colonization, but far predates it, and in that the dominant language is not associated with empire nor with its pedagogical apparatus (as was the case throughout India or Algeria, for instance). Israel/Palestine is a unique colonial context, and these two works are written by individuals who occupy different positions within Is-

rael’s multi-tiered ethnic and religious hierarchy. In short, the relationship of the languages to one another, the positions of the two authors relative to the state (and as follows, to each other), and finally, the relation of all these to models of coloniality and postcoloniality need to be probed further before we can continue to the texts themselves.

As writers of Arabic, both the Palestinian Habiby and the Iraqi-Jewish Naqqash occupy exceptional places within the Israeli literary spectrum. The writers of Arabic literature in Israel belong to two small groups, one comprising Palestinian Arabs who became citizens of the state (the so-called “48 Arabs”)¹⁷ and the second, slightly smaller group consisting of bilingual Jewish writers from Iraq who settled in Israel after the establishment of the state and at some point, past or present, published in Arabic.¹⁸ In juxtaposing Habiby and Naqqash, I imply a certain connection (albeit a loose one) between their respective projects that transcends their different affiliations.¹⁹

The foremost point of tangency is, of course, their choice of language. These two writers work not in the acquired, dominant language (Hebrew) but rather, in Arabic, their mother tongue, in a society where it has become a secondary, minority language. Viewed in comparative context, this paradigm is analogous neither to the Algerian writer of French (who uses the language of the “Other”) nor the Algerian writer of Arabic (who uses the majority tongue). Furthermore, although both Habiby and Naqqash have produced heteroglossic narratives embodying hierarchical linguistic configurations, those configurations themselves are far from identical: while Habiby’s Arabic narrative portrays Hebrew as the dominant (colonizing) tongue, in Naqqash’s work it is the colloquial dialect of the Iraqi Jews that is dominated by standard/literary Arabic (and, to a lesser degree, by the Muslim colloquial dialect and by Israeli Hebrew). Hence, in juxtaposing these two authors, we might question the assumption of a stable, generalized order of languages within a particular national setting.²⁰ It could be argued that Habiby is writing about Hebrew and Arabic within Israel, whereas Naqqash is really talking about dialects and literary Arabic relative to another context—that of Jews in Iraq. But in fact, in reading Naqqash we are broaching two or even three contextual frameworks. Naqqash is an Iraqi Jew writing in Israel (already a transnational context). As a Jew writing in Arabic in the post-1948 Middle East, however, his project defies not only the dominant cultural order of Israel, but that of the whole region, Israel and the Arab world alike. (Perhaps the only thing that Israel and the Arab world agree on is the dichotomization of “Jew” and “Arab.”) Hence we need to think about the relationship between the languages of his narrative in terms of all three frameworks: Naqqash as a Jew in Iraq,

as an Iraqi in Israel, and as an Arab Jew in a polarized Middle East.

To read Habiby, we must consider the nature of the relationship between Hebrew and Arabic. Both are “minor languages” in relation to the European metropolis; they are also closely related descendants of the same Semitic language family, sharing a number of cognates (a point which will prove important in my analysis of Habiby’s novel). Jews and Arabs have a shared history and culture in collective memory, as exemplified by the intensely productive literary interaction of Arabic and Hebrew in mediaeval Andalusia.²¹ With both a philological kinship and a joint literary past, then, Hebrew and Arabic in their current, colonial nexus present a horizon of thematic possibilities quite distinct from that of the “X-ophone” model. In particular, the idea of a deceptive *closeness* (as opposed to the sense of remoteness that generally characterizes relations between metropolitan and indigenous languages) permeates Habiby’s work and is also indicative of the actual (physical) proximity between the speakers of Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine.

If sociolinguistic context forms the first major point of divergence from the more common Francophone/Anglophone model, sociopolitical context constitutes the second: North Africa and the subcontinent are in the post-colonial phase, whereas Israel/Palestine is still locked in conflict. In the current deadlock, there are no realistic prospects of decolonization, and although within the 1948 boundaries Jews and Arabs alike hold citizenship and nominally equal rights, the position of the latter is incontestably that of second-class citizens. As a neo-colonial power, Israel is an exceptional case, having never employed within its 1948 borders the absentee landlord model on which (post)colonial theory was largely based, yet adopting a mix of the “landlord” and “settler” models in the territories occupied since 1967.²² We must also take into account that Jews have a historic connection to the land which, while it should not be confused with (or used to justify) the colonial-style land-grab that took place, does lend a vast wealth of cultural sources, references, and allusions to the writers currently working within its borders. That is to say that the long tradition of Jewish attachment to and writing about the land, itself quite genuine and legitimate, and the set of iconic images and phrases that have grown up around this tradition, are mobilized in the service of Zionism but may also serve ironic or subversive purposes, as represented by both Habiby and Naqqash. This too may be unique: I cannot think of a similar example of a symbolic tradition centered around the land being colonized that far predates the colonial moment.

Joseph Massad discusses the simultaneity of the colonial and post-colonial phases within Israel/Palestine in

terms of a “settler colonialism” which, “being a variant of colonialism, presents us with different spatialities and temporalities as regards a diachronic schema of colonialism, then post-colonialism.”²³ He points to South Africa, the U.S., and Rhodesia as other examples “where settler-colonists declared themselves independent [initiating the “post-colonial” phase] while maintaining colonial privileges for themselves over the conquered population [extending the ‘colonial’ phase].”²⁴ Massad correctly notes that simply calling the territory in question “Palestine” is to “refer to it as a colonized space in both the pre-1948 and post-1948 periods,” whereas to call it “Israel” is to recognize the realization of the Zionist project post-1948. Who in this schema occupies which position is a matter of multiple relativities: “Mizrahic Jews would have a more difficult task characterizing the nature of the space and time they inhabit owing to their dual status of being (internally) colonized vis-à-vis the Ashkenazim with colonizer privileges vis-à-vis the Palestinians.”²⁵ While Massad’s article does not take up the place of the Occupied Territories currently under military administration in this colonial schema, we should consider here that Israel within its ’48 borders represents what Massad calls the “‘post-colonial’ colony” even as it exercises direct rule over, and colonization of, another, foreign territory. In this sense it is as if we imported a mini-Algeria into South Africa. As such, any analogy between Israel and other colonial contexts can be partial at best.

How, then, to characterize these two writers in relation to this anomalous colonial paradigm (as well as to one another)? The late Habiby, who remained in his native Haifa and became an Israeli citizen after 1948, represented the Israeli Communist Party in the *Knesset*; his much-publicized acceptance of the 1992 Israel Prize for Literature generated considerable controversy throughout the Arab world.²⁶ Yet Habiby never ceased to identify himself with Palestine, in the sense both of a personal history and a political cause. Not surprisingly, critics of Arabic tend to classify him as a “Palestinian” writer while for critics of Hebrew, he is an “Israeli Arab.” The preoccupation of his fiction with the plight of Palestinians (whether in the 1948 borders of Israel, in the Occupied Territories, or in Lebanon) is reason enough to call Habiby a “Palestinian writer” even while acknowledging his deep connection to Israeli society. His writing can be comfortably classified as engaging the colonial dynamics within Israel, whether we locate it within the rubric of “colonial” or “post-colonial” literature.

Naqqash’s case is more complex: on the one hand, as a Jewish writer in the Jewish state, he ostensibly shares the privileges of the ruling majority. The reality, however, is that as a self-declared “Arab Jew” working in Arabic, he falls quite between two chairs.²⁷ In Israel he

has almost no reading public, and hence no interested commercial publishers; as for publishing abroad, it is nearly inconceivable that any reputable Arab press would publish the works of an Israeli Jew.²⁸ Virtually unknown both within Israel and abroad, Naqqash lacks any measure of institutional support or public recognition (while Habiby enjoyed widespread recognition, critical acclaim, financial success, and—perhaps most important of all—access to publishers and readers throughout the Arab world). Naqqash himself rejects the ideological basis of Israeli identity by claiming that he is in exile from Iraq, a claim that stands in direct opposition to the normative paradigm (which associates the diaspora with exile and Israel with “redemption” in the form of a quasi-religious repatriation).

All this is perhaps sufficient to classify Naqqash as a diasporic writer or a writer in exile. But his exile being the direct result of colonial intervention in Iraq and Palestine, I argue his status as a colonized writer as well. This is a point that has not yet been sufficiently theorized in writings on the coloniality of Israel/Palestine: it is not only a matter of Mizrahi Jews being “internally colonized,” as Massad puts it,²⁹ but of the fact that their dislocation is the joint product of Zionism and European colonial politics in the region. Naqqash, as an Iraqi, was colonized by the British. He was then brought against his will to Israel, which itself had been doubly colonized by Britain and by Zionism. As someone who declares himself an Iraqi—whatever that may mean to him—and lives in Israel as a citizen of that state, he is not altogether different from a (non-Jewish) writer who declares himself Palestinian and lives in Israel as a citizen. Without disregarding Naqqash’s position of privilege relative to his Palestinian-Israeli colleague, we can say that his similarly anomalous status in the Israeli landscape establishes an additional point of tangency from which we may draw comparative insights.

In this light, we can read Habiby’s *Al-Mutasha’il* [*The Pessoptimist*]³⁰ and Naqqash’s *Ana wa-ha’ula’ wa-l-fisam* [*I, They, and the Split*]³¹ as texts that defy easy categorization into either the “colonial” or the “postcolonial” rubric, but that explicitly engage the problems of authority and identity at the heart of (post)colonial discourses. These two Arabic works, written in Israel but informed by memories of Palestine and Iraq respectively, both deal with the transition from life in an Arabic-language society to life in Israel and with the process of “translation” the protagonists themselves undergo in order to cope with life in exile.³² Both works also bring the mindset of translation into the language of the writing, and demand it of us in the reading. Manipulating translation, I argue, enables the writers to expose the relationship of language to authority and thus to reclaim their own histories, transcending barriers both cultural and political.

False Friends: Mistranslation as Stratagem

Habiby is best known for his signature work *Al-waqa’i’ al-gharibah fi ikhtifa’ Sa’id abi al-nabs al-mutasha’il* (*The Strange Facts in the Disappearance of Sa’id the Ill-fated Pessoptimist*). This satirical novel chronicles Palestinian life in Israel through the misadventures of the hapless hero Sa’id, who (having been rescued from an impossible situation by benevolent space aliens) now relays his story through a series of letters dispatched to an unnamed narrator.³³ The story of Sa’id’s “strange facts” commences shortly after the 1948 Israeli-Palestinian war (referred to by Israelis as the War of Independence, and by Palestinians as the *nakbah* or “calamity”), when we find Sa’id amongst the scores of Palestinians seeking refuge in Lebanon. Before long, however, Sa’id decides to leave his mother and sister behind in Tyre and return to the “inside.” Having infiltrated the border, Sa’id presents himself before the Israeli military authorities, claiming sanctuary in the name of an Israeli official with whom his father (killed in the war) had collaborated.

The authorities detain Sa’id overnight in an ‘Akka mosque, where his former headmaster gives him an impromptu “history lesson” on the numerous conquests of Palestine. The following day, an Israeli army driver conveys Sa’id to his hometown, ushering him into his new life with the words “*ahlan wa-sablan fi medinat yisrael*” [Welcome to the *medinab* of Israel]—which our distraught protagonist misinterprets to mean that the Israelis have changed his beloved city’s name from “Haifa” to “Israel.” Only much later does he come to understand the source of his error: the word *ma-DI-nab* means “city” in Arabic, but in Hebrew, the same word, with a slight shift in vowel and stress (*me-di-NAH*), connotes “state.”³⁴

The obvious irony of an Israeli using the standard Arabic greeting (*ahlan wa-sablan*) to “welcome” a Palestinian refugee to his own, now-occupied land is further compounded by Sa’id’s misinterpretation. On the level of the narrative, this blunder characterizes Sa’id’s extreme naiveté. The same blunder, however, also functions on the level of meta-narrative as a strategic communication aimed directly at the reader: Sa’id’s mistranslation subtly transforms the intended message of the driver into the implied message of the author—the latter bearing the real truth value within Habiby’s economy of meaning. Indeed, we find consistently throughout the novel that it is not the narrative’s portrayal of the Israelis themselves so much as Sa’id’s failure to correctly understand them—and in this particular instance, to understand their name for their country (*medinat yisrael*)—that conveys the essence of his encounter with his new colonial reality. Habiby’s manipulation of the cognate *madinab/medinab* exemplifies his narrative strategy: from here, the tale that unfolds is one of slight shifts, of *double entendres*, in which appear-

ances of familiarity are misleading. As an opening example, then, this brief vignette of Sa'id and the Israeli driver humorously but pointedly introduces the new Israeli state from a Palestinian perspective, alludes to Israel's very real policy of changing place-names from Arabic to Hebrew,³⁵ and nods to the linguistic proximity between Hebrew and Arabic that will be so central to the spirit of this remarkable text.

This novel (henceforth referred to as *The Pessoptimist*), while written in literary Arabic and sprinkled with the colloquial Palestinian dialect, depends as much on its Hebrew backdrop as on the Arabic of the narrative to make its meaning. Much of the novel's dialogue consists of conversations between Sa'id and his Israeli-Jewish interlocutors, which presumably take place in Hebrew but are reported to the reader in Arabic. Furthermore, Sa'id's direct addresses to the reader and conversations with Palestinians are often interlaced with references to Hebrew and to Israeli material culture. Habiby himself was a Palestinian who, after 1948, became an Israeli citizen and one of Israel's political and literary luminaries; who wrote both in Hebrew and Arabic but maintained a division of labor, using Hebrew for his journalism and political essays and Arabic for his fiction.³⁶ His multi-layered linguistic and social background shapes the context for *The Pessoptimist*; the driver's hybrid Arabic-Hebrew "welcome" is not atypical of Israeli speech patterns of those years, and the cutting humor of the scene would be instantly recognizable by any reader, whether Jewish or Palestinian, in Israel.

While such moments of "play" between Hebrew and Arabic are interspersed throughout the novel, in each case it is not simply language, but actual, material survival that is at stake: these verbal exchanges are power plays as much as they are wordplays. The representation of linguistic negotiations (i.e., translation and mis-translation) between the two languages becomes an *internal* literary strategy, deployed first in order to expose the colonial mechanisms of power, and then to subvert them. This, I contend, is far from underdetermined: in such a work, written under bilingual conditions and in what is, from the Palestinian perspective, a colonial context, translation between the two languages cannot take place without some degree of political confrontation. At the same time, however, the relationship established between Hebrew and Arabic in this novel is not one-dimensional. Habiby repeatedly emphasizes the proximity and interrelation of the two languages, and the transactions between them are far more multivalent than a straightforward critique or denunciation of the hegemonic language and discourse would allow.

One could, in this regard, even say that the operative metaphor in this book is the false cognate. The "*madīnab/ medīnab*" confusion is a classic example of *faux amis*, i.e., false friends—and in fact *The Pessoptimist* as

a whole is rife with false friends, not restricted to the linguistic variety. Co-opted into the Israeli security apparatus as an informer, Sa'id soon finds himself surrounded by a league of false friends: the secret service agent *Adon* Safsarshik, Sa'id's would-be savior; Sa'id's own boss Ya'qub, an Arab-Jew; the "Big Man" to whom both Sa'id and Ya'qub must answer. They also include, among other minor characters, the nameless Israeli soldier in the station at 'Akka who tells Sa'id that he volunteered for the army in order to "fight feudalism," that he "likes Arabs," and who promises that when the war is over, the State will build *kibbutzim* for Arabs, which, he says, will "rely on liberated young men like [Sa'id] who speak a human language" [*sa-yuqimun li-na kibbutsat ya'tamidun fi-ba 'ala amthali min ash-shubban al-mutaharririn al-ladbina yuqinun lughab insaniyyah*].³⁷ To this remarkable declaration, the soldier adds "*shalom*" in Hebrew—which Sa'id promptly translates into the English "peace," "proving my humanity" (Arabic: *mu'akkidan insaniyyati*).³⁸ The soldier then laughs and replies "*salaam, salaam*" in Arabic—charitably extending the linguistic boundaries of humanity so as to include the Arabic-speaking (though apparently "liberated") Sa'id.

Of course, Habiby's representation of such discourse mimics the double-talk and hypocrisy of the establishment. But this kind of verbal chicanery presumes transparency both of the language and of the implicit rules of the game—an assumption that Sa'id repeatedly foils. Instead, he takes the rulers at their very literal word. In one such scene, set at the conclusion of the 1967 "Six Day" war, the Voice of Israel broadcast calls for all "defeated Arabs" (in Arabic "*al-'arab al-mahzumīn*") to fly white flags from their houses. The announcer is obviously addressing the inhabitants of the newly-conquered West Bank, but Sa'id, listening in Haifa, is unsure *which* "defeated Arabs" he means. To be on the safe side, he ties a white cloth to a broomstick and props it on his roof. When his boss Ya'qub arrives furiously demanding an explanation, Sa'id protests that he meant only to demonstrate his loyalty to the state. Ya'qub retorts that the higher-ups have interpreted his action as an insurrection, explaining: "That announcer was telling the West Bank Arabs to raise white flags in surrender to the Israeli occupation. What did you think you were up to, doing that in the very heart of the state of Israel, in Haifa, which no one regards as a city under occupation?" to which Sa'id indignantly replies "*ziyadat al-khayr khayr*" – "you can't have too much of a good thing!"³⁹ His self-declared patriotism notwithstanding, Sa'id's misinterpretation of the announcer's directives quickly lands him in Shatta prison.

Through such faulty and overly literal interpretations, Sa'id inverts the official state discourse so that it ends up meaning the opposite of what its spokespersons intend. In this world, where the idiom of the conquerors is first

used to control and then to justify that control, Sa'īd's linguistic failures are a symbolic corrective: by not understanding, by not performing the desired translation, our hapless hero re-bends this warped reality to conform to his own stubborn innocence. And in keeping with the cultural tradition of the fool who doubles as prophet, his linguistic tomfoolery doubles as ethical critique.

Mistranslation thus works diagetically in the text to neutralize the discursive power of the master's language (and it should be noted that from 1948-1966—much of the time period portrayed in *The Pessoptimist*—the “48 Arabs” were under direct military administration, so this power is far more than symbolic). Anuradha Dingwaney identifies the subversive potential of mistranslation when she describes the “between” space of translation and cross-cultural texts as “that space from within which the (colonized) native deliberately (mis)translates the colonial script, alienating and undermining its authority.”⁴⁰ But what distinguishes this situation from the gamut of colonial encounters is the kind of interaction specific to Arabic and Hebrew: Sa'īd's mode of resistance is neither a blind nor an arbitrary misunderstanding of the language of the Other due to its utter incomprehensibility. As we saw in the “*m adīnab/medīnab*” example, it obtains not from the distance, but rather, from the proximity between the two languages. As Michaela Wolf notes:

For Bakhtin... hybridity describes the process of the authorial unmasking of another's speech through a language that is “double-accented” and “double-styled.” A “hybrid construction” is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers, to a single speaker, one that actually contains within it two utterances, two manners of speech, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological systems. Bakhtin . . . showed that frequently *even one and the same word belongs simultaneously to two languages or two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction. It is through this hybrid construction that one voice is able to unmask the other within a single discourse. It is at this point that authoritative discourse becomes undone.*⁴¹

The thematic potential of the “hybrid construction” is milked by Habiby throughout the novel to make a point not only about Palestinian life under Israeli rule, but about the instability of language itself, particularly when it is pressed into the service of essentializing or totalizing discourses. Not only can language come to “mean” something other than what the speaker intends, but cognates and shared roots can cross the delineating boundaries of language and national identity, thereby destabilizing the distinction between Self and Other. We see this point well-illustrated in a passage that spoofs the hyperbole of nationalistic and militaristic language in

both Hebrew *and* Arabic. During Sa'īd's overnight stay in the Jazzar mosque in 'Akka (Acre) just before his return to Haifa, his former headmaster gives him a brief history lesson on the numerous conquests of Palestine. Reminding Sa'īd that 'Akka was liberated from the Crusaders by the Mamluk leader Qalawun in 1291, he adds: “His military title was al-Alfi, meaning ‘the ‘Thousander’ [...]” When Sa'īd asks if the rank of *Aluf* for the Israeli generals is derived from Qalawun's title, the headmaster replies: “God forbid, my son. No. That is derived from the word for a leader of a thousand men, a term used in the Bible. Oh, no! These aren't Mamluks or Crusaders. These are people returning to their country after an absence of two thousand years.” To this explanation Sa'īd responds: “My, what prodigious memories they have!”⁴² The headmaster concludes:

Anyway, my son, people have been talking for two thousand years in terms of thousands—generals of a thousand men, men slain by the thousands, the Alfi's and the Aluf's and so on. There is nothing on earth more holy than human blood. That is why our country is called the Holy Land” [*Ala kulli hal, yabni, dhalla al-hadith yajri, mundhu alfay sanab, 'ala l-uluf, qadatun alfiyun, aw alufiyun, wa-qatla bil-uluf. Laysa hunaka 'ala l-ard 'aqdas min dami l-insan, wa-li-dhalika summiyat biladuna bil-muqaddasab*].⁴³

The irony of this passage is trenchant, but what gives it its stylistic punch is the repetition of the *ishbiqaqat*, or morphological derivations, of the trilateral root *alif-lam-fa* (Arabic)/*alef-lamed-feh* (Hebrew). Habiby plays with the root between the two languages, in two antithetical contexts—one the Mamluk router of the Crusaders; the other, the term for an Israeli general—to satirize such overblown language (“thousands and thousands of...”). In the original, this fast-paced and highly exaggerated repetition of the *a-l-f* root comically defamiliarizes it and renders both the Hebrew “*Alfi*”s and the Arabic “*aluf*”s absurd (although it should be noted that in Arabic, the passage *sounds* funnier than it *looks*—a testament to the performative quality of the text). Habiby also invokes the trope of “two thousand years” [*alfay sanab*] so central to Zionism's narrative of return; the headmaster's emphasis on the abstract “thousands” does not directly negate, but rather, relativizes and deflates the Zionist narrative as but one particular moment in an infinitesimally grand historical sweep (as opposed to *the* defining and definitive moment). Likewise, by telling Sa'īd that it is the blood of the anonymous victims of history that has put the “Holy” into the Holy Land, the headmaster de-centers Zionism's exclusive, Judeo-centric claim on the Biblical primacy and sanctity of the land. “[S]ince the facts of ‘history’ are inescapable for the post-colonial, since attention to history is in a sense demanded by the post-colonial situation, post-colonial theory has to formulate a narrativizing strategy in addi-

tion to a deconstructive one.”⁴⁴ Here Habiby’s narrativizing strategy uses the shared *linguistic* history of Arabic and Hebrew to parody (and hence interrupt) either side’s singular claims to what is in fact a common geographic territory and history. But to arrive at this meaning—to understand the passage’s ideological function—one must be familiar with *both* cultural discourses and their symbolic resonances, as per Mehrez’s notion of the “double” text.

The doubleness of the text (and the demands it consequently places on the reader) are underscored in a chapter entitled “First Lesson in Hebrew” [*al-dars al-awal fil-lughah al-‘ibriyyah*]. Here, Sa‘id relates how during his early days back in Haifa, wanting to know whether he can still catch a bus, he needles his memory for the right Hebrew phrase to ask for the time. He finally asks a passerby, who shouts back “Acht.” Sa‘id recalls: “I was no dummy and remembered that ‘acht’ means ‘eight’ in German. So I...continued on foot toward the Valley of Nasnas [sic],⁴⁵ having made up my mind to learn Hebrew.”⁴⁶ Any reader who knows Hebrew immediately apprehends the source of Sa‘id’s error: “*ebat*” (pronounced by most Israelis as “*ekbat*”), meaning “one,” could easily be confused by a non-Hebrew speaker with the German “*acht*.” (Unfortunately, Le Gassick’s translation elides the Hebrew subtext altogether; perhaps it was lost on the translator!)

From these episodes we can conclude that Sa‘id is not exactly an unreliable so much as an “uninformed” narrator. As such, to make sense of the narrative, we readers must fill in the gaps by knowing what Sa‘id doesn’t. In some cases, this knowledge is linguistic: this last passage, for example, requires us to work backwards from Sa‘id’s mis-translation (*acht*) to reconstruct the original Hebrew (*ekbat*). In other cases (such as that of the white flag incident), our privileged knowledge is of the message that the authorities think they are conveying to Sa‘id. There we readers have to negotiate between the discourse as presented to Sa‘id and his interpretation of it: in other words, between the message sent and the message received. For it is in these “between” spaces that the message of the *author* filters through.

But at other moments in the narrative, Sa‘id seems to slip out of his dimwitted role and assume the knowing voice of the author. In one such instance, Sa‘id continues his narration of the “*acht*” incident by explaining how he teaches himself Hebrew; it takes over ten years, he tells us, before he is able to deliver a public address. He then adds:

But what is strange is that now a quarter century later the soapmakers of Nablus were able to learn Hebrew perfectly in less than two years. When one of them switched to the manufacture of marble tiles he hung up a sign in easily read Kufic script of Arabic, saying that his premises made *shayesh*, followed

by his own magnificently prolix and distinctively Arab name: *shayesh*, of course, is the Hebrew word for marble. This is not merely a case of necessity being the mother of invention; it is also a matter of the financial interests of a country’s elite who cared so little who ruled them politically that they applied in practice the Arabic proverb: Anyone who marries my mother becomes my stepfather.⁴⁷

The marked change of tone (from loony to level-headed, confounded to critical) seems to signal a shift from Sa‘id to Habiby’s voice, and with this slippage, the thematic representation of language and translation takes on a different valence. Elsewhere, Sa‘id/Habiby acknowledges that translation is a means of material survival; in a long discussion of the “virtues of the Oriental imagination,” the Arab waiters in Tel Aviv hotels who “translate” their names into Hebrew are cited as proof of this fertile “imagination.”⁴⁸ (This form of mimicry calls to mind Kilito’s *mustanbib*, lost in the desert and forced to bark in order to survive; barking may be a necessity, but it still reduces him to being an animal). In this case, however, translation to Hebrew is depicted as no more than a gratuitous measure reflecting unabashed opportunism. The authorial voice links language directly to national identity, and essentializes it as being either pure or impure (disloyal). Translation in this passage is the offender, leading to an impure linguistic admixture and compromising (if not betraying) the national cause. The Arabic proverb makes only too explicit the fidelity/infidelity metaphor embedded throughout the passage.

But this authorial intervention is not the only counterpoint to Sa‘id’s gullibility and passivity. Habiby also offers us Sa‘id’s son “Wala’.”⁴⁹ Where Sa‘id uses translation to adapt and survive—and while his mistranslations serve to “unintentionally” resist the conquerors’ propagandizing agenda—his son Wala’ rejects such complicity and instead joins the *fida’iyyin* [guerilla fighters]. Eventually, trapped in an ambush by the state security forces, he walks into the sea and disappears beneath its surface, directly followed by his mother. Even the opposition between father and son is manifested in the narrative as a matter of *linguistic* transformation: the *fida’iyyin* with whom Wala’ throws in his lot are translated into the *fada’iyyin*, or extraterrestrial beings, who come into the story to rescue Sa‘id from his own impossible situation. All in all, the difference between salvation through active, real-life resistance, on the one hand, and passive fantasy/insanity, on the other, turns out to be a matter of switching the soft “d” (*dal*) to the velarized “D” (*Daad*) and the short *i* to short *a*.⁵⁰ This pronounced similarity lends itself to a number of possible interpretations: is Habiby saying that father and son are reflections of one another, that the solution through armed resistance is as elusive as rescue by space aliens?

Or is he perhaps commenting on the arbitrariness of language itself?

Language is also thematized throughout the novel in other ways, with revealing chapter headings such as “Sa‘id Changes into a Cat that Meows”⁵¹ and “The Ultimate Tale: The Fish that Understands All Languages” [*Abkir al-hikayat hikayat as-samak al-ladbi yafham kull al-lughat*].⁵² The latter comes as a kind of postscript to the narration of Walaa’s escape into the sea and presumed suicide. Following the loss of his son and wife, Sa‘id returns to the site regularly to fish and to silently call to his son, “hoping always for some response.” He relates:

One day a Jewish boy who had sat down unnoticed beside me surprised me with the question, “In what language are you speaking, Uncle?”

“In Arabic.”

“With whom?”

“With the fish.”

“Do the fish understand only Arabic?”

“Yes, the old fish, the ones that were here when the Arabs were.”

“And the young fish, do they understand Hebrew?”

“They understand Hebrew, Arabic, and all languages. The seas are wide and flow together. They have no borders and have room enough for all fish.”⁵³

The point being conveyed here doubtless needs no elaboration. What is interesting is *how* this utopia is imagined: Sa‘id describes freedom as a kind of linguistic universality in which translation is obviated, rendered completely unnecessary. In sum, translation is hardly valorized in these passages: at best, it is tolerated as a means of survival, at worst condemned as selling out. In any case, the need to translate is a symptom of the impossible situation in which Sa‘id lives, and as such it (along with the situation as a whole) is wished away.

With these “old fish” and “young fish” in mind, let us consider the real-life translation history of the text and its double interaction with critics on both sides of the language divide. As noted, Habiby wrote all his works of fiction in Arabic, and *The Pessoptimist* has become a benchmark of modernism in Arabic literature. At the same time, it is a text that made a deep impression in Israeli cultural consciousness through its Hebrew translation. More to the point, as we have seen, the Arabic narrative is itself deeply engaged with Israeli social reality⁵⁴ as well as with Hebrew, the language of the state. All these elements contribute to its “doubleness,” and to the challenge it poses to the reader. A brief survey of the extant scholarship on the book suffices to reveal that knowledge of only one language (i.e., Hebrew or Arabic) allows for only partial comprehension of the text’s incredibly lush, multi-layered, and allusive fabric.

Hebrew literary critics writing on *The Pessoptimist* focus on its transmission into Israeli culture via Hebrew

translation, construing Habiby’s *oeuvre* as part of the corpus of Hebrew literature.⁵⁵ Along with the works of Palestinian writing in Hebrew, Habiby’s works have been treated in more sociological than literary terms, inspiring studies on “Arab-Israeli identity” and of the politics of reception rather than close textual analysis.⁵⁶ Israeli critics have, moreover, tended to give Habiby’s work a benign reading curiously unmatched with its sardonic, darkly humorous tone.⁵⁷ This naturalization of Habiby’s writing most likely stems from two sources: his visible role in Israeli cultural and political life, and the fact the Hebrew translations, carried out by Anton Shammas under Habiby’s own supervision, were published in near-simultaneity with the Arabic originals. But a reading wholly based on those two factors belies the fact that *The Pessoptimist*, like Habiby’s other literary works, was written in Arabic; that it draws on the classical tradition of the *maqamah*; that it is in deep dialogue with Arabic sources (replete with references to and intertextual uses of the *turath*, or classical tradition, including frequent and liberal references to the likes of al-Mutanabbi, al-Ma’arri, Ibn Arabi, and also modern poets such as Samih al-Qasim), and finally, that it has been thoroughly digested by the Arabic reading public as a Palestinian text.⁵⁸

Criticism by Arabic-reading scholars has treated the text in more directly literary terms, but, for its part, fails to address the Hebrew linguistic and cultural dimensions of the text.⁵⁹ For example, Samia Mehrez, who has argued convincingly for the “double” status of the Francophone Maghrebi text, does not make this connection regarding *The Pessoptimist* in her own (albeit considerably earlier) study of irony in the novel.⁶⁰ As a result, most of these studies give short shrift to the polyvalent character of the narrative. A comparison of the two most recent English-languages articles on *The Pessoptimist*—one written by a graduate student in Beirut and the other by an Israeli professor in the U.S.—reveals that while both articles devote a weighty portion of their space to reviewing earlier criticism of Habiby, they consult not even a single common source. Given the availability of much of this critical material in English, it is striking that neither author has utilized the scholarship generated by the “other” side.⁶¹

But perhaps this, too, is symptomatic of the problem of “claiming Habiby.” The code-switching connected with the publication history of Habiby’s works blurs the distinction between original and translation in such a way that he can be viewed by one school as a Palestinian writer of Arabic and by the other as an Israeli writer of Hebrew. The questions surrounding the linguistic identity of his *oeuvre* could perhaps be productively compared to cases of other well-known bilingual writers, such as the Algerian Rachid Boujedra, who writes in both Arabic and French and a number of whose works

are of disputed linguistic origin. These questions are, of course, also symptomatic of the general condition of hybridity or doubleness we encounter in the texts themselves.

Naqqash and Double Marginalization

The group of Palestinians writing in Israel is complemented by a number of Jewish authors from Arab countries who continued to work in Arabic after emigrating to Israel. Of this group, Samir Naqqash is the youngest and by far the most prolific writer, having published over three collections of short stories, three plays, one book of novellas, one short and four full-length novels.⁶² Naqqash considers himself in exile from Iraq, which he left in 1951 at age thirteen, and makes no secret of his alienation from his surroundings in Israel.⁶³ In fact, we find much less Hebrew in Naqqash's works than in Habiby's. While that may seem counter-intuitive, it is actually not surprising given that the late Habiby was a vigorous participant in political and cultural life in Israel, whereas the virtually unknown Naqqash (who recently moved to England) rejected his linguistic and cultural milieu in Israel in order to maintain his Iraqi identity. The thrust of bilingual energy in Naqqash's writing is not between Arabic and Hebrew, but rather, between the colloquial Jewish Baghdadi dialect and *fus'ba* (literary Arabic).⁶⁴ This use of the Jewish Baghdadi dialect is the distinguishing characteristic of Naqqash's work; to my knowledge, he is the only writer ever to employ the dialect in fiction.

Iraq, until the mid-twentieth century, was the site of what linguist Haim Blanc describes as an "unusually profound and sharply delineated dialectal cleavage...corresponding to the three major religious communities, namely the Muslims, the Jews, and the Christians."⁶⁵ The Jewish dialect itself is said to be about eighty percent comprehensible to an Iraqi Muslim or Christian, but it is marked by a noticeably different phonology and by its richly heteroglossic lexicon of loan words and expressions from Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as Persian and Turkish. For centuries it functioned as the private language of the Jews of Iraq, and now, with the community's dispersion to Israel and the West, it is a dying tongue. In the double interests of mimesis and linguistic preservation, Naqqash uses the dialect to represent the speech of Jewish characters in his works. Additionally, he freely employs the Muslim Iraqi dialect and, in the section of the narrative set in Israel, Hebrew words and phrases. To the general Arabic reader unfamiliar with all three colloquial idioms, this linguistic mishmash presents a formidable challenge. In response, Naqqash has devised an unusual, if cumbersome, system: for every potentially mystifying passage he appends a *fus'ba* translation, and often additional commentary, in the lower margins of the text. Visually, the effect is

striking, with the bottom margin often extending upwards well into the page. (This elaborate text-commentary structure is also vaguely reminiscent of Jewish and Muslim scriptures with their marginal commentaries.) The glosses, while of uneven helpfulness,⁶⁶ provide a fascinating example of the author stepping out of his or her own fiction to supply the reader with information for filling in contextual gaps; collectively, they imply a certain textual culture or outlook independent of the narrative. The margin, in this way, becomes a kind of third space in the text, one that mediates between the world of the narrative and the world of the reader.

That there should be so much distance between the two that this compensation is even needed speaks also of marginalization in its political sense. One could say that Naqqash, as a self-defined Arab Jew, takes his symbolic revenge on the history from which he was ejected by putting the Jewish dialect in the narrative and its translation in the margin. Alternatively, he might have tried translating inside the narrative, by trying to produce a language that would retain the flavor of certain "colloquial" [*amiyyah*] expressions but still be user-friendly for the general Arab reader. But Naqqash makes no such concessions, refusing to translate himself into a more marketable idiom and demanding instead that the reader use the margin to translate. This is, perhaps, a radical example of Mehrez's observation that the reading of a hybrid text cannot be other than a perpetual translation.

Like Habiby, Naqqash thematizes interlinguistic tensions. His novella *Ana wa-ha'ula wa-l-fisam* [*I, They and the Split*]⁶⁷ follows the protagonist, a young Jewish boy in Baghdad, through the gradual deterioration of Jewish life in Iraq during the forties and his unwilling emigration to Israel in the early fifties.⁶⁸ Language in this novella is profoundly linked to communal identity, first that of the Jews in Iraq and then that of the Iraqi immigrants in Israel. The first half of the story, set in Baghdad, pivots around a cast of secondary characters with Gurji Chilwiyyah, the narrator's feared and hated religion tutor, at the center. The teacher's repeated command of "*Iqa!*"⁶⁹—"Read!" haunts this part of the text (not to mention the narrator's life) as a menacing trope. In the midst of his description of one of the dreaded Torah lessons, the narrator digresses into a recollection that well demonstrates both the story's stratified linguistic texture and its thematization of language and identity: "I read; about the promised land I read. But I am in Iraq and it is here that I live and breathe and learn and dream, and plan for the future. And during the holidays, there is the shaking of hands, and the murmuring of lips: *Tizku le-shanim rabuth. Inshallah sana alakh a-bi-rushalim.*"⁷⁰ When we refer to footnote twenty-six, we find: "A traditional greeting exchanged by Iraqi Jews

since time immemorial, which means: may you live long and may we celebrate next year in Jerusalem.” We then return to the narrative: “Even our partner Hussein Al-‘Alaywi, who has been speaking of the impending liberation of Palestine, heard this holiday greeting from my uncle’s naïve wife and scowled, checking his rage in a circumspect silence.”⁷¹

I have translated the literary Arabic into English and retained the Judeo-Arabic in the original in order to convey the experience of the general Arab reader. Here we see the interpolation of Hebrew (“*tizku le-shanim rabot*”) and Judeo-Arabic (“*sana alakb a-bi-rushalim*”) into the *fus’ha* (literary Arabic) narrative. In the narrative, the Muslim partner, who doesn’t know that this is merely a holiday greeting, understands the literal meaning of the Judeo-Arabic expression but fails to translate it correctly into its idiomatic usage. Instead, he hears a political sentiment supporting Zionism. In contrast to *The Pessoptimist*, here the mistranslation does not reveal a deeper truth; rather, it dramatizes the rise in intercommunal tensions that eventually leads to the narrator’s ejection from his native Baghdad. It is no accident that Naqqash chooses this particular expression to make the point; within Jewish culture, anyone, no matter how secular, would immediately recognize the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem.” We see a double (both textual and meta-textual) irony here in that the banality of the expression is lost not only on the Muslim character, but presumably on the reader too: hence the explanation in the margins.⁷² Naqqash’s footnote may also serve as an implicit criticism of the Zionist project which did, in fact, perform the ultimate over-literalization of this ages-old figure of speech. (In this respect, one could say that the idiomatic/figurative translation is not so much “lost on” as “stolen from” the reader.)

Translation in the margins thus works in tandem with the narrative to realize Naqqash’s goal of representing his idiom faithfully while facilitating its decoding; it is a way of defying extinction even as it acknowledges its inevitable advance. This, too, recalls Niranjana’s observations concerning the relationship of translation and history:

The postcolonial desire to re-translate is linked to the desire to re-write history. Re-writing is based on an act of reading, for translation in the post-colonial context involves what Benjamin would call ‘citation’ and not an ‘absolute forgetting.’ Hence there is no simple rupture with the past but a radical rewriting of it.⁷³

The desire to re-write history holds as true for the thematic content of Naqqash’s (largely autobiographical) fiction as for his linguistic revisionism. And the two are certainly interrelated: re-inscribing the language of Iraqi Jews into the canon of Arabic fiction is one means of re-inserting Iraqi Jews into the historical narrative itself.

As the narrative continues, things grow steadily worse. As but one anti-Jewish measure adopted during the government-sponsored repression of the Jewish community, teaching Hebrew is made illegal, and Gurji Chilwiyyah arrested. The situation becomes increasingly intolerable until the narrator’s family finally reaches the devastating conclusion that “there is really no future for Jews here [in Iraq]” [*Ma di-yilla’ darb. Rab nisaqqat minimshi. Fi’alan ma kballu lil-yahudi ba’d ‘ayshab binah*].⁷⁴ Reluctantly, they go to sign up for the *tasqit* (the denaturalization of Jews registering for emigration)⁷⁵ poignantly depicted by Naqqash in a passage remarkable for its portrayal of the contradictory reactions on the part of Muslim and Jew alike:

We take our nationality to the Meir Tweig synagogue and sign our names. There the bureau for denaturalization crouches in wait. The high-ranking officer sits on a table, carrying out orders. The people lose their identities—they dispense of them voluntarily. No...rather, they leave them to be torn up against their will. And once again the puzzle is solved and made insoluble. Only a bit of time has elapsed and we have already become people without nationality or identity. The officer who has just stripped us of our *intimaa’* and torn us up by the roots gazes at us somberly, asking “Haven’t you heard the news?”

“No, why, did something happen?”

With a grim face, as brother complaining to brother: “What? You haven’t heard yet? Queen ‘Alia died.”

Stripped of identity...yet the faces grieve. And the *intimaa’* sticks its neck out from deep within the guts and weeps over the contradiction’s human remains.⁷⁶

The incongruity of the Iraqi officer addressing the Jews as members of the imagined community of the nation, during the *very moment* of their denaturalization, is jarring indeed. *Intimaa’*—a word without exact equivalent in English—connotes the feeling of membership, belonging to and affiliation with a collective. Here, it is precisely in relation to the imagined national community that Naqqash invokes the term. Even as the officer strips the Jews of their citizenship, he reflexively continues to view them as members of the polity, expressed by Naqqash in terms of a familial relationship (“as brother...to brother”); conversely, even in their disenfranchised condition the now-stateless Jews continue naturally to “imagine” themselves part of the same community. Yet the narrator also simultaneously recognizes the paradox of their deeply ingrained *intimaa’* (as Iraqis) in a nation that has rejected them (as Jews). At the end of the passage, it is not the denaturalized Jewish citizens who are weeping for their departed queen, but the *intimaa’* itself that now weeps over its abandoned subjects. Their identities fragmented by this paradox, the people are reduced to *ashla’* [disjointed parts of corpses]

in the construct “*ashla’ al-munaqadab*” [the human remains of the contradiction]. This is another moment in which the text’s meaning emerges through the gap between the message sent and the message received. Here, however, the gap obtains not from a disjunction between two languages, but directly from the disjunction between language and the authority that informs, underscores, and authorizes it. In this case it is the changed relationship between sender and addressee relative to this authority that creates the communicative breach: the officer (an agent of the state) speaks the Muslim dialect of Iraqi Arabic, comprehensible to both parties, but his message at the moment of utterance is based upon a faulty premise concerning the narrator’s family (that they are full citizens, required as such to identify with the monarchy and other national symbols). Thus the statement itself is rendered false.

The narrator watches as one by one, the entire cast of secondary characters that peopled the earlier part of the story (and his childhood) leaves for Israel:

Baghdad is being emptied of her Jews. The synagogues are emptied of their worshippers; the schools, of their pupils, and the hospital of its visitors and patients. And the clubs and the playgrounds and the prophets’ tombs, all are empty and deserted. The city is sad and gloomy in her stillness, and her silence speaks the most eloquent of languages.⁷⁷

The story follows the narrator and his family through their own final moments in Baghdad and then resumes with their arrival in Israel. From this point on, it is infused with the narrator’s bitter disappointment as he encounters successive neighbors and acquaintances from Baghdad and emphasizes each one’s dramatic fall in socioeconomic status. This process of disillusionment culminates in the re-discovery of Gurji Chilwiyah, the Torah teacher, now a bum on the streets of Jerusalem (whence the story ends). In one passage narrated entirely in Iraqi Jewish dialect, “Albert” (French pronunciation), a formerly prosperous merchant whom the narrator describes as a big barrel of a man, explains to his incredulous listeners the circumstances by which he has become a beggar:

I can’t stand being hungry and not having something to eat. One day I was walking in Tel Aviv. I went into a restaurant and said, bring me a fish. He said, head or tail? So I said, what’s this head or tail business? Just bring the whole fish! He brought me a fish just about as long as my hand, and I finished it off in one bite. *Yaba*, how much? He said ‘sixteen *lira*.’ A fish the size of my hand, sixteen *lira*—sixteen *dinars*! Two or three months go by like this, and the last of my money runs out. I want meat, there’s no meat...no chicken...no eggs. And I’m hungry, and I want to eat! Some Ashkenazi nearby us [in the transit camp] was raising a couple of chickens.... I don’t

know where the *mamzer* got them from. I open the door of my hut and I gather a little barley and call out to the chickens. This one walks inside and I shut the door and grab her. The knife is ready. No sooner is she in my hand than I dispatch her. Then I say to my wife Hanina, ‘Hanina my girl, don’t be sad—today fate has brought us something good to eat.’

So...? How did you become a beggar?

One day I was walking down the road. It was in the winter and was raining—you haven’t yet experienced the rain here. It rains like mad. I ducked into an alley to wait for it to stop. I just happened to put out my hand to see whether or not it had stopped raining, and a coin falls in my palm! So I left my hand right where it was until it filled up with coins. Then I came home and said, ‘Hanina, I found myself some nice work. Better than sitting around doing nothing.’⁷⁸

Thus far we have analyzed passages written primarily in *fus’ha*, with brief interpolations in Judeo-Arabic in the first case and in the Iraqi Muslim dialect in the second. In this last passage, however, the entire narration is written in Jewish dialect. An incredibly literal rendition of the dialect’s particular idioms and cadences, Albert’s speech is transcribed phonetically to the degree that it makes little sense until read aloud (and at many points, until it is compared with the *fus’ha* translation in the margins). Without pathos, and with only a modicum of irony, Albert explains his new “profession” as the product of a misunderstanding. The entire monologue hinges on the cultural and social disorientation of the newly-arrived Iraqi Jews vis-à-vis the veteran, primarily Ashkenazi (European-Jewish) Israelis; but this tension is alluded to only obliquely, as the character is speaking with other Iraqi immigrants, whom he assumes share his viewpoint. How does Naqqash manage to convey all this within the *fus’ha* translation in the margins, directed at the general, non-Jewish Arabic reading public?

A close reading of both the *amiyyah* version and its *fus’ha* translation reveals some informative choices. Albert, who has been in Israel longer than the narrator and his family, translates the Israeli pound (“*lira*”) into the Arabic “*dinar*” (used in Iraq), emphasizing the inordinate expense of food in the new country relative to the one they have left behind. Thus, while the exchange rate in Albert’s explanation (“sixteen *lira*—sixteen *dinars*”) is one-to-one—an exact equivalence—it is also shown to be a false equivalence, in the sense that the buying power of the *dinar* in Iraq is so much greater than that of the *lira* in Israel. The logic of this “false equivalent” in Albert’s translation of monetary values is thus similar to the logic of the false cognate: even (or especially) when things seem to be familiar—to *make sense*—they are essentially different, and they confound.⁷⁹

When Albert refers to his money running out, the *'amiyyah* calls it *"flus"* [money] while the translation refers to *"darabim"* (the plural of *dirham*, in many Arab countries a smaller denomination of money than the *dinar*); later on, referring to the coins that drop into his hand, both the *'amiyyah* and the *fus'ha* use *"qirsh,"* a linguistic relic of the Ottoman era (source of the Hebrew *grush*), now the smallest denomination of coins in many Arab countries, such as Egypt. This use of particular and familiar denominations of money locates the passage within a distinctly Arab material frame of reference (but interestingly, not one associated directly with either Israel or Iraq).⁸⁰

In reference to the neighbor, the *'amiyyah* version reads: *"aku fed wehid ashkenazi jighanu amghabi kam jiji. Maqhaf minayn jibu il-mamzer."* This version uses two Hebrew terms: *"Ashkenazi"* (Jew of European origin or descent) and *"mamzer"* (bastard). *Mamzer* is a traditional term of disparagement in Jewish Baghdadi dialect, where it is still closely linked to its original, legal-religious meaning; in Israeli Hebrew usage it connotes something closer to "scoundrel," usually uttered with an undertone of admiration for the subject's wiliness. But whether Albert is using the term in the Iraqi Jewish or the Israeli sense, in either case, the general Arab reader would be completely unfamiliar with the term. When we look at the *fus'ha* translation of those two sentences, we find: *"yujid bi-jivar sarifatina al-khamiyyah, rajul shiknazi yurabbi 'adadan min ad-dajaj. La adri al-laqit min ayna ati bibim."*⁸¹ A number of points bear mention here. First, the *fus'ha* translation adds *"sarifatina al-khamiyyah"*⁸² (our makeshift hut), which the original leaves implicit. Second, *"Ashkenazi,"* which in Israeli Hebrew is a neutral term but which Albert uses as an "Other-ing" collocation, is rendered in the margins as *"shiknazi"*—which, in MSA (Modern Standard Arabic), has a slightly derogatory connotation. (Had Naqqash wished to choose a value-neutral term, he could have written *"rajul yahudi urubi"* [European Jewish man] or something similar.) In choosing *shiknazi*, Naqqash conveys to the reader what is arguably a stronger sense of Other-ness and perhaps distaste than emerges from the original (where it is implicit in the socio-cultural context if not the actual language). Third, we find that *mamzer* has been translated into *fus'ha* as *"laqit,"* the (very) classical Arabic term for "foundling." The register of this word is oddly formal and elevated in comparison with *mamzer*, although *laqit* is used in a similar sense in Abbasid literature, it is not a term of disparagement in today's parlance (*'amiyyah* and standard Arabic both have other terms to convey "bastard" as an insult). No real sense of consistency, then, issues from Naqqash's choices: *shiknazi* lowers the register, while *laqit* raises it considerably and fails to convey the nuances of the term in Hebrew or Jewish dialect. What we *can* say is that these various adaptations—the

addition of the reference to the tent-hut for context, the Arabization of "Ashkenazi," and finally the replacement of a Jewish term with strong cultural associations with a "non-ethnic" classical epithet—all demonstrate both the degree of verisimilitude in the original *'amiyyah* and the efforts Naqqash expends in accommodating the reader through a translation that is as much cultural as it is linguistic. This is truly a "double text" not only in that it straddles two worlds, but that it is literally written (and read) in two languages.

Conclusion: Towards an Intra-textual Theory of Translation

We have seen how *The Pessoptimist* and *I, They, and the Split* incorporate counter-histories—such as the schoolmaster explaining the history of Palestine to Sa'id, or Naqqash's Arabic-language, Iraqi-Jewish perspective on "absorption" into Israel—into their narratives. In Niranjana's words:

Perhaps post-colonial theory can show that we need to translate (that is, disturb or displace) history rather than to interpret it (hermeneutically) or "read" it (in a textualizing move)...The post-colonial desire for "history" is a desire to understand the traces of the "past" in a situation where at least one fact is singularly irreducible: colonialism and what came after. Historiography in such a situation must provide ways of recovering occluded images from the past to deconstruct colonial and neocolonial histories.⁸³

Habiby and Naqqash's writings both perform this function, challenging official Zionist historiography as well as the now socially-internalized narratives that hold Palestinians accountable for their own displacement and suffering, and that deny or downplay the reality, historicity, and normality of Jewish life in Arab countries, as well as the multiple levels of loss most Arabic-speaking Jews encountered upon arrival in Israel. Naqqash's novella also challenges the elision of the Jewish presence from Arab national narratives. In both texts, the means to this recovery process is the author's creative use of language and languages. Each narrative, furthermore, depicts the strategies of life in exile as a kind of auto-translation or code-switching in a hostile world, recalling Niranjana's equation of "hybridity" with "living in translation."⁸⁴ Yet these two texts also demonstrate considerable differences in the authors' relationships to language, which stem from their respective relationships with the past and the decisive moment of rupture. *The Pessoptimist* takes place *ex post facto*, after 1948; the "before" is depicted as a period of harmony between Sa'id and his human and linguistic environment, followed by the "after" of life in Israel in which the narrative's wacky events are set. By contrast, Naqqash's story takes place both in Baghdad and in Is-

rael and traces the deteriorating status of the Jews in Iraq. Naqqash therefore portrays linguistic tensions in both the “before” and “after” periods, and what changes is the context; when he’s in Iraq, learning Hebrew is forbidden and the Jewish dialect of Arabic is misunderstood or derided by the Muslim majority, but when he’s in Israel, it is Arabic that is the scorned and repudiated tongue.

As a result, translation within these texts takes different forms. In Naqqash, the heteroglossia and intricate cultural references necessitate the textual crutch of the margins, which mediate between the internal world of the narrative and the external world of the reader. In admitting (and perhaps emphasizing) the linguistic opacity of his narrative, Naqqash sacrifices literary convention in order to insist on and valorize a historic principle: the once-pluralistic character of Baghdad, now all but forgotten. His obsession with recording the linguistic minutia of this vanished world verges on fetishization. In face of Israeli national discourse, his writing is not post-Zionist but rather, nostalgically “pre-Zionist,” intent on resuscitating the Iraqi-Jewish ambiance in its fullness—and on not admitting the present into this recreated world, but for the margins.

In Habiby we see a pronounced interaction between Arabic and Hebrew in the narrative, with an emphasis not on linguistic equivalence or transparency, but on misinterpretation. Through the “between” spaces of the narrative, this Arabic novel first encodes, and then effectively re-writes the language of Israel from a Palestinian insider’s perspective. At the same time, even as he reveals the myriad ways in which the Israeli military and security services brutalize, dispossess, and exploit the remaining Palestinian population, Habiby’s choices of anecdote, idiom, and above all, his thematic use of translation and wordplay between Arabic and Hebrew all conclusively demonstrate one point: that the two peoples, like their histories, cultures, and languages, are irrevocably intertwined. This is not necessarily a hopeful observation, but it is an incontrovertible reality.

These works suggest an understanding of translation where it is not only something that happens after the story ends, but is a crucial part of the narrative itself; where it generates plot and meaning; a theory of translation in which it is not equivalence, but the necessary lack thereof, that reveals and delivers the actual truth value of the statement. These are texts in which nearly any statement may have a double meaning; in which language is not a transparent medium so much as a metaphor for itself,⁸⁵ an inside joke between author and reader, delivered at the character’s expense. Habiby’s use of mistranslation in particular is also a project of destabilizing linguistic referentiality. To borrow the terms of Jakobson’s verbal communication model, we can say that here meaning is conveyed *not* through the successful

delivery of the message from addresser to addressee, but through its failure.⁸⁶ In the thematic *representation* of communicative breakdown, we see language recognizing its own inevitable fiction, acknowledging how tenuous is the absolute link between symbol and referent, how easily it is obstructed: “As Barbara Johnson points out, translation ‘has always been the translation of meaning.’ The idea that signified and signifier can be separated informs the classical conception of philosophy as well as translation.”⁸⁷ This kind of disruption in the signifying function serves not only to intervene in authoritative discourses (as exemplified by the targeted misreading/re-writing of hegemonic historical narratives), but in essentialized, proprietary notions of language itself. In transgressing the boundaries between languages, translation crosses the demarcating lines of geography, identity, and culture. Translation thus becomes a means of engaging not only the barriers between people, but the barriers *within* them. In these and doubtless many other bilingual texts, translation works inside the narrative to negotiate between different languages and cultures, between author and reader, and even between the conflicting layers of affiliation and identity that the author brings to the text.

NOTES

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I am dedicating this article to the memory of Professor Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, who passed away on 4 June 2002 at age 44, after a lengthy battle with cancer. As devastating as her untimely death is to so many, her indomitable spirit and sharp intellect continue to inspire the work of all those privileged to have studied or taught with her. This article is no exception.

¹The title indicates that the writing in question was produced within the 1948 borders by two writers who are citizens of the State of Israel. Yet I would not call this writing itself “Israeli” without further qualification (Palestinian, Arab-Jewish, Iraqi, etc.). The problematic nature of such appellations in the Israeli-Palestinian context is discussed later in the paper.

²The character speaking here is, in fact, a Muslim. The bullies probably don’t believe him because certain elements of his speech are characteristic of the Jewish dialect (e.g., the use of “*ana*” rather than “*aani*” [sounds like *aab-nee*] for “I”). To the reader familiar with Iraqi Arabic, these small differences in phonology convey much of the story’s meaning.

³The lecture, “*Les mots canins*,” appears in English as “Dog Words,” trans. Ziad Elmarsafy, in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994). The epigram quoted at the top of this article appears on p. xxvii. Note also that the

morphology of the word *mustanbib* indicates not that the *mustanbib* is a “barker” but that he is “one who follows [the sound of] barking.”

⁴Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

⁵Elmarsafy, *Displacements*, xxvii.

⁶The relationship of language and power in postcolonial contexts has been extensively theorized by Tejaswini Niranjana and others, including (but by no means limited to) Alfred Artega, Jacques Derrida, Emily Apter, and Auradha Dingwaney. In *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) Niranjana investigates the relation of language to authority through an historicized reading, tracing the complicity of translation in producing colonial subjects, and indeed in producing “history” itself, as “the problematics of translation and the writing of history are inextricably bound together” (42). In considering how the “discourses of education, theology, historiography, philosophy, and literary translation inform the hegemonic apparatuses that belong to the ideological structure of colonial rule” (33), she uncovers “the desire of colonial discourse to translate in order to contain (and to contain and control in order to translate, since symbolic domination is as crucial as physical domination)” (34). The contributors to Artega’s volume *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), building on the work of Bakhtin and Bhabha, examine the transmission of culture between self and Other while foregrounding the hybrid linguistic character of the post-colonial text. See also Jacques Derrida’s *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross Cultural Texts*, eds. Auradha Dingwaney and Carol Meir (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 1998), and Rainier Grutman, “Metaphor of Translation,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. Mona Baker (Routledge: London, 1998), 149-160. Finally, see also the special issue on “Translation in a Global Market” in *Public Culture* 13:1 (2001).

⁷Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 59.

⁸Samia Mehrez, “Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: The Francophone North African Text,” in *Rethinking Translation*, 121-138, 121.

⁹See also Lydia Liu, ed. *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), especially “Introduction,” 1-12.

¹⁰Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986). Along these lines, Benjamin compares the original and translation to fragments of a vessel: “[A] translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s model of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel” (78). Benjamin even describes the act of translation as the “liberation” of a text from its imprisonment in language, its release into the heightened realm of “pure language” where it is not subject to the

restraints of the signification process, and its re-inscription (or, if you will, its re-incarceration) into another linguistic code (80). Finally, he recognizes the reciprocal relationship of the translation to the original, saying that languages are “powerfully affected” by translation and crediting translation with prolonging the life of the original text by giving it reincarnations. (81). This, of course, is a much richer approach than that allowed for by the old metaphors of fidelity and equivalence. But by decontextualizing the concept of language and consigning it to the lofty realm of the metaphysical, Benjamin creates an artificial division of the text from the world: his conceptualization of the translator’s work seems to assume that all languages enjoy equal status in the world, and that the translator is also unaffected by the pressures and forces that govern relations between his or her own language and that of the text. In terms of postcolonial thought, the fundamental problem with Benjamin’s essay is that there *is* no “pure language”: that we, as authors, as readers, and as translators, cannot think, let alone write, in terms untainted by the power relations governing the world in which we live, the only reality we can know—a reality constructed for and digested by us in the categorically imperfect medium of language. (I should also note that Tejaswini Niranjana’s reading of Benjamin’s essay [*Siting Translation*, Chap. Three] focuses on his concern with historiography and historical materialism. But while she is able to draw out these undercurrents from the text by reading the essay alongside many of Benjamin’s later writings and drawing parallels, these concerns are not overtly expressed in the essay itself.)

¹¹See, for instance, Paul de Man’s “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator,’” in *Yale French Studies* 69: 1985, 25-46 (also in *The Resistance to Theory* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986], 73-105). De Man distinguishes between the poet and the translator by saying that the poet has “some relationship to meaning, to a statement that is not purely within the realm of language[...] he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language,” whereas “The relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language, wherein the problem of meaning or the desire to say something, the need to make a statement, is entirely absent. Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated” (*Yale French Studies*, 34). In other words, once something is in language, it is already no longer original. For de Man, then, the “original” text is already translated, and scholars and critics of writing “kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead” (36). So while the act of writing is already an act of “translation,” this renders translation itself a non-vital process of repetition (as opposed to creation). Benjamin’s “translator” is, in my view, actually much closer to de Man’s “poet” in that s/he must work backwards from the original and *reconstruct* the “pure meaning” that has been locked into language. Octavio Paz takes the opposite of de Man’s view in “Translation: Literature and Letters,” (trans. Irene de Corral), in *Theories of Translation*, eds. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 152-162, where he says that “translation and creation are twin processes... there is constant interaction between the two, a continuous, mutual enrichment” (160). As for the poet

and the translator, Paz states: “The translator’s starting point is not the language in movement that provides the poet’s raw material but the fixed language of the poem. A language congealed, *yet living*. His procedure is the inverse of the poet’s: he is not constructing an unalterable text from mobile characters; instead, he is dismantling the elements of the text, freeing the signs into circulation, then returning them to language”; translation, therefore, is an “inverted parallel of poetic creation” (159; my emphasis). The result is not a “copy” but a “transmutation” (160). Paz also says that “each reading is a translation” and that reading in general is “translation within the same language” (159). For Paz, even all *speech* originates from translation: “When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate: the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense, translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two tongues, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child’s experience” (152). The key word here seems to be *unfamiliar*. Any unfamiliar speech necessitates translation, and any process of interpretation (such as reading) is therefore an act of translation—i.e., transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar. In Habiby and Naqqash, the idea of unfamiliarity is manipulated for thematic purposes. The characters’ attempts at grappling with the unfamiliar and translating it into their own idiom often lead to instances of misunderstanding and mistranslation within the text and produce the “correct” translation of the author’s meaning within the meta-text. (See also endnote 66).

¹² Assia Djebar, for instance, ruminates at length within her narrative upon her own relationship with the French language and what it means to be “writing the enemy’s language” in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (London: Quartet Books, 1985), esp. 213–217, but it appears as a kind of digression in the voice of the author, outside the world of the narrative (plot, characters, etc.); elsewhere, she represents Arabic within the French prose but does not thematize the interaction of Arabic and French within the world of the narrative (see, for example, 202).

¹³Mehrez, “Translation and the Postcolonial Experience,” 122.

¹⁴Mehrez, “Translation and the Postcolonial Experience,” 122–124.

¹⁵Likewise, translation and market forces have codified a certain, select roster of post-colonial writers for Western consumption. In her introduction to the special issue of *Public Culture* on “Translation in a Global Market,” Emily Apter notes: “The constraints imposed by what is available in translation in part determine the content of the transnational canon, which contributes another layer of complexity to the value-laden selection process of authors and serves as partial explanation for why ‘global lit’ courses tend to feature similar rosters of non-Western authors...The most obvious explanation—that these and other writers among the ‘happy few’ are selected because they are universally acclaimed, excellent writers—obviously fails to fully account for their predominance” [*Public Culture* 13:1 (2001): 2].

¹⁶In “Balkan Babel: Translation Zones, Military Zones,” Emily Apter discusses the movement of translation studies in

the direction of transnationalism, which she sees as reducing its dependency on mediation through the major European languages: “In the field of transnational translation studies, the ramifications are clear: rather than a major language acting as the general equivalent between two or more minor languages, the translation process is now conceptualized as occurring within a field of the minor”—e.g. direct translation between “minor” languages like Tagalog and Ogoni. “Balkan Babel: Translation Zones, Military Zones,” *Public Culture* 13:1 (2001), 66. In another article in the same issue of *Public Culture* (“Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*: The Politics of ‘Rotten English’”), Michael North writes, “Translation seems by definition an international issue, and the translatability of a text seems to be relevant only when that text travels outside the national boundaries within which it was created. But these assumptions depend on a national model for which there are virtually no pure examples in the contemporary world, because even the most homogenous societies have significant minority languages. In many countries where there is no true majority language at all, the very existence of a national literary medium depends on the possibility of translation....” (96). In the cases of Habiby and Naqqash, translation within the text takes place between minor languages and between dialects. At the same time, the relative position of Arabic as a majority vs. minority language is reversed within the narrative time and the geographic space in which the narrative transpires. That is, Arabic in Palestine becomes a minority language after 1948. Habiby’s novel includes references to pre-1948 Palestine, when Arabic is still the majority language. Naqqash’s narrative begins in Iraq, where Arabic is the majority language, and ends in Israel, where it is the minority language. Hence both works, while written in Israel, reflect transnational situations in which the relative status of the languages in question undergoes a dramatic reversal.

¹⁷This group includes Habiby, Anton Shammas (who translated Habiby into Hebrew), Naim ‘Ariede (also a bilingual writer), Samih al-Qasim, Riyad Baydas, Salman Massalha, Siham Daoud, and Atallah Mansour, who is widely cited as the author of the first Hebrew novel by a Palestinian [*Be-or badash, In a New Light*, 1966]. For a more detailed discussion of “Arab-Israeli” or “Palestinian-Israeli” writers, including the questions of audience, politics of publishing and marketing, etc., see Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1999), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁸These include Anwar Shaul, Shalom Darwish, Yitzhaq Bar-Moshe, Sasson Somekh, and the youngest of the group, Samir Naqqash. While Israeli critics have demonstrated a minor fascination with the talented handful of bilingual Arab writers in their midst, they have devoted scant attention to the bilingual Jewish writers from Iraq. A more well-known group of Iraqi Jewish novelists who publish in Hebrew, including Eli Amir, Sami Mikhael, and Shimon Ballas, has garnered considerably more notice.

¹⁹This juxtaposition would strike many scholars of Hebrew literature and Israeli culture as counterintuitive; while there are a number of studies on “Arab-Israeli writing,” and a few on writing by Mizrahi and Sephardi authors, I cannot recall having seen an entire study devoted to Arab writing produced in Israel, let alone in comparative context. Israeli scholarship maintains a fairly rigorous ethnic-based division between its

various groups of writers (a point to be discussed in further detail later in the paper).

²⁰For instance, Michael North points out that while use of English by African writers has been roundly criticized as the “worst possible solution,” for a writer such as the Nigerian Saro-Wiwa, who is the “native speaker of a language with no written literature and no public presence in Nigeria,” English represents the *least* oppressive alternative: “To write in Khana, the language of the Ogoni, would have made him unreadable to all but an infinitesimal handful of Nigerians. And the alternative, to write in one of Nigeria’s major languages, would have been for him a more grievous imposition than English ... Saro-Wiwa takes exception to Ngugu’s position [on writing in English] because for him as a member of a minority group English provides an alternative to a linguistic oppression that is far more immediate and threatening.” “Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*,” 100. In other words, the status of English vis-à-vis indigenous languages is far from consistent across the spectrum of ethnic groups in the nation.

²¹For a fuller accounting of this phenomenon and its relevance for Middle Eastern Jewish writing today, see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993).

²²See also Daniel Boyarin, “Zionism, Gender, and Mimicry,” in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 234-265, for a provocative re-reading of Zionism’s conceptual/ideological foundations through post-colonial theory. Borrowing from Homi Bhabha’s writing on mimicry, Boyarin contends: “Herzl’s Zionism, I argue controversially, is *almost, but not quite*, colonialism. There are too many ‘striking features’ that ‘betray its colored [Jewish] descent.’ [Bhabha, 89]. Just trying to figure out what might be the mother country of Zionism immediately reveals the problem. Zionism, moreover, was anything but the instrument of an attempt to spread Jewish culture or Judaism to other peoples. Yet, in its discursive forms and practices, Zionism is very *similar* to colonialism. The plan was not for Jewish Palestine to be a colony but for it to *have* colonies” (256). Boyarin’s central point is that becoming a colonizer was, for Herzl, the ultimate means of “normalizing” the Jew as European and male. Joseph Massad corroborates this observation in an essay in the same collection: “[E]uropean Jews and gentiles alike viewed European Jews as Europeans (only) insofar as they were/are undertaking a colonial venture.” Joseph Massad, “The ‘Post-Colonial’ Colony: Time, Space, and Bodies in Palestine/Israel,” in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, 311-346; 316.

²³Massad, “The ‘Post-Colonial’ Colony,” 311.

²⁴Massad, “The ‘Post-Colonial’ Colony,” 311.

²⁵Massad, “The ‘Post-Colonial’ Colony,” 312.

²⁶Habiby was born in Haifa in 1919, and died there in 1996. In the preface to Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassick’s English translation of the novel, Jayyusi writes of Habiby: “A founding member of the Israeli Communist Party and a leading Arab Journalist, Habiby...was elected three times to the Israeli Knesset, or Parliament, on the Communist list, and has been editor in chief of the leading Arab periodical inside Israel, the bi-weekly, *Al-Ittihad* (Unity), on whose

pages he has published a large number of editorials revolving around social and political issues. As a writer of fiction, however, Habiby became known on a pan-Arab scale with his collection of short stories on life in Israel after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, *Stories of the Six Days* (1969). However, it is his novel *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* [note: Jayyusi and LeGassick’s translation of the title, as it appears on the cover, omits the “Ill-Fated”] (Haifa, 1974) that has won him the greatest acclaim.” Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, Trevor Le Gassick and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, trans., 2nd ed. (New York: Interlink Books, 2002), xii.

²⁷An extensive interview with Naqqash appears in *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing*, ed. Ammiel Alcalay (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 100-111. On why he writes in Arabic, Naqqash says: “I think that someone who professes to change from one language to another loses all direction. I don’t think it’s possible to write in a language that was taught to you at the age of twenty or twenty-five nor do I think it is a wise thing to attempt. Naturally, I prefer the language that I can express myself best in...The issue of [representing] speech was definitely something I was aware of. In Arabic, you can convey various levels of spoken language in a way that you cannot in Hebrew. There are also personal obstacles and reasons why I went into the Arabic language in such great depth and these are connected to the new reality here and the trauma we underwent. This resulted in a kind of roadblock between me and not only the language but everything that is Israeli which has lasted until the present” (107-108). He later adds: “A Jew who writes in Arabic presents all kinds of problems to everyone, yet I am simply continuing to write in my own language” (110). In a Hebrew article published in *Mifgash*, an Israeli journal devoted to promoting intercultural Jewish-Arab contact, Naqqash writes: “Arabic is the first language I grew accustomed to when I learned to speak; it became my second nature, I love it and am devoted to it even after having immigrated to Israel at age twelve, where I filled in my missing vocabulary, and it is my most powerful means of expression... Besides all that, it is a language known for its perfection and rich heritage; if we compare it to Hebrew, which was dormant for thousands of years, then revived and returned to development a short time ago, we find that it [Arabic] is more beautiful and richer by several fold.” (Samir Naqqash, “What Do You Want from Me? I’m Protecting My Autonomy!” quoted in Ami Elad Bouskila, “Arabic and/or Hebrew: The Language of Arab Writers in Israel,” in *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature*, Kamal Abdel-Malek and David Jacobson, eds. [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999], 133-158, 138).

²⁸As a result, Naqqash had to self-publish his first book. Most of his later works were published by the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq (a non-commercial press). A press run by Iraqi exiles in Cologne that calls itself *manshuraat al-jamal* in Arabic and *al-Kamel Verlag* in German published one of Naqqash’s books, *The Angel’s Genitalia*. This press, which publishes works by Iraqi dissidents and refugees, has also recently brought out an Arabic translation of a collection of Hebrew stories by Iraqi-Israeli writer Shimon Ballas.

²⁹For a fuller explanation of this collocation (Mizrahim as “internally colonized”) see also Joseph Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews,” *Journal of Pales-*

time Studies 25:4 (Summer 1996) and Ella Shohat's "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (Fall 1998), 1-35.

³⁰Emile Habiby (also spelled Imil Habibi): *Al-waqa'i' al-gharibah fi ikhtifa' sa'id abi al-nahs al-mutasha'il* (Cairo: Dar Shuhdi, n.d.).

³¹Samir Naqqash, *Ana wa-ha'ula' wa-l-fisam: majma'ab qisas 'iraqiyyah* (Tel Aviv: Jami'ah tashjia' al-abhath wa-l-adab wa-l-funun, 1978); idem, *I, They, and the Split: A Collection of Iraqi Stories* (Tel Aviv: Association for the Promotion of Research, Literature, and Art, 1978).

³²Vicente Rafael describes translation in this sense as "involv[ing] not simply the ability to speak in a language other than one's own but the capacity to reshape one's thoughts and actions in accordance with accepted forms," a process that involves "either affirmation or evasion of the social order." Quoted in Rainier Grutman, "Metaphor of translation," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, 149.

³³Throughout the novel, the means of the letter's delivery is never explained. An epilogue, however, adds: "The gentleman who received these strange letters wishes to inform you that when they reached him they bore the postmark of Acre. And so it was there that he pursued their author. Finally the trail led him to the mental hospital within the city walls, on the seashore" (161). The "gentleman" does not find him there, but the hospital does locate a name similar to Sa'id's: "Saadi al-Nahhas, known as Abu al-Thum, referred to by some as Abu al-Shum," who, it is revealed, had died a year earlier" (162). (In another play on translation and on double meanings, "thum" is the Arabic for "garlic" and "shum" its Hebrew cognate, which in Hebrew can also mean "none" or "nonexistent"—i.e. Abu al-Shum may not really exist.) The narrator continues: "And so the gentleman who received those strange letters left that place. It is now his hope that you will help him search for Saeed. But where should one look?" (162). This absurdist digression concludes with a parable about a madman who misleads a lawyer into searching for buried treasure, and in the meantime, occupies himself by painting a wall with a brush dipped into a bottomless bucket. When the lawyer returns empty-handed and perplexed, the madman invites him to help him with the painting. The last sentence enigmatically concludes: "The point is, gentlemen, how will you ever find him unless you happen to trip right over him?" (163).

³⁴Habiby, 92. See also Samia Mehrez, "*Al-mufaraqah 'inda James Joyce wa-Imil Habibi*" ("Irony in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Habibi's *Pessoptimist*"), *ALIF* 4 (Spring 1984): 33-54, 46.

³⁵Along these lines, Arteaga emphasizes the role of language not only in reinforcing but in creating the colonial reality: "Any monologism, with its drive toward a unitary and self-reflexive discourse, discriminates Self from Other, but in the colonial situation, it radically differentiates the identities of colonizer and colonized....The colonizer's language and discourse are elevated to the status of arbiter of truth and reality; the world comes to be as the authoritative discourse says." Alfred Arteaga, ed., *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 16. This is only too true in the Israeli-Palestinian context, where different historical "realities" down

to the level of different place-names for the same sites compete for primacy in determining the contours and, indeed, the daily stuff of lived experience.

³⁶His literary *oeuvre* includes a collection of stories, *Sudasiyyat al-ayyam as-sittah wa-qisas ukbrab* [*The Sextet of the Six Days and Other Stories*], 1969) and three novels, *The Pessoptimist* (1974), *Ekhayyeh* (1985), and *Sarayyah bint al-ghul* [*Sarayyah, Daughter of the Ghoul*], 1991).

³⁷Habiby, 91. In Le Gassick's translation: "They would depend heavily on 'liberal' young men like myself who knew a civilized language well" (41). "*Lughab insaniiyyah*" can be translated as a "human," "civilized," or "humanistic" language; in the Arabic it conveys something of all three meanings.

³⁸Habiby, 91. In Le Gassick: "He said, 'Shalom,' and I answered, 'Peace,' showing how civilized I was" (42).

³⁹Habiby, 163; translations are Le Gassick's, 122.

⁴⁰Dingwaney, *Between Languages and Cultures*, 9.

⁴¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Michael Holquist, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 304-5, quoted in Michaela Wolf, "The *Third Space* in Postcolonial Representation," in *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era*, Sherry Simon and Paul St. Pierre, eds. (University of Ottawa Press, 2000), 133 (emphasis mine).

⁴²All quotations in this paragraph are from Le Gassick, 24.

⁴³Based on Le Gassick's translation, 24, with some additions (emphasis is mine).

⁴⁴Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 37-38.

⁴⁵This is a mistake in the Le Gassick translation; the neighborhood of Haifa is called Wadi Nisnas, not "Nasnas."

⁴⁶Le Gassick, 48.

⁴⁷Le Gassick, 49.

⁴⁸"And don't forget Shlomo in one of Tel Aviv's very best hotels. Isn't he really Sulaiman, son of Munirah, from our own quarter? And 'Dudi,' isn't he really Mahmud? 'Moshe,' too; isn't his proper name Musa, son of Abdel Massih? How could they earn a living in a hotel, restaurant, or filling station without help from their Oriental imagination [...]?" (Le Gassick, 101); in Arabic: "*Wa-an-nadal shlomo, fi afkham fanadiq til abih, a-laysa huwwa sulayman bin munira, ibn haritna? Wa-dudi, a-laysa huwwa mahmud? Wa-moshe, a-laysa huwwa muusa bin 'abd al-masih? Fu-kayfa la yartaziq ha'ula fi funduq aw fi mata'm aw fi mahatat benz'in, law-la al-khayal ash-sharqi?*" (Habiby, 141). This too recalls Rafael's observation that translation of this kind involves "either affirmation or evasion of the social order."

⁴⁹The name Walaa' means "loyalty" or "fidelity," while Sa'id means "happy" ("Pessoptimist" in Arabic is Habiby's neologism, "*mutasha'il*," — a combination of *mutafa'il* (optimistic) and *mutasha'im* (pessimistic). In the story, Sa'id chooses the name "Walaa'" to please his Israeli boss, who disapproves of the name "Fat'hi" (victorious) originally proposed by the child's mother; see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 217.

⁵⁰See also Roger Allen's discussion of this wordplay in *The Arabic Novel*, 214.

⁵¹The chapter reads:

I lived in the outside world...for twenty years, unable to

breath no matter how hard I tried, like a man who is drowning. But I did not die. I wanted to get free but could not; I was a prisoner unable to escape. But I did remain unchained.

How often I yelled at those about me, "Please, everyone! I groan at the burden of the great secret I bear on my shoulders! Please help me!" But all that came from beneath my moustache was a meowing sound, like that of a cat.

Eventually I came to believe in the transmigration of souls.

Imagine your soul, after your death, entering a cat and this cat being resurrected and roaming around your house. Then imagine your son, whom you love so dearly...and you calling him, meowing to him again and again, while he tells you again and again to shut up. Finally he throws a stone at you. This makes you retreat, reciting to yourself the words of our great poet al-Mutanabbi in the gardens of Buwan in Persia: "In face, hand, and tongue a stranger."

That's how I've been for twenty years, meowing and whimpering so much that this idea of transmigration has become a reality in my mind. Whenever I see a cat, I feel uneasy, thinking that this might be my mother, may her soul rest in peace. So I smile at it and pet it, and even exchange meows with it (Le Gassick, 76).

The Arabic uses "*harab*" for "cat" and "*tamu*" for (she) meows, and "*mua' al-harab*" for "the meow of a cat" (Habiby, 122).

⁵²Habiby, 148.

⁵³Le Gassick, 114.

⁵⁴For example, in a chapter called "The Story of the Golden Fish," Sa'id recalls: "Since I realized that birth control was a proof of loyalty, we had no more children. And whenever our secret became too heavy to bear, I declared my loyalty, whether I was asked to or not. I had regarded myself as an introvert until they sent us in a delegation to Europe and had us take along lots of *tambal* [sic] hats to present to our Jewish brothers there, along with talk of milk and honey, the marrying of spinsters, and the cure for cancer. I presented them with my shirt, pants, and all my underwear, keeping nothing hidden but my secret" (Le Gassick, 97). This passage cannot be fully appreciated without familiarity with the *kova' tembel* (which Le Gassick mistakenly transcribes as "*tambal*"). This floppy, brimless hat, shaped like the top of a mushroom, became an iconic symbol of "pioneering" life in Israel in the early years of statehood. (The word *tembel* idiomatically means "fool," "dunce," or "idiot," in Israeli Hebrew). Habiby brilliantly weaves this cultural icon into his parodic passage detailing Sa'id's loyalty to the state.

⁵⁵See, for instance, Rachel Feldhay Brenner's "Hidden Transcripts' Made Public: Israeli Arab Fiction and Its Reception," *Critical Inquiry*, 26:1 (Autumn 1999), 3 of electronic version, and "The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction: Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas," *Israel Studies* 6:3 (2001), 95. Brenner's explicit focus is on the transmission of these authors' works into Israeli Hebrew culture. She acknowledges, but does not pursue, the status of Habiby's works as Arabic novels. In first presenting him, she

notes briefly that his works "were originally written in Arabic and translated by Shammas under Habiby's supervision" ("Hidden Transcripts' Made Public," 3, electronic version), then proceeds to group his writing with the other, Hebrew-language texts: "The exceptional combination of genre, authors' nationality, and language suggests that a particular kind of intention motivates these texts: to present Israeli Arab autobiographical narratives to a Hebrew-speaking Jewish audience. The authorial intention, the *raison d'être*, of this act of writing is inextricable from the identity of the targeted reader [...]" (3). Given that Habiby wrote the texts in Arabic, how does he share in the linguistic aspect of this "exceptional combination"? Indeed, the statement implies that "the targeted reader" of a major twentieth-century Arabic novel such as *The Pessoptimist* is the Hebrew-speaking Jewish audience. Certainly, Habiby had this audience in mind when writing the novel; but it is equally evident that it is aimed at least at much, if not more, at the Arab reader. Elsewhere, Brenner notes that in *Sarayab, Daughter of the Ghoul*, Habiby "draws the attention of his Hebrew reader to the status of his fiction as a translated text when...he steps out of his narrative to question whether Shammas could adequately translate a particularly complex pun from Arabic into Hebrew" (3); in her later article, she underscores the fact that "Habiby's *oeuvre* reached the Israeli readership in Hebrew translation" and focuses on the question of why Habiby would "knowingly endanger his reputation, friendships, and the readership in the Arab world to enter the world of the Israeli Jewish majority through the special effort of translation" ("The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction, 96). These are pertinent considerations; however, Brenner's analysis of Habiby's novel proceeds without further regard for them.

⁵⁶Shammas's novel is the only exception to this rule—that is, the only literary work by a Palestinian in Israel to be read closely and analyzed from theoretical perspectives not restricted to the issue of the author's identity.

⁵⁷This point is discussed insightfully by Brenner. In summarizing the response of Israeli critics to Habiby's work and, especially, to the decision to grant him the Israel Prize for literature, she concludes: "Despite their claim to approach Habiby apolitically, the appreciations of his work disclose a subtext no less programmatic than the negative responses of his Arab critics. Israeli Jewish liberals interpret Habiby's writing as a benevolent satiric representation of human folly, associating it with satiric humanist literature, such as Voltaire's *Candide* and Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*. This move allows the liberal left to see Habiby's prize as a victory of justice over political and national differences. The critical emphasis on Habiby's 'back door' message, his 'softened...description of Arab life in Israel under military rule,' and his humanism places [sic] Habiby's work in the context of universal moral values" ("Hidden Transcripts' Made Public," 5, electronic version).

⁵⁸Interestingly enough, Habiby himself supplies many of the intertextual references himself in the form of occasional footnotes in the text (which, while it is far less a prominent feature of the text than in Naqqash, could still be interesting to compare to the latter's extensive footnoting system). For one instructive exploration of intertextuality in *The Pessoptimist*, See Anna Zambelli Sessona, "The Rewriting of the Ara-

bian Nights by Imil Habibi,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 5, 1 (Jan 2002), 29-48, which discusses applications of *Alf layla wa-layla* [*A Thousand and One Nights*] in the novel. Akram Khater’s “Emile Habibi: The Mirror of Irony in Palestinian Literature,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24, 1 (March 1993), 75-94, focuses on how “Habibi uses the tool of laughter to reclaim the identity of the Palestinian-Israelis from the throes of the hegemonic State, historical amnesia, and mindless materialism” (76), but also treats stylistic issues such as the generic similarity between Habibi’s narrative style and the Arabic *maqamah*, and Habibi’s use of traditional linguistic structures such as *saj*’ (rhymed prose) “in ways that seem to bring out the absurd as much in the style as in the image” (90). In his brief commentary on the novel, Edward Said also notes its use of irony, which, in his view, makes it “unique in Arabic literature,” and claims that it “sketches the complete picture of Palestinian identity as no purely political tract can.” *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 153. See also Mehrez, “Irony in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Habibi’s *Pessoptimist*,” 42, and Roger Allen’s discussion of the novel (*The Arabic Novel*, 209-222, esp. p. 213); both mention Habibi’s use of the *maqamah*, in addition to other stylistic and intertextual features. Faysal Darraj’s “*Imil Habibi: tigniyat al-bikayah wa-binaa’ al-sira al-dhatiyyah*” [*Emile Habibi: The Technique of Storytelling and Autobiographical Form*] (*Majallat al-Karmel*, 52 [Summer 1997]) focuses on autobiography as a structuring principle in Habibi’s *oeuvre*. Finally, see Maher Jarrar, “A Narration of Deterritorialization: Imil Habibi’s *The Pessoptimist*,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 5, 1 (Jan 2002), 15-28 for a reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and *The Pessoptimist*.

⁵⁹As a case in point, one might consider Le Gassick and Janyusi’s numerous errors in transliteration of Hebrew terms and their consistent omission of explanations of these terms or of other Hebrew references (the edition includes numerous footnotes for Arabic terms and for references to Arabic literary and historical figures).

⁶⁰Mehrez, “Irony in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Habibi’s *Pessoptimist*.”

⁶¹I am referring here to Jarrar, “A Narration of Deterritorialization,” and Brenner, “The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction.” (Brenner quotes Mahmoud Darwish, Edward Said, and ‘Azmi Bishara on Israel/Palestinian identity issues and on Darwish’s relationship to Hebrew, but her investigation of responses to Palestinian writing in Israel does not yield any sources outside of the Israeli sphere.)

⁶²Naqqash’s other works include: *Al-Khata’* (*The Mistake*, short stories) (Jerusalem: Al-Ma’arif [1971]); *Al-Rijs* [*The Abomination*, a novel] ([Jerusalem], 1987); *Fi ghibyibi* [*In His Absence*, a play] (Shefaram: Al-Mashrik, 1981) *Hiyakat kull zaman wa-makan* [*Tales of Any Time and Place*, stories] (Tel Aviv: Association for the Promotion of Research, Literature, and Art, 1978); *Nazulab wa-khayt al-shaytan* [*Tenants and Cobwebs*, a novel] (Jerusalem: Association for Jewish Academics from Iraq, 1986); *Yanma habilat wa-ajbadat al-dunya* [*The Day the World Was Conceived and Miscarried*, four novellas] (Jerusalem: al-Sharq al-‘Arabiyyah, 1980); *Awrat al-mala’ika* [*The Angles Genitalia*, a novel] (Cologne: al-Kamel Verlag, 1991). This list is not exhaustive.

⁶³See Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, 107-108.

⁶⁴What I refer to here as *fus’ha* is also known variously as “classical Arabic” (although modern literary Arabic is not, strictly speaking, “classical”) and as “Modern Standard Arabic” (MSA). Essentially it is the common written medium shared by the entire Arab world (used in speech only in very formal situations). While ‘*amiyyah*’ (spoken, or colloquial, Arabic) differs greatly from region to region, *fus’ha* is mutually comprehensible to all literate Arabs. *Fus’ha* is traditionally afforded greater respect than ‘*amiyyah*’ due to its proximity to the Arabic of the Qur’an and to the language of the classical religious, scholarly, and literary traditions. In other words, *fus’ha*, as the language of religion and learning, occupies a far higher status than ‘*amiyyah*’ (which is popularly not even conceived of as a “real” language).

⁶⁵Haim Blanc, *Communal Dialects in Baghdad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press-Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1964), 3.

⁶⁶In her pioneering study on Iraqi Jewish writers, Nancy Berg opines that “[t]he gloss does not necessarily make [Naqqash’s] text accessible to the Iraqi, much less the non-Iraqi. Naqqash’s fellow Iraqi-born writers have expressed their own difficulties in reading his work....Yitzhak Bar-Moshe [another Iraqi-Jewish writer of Arabic] declares his colleague’s work to be ‘unreadable’ and ‘not enjoyable,’ due to the effort it demands. In an interview he described reading Naqqash’s writing as a Sisyphean task, every book a dictionary. ‘I know the words, but kill me if I know what is the context, how does he use it here, why?’” Nancy Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), 55. Naqqash himself says of his writing: “Spoken dialogue is much more trustworthy and exact than dialogue written in literary language. And this is one of the difficulties that makes some of my work virtually unreadable. So that I find myself forced to add translations below the dialogues. I myself don’t even know how I got to this point of being able to use the language of each character, regardless of their social standing....As I said, our house was a kind of meeting place for many different kinds of women and men. My mother and my aunt in their respective professions knew many Muslim women of all classes and they were always our guests so I had the opportunity to hear and absorb all of these different dialects and styles and I would listen to them and it sunk in” (Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden*, 107.)

⁶⁷The term “*fisam*” literally means “split” or “fissure,” but the same root in a different morphological pattern (“*infisam*”) denotes schizophrenia. The sense in which Naqqash uses it conveys something of both: he is discussing both the split between Muslims and Jews in Iraq that develops during the time period in which the story is set, and the sense of rupture it causes in the narrator’s identity, as expressed in the following passage: “And I, eleven years old, hear the [anti-Jewish] cries and taste bitterness. The struggle taking place inside me, between the two men of different opinions, intensifies. The crack of the *fisam* (fissure) widens and its lines are bloody, [but they] melt away overnight” [Wa-ana fi al-hadiyyah ashrah, asma’ al-hutaf, wa-amdugh al-‘ulqam. Wa-as-sira’a fi dakhli bayn ar-rajulayn, al-mukhtalifin fi ar-ra’i yashtaddu. Sada’ al-fisam yitas’a wa-khututu damawiyah timsi wa-tasih] (167).

Later, after the narrator's family has registered to leave, we read: "And we are fragments [shatat] being pulled by the two sides of the *fisam*: Belonging and not belonging [intimaa' wa-la intimaa']" (182).

⁶⁸A summary of the historical developments that form the backdrop to Naqqash's novella appears in Charles Tripp's *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000):

These events were the prelude to the eventual disappearance of the large and long-established Jewish community in Iraq....The establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine simultaneously with the British Mandate for Iraq had made the position of the Jewish communities in the new Iraqi state peculiarly invidious. It was not long before the Jews in Iraq were being accused of serving both the British authorities in Iraq and the Zionist project in Palestine which the British Mandate had facilitated. During the 1930s, with the outbreak of the Arab revolt in Palestine and the heightening of pan-Arab and anti-Zionist agitation in Iraq, press attacks on the Jews became ever more vehement. Some Jews in Baghdad were physically assaulted....Public attempts by the leadership of the Jewish community to impress upon their fellow countrymen that they were by no means supporters of the Zionist enterprise in Palestine carried little weight when contrasted with the accusations emanating from the Arab nationalist circles of the Muthanna Club. With official encouragement from the army officers who dominated Iraqi politics in the late 1930s, the charges levelled against the Jewish community in Iraq made no distinction between Zionist and Jewish identities, vilifying both in terms of an imported anti-semitism that also exploited local sectarian prejudices. This was a potent mixture, the violent results of which were seen in the *Farhud* [pogrom] of 1941 [in which some 200 Jews were killed, far more raped and maimed, and Jewish property looted and destroyed]. For many Jewish Iraqis it was an ominous indication not only of their vulnerability in Iraq, but also of the apparent indifference of the authorities, both Iraqi and British, to their fate....It was at this juncture [in 1949] that the Iraqi security services uncovered a Zionist network in Iraq which was helping Iraqi Jews emigrate to Israel. This in turn led to extensive arrests in the Jewish community and increased suspicion, effectively barring young Jewish Iraqis from employment by the state or in the professions. For many in the Iraqi Jewish community it appeared that there was indeed no future in Iraq itself since neither their community leaders nor any international body was willing or able to defend their rights as Iraqi citizens. Encouraged both by successive Iraqi governments and by the Israeli authorities, the vast majority of the community of over 100,000 took advantage of a 1950 law allowing them to renounce their Iraqi citizenship and to leave Iraq forever. By 1952 the community had virtually ceased to exist, much of its property had been expropriated by the Iraqi government and only a few thousand Jews remained in Iraq. (124-126; see also 105-106 on the *farhud*).

In "imported anti-semitism" Tripp is referring to the pro-Axis orientation of influential members of the Iraqi political and military leadership and to the agitation of Nazi propagandists in Iraq during the 1930s; a failed coup by these elements in

1941 led to the *farhud* and to British re-occupation.

⁶⁹The imperative "Read!" should be "Iqra'" (or "Iqgha" in the Jewish dialect), but the teacher apparently either has trouble pronouncing the missing consonant or idiosyncratically "swallows" it when saying the word.

⁷⁰Naqqash, 131. All translations of Naqqash in this essay are mine.

⁷¹Naqqash, 131-132.

⁷²In a way this is an anomalous example of the double text, because the double text's implied reader would be conversant in both cultures, but here the implied reader is obviously assumed not to have access to both.

⁷³Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 172.

⁷⁴These words are spoken in the Muslim dialect, as a member of the narrator's family explains to a Muslim family friend. The full quote reads: "There's no way around it [lit: no path will appear]. We'll sign up and go. They really haven't left any life for a Jew here" (168).

⁷⁵The *tasqit* refers to the forfeiture of citizenship under the Denaturalization Law, passed by the Iraqi parliament on March 2, 1950, which essentially gave the Iraqi Jews one year to register to leave the country legally provided that they give up their Iraqi citizenship. The day after the law expired, the parliament in secret session passed another law decreeing that all the possessions, holdings, and assets of Jews who had signed up were to be "frozen," i.e., nationalized, and pass into the hands of the government. This wealthy community of 130,000-140,000 was thus rendered destitute overnight. For more background on the *tasqit*, see Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq: 3,000 Years of History and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985) and Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951* (Portland: Frank Cass, 1997).

⁷⁶Naqqash, 168.

⁷⁷Naqqash, 170.

⁷⁸Naqqash, 185-186.

⁷⁹Of course, the linkage between unfamiliarity (foreignness) and error is well represented throughout both this text and *The Pessoptimist*. In *The Concept of the Foreign: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003), (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), Rebecca Saunders theorizes the connection between foreignness and error, investigating "the relationship that hermeneutics draws between foreignness and error and the manner in which foreigners may be identified by linguistic or social errors, as well as the component of (potentially random) movement within foreignness...and the way foreignness shares with madness the characteristics of both wandering and untruth" (45). Certainly the last part of the quotation would be especially applicable to the character of Sa'id. But the idea of the false cognate, or false equivalencies, is an interesting twist on Saunders's linkage of foreignness and error, as it is a *difference* masquerading as a *similarity*—hence its propensity to cause error is that much less obvious, and more insidious.

⁸⁰His use of this particular term is especially striking given that in Iraq of that time, the equivalent currency was "*fiils*" while the Israeli equivalent is "*agurah*" (plural "*agurot*"), and the idiomatic Israeli Hebrew word for a very small monetary denomination would be "*grush*" or "*pruta*."

⁸¹Naqqash, 186.

⁸²“*Khamiyya*” is an unusual adjective, perhaps invented by Naqqash; the term from which it seems to be derived, “*kham*,” is itself already an adjective that means “unworked, unprocessed” or “linen, calico.” Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, 3rd edition, J. Milton Cowan, ed. (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, Inc., 1976), 224; my guess is that he uses the term here in the sense of crude, unformed (hence “makeshift”).

⁸³Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 39, 41-42.

⁸⁴Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 40.

⁸⁵What I mean here is that the language of these texts is infused with a meta-awareness of itself as language, which I see as having a metaphorical function; a self-conscious idiom fashioned to imply that it has a consciousness—that it “knows” its shortcomings, that it recognizes its own function in the signification process—is no longer “language” in the sense of an idiom that performs its referential function transparently and unconsciously, but can only be a *metaphor* for language in that sense—the difference between *representing* and *being*, as it were. (Of course, in the case of literature, no language is so naïve; usually, however, it is styled to “trick” the reader into thinking it is acting transparently, while here, that crucial pretense is itself abandoned). This idea also has parallels in theories of translation: “Sometimes the translated text itself is viewed as a metaphor for the foreign text, as when Gregory Rabassa argues that “a word is nothing but a metaphor for an object or ... for another word,” and that translation is a “form of adaptation, making the new metaphor fit the original metaphor” (1989: 1-2). For Rabassa, translation is the piecing together of metaphors, in order to construct another entity which is also a metaphor: metaphor as a metaphor for translation” (Rainier Grutman, “Metaphor of Translation,” 149).

⁸⁶Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present*, Jean Jacques Weber, ed. (London: Arnold, 1996), 10-35, esp. 13.

⁸⁷Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 55.