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## Translating the Self in Edward Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the link between the notion of 'cultural translation,' initially introduced by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), and autobiographical writing by a translingual writer: Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place* (1999). As an Arab-American intellectual, Said culminates his writing career with a memoir, in which he represents the educational years of his life. Said shows through the narrative that the interplay between Arabic and English language and cultures strongly influenced the formation of his identity. Thus, this paper explores reading his memoir as an attempt at 'cultural translation' according to which difference is not necessarily trapped in binary oppositions of self/other; East/West; home/foreign land – to name only a few. Difference in this context rather opens a possibility for more fluid boundaries allowing for negotiation and change.

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The influence of culture on the production and reception of texts has become an integral part of translation studies. Much emphasis is also placed on encounters and events involving actual linguistic transfer. From this perspective, the paper adopts an approach to translation broadly based on the etymological meaning of the word as 'carrying across.' Given this premise, the paper examines how autobiography as a genre uses narration as a medium for constructing the self and its 'others' showing how in the process this self is 'translated' to the reader. Thus, the link that is proposed in this research between autobiography and translation is mainly focused on the role translingualism of the author of autobiography plays in rendering cultural, social, and political aspects to a reader/audience.

The study aims to examine the potential use of the genre of autobiography as a means for cultural translation of the self, with reference to Edward Said's memoir, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999). Said indeed produces a traditional autobiography in which he deals with his early formative years focusing on his experience at home and in the various educational institutions he attended between Cairo, Egypt, and the United States. The paper maintains that when examined

against the backdrop of autobiography studies, Said's memoir typically constructs the autobiographical self and its others. Moreover, the reader is led from the beginning to understand that this is Said's own subjective perspective of both personal and public matters; therefore, the question of interplay between memory, truth, and historical reality is addressed as an integral part of the notion of constructedness. The act of construction of self occurs within a context of constant translation influenced by the existence of Said between two cultures: the Arab and the Anglo-American. The memoir could be read as an account of the evolution of Said's resistance-driven sensibility influenced by his experience as a child living under colonial rule, unable to belong fully – for physical and geographical reasons – to his homeland, Palestine, and finally settling as an immigrant (though a very privileged one) between Egypt and the United States. This study, thus, explores the negotiation undertaken by Edward Said in his memoir, *Out of Place*, of the location in-between two languages and cultures (English and Arabic); and argues that by re-constructing his formative years, Said not only provides a personal account but also a statement about the identity of an intellectual belonging both to the Arab world through filiative ties and the Anglo-American tradition through professional and socio-cultural affiliation. Drawing on the concept of hybridity and third space proposed by Homi Bhabha, the paper discusses ways in which Said engages in cultural translation of himself and with which he constructs and negotiates his position as a Palestinian/Arab intellectual with very strong influence and presence in the Anglo-American culture.

Autobiography deals with writing about oneself in the world and as such the contriving of the narrative involves representing the self in relation to others; it is a constant search for past time and space, and a perpetual reflection of and on the present. Thus, it intersects with narration and memory. In his seminal edited volume, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), James Olney explores the historical roots of autobiographical writings and the impulses that motivated people to provide willingly to the public their own story. However, he traces the evolution of interest by critics in autobiographical writings providing very interesting insights about the earlier studies that dealt with this type of writing (11–13). He explains that in the case of autobiographies by literary figures (or criticism scholars for that matter), the role of autobiography becomes twofold: in addition to providing insight into the autobiographer's life, it further provides a synthesis of the oeuvre produced by this author (14).<sup>1</sup> This is very relevant in the case of Said whose memoir becomes a “central document” providing integral insights to some of his lines of research – particularly the line that deals with the various affiliations the intellectual socially or culturally has or consciously develops within his/her milieu. Moreover, Said's formulations on the notion of exile essential for his model of the intellectual are enacted in his own account of himself and his identity in the memoir.

## 1. Construction of the Self and the Other in Autobiography

Dealing with autobiography means addressing important intricately connected issues; namely the story/history (i.e. the private and the public narrative of the account); the role of memory in 'constructing' this account; the question of truth or rather 'truthfulness' of the account; and the position of the self (both autobiographical and narrative) within this account. Within the field of autobiographical studies, scholars address the difference between an autobiography, which, as the naming indicates, is an account of the entire life span of the author, and memoir, which rather deals with a bracketed section of the life/history of the writer. This was discussed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their reference book *Reading Autobiography* (2010). They maintain that for contemporary writing "the categorization of memoirs often signals works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author's standing as a professional writer with the work's status as an aesthetic object" (4). They also maintain that writing a memoir foregrounds "historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations" (4). More importantly, nonetheless, they categorize memoir under a larger umbrella term, that of "life writing" or "life narrative" which deals with acts of representation of one's own life and the life of others. However, this intersubjective mode of writing relies heavily in its constructed nature on the role of memory: "When we read or listen to an autobiographical narrative, then, we listen for and attend to the role of remembering [...] in the act of making meaning out of the past and the present" (30). Through this selectivity of memory, and the "perspective of old age, Said discerns how both geographical ruptures and familial estrangements propelled him to search for a freely chosen identity" (Barbour 298). From the outset he states that having lived in different places in the world was part of "growing up, gaining identity, forming [his] consciousness of [him]self and others" (Said 1999, xiv). Thus, he acknowledges the influence of physical mobility on his early development and later on his making as an Arab intellectual working from within US educational and intellectual institutions. He even decides to select only the years of his education (school to university years) for his focus. Moreover, and in line with the genre of the memoir, he explains that he used this period of time to explore "implicitly the hold those very early school experiences had on me, why their hold still persists, and why I still find them fascinating and interesting enough to write about for readers fifty years late" (Said 1999, xiv).

In line with this view that a memoir deals with a bracketed section of the writer's life, which constructs reality rather than simply represent it, is the view explicated by Jerome Bruner in his article "Self-making and world making" (2001) concerning the nature of autobiographical narrative. According to Bruner, narrative includes elements that are both ordinary and expected and others that are more 'individualized'; however, it is through such elements that identity and agency

are highlighted. This individualization, which makes the memoir worth telling to public readers, is achieved through what Bruner terms as “turning points” in the narrative, meaning “those episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agent’s intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought” (31). Indeed Said’s narrative account is rich in such episodes that acted as turning points in his life at the time or in hindsight; they were mostly related to the growing consciousness and awareness that came to bear on him of the wielding of power by parental authority, school establishment, and colonial representatives. With the turning points language itself becomes an active element of performance; with referential possibilities stretched beyond the limited meaning of words. One of the most poignant turning points is the loss of Palestine with the events of 1948, which combines the role of memory in reconstructing past events and the position of the narrative and autobiographical selves in the process. This turning point could be seen also as contributing to the conscious construction of Said’s Palestinian identity. Although as a child he was aware that a loss was experienced, still “[w]hat overcomes me now is the scale of dislocation our family and friends experienced and of which I was scarcely conscious, essentially unknowing witness in 1948” (Said 1999, 115). Said was unable to grasp at the time that displacement due to overcoming Palestine had massive negative impacts not only on his family but on the Palestinians as a people. His Aunt Nabiha seems to have been the family member deeply immersed in the calamity investing emotional and practical effort. She spoke about the early atrocities with a “tone [that] was often plaintive and scandalized as she described the horrors of events like Deir Yassin – “naked girls taken through *their* camps on the backs of trucks” (Said 114). Thus, the words of this politically engaged relative performed to Said’s childhood eyes the image of humiliation and horror. Said himself acknowledges that this talk about the massacres was not simply a verbal expression of the “horror of a horrendous cold-blooded massacre of innocent civilians” but rather a physical embodiment of the “shame of women being exposed to male eyes” (114). Stepping back into the commentary by the narrator, Said reminds the reader that his political consciousness had yet to be developed by maintaining that at the time he could not “imagine whose eyes” was his Aunt Nabiha speaking about gazing at bodies of Palestinian women – to their shame. This part of the account is also a turning point marking one of the formative ruptures experienced by Said contributing to his embracement of the exilic mode of thinking and acceptance of detachment from places: “All of us seemed to have given up on Palestine as a place, never to be returned, [...] missed silently and pathetically” (Said 115). Said, the narrator, captures a point in time when language not only performs the atrocious act, but also when he as a child – shielded by his family from political upheavals of his time – fails to articulate his deep sense of loss because of the limited range of words he possessed with which he could verbalize the concept of loss. He was not

able to ask his father about the whole ordeal as he “had not available vocabulary for the question” (Said 1999, 115).

This brings us to the question of ‘truth’ with regards to representing the self through writing autobiographies, and the role the understanding of truth plays in identification of self. In this work, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), John Eakin argues that “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiography narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). However, this word “fictive” is elaborated later by Eakin who indicates that the work of twentieth century autobiographers led to the acceptance of the fact that autobiography is not about the reconstruction of a historically verifiable past, but rather this past is shaped by memory and imagination “to serve the needs of the present consciousness” (1985, 5–6). Said upholds a similar position towards his construction of himself and his family. In the opening line of the first chapter that he regards himself as the “invention” of his family, given the fact that “[a]ll families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language” (Said 1999, 3). The invention in the case of Said is double: he was invented by his family in the sense that he was formed and influenced thereby and he in turn ‘invents’ his family and life through the dialectical interplay between his impulse at self-invention and the received models of selfhood in his culture (Eakin 1985,7).

Not only is the issue of truth measured differently in autobiography, Eakin in a later article presents a view of autobiography based on neuroscience where he claims that narrative is biological and part of our imaginative representation of ourselves and our lives. Thus, “the allegiance to truth [...] is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one’s self” (Eakin 2004, 125). Autobiography combines the personal and the public and reconstructs an account about one’s identity and position, which cannot and should not be checked against hard facts.

Past life is being rearranged because it is being interpreted in terms of the meaning (or meanings) that life now is seen to possess. The dominant autobiographic truth is, therefore, the vision of the pattern and meaning of life which the autobiographer has at the moment of writing his autobiography. Autobiography cannot be read in a truthful manner if the reader cannot, or will not, recapture the standpoint, the point of view of the autobiographer as autobiographer. (Weintraub 827)

Truth, therefore, can be experienced when the reader understands that the autobiographer’s viewpoint is influenced by emotions and other intangible factors of the past. In this respect, Micaela Maftai speaks of “individual truths” which are pitted against “other” forms of truths:

The memoirist *can* ‘work with’ alternate truths [...], or at least allow them into the scope of the work. Indeed, establishing one’s own story out of the stories of all other implicated individuals seems to necessarily involve carving one’s account from all possible accounts/ constructions, thus involving ‘work[ing] with’ multiple truths. Ultimately, one can only be sure of one’s individual truth [...]. (19; original emphasis)

Accordingly, whether the autobiographer deviates from publicly accepted facts or widely circulating beliefs is beside the point. The autobiographer is ultimately constructing his/her identity, position, self by representing himself/herself to the reader.

In the same vein, Said is aware that what he is providing to his reader is rather a version of a truth not necessarily shared by all those represented – and certainly not the reader. He felt to have been motivated by being “true to (his) perhaps peculiar memories, experiences, and feelings” and in achieving this truth Said does not set himself in binary opposition vis-à-vis his other but rather “both as narrator and as character, [he has]consciously not spared [himself] the same ironies or embarrassing recitals” (Said 1999, xiv–xv). Moreover, from the perspective of antagonistic readers, Edward Said’s memoir was received with great controversy concerning this question of truth. Scholars analyzing the work have noted the attack leveled against Said by Justus Reid Weiner “a critic who claims to have conducted some research with the explicit aim to reveal Said’s life account as largely fabricated and politically motivate” (Döring 72). However, Döring immediately brushes aside being concerned with discussing the memoir as a “historical record,” and maintains that as a reader of the memoir he would rather place the work against the backdrop of Postcolonial Studies and the ways that could be adopted to “engage with the challenges of transcultural literatures” (Döring 72). Similarly, Paul Armstrong alludes to this public debate over the authenticity of Said’s account, only to maintain that what really matters is the link between the self/identity constructed in the memoir and the larger context of cross-cultural interaction:

It matters little to me, however, whether any one of Said’s autobiographical claims happens to be true or false. What interests me is how the persona he constructs in his memoir helps us understand, perhaps better than his theoretical writings, how persona identities and community affiliations are created and how cross-cultural conflicts thwart the hermeneutic and political ideal of reciprocity. (Armstrong 98)

Reading Said’s memoir reveals the strong role played by cultural translation in creating and representing identity and establishing affiliation despite the lack of rootedness to a particular location or place.

## 2. The Model of Cultural Translation in Postcolonial Studies

Given the centrality of Said as a major contributor to postcolonial studies, his memoir cannot be severed from this larger context. Although his work is steeped in the personal, it is also a testimony on and a negotiation of the historical and socio-political public context in which he lived and operated. Furthermore, Said represents to the reader the different factors that contributed to the construction of his own identity/ self. In this representation, the condition of exile, estrangement, and displacement is upheld. Exile is not experienced physically and geographically mainly – because Said after all was privileged and was not a refugee nor was he forced to migrate. In his case the situation of exile is rather a precondition for the intellectual to be able to mediate between cultures of origin and those of destination. Perhaps, Said's cultural and critical views could illuminate this position that a reader sees being constructed in the memoir. Speaking of intellectuals in exile, Said credits their experience with the additional dimension of the "originality" of vision which arises from their awareness of more than one culture, or one 'home' for that matter. This vision "gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that [...] is *contrapuntal*" (Said 1984, 55; original emphasis).<sup>2</sup> He believes that the experiences of old and new, 'native' and hosting culture, memories and realities are all juxtaposed contrapuntally in a way that "diminishes orthodox judgment and elevates appreciative sympathy" (Said 1984, 55). Exile, therefore, enables the intellectual to operate in a space where difference is negotiated and is seen as a possibility for enrichment, despite the harshness of the encounters with the other and the displacement that is a precondition to this status.

However, the question that needs to be asked is how does the sympathetic understanding of difference help in producing works that avoid mere opposition or works predicated on polarity? Within the context of Postcolonial Studies, Bill Ashcroft's "poetics of transformation" offers a possibility for achieving this end: "A poetics of transformation is concerned with the ways in which writers and readers contribute constitutively to meaning, the ways in which colonized societies appropriate imperial discourses, and how they interpolate their voices and concerns into dominant systems of textual production and distribution" (19). In addition to his cultural and critical works where he addresses the cultural production of the imperial and colonial powers, Said appropriates the form of autobiography disclosing personal colonial encounters and in the process translating to the reader how such encounters were used to develop his consciousness of his position as a powerful Arab-American intellectual. This process acknowledges power relations and tries to shake established positions: "Transformation recognizes that power is a critical part of our cultural life, and resists by adapting and redirecting discursive power, creating new forms of cultural production" (Ashcroft 19).

Autobiographies written by individuals who experienced colonialism, Third World subjects, immigrants, people in diaspora, exiles and otherwise individuals



in-between cultures achieve Ashcroft's proposed transformation. In such works "the very notion of 'location' starts to change, when 'place' becomes layered with numerous crossings" (Anderson 114). Such crossings are represented autobiographically by postcolonial writers in a manner that challenges the established forms of autobiography produced by colonialists. Drawing on the ideas introduced by Homi Bhabha, Smith and Watson argue that autobiographies written by postcolonial subjects redirect discursive power relations by introducing a new platform for self-representation, which negotiates a new understanding of difference. "[P]ostcolonial theory has importantly emphasized another sense of location of colonized subjects as "third space," in Homi Bhabha's term. For Bhabha, the third space is a zone or a "place of hybridity" produced at the moment of colonial encounter, a site at which communication, negotiation, and cross-translation may occur" (46).

As such, both the narrative self and the autobiographical self in Said's memoir can be read in view of such notions introduced by Homi Bhabha in his interview "Third Space" (1990). Bhabha explains how the immigrant/ exile could be seen to possess two selves: one with an eye on the society/ culture of origin and the other immersed in the new culture. However, Bhabha proposes that in this "third place" both selves lose their "sovereignty" in order "to gain the freedom of a politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference" (213).<sup>3</sup> He further explains that "the crucial feature of this [...] awareness is that it doesn't need to totalize in order to legitimate political action or cultural practice" (1990, 213). Thus, according to this view – offered by Bhabha as a pathway to perceive of the self outside of the simplistic binary opposition between self and other – that denies the fact that the self is capable of holding the ultimate truth and that celebrates 'cultural difference,'<sup>4</sup> cultural translation is inevitable.

Said further addresses personal, political, social, cultural, and historical events that cannot be assimilated under West versus East;<sup>5</sup> but are rather individual components where difference is negotiated. Thus, the nebulous concept of 'cultural translation' as offered by Bhabha, in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994) particularly in the chapter titled "How Newness Enters the World," is useful in reading Said. This concept is mainly invoked in migrant contexts and raises the question of the approaches by the migrant vis-à-vis his/ her own culture and the new culture where s/he becomes situated. One of the key features of this cultural translation is the "borderline negotiations" (Bhabha 1994, 319). The question that is raised is whether the 'migrant' is capable of freeing the "essence of the self" from the restrictions of his/her own culture or rather changes only on the surface "preserving identity under its protean forms" (1994, 321). In this sense, the experience of the migrant is "translational," i.e. it is based on negotiation of difference. The migrant is "caught in-between a 'nativist,' even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation" (1994, 320). However, this situation involves a state of constant negotiation of meaning through language and otherwise. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Bhabha compares this "newness

of cultural translation” to Benjamin’s ‘foreignness of language,’ which implies “describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference” (1994, 325). In this paradigm, the translator, therefore, is rather a trope for a person always involved in a process of negotiating meaning. On another level, language becomes the site of translation but as “language *in actu* (enunciation, positionality)” (1994, 326). The particular selection by Said of specific memories about the use of certain words/expressions in Arabic or in English is made keeping in mind the cultural and socio-political implications such words invoke.

### 3. *Out of Place: A Site of Cultural Translation*

Said’s act of autobiography as translation can be discerned on various planes. In his work, the narrator is separate from the autobiographical subject; thus, multiple layers of the self are produced (Maftai 10) and become interconnected in a process of translation. There are three selves at play: Edward Said, the accomplished intellectual driven by his serious illness to write his memoir; Edward, the boy and young man – the protagonist of the narrative; and Edward as perceived by his parents (mostly his mother), family, and friends. Narrative progresses from early school days towards the experience of high school and university in the United States. The narrative is not chronological and is interspersed with statements and comments made by Said, the narrator.

The narrative binding these selves together is, as the title of the memoir indicates, heavily permeated with a sense of alienation. Said confirms this sense from the outset when he links the experience of schooling and the foreignness/Englishness thereof with the essential ‘difference’ he felt as a student from other students in schools in which he studied. These students with their English names were just ‘*right*’ and stood in sharp contrast to Said; despite the fact that he admits that they have never referred to ‘home,’ for as a child he associated the notion of home with them. With home representing difference, to Said “in the deepest sense “home” was something [he] was excluded from” (Said 1999, 42). This early sense of alienation was not only spatial but also social and cultural as Said further explains in this part. Although he does not use the description ‘migrant’ to identify his family and his life in Cairo, the narrative is imbued with this awareness of in-betweenness: Cairo “a city I always liked yet in which I never felt I belonged”; English teachers were neighbors but were never people whom he liked; all children in school “thought” his family was Egyptian but “there was something “off” and out of place about us (me in particular)” (Said 43). This sense of difference and alienation is communicated early on in the narrative and punctuates the interplay among the various selves. This leads to Said’s continuous engagement within a process of ‘translating’ and ‘negotiating’ his position vis-à-vis others and the readers.

In this work, the use of language becomes a site for the enactment of cultural translation. Said's life both personal and public could be seen as space between English-speaking and Arabic-speaking cultures. As much as the two languages were part of his daily experience, his comments on the use of one language and not the other in intimate, difficult, painful, or even happy occasions are statements on the experience of language as an expression of identity. For that purpose, Said employed code switching<sup>6</sup> on some occasions or what was termed by Cronin a "negentropic translational perspective" (129), where a strategy of partial or non-translation is adopted (130). According to this strategy, a few words are rendered in Latin letters in italics, most of the time followed by a "translation" into English. Although this strategy is not used frequently, it was employed by Said in a couple of occasions to mark the reversal of situations of humiliation. In his account of his school years in Victoria College in Cairo, Said describes Mr. Keith Gatley, the form teacher: "Gatley was referred to as *"al-Khawal,"* or "faggot," his dreadful scar (it was rumored) being the result of a fight with a pimp whom (according to the same scurrilous report) Gatley tried to cheat" (Said 1999, 182). The Arabic word is not used for lack of an English equivalent; on the contrary, it represents a realm of resistance unreachable by the teacher described as such due to cultural and linguistic gap between him and the student.

However, the act of cultural self-translation is also combined with "translation between the conceptual and affective 'feel' of two languages" (Besemeres 32). Thus, towards the end of the memoir, Said stops the narrative to contemplate his relationship with the three languages of his upbringing: Arabic, English, and French in affective terms. "Arabic was forbidden and "wog"; French was always "theirs," not mine; English was authorized, but unacceptable as the language of the hated British" (Said 1999,198). Having acknowledged the troublesome interplay of languages due to the emotional and cultural value ascribed to them, Said states immediately in the following paragraph that only in his old age he is able to articulate his ideas in any of such languages in a less cumbersome manner: "Only now that I'm over sixty can I feel more comfortable, not translating but speaking or writing directly in those languages, almost but never quite with the fluency of a native" (1999,198). However, this sense of in-betweenness is never relinquished by Said; despite admitting that as his intellectual identity became more established he became more comfortable with the use of English and French, he adds the caveat that he lacks the fluency he believes a native should enjoy. Said also uses this part of the narrative to alert the reader that language was also a factor contributing to his conscious identity construction: "Only now can I overcome my alienation from Arabic caused by education and exile and take pleasure in it" (1999,198). It is true that Said remains to be an exile – by choice and sentiment – however, only after having asserted his ties to Arabic through the process of constructing his Arab-Palestinian identity, could he 'enjoy' Arabic without being troubled by its use.

The narrative reveals complex interaction between Arabic and English, and creates “new dialogic spaces in which language choice is located outside the oppositional model set up by the traditional binaries of postcolonial theorizing: centre/margin, self/other, colonizer/colonized” (Wilson 237). Constructing the image others had of him, Said, for instance, recalls comments on his moral and physical appearance and behavior across his narrative. In this regard, Arabic and English are juxtaposed throughout evoking in the reader the sensitivity that Said experienced whenever either language enunciated a cultural judgment. Within a few pages of the narrative, Said – the narrator – comments on the impact that language had on his narrated self. On one occasion, he recounted that as a child whenever he committed infractions against his sisters he would be “reported” and then “disgraced” in English (Said 1999, 59). But at the same time, speaking of the perception his parents had of his physical and moral clumsiness as a child, Said concludes the episode with an account about his inability to speak in a manner compliant with the decorum ‘expected’ of him. In the process, he contrasts the use of the English words “biting” and “sharp” to describe the tongue with the value laden Arabic word “long” (1999, 68). This pronouncement against him alienated Said from the realm of “required politeness and verbal savoir faire, important qualities in most Arab societies” (1999, 68). Judged by the standards of Arabic language, Said was “regarded as outside the range of normal behavior, a rogue creature of whom other people should be wary” (1999, 68). Therefore, language in this context extends beyond the binary difference of language of colonizer versus that of colonized. It is invoked to reflect on the expressive impact of Arabic and to act as one of the Arab cultural components contributing to the making of Said’s identity as a Palestinian Arab.

The feeling of foreignness extended to other cultural signs, such as food, cinema, and games; when he was transferred to the Cairo School of American Children, Said was able to ‘belong’ (even if temporarily) by the Americanized pronunciation of his name “Edward Sigheed” (1999, 80). Nonetheless, his Arabic diet of Shami bread filled with cheese or prosciutto invoked in him the state of alienation as he “fell back into doubt and shame that I, an American child, ate a different food, which no one ever asked to taste, nor asked me to explain” (81). In stark contrast to this alienating context of Cairo – where the family belonged, but not that much – the scenes from Jerusalem are presented as breaks from the isolation of Cairo. “Our daily conversation in school and home was uniformly in Arabic; unlike in Cairo, where English was encouraged, our family in Jerusalem “belonged” and our native tongue prevailed everywhere, even when talking about Hollywood films: Tarzan became “Tarazan”” (Said 85). In this reference to the use of Arabic in Jerusalem Said decides to provide the Arabic and English references to indicate the “complexity of language and culture without which translation would not exist and which justifies its existence in the first place” (Cronin 130).

In his years in Victoria College, the relationship with language becomes very intricate as the use of Arabic becomes an act of defiance on the part of the unruly students who negotiate their existence in a foreign school on Egyptian soil and among foreign teachers. One of the climatic moments of this defiance resides in the use of “criminalized” (Said 1999, 184) Arabic and even taboo words. One of the masters that rather fell victim to this conduct was the history teacher who would be addressed by one of the students “mouthing an Arabic imprecation [...] immediately followed by a “loose” translation [...] that had nothing to do with the foul phrase (“your mother’s c----t”)” (1999, 184). With all this ability to act resistively as he advances in his school years, Said translates the linguistic divide between himself and the “imported staff” as an “unbridgeable gulf”; pupils “were viewed as either a distasteful job or as a group of delinquents to be punished anew every day” (Said 1999, 184). The manner with which Said explains his relationship to school as an institution within colonial context asserts that language performed resistance through the play on the linguistic gap between teachers and students. Nevertheless, this elusive act of defiance is matched with the corresponding ability to perform physical action against unruly students by the colonial authority of the school. Said represents through this and other similar episodes the tensions between his own identity – in the making – and the colonial alienating reality he is experiencing.

Resistance in the case of Said is not just a matter of ‘using’ the language, it is closely connected to endorsing or rejecting certain descriptions ascribed to him and his family. In his account of the late forties and his family’s life in Cairo at the time, Said contemplates the position of people of Levantine origin – who for long had been an integral part of the cosmopolitan scene of the city. Nonetheless, he feels indignant at the increasing incidence of the designation of his family and others in their position as *khawagat*, “the designated and respectful title for foreigners” (1999, 195) instead of the more culturally nuanced “Shawam,” which combined connotations of geographical origin and lifestyle in Egypt. Said’s problem with this designation is that it referred to “foreigners” by Egyptian Muslims which “always carried a tinge of hostility” (Said 1999, 195). Said refused to “dwell” in this naming and even “resented” it. He explained this in his own words: “I chafed at it, partly because my growing sense of Palestinian identity [...] refused the demeaning label, partly because my emerging consciousness of myself as something altogether more complex and authentic than a colonial mimic simply refused” (1999, 195). Thus, Said could live with the alienation and with the in-betweenness (indicated in being named a Shami), and even forge a resilient self in the process. However, this notion of being espied as a sheer mimic of a colonial individual (in which he joined several times in ridiculing) – as the example from Victoria’s College tells – was an unacceptable possibility altogether.

Said expresses to the reader his awareness as an “author” of the complexity of working between two languages and “trying always to translate experiences

that [he] had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language” (1999, xiii). The translational and the transnational dimensions of the memoir are as such acknowledged by Said from the outset. He is also conscious of the fact that the question is no longer one of opposition between the two; it is rather one of intertwining by trying “to produce one [language] in the language of the other” (i.e. that of Arabic in English) (1999, xiv). The situation is made even more complex with the fact that in his case “languages were mixed up [...] and crossed over from one realm to the other” (xiv). The narrating self is a very fluent master of the acquired English language; but is also sharply conscious of the implications of the use of the language in contexts where it is not the native one. In more than one occasion, Said interrupts the narrative to make comments on the use of English around him or against him in school or in social encounters. Thus, the use of English is translated to the reader as an indication of a statement or a position rather than a practice taken for granted. The account is interspersed with this conscious use of the language and with the consciousness of its use ‘against’ the narrator and the autobiographical self. Rita Wilson qualifies this interaction between the mother tongue and ‘new’ language as “dwelling” in a new language with all the possibilities of “interlinguistic mediation, of imagining, learning, understanding and performing other languages” (244). However, as much as Said is aware of these possibilities, he seems to have been caught in the intricacies of this language exchange. On one level Arabic is Said’s mother tongue and is a formative part of his character “since identity and self-concept develop over a long period, usually relying on the surrounding language” (Wilson 243). On another level English cannot be said to have been a ‘new’ language in the sense of being newly acquired – as he was quite fluent in the language being the language of learning from early childhood. But Said’s arrival to the United States brought with it ‘newness’ in his perception as a narrator and a narrated self of the language and the cultural elements and practices it comprises.

Despite the fact, that throughout his narrative Said does not speak with any nationalist nostalgia about his life in the Arab world, his heightened sense of estrangement experienced upon his arrival at the US to study makes him think of Arabic and his life in the Arab world as a possibility for recovering some sense of ‘home’ – “ludicrous as that may sound, and though I believe I have no illusions about the “better” life I might have had, had I remained in the Arab world, [...], there is still some measure of regret” (Said 1999, 222). At Mount Hermon high school, Said also experiences this same sense of alienation and tells of an encounter he had with a person called Edmund Alexander who was an acquaintance of a friend from Cairo and to whom he introduced himself in an attempt to establish rapport. Said’s gesture of intimacy approaching the man was using Arabic “thinking that his and my native language might open up a more generous avenue of interaction” (228). However, he was shunned by Alexander only to realize that this ‘migrant’ rather opted for ‘assimilation’ by refusing to use

Arabic in his conversation with Said; ironically, though, Alexander refused using English heavily laden with Arabic locution (228). Through his autobiographical narrative, Said embodies the negotiation of identity and of ‘beginning’ in once again whenever he begins in a new context. Upon arrival at the United States he realized that he is starting a new experience characterized by “unlearning [...], relearning things from scratch, improvising, self-inventing, trying and failing, experimenting, canceling, and restarting in surprising and frequently painful ways” (Said 222). Therefore, though Said cannot be said to be writing from the margin, he was not mainstream either; and in being in-between in this sense, his work is a translation (i.e. negotiation of identity).

Said’s memoir could be read as his personal account of the view he held of how the intellectual should be. He was aware that for an intellectual not to be co-opted s/he had to preserve this detachment from the idea of ‘home’ and rather embrace the spirit of ‘exile.’ In the conclusion of his work he echoes the notion Bhabha states that the self in negotiation through cultural translation is not a monolithic entity seeking assimilation. Said closes his narrative saying: “I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a sold self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance” (1999, 295). This account of a formative part of Said’s life is an example of cultural translation in action; a translation that enables dialogue without necessarily aiming at inclusion and reconciliation; that shows subversion as a means of survival; that assures us that “dissonances” are rather enabling and that to prefer “being not quite right and out of place” (1999, 295) is a valid choice.

## Notes

- 1 This view is adopted by other scholars who analyzed Said’s memoir: for instance Paul Armstrong reads Said’s autobiography and the role of exile in intellectual’s life against the backdrop of his other critical work *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*; similarly Tobias Döring reads Said’s autobiography not in search for verification of factual information but juxtaposes it with works such as *After the Last Sky* to argue for the possibility of reading culturally different texts with a desire of critical engagement rather than reading such texts as determinedly fixed.
- 2 For a critique of this notion of contrapuntality (the image borrowed from music to indicate the creation of harmony from dissonance) as an approach to difference, see Paul Armstrong (117).
- 3 The researcher is aware of the critique leveled against Bhabha for failing at times to give concrete definitions of “third space” and “liminality” and that he is read by some as celebrating an elitist version of detachment that does not take into account the plight of the less privileged groups. For example,

Robert Spencer states, “writers like Bhabha who hymn an extant cosmopolitan condition have a tendency to glide free of worldly affiliations into a sort of intercontinental latitude. Theirs is a weightless detachment from territorial boundaries and from any commitment to alleviating the plight of the vast majority of human kind that continues to live without the privileges of unlimited foreign travel” (Spencer 404–405).

- 4 “With the concept of difference, [...], what I was attempting to do was to begin to see how the notion of the West itself, or Western culture, its liberalism and relativism – these very potent mythologies of ‘progress’ – also contain a cutting edge, a limit. With the notion of cultural difference, I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (Bhabha 1990, 209).
- 5 The researcher is aware that such designations “East” and “West” should be problematized and cannot be sweepingly used to indicate socio-political or even geographical realities. However, they are used in the sense in which they were deployed by Said and Bhabha alike during the nineties of the twentieth century, with the rise and spread of postcolonial studies.
- 6 Alternating between two or more languages, using the technique of transliteration of Arabic/non-English words.

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