

Qalqalah: Thinking About History

Sarah Rifky

Qalqalah: Thinking About History is the sequel to *Qalqalah: The Subject of Language*, a short story of speculative fiction imagined by researcher and curator Sarah Rifky in 2015 as a response to an invitation by Bétonsalon - Center for Art and Research and KADIST Paris. In the second episode of linguist Qalqalah's adventures, written in 2016, the voices of the author and the protagonist intertwine while reflecting on the role played by language/s in relations of conflict and domination, as well as in the writing of history and the imagination of a future. In Qalqalah's near future, she encounters a group of monolingual activists who advocate for speaking only one language, while the number of active languages has been reduced to approximately twenty. Among these languages, Arabic, English and French are specifically mentioned and chosen as vehicles for poetical and political statements and positions.

At this moment in the story, Qalqalah is an old woman. While she is regularly solicited as a witness of history, she loses her memory, stutters and ends up refusing to participate in the author's story. Such an act of refusal, or withdrawal, manifests against the requirements for transparency, communication and productivity that are regularly imposed upon us. Could it help us rethink our ways of doing with art and with research?

Like the first short story, *Qalqalah: Think About History* was initially written in English and translated into French by Yoann Gourmet. This text has been translated for the first time in Arabic by Yazan Ashqar, in close conversation with Sarah. Offering our heroine Qalqalah yet another life, this translation may hold a more special meaning from her other multiple incarnations: indeed, the Arabic rendition revives Sarah's native mother-tongue and Qalqalah's father-tongue. One could then imagine that this Arabic translation paves the way for a possible reconciliation between the author and her protagonist — the latter resisting the former's effort to tell the story. More tangibly, what does it mean to read the story of Qalqalah in her native Arabic father-tongue — a language that gave her a name, one that she is enamored with, but that evidently slips from her fingers and voice? To both multilingual and monolingual readers, who may speak, read, understand, write and fall in love in Arabic without mastering it, this translation echoes Jacques Derrida's take on monolingualism: "I have only one language; yet it is not mine". This Arabic rendition could be read as a possible bridge between polyglots and monolinguals who share the Arabic language, here or in the future UAW.

This short story was initially published in *Qalqalah #2*, 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.

Qalqalah: Thinking About History

Sleeping and waking present a philosophical conundrum: what happens to the repositories of language and memory in the transition between these two states? One must remember that anything that negotiated two states in the era of nations was hugely political. Things are different now. Everyday, Qalqalah gets up to face the rest of her life, a life post-narrative. In her recollection of stories, she never takes language for granted. Today, as she wakes up, she tries to understand the paradigm of “monolingual activism” of a group of people she had met outside of a convention seeking to invent a new polity with the help of linguists and financiers. She rightfully reasons that at the heart of any monolingual impulse is a questioning of the hegemony of imperial language. She pauses to rethink her thought in a language outside of English. It is a repetitive thought. She pauses again to rethink her thoughts in a language external to French. The pauses continue until she has rethought her thoughts in the spectrum of languages known to her. The feeling associated with each thought was distinct from the other thoughts, even though it was a gloss of the same thought. One might think it odd that the same thought feels different across languages. This whole mulling over language takes time. Words gather en masse yet they don’t tell a story; they just sit there in a pile in her mind... As the day went on, she thought to herself that there were certainly merits to reviving languages that were almost dead, and to exploring each language for its own sake. This would incite a renewal of philosophy for the service of the future, a philosophy that was often lost in the battles of many languages on one tongue. The truths that populated Qalqalah’s mind that day had all been spoken on the tongues of ancient linguists, but none lived long enough to give account.

It is worth noting that in the era of the nation state, people spoke many languages. In the age of the Conglomerate Corporation the nature of competition had changed. If the CC was committed to incubating philosophy in its universality, it was holding poetry at bay. Poetry is the only possible means of vocalizing another future. Poetry in its particularity is not complicit, for it simply does not translate. Metonymy in rhyme, broken language, and syntax re - ordered. Its content is encrypted in form and that in itself, is unique.

While she was attending a gathering of monolinguals, within the chaos of activists, a voice interrupted the noise. In a crisp sounding English, a former British Islander addressed the crowd and no one in particular: “Do you speak French?” a bilingual translator immediately rose to the voice and echoed the question further “Qui parle Français ?” Several heads turned to the translated voice. Silence enveloped the gathering for a moment, as the monolinguals shifted uncomfortably. Heads that didn’t turn had understood also. They may not speak French, yet understanding is always imminent. Does the unintentional act of understanding make one complicit with the bilinguals? Some languages lurk in other languages; it is hard to separate them entirely. The true essence of monolingualism is historically impossible — any claim to this position (of monolingualism that is) is always broken. Qalqalah sighs to herself as she imagines a shuttle lost in space between languages. What had this voluntary translation done? Was it even accurate? In another instant or language, how does this anecdote translate from the English into French?

If present, one would feel interpellated. Somehow, we are all complicit in this future. Even I, myself, as the author-as-narrator become unnecessarily involved in this affair. I descend into the realm of the story, which is an uncomfortable place to be. Fear of losing one’s language compels the monolingual activist to refuse to speak to another. At the same time, conquest is only possible through speaking another’s language, is it not? Qalqalah would often fantasize about Napoleon’s accents, musing over

them as inflections of history, of ideology. It is said, that he had never mastered English. As a woman, it made little sense to Qalqalah to imagine a salvation from automated economy entirely through a monolingual stance, even if this language was approached in love, in the manner of Ibn al Arabi's teachings. In love with Arabic, she had become Arabic. They had become one. Qalqalah's entire premise of being is predicated upon language; language beyond rhetoric and poetry, rhythm and letter, implicit, coded, hidden, that which is beyond the lexical, beyond words. To recite verses of Ibn al Arabi's poems here in translation would betray the text. Qalqalah, like her own memory of history, is a contradiction. Here we stand as readers outside the text in foreboding weather, Qalqalah's breath heaving to the rhythm of the incoherent claims of a monolingual state, young unstable speaking subjects, and jealous languages fighting on people's tongues, smashing against their dentals. She puckered her lips into the shape of an O and her breath turned to smoke. Qalqalah exhaled the ghost of labial wars and revolutions in language into the cold air. Even this long sought-after future had been co-opted, she thought. She studied the odd crowd of willful youth, each with the claim to a language that ultimately was not their own, yet was not foreign to them, and resigned herself from them. She imagined her right hand a sibha and proceeded to re-count the names of all books.

If in the 20th century, disciplines of study had turned to meaning making as a necessary method, to semiotics as the study of signs both within and outside of language, this method was preserved against other losses. If in the early 2000's it was said that over six thousand unique languages thrived on earth, how could it be that fifty years later, the world was down to roughly twenty, amongst which only two prevailed. With the death of language, some realms of knowledge cannot be accessed. It was said amongst the learned in the home of her ancestors, that the ancient science of *sīmiyā*, was a predecessor of semiotics and semiology. Why was this no longer relevant? *Sīmiyā* hinted at divine intervention in secular affairs. It was rumored amongst those innately concerned that the divine's wrath would ultimately rob Adam's offspring of all their words. The wise ones would say: like the iconoclast you believe most in the icon, and didn't the divine himself teach Adam all his words? *Sīmiyā* is a spiritual science that etymologically had connected to a rational future, even before we arrived. We are only a few years away from declaring the time precisely mid 21st century and the question of spiritual demise still haunts the handful of languages at the disposal of humanity.

It is difficult to express as an author how one might feel when one's character refuses to remember, or simply can't. Qalqalah, wants to remember a story, to be able to tell it again. To narrate history, which in part is also about a past-present. In every attempt to utter the story she stutters – the range of vocal expressions we are left with are difficult to put into writing, yet each incomplete utterance is telling, of loss, of troublesome grief. "Qalqalah, tell us..." The future is most often haunted by a coming silence. "Qalqalah," I try again, "tell us..." This time the silence singles me out. Once upon a time, I was asked, as a writer, what happens when the character interrupts the story? I shrugged; I always imagined that, in writing, one retains some degree of narrative control, that one writes out characters. Evidently, that is less true than truth itself. I am summoned to sit quietly and listen to Qalqalah's stammering, making notation of her sounds and her quivers, a coded language outside of the bounds of what I know and narrate.

How does one meet a character from the future? Is this not a temporal impossibility? Perhaps. In the history of political rupture what was anticipated was the occupation of space, few people had then spoken of the occupation of time. The scientifically daring tampered with their quantum mechanics and closed time like curves, and once in a while one would hear of someone invited to be the test-subject of traveling through time, although this in itself was rare. Then, others through spiritual meditation made it possible to transcend the trappings of being here and now. It became increasingly evident that in writing all sorts of oddities

exist, and nearly nothing is impossible. As a writer one could easily fall through the loopholes of language, evading both time and translation.

“Qalqalah, what do you remember of History?” Indignant, she leaves the story. I resign myself to the fact that future subjects have something in common with history as a subject. I am told after the fact, that she is pursued by two editors of a journal that meet her in writing, imploring her to say something more on the subject of history. They come back with a piece of crumpled paper from the future, with little drawings. In Paris, the journal hires several cryptographers and hackers who mull over the string of glyphs and who at the time of publishing come to two distinct conclusions: on the subject of history Qalqalah’s words may have meant “it matters” whereas in the future they may come to denote that “unicorns drink ambrosia”.

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-thinking-about-history>