



## Chapter 17

# THE QUEERNESS OF TEXTUALITY AND/AS TRANSLATION: WAYS OF READING HODA BARAKAT'S THE STONE OF LAUGHTER

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THIS CHAPTER USES HODA BARAKAT'S *The Stone of Laughter* (*Ḥajar al-Ḍaḥk*, 1990, trans. 1995) to explore some of the critical and pedagogical possibilities of working with contemporary Arab literature in translation. On the one hand, translation arguably makes manifest a struggle between authority and inadequacy at the heart of *all* language, thereby potentially resisting the 'auto-authorization' of different communities and their ways of meaning.<sup>1</sup> By extension, translation might help to complicate what Jacques Derrida calls 'homo-hegemon[ic]' versions of national history.<sup>2</sup> As Derrida's neologism implies, historiography emphasises exclusionary norms and relations, and Arab creative literatures have tended to expose nationalism's structuring latencies and to elaborate its symptoms. Since the first phase of decolonising writing by authors such as Naguib Mahfouz and Driss Chraïbi, but particularly since the 1967 *naksah*, creative writers across the Middle East and North Africa have exposed a 'correlation between authoritarianism, censorship, repression, and patriarchal sexuality'.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, one must attend to the fact that the processes that make literature in other languages available to English-reading audiences almost inevitably involve epistemic violence. When read outside the region, contemporary Arab literature is particularly susceptible to reification. Mai al-Nakib regrets that it is seen as intrinsically political,<sup>4</sup> and Sinan Antoon critiques the 'forensic' interest of twenty-first-century Western audiences in a region increasingly seen as the crucible of international violence.<sup>5</sup> Both writer-critics highlight insufficient awareness of subtending canons and inattention to the aesthetics and creative ambiguities of imaginative literature.

As a supposedly early representation of Arab non-conforming masculinity<sup>6</sup> set during the Lebanese war (1975–90), *The Stone of Laughter* is especially vulnerable to critical co-optation. Marcia Lynx Qualey notes that while politics, religion and sexuality purportedly remain taboo areas in the Arabic literary field, lively fictional depictions of all three subjects (sometimes simultaneously) abound. Indeed, she queries: 'how many "taboo-busting" novels can we read before we wonder about the strength of this taboo [?]'.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, 'positive, normalized depictions of gay male relationships' remain a relative blind spot, as self-identifying gay and queer Arab writers such as Saleem Haddad and Abdellah Taïa corroborate.<sup>8</sup> Particularly complex representational politics pertain when sexuality enters the cross-cultural field, as illustrated by debates over Joseph Massad's critique of the 'colonizing' work implicit in ascriptions



of particular labels to Arab sexualities;<sup>9</sup> or by Jasbir Puar's exposure of the homonormative privileging that annexes particular national(ist) subjects, whilst reproducing ethnic and sexual others as Oriental, 'terrorizing', and irredeemably un-modern.<sup>10</sup>

The protagonist, Khalil, and narrator of *The Stone of Laughter* are legible in ways that illuminate intersections of desire and violence and the challenges of translatability in contexts both of national production and of transnational reception. I argue that Sophie Bennett's translation<sup>11</sup> amplifies the implied intentions of Barakat's novel in its transmission of precariously queer gendered/sexual subjects. This chapter works towards, but also challenges this hypothesis, demonstrating the desirability of collaborative, multi-lingual, postcolonial engagements with Arab and Middle Eastern literatures as these circulate (selectively) in the world literary domain.<sup>12</sup>

### Postcolonial Pedagogies

Postcolonial criticism underlines dynamic resistance to regimes that have successively denied the human rights, diversity and potentiality of citizens in historically constructed polities. A great deal of Arab writing (including in the persistently colonial context of Israel/Palestine) stresses the ongoing need for decolonisation in more than the obvious political sense of liberation from external control. From the mid-twentieth century, modern Arab literatures have also contested a teleological version of nationalism and revealed ways in which national identity formation involves the exercise of repressive power. A postcolonial perspective should therefore also yield insights into nation state configurations and rhetorical practices.

Lebanon is not a conventionally postcolonial setting. Compare Egypt or Algeria, for example, which have a territorial integrity that predated colonial rule, but in which national identity cohered and took particular rhetorical forms as an effect of British occupation and French settler colonialism and incorporation within the Hexagon, respectively. Lebanon was not a separate country prior to its absorption within European mandated spheres of political, economic and cultural influence. Moreover, France couched its case for stewardship of parts of erstwhile Bilad al-Sham or Greater Syria strategically in the discourse of minority protection. The resulting hierarchical construction of religious diversity in what would become independent Lebanon produced a particularly fractious national identity politics, exacerbated by power-sharing agreements linked tenuously to demographics.<sup>13</sup> Saree Makdisi argues, in fact, that the most enduring effects of European colonialism are evident in the Levant.<sup>14</sup> While his point relates in particular to Israel/Palestine – with which Lebanon's precarious state continues to be intertwined – Lebanese history since 'independence' in 1943 exemplifies the frangibility of nations constructed by colonial boundaries.

Violence in the contemporary Arab world – supposedly structured by 'ancient structural deficiencies or ethnic and religious exigencies' – is complexly linked to an ongoing history of colonial and imperialist interventions in the region.<sup>15</sup> As Nouri Gana puts it:

The attempt to elide or erase altogether a Euro-American and Zionist interest in almost every aspect of so-called ethnic or sectarian violence in the Arab world is nowhere clearer than in the case of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). The very common characterizations of this war as 'ethnic', 'religious' or 'sectarian' not only

exonerate Western imperialism and its unexorcized legacies but also obscure the incubational historical moments [such as the 1948 *Nakba*] of which the war is a product.<sup>16</sup>

Lebanese literature tends to approach its colonial history and its ongoing entanglements with Israel (among other regional powers) obliquely. It characteristically reveals civil violence as multi-axial in its constitution and effects, and privileges diverse and overlapping marginalities. Notably, Lebanese fiction exposes gender norms and sexual violence as integral to the production and maintenance of community boundaries. If certain sorts of (white, masculinist) ‘orientations’<sup>17</sup> shore up competing nationalisms within a late capitalist global economy, then the disentangling of intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ‘confession’ (religious identity) and class becomes, in this context, a mode of critiquing homo-hegemonic violence.<sup>18</sup> *The Stone of Laughter* is exemplary in these respects.

However, and as a postcolonial orientation reminds us, imaginative texts are ‘worlded’ by historical relations of uneven exchange, so attract ‘particular reading dispositions and desires’.<sup>19</sup> Jasmine Zine, Lisa Taylor and Hilary Davis argue that ‘neo-Orientalist imaginaries within the contemporary [post-9/11] political and discursive landscape’ must be ‘continually and vigilantly challenged’ through forms of ‘anti-colonial pedagogy [as well as] praxis’. Western-Arab world relations take place on a terrain that ‘will always bear the imprint of imperial legacies’.<sup>20</sup> If we are to engage Arab literatures, languages and representational spaces in the ‘structured dialogic spaces’ of a Western academic setting, this requires critically reflexive approaches.<sup>21</sup> In the context of an ongoing ‘war on terror’, economies of antipathy and desire re-animate Orientalism to produce hyperbolic representations of Arabs (p. 298). Zine *et al.* warn, in this context, that even ‘resistant’ texts struggle to ‘secure deconstructive readings’.<sup>22</sup>

Specific reception challenges pertaining to Arab literatures intersect with a more diffuse ‘libidinal economy of multicultural literature education’ in the Western academy (pp. 300–1). This, when uncritical, ‘structures instrumental desires . . . not only to know the Other’ – through the use of literary texts as cultural proxies, as Antoon suggests – but also, insidiously, ‘to demonstrate one’s . . . cosmopolitan enlightenment regarding [that] Other’ (pp. 300–1). Literature can be used to secure an ultimately self-serving passive or projective ‘empathy’ towards ‘pre-defined difference’ which readers strive to overcome in order to ‘identify’ with characters (pp. 305–8).<sup>23</sup> An anti-colonial pedagogy and praxis of reading must perforce both reflect upon specific contexts of narration, production and reception, and sustain the possibility of resistant residues of meaning or untranslatability. This is part of the wager of a recursive, historicised, situated ethics of reading.

Critics engaging the linguistically diverse field of Arab literature tend to argue for new comparative directions in postcolonial studies. Wail S. Hassan and Rebecca Saunders, for example, support multilingual approaches to the ‘contested gathering points’ of language, identity, property and temporality that creative fiction foregrounds.<sup>24</sup> I too advocate a multilingual, critically collaborative approach.<sup>25</sup> To this end, I presented the first version of this chapter to an audience of English, French and Arabic speakers, then drew upon feedback to design a ‘masterclass’ on Barakat’s novel at my home institution. Invited participants spanned final-year undergraduate to final-year doctoral level and had a range of prior engagement with Middle Eastern literatures, from no

pre-existing knowledge to research expertise in one or more Mashreqi, Maghrebi and/or wider Middle Eastern/Western Asian literary context. Four of the participants (from Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), one of whom was writing a Lebanese postwar novel (in English), are native Arabic speakers. Some of them work on contemporary Middle Eastern literatures and/or issues germane to Barakat's novel, such as gender representation in war writing, and others have different contextual, conceptual and/or historical literary interests. The seminar solicited and interrogated multiple linguistic, cultural and conceptual literacies, and, by extension, structures of feeling or 'regimes of truth'.<sup>26</sup>

As Nicholas Harrison argues – citing Edward Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* on the 'emancipatory possibilities of close reading'<sup>27</sup> – critics and teachers inevitably advocate particular modes of analysis. These should, though, ideally stand 'in a creative, dialectical relationship to the hermeneutic and affective richness of their [textual] objects', which 'allow considerable space for different readers to react' in potentially incommensurable ways.<sup>28</sup> The pedagogical ideal is to suspend transmission of a particular argument in order 'to do justice to [the] writing on something like its own terms'.<sup>29</sup> *Stone's* 'own terms' are refracted through translation from Arabic into English, in which most of the seminar participants engaged with it because English is their shared academic language. The elective reading mobility of some of my readers further complicates an understanding of audiences, which are not 'sedimentation[s] of established values' so much as 'amalgamations of perspectives' that cohere, whether transiently or in more enduring fashion, in particular times and places.<sup>30</sup> It may be that we can glean from an audience's 'indefinite plurality of perspectives . . . the inexorable fragmentation of any language or work' (p. 16).

Whereas my seminar design encouraged unpredictable outcomes, I also wanted to see how the group would collaboratively untangle a particular conceptual knot – of gender violence, desire, and translation – that I perceive as fundamental to *The Stone of Laughter's* ways of meaning. To this end, participants were provided with an advance list of non-exhaustive questions focusing on the novel's critical and paratextual framing; its fictional representation of gender and sexuality in the context of the Lebanese war; and a single page from the original Arabic text (discussed in the final section of this chapter) which enabled us to discuss the possibility of purposeful translation.

### *The Stone of Laughter: Paratexts and Pretexts*

*The Stone of Laughter* is set in the early 1980s: Khalil's first love, Naji, possibly a spy for a Christian militia, dies crossing the 'Green Line'; his family is replaced in the apartment block that is the main setting of the novel by rural relatives of Khalil fleeing Israeli fire.<sup>31</sup> Not atypically for a Lebanese writer of Christian heritage, Barakat sets her novel in West Beirut; that is, the non-Christian majority side of the front line that bifurcated the city during the war.<sup>32</sup> Khalil, unlike many of his friends, is a secular Muslim, though this is not explicitly stated, nor ascertainable from his name. He has a conversation with his friend Nayif, in which the two men reject sectarianism. However, Khalil queries Nayif's motives in resisting from the 'wrong' side of the line, suggesting that such tactics enhance his heroic status and that of his group (pp. 54–5). This critique of the cultural and economic capital of war masculinity pervades the novel, as when Khalil compares lists of martyrs to 'promotional leaflets of tourism companies and hotels' (p. 41). Sectarian politics are collapsed into a deconstruction of war 'logic'.

Hoda Barakat (1952–), one of Lebanon’s most acclaimed writers,<sup>33</sup> returned to Beirut for most of the Lebanese war; she left again in the year of the National Reconciliation Agreement (1989) for Paris, where she still lives. Her first three novels are set retrospectively during the war years. Barakat’s fiction is produced in Arabic but three novels to date have been translated into English, the last two by Marilyn Booth. The time-lagged availability of her work in translation arguably encourages generic assimilation, in that her novels become identifiable as (early) examples of what Syrine Hout terms a ‘transnational brand of Lebanese literature’. As Hout outlines the genre, Lebanese writers of two generations, based both in the country and abroad, and writing in Arabic, French and English, share an emphasis on individual and collective effects of the 1975–90 Lebanese War, such as the ‘psychological internalization of armed conflict’ and the challenges of traumatic memory in an amnesiac (Lebanese) or oblivious (overseas) public domain.<sup>34</sup> One can distinguish to an extent between a Beirut-centric Arabic-writing *literati* with whom Barakat remains associated and which includes authors such as Elias Khoury and Rashid al-Daïf, who continue to focus on ‘internal exile as a psychosocial or political phenomenon’ (p. 4); and diaspora authors such as Rabih Alameddine and Rawi Hage who write in English and juxtapose contexts of war, migration and minoritisation.<sup>35</sup> Fritz Lang suggests, though, that Lebanese authors continue to orient themselves strategically towards what literary gatekeepers have defined as a ‘tradition of legitimate writing’.<sup>36</sup> This ‘genrefication’ enables brand recognition, marketability and, I would add, teachability.

Another frame for reception of Barakat’s work is the established argument that Lebanese women’s writing, in experimental styles, stresses the effects of war on gendered subjectivity and foregrounds private space as critical margin on the nation, thereby exemplifying a ‘decentring’ ethos.<sup>37</sup> Barakat wrote *Stone* during the war in a basement apartment in Beirut – a marginal space comparable to the one in which she locates her protagonist – and has testified to literary writing as alternative to military and political power. ‘I belong to the damp darkness and to the forgetfulness of those making history in the streets’, she asserts, revealing an anti-establishment ethos: she ‘write[s] as the rat that gnaws at foundations and pillars’.<sup>38</sup>

Barakat reveals a deconstructive orientation in elaborations on her writing: she simultaneously claims marginal presence and self-erasure, gendered embodiment and transcendence, commemoration and ‘the void’ of textuality. This ambivalence is encapsulated in the title of her short ‘autobiographical’ essay, ‘I write against my hand’ (p. 47). Logically, if somewhat testingly, Barakat expresses relative indifference toward ‘women’s issues’, which she also ascribes to her liberal upbringing.<sup>39</sup> She is, however, fascinated by a polarised gender dynamic that subjugates *both* men and women. In a 2004 interview in English, she says:

When I write I have no gender. I have all the genders in the universe. It’s wonderful, it’s a moment of freedom. . . . They come to me in these voices – the voices of men – and they want to tell me because I am a woman. I never pretend I’m a man who writes. I’m always a woman who writes about men who tell me something.<sup>40</sup>

This ventriloquising and translational ethos sheds light on *The Stone of Laughter* and, in particular, its idiosyncratic narrative perspective.

Fadia Faqir, introducing *Stone* to an English audience, partly recuperates what she calls Barakat’s ‘third space’ poetics to a specifically women’s writing agenda, which

entails a simultaneous debunking of patriarchal social organisation, standard Arabic, and what is considered legitimate historical experience.<sup>41</sup> Faqir is aware of Barakat's *ironic* claiming of 'a dual [gendered] perspective' partly in order 'to resemble a man, to cut short the time for training . . . and prove my intellectual ability to construct and to invent'.<sup>42</sup> She shares the other woman's scepticism about universalising claims to women's anti-foundational literary style. Nevertheless, Faqir concludes her introduction to *Stone* by invoking the 'double-layered veil' that Arab women's writing in translation supposedly invites Western readers to lift.<sup>43</sup> More usefully – given the narrative perspective deployed in *Stone* and discussed below – Faqir elsewhere aligns Barakat's project with Hélène Cixous's assertion that 'feminine' writing (*écriture féminine*) is signified by 'the gender of the text' rather than the sex (or gender) of the author.<sup>44</sup>

Paratextual framing of *The Stone of Laughter* in English translation eschews such subtleties and produces a synthetic representational problematic. The back cover of the 2006 Interlink edition describes it as

a virile novel which brings forth the contradictory history of a city under fire through the life and dilemmas of a gay man.

The fractured narrative is woven around Khalil, a gay man who tried to avoid ideological or military affiliations as he finds himself confronted with the collapse of civil society.

Written sensitively, and without a trace of sentimentality or political propaganda, *The Stone of Laughter* shook the [*sic*] Arab readers' preconceptions about women's writing and questioned the necessity of political affiliations for Arab authors.

The novel is, supposedly, surprising twice over – not only is it unconventionally political (the clumsy prose suggests *apolitical*), but a woman writer focuses on a male protagonist. The dust jacket collocates terms supposed to be associatively dissonant: virile, fractured, gay, sensitive, sentimental, political, and women's writing. In so doing, however, it is reductive about what and how Arab women might write, how homogenised 'Arab readers' are assumed to read, and what might happen in the passage between Arabic and English, and between Arab and non-Arab majority audiences.

While one might relatively easily dismiss the 'insights' offered by a book cover,<sup>45</sup> critics also emphasise the 'gay' perspective that this novel purportedly makes available. Mona Katawi, reviewing the novel in *Al-Raida*, in English, assumes that 'Khalil is homosexual', though she acknowledges that his sexual orientation is only one 'element in his reluctance to choose virility' as a form of viable masculinity.<sup>46</sup> Mona Fayad also invokes 'the struggle of a gay man', even as her emphasis falls upon androgyny. She argues that

[Barakat] represents two figures who are marginal to the war: a gay male, Khalil, and a narrator who . . . is androgynous until the circumstances, specifically those in which Khalil is obliged to classify himself as masculine in order to take up his role as fighter for his community, force her to forego her androgyny and declare herself as feminine.<sup>47</sup>

Fayad does recognise that the eventual gender (but not necessarily sexual) conformity of both Khalil and the narrator is strategic, if necessary.

On the last page of the novel, two discrete entities separate. The narrator, for the first time explicitly claiming a first-person singular perspective, sees Khalil with a moustache and sunglasses, and attempts unsuccessfully to hail him as an intimate. But his car moves off, with a final view of our protagonist 'broad shouldered in his brown leather jacket' in the rear window. The narrator concedes that 'Khalil is gone, he has become a man who laughs. And I remain a woman who writes' (p. 209). Khalil accedes to a form of homosociality that is hypermasculine and overtly misogynist. He does not, though, 'become' heterosexual: the narrator, in more omniscient mode, reveals that he rapes his female neighbour, but also that his movement into the public domain is mediated by the patronage of a well-connected militia commander who desires him.

Fayad and Samira Aghacy plausibly interpret the narrator as the eventual personification of a female side to Khalil, who detaches herself as a separate textual presence once he emerges into the public sphere as a sexually violent, militarised man.<sup>48</sup> There is evidence for this eventual shift in the stylisation of the novel which, until the final section, moves in and out of focalisation through Khalil's perspective. At times the narrator directly 'look[s] at [his] body' and solicits reader identification, although not necessarily with a female perspective: 'the eye has only to fall upon him . . . for you to imagine yourself to be Khalil's father' (p. 11). At other times, Khalil's perspective is directly transmitted: 'Do I know so very little about [Naji]? . . . is he that other man, whose evil appetites awake at night and make him go . . . to kill in cold blood and come back to me the next day smiling, handsome and meeker than a sacrificial lamb?' (p. 57).

The early stages of *Stone* also position Khalil symbolically in an ambivalent 'narrow passing place', 'a stagnant, feminine state of submission to a purely vegetable life' (p. 12) that, whilst passive and suspended in conception, potentially 'resist[s] gender as a vector of power' (p. 169). From the 'phantasmagoric space' of his room, Khalil tries to evade 'the hegemonic discourse that defines gender and that seeks to appropriate him as a male national subject' (p. 164). In this context, 'femininity', or withheld participation in the public sphere – the latter coded as militaristic and male – might be read as (passively) resistant. One can then argue that the ending of the novel, which 'outs' a female (though not necessarily feminine) narrator who is distinct from Khalil, activates the potential of alternative, even 'queer', constructions of the nation, at least in writing.<sup>49</sup> In a double sense, Barakat's narrator-proxy assumes a minority position by translating (a man's and a woman's) marginal experience into, and so internally reformulating, 'monological culture . . . that commands and legislates . . . life from above'.<sup>50</sup>

Barakat has spoken of writing as ideally androgynous or hermaphroditic, suspending judgement on whether such writing would issue from a gender-transcendent space 'beyond the conditioning and characteristics of male and female social behaviour', or from a liminal 'junction . . . full of the elation arising from the blending of the genders'.<sup>51</sup> Using a botanical frame of reference, she gestures toward the plenitude (*jouissance*) of *écriture féminine* rather than the corporeal neutering that characterises Virginia Woolf's version of androgynous writing.<sup>52</sup> 'It may be', Barakat says, 'that the essence of creative writing lies in that merging of the sexes, the one with the other, which occurs among plants that exchange their pollen in the peace and harmony of open spaces.'<sup>53</sup> There is abundant evidence in Barakat's fiction that first-hand experience of civil war encourages an antipathy towards definitional categories.

More speculatively, she may also be influenced by French intellectual suspicion of '*la tentation communautaire*' ('separatist' identity politics) and tendency to champion a universal subjectivity.<sup>54</sup>

This last, rather than the deconstructive awareness Barakat also evinces, may partly account for her (to my mind) peculiar representation of Khalil's sexual orientation. In one interview in English, she says:

So there is a gay man in my first book but it's not shocking because he narrates a real sentiment of love. He isn't there to make *paysage*. He is something you cannot refuse – you have to admit – because he suffers and he's really in love and . . . I describe how much he is in love and how much he suffers and the beauty of the other [man].<sup>55</sup>

While it should be acknowledged that Barakat speaks here in her third language, she nevertheless issues a problematic invitation to empathise in a sentimental register. While the first part of the quotation beseeches us to feel with Khalil or to see through his eyes rather than observe him as part of the 'scenery' of the text, the empathy evoked is predominantly of an assimilative order, suggesting a partial (in both senses) recognition. We are invited to 'admit' – acknowledge and accommodate – a universalised lover: Khalil admires beauty and expresses himself in sentimental and tragic registers. It is perhaps not incidental that he never acts upon his desire in the text. If *The Stone of Laughter* is not a 'shocking' story, as Barakat says defensively, then we might ask what kind of 'gay' and/or 'love' story might be perceived as such, by whom, and what the stakes are of choosing to plot and populate it in this manner – in this appeal to the reader – rather than some other.

Our seminar demonstrated the inadequacy of some of the modes of framing *The Stone of Laughter* outlined above. The feminist credentials of Barakat's text, for a start, prompted debate. We eventually agreed that 'Barakat aims at deconstructing male suppressive values that keep not only the female, but also the male, in subjection, and ensure his [and her] conformity within the matrix of patriarchy',<sup>56</sup> and that this is feminist work. However, *Stone* is particularly interested in masculinity under duress at a particular historical juncture, and the refraction of Khalil's ambivalently gendered consciousness through the perspective of a narrator whose sex is only belatedly revealed produces instructive interpretative challenges.

Khalil is repulsed by cultural constructions of womanhood, for example the 'larded, powder-puff femininity' of a newlywed who moves into his apartment block (p. 75). He is, though, also susceptible to the reproduction of binary gender typologies in the way in which he identifies: as 'a woman, a housewife', 'a snow-white old maid' (p. 9), a 'plump divorcee' (p. 23), and (aspirationally) 'wife of the wrong sex' (p. 115). His response to real women (characters) tends toward disgust, suggesting a disavowing economy of abjection: he feels 'intense hatred' for Zahra, the sister of his second love Youssef, becoming

extremely sensitive to and disgusted by the dreadful smell that her armpits exhale, making him certain that two legs of that size, hands as red as that with such thick, animal skin cannot belong to a creature with a soul. He thinks of her as an old rotten fish. (p. 84)



His radical distrust of women produces fragmenting scopical violence: he ‘doesn’t see all of [his neighbour Rita]. Just a bit of her. He sees her lips which never stop moving’ (p. 7). In a still essentialist, if more positively coded manner, Khalil positively aligns sexually non-available women, particularly mothers, with immanence, earthliness, and the ‘[w]isdom of life and death’ (p. 131).

We decided that although Khalil is susceptible to misogyny, this is because he fundamentally rejects binary gender.<sup>57</sup> In fact, he tends to align women with *liminal* states: they contain the Other within the self in pregnancy, have ‘excessive’ bodies, and mediate the passage from life to death of martyrs. Khalil imagines his room as ‘a womb in which [he] swam, breathing in the cosmic harmony that the light radiates, soaking it up as into his very nature as if it were an extension of his slender body’ (p. 64). Two-way corporeal-spatial assimilation here underlines the protagonist’s category crisis; it also suggests a melancholic relation to the maternal body. This has political significance in the novel: we learn that Khalil’s mother refused to acknowledge constructions of national identity, hence ‘enemies’, and would have said that Khalil was her daughter in order to prevent his recruitment as a soldier: ‘To hell with your country and every other country, my precious’, she says, and ‘laughed out loud’ (p. 110).

Fayad suggests that the novel’s laughter is linked to the Arabic expression *yanfajiru duhkan* – to explode with laughter – and so to the violence that civil war inevitably entails.<sup>58</sup> Khalil’s alchemical transformation into a ‘man who laughs’ is satirically conceived. However, as one seminar participant observed, the maternal laughter cited above should echo through the novel as counterpoint to the cynical laughter with which it ends, signalling a subtending anti-patriarchal and anti-nationalist orientation: in this way, too, laughter can be seen as explosive. It was agreed, however, that ‘female’ spaces are very tenuously secured in this novel. Khalil’s rape of his neighbour is a narrative shock that distances the reader from the novel’s erstwhile protagonist, and violently displaces the public danger/private safety binary that he himself has attempted to sustain. The narrator herself loses sight of, and the means to signify, her ‘beloved hero . . .’ (p. 209).

The seminar group was unanimously resistant to categorising Khalil as ‘gay’. We considered the protagonist’s stymied sexual development and concluded that not only does his desire remain unconsummated, it is neither unidirectional nor fully articulable *as* desire at any point in the text. Khalil is not a youth who, in rejecting traditional political structures, has ‘broken down the door of conventional masculinity and entered manhood by the wide door of history’; neither has he, like his peers, taken the measure of the war and accordingly ‘laid down plans to fasten their hold on the upper echelons . . . in politics, in leadership, in the press. . .’ (p. 12). His alienation from the homosocial categories that the war privileges is such that while the Brother confidently asserts power whilst admitting that he no longer (also) sleeps with women, Khalil is unable to say what or whom he desires (p. 190). In fact, the novel does not show war’s production of ‘ideal’ (that is, heteronormative) gendered citizens (p. 165) so much as the ways in which nationalism entails *homo-* as well as heteronormative privileging.<sup>59</sup> But Khalil as protagonist confounds expectations about (historically specific) normative masculinity all the way through this novel, and in so doing exceeds containment, either as the ‘beloved’ (object) of the text or its ‘hero’ (subject).

We thus disagreed with Khalil Hadeed’s reading of *Stone*: not his assessment that Barakat presents Khalil’s homosexuality and its ‘encompassing gender liminality’ as

‘effects of an arrested biological development’ – the novel does link Khalil’s homoeroticism<sup>60</sup> to a resisted passage into adulthood. However, the arresting force of civil violence is primarily at stake. The war directs gender and sexual development onto particular homosocial tracks. Khalil must become like Youssef, who ‘has grown up. . . . He’s absorbed in his external time while I’m waiting at the other end of the tunnel, clutching the egg of my dreams like an old hen’ (p. 117). But our main disagreement was with Hadeed’s claim that Khalil’s arrested development produces epistemic closure; that is, replicates the inconceivability of same-sex love (see p. 81). To our minds, *The Stone of Laughter* proposes utopian feminine masculinity, or androgyny, as more of a challenge to utilitarian nationalism than homosexual preference, which is never definitively ruled out as a future mode of public participation. The plot of *The Stone of Laughter* closes down gender ambiguity, but not sexual inclination. In keeping with Barakat’s deconstructive tendencies, what is othered by the novel as a whole – rather than merely its plot – are either/or categories: the imperative to be male or female, masculine or feminine, gay or straight.

### The Queerness of Textuality and/as Translation

*The Stone of Laughter* stresses the materiality of its protagonist’s ‘pale, pale, still body’, partly counteracting his dematerialisation in normative discourse, ‘a language [that] stole Khalil’s first voice away and did not give him another, a language that did not adopt him’ (p. 144). But it is important that this character is never definitively categorisable or, indeed, *translatable* in gendered, sexed or sexual terms. Ultimately, he escapes even the narrator’s control.<sup>61</sup> Until that point, however, Barakat’s narrator focalises, describes and delimits Khalil’s body, ‘translating’ his thoughts and feelings into the narrative. We recall the author’s self-presentation as ‘a woman who writes about men who tell me something’.

However, *The Stone of Laughter* suggests that it is difficult to avoid complicity with dominant symbolic and scopic regimes. Khalil is partly positioned by the narrator as ‘gender-deviant’: described parodically and pathologically – ‘Poor, sickly Khalil. Poor, lowly Khalil. Poor, puny Khalil’ (p. 145) – or as being in possession of an incomplete body: ‘when one looks at his narrow shoulders, no wider than the little pillow where he lays his head, one is led to question the wisdom of Mother Nature when, sometimes, she stops a stage short and fails to send on hidden desires to their appointed ends’ (p. 11). In these examples and elsewhere, narrative perspective is difficult to disentangle from Khalil’s gender insecurity, as well as from the implied authorial viewpoint. My seminar participants felt that Khalil is never fully realised as a character. This, though, usefully points to the fact that this novel is fundamentally concerned with the entwined problematics of narration and language.

In our seminar, we considered queerness – as a continuum that encompasses both eroticism and sexuality as well as, potentially, the absence of desire – both as a means of explicating Khalil’s gender and sexual orientation *and* in terms of the ways in which this character might resist narrative framing. We then zoomed in on a passage in the translation which explicitly uses the word ‘queer’. Here Khalil is worrying about his erotic dreams, of uncertain content and variable object choice:

Khalil knew that a fear of blood to the point of faintness, having short legs, a slight build, straight chestnut hair and large eyes, all these do not make a man a

hermaphrodite, or effeminate, or make him any less masculine, or . . . queer . . . he knew that the temporary breakdown that he was suffering was only a psychological crisis that the mad world outside had imposed upon him . . . he knew that there were certainly more female hormones in him than there should naturally be, for they protected him from committing the crime of the act, so it was only a passing crisis, it would come to an end . . . he definitely desired women but, at this moment in time, he did not feel particularly susceptible to any particular woman. Khalil's efforts end in a short, broken phrase in which he says to himself, to no avail: 'Naji is dead'. (p. 75)

Descriptors here destabilise the relationship between sex and gender. 'Queer' is one of a series of terms contrasted with 'a man' – that is, a *made* man – that include hermaphrodite, effeminate, less masculine, queer and/or with excessive female hormones. The consciousness transmitted in this passage is anxious about physical, psychological and hormonal deviations from the norm, and defensive about (in)appropriate object choices ('he definitely desired women'). The passage acknowledges, even as it disavows, gender trouble. It also moves toward an incapacity to mourn – for a specific man, but perhaps for same-sex desire more generally – drawing attention to the 'short, broken phrase' that is the novel's (but not elsewhere the author's) signature style. Indeed, 'queer' itself is partially separated out by ellipsis. The passage flags up language as a critical component of Khalil's struggle to secure a viable social identity.

This is strongly reminiscent of Butler's argument that queer desire emblematises impossible mourning, because it is unrecognisable or un-nameable *as* desire.<sup>62</sup> Khalil's desire – to both have and to destroy man(hood) – is profoundly melancholic. After his two loves, Naji and Youssef, are violently killed, we read:

I'm like someone whose dead have been stolen away, Khalil said to himself regretfully . . . someone who's left on the edge of the desert a few seconds before the murder . . . someone who raises his dead with the tears of his eyes . . . who carves their pictures chip by chip and always, before the desire is ripe, before the mellow season comes, always, before Khalil's buried desire to kill them makes itself clear they kill them and they steal away their corpses, leaving him only with the inability to weep for them and the lack of will to bury them, to remind him, always, that he is not man enough to forge his world of dreams and not woman enough to accept . . . he is at a loss as to what he could possibly do to see his two dead and bury them. (pp. 132–3)<sup>63</sup>

This evokes a widely distributed structure of feeling in the post-1967 Arab world: *wuqūf* 'ala al-aṭlāl, or 'standing by the ruins' of a deserted dwelling place and yearning for both it and a lost beloved.<sup>64</sup> Ken Seigneurie, analysing (post-)war Lebanese cultural production, positions elegiac humanism (exemplified, for him, by the prefatory *naṣīb* to the Bedouin *qaṣīda*) against the teleological impetus of sectarian nationalism and its violent ethos of martyrdom. As he sees it, remembrance should lead to reconciliation and an eventual superseding of loss.<sup>65</sup> The fetishisation of the (particularly male) martyr's body in the service of competing communities is critiqued throughout *The Stone of Laughter*. However, as the extract above makes clear, it is because the bodies that Khalil grieves are always already impossible objects of desire – a fact that death only enhances – that his murderous and suicidal impulses persist.

Butler suggests that in attempts to disentangle gender from the 'sex' (that is, the sexed body) that shapes, channels and represses its complexity, a degree of untranslatability will inevitably remain. She critiques the fact that gender is compelled to translate the language of unconscious articulation into something coherent:

[T]he question may well not be, 'what gender am I?' but rather, 'what does gender want of me?' or even, 'whose desire is being carried through the assignment of gender that I have received and how can I possibly respond?' Quick – give me a way to translate!<sup>66</sup>

Translation, here, produces a *sustained* remainder or excess that cannot be reconciled. *The Stone of Laughter* does reveal gender and sex as translational anomalies. Bodies, in their gender performance and sexual orientation, are portrayed as potentially fluid or hybrid, only bifurcating under duress into virile masculinity, on the one hand, and a 'woman who writes', on the other. Until – and even at – the end, both Khalil and the narrator perform sexual ontology queerly, denaturalising a heteronormative symbolic.

However, if we follow Butler's logic, once queer desire and/or identity is named, translated and made comprehensible, it is no longer melancholic – and perhaps loses its critical edge. Puar puts the point differently, querying the implications of the ostensibly non-categorising category 'queer' that, in claiming to be 'singularly transgressive of identity norms', narrates its own exceptionalism: freedom from norms becomes a fetishised ideal and its own regulatory mechanism.<sup>67</sup> This raises the possibility that Khalil's queerness – *qua* unassimilable difference – might be reduced, through nomination as such in English, to a category. One recalls Massad's critique of what he (reductively) calls 'Gay International' intervention in Arab affairs, suggesting that it attempts to codify what (in a critique of Butler) he calls 'another *other* . . . , namely, those cultural formations whose ontological structure is not based on the hetero-homo binary' in the first place.<sup>68</sup> Massad sees this as symptomatic of unequally structured cross-cultural relations, if also as only partly translated across borders or 'hegemonic in intellectual and elite circles'. Nevertheless, he warns, elites influence the legislation of 'norms', thereby threatening 'the interstices of Arab societies and psyches' (p. 49).

Hadeed points to the risks of fiction that represents 'sexually deviant' characters symptomatically or allegorically, and there are certainly ways in which *Stone* deploys Khalil's non-normative masculinity to critique sectarian nationalist thought. Hadeed also draws attention to the limited political benefits of both constructionist and essentialist definitions of homosexuality.<sup>69</sup> He nevertheless insists upon the continued urgency of combating sexual discrimination. Because Arab cultural frames of reference for same-sex desire are often antagonistic to rights and freedoms, he argues for the desirable transportability of a politics that 'rejects a clear demarcation line between homo- and heterosexuality and refuses to delimit, *a priori*, the potential trajectories along which sexuality may develop' (p. 272). This deepens the irony of the reductive 'homosexual' framing of the novel – in English – highlighted earlier.

A comparison of the two versions of the novel suggests that the use of 'queer' reflects the 'decisionism of translation'.<sup>70</sup> A sentence from the passage cited earlier – 'all these do not make a man a hermaphrodite, or effeminate, or make him any less masculine, or . . . queer . . .' – is, in the original, '*al-rajul khuntha, aw dhakaran da'if al-dhakurah aw . . . sha'dhan . . .*'. While the dictionary translation of *khuntha* is

'hermaphrodite'<sup>71</sup> and *al-rajul dhakaran da'if al-dhakūrah*, 'an irregular weak man', plausibly translates as 'effeminate', *sha dh* – translated as 'queer' – means unnatural, bizarre or abnormal. The Arabic speakers in my seminar insisted that it has, in relation to sexuality, connotations of deviance that do not challenge heteronormativity but, rather, reinforce it.<sup>72</sup> Khalil in the original is, then, differently 'queer' to the way in which the term has been reconfigured in English. Indeed, there may not be a term in Arabic that delivers the queerness of 'queer'.<sup>73</sup> One participant in my seminar pointed out, however, that 'deviant' could be kept in order to mark the limits of the sexual lexicon of contemporary Arabic, particularly given that the novel itself frequently marks the inadequacies of language. The same person pointed out that 'deviance' is not an intrinsically negative term, at least not in English. Puar, in fact, uses deviance as a synonym for queerness, and critiques both as regulatory regimes that (in some places) privilege freedom and individuality.<sup>74</sup>

It is perhaps no coincidence that Bennett also researches gender and identity in modern Arabic literature.<sup>75</sup> This raises the risk of the translator and/or her English-reading audience annexing the Arab other to liberal and/or cosmopolitan, *viz* 'enlightened' values. Such values are, however, learned rather than innate: they are the product of specific environments rather than deep cultural conditioning. All of the Arabic speakers in my UK-located university seminar saw the translation of *shādh* as 'queer' to be both an appropriate metonymical rendering of this novel's philosophically rich content, and a politically useful representation of non-normative gender identification and sexual desire. We concluded that 'queer' is an immanent tendency in the original brought out in the afterlife of translation.<sup>76</sup>

This consolidated my own view that the (mis)translation of *shādh* is in line with what the text shows more comprehensively: the competing biological, social and political demands on Khalil's gendered and sexed body – including the demands that the narrator places on it – and the way in which his desire spans homoeroticism, homosexuality and homosociality (and, ultimately, exceeds definition). The word 'queer' gestures toward ontological possibilities that resonate beyond both the conclusion of the plot and narrative closure: Khalil, as protagonist, continues to evade a woman who *writes*; indeed who, like an irresponsible translator, often tries 'to speak on the Other's behalf while at the same time denying this essentially appropriative gesture'.<sup>77</sup> However, the narrative frame fails to close upon her 'beloved hero. . .' Similarly, the elliptical framing of 'queer', in the translation, signals a *tentative* move beyond an understanding of Khalil as either physically aberrant or morally abhorrent. 'Queer' can thus be read as aporetic. And as such, it is metonymic of the 'poetic' qualities of *Stone* – which constantly flags up untranslatability – rather than its 'message'.<sup>78</sup> This text's self-staging contextualises 'queer' in open-ended rather than 'colonising' ways.

Whether we conclude that the translational insertion pinpointed here makes more visible what is already there, or that it strategically reorients the text, however, we can extrapolate that an inexact replication of an original's 'way of meaning' is the work of translation. Appropriately, given Barakat's preoccupations, Butler has argued that translation – like drag – contests the structuring logic or very notion of an original, or self-presence, so also naturalised gender or sex.<sup>79</sup> The work of art mobilises culture against authority, continually 'articulating new values and world historical orientations'; it disrupts established ways of meaning.<sup>80</sup> But because any audience has an indeterminate plurality of perspectives, creative texts are also susceptible to untangling

in different ways, and even to unravelling. As such, reading in translation can reveal that language is intrinsically ‘a hegemonic formation that requires forever inadequate attempts at discursive domination’ (p. 18).

*The Stone of Laughter* actively invites a deconstructive reading. The fractured style of Barakat’s novel (in both versions) clearly evokes the difficulties of subject-constitution in language/the Symbolic,<sup>81</sup> as well as the surreal experience of the Lebanese war with its inescapable cyclical violence and multiple divisive effects on national community. This literary treatment of language’s effects should remind us of two wider truths. First, national and sub-national identities are discursively constituted, and it has been one task of post-colonial writers to expose the exclusionary violence that this inevitably entails. Second, translation does not – cannot – aspire to literal equivalence. It is, rather, a process of active interpretation or co-production: an intimate engagement with another (text). Translation is not just ‘touching’ or empathic: it is exposing, unsettling, even violently wrenching. It can also be seen as queering an original.<sup>82</sup> *The Stone of Laughter* exemplifies ways in which Arab fiction *refracts* rather than simply transmits the violence of identity politics contested at particular historical junctures. If we wish to engage it and wider Middle Eastern literatures in translation, we must do so in ways that take into account their contexts of emergence, aesthetic complexity and hermeneutic limits, as well as the embodied positionalities and structures of feeling of diverse readers.

## Notes

1. Adam Rosen, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Politics of the Pure Word: Melancholia, Mourning, and the Task of the Translator’, *Canon: The Politics of Language*, 16 (2003), [http://canononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/melancholia\\_mourning\\_rosen.pdf](http://canononline.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/melancholia_mourning_rosen.pdf) (last accessed 1 July 2017), p. 16.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or: The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 64.
3. Samira Aghacy, *Masculine Identity in the Fiction of the Arab East since 1967* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009), p. 9.
4. Mai Al-Nakib, ‘Arab Literature: Politics and Nothing But?’, *World Literature Today*, 90:1 (2016), pp. 30–2.
5. See Malcolm Forbes, ‘Iraqi Writer Sinan Antoon on his novels about his embattled homeland’, *The National*, 14 May 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-lifestyle/the-review/iraqi-writer-sinan-antoon-on-his-novels-about-his-embattled-homeland#page3> (last accessed 1 July 2017), n.p.
6. There are much earlier examples: see Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). I allude here to the paratextual framing of this novel discussed in the second section of my chapter.
7. Marcia Lynx Qualey, ‘Homosexuality and the Arabic Novel: The Triumph of Mockery’, *Arabic Literature in English*, 4 September 2015, <https://arablit.org/2015/09/04/homosexuality-and-the-arabic-novel/> (last accessed 1 July 2017), n.p.
8. Qualey, ‘Homosexuality and the Arabic Novel’, n.p. See also Eman Elshaikh, ‘Being Arab, Queer, & Everything in Between: Interviewing Saleem Haddad, the Author of *Guapa*, *Muftah*’, 7 March 2016, <https://muftah.org/queer-arab-an-interview-with-saleem-haddad-the-author-of-guapa/#.WT5ssMaZOXV> (last accessed 1 July 2017) and Alberto Fernández Carbajal, ‘The Wanderings of a Gay Moroccan: An Interview with Abdellah Taïa’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 29 May 2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1327966> (last accessed 1 July 2017), pp. 1–12.

9. Massad approvingly cites Diana Fuss on this point: 'Is it really possible to speak of "homosexuality", or for that matter "heterosexuality" or "bisexuality", as universal, global formations? . . . What kinds of colonizations do such translations perform on "other" traditions of sexual difference?' (Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, p. 41).
10. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 2, 17.
11. Bennett has also translated two novels by Egyptian author Latifa al-Zayyat, for Quartet.
12. I am grateful to Anna Ball for suggesting that I test my ideas pedagogically. My warm thanks to participants in the resulting 2 May 2017 seminar at Lancaster University (UK): Ghadeer Alhasan, Naji Bakhti, Kirsty Bennett, Húyem Cheurfa, Rachel Fox, Lee Hansen, Madonna Kalousian and Michael Pritchard, and to Michael for feedback on the chapter.
13. See Samir Kassir, *Beirut*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
14. Saree Makdisi, "'Postcolonial' Literature in a Neo-Colonial World: Modern Arabic Culture and the End of Modernity", *boundary 2*, 22:1 (1995), pp. 85–115; p. 92.
15. Nouri Gana, 'Formless Form: Elias Khoury's *City Gates* and the Poetics of Trauma', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 47:4 (2010), pp. 504–532; p. 506.
16. Gana, 'Formless Form', p. 506.
17. See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
18. These are characteristics of fiction written both in Lebanon and in the diaspora; in Arabic, French and English; and spanning almost three decades. For a longer discussion of gender and sexual violence as structuring aspects of Lebanese war imaginaries, see Lindsey Moore, *Narrating Postcolonial Arab Nations: Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, Palestine* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 123–63.
19. Jasmine Zine, Lisa Taylor and Hilary Davis, 'Reading Muslim Women and Muslim Women Reading Back: Transnational Feminist Reading Practices, Pedagogy and Ethical Concerns', *Intercultural Education*, 18:4 (2007), pp. 271–80; p. 276. See also Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993) and Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair-Majaj, 'Introduction', in Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair-Majaj (eds), *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers* (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 1–26; p. 12.
20. Zine, Taylor and Davis, 'Reading Muslim Women', p. 274.
21. Lisa Taylor, 'Reading Desire: From Empathy to Estrangement, from Enlightenment to Implication', *Intercultural Education*, 18:4 (2007), pp. 297–316; p. 298. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
22. Zine, Taylor and Davis, 'Reading Muslim Women', p. 276.
23. One could conversely argue for empathy – a feeling 'into' the situation of another – as productively unsettling. Taylor accepts that one needs to 'care' about texts emotionally and/or aesthetically, but critiques the fact that cross-cultural reading can involve the assimilation of other experience into the familiar, reducing characters to 'identificatory proxies, screens or foils' through processes of selective (un-)noticing (p. 307).
24. Wail S. Hassan and Rebecca Saunders, 'Introduction', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23:1–2 (2003), pp. 18–31; p. 23. See also Jane Hiddleston, 'État présent: Francophone North African Literature', *French Studies*, 70:1 (2016), pp. 82–92.
25. Arab literatures are produced in Amazigh, English, French, Hebrew and other languages, as well as Arabic.
26. Taylor, 'Reading Desire', p. 302.
27. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 67.

28. Nicholas Harrison, 'Said's Impact: Lessons for Literary Critics', in Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and Derek Attwell (eds), *Debating Orientalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 216–41; pp. 229, 226.
29. Harrison, 'Said's Impact', p. 235.
30. Rosen, 'Walter Benjamin's Politics of the Pure Word', p. 16. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
31. Hoda Barakat, *The Stone of Laughter*, trans. Sophie Bennett (Northampton: Interlink, 2006), p. 78. Subsequent references will be parenthesised in the main text.
32. See also, for example, fiction by Rashid al-Daïf.
33. *The Tiller of Waters* won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal in 2000 and Barakat was shortlisted for the 2015 Man Booker International.
34. Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 4. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
35. The picture is complicated by literature in French, and by the fact that many writers move back and forth between Lebanon and other places, in both their life and their work.
36. Felix Lang, 'Ghosts in the Archive – Lebanon's Second Generation Post-War Novelists and the Limits of Reconstruction', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 18:5 (2014), pp. 487–95; p. 491.
37. See miriam cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and miriam cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
38. Hoda Barakat, 'I Write Against My Hand', in Fadia Faqir (ed.), *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 43–7; p. 46. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
39. Samira Aghacy cites interviews in *Mawaqif* 73–4 (1993–4) and *As-Safir* (11 January 1994). See Samira Aghacy, 'Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter": Androgyny or Polarisation?', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 29:–4 (1995), pp. 185–201; pp. 185–6.
40. See Brian Whitaker, 'An Interview with Hoda Barakat', *Al-Bab*, November 2004, <http://al-bab.com/literature-section/modern-arab-writers> (last accessed 1 July 2017), n.p.
41. Fadia Faqir, 'Introduction', in Barakat, *The Stone of Laughter*, pp. v–viii; p. vii.
42. Barakat, 'I Write Against My Hand', p. 44.
43. Fadia Faqir, 'Introduction', in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, pp. 1–23; p. 19; Faqir, 'Introduction', in Barakat, *The Stone of Laughter*, p. viii.
44. Faqir, 'Introduction', *In the House of Silence*, p. 21. See also Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith and Paul Cohen, *Signs*, 1:4 (1976), pp. 875–93.
45. See, however, Amireh and Suhair-Majaj, *Going Global*.
46. Mona Katawi, 'Masculine Identity in Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*', *Al-Raida*, 21:104–5 (2004), pp. 111–12; p. 111.
47. Mona Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny: Passing as Masculine in Barakat's *Stone of Laughter*', in Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba (eds), *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 162–79; p. 163.
48. See Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny' and Aghacy, 'Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter"'. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
49. A subtle irony pertains to the fact that Khalil eroticises the figure of a *male* writer on whose 'strong, supple forearm' he imagines laying his head (p. 114).
50. Faqir, 'Introduction', *In the House of Silence*, p. 22. See also Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 84.
51. Barakat, 'I Write Against My Hand', p. 45.



52. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory Now* (London: Routledge, 1988).
53. Barakat, 'I Write Against My Hand', p. 45.
54. See Keith Harvey, 'Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 344–64; pp. 358–9.
55. See Whitaker, 'An Interview with Hoda Barakat'.
56. Aghacy, 'Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter"', p. 185.
57. Khalil is at first somewhat attracted to his cousin Zahra but then transfers his desire to her brother Youssef. Aghacy links this to the progression of the war and to Khalil's increasingly urgent desire to remain uncontaminated by normative masculinity – that is, heterosexuality (see Aghacy, 'Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter"', pp. 187–8). Khalil's misogyny thus reads as *symptomatic*. There are moments when Khalil does seem to evince desire for women, but this tends to entail a triangulation: he desires (to be) the woman his male beloved desires (see, for example, pp. 68–9).
58. Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny', p. 171.
59. See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.
60. I follow Hadeed's distinction between 'homosexuality' as 'a compelling sexual attraction' and 'homoeroticism' as more diffuse and encompassing of opposite-sex desire (Khalil Hadeed, 'Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure in Modern Arabic Fiction', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45 (2013), pp. 271–291; p. 273).
61. Fayad, by contrast, argues that the narrator 'excribes' Khalil or makes him, as a conventional male, disappear (Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny', p. 178).
62. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: Gender and the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 147.
63. The dead have a tellingly liminal status for Khalil: he sees posters of martyrs as 'souls hanging in the limbo of the street' (p. 42) and thinks that a corpse 'bears only a passing resemblance to its living owner, just enough to leave a crack through which doubt can creep in and out . . .' (p. 56).
64. Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins: Elegaic Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 14–15. See also Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasib* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 26–7.
65. See Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins*, pp. 1–34.
66. Judith Butler, 'Gender', in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), cited in Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 171.
67. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 22.
68. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, p. 40. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
69. Constructionism emphasises socially determined, so somewhat malleable *orientation*, whereas essentialism rests on physically determined, so fixed *identity*: see Hadeed, 'Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure', p. 276. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
70. Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 169.
71. A related term is *takhannuth*, effeminacy. Hadeed suggests that the symbolic function of the *mukhannath* – the dictionary definition for which encompasses bisexual, effeminate, powerless, impotent and weak – is to police the borders of acceptable masculinity (see Hadeed, 'Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure', pp. 276–7). This resonates with Judith Butler's theorisation of a necessary outside that enables normative bodies to emerge as bodies that matter (see Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 16). All dictionary definitions derive

- from J. M. Cowan (ed.), *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, 1994).
72. Aghacy claims that Barakat has described Khalil as 'sexually deviant', but does not provide the Arabic expression (Aghacy, 'Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter"', p. 188). Sofian Merabet relates a traumatic incident in which a doctor invokes 'the pejorative term, *lūfī* (son of Lot), generally used to describe gay men in Lebanon' instead of 'the neologism *mīthlī*, as in *mīthlīyya* (sameness, i.e., homosexuality), a word the doctor had certainly come across before'. The same doctor then calls his patient 'a *shādh* (pervert in Arabic)' (Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), pp. 38–9).
  73. 'Queer' can be translated either as *gharīb*, which means strange, obscure, difficult to understand, or as foreign. Same-sex desire, in medical discourse that is starting to be reclaimed – as Merabet notes (see above) – evokes similarity or sameness, also evident in the English 'homosexuality'. In English, however, queer deliberately exceeds this logic. Apparently 'kuweer' is gaining acceptance in cosmopolitan Arabic-speaking circles.
  74. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 23.
  75. Faqir, 'Introduction', *The Stone of Laughter*, p. viii.
  76. Walter Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task', trans. Steven Rendall, in Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, pp. 75–83; p. 77.
  77. Rosen, 'Walter Benjamin's Politics of the Pure Word', p. 55.
  78. Walter Benjamin argues that transmission of the message (what is symbolised) at the expense of the poetic (symbolising) is the mark of a 'bad' translation. For him, the afterlife of translation is not interesting in terms of what it reveals about the subjectivity of later readers but, rather, because of what it tells us about untranslatability (see Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task', pp. 75, 78, 81, 82).
  79. Butler, 'Gender', cited in Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 167. Rosen argues that Benjamin disavows 'the irredeemable loss of authority at the *very heart* of language' and mistakenly re-erects the translator in confrontation with an original that she or he attempts to redeem (Rosen, 'Walter Benjamin's Politics of the Pure Word', p. 16; my emphasis). Language is always already secured by opening itself hospitably to difference, so is a site of de- and restructuration *before* it enters an inter-linguistic domain (see *ibid.* p. 18).
  80. Rosen, 'Walter Benjamin's Politics of the Pure Word', p. 15. Page references for citations from this text will henceforth be provided in the main text.
  81. On Khalil as *un sujet clive*, see also Fayad, 'Strategic Androgyny', p. 167.
  82. Khalil's resistance to procreative masculinity contrasts interestingly with Benjamin's suggestion that an original text's meaning functions like a 'seed' that 'intimate[s] realization' (Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task', p. 77).