

Dreams Deferred, Translated: Radwa Ashour and Langston Hughes

La traducción de Dreams Deferred: Radwa Ashour y Langston Hughes

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Abstract: This article uses the project of translating into English Radwa Ashour's memoir, *The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs in America* [*Al-Rihla Ayyam Talibah Misriyah fi Amrika*], to explore a number of crucial questions in Arabic-English translation. It works through the ways in which the literary elements of the text—its poetics and poetic expression—are translated between the two languages, in relation to and in conversation with its social and political elements. The specific example used is Ashour's inclusion of her own translation of Langston Hughes's now iconic poem «Harlem (2)» (better known as «A Dream Deferred») in the original text. The article explores how Ashour presents this poem to her Arabic readership, as a representative of Black American poetry. This article's primary intervention is to analyze and formulate suggestions for translating a text that is explicitly political and highly poetic.

Key Words: Black-Arab solidarity; Black American poetry; Harlem Renaissance; Langston Hughes; liberation struggles; literary translation; politics of translation; Radwa Ashour; Third World Politics; translation of poetry.

Resumen: Este artículo parte del proyecto de traducción al inglés de las memorias de Radwa Ashour, *The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs in America* [*Al-Rihla Ayyam Talibah Misriyah fi Amrika*], para explorar diferentes cuestiones clave en la traducción del árabe al inglés. En él se analizan las formas en que los elementos literarios del texto —su arte y expresión poética— se traducen entre ambos idiomas en relación y en diálogo con sus elementos sociales y políticos. El ejemplo concreto que se emplea para ello es la inclusión de Ashour de su propia traducción del ya icónico poema de Langston Hughes, «Harlem (2)» (más conocido como «A Dream Deferred») en el texto original. El artículo explora cómo Ashour presenta el poema a sus lectores en lengua árabe como ejemplo representativo de la poesía negra estadounidense. El objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar y presentar propuestas para la traducción de un texto con un explícito tono político y un alto contenido poético.

Palabras clave: Solidaridad negra-árabe; poesía negra estadounidense; Renacimiento de Harlem; Langston Hughes; luchas de liberación; traducción literaria; política de la traducción; Radwa Ashour; política del tercer mundo; traducción de poesía.

1. INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes' powerful poem «Harlem (2)»—better known by words taken from its first line, «A Dream Deferred»—is as powerful today as it was in 1951. A manifesto of generations of African American rage, the anger inscribed in its eleven short lines sums up much of what Black America is still shouting in 2015. Today, reinvigorated movements of people working together to harness political and social power, for example within the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name campaigns, show that Hughes' poem is as relevant as ever. This anger builds and spills over with a poetic explosion in the last line, characterizing both Hughes' poetic output and also shoring up his analysis of struggles of Black Americans. The poem's enduring resonance has made it iconic:

Harlem (2)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (Langston Hughes, 1951)

This particular poem's status, its pithy expressions and potent message, have also led to its frequent translation, adaptation and invocation, particularly in solidarity contexts (Kernan 2007; Kutzinski 2013). In literary critical circles, Hughes is a much-translated international and internationalist figure and known for his contributions in particular to literary modernism (Dworkin 2012; Kutzinski 2013). But his popular resonance and importance extend considerably further. In 2013, for example, the series of innovative bus shelter posters created by the BAQUP (Bay Area Art Queers Unleashing Power) group included one dedicated to this poem, reproducing it in English with an Arabic translation. These posters that appeared in and around Oakland, California were devoted to raising awareness and promoting analysis of the crucial issues facing people in the city while insisting on transnational links. These posters included images of Emmet Till and Trayvon Martin, California prisoners on hunger strike, protests against US military intervention in Syria, support for Chelsea Manning, messages in favour of Queer rights, including solidarity with Palestine and against Israeli "pinkwashing", as well as a campaign called, «Fight AIDS not Arabs».

This public art intervention to bring Hughes in contact with Arabic, Arabs and Arab Americans is paralleled by a more conservative example, also based in the United States: the «Dreams Deferred» essay contest offered by the AIC (American Islamic Congress). This contest is open to two categories of young people, Arab/Muslim Americans and youth from the Arab region, who are meant to use Hughes' poem as inspiration to write an essay about their own experiences. This well-funded essay contest offers ten thousand US dollars in prize money per year; the AIC is bankrolled by a number of right-wing think tanks and foundations¹. Still ongoing, a selection of the first five years of prize-winners saw their essays published in a book, *Arab Spring Dreams: The Next Generation Speaks Out for Freedom and Justice from North Africa to Iran*, praised and with a foreword by feminist Gloria Steinem (Ahmari and Wedady 2012). The contest seeks in some ways to draw connections between the Arab world and the words of this African American poet.

The AIC contest encourages the development of individuality and individual rights, a message clearly at odds with both the message of Hughes' poem and his larger political vision. The prize's implicit endorsement of young Muslims/Arabs and Arab Americans replacing deferred dreams with the American Dream could be interpreted as a cooptation and distortion of Hughes's rage and his powerful message. This of course is not the first time Hughes or his work has been watered down or manipulated for different purposes. Himself a political activist pursued by McCarthy in the 1950s, his reinstatement within the African American mainstream has been in progress in different ways for years and much of his more radical political history has been overshadowed

¹ For example of such funders, see Donors Capital Fund and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, for more details on the AIC, its politics and funding, see Blumenthal (2013).

by these and often neglected (Dworkin 2012, 634, 651). Attempts to reinstate him in his political context and valorize his internationalism, his left political orientation and activism and his deep and strong links to the Arab world in particular have been taking shape now almost 100 years after his first poem was published in 1921 (Dworkin 2012; Gohar 2007; Kernan 2007).

I open this piece with these two short examples of how Langston Hughes's poem «Harlem (2)» has been used in the United States within two very different Arab solidarity contexts to build a bridge back to one of his earlier translators of a different era—leftist Egyptian novelist, scholar and activist Radwa Ashour. Ashour's scholarly and literary work on Hughes and other Black American poets and writers began in the 1970s and was firmly rooted in the third world solidarity and liberation politics of that time. On the broader level, Ashour and Hughes moved in similarly internationalist political worlds, in particular working to build bridges between African and diasporic African-descended peoples in this era. On the more specific level, Ashour translates and discusses Hughes's famous poem within her 1983 memoir, *Al-Rihla: Ayyam taliba misriyya fi Amrika* [*The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs in America*]².

This essay explores the possibilities for Black American and Arab political and poetic solidarity by analyzing Ashour's translation of «Harlem (2)» into Arabic within her memoir, as well as the way this poem figures within the text more broadly. It offers reflections on how translating Ashour's memoir from Arabic into English might also help us to think about some of these possibilities in different ways, including how to use the English language today to capture the language of Third World solidarity and liberation movements at a time when *Al-Rihla* is no longer current or in fashion. Importantly, this essay also reflects upon the meaning of how political and poetic solidarity might work within translation between the languages of Arabic and English as well as within the worlds of Arabs and Black Americans.

2. ARABIC TO ENGLISH TRANSLATION: THEORY, PRACTICE AND POLITICS

Debates about translating Arabic literature into English, perhaps rightly so, have focused on the reception audience for translated texts, in particular how Orientalism in its many guises affects this reception. Theoretical discussions of Arabic-English literary translation have been circumscribed by the particularities of a target readership and environment steeped in difference and exoticism, and/or racism and hostility. While scholarship on Arabic-English translation has taken up many of the major terms of

² Until now, only one chapter of this book has been translated into English; it will appear in a forthcoming publication, see Ashour (2016).

debate circulating within the larger field of translation studies—foreignization vs. domestication, cultural and linguistic translation, and how best to achieve resistant translations in these contexts—it centers around questions of how the particularly nuanced and uneven power relationship between the Arabic-speaking and English-speaking worlds, particularly in twentieth and twenty-first century contexts, are articulated.

Many critics of Arabic literary translations have been attracted to theoretical interventions that argue somehow for “resistant translations” —those that seek to highlight and redress power imbalances and flows of global capital, which leave the Arab world—and Arabic literary texts by extension—disadvantaged and disempowered (Booth 2008; Boullata 2003; Hartman 2012). Translation has participated directly and indirectly in many of the political projects devastating the region, including (mis)informing general public opinion about Arabs, Muslims and in particular Arab and Muslim women. The arguments for resistance and connecting politics to translation, largely developed out of the postcolonial strands of the field, thus are convincing and urgent to many of us.

What this call for resistant translation might mean to us as translators and scholars has remained more difficult to discern. As Tarek Shamma has pointed out, postcolonial translation theorists have offered much to helping us unravel power dynamics in translation, but when we reach the level of language and thinking about how to work with these ideas in practice we are bereft of ideas about how to make linguistic interventions to bring our ideological arguments to fruition (2009, 119). Some of the challenges we face include how to inscribe notions of resistance into the practice of our translations. Beyond choosing the texts to translate, the question of whether or not in given contexts foreignization and/or domestication is resistant occupies some of this discussion. In domesticating certain texts to meet target readership and publishers’ expectations, for example, translations from Arabic to English at times exoticize them even more, making resistance difficult (Abdo 2010; Booth 2008; Hartman 2015). Texts that already «resist» the target audience’s expectations in different ways—such as explicitly political works from different time periods—offer particular challenges to thinking about the best way to convey not only their meanings but their language. Given how minutely located activist translation strategies are in space, time, history and political contexts, Maria Tymoczko has warned against offering prescriptive recommendations for how one might achieve activist or «resistant» translations in practical terms (2010, 251-252).

While caution is warranted in calling for strategies too specific to be meaningful across texts and contexts, study and reflection upon how to bring theoretical insights into practice and vice versa in Arabic-English translation are needed. The case of Radwa Ashour’s memoir and her translations and discussions of African American poetry and literature offers a location to work through some of these questions about politics and resistance in translation concretely. How to convey *Al-Rihla*’s Egypt-centered anti-racist, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic politics of 1970s Third World solidarity in

twenty-first century English is one challenge it presents. Moreover, its focus on poetry and literary works—African, African American, Arab and Egyptian, as well as others—means that the balance between politics and aesthetics is also central to formulating translation strategies.

3. RADWA ASHOUR'S *THE JOURNEY* CONTEXTUALIZED

If translation strategies must match source and target language contexts, the world of Radwa Ashour's *Al-Rihla: Ayyam taliba misriyya fi Amrika* is very different to that of its eventual translation. This is one of Ashour's only untranslated works; her novels and in particular her later literary output have recently appeared in solid and widely appreciated English translations. Like her memoir, Ashour's fiction is also politically relevant and informed, often taking up the same political contexts of the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular drawing links between Egypt and the question of Palestine. The fact that Ashour's memoir has not been translated therefore does stand out, because this genre is one that has been appealing to English target readerships, as memoirs by Arab women often find their way to translation much more easily than do works of fiction (Abdo 2009, 2010). Perhaps the very features of this particular memoir that I have highlighted above are the same ones that has left it neglected, however. As scholarship on English translations of Arab women's memoirs have pointed out, these most often conform to relatively rigid and stereotyped notions of Arab women's lives, what Kahf has termed the roles of «victim, escapee and pawn» (Kahf 2002; Abdo 2010). Moreover, the political implications of the kinds of changes that works by Nawal El Saadawi or Hanan al-Shaykh underwent, as pointed out by Amal Amireh (2000) and Michelle Hartman (2015), mean that Arab women writers are placed in roles in which they are cast as anomalies, i.e. as «exceptions to the rule» within their own cultures and contexts. This kind of representation runs directly counter to Ashour's political positions and would undermine the very political projects she was devoted to writing about as a politically engaged leftist, embarking on a trip to the United States to study Black American poetry.

Radwa Ashour opens her memoir by invoking the Egyptian men who went before her, traveling abroad for knowledge, explicitly invoking Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi:

I wasn't carrying a picture of handsome, turban-wearing Shaykh Rifa'a with me, but I'm certain that he was somewhere in my consciousness even if I'd stopped paying close attention to him. I was, like him, on my way to seek knowledge in a country, «far-away from us, the furthest from consideration». But I was unlike him too. I was leaving neither as a neutral person who doesn't know what she's faced with, nor like the generation of researchers who followed him—the ones who left and returned besotted with the bright lights of imperialism (Ashour 2016).

Far from being ideologically neutral, Ashour is a committed anti-imperialist working in a Third World solidarity framework, particularly at this time of political opposition to the war in Vietnam. Indeed, she tells us that she was not enthusiastic about travelling to the United States at the time of global protest against it, but rather to further her goal of earning a PhD in Black American literature, a goal unattainable without traveling there to experience African America and study in one of its important research centers, the newly founded WEB DuBois Department of Afro-American Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Ashour 1994, 2000). Her insistence on linking Arab struggles to Black struggles without romanticizing or exoticizing them is part of the importance of her memoir and its analysis. On the political level, therefore, her memoir is quite different than the works of many other Arab authors who invoke or refer to Black Americans, as they do Indigenous Peoples of the United States, in political solidarity but without deep knowledge of their histories or struggles (Hartman 2004, 2005).

Ashour's commitment to linking politics and poetics means that she weaves poetry into her memoir, especially that of African Americans, as well as other works by Black Americans, like Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech, «The Meaning of July Fourth to the Negro». The translations of these classic works of Black American history and literature convey their meaning in Arabic to her Egyptian/Arab audience in the 1980s. Throughout the memoir, this is also continually tied back to Arab struggles, including the Egyptian student movement, the Algerian revolution, and most importantly for her perhaps, the Palestinian liberation struggle. Her discussion throughout the memoir of translating her husband Murid Barghourti's poetry from Arabic into English further demonstrates and thematizes the issue of translation as both a political and aesthetic occupation and calling.

4. TRANSLATING LANGSTON HUGHES INTO ARABIC

Radwa Ashour's translation of Langston Hughes' famous poem «Harlem (2),» is located in chapter eleven of *Al-Rihla [The Journey]*. At this point in the memoir, Radwa has been in the United States working on her PhD in Black American literature for some time, far from her husband and family, lonely and alienated in a foreign environment, but stimulated intellectually by it all the same. She is reinvigorated by her husband Murid Barghouti's visit from Egypt and plans ways to show him as much as she can of the United States and her world there when he comes. With the early chapters of the novel focused intensely on her loneliness and alienation in this strange country, and her knowledge of African American literature expanding throughout her stay, this chapter is something of a culmination of many of the strands laid out in the earlier sections. After Murid arrives, the couple travel to New York City to explore its many cultural and touristic features. One morning, after having taken a long walk through the city and

having met many people, as they finish breakfast at a local diner, Radwa asks Murid if they should visit the Statue of Liberty or visit Harlem (Ashur 1983, 132)³. She poses this question to her husband several times, implicitly encouraging him to agree to visit the iconic Black neighbourhood and centre of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement of which Langston Hughes was a part.

Standing on Fifth Avenue in mid-town Manhattan, Radwa asks Murid one more time if he would like to go to Harlem and then recites Hughes's poem—translated into Arabic:

ما الذي يحدث لحلم أجلوه؟
هل يجف
كزببية في الشمس،
أم تخرج به القروح فيفتح؟
هل تفوح رائحته كاللحم العطن؟
أم يفرز قشرة
كمشروب سكري مركز؟
ربما يتدلى
كحمل ثقيل
أم انه ينفجر؟
(Ashur 1983, 132).

This eleven-line poem becomes ten lines in translation and, though short, stands out within both the chapter and the overall memoir. This is all the more so, because only two pages earlier in the very same chapter, Radwa recited lines of poetry from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, but in the original English. Her choice to leave parts of one poem in the original but to translate the other is striking and merits some discussion.

The Wasteland and TS Eliot's work more generally have been much appreciated by Arab litterateurs and the work has been translated into Arabic at least a dozen times by prominent writers (de Young 2000; Jabra 1971; Samarrai 2014)⁴. Hughes's poetry has also been translated into Arabic in publications dating back to the 1950s. The most famous and widely circulated of his poems was done by Samer Abu Hawwash who also included some in a newly edited, expansive anthology of American literature that just appeared in the United Arab Emirates. This particular poem appears in neither volume, however, and as far as my research indicates the rendition of «Harlem (2)»

3 Elsewhere I have analyzed in detail the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty and the way it is juxtaposed with and contrasted to Harlem in this work, and she has compared this symbolism with the poetry of Adonis (Hartman 2005).

4 The first translation of the *Wasteland* was done by Tawfiq Sayigh in 1955. This poem has been translated at least a dozen more times since then.

here is Ashour's own, not taken from any previously published or circulating translation. Why does Ashour provide a translation here for one poem and not the other over the space of just two pages? The relative fame of the two poems in Arab contexts might provide one answer, and the existence of many previous translations of Eliot and none of Hughes could mean that she felt compelled to translate the latter poem for Arab audiences who would not have another source to turn to.

Here I would also like to suggest another possible interpretation for this choice, linked to the different roles and contexts Eliot and Hughes occupy in the world of English-language poetry and different kinds of importance Ashour gives them. T.S. Eliot here is being invoked to underline the alienation and harshness of modernity and the city as an «Unreal city under the brown fog of a winter dawn» (Ashur 1983, 130). He is invoked with respect and the social commentary embedded in his poem filters into some of what Ashour is trying to convey about the alienation of modern cities in her memoir. Langston Hughes, on the other hand, is very specifically mobilized within *Al-Rihla* as someone whose work is directly tied and relevant not only to her as a scholar of Black American literature, but also to Arabs and Arab struggles more generally. She recites this poem to entice her husband Murid to go with her to Harlem, and identifies this as a vibrant urban location that is relevant and urgent to both of them, just after reciting it (Ashur 1983, 133).

The politics behind Ashour's choice to translate Hughes and not Eliot into Arabic are clear. She translates the poem «Harlem (2)» like she later translates Frederick Douglass's famous speech, «What is the Fourth of July to the Negro» to convey their meaning in Arabic to an Arab readership. In this way, Eliot remains an "other" within Ashour's text, but Hughes and Douglass form a part of the implied "self". In providing this translation, Ashour ventriloquizes Black writers and allows them to speak to Arab audiences in Arabic through her voice. Moreover, contextualizing Hughes's translated poem within a commentary about how much his work impacted her and how she relates to it solidifies the association and affiliation between Arabs and Black Americans. The further contextualization that Ashour gives the poem is replete with references to Black Nationalism and liberation movements, including Black soldiers returning from World War One talking about liberation, civil rights, Marcus Garvey and the Back to Africa Movement, and the slogan Black is Beautiful among others (Ashur 1983, 133).

5. «HARLEM (2)»: MEANINGS OF TRANSLATION CHOICES

The fact that Radwa Ashour chooses to translate this poem by Langston Hughes, while leaving other poetry untranslated, strongly underlines its meaning to her Arab readership. This is further reinforced by specific translation choices she makes in the Arabic translation and the way it reads within the overall text of *Al-Rihla*. Ashour's

word-for-word, almost literal, translation uses solely Modern Standard Arabic; no words in the poem are drawn from spoken or colloquial Arabic. It does not use any innovative rhyme, rhythm, or meter, nor does it engage in interesting word play. The choice of vocabulary is accurate and simple. The translated poem therefore reads as a relatively flat rendition of Hughes's clever, playful poem, complete with inner rhymes and evocative word choices. In contrast to Hughes's poem, whose power resides in its simplicity and artistry, reaching a fever pitch with its explosion at the end, Ashour's translation is somewhat heavy and didactic, further reinforcing the supposition that she translated it in the memoir largely to preserve its meaning and not its art.

Some of the specific translation choices made by Ashour can reveal the intricacies of these dynamics in more detail. The analysis that follows is meant less as a critique of these choices, her techniques, or the success of the poem in Arabic than as a gambit to raise issues and questions about the role of the poem within the memoir and the possibilities that such an analysis can offer us today—particularly when contemplating the translation of the memoir itself from Arabic into English. The first example is the poem's iconic first line, «What happens to a dream deferred?» These words—the expression «dream deferred» in particular—are certainly the most famous in the poem and, as we have seen above, are used today in many contexts to invoke the reactions of people who have been long oppressed and denied their rights. Ashour's translation is:

ما الذي يحدث لحلم أجلوه؟

There are two levels of difference in capturing «dream deferred» here in Arabic: the grammatical construction and the choice of vocabulary.

To begin with the latter, in English the word «deferred» is a synonym of «postponed», possibly the meaning closer to the Arabic verb chosen here (أَجَّلَ). While a correct word choice for meaning, it is a choice that does not reproduce the alliteration. There is no interesting, playful or musical interaction between these two words as there is in English. Moreover, as a vocabulary item, «deferred» is a more formal and literary word than «postponed» or other adjectives, and thus the word draws attention to itself, yet this is not at all captured in the Arabic translation here.

The Arabic phrase that Ashour has chosen to render the meaning of the English expression is not a noun-adjective construction as it is in English. The English expression, in fact, is all the stronger because of its reversed syntax. Hughes refers to a «dream deferred» rather than «deferred dream», which would also have been a grammatically correct, standard way of expressing this idea. Ashour here does not choose a standard noun-adjective construction, nor does she choose to use a creative or unusual one. Rather she uses a standard grammatical construction leaving the indefinite noun «dream» (حلم) to be modified by a verbal phrase that would literally translate as «that they have postponed/deferred it». The «it» here is referred to as a

«resumptive pronoun» and needed in Arabic to complete the phrase. This translation choice is consistent with Ashour's efforts to keep the meaning as close to the meaning and content of the English source text as possible. Ashour's translation emphasizes the active role of those who have deferred the dream of an entire people, canceling out any possible interpretation that the dream may could be deferred randomly or unintentionally. This translation choice therefore is important to underline because it underscores the politics of the poem subtly--if not through artistic means, then through a shade and nuance of meaning.

There are many more examples of word choice that could be analyzed, but here I would like to reflect on just one more, the way in which she chose to render «rotten meat,» from the line, «does it stink like rotten meat?» This is one of the questions that refer back to what happens to a dream deferred. Ashour chooses to render this as, اللحم العطن. Again, the literal choice of words is correct and accurate. The word here used to render «rotten» is synonymous with decay and shares a root with words to do with removing the skins or hides of animals for the tanning process, and so it is evocative. I found it interesting to compare this word choice with that used by the translators who created the Oakland billboard. The poem is strikingly similar overall, especially in word choice and vocabulary, but this is one choice that was different. The word used to render «rotten» there is فاسد. This word also carries the connotations of being spoiled or decayed but the root of the word and meanings around it are evocative of an entirely different context of usage. This word not only is the same one used to denote corruption and evil, for example when referring to politicians or political leaders, but also has a legal meaning to do with imperfection within Islamic law. The possible additional connotations evoked by the latter choice are provocative, perhaps more so than Ashour's choice, especially politically.

These two short examples demonstrate the translation of entire poem as a flat, blunt Arabic *fusha* rendition that does not manipulate words or create poetic artistry. This is not true of Ashour's translation alone, nor is it fair to say that the Oakland translation captures this poetry better. They two translations are in fact very similar, about half of the lines are identical. In fact, most translations of Hughes' poems seemingly have not managed to capture his musicality well at all. Some have referred to this musicality in his poems as their «lilt and sway», referring to how the author was heavily influenced by music, in particular be bop (Kernan 2007, 405). His French and Spanish translators, considerably more prolific and widespread than those working into Arabic, all faced this challenge in different ways (Kernan 2007).

It is clear that Ashour's choices in particular, however, are influenced by her commitment to conveying the content and meaning of Hughes's writing. In so doing she roots him firmly in his political context of leftist, Black liberation politics. This means that her translation also fits very well within the larger text of *Al-Rihla*, her memoir, and the 1970s context in which she locates it. She wants her readership to learn about

Harlem and Black American struggles and shows how they are very much connected to Arab and Egyptians ones. She preserves the imagery and ideas literally, and keeps the text local, but does not find creative or innovative means to capture any of the poetic suggestivity embedded in the original: its musicality, rhyme, rhythm and so on. Ashour's translation of Langston Hughes offers Arab readers a glimpse into Black American poetry and literature by emphasizing the experiences that shaped it. The excitement and innovation in Ashour's work is not found in creative, poetic language but in embedding these ideas and the histories of Black people in a clear, plain Arabic language that is designed to speak directly to an Arab readership.

6. TRANSLATING ASHOUR, RETRANSLATING HUGHES

The challenge of Radwa Ashour's translation of Langston Hughes within her memoir of life in the United States of the 1970s, shaken by the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and protests against the war in Vietnam, is how to develop strategies to move such an Arabic text into English today. How can a work whose language is a simple, but relatively formal, modern standard Arabic be translated into an English that makes its vibrant, living messages reach communities today? The same people who created bus shelter art in Oakland, with a Langston Hughes poem translated into Arabic, are envisioned as a likely target audience for this translated memoir.

The language Ashour uses is not only challenging because it is Arabic *fusha*, but also because it continually invokes and evokes a highly charged political atmosphere of the 1970s. The language of liberation, people's struggles, resistance and revolution does not sound inflammatory but simply descriptive and quotidian in her text. The clear and plain language of Ashour's text is perhaps easier to transfer into and capture in English than Hughes's notoriously difficult to translate poetry. The reflections upon translating «Harlem (2)» here offer some insights into the possibilities and problems involved in the translation of Ashour's larger memoir in which it is couched and the back-translation (a translation of a target text back into the source text language) of this poem—literally and figuratively—into English.

The eventual translation of *Al-Rihla* will most likely, if possible, include the full text, in the original, of Hughes's «Harlem (2)». The challenges and awkwardness of the Arabic translation hints that a back-translation of the Ashour's translation might make the poem so distant to readers so as to have no meaning. But having said that, contemplating a translation intervention, thinking about translating the translation, raises questions about source and target texts, exoticism and familiarity and the meaning of what a translated text is. Any translation from Arabic back into English would reveal a number of differences with the original, some of which would no doubt lead to interesting questions. A translation like, «What happens to a dream they defer?» or «What happens

to a dream they keep from you?»), for example, directly offers an interpretation. Rather than the reader figuring out the context, s/he would know that this dream was not being simply deferred randomly, but was purposely denied to a people. This back-translation of the poem would allow us to learn something not only about how poetry works but both how translation functions as interpretation and how translators must make choices. As a translation intervention, then this could offer possibilities.

How a translation prioritizes a poem's meaning versus its art is the first major question this possibility of back-translation raises. Perhaps when it is contextualized within Ashour's memoir, the importance of Hughes's poem is really simply limited to its meaning. If the musicality of the poem does not exist for Ashour's Arabic readership, should it for the English-language readership of her translated memoir? Should the English translation of *The Journey* not remain «faithful» to this idea of the meaning of the poem taking precedence? Moreover, if the English translation of *Al-Rihla* maintains a position—common amongst translation studies theorists in Arabic-English translation—that it should not aim for absolute fluency but keep its identity as a translated text that does convey difference, why should the same not be true for a new version of «Harlem (2)» contained within it? These suggestions go against the grain—not only of a book that «reads well» and might actually stand a chance of being published, but also of the appreciation of the mixture of aesthetics and meaning, content and form, poetics and politics in literary works. While here I will not go so far as to advocate for the inclusion of a back-translation of Ashour's translation of Hughes rather than including the original poem in any eventual translation of *Al-Rihla*, I would point out that these reflections give us greater insight into translation and what the meaning of producing translations is. Even as we may argue for certain theoretical positions and contemplate interventions, this example demonstrates the attachment to original texts—iconic poetic texts perhaps even more so than others.

7. CONCLUSIONS

What can thinking about translating Ashour's text—which emerged from an era of Third World unity and liberation struggles—offer us today? One of the important points raised in this discussion is underlining the fact that Langston Hughes and Radwa Ashour are internationalist figures⁵. Ashour and Hughes shared similar leftist, Marxist politics, a commitment to conveying political messages in their writing and an insistence on joining crucial issues of struggle and liberation with their literary output and analysis.

5 This is consistent with the argument given by Dworkin (2012), Gohar (2007) and Kernan (2007) in relation to Hughes and Hartman (2004, 2005) about Ashour. See also Pickens (2014) for understanding Black-Arab relations and solidarity politics in literature, including internationalism.

The struggles of Black Americans and Arab peoples are seldom found side by side in today's literature, nor are common critical links between the two sought in scholarly inquiries. However, Ashour's memoir brings them both together in a very powerful manner. The translation of Ashour's memoir into English, therefore, can bring these powerfully conjoined political agendas and literary manifestations to a much wider audience and afford much greater visibility. This means not only deciding the best ways to translate and convey Ashour's Arabic language text to English-language reception environments, but also insisting on maintaining and conveying Third World solidarity politics, particularly those emphasizing links between Black Americans and Arabs.

This article has argued for the reclaiming of histories that have been erased and the recontextualization of figures who have been divested of their contexts. This means that Langston Hughes and his poem should reclaim a place within radical Black American literary and political traditions. It also means that the translation of *Al-Rihla* must maintain Radwa Ashour's place within her contexts as well. Arabs and Black people today are drawing on these histories of struggle to work together in solidarity to resist United States imperialism and oppression both within the US and abroad. I recently asked a classroom of university students, none of whom had previously been introduced to the work and legacy of Langston Hughes, for their initial reaction to the poem «Harlem (2)». All of them read the poem as an expression of the common sentiment—follow your dreams. They saw this as encouragement not to put off until tomorrow what you can do today, i.e. «seize the day», as another poet would have it. This room full of students about to graduate from university understood Langston Hughes as encouraging them to do MA degrees, take a long holiday in the Maldives, or open a small business. And while this may not be an entirely «wrong» interpretation, it drives home how far removed from Hughes' and Ashour's urgent messages many people are within the twenty-first century context, while others are still fighting the same battles and engaging in the same struggles. The struggle for dignity and equal rights, achieved through unity and political commitment, are the legacy that writers and poets like Hughes and Ashour have left to us today. Finding ways to link them together and translate their messages across not only languages but also time is perhaps part of what we can do to work towards realizing those dreams.

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