

Staging Translation:
The Polylingual Narratives of
Derek Walcott and Rabih Alameddine
Dalia Bolotnikov Mazur

Abstract: This article analyzes how authors respond to the implications of translation, circulation, and readership in a global market dominated by particular linguistic superpowers. The two authors I examine compose their works in English in a way that complicates the language's hegemony. Focusing on the staging of translation in Derek Walcott's poetic sequence "Sainte Lucie" (1976) and Rabih Alameddine's novel *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013), I demonstrate how these Anglophone writers enact a polylingual consciousness. I argue that the English content of the first-person narration in the two texts provides monolingual readers an entryway into the transitional linguistic space of a translator. Through relational, rather than hierarchical, approaches to translation, the translator-narrators in these texts unsettle market expectations and destabilize the local-global dichotomy. Ultimately, this article exemplifies how Anglophone writers can reject the premises of a philological tradition that partitions linguistic environments.

Keywords: Rabih Alameddine, Derek Walcott, translation, local and global, multilingualism

I. Introduction: Poetics of Polylinguaging

Derek Walcott's five-part poetic sequence "Sainte Lucie" and Rabih Alameddine's novel *An Unnecessary Woman* unfold through the first-person perspective and guidance of a translator. The two texts are written predominantly in English, yet neither fits neatly into a single

lexicon. As the speaker in “Sainte Lucie” tries to recuperate his memory of the eponymous island and its language, he juxtaposes English and Saint Lucian Kwéyòl words and phrases, often in adjacent translations. *An Unnecessary Woman*, which takes place in Beirut, features a narrator who uses English and French as vehicles for translating books from source languages she does not know into Arabic. Alameddine splits his time between the US and Lebanon, and Walcott alternated between the US and Saint Lucia, so both diasporic artists are keenly aware of and often investigate within their work the implications of entangled linguistic attachments. The presumption of translation as a transparent act is an illusion that obscures the difficult, even painful, negotiations that occur in the process—concealing the jagged splinters of the passageways between languages. Walcott and Alameddine disrupt such illusions by emphasizing the chaos involved in carrying narratives across cultural worlds. Though they vary in approach, “Sainte Lucie” and *An Unnecessary Woman* both foreground the act of translation rather than mask it: the two texts transpire within the interplay between languages rather than an artificially monolingual reality.

To interrogate the role of Anglophone literature within the contemporary global context, this article examines the literary practices of these two writers, who compose their works in English in a way that complicates the language’s hegemony. I argue that the English content of “Sainte Lucie” and *An Unnecessary Woman* provides an entry-way through which the authors transport monolingual readers into the transitional linguistic space of a translator. As case studies, the poem and novel demonstrate how Anglophone writers can incorporate the staging of translation—a narrative performance of the translator’s process—as the framework for immersing their audience in a polylingual consciousness.

Despite evident distinctions between Caribbean and Lebanese historical contexts, both bear consequences of linguistic imperialism. In her essay “A Journey into Speech,” Michelle Cliff stresses that an effect of “passing into the anglocentrism of the British West Indian culture is that you believe absolutely in the hegemony of the King’s English,” which holds up the writing of John Milton, William Wordsworth, and John

Keats as ideal “with an assurance that we were unable . . . to compose a work of similar correctness” (32–33). In her own work, Cliff sometimes “alternate[s] the King’s English with *patois*” to reflect the consequent split consciousness: “It would be as dishonest to write the novel entirely in *patois* as to write entirely in the King’s English” (33). Aspects of Cliff’s description echo Etel Adnan’s portrayal of language status during the French mandate over Lebanon. In “To Write in a Foreign Language,” Adnan explains that her generation used French textbooks, studied France’s geographic features, “breathed an air where it seemed that being French was superior. . . . [A] whole generation of educated boys and girls felt superior to the poorer kids who did not go to school and spoke only Arabic. Arabic was equated with backwardness and shame,” and “anybody heard in class or in recreation speaking Arabic was punished.” Adnan writes that the consequences of this education, its “psychological conditioning,” persisted into the next generation, long after the French mandate: “Most of the students spoke [only] Arabic at home, but when they themselves became parents they started talking in either French or Arabic to their own children, or a mixture of the two languages.” Alameddine’s *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* demonstrates the increasing status of English and fluctuating levels of prestige accorded to French and English in Lebanon, when around thirty years after the French mandate, the protagonist’s father transfers her to “the best school in the city” after deciding that she “needed to have English, not French, as [her] primary language” (4). The subjugation of local languages has a much longer, violent history in Saint Lucia, which alternated between Britain and France’s colonial rule fourteen times over the course of hundreds of years. The complexity of the resulting multilingualism in Saint Lucia and Lebanon is key to the construction of Walcott’s poem and Alameddine’s novel.

Alameddine’s and Walcott’s narratives, which center on language and translation, emerge through polylinguaging, whether performed or narrated. While “Sainte Lucie” features translations, *An Unnecessary Woman* exemplifies what other scholars have called “transfiction” (Kaindl and Spitzl) or “transmesis” (Beebee)—fiction that depicts the act of translation.¹ Thomas Beebee asserts that “transmeses remind their readers that

the universe is multilingual” by making visible and legible the work and position of a translator to a larger public (3). In his study of border epistemologies and the geopolitics of knowledge, Walter Mignolo promotes “bi or pluri languaging,” which is “precisely the celebration of the crack in the global process between local histories and global designs . . . and a critique of the idea that civilization is linked to the ‘purity’ of colonial and national monolanguaging” (250). Translation allows the narrators of *An Unnecessary Woman* and “Sainte Lucie” to mediate between self, local community, and global literary network.

Tracing the roles and movements of languages in Alameddine’s and Walcott’s texts calls attention to the implications of translation, circulation, and readership in a global market dominated by linguistic superpowers. In her argument for a linguistic remapping of the postcolonial canon—to include, for example, “texts from regional languages in India, either in the original or through translations” (229)—Nirmala Menon presents a survey of major articles and journals, pointing to a decades-long trend “toward the domination of postcolonial works written in English” (223). Emily Apter’s work in the field of translation studies documents “the contradictory process by which globally powerful languages . . . simultaneously reduce linguistic diversity and spawn new forms of multilingual aesthetic practice” (*The Translation Zone* 3). Turning to these forms of multilingualism, Samuel Spinner observes the challenges of most “languages in the face of the anglophone cultural juggernaut” but suggests that, nonetheless, “minority subjectivity can be asserted in a hegemonic language” (150). This article offers ways in which Anglophone authors can, like the narrators in Walcott’s and Alameddine’s texts, evoke a plurality of language worlds despite writing in English.

The juxtaposition of “Sainte Lucie” and *An Unnecessary Woman* generates a vision of languages and histories as intertwining helices coiling around one another and fosters a space of encounter reminiscent of Édouard Glissant’s expanded definition of “creolization”: “the meeting, interference, shock, harmonies, and disharmonies between the cultures of the world” (“The Unforeseeable Diversity of the World” 290), a vision based on nonhierarchical contact and interaction, established

through “relation” rather than “abstraction or idealization” (293–94). Through relational rather than hierarchical approaches to translation, the translator-narrators of “Sainte Lucie” and *An Unnecessary Woman* unsettle market expectations and destabilize the local-global dichotomy. Zuzana Tabačková points out literary criticism’s propensity for analyzing “American ethnic writers . . . through the perspective of culture and identity as well as the tendencies to either identify or non-identify with the culture of their adoptive country” (113). Alameddine’s and Walcott’s approaches, which complicate notions of nation and identity, make the authors impossible to contain within clear-cut reductive categories and representative roles based on region and ethnicity. Alameddine often comments on being requested to represent “Lebanon and the entire Middle East and all the Arab population of the world” (Alameddine, “This Is Also My World”),² but although his books have been translated into “17 or 18 languages,” the only one of Alameddine’s novels with an Arabic translation is *I, the Divine* (Alameddine, “Rabih Alameddine”). Although *Koolaid*s was translated into Arabic, “the translator refused to put his name on it. He was terrified—they wanted to censor it and [Alameddine] refused and it never came out” (Alameddine, “Rabih Alameddine”). Similarly, Walcott has been reprimanded for making his poetry “not West Indian enough,” “too much concerned with world literature and international sophistication” (Morris 178). As Wail S. Hassan asserts in his analysis of the “syncretism at the heart of Alameddine’s conception of cultural identity,” if “stories belong to all those who tell, hear, distort, and reshape them, then it would be folly to claim that any one culture is autonomous, self-identical, uncontaminated by outside influences, or has a monopoly on knowledge or truth” (215).³

II. Derek Walcott’s “Border Thinking”

Across Walcott’s career, a number of scholars and critics tried to pigeon-hole him as the epitome of cosmopolitanism or as a traitor to his background. Among the alleged evidence for these claims, Mervyn Morris lists Walcott’s wide-ranging allusions, stylistic influences, and subject matter: “Poems which happen to be about death, love, evil, art, the loss of faith, are not relevant enough for those who find compassion

or complex ambiguity decadent luxuries in our emergent society, and call instead for poems which speak stridently of politics, class and race" (178). As Morris explains, Walcott often wrote poems of the latter type, as well, if not bluntly enough or in the form suiting these critics' expectations. *New World Fortnightly* condemned Walcott for a "pre-occupation with being published abroad" (qtd. in Morris 179), even though his first publication was at his own expense in the West Indies, and Kamau Brathwaite classified Walcott as a "humanist poet" who receives inspiration from his society but whose voice often speaks "away from that society rather than speaking in towards it" (qtd. in Morris 177–78). From a different lens of criticism, in her discussion of Walcott's code-switching in poetry to reflect his "divided mind and inheritance," Helen Vendler wrote in a review of Walcott's *The Fortunate Traveller* that "mixed diction has yet to validate itself as a literary resource with aesthetic power." The suggestion from these critiques is that Walcott is always either leaving his culture in the past or representing it ineffectively. Conversely, Walcott's literary position may be more aptly characterized as engagement with what Mignolo conceptualizes as "border thinking," the "rearticulation and appropriation of global designs by and from the perspective of local histories" (39). Edwin Gentzler investigates identity formation within "border spaces" in which "distinctions between the 'original' and 'foreign' cultures tend to disappear, for cultures tend to be both simultaneously" (145). Through the speaker in "Sainte Lucie," who embodies these forms of plurality, Walcott carries his reader back and forth between split yet tied existences—the more distanced contemplations of someone exiled from his past and the immediate perspectives from the heart of the island expressed through its sounds, smells, and atmosphere.

The first part of "Sainte Lucie," a single sentence titled "The Villages" that spans twenty-three lines, opens the poem in the middle of remembering. This section comprises a succession of prepositional phrases, which offer ethereal descriptions of Saint Lucia's villages and also evoke a sense of absence: "I am growing no nearer / to what secret eluded the children[,] . . . something always being missed" ("Sainte Lucie" 35), something that the poem attempts to recreate. The speaker grasps at

evanescent images, the specificity of the village names in the first line becoming obscured by the passage's reiteration of hazy descriptors ("floating shadow," "house-shade," "sun-bleached," "grey," "smoke," "drifting") and the hushing effect of the breathy "sh" alliteration throughout the section ("shack," "shuttered," "shadow," "shallows," "shade") (35). There appear a noteworthy number of compound nouns and adjectives—for example, "sea-net" and "grey-scurfed"—as if to access expressions not readily existing in the English language. Walcott experiments in many of his poems and plays not only with code-switching but with forms of deviation from standard English—in diction, syntax, rhythm, grammar, and intonation.

The second, unnamed section of "Sainte Lucie" amplifies Saint Lucia's soundscape by submerging the poem's reader more definitively in a space of linguistic fusion.

Part II begins with a list of local fruits:

Pomme arac,
otaheite apple,
pomme cythere,
pomme granate,
moubain,
z'ananas
the pineapple's
Aztec helmet,
pomme (35–36)

Aside from the Edenic symbolism to which the speaker returns in the poem's fifth, ekphrastic section,⁴ Part II is also pedagogically compelling. In the first two lines, "otaheite apple" provides a more globally recognized term for the regionally common name "pomme arac"—but the latter preserves the connection to the Arawaks, who inhabited the island since around 200 A.D., until their decimation by European invasion. In the next three lines, the pomegranate is sandwiched between "pomme cythere" and "moubain," which is translated as "hogplum"⁵ (36) in "Names," the poem that precedes "Sainte Lucie" in Walcott's *Sea Grapes* collection. "Pomme cythere" and "moubain" refer to the same fruit,

sometimes called ambarella or golden apple, but the fruit has more than a dozen other names, varying by location. Barbara Cassin regards the plurality of languages as a “determining factor in the constitution of the world because, far from expressing in a different manner the same thing, as is commonly thought, the plurality of languages places difference at the heart of the essence of things” (58). Rather than seeking to simplify and conflate particular local terms with more globally transportable ones, Walcott instead provides an irreducible sampling of possibilities. If globalization is the “imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere,” flattening and standardizing, then the poem more closely reflects Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “planetarity,” which “embrace[s] an inexhaustible taxonomy of . . . names” (“Planetarity” 72–73). Spivak contrasts the “computerized globe,” which “allows us to think that we can aim to control it,” to the “planet,” which exists “in the species of alterity, belonging to another system,” even as we inhabit it: “If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, . . . alterity remains underived from us. . . . [I]t contains us as much as it flings us away” (72–73). At the final “pomme” of the excerpt, the speaker pauses, explaining that he has “forgotten / what pomme for / the Irish potato” (Walcott, “Sainte Lucie” 36). The absent name is “ponm tè” in Saint Lucian Kwéyòl, or “pomme de terre” in French—the missing factor is the earth, the ground that keeps one rooted. The allusions to the earth and what it grows trace the speaker’s struggle to recall forgotten words and their histories, inseparable from his sense of self and home: he calls out, “Come back to me / my language. / Come back” (36).

The plurality of linguistic renditions that Walcott offers in “Sainte Lucie” has two important implications: dissociation and polyphony, qualities that M. NourbeSe Philip uses to characterize what she calls the “fugal societies” of the Caribbean: “Societies in which the harsh melodies of loss and exile,” belonging and longing for a return, are “repeated over and over again in different keys and at different intervals” (91). Philip invokes two definitions of fugue—the musical composition with polyphonic elements and the dissociative state arising through the psyche’s self-defense against trauma, both interwoven in the Caribbean context with “the poisonous legacy of colonialism” (84). The grammatical

structure of the unnamed section in “Sainte Lucie” epitomizes the “fragments of memory” (80) that Philip depicts:

Come back,
cacao,
grigri,
solitaire,
ciseau
the scissor-bird
no nightingales (Walcott, “Sainte Lucie” 36)

The often-ambiguous enjambment, abruptly juxtaposing images rather than clarifying sentence structure, defers finality; the poem’s edges hold together its scenes and sense descriptions uneasily and contingently. This section’s seven sentences sprawl across four pages and are each on average nineteen lines long, with the longest sentence continuing for forty-five lines before a terminal punctuation mark. The phrases lack smooth transitions and vary in the choice of whether to translate the Saint Lucian Kwéyòl into English, as with “ciseau / the scissor-bird.”⁶

The speaker describes himself as a “wild golden apple / that will burst,” overfilled with love for Saint Lucia and its people, regretting that he “never told enough” about it in his poetry: “moi c’est gens Ste. Lucie. / C’est la moi sorti; / is there that I born” (39). Bishnupriya Ghosh stresses the violence inherent in “mak[ing] the local globally communicable” and describes such forms of joining together as “‘cultural grafting’—the suture on the skin of text ever a reminder” of the insurmountable incommensurability in cultural translation (45). However, Ghosh also draws attention to translation’s regenerative power and the potential it holds for the “activist reader” who responds to the call of “everyday cultural translations” and can then “further be ‘borne across’ to the local and vernacular contexts” of literature (12). Walcott’s invitation to readers to diligently engage with and scrutinize his work challenges them to become precisely such active and activist readers.

Walcott’s speaker’s plea for recovery articulates both the trauma inflicted upon Saint Lucians and the erosion of their language. Yet the speaker’s voice also exhibits linguistic resilience through its demands.

In the process of narrativizing the speaker's struggle to remember his language, Walcott teaches certain qualities of the language to his English-speaking public through techniques of musical improvisation. After establishing the apple, for example, as the basis for his performance, he plays with the reader's image of the familiar fruit by moving through its linguistic relations. The initial reading is not overly jarring because of the comfort of recognition and approximate translation, but every successive reading unveils the many variations in the apple's forms, sounds, and tastes. Each recitation brings the reader further into the poem's—and Walcott's—affective environment. Ghosh argues that "pay[ing] attention to the rhetoricity of the text" fosters "everyday acts of performative translation that move toward context-specific linguistic learning" and resist "fetishistic claims on local cultural space" (120). Rather than reducing a text by either refusing nearness or immediately assuming complete understanding, the translator must lovingly embrace it with a careful, creative awareness of its alterity.

In the second stanza of Part II, the poem teaches cultural context through language immersion, but it also incorporates the context's untranslatability:

Evening opens at
a text of fireflies,
in the mountain huts
ti cailles betassion
candles,
candleflies
the black night bending
cups in its hard palms (Walcott, "Sainte Lucie" 37)

The evening that "opens at / a text of fireflies" alludes to the final line of "Names," in which Saint Lucian children read star patterns in the sky not as Western-tradition constellations but as "fireflies caught in molasses" (Walcott, "Names" 34). The pair of lines that follows exemplifies Walcott's strategic partial translation: "in the mountain huts / ti cailles betassion" ("Sainte Lucie" 37). Walcott uses French orthography rather than spelling according to the Saint Lucian Kwéyòl writing

system,⁷ so for an English speaker with limited knowledge of French but no experience with Saint Lucian Kwéyòl, the poem's language becomes even more confusing: some words are misleadingly different from what they resemble in French, and the spelling variations turn dictionary searches into guesswork. If "betassion," or "bitasyon," refers to the countryside and "cailles," or "kay," refers to "houses," then the line translates the "mountain huts" into "little ['ti] country houses" (*Kwéyòl Dictionary* 23, 104, 214). But if "cailles" comes from the French word "écailles," then Walcott is translating the literal image into a more metaphorical one of scales covering the countryside. By offering multiple versions and resisting definitive interpretations, Walcott simultaneously suspends his readers in the sensuous and linguistic world that the poem recalls, evoking the fragmented consciousness that Cliff and Philip depict, and teaches them the impossibility of equivalence in translation: Orion is a poor translation of the night's text of fireflies, and "mountain huts" do not convey a vision of home as effectively as the repetitive yearning for "betassion" throughout the poem. The implications of this impossibility connect to Apter's call for the tactical mobilization of untranslatability⁸—"Nonequivalence, the right not to translate, cultural incommensurability"—to push against the "predominance of global English, or Globish" ("Untranslatability and the Geopolitics of Reading" 199).

While the embedded translations in "Sainte Lucie," such as the "mountain huts" and "scissor-bird," help the reader reach the conclusions necessary for at least partial comprehension, the recurrence of unfamiliar words deliberately precludes transparency. Rey Chow posits that "writers of multiple ethnic and cultural descents often introduce readers to entirely exotic dimensions of human encounters, transforming the English language at their disposal into a discordant, vertiginous discourse archive" and unleashing "linguistic multiplicities," thus enacting multiple, simultaneous systems of meaning-making (*Not Like a Native Speaker* 60). Chow's concept of the "xenophone" defines the "foreign-sounding speech/tone" (11) as the "emergent languaging domain" that "bears in its accents the murmur, the passage, of diverse found speeches" (59). She locates evidence of the xenophone in "those discourses that, even when

they are communicated in the colonial or imperial registers of standard or proper English, French, Spanish, or Chinese, carry memories that are not quite containable within the illusorily unified histories of such registers" (59). In a sense, Walcott experiments in the five sections of "Sainte Lucie" with different ways of conveying those "xenophonic memories" (Chow 59). The third and fourth parts of the poem do so through a concurrently bilingual performance of a song.

Walcott presents the third section, "Iona: Mabouya Valley," as a "Saint Lucian *conte*, or narrative Creole song, heard on the back of an open truck travelling to Vieuxfort" ("Sainte Lucie" 40), and the fourth section is the song's side-by-side English translation. The bilingual rendering of the song invites the reader to overhear one language performing another:

Moin 'tendre un corne cornait	I heard a horn blowing
a sur bord roseaux-a.	by the river reeds down there.
Moi dit: "Doux-doux, moin kai	"Sweetheart," I said, "I'll go
chercher	looking
volants ba 'ous." (42)	for flying fish for you." (43)

Through the parallel placement of the poem and its correspondence with the English, the reader can learn about the construction and rhythms of the Kwéyòl. Polylinguaging, a synchronous staging of the narrative song and its English translation that necessitates holding both linguistic worlds in mind at once, allows Walcott to situate his reader in the fragmented position of the poem's speaker. Glissant proclaims that "a plural, multiplying, fragmented identity is no longer given or thought as a lack of identity but rather as a huge opening[.] . . . an astonishing expansion of personal or collective identity throughout the field of the world's unforeseeable variations" ("The Unforeseeable Diversity of the World" 288). Walcott builds on this expansion of identity through a mural in the poem's fifth section.

The final section of "Sainte Lucie," an homage to the altarpiece of the Roseau Valley Church on the island, brings all the senses that were evoked throughout the poem into a single synesthetic experience. The speaker observes the massive mural created by Walcott's friend Dunstan

St. Omer,⁹ an artwork depicting Biblical figures and cultural traditions in Saint Lucia. He describes the painting thus:

like a dull mirror, life
repeated there,
The common life outside
and the other life it holds (Walcott, "Sainte Lucie" 46).

The speaker's resonant descriptions expand and contract between biblical imagery and everyday life, between the present and the past, and move outward from the painted images: the Roseau Valley's "roads radiate like aisles from the altar towards / those acres of bananas, towards / leaf-crowded mountains" (46) that are mirrored on the outskirts of the mural. St. Omer referred to this altarpiece as a personal breakthrough in asserting Saint Lucian identity: "A white Christ was always used to dominate blacks, and in Jacmel, I painted my first black Christ" (qtd. in Popovic). The Holy Family expands in the mural to include, as St. Omer observes, "members of the community: a chanteur, dancers, a chak-chak band, an Amerindian woman and child, a banana worker, the artist himself," so that, to the church's attendees, "it suddenly seemed as if the church belonged to them" (qtd. in Popovic). After "the deaths / of as many names as you want," the destructive history of colonialism and its lasting effects on language and memory, the speaker in "Sainte Lucie" imagines a homecoming of "faith like a canoe at evening coming in," like the mural's canoe sailing toward the Madonna and Child at the center, so in looking through the altarpiece's vision of the island's people, the speaker can see "the real faces of angels" (Walcott, "Sainte Lucie" 49). The painting brings together the arts, traditions, and images of a place Walcott considers home, and this fusion of senses parallels what Walcott tries to express through the intertwining of linguistic and cultural worlds throughout the rest of the poem, a braiding of sensibilities.

"Sainte Lucie," with its concurrent pain and beauty, responds to writers who, as Walcott discusses with disdain in his 1992 Nobel Lecture, have lamented the "unfinished," still "evolving" cities of the Caribbean ("The Antilles" 76). In his speech, Walcott denies the traveler and the exile the right to judge the proportions of the Caribbean city, which

is to be measured solely “by its own citizenry and architecture”: “To be told you are not yet a city or a culture requires this response. I am not your city or your culture” (76–77). Azade Seyhan similarly draws attention to modern diasporic writers’ need to “reclaim cultural heritages whose emotional and intellectual force had been suppressed by a monolingual and monocultural parochialism that masqueraded as successful acculturation” (20–21). Walcott impresses upon his audience the fruitlessness, as well as danger, of imagining an exterior system of measurement for another tradition, of presuming comparability and ease of classification. Walcott’s adjacent translations counter such a vertical, hierarchical model of comparative studies, replacing it with one that echoes Chow’s call for a way of “judging the value of different things horizontally, in sheer approximation to one another—an act that . . . would have to remain speculative rather than conclusive, and ready to subject itself periodically to revamped semiotic relations” (*The Age of the World Target* 81; emphasis in original). The approach to literature that Alameddine’s protagonist in *An Unnecessary Woman* takes is comparably horizontal. She interweaves different languages and traditions in her work—outside of any fixed grid of reference—and the alternative translation model that she performs in the novel exists completely outside global exchange economies.

III. Rabih Alameddine: “I am my system, and my system is me”

For Aaliya, Alameddine’s introverted seventy-two-year-old blue-haired narrator, translation is the therapeutic, even religious system through which she lives and functions. For fifty years, on the first day of January, she cleans her reading room, takes a “ceremonial bath,” and lays out her ritual objects: “two versions of the book of choice—one English, the other French—the paper, the notebook that’s to be filled with actual notes, the 2B graphite pencils with the sharpener and Pearl eraser, the pens” (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 5–6). She then lights “two candles for Walter Benjamin” (6) and begins that year’s selected project. Though she dedicates much of her life to the task of translation, no one else witnesses the products of her devotion. After completing the work and reading her manuscript for the final time, she places the papers in a

box in the bathroom and moves on to the next project—in her words, “I create and crate!” (107). Aaliya’s mode of translation demonstrates the recalcitrance of a subaltern translator who inverts the global market: she consumes global literature but refuses the commodification of her own literary creations. She constructs an individual system exterior to the market, declaring full control over her own methods and criteria: “I am my system, and my system is me” (62).

In spite of never disseminating her products, Aaliya nevertheless develops a politics of translation that takes the proximate community into account. Her local public, like that of Walcott’s speaker, is linguistically heterogeneous. Since many in Lebanon can read English or French, Aaliya does not translate (into Arabic) works originally written in those two languages.¹⁰ By placing this restriction on her work, she builds into her system an implied “critique of *the uneven distribution of cultural capital among languages themselves*” (Chow, *The Age of the World Target* 86; emphasis in original). Because she excludes from translation texts originally written in French and English, the only non-Arabic languages in which she is fluent, the rules she has put in place require her to translate solely from English and French translations of texts originally written in other languages—making the results “one step further removed from the original” (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 62).

Though different from that of Walcott’s speaker, Aaliya’s system is also one of approximate translation. She contrives a distant reflection of an original text based on the qualities in two of its other reflected worlds. In this process, we see clearly Benjamin’s influence on Aaliya regarding a text’s afterlife: namely, the spaces between languages are revealed only in translation. According to Aaliya’s explication, Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” argues that staying close to the original when translating may “show the surface content of the original and explain the information contained within,” but it risks missing the “ineffable essence of the work” (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 105). Maintaining a certain distance from the original, then, allows Aaliya to access the concealed qualities of the text that attempts at direct translation might obfuscate. The value of Aaliya’s completed works lies in their ability to capture fragments of the “ineffable essence” rather than the market value

of translated content. She makes sense of texts across times and spaces, across crates—she juxtaposes instead of ranking or classifying as she interweaves the various voices and languages with her own. This approach corresponds to Glissant’s concept of “errantry,” which contends that “identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation” (*Poetics of Relation* 18).

Glissant’s description of relational thinking that requires “taking up the problems of the Other” is crucial for understanding the ethical importance that Aaliya places on reading and translating (18). For Aaliya, the formation of empathy requires emotional proximity to even the most detestable characters. When she reads about horrific acts and events, Aaliya dares to “let the wall crumble just a bit,” even when it would be simpler to remain comfortably distant: she declares, “I am Raskolnikov. I am K. I am Humbert and Lolita. I am you. If you read these pages and think I’m the way I am because I lived through a civil war, you can’t feel my pain” (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 100). Aaliya’s process of minimizing the distance between character and audience, writer and reader, parallels Spivak’s definition of translation as an “ethical,” even “erotic,” relationship between reader and text, a “most intimate act of reading” that requires a surrendering and response to the “call of the text” (“The Politics of Translation” 183).¹¹ The text’s call to listen resonates across Alameddine’s fiction, sometimes explicitly, as in the opening lines of *The Hakawati*: “Listen. Allow me to be your god. Let me take you on a journey beyond imagining. Let me tell you a story” (5).¹² Aaliya’s fully immersive reading methods, like Walcott’s speaker’s immersive techniques, allow her to feel a proximity to other characters and worlds. Aaliya’s examination of the work of Constance Garnett, one of the first English translators of Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy, illustrates her desire for knowledge of and passage between literary worlds, imagined by writers distant from the cultural spaces with which she is most familiar.

Although Garnett’s translations are famously imprecise and often inaccurate,¹³ Aaliya still feels gratitude toward Garnett for introducing her and other readers of English “to Heaven’s passions” (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 104). Translations allow Aaliya, whose name means

“the high one, the one above” (11), to temporarily rise beyond her local, immediate circumstances and traumas—familial disputes and estrangement, war, a best friend’s suicide—and to encounter other aesthetic worlds and forge relations within them. She states that “[l]iterature gives me life, and life kills me” (5). Aaliya’s mental travels, accomplished through reading and writing translations, reflect Syrine Hout’s argument that “contemporary Anglophone Lebanese novels embody a distinctive transculturality manifest in the portrayals of their characters’ recurrent movements from and back to Lebanon, in mind and/or in body, and of their processes of remembering war-related traumatic events” (*Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction* 10–11). These “recurrent movements” typify the tension in Alameddine’s novels regarding attachment to home and place. Sarah, the protagonist of *I, the Divine*, wonders, “Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not” (Alameddine, *I, the Divine* 99; emphasis in original). *The Wrong End of the Telescope* incorporates a semi-autobiographical character, an unnamed author addressed in the second person, whose unexpected code-switching at a Lesbos refugee camp contributes to his panic attacks: “You hadn’t realized that you were still in that split—discrete identities not quite melted in the pot, Lebanese and American, still an immigrant after all these years—until you came across a large group of Middle Easterners” and encountered a refugee who looked uncannily like “[y]our aunt who had died some thirty years earlier” (Alameddine, *The Wrong End of the Telescope* 328). Having left Lebanon in 1975, at the beginning of the war, to attend a boarding school in England and then the University of California, Los Angeles, Alameddine shares the fragmented identity that his characters describe. Alameddine remarks, “I had always wanted to escape Lebanon and head west. I felt more like an American than a Lebanese—only to find out when I arrived here that I was neither” (“A Conversation” 313).

Though it was pre-Islamic Arabic poetry that initially drew her into reading and writing literature, Aaliya spends most of the novel contemplating literature originally composed in other languages. As phrases outside of English permeate Walcott’s poem, Alameddine’s novel is filled

with references to and quotations from several dozens of writers around the world. Alameddine's fiction contains a multiplicity of literary and linguistic attachments. In *I, the Divine*, a novel whose central organizational premise is writer's block, Sarah requires multiple languages to address the personal and collective traumas impeding her story's narration. Several chapters are French versions—partially direct translations—of English ones, and certain plot features and phrases echo across the novel, creating a sometimes contradictory plurality of realities, identities, languages, and locations. According to Tabačková, “[i]ntermixing English, French, and Arabic suggests that no language can in a satisfying way express Sarah's experience” (114). Hout argues that in Alameddine's first novel, *Koolaid's*, “multilinguistic play is an essential ingredient for re-conceptualizing links among language usages, cognition, and emotions” (“To Paint and Die” 279). Jacob, the protagonist of Alameddine's novel *The Angel of History*, describes his entwined relationships with languages that shaped his poetry's development as he moved from Arabic to French to English: “English was my third language, Arabic my mother tongue, the romantic Rimbaud's French my bridge and my crutch” (Alameddine, *The Angel of History* 143). Yasemin Yildiz asserts that because of people's unpredictable, “multiple, and even contradictory, attachments” (204) to particular languages, “we need to reimagine subjects as open to crisscrossing linguistic identifications, if not woven from the fabric of numerous linguistic sources” (205).

With their strategies of interweaving languages and contexts, Alameddine and Walcott propel their readers through the English content to the numerous other linguistic worlds informing and joining in their texts. Aaliya's fluid travels across narratives recall Erich Auerbach's claim about world literature and the process of transcending one's own heritage: “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation” (17). Alameddine and Walcott both debunk the unviable conception of local and global as stable coordinates but diverge in methodology: the speaker of “Sainte Lucie” creates relations by teaching elements of his local culture to a global Anglophone audience, while Aaliya brings, through her translations, elements of other cultural worlds to a local public—first only within an imagined realm, but more

concretely by the novel's conclusion, when her work begins to reach her community.

Aaliya initially rejects the possibility of publishing her translations because she believes there has "never been a market for it" locally (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 107). She recounts the only time a publisher ever offered her the opportunity to translate; the book in question was Lana Turner's autobiography: *Lana: The Lady, The Legend, the Truth* (110). In a similar vein, Aaliya explains that she uses her job at a bookstore to order a wide array of books as a "public service," suggesting that these literary works would otherwise "have never landed on Lebanese soil. For crying out loud, do you think anyone else in Lebanon has a copy of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*?" (94). Aaliya's feeling of dislocation, of not belonging, leads her to "identify with outsiders" across literary worlds and to conclude that "[t]o write is to know that you are not home" (195). The extent of this identification has led some reviewers of *An Unnecessary Woman*, such as Eileen Battersby, to accuse Alameddine's narrator of being too "Americanised" to have lived in Beirut her whole life (Battersby). Robyn Creswell notes that contrary to the literary desert that Aaliya describes, Beirut has a reputation as the publishing hub of the Middle East, and in the 1950s and 60s, when Aaliya would have been embarking on her first translations, Beirut had the best literary magazines in Arabic, which included plenty of translations. Creswell elaborates that in passages lamenting the lack of a reading public for the literature she loves, "Aaliya becomes a more problematic narrator than Alameddine seems to intend. She is soliciting . . . the sympathies of non-Lebanese readers, who are clearly the novel's intended audience—by flattering our prejudices" ("Escaping Beirut"). Pertinently, even though Alameddine has suggested that "the audience is no one," that "[s]he's just writing these thoughts down to record them, kind of like a diary" ("This Is Also My World"), Aaliya sometimes explains details regarding vocabulary and grammar in Arabic, as if to an English speaker. For example, she says, "My mother used to call me a praying mantis (the term in Arabic translates to 'prophet's mare,' which is beautiful, if you ask me)" (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 219).¹⁴ Ultimately, though, Aaliya's encounter at the end of the novel with her neighbors and their

warm reactions to her translations link Aaliya's assumptions to her reclusiveness rather than to a characterization of the city.

Aaliya explains near the novel's opening that she does not have a social function—not in her community nor even within her family, as the only child from her mother's first husband and a divorced woman with no children. She characterizes herself as "superfluous," existing as her "family's appendix, its unnecessary appendage" (13). Instead, she creates a social function for herself within the literary life of her mind. Her translations are a form of contact with the world, but an imaginary one—the real forms of human contact she sees are often violent, whether in war or interpersonal relations. On the way to a rare visit with her mother, who "loves her sons only" and for whom Aaliya, "her eldest, hardly register[s] in her consciousness" (70), Aaliya recalls the story of Bruno Schulz, a writer and artist whose death was delayed because a Nazi officer wanted to take advantage of his painting skills, labeling him a "necessary Jew":

Landau fancied himself a lover of art. He forced the necessary Jew to paint murals for his son's bedroom depicting scenes from beloved fairy tales. Landau kept Schulz alive until . . . Karl Günther, a rival Gestapo officer, killed Schulz to get back at Landau, who'd killed a dentist Günther favored—a necessary dentist, one presumed. Günther said to Landau, "You killed my Jew—I killed yours." (183)

A "*necessary* human," then, is a performer of desired labor that must be continued until an arbitrary demise—labor for the price of life. Aaliya's chosen vocation is certainly better than Schulz's forced one in terms of its social necessity. But the novel's piecing together of memories and literature ultimately leads Aaliya to find an alternative to the harshness of this stringent market economy: the gift economy, in which a person can become necessary by giving without illusions or expectations of some equivalent return.

As we move with Aaliya toward the novel's conclusion, we witness her radical reconfiguration of values that ultimately affects her individualized system of translation. A bursting of a water pipe and consequent flooding bring Aaliya's neighbors—Joumana, Marie-Thérèse, and Fadia,

whom she had shunned for years—into her apartment and reclusive life. These women, whom Aaliya internally calls the “three witches” and whose morning coffee conversations she has been overhearing for thirty years, run into the apartment to warn Aaliya about water damage, when they notice all of the soaked boxes. Gradually, they bypass her petrified silence and draw out the truth about her crates and secret life. She wonders, “How can I explain my esoteric vocation, . . . the private source of meaning in my life. ‘Translations,’ I say. ‘I’m a translator’” (267). Immediately, to Aaliya’s surprise, the women get to work separating and drying the thousands of translated pages and, at the same time, admiring excerpts and asking questions about them. The inquiries force Aaliya to finally assemble the words to express her life’s work to other—actual—people. Joumana, a university professor, cannot accept Aaliya’s prediction of a lack of public interest: “You’re not sure anyone is interested in reading *Anna Karenina*?” (283). Looking through the different novels, Joumana notes the numerous authors whose names she does not recognize—Pessoa, Hamsun, Cortázar, Hedayat, Karasu, Nooteboom, and Kertész, several of whom, Aaliya points out, are Nobel Prize winners—and tells her translator neighbor, “I’d like to read them. Others would as well” (284). The novel’s ending challenges Aaliya’s “unnecessary” status within this emerging public of neighbors, a sort of global neighborhood in which translation becomes an ethical practice rather than a matter of market participation. The interjection of real human responses from her community into Aaliya’s system allows a public to materialize—the very neighbors with whom her life has been softly entwining all along—and gives her the chance to “break free” from at least some of the rules she sets for herself (289).

Cassin’s book on home and homelessness ends as follows: “When are we ever at home? When we are welcomed, we ourselves along with those who are close to us, together with our language, our languages” (63). *An Unnecessary Woman* reaches a similar conclusion. The flood’s destruction, like Glissant’s errant thinking and uprooting, takes apart the constrictions of Aaliya’s prior system and creates space for more flexible, more relational thinking, drawing her nearer to her newly realized public and to the language of her chosen source texts: “If English

and French are the limits of my language, the limits of my world, then still my world is infinite. . . . I don't have to translate from a distance" (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 290). Aaliya's system will now be dynamic rather than static, taking into account the desires of the people around her rather than a hypothetical nearby population. Her choices as a translator, though still in part arbitrary, are now based in relation.

IV. Conclusion: A Relational Consciousness

Glissant contends that "the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. . . . Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent" (*Poetics of Relation* 19). Walcott's approximate mode of linguistic and cultural translation refuses to be submerged within monolingual expectations. Through the layering of language in his poetry, viscerally marked by a history of colonial rupture, Walcott draws the reader into the intricacies of local polylingualism, refuting the idea of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "the mediation of a universal, homogenizing middle term" (85). In Alameddine's novel, Aaliya's newly formed relations will lead to a local readership, but her work will remain in the gift economy—a giving over of aesthetic worlds to the community she personally selects through the methods of her own choice. The novel constructs an interrelated literary world in which writers and readers are in constant conversation (and argument), producing different ways of thinking and knowing in tandem. "Sainte Lucie" and *An Unnecessary Woman* do more than represent ideas about translation and the politics of language in a global market: through the methodologies and practices within them, they articulate alternative, more relational literary mappings. In lieu of adopting the premises of a philological tradition that partitions linguistic environments, the narrators in these two texts emphasize—and train their readers to adapt to—relations and multiplicities: they lay out languages adjacently, contingently, revealing the tensions in the spaces between linguistic and cultural worlds rather than allowing any one world to absorb another.

Notes

- 1 See *Transfiction* (2014), a collection of essays edited by Kaindl and Spitzl, for more information on translation's increased appearance as a motif and topic in literature and film.
- 2 Alameddine notes Americans' tendency to "pick one writer from every country . . . to represent an entire worldview," adding sarcastically, "I represent all Lebanese. No—all Arabs. Read my books and you'll understand what all Arabs are like" ("This Is Also My World").
- 3 Hassan cites a passage here from Javier Marías' *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* that appears as an epigraph in Alameddine's *The Hakawati*: "stories do not belong only to those who were present or to those who invent them, once a story has been told, it's anyone's, it becomes common currency, it gets twisted and distorted, no story is told the same way twice or in quite the same words, not even if the same person tells the story twice, not even if there is only ever one storyteller" (qtd. in *The Hakawati* 137).
- 4 The poem's fifth section, "For the Altarpiece of the Roseau Valley Church, Saint Lucia," draws parallels between Roseau Valley and the Garden of Eden. This mural in Jacmel, painted in 1973 by Dunstan St. Omer, depicts the Holy Family as local Saint Lucians.
- 5 "Listen, my children, say: / *moubain*: the hogplum" (Walcott, "Names" 34).
- 6 Walcott describes his linguistic admiration for "ciseau" in an interview: "Let's say you're looking up at a bird in the sky over St. Lucia and somebody says 'ciseau la mer.' Now 'ciseau la mer' means 'scissor of the sea,' and that's much more startling, much more exciting than saying 'martin' or 'tern.' The metaphor is almost calligraphic: when it is pronounced you can almost see it" ("An Interview with Derek Walcott" 58). The *Kwéyòl Dictionary* defines "sizo" as "Magnificent Fregate bird (*Fregata magnificens*)" (204).
- 7 In her book on the formal teaching of Kwéyòl in the Caribbean and U.K., Nwenmely explains that efforts toward a Saint Lucian Kwéyòl orthography can be traced to at least the beginning of the twentieth century, but the first systematic attempt to develop and promote a writing system was in the early 1980s (whereas "Sainte Lucie" was published in 1976). In 1993, Walcott controversially publicly undermined the new orthography's spelling patterns: "I do not think the orthography does justice to the elegance of Kwéyòl. If you want to write the word *d'leau* which they might write *dlo* to me that's barbarous. . . . [M]y feeling as a guardian of Kwéyòl is that I'm not going to write this illiterate" (qtd. in Nwenmely 79).
- 8 Apter argues that a "translational model of comparative literature" better responds to the demands of contemporary language politics: "Language worlds that bleed out of dichotomized generic categories afford a planetary approach to literary history that responds to the dynamics of geopolitics without shying away from fractious border wars" (*Against World Literature* 42–43).

- 9 Prior to this mural, St. Omer designed Saint Lucia's national flag, adopted in 1967. Walcott features St. Omer in *Another Life* (1973).
- 10 This choice demonstrates Beebee's point that transmeses can portray the "power differentials" between languages, which can range from the imposition of a language on a culture through conquest or colonization to the relative status of languages within cultures" (223).
- 11 Cassin also brings the body into her discussion of translation and movement across languages, commenting on the difficulty of knowing "what we change within us when we change languages, when we give ourselves over to another body of language opening onto another world of signifiers" (56).
- 12 "A hakawati is a teller of tales, myths, and fables (hekayât)[.] . . . someone who earns his keep by beguiling an audience with yarns" (Alameddine, *The Hakawati* 36). One of *The Hakawati*'s characters states that "no matter how good a story is, there is more at stake in the telling," the distinct form and style of the storyteller's version and ability to compel the audience (96).
- 13 Two of Garnett's harshest critics were Joseph Brodsky and Vladimir Nabokov. Aaliya mentions Brodsky's famous remark that the "reason English-speaking readers can barely tell the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky is that they aren't reading the prose of either one. They're reading Constance Garnett" (Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman* 103). Incidentally, Brodsky was close friends with Walcott, who collaborated with Brodsky on poetic translations.
- 14 Alameddine confronts the issues of translational choices, audience bias, and shifting perspectives more directly and acutely in an interview scene in *The Wrong End of the Telescope* involving a Syrian refugee family, two journalists (English and Belgian), a Dutch translator, Mina (the narrator, a Lebanese doctor living in Chicago), and Mina's brother, Mazen.

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