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One of the heroes of this talk is Fellag, a famous Algerian humorist.¹ In a portrait of the artist included in the published version of another of his plays, *Djurdjurassique Bled*, Pierre Lartigue writes that in Arabic, the name Fellag means "bûcheron, coupeur de routes. Au figuré, bandit de grand chemin" [lumberjack, road cutter. Figuratively: highway man or high way robber] (Fellag 1999, 95).² We do not need to know this or even to believe that it is accurate to appreciate Fellag's work but for the purpose of this talk, it is worth keeping in mind that, according to a public portrait inserted into one of his books, Fellag accepts that we imagine him as someone who stands in the middle of roads. Moreover, depending on whether we are in the literal or the figurative mood, the "cutting" involved may be deemed legitimate or illegitimate.³

Fellag is originally from Kabylia; his family moved to Algiers when he was a child and he moved to France in 1995 but not before having become a star in his own country with shows such as *Les Aventures de Tchop* (1986), *Cocktail Khorotov* (1990), *SOS Labess* (1991) and *Babor L'Australia* (1991). Since his arrival in Paris, he has also been involved in cinema and has published novels and plays while continuing his performance work with *Djurdjurassique Bled* and *Le dernier chameau*.

Fellag is best known for his wry and self-deprecating humor as well as for his idiosyncratic simultaneous use of three languages: Berber, Arabic and French. And yet, what he

¹ His latest one-man show, *Le dernier chameau* has been touring France for more than a year. *Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* [The Last Camel and other stories] has also been published by J-Claude Lattès in 2004. For more information on the show, see http://www.theatreonline.com/guide/detail_piece.asp?i_Region=0&i_Programmation=10254&i_Genre=0&i_Origine=&i_Type= (consulted January 5th, 2004).

² See also under "Name": "Fellag n'est pas un nom de scène. Il signifie : coupeur de routes" [Fellag is not a pen name. It means: road cutter] (Fellag 1999, 167).

³ Looking up the Arabic root in the dictionary will yield slightly different results.

calls the "cocoon" (Caubet 2004, 61) of his three languages would be even more accurately described as a constant attention to the status and function of words, to how they make meaning rather than what they mean. He claims: "je m'arrête sur un mot et je m'amuse à le triturer, à le retourner et à inventer d'autres sens" [I spend time on a word (literally I stop, I interrupt myself on a word) and I have fun manipulating it, turning it inside out, inventing other meanings] (Caubet 2004, 55).

Some of these manipulations are easily understood, both by his Francophone and/or by an Arabic and Berber speaking audience. Others are truly unique and revolutionary experiments with cross-linguistic moves that invent a new language within languages. I suggest that taken together, both practices may enable us to arrive at a new understanding of what it means to translate, or more accurately of what it means to stand in the way of translation when cultures and languages coexist unhappily. Often, the literally "arresting" power of Fellag's work is extreme because it creates new and therefore alienating knowledge. At other times, he slightly disturbs the relationship between a word and its most common meaning by reminding us of the forgotten and complex transformations that a linguistic unit typically undergoes as languages come into contact.

For example, he helps us remember why it should be difficult to describe the geopolitical area that is going to be the context of this talk. In English, it is called the Maghreb. In English (and in French for that matter), the word refers to the North African Mediterranean regions that correspond to several independent nations, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The word also evokes the Orient, the East. In Arabic, however, the word *maghrib* means something else, it means Morocco and also the West. Within that logic, Maghrebi people are Westerners. Most specialists in the field as well as people said to be of Maghrebi origin know this, but like many supposedly well-known facts, the equivalence between "Maghrib" and the "West" does not function as a self-evident truth. As Fellag puts it in one of his published texts, *Comment réussir un bon petit couscous* [How to cook a great little couscous]: "Les Maghrébins n'aiment pas qu'on les traite d'Orientaux. Et pour cause! Les premiers vrais Occidentaux, c'est nous! En arabe, le mot

Maghreb signifie "Occident". Maghreb, Occident—Maghrébin, Occidental! Alors que Français ne veut dire que Français" [Maghrebi do not like to be called "orientals." No wonder! We are the first authentic westerners! In Arabic, maghreb means "the West"—Maghrebi, A Westerner! Whereas French means nothing but French]. (Fellag 2003, 30)

It would be a reductive to assume that the only goal of Fellag's gesture here is to try and teach a non-Arabic speaking audience the "real" meaning of the word in Arabic (or even to suggest that the ambiguity of the word does make the Maghrebi superior to the French—a name, which, historically means something too)⁴. Fellag does play that game at times, acting as if his primary goal was to teach a French audience the rudiments of Arabic. He may ask the audience to repeat words after him, at first simple words such as "hit" (for wall) and then suddenly complete sentences that of course no one will be able to master unless they already know Arabic.⁵

But this is slightly different. I am not suggesting that it would be a vast improvement to stop thinking of "the East" when someone says "maghreb" and to start calling Moroccans "Westerners." What is at stake here is not the accuracy of the translation but the possibility to cross the distance between people who have access to two systems and those who, being less knowledgeable, are powerful enough to impose their own unselfconscious monolingualism on the bi-cultural and bi-lingual individuals who migrated and settled in what the monolinguals think of as "their own" country. That unbridgeable chasm, or rather the dangerous road that cannot be crossed, is what bilinguals "do not like" in Fellag's stories.

Fellag's achievement is not replacing something wrong with something right but inaugurating a new way of thinking about what we normally call translation or multilingualism. After all, the cultural layering of "orientalism" won't disappear once we find out that maghreb also means "the west" in Arabic. Historically, in order to move away from a strictly postcolonial

⁴ For a discussion of how the inheritance of the "Gauls" vs. Franks" is the object of a constant cultural traffic, see Weber's first chapter ("Nos ancêtres les gaulois," Weber 1991: 21-39).

⁵ See *Djurdjurassique Bled*, where he asks the audience to "repeat after him," then goes on to produce a complete sentence in Arabic before adding that this is "doctorate" material (Fellag 1999, 51).

point of view that imagines the migrant as the one who will eventually learn how to be French without an accent, to a more transnational point of view where creolization works both ways, and where Europe is creolized, I need to construct a linguistic and cultural reality where the word "maghreb" means both East and West. Europeans do not so much learn Arabic as learn that Arabic has always been there.

Authors such as Assia Djébar or Rachid Boudjedra like to remind their readers of the forgotten Arabic origin of so-called French words. "Algebra," "zero," "chimie" [chemistry] in *Les Nuits de Strasbourg* (Djébar 1997b: 216). They sometimes insert dictionary entries into the fabric of their novels; for example Boudjedra explains the meaning of "assassin" or "mesquin" [mean] in *La Vie à l'endroit* (1997: 164, 213) Fellag's tactic, however, is different. He does not so much go back to the origin as insist on keeping open a secret passage between several simultaneously possible meanings.

This paper is about the discursive, narrative or poetical gestures required of cultural agents who have to deal with this ambiguity.⁶ It is not about restoring the truth of some etymological archive, neither is it about finding a better translation for the word "maghrib." I am not arguing for a more accurate and erudite use of the original. Instead, I recognize the fact that a sort of fable, a tale, the story about the maghreb must be narrated again and again. It is like a coming-out story, it can never be told once and for all, in one language, one space, one word. This paper then, is about what we need to do if we choose to have it both ways, to have East and West at the same time and in at least three languages or even four if we wish to heed Djébar's suggestion that we also add the language of the our repertoire.⁷

Acknowledging that the possibility of translation is receding into the distance means accepting to take the risk of what Edouard Glissant calls "opacity." For Glissant, opacity is highly

⁶ In the larger project to which this paper belongs, the system of signs that I imagine here could be a language in becoming, something called the "European": a sort of Creole that would combine rather than choose between the languages of the old Europe and those of its migrants.

⁷ "Trois langues auxquelles s'accouple un quatrième langage: celui du corps avec ses danses ses transes, ses suffocations..." (Djébar 1999: 14).

desirable and he even insists that should be a "right for all".⁸ When one subject refuses to translate, when another one accepts not to understand the other and the other's language, the protagonists are confronted with "opacity," and even if we intellectually understand why this is desirable, we may still experience the situation as an experience of frustrating alienation.

My title, "Jay translation: ki ma qal Abidche," could be an example of what happens when we take that risk: if you do not understand, faced with that moment when words mean nothing to you, you may react in a way that may not even be a conscious choice: you will perhaps wait for the explanation that is implicitly promised, but then you must have the patience to do so (you are giving the title the benefit of the doubt, which means that the speaker must, at some point, keep her promise). Alternatively you may decide that no one has earned your patience yet and opt out of the talk altogether. Some are capable of a degree of indifference because they are not threatened by the unknown nor by the presence of meaninglessness at a place where some *captatio benevolentiae* usually occurs.⁹ The unknown may even trigger curiosity. In other words, opacity forces the cultural agent to respond to the challenge with some degree of benevolence or irritation. The failure or success of such experiments largely depends on where we situate ourselves on this continuum.

"Jay translation" as proposed in the title, is a form of translation that has something to do with jay walking: i.e. going across not only one but several intersecting roads (or languages), crossing in the middle of traffic (linguistic traffic) and occupying a space (the middle of the crossroads) that you are told to stay away from, for your own safety and that of others. By using this title full of strange sounds and concepts, I am using signs in a way that is not pre-dicted (literally already said): I therefore accept the necessity to tell stories about what is "behind" the words I use, to create a meta-layer of communication where some decrypting must occur, some traversing time must be given, or at least invested, borrowed and lent.

⁸ See the end of the chapter entitled, "Pour l'opacité," in *Poétique de la Relation*: "Nous réclamons pour tous le droit à l'opacité" [We claim the Right to Opacity for all] (Glissant 1990, 209).

⁹ A catchy title would be an example of such *captatio benevolentiae*.

Just as the word "maghreb" opens a messy mental passage or secret tunnel between East and West, "jay-translation" occurs when a subject refuses to obey street signs and ventures where there is no legitimate path, creating what is sometimes referred to as "lines of desire" across lawns, across unmarked fields.¹⁰ Fellag is not interested in looking for a lost language whose recovery would be the goal of the experiment. He is not claiming that his art seeks to resurrect the tongue of his ancestors; he is not "berbériste" even if he obviously defends the right of Berbers to their identity. He does not yearn to recapture the language of the mother or even of the grandmother like the narrators of Assia Djébar in *Oran langue morte* (Djébar 1997a). Neither does he wish to collect traditional folktales as Mouloud Mammeri or Jean Amrouche did before him (Mammeri 1989, Amrouche 1989). Although he acknowledges his debt towards traditional storytellers, he also emphasizes the differences between his texts and old folktales. In an interview granted to Dominique Caubet and published in her recent book, *Les Mots du bled* [Words from back there],¹¹ Fellag states: "En général, les conteurs maghrébins sont les gardiens de la morale sociale: ils confirment les interdits qui existaient déjà dans l'esprit des gens; ils les reproduisent avec des effets grossissants qui leur donnent encore plus de poids pour les auditeurs. Tandis que moi, je remonte la morale à contre-courant..." [Generally speaking, Maghrebi storytellers are the keepers of the moral order: they re-enforce taboos that already existed in people's mind. They reproduce and magnify them, which increases their influence on their audience. I, on the other hand, go up against the moral flow] (Caubet 2004, 36). Fellag knows that claiming an identity they taught (him) to despise, to borrow Michelle Cliff's title, is not an inherently progressive gesture (Cliff 1980).

And by doing so, by positioning himself in the middle of the road, or by going against the flow of the traffic, Fellag gives us an opportunity to follow in his tracks, to emulate his tactics.

¹⁰ For the "oppositional" value of such practices, including the creation of a unique city map by pedestrians who cut across buildings, see Chambers 1991: 6-7.

¹¹ But here is another messy tunnel since "bled," the derogatory reference to a backward village is also "bilad," the native land and the nation that the memory of the war of liberation glorifies.

Rather than translating from one language to another, he invents a language that we may learn and use, even if we do not master it. Dominique Caubet writes: "Fellag emprunte certes des expressions à la rue, et les retravaille largement (comme il l'explique dans les entretiens), mais la rue reprend également les siennes, parées désormais d'une forme de légitimité ("ki ma qal Fellag..." 'comme disait Fellag...'). Il ne s'agit pas d'un simple aller-retour, mais d'un véritable processus de transformation" [Fellag borrows street language and then radically reworks the expressions (as he explains in the interviews). Then the man in the street re-appropriates his words, which are now endowed with a form of legitimacy ("ki ma qal Fellag..." 'as Fellag put it...')] (Caubet 2004, 15). When someone else picks up a phrase and adds a tag such as "ki ma kal ... and then a name," the enabling precaution reveals the existence of what I am calling "jay translation": instinctively, the speaker knows that it is not enough to simply use the word, but that it is prudent to place it behind a sort of symbolic marker to protect the new and fragile usage against the "flow" of legitimate words.

Another manipulator of words, a linguistic craftsman, has provided me with an adequate metaphor for the type of safeguard that is necessary to nurture the emergence of a new language. His name was Boussad Abdiche. If the talk is entitled "ki ma kal Abdiche" it is because his work enabled me to compare Fellag's linguistic usage, this "jay-translation" practice, to what happens when a person walks across a busy Algerian street, interrupting the flow of fast and furious traffic, under the relative protection of a pedestrian crossing. What Fellag does then, is jay-translation in the middle of the typically chaotic Algerian traffic that Abdiche renames "circus'lation" ("circus'lation, ki ma qal Abdiche..."). This practice requires humor but also virtuosity, it is dangerous and potentially lethal both for the literal pedestrian, and for the figurative conversation between cultures.

Who was Abdiche then? Like Fellag, he was from Kabylia and as a journalist, he tried his hand at various genres but excelled as a satirical writer. In the 1980s he published several book-length collections of social commentaries or chronicles and "billets" (short position pieces)

before being killed in a terrorist attack in December 1996 in Algiers. The book called "La circus'lation" is a series of satirical fragments written by an Algerian author who humorously criticizes his compatriots' driving etiquette or lack thereof (Abdiche 1986). The title fuses the French word "circulation" (traffic) and the English word "circus," an effective signal that the tone is going to be humorous. Many of the drivers, pedestrians or road builders mocked by Abdiche are clowns. At the same time, we would not be wrong to suspect that the reference to the circus hides more serious undertones. Slightly freakish performances are to be expected. Sometimes, clowns are cruel, or pathetic or both. After all, circuses have always played with a certain stereotype of the monstrous, etymologically what I show (*montrer* in French).

The possible presence of monsters or at least of ambiguous clowns whose antics might amuse as well as frighten us is worth keeping in mind especially if we notice that for the author, traffic, the way in which people move about, is always already a metaphor. In this compilation of jokes, anecdotes and quotes, traffic stands for what has gone horribly wrong in post-independence Algeria; it represents the social ills that plague the country. The circus'lation of cars and people is already a transfer, we might say a translation, of what the author thinks about the polis, and about his compatriots' cultural practices. The satirical short pieces denounce Algeria's ruthfully inadequate road system, but also what the author calls the Algerians' "detestable mentality" and their disregard for rules and public space. Talking about traffic enables Abdiche to move from the car and the driver to the nation and the nationals' shortcomings. He bemoans the absence of proper highways and blames it on corruption, he laments the incessant traffic jams that interrupt the flow of cars and clogs the system, physically but also symbolically since the lack of fluidity generates tensions and antisocial practices. When drivers get stuck (and they are always stuck), solidarity and equity disappear. Everyone tries to cheat, developing individualistic practices to get around the problem. Instead of waiting for their turn, drivers sneak up to the front of the line. Neither fair play nor regulations play a role in this system where the most audacious and the most corrupt always win.

Like ancient Greek fables or their seventeenth-century equivalent, the "billets" sometimes spell out the moral lesson that they wish to teach us. On April 7 1983, Abdiche writes: "Lorsqu'on parle du non-respect de la priorité, on pense généralement au code de la route. Mais dans la conduite des affaires publiques, nous trouvons aussi de mauvais conducteurs qui ouvrent à certains des voies en principe réservées à d'autres, favorisant ainsi des dépassements dangereux" [When we talk about people who disregard the right of way, we usually refer to drivers. But in the conduct of public affairs, we also have bad drivers who allow some to take roads that are, in principle, reserved for others, and encourage unsafe overtakings" (Abdiche 1986, 39).

In such a perversely unpredictable system where the right of safe passage has disappeared, itineraries become chaotic and it is impossible to conceptualise how to best travel from point A to point B. Only anarchy and individualistic tactics subsist; the system of signs that the code represents is replaced by incomprehensible chaos. Language is noise. Because transportation and movements become haphazard and unpredictable (there is no etiquette, no protocol), the land and the territory lose meaning. No one knows which movement is safe, which is unsafe. No one knows how to read the map and it ends up disappearing. The difference between public and private is eroded by people who appropriate the street and turn it into their parking space or on the contrary build extensions to their houses that occupy public space or add obstacles such as road bumps that slow the traffic. What is proper, propriety is replaced by a mad understanding of private property that is never shared. For pedestrians are just as guilty as drivers:

Bien des piétons s'imaginent qu'à partir du moment où ils traversent dans les clous, ils sont protégés par un rempart invisible.

Aussi, vert ou rouge, ils foncent sans regarder. D'où cette réflexion acerbe d'un automobiliste qui a heureusement de bons freins: "Ce passage, ils le considèrent tellement comme le leur, que s'ils le pouvaient, ils l'amèneraient à la maison."

(Abdiche 1986, 9)

[Many people imagine that they are protected by an invisible wall if they cross at a pedestrian crossing.

Regardless of whether the light is green or red, they march across the street without another look. A driver, whose brakes were fortunately in good shape, remarked bitterly: "They are so convinced of their right of passage that if they could, they would take the pedestrian crossing into their homes."]

Like the pedestrian who crosses a street, the translator who must transform his or her language in order to bring words home to someone else must interrupt the traffic of fast everyday language that does not necessarily pay attention to his or her lateral move. In the realm of print culture, a certain type of commodified circulation of books assumes that success means that the largest number of copies will find their ways as fast as possible to their reader (or owner/buyer). Consequently, the translator goes across that metaphoric high speed lane and interrupts the traffic of goods. He or she needs some sort of protection that guarantees that the seemingly slow and lateral (transnational and also transgressive work) will not be killed by a fast car.¹²

Abdiche does not criticize the principle of the pedestrian crossing but he objects to people who forget that they are in a vulnerable position. Similarly, it is probably a good idea for translators to remember that they are not safe. The vision of someone actually bringing the crossing into one's own home is obviously absurd. It is not only funny because it is an ineffective attempt to selfishly appropriate something that belongs to all. Part of Abdiche's critique is indeed that Algerians try to counteract the absence of public space with individualistic tactics that backfire lamentably. In this particular case, however, what is especially laughable is the notion that the sort of right of way that a pedestrian crossing provides can actually be removed from its context (the street) and kept active in one's own house. When one is at home (within one's own language, within one's own borders and protected by the laws that define private property), one

¹² That a booby-trapped car was the cause of Abdiche's death now sounds like a horrifically ironic conclusion to his attempts at talking some sense into the typical Algerian driver.

has already contained the flow of traffic. The safety provided by the four walls of the house is not increased by importing a symbol that shields us from a deadly collision with otherness that can only happen if we try to cross over. Safety comes at precisely that price: inside, we no longer encounter the other who might threaten but also inspire us. If the translator is the person whose role is to take the risk to go across the traffic, the monolingual who speaks only one language (or who thinks that it is possible to "have" a language if we think of Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* [Derrida 1998]) is the one who stays at home. And if the translator probably needs some help in the difficult task of interrupting the norm (Venuti 1998), the monolingual subject, on the other hand, is in need of less safety, and of more reasons to venture outside. Ultimately, what is ironic about Abidche's vision is that the person who acts as if he wanted to take the crossing home is in fact the same person who crosses the street without even being aware that a danger exists, as if that subject did not even know that caution is in order when one goes across cultures [Regardless of whether the light is green or red, they march across the street without another look]. Just because a driver stopped because his brakes were in good order does not mean that the other man did not risk his life.

In Fellag's shows, the audience is often suspected of being in the shoes of the reckless pedestrian and part of the clowns' role is to expose their absent-mindedness. Because the colonial past makes us imagine the postcolonial migrant as the formerly colonized individual who writes in French (the Francographe subject) and whose responsibility it is to make French monolingual subjects understand the other tongue, that logic automatically puts Fellag in the shoes of the perpetual translator. But Fellag's imaginative rewriting of that position redefines translation as what we (the "ignorant" public) should be doing more consciously.

Fellag is not the migrant worker whose non-European language must be translated so that the majority audience can understand him. In his performances, he speaks three languages simultaneously and his exile is precisely motivated by the fact that this choice is a dangerous stance to take against those who want to standardize the traffic of words in order not to be

interrupted and contradicted. Talking about the imposition of "classical Arabic" as the official medium of the state, Fellag says "l'état écrivait des textes et faisait des discours politiques dans une langue que personne ne pouvait contredire parce qu'ils ne la comprenaient pas" [The State wrote texts and delivered political speeches in a language that no one could contradict because no one understood it] (Caubet 2004, 40). This type of opacity is the opposite of what Glissant recommends: it is the totalitarian assumption that no translation should be attempted because every language is going to be an inferior copy of the original.

What Fellag practices instead is a type of opacity that comes from the fact that what he calls "MA" langue is really a constantly evolving mixture of Arabic, French and Berber. "Quand je pense, c'est vraiment les trois. Quand je travaille, c'est vraiment les trois. Quand je m'amuse comme ça dans ma tête, à inventer des choses, à me faire un petit monologue, ça passe vraiment par les trois langues aussi" [When I think, the three are really there. When I work, the three are really there. When I have fun dreaming up something, inventing a little monologue, it really takes all three languages too] (Caubet 2004 48). Because Fellag uses all three languages simultaneously, the result is a heterogeneous combination that cannot be translated because different bits belong to different languages. Translating the whole text into one single language would be the equivalent of taking the pedestrian crossing home. It would feel safe, but the reader would precisely lose the experience of what happens when one is confronted to this flow of words, some of which remain incomprehensible although the show as a whole is not. This level of non-translatability does not have to do with the meaning of each word but with the rhetorical decisions that motivate the cohabitation between the three languages. By accepting to threaten some of the spectators, Fellag reveals the potentially dangerous consequences of messing with the flow and traffic of signs. Political interventions that try to treat certain languages as correct and others as marginal and unauthorized idioms are a good symbol of the type of systemic violence that any scene of translation may well trigger. Something is interrupted by Fellag's practice and it

may be described as the illusion that translation may pacify the encounter between subjects whose languages are fundamentally always opaque to one another.

The presence of trilingualism reformulates the type of issues discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay on the "The politics of Translation" (Spivak 1993). Talking about what constitutes "safe" translation practices and more specifically about her own experience as a translator of eighteenth-century Bengali poetry, she advocates "surrendering" to the text, a word that evokes vulnerability but also violence or at least danger. She argues against what would constitute "safe" translation practices:

First then, the translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point to the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner. (Spivak 1993, 183)

In Fellag's discursive universe, this "absolute fraying" spills over onto encounters between subjects who sometimes do not even know that they are not speaking the same language or rather who must be made aware, through his own layer of commentary, of what is at stake in the moment of fruitful misunderstanding between the migrant who speaks French with an accent and the French people who do not even know that they are guilty of ignorance.

How does Fellag manage to translate his own sense of opacity, the protective yet messy and unrecognized mixture of languages that sometimes are not even called languages without "taking the pedestrian crossing home"? Why am I suggesting that his "jay-translation" accepts a level of risk that is carefully calculated even if it is clearly never completely safe? One of Fellag's typical gestures as a jay-translator is to refrain from staying at the level of exchangeable words. He does not replace one self-contained system with another as if the transfer exhausted the traffic of cultural signs.

Instead, he either mixes languages or, when he does not, he relentlessly draws our attention to a flow of signs that we may not even be aware of. In other words, he reminds us that

the pedestrian crossing is not fool proof, that the business of translation is never finished, that we are still at risk of not understanding, of misunderstanding. For example, Fellag systematically highlights moments of intercultural dialogues that normally do not get translated nor interpreted because they fall into the category of silence, of linguistic non-events.

For example, in "How to put prepare a fine little couscous" [*Comment réussir un bon petit couscous*], he shows that a translator must pay attention to *how* silence means because ignoring it would mean like finding oneself at a busy intersection where multilingualism and ignorance meet disempowerment or empowerment. In the following scenes, casual interpretive practices are shown to have potentially serious consequences. After relating the French's appreciation of couscous to a hypothetical acceptance of Maghrebi people, he tells a story of what could at first appear to be a non-conversation. The non-dialogue occurs between what the French call "l'Arabe du coin" (the Maghrebi owner of their local convenient store and a stereotypical figure of contemporary France) and a clueless customer who has come to buy what will turn out to be industrial couscous. What Fellag translates here is in fact a moment during which there is apparently nothing to translate because the character deliberately says nothing.

Le grain industriel se vend dans n'importe quel espace commercial, mais on peut aussi l'acheter dans sa rue, chez "l'Arabe" du coin, qui est le plus souvent un Berbère marocain. Il n'a rien contre les Arabes, bien au contraire, mais ça le fait chier qu'on l'appelle par quelque chose qu'il n'est pas et il considère que c'est une grave atteinte à son intégrité identitaire. Il ne dit rien parce qu'il respecte la France et ses lois, ainsi que l'ignorance et la légèreté de ses habitants." (Fellag 2003: 22)

[You can get industrial couscous in any shop but you can also get it on your street corner, from the "Arab's" store. Most of the time, the "Arab" in question is a Moroccan Berber. He does not have anything against Arabs, quite the contrary, but it bothers the hell out of him to be called something he is not and he

considers that it is a serious attack against his identitarian integrity. He says nothing because he respects France and its laws as well as its inhabitants' ignorance and superficiality]

From one point of view, since the grocer says nothing, there should be nothing to translate, there appears to be no traffic at all. But Fellag's "translation" of the cultural encounter has to do with the identification of a moment of silence as the proliferation of invisible signs. Saying "he says nothing because..." identifies the moment of silence (thus interrupting it) and replaces it with words. Fellag reads this silence for us and interprets it as a self-conscious decision that hides a reasoned political gesture involving the recognition of something called France, laws, the French. Fellag chooses to interrupt the man's silence with a story. His explanation reveals that the man's silence was a flow of signs that needs decoding. Just as he makes us repeat words in Arabic, he teaches us how to distinguish between silence and nothingness.

And Fellag goes even further. I suggest that he reveals the man's position of power and his deliberate decision to remain in control of the conversation by choosing silence as one of the options rather than as the result of constraint, fear or submissiveness. Fellag's rhetorical trap lies in his use of the word "respect." Saying that the reason for the grocer's silence is a form of respect seems at first, to pacify the exchange: the "translation" protects the flow of information from threats that we normally identify with mis-understandings. The reader suddenly realizes that something was there that he or she did not perceive and the word "respect" is like a pedestrian crossing. Something was coming at us that we had not seen but we are safe. The fast car was in fact a demonstration of respect. The readers or portion of the audience, to whom the lesson is addressed, are after all the same men and women who would witness the man's silence without understanding it. Pointing out that they mistook a sign for meaninglessness and nothingness makes them aware of their incompetence. They appear as bad readers. On the other hand, if the sign that they missed was a mark of respect, what Fellag adds to the context here is a benevolent

and generous explanation and addition. The audience understands more and what is understood is likely to improve the atmosphere of the dialogue. Note that this is achieved, at least we think so at first, at the expense of the man's "integrity" and dignity: he must swallow his irritation and the trade-off is his "respect" for something called "France" and its laws.

Of course, even that proposition should be greeted with suspicion: if we think about it, no French law requires that a Berber grocer says nothing when mistaken for an Arab. Yet, the connotations of the trade-off are clear. The grocer makes the sacrifice of his identity by placing himself in the subservient position of the migrant who assimilates and respects the country's "laws." Up till then, there is no humor in the sentence until the supposedly safe crossing of signs provided by Fellag is abruptly terminated when he equates "France" and its "laws" with the French's "ignorance" and "superficiality." The migrant's silence is now revealed to be a form of superior knowledge that far exceeds the type of condescendence or paternalism that we expect of the majority. The word "respect" barely hides the fact that the man accepts to allow the ignorant protagonist to get away with ignorance and to preserve a feeling of superiority. This comfortable position is what Fellag shatters when he describes the grocer's silence as "respect for the French's ignorance and superficiality."

The next scene goes even further. If the grocer's silence can be interpreted as the removal of a symbolic pedestrian crossing, the episode that we are about to analyze is the equivalent of a pedestrian being warned too late that a truck is about to run him or her over. In this passage, silence is replaced by threatening sounds that do not count as translatable "language" until Fellag intervenes.

Quand vous arrivez à la caisse, soyez patient si l'épicier palabre au téléphone [...]
S'il devient tout rouge, gesticule, transpire et crache des sons bizarres en vous fixant droit dans les yeux, n'ayez pas peur. Primo: pendant qu'il vous fixe, il ne vous regarde pas. Il prend juste appui sur vos yeux pour se projeter jusqu'à son village natal et dire à son cousin ce qu'il pense. Secundo: les mots rugueux,

acérés et remplis d'âpres consonnes qu'il mâchonne dans sa bouche avant de les envoyer dans le combiné ne sont pas des insultes. C'est du berbère.

Il jure que, depuis trois jours, il n'a vendu qu'un misérable pot de harissa et que le premier client qu'il voit depuis la veille, c'est un "infidèle" qui se tient devant lui, en ce moment même, comme un dadais, un paquet de couscous à la main. (Fellag 2003, 24)

[When you get to the cash register, be patient if the grocer is talking on the phone. If he is red in the face, gesticulates, sweats and spits out weird sounds as he looks straight at you, don't be scared. First of all, he is staring but not looking at you. He is bouncing off your eyes to project himself back to his native village so that he can give his cousin a piece of his mind. Secondly, the rough, sharp words full of acrid consonants that he chews before spitting them into the phone are not insults. He is speaking a Berber language.

He swears that for three days, he has sold nothing but a lousy tube of harissa and that the first customer he has seen in two days is an infidel standing in front of him like an idiot, a pack of couscous in his hand].

Once again, the system of address explicitly asks the reader to put him or herself in the customer's shoes (the text is addressed to "you"). Fellag uses the same tactic of one upmanship or overbid as in the previous passage and then goes one step further. At first, he pretends to act as the knowledgeable mediator who will make sure that a misunderstanding due linguistic incomprehension will not result in a painful and conflictual dialogue. What is literally misunderstood or not understood should not lead to a misunderstanding (in the sense of a dispute: and here I am beginning to rely on Jacques Rancière's interpretation of "mésentente" a word that combines mishearing, misunderstanding and disagreeing). The customer who, as we have already established, is potentially an "ignorant" and "superficial" reader, is confronted with aggressive noise (the man "crache des sons bizarres" [spits out weird sounds]). Fellag's

intervention allows "us" to cross, supposedly unharmed, this barrage of "bla-bla" which, as Kristeva reminds us, signals the presence of the barbarian because it is not understandable (Kristeva 1988: 75).

Fellag's translation turns noise into language. He describes the sound in a pseudo-scientific manner that disconnects meaning from the words but places them in a linguistic universe: the "rough, sharp words full of acrid consonants" are no longer noise. They cannot be ignored as parasitical nonsense. But just as Fellag is pointing out that the customer is in the presence of meaning, of "words" he also immediately spells out the nature of the fear that the customer may experience in the presence of the unknown and strange language. What he does not understand could be interpreted as threatening, a form of violence directed against him in particular. Fellag first pretends to protect the reader from such misunderstanding, pretends to reassure: these are not insults. And at the same time, when he does "translate" the words, we discover that the words are indeed insulting for the customer, but not because the man wishes to insult him, but precisely because he talks about him as if he were not there. As if he ignored his presence in the middle of the busy street, as if his existence was a non-entity. The man is not being insulted by the words, not even by the fact that he is described as someone who is standing there like an idiot (the word "dadais" in French is in fact rather mild). What is insulting is precisely that the man does not even address him to insult him. If the "ignorant" and "superficial" customer gets the point, he is not likely to understand that he is being insulted because he is being treated like someone who is not worth talking to but only about.

The grocer obviously knows how to curse but he does so in his own language and his insults are precisely not meant to have a performative effect. The curse is not a malediction. He does not try to curse his customer with a deadly disease and the only "red" plague in this story (The red plague rid you For learning me your language" Act 1, scene 2, line 363-4) is a harmless tube of harissa. The use of Berber is indeed insulting but only because the man treats his customer as a non-entity, a stepping stone that allows his gaze to travel somewhere else. If the man's goal

was to insult his customer in Berber, then his speech act failed lamentably since the meaning of the word for "dadais" [idiot] gets lost in the space between languages. The performative effect that typically accompanies an insult, at least if the aggression is a felicitous speech act, is completely neutralized in this story. As Judith Butler reminds us in *Excitable Speech* hate speech does not always work and words can "misfire" even when a subject deliberately directs a slur at another (Butler 19). But in this case, the system of address makes it impossible for the word "idiot" (*dadais*) to affect the potential victim since the curse is proffered in a language that he cannot understand.

In this strange case of what Austin might have called parasitical speech (after all, it does sound like static on the line, meaningless background noise), misunderstanding does not mean that the violence of the insult disappears nor is Fellag trying to deny the frictions and tensions of the dialogue. We could argue that, as a storyteller, this translator casts oil on the fire and re-introduces the word's venom by providing a French translation of the grocer's tirade. But even in the absence of a translation, his account of what happens between the two men is enough to reveal the offensive quality of the phone conversation that relegates one of the potential interlocutors to the place of excluded and silent third. Paradoxically, what constitutes the most serious insult here is the fact that the grocer is not even addressing the man. In fact, he does not address him at all, he denies him his identity as a man worthy and capable of sharing words and ideas.

Jacques Rancière's model of "mésentente" (disagreement but also mishearing) provides us with the beginning of an interpretive grid of this moment, provided we redistribute the roles played by the characters in the sketch along lines of power that would normally make us assume that the dominant subject is the French customer. This exchange is a specific type of "mésentente" where the subject normally supposed to be in a position of power experiences the encounter from the point of view of the "sans-parts" as Rancière calls them: those who are never counted as parts of the community.

Car le problème n'est pas de s'entendre entre gens parlant, au propre ou au figuré, des "langues différentes," pas plus que de remédier à des "pannes de langage" par l'invention de langages nouveaux. Il est de savoir si les sujets qui se font compter dans l'interlocution "sont" ou "ne sont pas," s'ils parlent ou s'ils font du bruit." (Rancière 1995 79)

As Jean-Louis Deotte points out this definition of "mésentente" insists on the fact that one of the protagonists' words are denied the status of human "logos": according to Rancière, "the most radical misunderstanding is the one that divides two speakers—when the first cannot understand the second because, according to him, words do not belong to articulated language, to *logos*, but rather to an inarticulate voice, to *phôné*. That voice, which, according to Aristotle (in *Politics*), humans have in common with animals, can only express feelings, pleasure or pain, in the form of a cry, contentment or hate, and by cheers or booing in the case of a group. If some people cannot consider others as speakers, it is simply because they do not see them, because they don't have the same share within the political partitioning of the sensible." (Deotte 2004, 78)

We usually assume that the marginal migrant, reduced to powerlessness by the majority, will occupy the place of those humans whose language is reduced to the level of noise and who are thus silenced within the polis. For example, when we describe a speaker as someone who has a foreign accent, we typically have already forced him or her to operate within our area of competence, our own native language. It is often the case that whatever linguistic knowledge that subject has is dismissed as noise and even overlooked or left unread. Farida Belghoul's novel *Georgette!* has provided scholars interested in this pattern with an archetypical example of such encounters between the ignorant schoolteacher and the misinterpreted pupil. When the child's father opens her notebook and writes a letter in the Arabic alphabet that the daughter's teacher cannot read, he does not know that the first page will still look "blank" to her because even the most basic assumption about which side of the notebook constitutes the front and the back is not shared (Belghoul 1986).

In Belghoul's novel, the migrant logos and even written word is reduced to the level of absence and meaninglessness whereas, in Fellag's scene, those roles are reversed but also modified. The customer and the grocer are locked in a moment of "mésentente": they cannot talk to each other because one subject does not recognize the other as another subject endowed with language but it is the other one who only perceives noise. The man reduced to a silent and patient silhouette does not "understand" the other, he only hears consonants. But the fact that he does decode these sounds does not put him in a position of power because he cannot impose his own language.

The other man does not even "see" the other and uses him as a means of transportation: "Il prend juste appui sur vos yeux pour se projeter jusqu'à son village natal" [he simply uses your eyes as a stepping stone to project himself to his native village]. The other is a literal metaphor. His only raison d'être is to provide an excuse for the message that the grocer wants to deliver to the cousin who calls to ask for money. The customer only represents the man's difficulty to make ends meet. He is not there as himself, a man who wants to buy couscous. He is interchangeable, he is a metaphor, both what stands for something and what etymologically transports, allows the other to go somewhere.

If Caliban (another diasporic Algerian after all and also a second generation immigrant) is the exemplary hero of postcolonial criticism, interested in re-appropriation, in reclaiming, and in the process of writing back to the Empire, Fellag's imagined audience occupies a slightly different position. Regardless of whether we identify with the grocer who curses the customer in a language that he does not understand or whether we must put ourselves in the shoes of the person who hears the insult as noise and stands there like an "idiot" without knowing that he is being called an idiot, the sketch changes our ability to respond to such scenes. Revising Caliban's position as the subject who uses the master's language to curse him, Fellag's reader can now say, not exactly: "You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse"(Act 1, scene 2, lines 362-3) but, although you have not taught me the three idioms that you speak fluently, you

have taught me how to jay-translate. I now know that I am being cursed even if I don't know your language. Or, from the other perspective, if we identify with the grocer, I know that you know that I might be insulting you. No one, in Fellag's scene, speaks directly to the other stating "you taught me language" (*The Tempest*, Act 1, scene 2, line 362). The migrant, even if he is a formerly colonized subject, or rather from a formerly colonized nation, does not speak the colonizer's language, what has sometimes been called, in a Maghrebi context, the "langue adverse" [the antagonist's language]. But the logic is not simply reversed either.

Fellag's stories can hardly be claimed by people interested in building national canons or even a corpus of migrant literature or exilic voices. They continually cross the often invisible, unmarked and therefore unprotected passage that opens up within the word Maghreb if we accept to have it both ways and to listen to at least two languages simultaneously. Like many contemporary artists who tend to be identified with popular culture¹³ and with satirical dissidence, Fellag's system of address forces his audience to take risks as we accept to accompany him on a journey that is neither the equivalent of an emigration nor a return to the native land. He is implicitly asking us to cross a powerful flow that is sometimes called the Mediterranean, or sometimes Arabic, sometimes Maghrebi culture. Positioning oneself in the middle of this current reveals the resemblance between what we call a language and nation, a genre and a register. What matters is not so much the result of this crossing (the translated unit) or even, the process (the translation itself). If I had Derrida's knack for coinage, I suppose I could have coined a word capable expressing "translation" and the famous -ance suffix (because as in what H el ene Cixous's *Algeriance*, there is no way of departing from a language of origin that never existing nor of arriving at a language of destination). But even a new word would seem inadequate in its attempt to map out a new semantic field or territory. It is probably less safe, more instable and therefore more productive to use old words and ask them to cohabit as when I talk about "narrative

¹³ Dominique Caubet talks about "contemporary creations" by popular artists and her interviewees included Algerian cartoonists such Gyps or Slim, ra i singers, playwrights or stand-up comics. I wish to thank Emily Sahakian and Hakim Abderrezak for their generous assistance.

translation," or to mix and match units across language as I did in the title, "jay-translation ki ma qal Abdiche." After all, we may be less interested in the perpetual delay of the translation process than in the transformative, creolizing effects that such a journey has on us readers, the audience, the public at large, speakers of Arabic, French and Berber, and perhaps eventually ideologues who have been known to control the linguistic scene especially in Algeria since 1962.

For the issues raised by Abdiche and Fellag could be addressed if we asked a slightly different question, namely, why has the Maghreb not generated an equivalent of the international debate around creolization in the Caribbean? Why does Fellag who insists on claiming three languages remain an exception? Is it due to the authoritarian process of Arabisation? Or to the fact that pre-colonial languages were not erased by a middle-passage? Or rather to the fact that the "sabir" that was used between the colonizer and the colonized never evolved because it was not used among the members of the colonized people who still spoke their own language?

Fellag's example suggests that the possibility of a specifically Maghrebi "creolization" process exists even if it remains a marginalized phenomenon, perhaps one of what Glissant calls "an unimagined minority" (*une minorité insoupçonnée* [Glissant 1995]). The moments of narrative translation do not move between languages, they represent a precarious and self-contained exercise during which the artist performs in a language that is not supposed to exist. Something, once performed on stage, once written or once imagined in a story (since many genres are possible) starts existing as a language that could eventually be translated or encoded. When Fellag uses certain turns of phrase and certain words, he enables other speakers to re-use them under the limited and precarious protection of the "ki ma qal Fellag" effect. This result is obviously not sanctioned by any well-defined or well-recognized community, it does not belong to a grammatical nation, but it may be the equivalent of building an anthology of tales and legends that, according to Michel de Certeau, function like "*repertoires of schemas of action*" (Certeau 1984: 23) that certain individuals will agree to share and use to recognize each other as desirable partners in a new type of conversation.

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