

Qalqalah: The Subject of Language

Sarah Rifky

Qalqalah: The Subject of Language is a short story of speculative fiction, imagined by Egyptian writer Sarah Rifky in 2015 as a response to an invitation by Bétonsalon - Center for Art and Research and KADIST Paris to contribute to what would become a bilingual online reader (the ancestor of Qalqalah قلقلة). The story's heroine, Qalqalah, lives in 2048. A linguist — and former artist — she inhabits a world transformed by financial crises and the popular revolts of the 2010's. Territorial borders, economical resources, knowledge categories and the use of languages have been reconfigured around regional corporations such as UAW (United Arab World), where Qalqalah lives. In her old age, she gradually loses her memory and mulls over the possible ways of telling her / his - stories, as she apprehends the world through the prism of language and translation.

When we received this text in the autumn of 2015, the French political context was marked by the November Paris attacks, by the state of emergency and by what the mainstream media and politics dubbed a "migrant crisis". Qalqalah — a polyglot character, enchanted with the Arabic language — immediately became an ally in how we collectively navigated accross a political, judicial, media and cultural landscape overflowed by reactionary discourses and islamophobic stigmatization. She has not left us since then, remaining a powerful ally until today. Qalqalah nurtured the theoretical and political basis of this trilingual artistic research platform, and gave it its name. Her poetical and political musings about languages and their imaginative potential — telling the world differently so as to be able to transform it — not only accompanied our curatorial and editorial trajectory; it also generated a fertile ground and a toolbox out of which friendships, collaborations and unexpected forms of knowledge could emerge.

Qalqalah: The Subject of Language was initially written in English and translated into French at the time of its first release in *Qalqalah #1* (ed. Bétonsalon - Center for Art and Research and KADIST, Paris, 2015). For this new release, the text was translated into Arabic by Yazan Ashqar. A native-Arabic speaker, although she primarily writes in English, Sarah accompanied the translator throughout the adaptation of her text. Praising the translation's fluidity, she nevertheless reckoned that "the story doesn't sit comfortably within Arabic, certain terms don't work. Terms have a certain aura, linked to many mental connections and references that come from English for example and these are severed in translation." For her, these tensions do not undermine the quality of the translation itself (in Arabic, as well as in French), but rather relate to the quality of the being of the text in translation. "The essay has a certain force that resists me as the author, that resists the translator, and that resists you, as editors." Sarah added, a bit provocatively. Like Qalqalah herself, the text does escape our control and acts in ways we cannot predict upon its readers, even more so when transiting more or less faithfully into other

languages. To understand translation as a generative form of betrayal also invites us to read and think more carefully.

Inaugurating the new platform Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة by republishing this founding short story, as well as its sequel *Qalqalah: Thinking About History* (2016), seemed like an obvious choice. We did not foresee, of course, that this text would be released again at a new moment of unprecedented global crisis, only a few weeks after the world started shutting down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Sarah herself remarked, it became impossible to reread this story without thinking of the current moment, when the collapse of the economy has never been so easy to imagine. In “reimagine: all the people”, an opinion piece she wrote for the online magazine *mada masr* on March 27, 2020, only a few days before the launch of Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة, Sarah wrote: “To think about language at a time like this seems scholastic, but it really isn’t. To call a thing by its name, can help reframe the problem — and the imagination.” Qalqalah invites us to think about language. She speaks at once from our past and from our future, and her voice resonates acutely into our present.

This short story was initially published in *Qalqalah #1*, ed. Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research and KADIST, Paris, 2015. We thank Sarah Rifky, as well as these two institutions, for granting us the permission to publish it again.

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In keeping with time, before I tell you a story and talk about the future, let us travel back to a moment in the past. Let us travel back to January of 1977 in Cairo. The capital is on fire and the Egyptian Bread Riots are rippling through the city. They are tearing the liberal policies of Sadat’s *infitah* to pieces. In a small apartment in Giza, a woman, a poet, not particularly religious, wakes up from her sleep... Placing one hand on her bump of five months, she whispers a few words to dispel nagging spirits... In her sleep, she was visited by the prophet...peace be upon him. In the dream he said, “Give your child a good name.” A good name does not necessarily mean a name with a good meaning, but more importantly a name that would ensure a good and prosperous future. The first act of language, is always giving a name. The child is born and named: she is called Qalqalah.

It is worth of noting that Qalqalah grows up to become an artist, but this account is not about that. We are interested in what happens a long time after. In 2048 Qalqalah is turning seventy - one. She is an unusual woman in all respects. It all started with the unusual name she was given. Qalqalah, a very Arabic sounding word, is not a name; it is a motion in language, a phonetic vibration, a bounce or an echo, over certain letters of the Arabic scripture that make up the words “QT bgd” — which almost translates into English as “a cat for real.”

Although it is easy to understand how Qalqalah came to be an artist, in the context that she found herself in, in the type of family that brought her up, no one can historically determine exactly when art, as a vocation, as we understood it in 2014, became obsolete... Some argued that everyone had become an artist, or no one was, but it doesn’t really matter. When did art as art cease to exist? It is vaguely said to have been around the 2030’s, shortly after the economy had finally and completely collapsed. The collapse was more of a systematic meltdown, felt and accepted, and didn’t come with a bang or a boom or a clear event. The fact of the future was that the economy, predicted for so long to collapse, had collapsed.

Finally. The unimaginable had finally arrived, and with it the order of the world radically changed, much faster than anyone could have possibly imagined.

Qalqalah now lives in the United Arab World, a conglomerate of corporations, where as a citizen she takes up her place as a linguist, serving the greater good of UAW (often pronounced by Arabic speakers as: WOW, which also signified the letter “waw”). The “waaw“ is the 27th letter of the Arabic alphabet, of the *abjadiya*. It represents the number six and belongs to the element of air. It symbolizes the mystical promise of total assent, and it denotes the universal aspect of the whole according to some mystics. Already in the 11th century, Ibn al Arabi gives quite some attention to waw in a booklet dealing with the letters “waw”, “meem” and “nuun”. We find out that “waaw”, a letter, is the first perfect number. By other sheikhs we are told that “waaw” corresponds to the quality of dying when you still are alive, which of course, is a part of the message.

Ten centuries later, in the 21st century, linguists and translators have found a good place in the new social scheme of UAW. This is an unexpected turn to things, who would have thought that linguists and translators would be well-compensated jobs in this future which I speak to you in present tense? Not only that, but to work with words, and words as numbers, are skills that are held high-regard in the era of new corporations. Qalqalah had been lucky: as a young person she hadn't opted to study languages, but she was naturally attune to many, having grown up with six. Qalqalah's parents were *both* poets, and she had briefly married into a family of bookkeepers, of librarians, from the former Kingdom. In her old age Qalqalah regrets never having children, like many of her generation, but she thinks of every word she speaks as giving birth to “new meaning.”

In the winter of 2048, Qalqalah is invited to attend a closed meeting at the prestigious University of the Future Post-Sense (UF-PS). The university is situated in a former parliamentary building of a place that was formerly known as Bern in Switzerland. The overhaul of the school into a sort of think tank was part of the larger education reform movement on a continental scale, and was meant to secure those schools and universities didn't shut down with the economic collapse of the early thirties. Previous universities realigned themselves to new corporate bodies with the promise that they would bring in returns on investment pretty quickly.

This is a time where philosophy is prized for bringing in fast results and where ideology is incubated, as it has failed to simply emerge in the previous decades, despite ongoing political tumult and hyper-action. The closed convention Qalqalah is invited to is one in a series that are taking place worldwide. She often declines such invitations where she finds herself bored with the lack of imagination of present scholars and researchers... In her seventh decade of life, she finds that pretty much anything that was worth saying has already been said in years before. The effect of recycling language is tiresome to her ears. Qalqalah has lived through a lot. Organizers of such conventions are often younger avid types that have no memory of a past, but sense something akin to nostalgia for it.

It is true of people born in the 2000's that they have a different experience of memory: they are an entirely different type of human altogether. Save for those who were born into families of time separatists and idealists who had tried to extract themselves from the system and which were very few, the new generations had very narrow attention spans, and contrary to what one would imagine made up human life, no real connection to narrative. Whereas in decades before, the premise of being human was based on a continual history, narrative mimesis and the ability to retell one's life in stories, suddenly narrative has caught up, it is instant, and it disappears as soon it speaks.

Organizers of the convention are interested in Qalqalah, as she is a first hand witness to the early waves of uprising and recounted revolutions and

occupy movements in the early tens and twenties of the century. She had lived through regional wars and was part of the dissident movements that caused the collapse of the nation-state system in the Eastern hemisphere in the late twenties and early thirties. Not that much good had come out of that. But like many people at this time Qalqalah has trouble recollecting memories of her past. Suffering from attention disorders, narrative fatigue and spiritually struggling with psychotic breaks means that Qalqalah isn't as lucid, as we are today, in 2014. Or maybe one could say she is more lucid, just in a way that disagrees with post 1950's psychiatry. For the Bern-convention, she is tasked with piecing together something that resembles a political narrative, a type of history, of the political cracks in time since the 2010's. She struggles to remember a distant past beyond the hyper-capital conglomerate of the new United Arab World.

The conference in Bern draws on conscious and unconscious thought and behavior, paving the economy towards a post-linguistic future. Qalqalah is suspicious of institutions, yet thrives on language. She has an innate understanding that there is no future post-language.

On the fringes of the conference, she finds herself amongst a self-proclaimed group of "monolingual activists" from the Indo-European worlds. She attends their meetings and embarks on a set of impossible questions about the future of a region. Is a political paradigm shift possible through a rediscovery of other languages? Is speaking more than one language a form of treason masked as knowledge?

Speaking so many languages, it is impossible to think, she thinks. To think in her native Arabic father-tongue, Qalqalah has to unlearn her other glossal skills. She has an inkling that if she sets out to investigate linguistic facts and little known secrets of the Arabic language, in its chronographic dimension, it would be possible to approach the future differently. Arabic for a fact does not have future tense. Or rather, its future is derivative of the present. Qalqalah is caught in a conundrum of questions, for what does it mean for a language not to encompass a future in speech, she wonders. In end effect, we have to ask ourselves what the political consequences are of introducing new forms and tenses to old languages.

Sarah Rifky

Sarah Rifky is a writer and theorist of modern and contemporary art. She is a PhD candidate in History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art and the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Her current research is focused on the emergence of what she terms "Cultural Infrastructure" in Egypt during the 1950s and 1960s. She is interested in the work of institutions, artists and art in global modernism.

<https://qalqalah.org/en/histories/qalqalah-the-subject-of-language>