

Language and Loss, Or How to Bark like a Dog and Other Lessons from al-Jahiz

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At the new Detroit airport they were nearly sixty people; most of them had come from the nearby suburb of Dearborn and others from more distant places. And those whom I didn't call 'cousin,' I called 'neighbor,' but in most cases, it was 'brother.' It seemed that the need to make the symbolic relation closer was indirectly proportional to the distance of our blood relations.

Ahmed Baydoun, *Bint jibayl, mishighan* (p. 7).

Ahmed Baydoun thus opens his travelogue/memoir *Bint jibayl, mishighan* by describing the airport welcome he receives on his first visit to the United States.¹ The large gathering reveals the strength of the personal ties that connect Baydoun, a Lebanese professor of history from Bint Jibayl in southern Lebanon, to his many relatives and friends who have collected to meet him in Michigan. After hugging, kissing, and shaking hands with them all, he proceeds with his sister and her husband into the parking garage to 'a black car, of the greatest luxury' where he 'witnesses the first crushing battle between the car and its driver' (p. 8). The car that they have driven to the airport for the occasion is keyless—the kind that opens only when a series of numbers is punched into the keypad above the door handle. Try as they might, the sister and her husband cannot get the car to open to the secret code. Seeing their predicament, a cousin offers to take them home. This unfortunate man, however, cannot remember where he has parked his car. Baydoun wryly comments, 'I said to myself, "Abu 'Ali, here we are in the land of strangers. It is not befitting that a rebellious car and another one that has disappeared get the best of your brother-in-law and your cousin. It must be you and your brother-in-law against the rebel, and you and your cousin against the fugitive"' (p. 9). As a gentle rain falls outside, Baydoun and his family find themselves standing in the parking garage of the Detroit airport held hostage by a car with which they cannot communicate and by another they cannot locate. The irony of such difficulties with cars occurring in

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¹ Ahmed Baydoun, *Bint jibayl, mishighan* [Bint Jibayl, Michigan] (Beirut: n.p., 1989).

the motor city marks the beginning of Baydoun's journey in America and ominously foreshadows the larger issues of his story: the loss of language and sense of place that Baydoun encounters among his relatives and compatriots in Michigan.

Recounting the story of this journey, Baydoun's book typifies the best of the Arabic tradition of travel [*rahala* or *rihla*] literature. Medieval Arab adventurers such as Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta² and more recent travelers in the twentieth century such as Muhammad Thabit, Taha Hussein, and Sayyid Qutub³ described the new things their journeys revealed to them and how they related to their known experience. Baydoun follows in the pedantic vein of these works, adding to their didactic methods of commentary his own eye for social mores and characteristics similar to another inveterate Arab traveler and writer, Ibn Khaldun.⁴ Unlike some of his more serious-minded fellow travel authors, Baydoun infuses his text with humor and biting critiques, a result of his incredulous reaction to this Lebanese community in Michigan. Such satire makes his work reminiscent of the semi-fictional nineteenth century text, *Al-saq 'ala al-saq fi ma huwa al-firiyaq* [Thigh over thigh on the question of who am I] by Ahmed Faris al-Shidyaq, whose main character amusingly comments on life in the countries he visits.⁵

Baydoun's rhetorical playfulness and anecdotal narrative style also recalls the writings of an older literary ancestor, Abu 'Uthman 'Amr ibn Bahr al-Kinani al-Fuqaimi al-Basri, otherwise known as al-Jahiz, the prolific non-fiction writer of the eighth century. In the Detroit airport's parking garage, Baydoun proposes an oft-quoted Arab solution to the incommunicado and lost cars, conjuring up the fraternal Arab allegiance embodied in the saying, 'me and my brother against

² Ibn Jubayr (1145–1217), born in Valencia, Spain, wrote of his journeys to Arabia, the Mediterranean, Egypt and Iraq, and his text served as the model for other accounts; the most recent English translation is R. J. C. Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (1952). Ibn Battuta (1304–77) was born in Tangier, Morocco, and traveled through North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Arabia, Yemen, East Africa, and Asia Minor, among other places. His accounts of his voyages have been edited and published in Arabic as *Rihlat Ibn Battuta* (Dar Sadir-Dar Beirut, 1960). An English translation by H. A. R. Gibb of Ibn Battuta's travelogue appears as *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (Cambridge, 1958–62).

³ Muhammad Thabit was an Egyptian school teacher who logged a total of 200,000 kilometers on his summer holidays traveling to Iceland, Japan, South Africa, Afghanistan, the Americas, Australia, and Hawaii and places in between. He published at least eight books on his travels; see Jacob Landau, 'Muhammad Thabit, A Modern Arab Traveller,' in *The Journal of Arabic Literature*, 1 (1970): 70–74. Taha Hussein (1889–1973) was also an Egyptian; he earned his Ph.D. in France in the early twentieth century, and the third volume of his autobiography deals with his experiences in that country; it has been translated as *A Passage to France: The Third Volume of the Autobiography of Taha Husain* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976). Sayyid Qutub (1903–66) wrote about his visit to the United States during the 1950s in *Amrika min al-dakhil bi minzar Sayyid Qutb* [America from the inside through the eyes of Sayyid Qutub] (al-Mansura: Dar al-Wafa', 1986). A translation of a section of his work appears in *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature: An Anthology*, Kamal Abdel-Malek, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁴ Ibn Khaldun (b. 1332 in Tunis, d. 1406 in Cairo) wrote, among other things, *al-Muqaddima*, the prolegomena to his history of the dynasties of the Maghrib in the fourteenth century, and it remains an often referenced commentary on social organization, culture, and political development.

⁵ In English, literally 'Leg over leg about who is Firiyaq' and more poetically translated as 'Thigh over thigh on the question of who am I' in *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, Dwight Reynolds, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

my cousin, me, my brother and my cousin against the enemy.’ But he fails to employ a more useful Arab trick offered by that venerable satirist al-Jahiz, who could have explained what a bedouin does when lost. Not only could al-Jahiz help Baydoun out of his predicament in the parking garage, but al-Jahiz also provides a worthy companion for Baydoun’s whole trip in America.

Life in Exile: Losing Language and Articulating Loss

In today’s world of global migration and immigration, exile defines the lives of many humans. The people of Bint Jibayl came to the United States to escape the Lebanese civil war, the harsh conditions of the Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982, and the even harsher policies under the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon that followed. Not all exiles are the product of political, ethnic, or religious violence, however; some states of exile stem from a temporary absence from home for study or work or a self-imposed displacement springing from economic or personal reasons. Whatever the reasons or causes, the state of exile forces a person into a new state of being, one that frequently requires learning a new language and always necessitates dealing with the memories of life in the old home. ‘Most people,’ writes Edward Said, ‘are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal.’⁶

The duality engendered by exile shows that one never can abandon fully one’s life and live another; the relics of past lives will remain always, mixing with the present and clouding the future. The heartbeats of the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ pounding in the exile’s ears can complicate the journeys back and forth along treacherous paths lined with family obligations, potential violence, personal goals and desires, governmental bureaucracy, and economic realities. In such murky terrain, knowing which path to follow and what to say, when to say it, and in what language, make the life of an exile a constant struggle for orientation. Exiles often find themselves powerless in their new society and culture because their intricate web of knowledge, relationships, and skills are mostly relevant to their lives in their old home.

Immigrants and exiles find themselves neither totally at home in the new culture and place nor able to return comfortably to their old lives, which no longer are as they remember or lived them. Hassan Khader, a Palestinian living in exile in Tunis and who returned to Palestine following the Oslo Agreement in 1993, wrote upon his return:

Eternity lasted only a moment. I did not find the homeland in the homeland, because I had changed and the homeland had changed. Exile requires an idealized homeland, one that becomes unbearably perfect. There is no homeland without exile, and the longer we

⁶ Edward Said, ‘Reflections on Exile,’ in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 186.

are away from our homeland, the more memory plays its never-ending game of selection and deletion, purification and withdrawal. What existed is confused with what we imagined to exist while in exile, or what convenience seduces us into believing.⁷

The original home and culture and the new home and culture mix inside them, creating a confusing jumble of associations spanning the past and the present and the known and the unknown. For the exile, making sense of what existed then and what exists now makes establishing themselves, their values, and their languages particularly challenging.

Perhaps because exiles lose many things and gain others, they always seem to be in a perpetual conflict to know what is most important—the things they gave up or the things they gained. Baydoun writes,

In the airport, when I arrived, my ‘Americanized’ sister videotaped us. And in the airport, when I left, they videotaped me with each person (even with the guy who consistently beat me in chess throughout the summer of 1976), and in pairs and in groups of ten. And at the Islamic Center, the organizers delayed me from ascending the minbar so that they could set up the video camera. And after the lecture we were videotaped again. And at the wedding, they videotaped everything. And when we went to our old neighbors’ house one evening, we found them watching a wedding video of people who were no relation to them. Copies of these videos are sold and exchanged among the attendees. I thought perhaps they are watching this video because someone in the house was going to get married, and thus they were studying the complicated wedding customs here. We had Thanksgiving at the house of my ‘Americanized’ sister in Kalamazoo, also attended by someone living in Texas, and someone from California, and someone from another part of Michigan. We talked about the person who couldn’t come from Georgia, we ate a whole farm of turkeys, and we videotaped the event. It goes without saying that certain parties wanted me to watch these videos before I left—just part of the careful attention paid to every part of my visit (p. 15).

The act by these immigrants/exiles of physically recording significant moments in their lives strikes Baydoun as a marker that characterizes the exile. In doing so, exiles are trying to create a tangible record of their lives, in the face of unreliable memories and the possibility of loss:

The lives of those in exile need to celebrate something that becomes for them a hallowed memory. They memorialize their encounters and gather together the dispersion of their days in moments of unnatural character, or ones that tend toward such. Photographic records affirm the exceptional character of these moments and turn them into ceremonial events. It is as if through pictures they can connect their lives here with their previous lives in the old home. Or as if their memories are a string of pictures that was one day suddenly purged of revered moments. So now they gather images in exile, carefully packing away their lives here into suitcases, which they will take with them some day ... that some day when they return home (p. 15).

Such photographs are what Salman Rushdie calls, ‘the shards of memory’ which, when trying to recall his childhood in Bombay, ‘acquired greater status, greater

⁷ Hasan Khader, ‘Hal kuntu huna?’ [‘Was I here?’], in *al-Karmal*, no. 51 (Spring 1997a): 118. See also a reference to an English translation of this article by Khader (1997b).

resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.⁸ Unlike Rushdie's search for his childhood through exploration of the precious fragments that remained, the Bint Jibaylis actively create the past they will recall by recording specific scenes from their present lives. Their past, as Baydoun sees it, is not an individual memory but a collective one, memorialized in weddings, parties, dinners, arrivals, and departures. The collective past provides the individual with a framework on which to hang his or her individual memories. But despite this charting of the past, individuals can get lost, separated from their folk and culture.

Language and Loss: The Mimic, the Exile, the Arab-American

What lessons do al-Jahiz and his lost bedouin have to offer Baydoun and his understanding of the lives of exiles? It all lies in the solution to the question of how a lost bedouin traveling in the desert at night would find his way. Simple, really—he would bark like a dog (*istanbah*). This imitation would save his life because any nearby dogs—who generally live around tribal tents and whose sense of hearing is keener than humans—would hear the imitation barks, and start to bark in reply, and thus the lost bedouin would find the way to human habitation.⁹ The preeminent North African scholar Abdelfattah Kilito explains this transforming process, elaborating on the Pandora's box of troubles that comes with barking like a dog. Kilito implicitly compares the situation of the lost traveler to that of the bilingual writer, as he himself is both an Arab and a Francophone author. In question are language and identity and 'how the act of speaking a different language threatens to strip the speaker of his or her self.'¹⁰

Barking like a dog, a seemingly simple way of finding home, is fraught with difficulties, as Kilito understands it. The imitation barks, while they might save the bedouin, are ultimately a failed enterprise. At length, the act of mimicry

⁸ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 12.

⁹ Abdelfattah Kilito, 'Dog Words,' in Anjelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xxii. Four versions of this essay appear in print. The first was in his book in French, *L'Auteur et ses doubles*, published in 1985. The second was an Arabic translation which also appeared in 1985 as the final chapter in his *Al-kitaba wa al-tanassukh*. The third version entitled 'Dog Words' appeared in English in 1994, also translated from the French, as the introduction to a volume entitled *Displacements*, edited by A. Bammer, and had been presented as a conference paper. Slight differences between them in both language and content exist, and the end to each is unique. The fourth version appears in the excellent translation into English of the French text by Michael Cooperson, which was published as *The Author and His Doubles: Essays on Classical Arabic Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001) and which shares the same ending as the Arabic translation. Given this plethora of possibilities, I have chosen from the version that suits the context here (as noted), using my own translations of the Arabic but with reference to the two English versions [1994 and 2001].

¹⁰ Ziad Elmarsafy, Translator's Introduction to the essay 'Dog Words,' in *Displacements*, A. Bammer, ed., p. xxi.

reveals what the person is not, the person's *inauthenticity*. How does mimicry serve exiles in their new place and culture? Kilito writes,

Mimicry is not free of difference: the mimic wants to assimilate, to be 'like them', and yet in the end, he only marks his separation because by definition he repeats what he is not—and 'like (or almost)' is not an identity. Mimicry is based on an internal presence and an external appearance. Whatever the completeness of the mimicry, it can never erase the difference.¹¹

If mimicry reveals our inauthenticity, then the lack of mimicry reveals the exile or the stranger for just that—their strangeness. By refusing to imitate, the stranger remains a total outsider. 'The discourse of mimicry,' according to Homi Bhabha, 'is constructed around an ambivalence.'¹² For Baydoun on his journey to America, this ambivalence exists not only in what people do and say, but also in how they present themselves. While greeting the group that came to receive him at the Detroit airport,

... Some of the people asked me if I knew them, and to some I answered yes and to others no. I wasn't sure to whom I said what in some instances. A few others, I never had seen before in my life, because they were born here or were in Beirut when I was in Bint Jibayl. And a couple more I had seen just a month before in Beirut but now their appearance had changed somewhat since that time—it was as if they had acquired the characteristics of a recent exile (p. 8).

The problem of mimicry lies not only in attempting to blend into the new society. The problem of belonging reappears even upon returning to one's 'origins' after learning how to blend into the new place. At the airport, Baydoun faced the pack of relatives who stood divided into two groups, men on one side, women on the other. 'We still are just like we were,' he comments (p. 7). And as Baydoun greets each person, his sister tries to sing one of the old welcome songs, but she forgets most of the words. 'Well,' he remarks caustically, 'I guess we aren't *exactly* like we were' (p. 7). Baydoun's description of his trip reveals how this community of Bint Jibaylis living in Michigan is made up of unpredictable fragments of the home left behind, recombined in a new context.

In receiving him, the residents of Bint Jibayl, Michigan, follow customs they knew from the homeland, and also what they regard as 'tradition'—the divisions between men and women and the welcome song. However, when they aren't able to remember the 'tradition' completely, the loss becomes obvious to all. At the airport, no one notices that the group is divided by gender; however, everyone notices his sister's failure to remember the words to the song. His sister's forgetting occurs in a place far from Bint Jibayl, Lebanon, in a society that causes her to forget the old customs of 'home.' No one could imagine the sister forgetting the words to the song if she were in Lebanon, because she

¹¹ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-kitaba wa al-tanasukh* [Writing and reincarnation] (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-thaqafi al-a'rabi, 1985), p. 122.

¹² Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man,' in Fred Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), p. 153.

would still be in her land and the culture of her origin. And even if she did forget, it might go unnoticed. But here in Dearborn, her forgetting is part of a general feeling of removal, of loss. ‘Because exile,’ comments Edward Said, ‘unlike nationalism is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past.’¹³ The sister’s inability to remember the song in America makes everyone recognize from what they have been cut off. What have become ‘traditions of life’ for her now, once simply was ‘life’ as she lived it in Lebanon. The reality is that in America the sister has lost this knowledge—something that becomes obvious only when she (or anyone else for the case of argument) must recall this bit of the past and successfully bring it into the present. Ways of life become ‘traditions’ when their active employment must become conscious. Without rehearsal, ways of life fade from memory, resulting in, as Kilito contends, when ‘opening one’s mouth amounts to self-betrayal, the revelation of one’s difference and one’s lack.’¹⁴

The loss of tradition may be only a symptom of a larger loss faced by an exile. The lost bedouin faces some of the same obstacles. ‘As he hears the dogs bark, the wanderer says to himself, “I will either find strangers or my own people. Dogs are monolingual; the ones that I know bark in the same way as those that I don’t know.”’¹⁵ In Kilito’s scenario, the bedouin follows the barked replies and they take him toward a tent, a campfire, and safety. But what if he finds another tribe, a different people who perhaps speak another language?¹⁶

Baydoun’s visit to Bint Jibayl, Michigan, evokes the same puzzlement as the lost bedouin expecting to find his own but finding others instead. In Dearborn, Baydoun goes to the Arab Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), which provides translation services, helps people with government paperwork, distributes food to those in need, provides health care services, and has after-school programs for kids. Amidst all of this, Baydoun sees an exhibition of traditional Arab handicrafts: bedouin and peasant clothing and coffee making equipment. ‘I thought the exhibit a little lacking. But H.J. explained to me that the center is working gradually to increase exhibit pieces’ (p. 36). Another wall displayed pictures of some of the founders of the Arab community in Detroit, and the pictures and life stories of some famous Arab-Americans. These photos and stories signify more to Baydoun than the coffee pot and the dresses.

What I was looking at was the creation of an American memory for the community. Here, you cannot turn only to ‘the homeland’ to find their collective memory. The pictures and the stories of Arab Americans are built around a people who live here, and some of whom died here, and this is what deserves mention about their lives and what deserves to be harmonized with the character of the community. The homeland no longer

¹³ Said, ‘Reflections on Exile,’ p. 177.

¹⁴ Kilito, 1994, p. xxix.

¹⁵ Kilito, 1994, p. xxv; 1985, p. 118; and 2001, p. 105.

¹⁶ Kilito, 1985 [Arabic], p. 118, ‘the lost traveler is impelled to believe that he has found his goal of persistent search: the dogs have barked and at a bend he sees the glowing fires ...’ Or in Kilito, 1994 [English], p. xxv, ‘The wanderer quickens his step [...] under the mistaken impression that he has found what he was looking for: the dogs have barked, and just around the corner campfires have added to the evidence.’

absorbs everything. At the same time, however, the homeland remains a part of all this, evidenced by, for example, the exhibit of clothing and coffee-making items—except that here they exist out of time and place and are frozen in ‘folklore.’ It is as if the exhibit, with its relative meagerness, is only an indicator of a distant identity; as for real life, it is what appears in the pictures and stories (p. 36).

Baydoun does not find Lebanese people when he goes to visit ‘Bint Jibayl,’ Michigan. Instead, he finds Lebanese-Americans who are in the process of creating their own history and customs, and ultimately their own identity.

The process of creating an identity carries with it the painful accretions of ‘here’ and the divestiture of ‘there.’ The symbolic meaning invested in the fragmented ‘shards of memory,’ as Rushdie calls them, makes life as a hyphenated Arab-American fraught with multiple languages and unknown losses. Sam Hamod’s poem about his father illustrates such an existence:

These men died with the wrong names,
Na’aim Jazeeny, from the beautiful valley
of Jezzine, died as Nephew Sam,
Sine Hussin died without relatives and
because they cut away his last name
at Ellis Island, there was no way to trace
him back even to Lebanon, and Im’a Brahim
had no other name than mother of Brahim,
even my own father lost his, went from
Hussein Hamode Subh’ to Sam Hamod.
There is something lost in the blood,
something lost down to the bone
in these small changes. A man in a
dark blue suit at Ellis Island says, with
tiredness and authority, ‘You only need two
names in America’ and suddenly—as cleanly
as the air, you’ve lost
your name. At first, it’s hardly
even noticeable—and it’s easier, you move
about as an American—but looking back
the loss of your name
cuts away some other part,
something unspeakable is lost.

[...]

My father, a man I came to know
as so secretive, yet so generous, a man alone; now I know
this was part of that other reality, where his name, that
language, Hussein, Sine Hussin, Im’a Brahim, *Asalamu Aleikum*,
all of these sounds were part of his name, this was that other
edge of Lebanon he carried with him, that home, that same
good food of the rich smells, it had to be in these moments, these things
were not lost, but were alive and living in this room,
in this house, in these people, in this moment.¹⁷

¹⁷ H. S. (Sam) Hamod, ‘Dying with the Wrong Name: Three parts of an unfinished poem,’ in Gregory Orfelea and Sharif Elmusa, eds., *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (New York: Interlink Press, 1999), pp. 169–72.

Can one really live one's life in counterpoint, maintaining two homes or two homelands, not designating one as the present and the other as a memory? Al-Jahiz sheds some light on this predicament of translating the self between two places and two languages in his views on past civilizations. According to al-Jahiz, the Persians' history is evidenced in their buildings while the Arab past is contained in poetry. While buildings can be demolished, poetry cannot. Poetry, however, 'has the drawback of being untranslatable.'¹⁸ Which is perhaps why al-Jahiz, living in 'Abbasid Iraq amidst that fertile mix of Persian and Arab worlds, excelled in neither poetry nor architecture, but became a virtuoso in the relatively uncelebrated genre of Arabic prose writing. He did not dally in poetry, the untranslatable, because 'the translator needs to possess as much literary ability as he does knowledge; he must be familiar with the original language and the language of translation, and have a perfect command of them both. *But when we find someone able to speak two languages we can be sure that he corrupts them, for they are bound to influence each other, borrow from each other and distort each other. Besides, how is it possible to have the same mastery of two languages as of one?*'¹⁹ The conflict of bilingualism, and thus the mere act of talking, plague the migrant, immigrant, exile, dual heritage hyphenated human. The bedouin barks and corrupts his own tongue, while tricking the dogs that would be confused to know that it was human barks to which they responded. The Bint Jibaylis learn English, forever after peppering their Arabic with 'please' and 'thank you' in addition to *barrik al-siyara* ['park the car'].²⁰ Languages constantly mix, and for the bilingual speaker to keep them apart, 'every time he opens his mouth, he must exert a significant effort, an effort that sets him apart from others who speak comfortably, like people playing themselves, who speak as they breathe, and whose breathing is calm and regular.'²¹ Kilito further attests that

when two languages meet, one of them is necessarily linked to animality. ... There is no way that we can speak of conflict in this case: for a conflict to arise the two opponents must be on equal, or at least comparable, footing. Bilingualism does not evoke the image of two adversaries approaching each other armed with nets and tridents; rather it suggests that one of the combatants already is sprawled on the ground awaiting the death blow.²²

Hiding the secret language, as Sam Hamod's father did, and concealing the secret self, provides one solution to the problem of bilingualism and exile. Another Arab-American poet offers a similar reaction.

¹⁸ *The Life and Works of Al-Jahiz*, translated and edited by Charles Pellat (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

²⁰ While bedouin actually *barrik* a camel (meaning to get it to crouch for loading, unloading, mounting or dismounting), a number of Dearbornites have suggested that the noble desert has nothing to do with their use of the word. Since Arabic has no letter 'p,' it is not uncommon for new learners of English who are native-Arabic speakers to use 'b' in the place of 'p.'

²¹ Kilito, 1994, p. xxvii; 1985, p. 121; and 2001, p. 108.

²² Kilito, 1994, p. xxvii; 1985, p.121; and 2001, p. 108.

Last Sunday was a fine day
for me to be a good *Americani*.
I painted the kitchen table
and talked to my next door neighbor
while he washed his car.
[...]
Before it got dark
I hopped in the car
and bought sliced salami,
toilet paper
and a six pack of beer at 7-Eleven.
[...]
I had my life
figured out cold for me.
Only from time to time
I wake up in the middle of the night,
or maybe somewhere when the night
is just fading into day,
when the moment
is neither here nor there,
which is a safe time to think
about Palestine and olive trees,
and I pity myself
and the place I came from.²³

Perhaps it is poetry—the venue which al-Jahiz maintains is the Arab preserve of the past—where Baydoun’s Arab compatriots living in exile can best express their ties to their own past, history, and origin. This medium may be safe for the immigrant, because as one Arab American poet says, ‘... poetry does not have a place in American society ...’²⁴ And while poetry is the preserve of the Arabs, these Arab-American poets write in English, which necessarily restricts their audience. Poetry of this immigrant community, then, becomes a language of its own, because, as al-Jahiz maintains, it cannot be translated. This dual heritage poetry, which belongs neither to Arabs nor to Americans, can cradle the shards of memory in lines of rhyme and words of fear, in an exile’s understanding of language and loss.

This battle of languages ultimately proves to be the denouement of Baydoun’s journey to Bint Jibayl, Michigan, and climaxes when he unwittingly sets English and Arabic at each other in the arena of a lecture he gives at the Islamic Center in Dearborn. He delivers the lecture in Arabic to an audience of Arabs and Arab Americans to whom Arabic is the mother-tongue, the language of childhood and the old home, but who bring with them their years and lives of English, the official and functional language of the United States. The Dearborn Bint Jibaylis have more or less kept the disputatious languages apart, leashing Arabic firmly

²³ Fawaz Turki, ‘Being a Good *Americani*,’ in Orfelea and Elmusa, *Grape Leaves*, pp. 198–99.

²⁴ Etel Adnan in Orfelea and Elmusa, *Grape Leaves*, p. 86.

to family, food, and religion, and allowing English to roam the fields of work and study. Baydoun makes the understandable mistake of releasing Arabic into the learned realm with his lecture on the current situation in Lebanon.

Baydoun's Arabic lecture proves a gallant combatant, but he is unaware that he has lost before he ever started. English dominates Bint Jibayl, Michigan, as the language of power and the language of success. Arabic has suffered in the United States as the weaker of the two and has paid a dear price—the desire of the people to be present at his lecture, does not necessarily mean that they understand Arabic. So when Baydoun clothes Arabic in the garb of intellectual knowledge and professorial status, he loses his audience.

After the lecture, the host opened the floor for discussion, and called up to the minbar a bewhiskered young man in his late twenties who had raised his hand immediately. [...] After beginning with '*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*' [In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful], he thanked God and praised him [...] and ordered us to pray for the Prophet of God, and we obeyed him. I imagined that he would say splendid things after that because prayers for the Prophet ring out in our houses in all that is beautiful, as the saying goes, 'That's as beautiful as the prayers for the Prophet.' Except that the young man had hardly finished this preamble when he started to stammer and make grammar mistakes and begin sentences that he never ended. I understood from him, with difficulty, three things. First, that he did not agree with my assessment of the Lebanese problem; second, that he was asking me what my assessment was exactly; and third, that all homeowners should clean the area in front of their homes. I realized that his last comment was somehow in reference to a point I had made in the conclusion of my lecture ... (pp. 41–42)

While Baydoun is sufficiently flustered by this situation, his audience gives him no room to maneuver.

I did not have more than a few seconds to decide whether I would answer him myself or let the people in the audience who had raised their hands [while the young man was talking] answer him. These few seconds did not even pass before one person, and then three more from the front row came up to shake hands and congratulate me and then gave their apologies for leaving. So I had to get up and shake hands with them. And in these moments, more than half of the audience came up to me one by one, amidst the chaos of moving chairs, and following the example of the first bunch, as if they were voting with their feet for the end of the discussion. And after I was done shaking hands with that rather large group—an unprecedented act in any lecture format—the young man was still standing next to the minbar and looking at me and at those who remained in the hall, most of whom were standing now, looking at us, while others were walking out to drink coffee. ...

It seemed that I should understand that I had just done the equivalent of knocking the audience over and flattening them under a steamroller. But I took it to mean something else. That the audience found in my lecture—to put it simply—a sublime celebration of language. They listened to the language of their roots neither haltingly delivered nor spoken ungrammatically, and they were enraptured, even though they did not understand everything. However, it seemed that they all understood from the lecture, without a doubt, was the desire for a comprehensive Lebanese peace, which was also their own

most basic desire [...] My friend Abu ‘Ali advised me that they saw me as bringing an extraordinary purity to their language of origin. It occurred to me that the situation was something similar to that of a Catholic Mass. And I thought then that the Vatican was wrong when they made its Christian followers change the language of the mass from Latin—or most of it anyway—into modern spoken languages. ...

When Abu ‘Ali offered his interpretation, I felt clearer about what had happened. And I admired the tolerance of the audience for not showing their anger with me over their difficulty in understanding the subject. Perhaps they understood the most important value I expressed in the lecture and more—that we should not jump to blame the other persons just because we don’t understand them (pp. 42–44).

The exile’s conundrum—the constant likelihood of misunderstanding stemming from language, coupled with the sense of loss toward the homeland—most clearly presents itself to Baydoun at his lecture. The audience attends the lecture out of interest in and concern for the homeland and out of a sense of community, but they are living in the United States, not in Bint Jibayl. Baydoun’s journey charts his denial of this fact, assuming instead that he is dealing with the same Lebanese he left behind in Beirut when he boarded the plane for Detroit. Although he crossed an ocean in geographical time and space, he never bridged the vast distance that separates them in social, psychological, or linguistic terms, and he confronts a construction of Lebanese-ness he has never seen before. It is only when someone from the community makes the gap between them evident that he understands his power over the immigrant community as a representative of both the homeland and language that they have left.

The experiences of Detroit’s Lebanese immigrants represent Kilito’s ultimate dilemma for his lost bedouin. Living in America or wandering lost in the desert both require transformations of the self. Suppose the lost bedouin has grown accustomed to barking, and as Kilito proposes, ‘decides to stop the game, but is unpleasantly surprised to find that he cannot utter the words that he could once pronounce ... he cannot speak; the sounds that leave his mouth are barks, irrevocably.’²⁵ No longer can he speak his original language nor is he a dog. Perhaps our lost bedouin secretly admired Ibn Marzuban who wrote *Fadl al-kilab ‘ala kathir miman labisa al-thiyab* [The superiority of dogs over many who wear clothes].²⁶ But transformations are events against which many have been cautioned, not least of all Jalal al-Din Rumi who in his immense *Mathnavi* tells a story in which ‘... the crow sees a partridge walk by and is amazed at the measured elegance of the partridge’s gait. After long and painstaking practice the crow forgets how to walk like a crow but never learns how to walk like a

²⁵ Kilito, 1994, p. xxiii; 1985, p. 116; and 2001, p. 102.

²⁶ *The Book of the Superiority of Dogs Over Many of Those Who Wear Clothes: Ten Stories and Poems on the Dog*, translated by G. Rex Smith and M. A. Abdel Haleem (Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1977). Ibn Marzuban may have written this book in reply to al-Jahiz’s argument in *Kitab al-hayawan* [Book of Animals] that man’s ability to reason makes him superior to animals; see Robert Irwin, ed., *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1999), pp. 203–06.

partridge.²⁷ Is it possible that Bint Jibayl exiles have become neither Lebanese, nor American? In truth, our medieval companions aside, comparisons to the animal kingdom limit the creative powers of the human intellect. Because it is not, as Baydoun discovered, that the exiles are neither Lebanese nor American. It is that they are both. Lawrence Joseph, a poet and lawyer born to a Lebanese family in Detroit, knows what it means to be both Arab and American.

In the house in Detroit
 in a room of shadow
 when grandma reads her Arabic newspaper
 it is difficult for me to follow her
 word by word from right to left
 [...]
 Lebanon is everywhere
 in the house: in the kitchen
 of steaming pots, leg of lamb
 in the oven, plates of kousa,
 hushwee rolled in cabbage,
 dishes of olives, tomatoes, onions,
 roasted chicken and sweets;
 at the card table in the sunroom
 where grandpa teaches me
 to wish the dice across the backgammon board
 to the number I want;
 [...]
 Outside the house my practice
 is not to respond to remarks
 about my nose or the color of my skin.
 ‘Sand nigger,’ I’m called,
 and the name fits: I am
 the light-skinned nigger
 with black eyes and the look
 difficult to figure—a look
 of indifference, a look to kill—
 a Levantine nigger
 in the city on the strait
 between the great lakes Erie and St. Clair
 which has a reputation
 for violence, an enthusiastically
 bad-tempered sand nigger
 who waves his hands, nice enough
 to pass, Lebanese enough
 to be against his brother,
 with his brother against his cousin,
 with cousin and brother
 against the stranger.²⁸

²⁷ Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 299.

²⁸ Lawrence Joseph, ‘Sand Nigger,’ in Orfelea and Elmusa, *Grape Leaves*, pp. 243–45.

Conclusion: Becoming Hoarse

Being both Arab and American, like the lost and barking bedouin, creates an ambivalence through imitation and through pretensions to both identities, always making us question the authentic. Ambivalence is a transforming experience both for the barker and the one who hears the barks. From now on, you too, like me, will turn and ask when you are out in the desert at night, was that a barking dog or a lost bedouin that I just heard? Kilito concludes his essay knowing that the night will not last forever:

With the rays of the dawn, all the dogs in the world become silent. Our lost traveler finds a spring, and when he bends to drink, he sees his reflection in the surface of the cold water. But what face does he see? Is it a dog? No. That would be too easy. Because then we would have to describe the type of dog that was reflected, and that is impossible. So it is most befitting that we say that our *mustanbih* [human dog-barker] sees his own face, the one he is used to seeing. He has regained himself and sighs deeply—his fears of the night did not occur and the depth of the darkness did not touch him.

But he is wrong, and I know it. And he will not fail to realize it also, because the water will bubble out of the spring creating small waves which gently rock his picture until suddenly it dissipates and is taken far away by the stream, always far away. The traveler looks fearfully into the water under his feet, and does not find himself. The reflection has been erased and is gone.²⁹

Are the immigrant and exile destined never truly to see themselves, but instead to be reassured temporarily by appearances, only to watch their reflection carried somewhere else? Or is it that the lost traveler never can see a true reflection? Is it that something is always absent, because the medium is inadequate to express both barks and words? Perhaps it is better to think that the person may not find his face as he has known it, but he at least will find a reflection of some part of his experience.

After two weeks in the United States, Baydoun gets on the plane in Detroit to return to Lebanon accompanied by another gathering of relatives and friends.

I remembered Bint Jibayl Lebanon, not Michigan. And it occurred to me that it was possible, if Bint Jibayl were not under occupation, for us all to go there together from this airport ... across the Atlantic. Among us here now there are strong men, any one of whom is able to carry the banner as well as I was as a child in our homeland. This is what the song says, anyway. Most of them are prepared to return, as temporary as it may be, in overestimation of what draws them back to their origin. But they cannot succeed in achieving the sense of order that their kind crave. Because when the old system of meaning is weakened, it is impossible to regain this same sense of order. Exiles, therefore, carry themselves from place to place, struggling to recover that sense of order or to find some new way to preserve it. All of this is, of course, unbelievably difficult. And that Atlantic that we must cross is a deep ocean in which many things can be lost.

I also remembered my fright when I first read—not long ago—that many villages had

²⁹ Kilito, 1985, p. 123. The conclusion to the English version of this essay [1994] that was delivered at the conference is completely different, but the 2001 translation of the essay is the same as the 1985 Arabic version.

been erased completely from the map of Lebanon during the First World War because of famine and immigration. It wasn't that the inhabitants of the villages had gone from a thousand down to one hundred—rather, the village disappeared entirely. During this current war and occupation, villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of cities have been wiped out. But the hope remains that their inhabitants will resurrect them out of their destruction, and this lessens the sharpness of my fear. For the villages that were wiped out by famine and immigration more than three-quarters of a century ago, their people no longer identify themselves or are identifiable as 'their' people. This is the source of my fear. I was reminded of this fear because Bint Jibayl, Lebanon is quickly disappearing today, and growing larger, also quickly, is Bint Jibayl, Michigan (pp. 58–59).

Since Baydoun wrote *Bint jibayl, mishighan*, the occupation has ended, and Israel has withdrawn from south Lebanon under the cover of darkness in the matter of a few days. Perhaps then, becoming an *Americani* and barking like a dog are a solution to the dilemma of the trials of one long night. With the dawn, both Bint Jibayls, Lebanon and Michigan, will see themselves reflected in the water and will seek to maintain a connection to each other, watching their pictures carried from their small springs back and forth safely across the deep waters of the Atlantic.

Baydoun's book, like al-Jahiz's finest writing, presents the reader with the delightful quandary of trying to understand where the author stands on the subject he is addressing. It is possible, certainly, to read Baydoun's work as a critical treatise on this group of Lebanese immigrants living in Dearborn, Michigan (basically, his family and friends). Such an interpretation allows him the freedom to ridicule their adaptations and deride their new values. But Baydoun's satirical pen, like the master's own, loops back onto itself, and becomes critical of the critical eye. His own weakness is revealed, for example, when the Michigan Bint Jibaylis ask him if he carries a picture of his wife and daughter with him. His astonishment at the idea contains a questioning of both their values and his own—that something that is so important to them never has occurred to him to do. *Bint jibayl, mishighan* should be read, then, to take pleasure in the novelty of the subject and Baydoun's splendid narrative style, and to revel in the humor, contradictions, and compassion inherent in this community's version of Lebanese-ness in America. Baydoun's opening dedication overrides everything else and sets the tone for the reader: 'This book is a celebration in honor of Bint Jibayl, Michigan.'

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