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Introduction

In 2022, the world reached a dire milestone: according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of displaced people around the world surpassed 100 million. To put this figure in perspective, one in every 78 people on earth has been forced to leave home on account of war, human rights abuses, food insecurity, and climate-related disasters.¹

Scholars have pointed out that in this age of unprecedented forced displacement, asylum seeking, and unauthorized migration, it is crucial to listen to migrants and refugees and not just to commentators whose own domiciles and livelihoods are fixed and secure.² This push to listen is especially crucial given that the voices of those who have firsthand experience of displacement tend to be conspicuously absent from both media reports and policy debates on the subject of migration. In fact, even in their own asylum interviews, applicants for refugee status are rarely able to speak freely given the strict criteria for being granted asylum in host countries around the world.

Orphaned of Light: Translating Arab and Arabophone Migra-

¹ “More Than 100 Million.”

² See, e.g., McKenzie and Triulzi, “Listening to Migrants’ Narratives”; Andrews, Introduction; and Squire et al., Introduction.

tion takes a literary approach to the endeavor of listening to migrant voices. *Absinthe 28* features translations of contemporary Arabic literature—most originally published in the 21st century—on experiences of migration, broadly defined. In these works, “migration” includes but is not limited to forced displacement. It takes numerous forms and is considered from a variety of perspectives: diasporic life, undocumented labor, refugeehood, human trafficking, internal displacement, exile. The works’ authors are individuals whose personal experiences of, or up-close encounters with, migration inform their writing on the subject.

Translating Migrant Voices

The call to “listen to migrant voices” should be more than a vague platitude recited in the name of inclusivity. One specific reason to emphasize the importance of detailed firsthand accounts of unauthorized migration is that in many host countries, the field of mainstream discourse about refugees and migrants is limited by “hostility themes” in which oversimplified narratives in opposition to and in defense of migrants are constantly battling each other.³ Those on the political right tend to paint migrants as dangerous or at least burdensome, whereas liberals tend to emphasize migrants’ victimhood and lack of alternatives. In this fraught discursive landscape, the fact that migrants must at times take forceful or artful action in the face of violently exclusionary border regimes becomes an opportunity for migration antagonists to demonize the newcomers. Meanwhile, many refugee advocates ignore these complex forms of migrant agency, which disrupt the simple, touching arc of tragedy and philanthropy.

Not only do asylum seekers have to contend with these diametrically opposed and flattening narratives when telling their stories to audiences in their host countries, but they also internalize some of them. With this in mind, we can understand how literature in Arabic (and other languages) on the subject of migration can serve the purpose of sorting through conflicting feelings about it, away from

³ Leudar et al., “Hostility Themes.”

the Western media spotlight. On the page, migrant authors can treat such thorny issues as smuggling and human trafficking, the common tactic of stretching the truth during asylum interviews, the ills of international aid, and religious fundamentalism without much fear of playing into the hands of a host country's nationalist ideologues. And the domestic popularity of Arabic literature on unauthorized migration demonstrates that the phenomenon might well be as much an object of curiosity and debate in "sending" countries as it is in "countries of reception."

Translators face a difficult question, then: If one of the purposes of Arabic migration literature is to provide a secluded venue in which to air raw emotions and express views on controversial subjects, what are the ethics of translating this literature into English? Is it possible that such translations could do more harm than good?

Khaled Mattawa, one of *Absinthe 28*'s translators, addressed a similar concern at a symposium I co-organized with him in the fall of 2021 at the University of Michigan called "Translation and the Making of Arab American Community." The interplay between Arabic and English, he said, has been "a part of mediating the Arab American experience for a long time." In the city of Dearborn, Michigan, which boasts the largest concentration of Arabs in the United States, Arab residents from various national, religious, generational, and linguistic backgrounds must "translate" their experiences not just for non-Arabs, but for *one another*—including some members of younger generations who have limited proficiency in the language. Therefore, in visiting a community like Dearborn, one enters "not a melting pot necessarily, but a market of exchanged, evolving ideas that are working toward a medium." Still, Mattawa added, there remains a palpable ambivalence over publicizing this multilingual dialogue:

The specter that haunts this utopic state of existence where Arabic and English are kind of flourishing is the surveillance and security that is eavesdropping on these conversations. So while we come to this conversation with a lot of excitement and with a lot to learn from each other, we will not neglect the fact that we are being overheard all the time, even here.⁴

⁴ To watch a video recording of Mattawa's speech and the rest of the event's proceed-

It is true: government surveillance has been an unsettling, panoptic reality for Arab Americans, particularly in the years following the 9/11 attacks.⁵ And in the case of unauthorized migration to Europe, long before migrants physically enter the EU, the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosur) tracks them with imaging and sensing technologies using satellites and reconnaissance aircraft.⁶ Both Eurosur and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) sanitize their image by operating with both a policing and a humanitarian mission—keeping migrants out, yes, but also saving their lives by facilitating and conducting rescue operations and targeting violent smuggler gangs.⁷ This humanitarian element might be intended to keep at bay accusations that these entities actually *bring about* migrant deaths, but scholars have nonetheless shown that by forcing unauthorized migration further underground, governments make it even more dangerous, compelling migrants to undertake darker, stormier, more remote—and thus deadlier—crossings.⁸

In light of this systematic surveillance, legitimate misgivings may arise for migrants about being translated. With this critique in mind, why take on this project of translating a collection of contemporary Arabic literary works about migration and refugeehood? A couple of factors may begin to allay concerns. First, we have, of course, received permission to translate and publish these works, and many of the authors we contacted expressed excitement for their writing to be made available to a broader, Anglophone readership. Second, there is an argument to be made that although the Arabic language can make possible the kind of non-polarized discourse that digs deep into the uncomfortable nuances of migration and migrant subjectivity, this does not mean that this discourse automatically transforms *back* into a polarized one when an Arabic work is translated into English. On the contrary, translation can create much needed open-

ings, visit <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/translate/midwest/2021/11/12/november-12-2021-symposium-on-translation-and-the-making-of-arab-american-community/>.

⁵ See, e.g., Khan and Ramachandran, “Post-9/11 Surveillance”; and Scahill and Devereaux, “Watch Commander.”

⁶ See Ajana, “Digital Biopolitics.”

⁷ Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.*, 72–73.

⁸ See, e.g., De León, *Land of Open Graves*; and Albahari, *Crimes of Peace*.

ings for dialogue in otherwise deadlocked debates by introducing new, unexpected details and immersive reading experiences. But—and I stress this point—these justifications do not magically resolve the tension between the sunny view of Arabic-to-English translation as a force for greater mutual understanding, on the one hand, and the darker, more critical view of it as a kind of unwelcome surveillance, on the other.

“Orphaned of Light”

Absinthe 28's title gestures toward some of the complexity I have laid out above. “Orphaned of light” is a phrase borrowed from one of this issue's selections, a poem written by Dearborn-based writer Gulala Nouri and translated by Ali Harb. But the motif of light and darkness, often infused with a deep sense of loss, runs throughout several of the pieces featured here. In many cases, the motif takes the form of a character being deprived of—and craving—actual or metaphorical light but nonetheless taking advantage of darkness. Refugees flee dark circumstances and seek brighter futures abroad, but given the illegalized nature of their journeys across borders, most of them must make their way under the cover of darkness.

For some, even after arriving in Europe, their futures are still “bereft of light,” as Rachid Niny writes in *Journal of a Clandestine Migrant*, a selection of which is translated by Angela Haddad for this issue. But the fact that Niny does not possess the proper documentation to reside legally in Spain *requires* him to operate “undercover,” which, as Haddad points out, is another possible translation for the adjective in the book's title. Elsewhere, the dynamics of light and darkness are more literal. In Nisma Alaklouk's “Her, Him, and Gaza,” translated by Julia Schwartz, Gaza is described as often wearing a “dark outfit—sometimes as funeral garb for the multitude of martyrs, sometimes because there wasn't enough diesel to fuel the manual electricity generator.” Still, for Alaklouk's narrator, the joys of light cannot be fully appreciated in her new home in Belgium. The New Year's fireworks remind her too much of the sound of bombs falling, which she heard on a regular basis in Gaza.

The aforementioned poem by Nouri, “No Flowers on My Doorstep,” contains a similar emotional contradiction. The speaker repeats the sentence “Flowers are not for me” and describes the neighborhood women who *do* keep flowers on their doorsteps as only caring about appearances while remaining ignorant of life’s darker realities. And yet the speaker admits that she used to keep flowers herself but was “bereaved” of them. They were “plucked” from her and given as gifts to soldiers going off to war or laid in the caskets of those who died in battle. In those caskets, “my flowers are orphaned of light / and I am orphaned here in this house on the intersection.” The refrain “flowers are not for me” thus reveals itself to be not a statement of personal taste, but rather a lament. As in the examples above, the poet’s relationship with light (a condition for flowers to grow) is an ambivalent one, which connects with migrants’ ambivalence about being translated. The play of light and darkness suggests a desire to be seen and to express oneself, on the one hand, and a need for privacy and even secrecy, on the other.

Side-by-Side Translation

We have attempted to further reflect this theme of revealing and concealing by presenting this issue’s poetry in a side-by-side Arabic-English format. The presence of the Arabic text serves as a reminder that a translation, especially of a poem, is not a “faithful copy” of an “original,” but another entry point into an expanded literary work. For Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail, who spoke at the Arab American translation symposium, translation is not a transfer of an original poem to a new language but rather a second writing of the poem. Her bilingual poetry reading at the event was an exemplar of the way that translation can provide a multidimensional experience of a work of art that would not otherwise be possible. For Palestinian American writer Sara Abou Rashed, who translated her own poetry for this issue of *Absinthe*, the bilingual format brings out overtones of “past lives”—hers in Damascus, her grandparents’ in Haifa—that she perceives amid her current experiences in the United States. She writes,

“I cannot imagine what it feels like to know only one [language], to express my thoughts in only one register, octave, rhythm, alphabet. Perhaps we—multilinguals—come to cultivate consciousnesses greater than the singularity of each of our languages.”

The side-by-side format also allows us to publish works by two poets who originally wrote their poems in English. The inclusion of Arabic renderings of these English-language poems points to the fact that translation of migration literature need not—and should not—be an extractive practice by which English literature is enriched. Instead, translation must be understood as multidirectional and multifunctional. While Abou Rashed’s translation of her own work into her mother tongue works primarily as a means of authentic self-expression, Mootacem Mhiri’s English-to-Arabic translation of scholar and activist Becky Thompson’s work accomplishes something quite different. Thompson’s poetry bears witness to the experiences of refugees she met while volunteering in Greece, and Mhiri’s translation makes that poetry more accessible to many of those about whom she writes.

Why Arabic?

Little of the above discussion on migrant voices, border regimes, the imagery of light and darkness, and the migrant subject’s selective tendency toward revealing and concealing is specific to Arabic-speaking refugees. So why limit this issue of *Absinthe* to translations from (or to) a single language? Though Arabic may be the most widely spoken language among the world’s refugees today, Arabic-speaking migrants share routes, smugglers, and refugee camps with speakers of numerous other languages: Farsi/Dari, Pashto, French, Kurmanji and Sorani (along with other dialects of Kurdish), Urdu, and many more. Why not include work translated from some of these languages as well?

One reason is simply the reality of limitations on time, resources, and foreign language skills. A more satisfying answer, however, relates to the Arab communities of Dearborn, where the University

of Michigan has a campus and whose diverse stories of migration (along with those of Dearborn Heights, Hamtramck, and other cities) enrich the unique cultural character of Metro Detroit. Indeed, Arabic is the third most widely spoken language in the state of Michigan. This August, in a move that language access advocates had long been fighting for, Dearborn held its first elections for which Arabic-language ballots were provided. Though *Absinthe* has featured individual translations from Arabic in the past, this is the first issue devoted entirely to Arabic literature. For a translation journal that was founded in Detroit and was adopted by the University of Michigan, the publication of such an issue seems highly fitting, if not overdue.

A final reason to feature exclusively Arabic works in an issue on migration and displacement is the fact that since the Nakba of 1948, the Palestinian refugee has been a central figure in Arabic literature. In Arabic, the word *lāji* ' (refugee) immediately conjures up thoughts and images of Palestine and its people. The works of refugee writer Ghassan Kanafani are peerless in their depiction of the plight of displaced Palestinians. In the final scene of his novel *Men in the Sun*, three refugees suffocate in the back of a lorry during a botched clandestine border-crossing attempt. This scene remains unrelentingly poignant as media reports of similar calamities appear on a painfully regular basis today. We open this issue of *Absinthe* with a lesser-known short story of Kanafani's, "The Stolen Shirt," translated by Michael Fares. Its depiction of life in a Palestinian refugee camp in the 1950s sets the stage for the more contemporary works that are featured in this issue. The story serves as a chilling reminder of the decades-long genealogy of Arab refugeehood that has continued with renewed vigor in the 21st century.

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