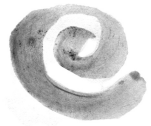


On identity, cultural history, and the power of language



Literary translator Emma Ramadan on the complexities of growing up in a multi-language household, understanding the cultural value of a good translation, and how our own understanding of self is wrapped up in language.

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As told to Sara Wintz, 3099 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Translation](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#).

Did you grow up in a multilingual household?

My mom's mother tongue is English. She's British. But she also speaks French fluently, and apparently speaks German, though I've never heard her speak it. My father's first language was Arabic, then French, then English. They only spoke to my brother and me in English. My dad's whole family was in Southern California with us. Every weekend we had a big family get together at my grandparents' house with a big Lebanese meal and there'd be a ton of Arabic and a lot of switching between Arabic and English and French. But I only spoke English.

So you couldn't understand what they were saying in Arabic?

Not at all. There was probably an aspect of... my mom couldn't understand Arabic, so my father didn't want me to have a language with him that excluded my mother. But I don't know that he actually wanted to teach me Arabic. He never spoke to me about Lebanon. Both my parents spoke French and we spent a lot of time in France. It was this language my parents had apart from me and my brother, so if they wanted to speak about things in front of us, they had their secret language. When he could, my brother immediately started taking French in school and so did I. We wanted to be able to understand and respond to what they were saying. I really enjoyed it, and so I kept doing it. My mom spoke French pretty well, and she helped me practice and helped me with my homework. At a certain point, for example with my translation work, she was no longer able to help me. It became very clear very quickly that her French was not an intricate literary French. I started asking her questions from the translation projects I was working on and she'd say, "I have no idea." At a certain point my French became different than my parents' French.

When did you decide to be a translator?

When I was in college. I was studying Comparative Literature and I didn't really know what to do with that. I knew I really liked books and I really liked reading and I really liked French and I really liked language, but at Brown, there's no core curriculum and literally all I did was take classes where I read and wrote essays about books. That was what I enjoyed doing, but it also felt super unsatisfying. I wasn't interested in turning books into homework, something that you're dissecting and analyzing to the point of just trying to get an A. The format of that sucked all the life out of it for me. I was expressing this to someone, and she said, "Don't you know there's a translation track? It's a track of Comp Lit where you take writing workshops and linguistics classes and you basically use your love of books and your love of language to translate and create a new work in English."

Translation, to me, sounded like a great way to engage with literature, in a way that feels satisfying and doesn't feel like it's killing the magic of literature and is instead giving it *more* life. The idea of it sounded great.

I studied abroad in France and tried to do a little bit of translation on my own, and then I came back to Brown. As soon as I came back, I switched to the translation track of Comp Lit. I had really great mentors at Brown: Cole Swensen, Forrest Gander, Robyn Creswell. After graduation, I went straight into the M.A. program in Cultural Translation at The American University of Paris, where I learned how to be mindful of what it means to be translating from one culture to another, and the disparities between cultures. Those were questions I hadn't been asked to think about at Brown, questions I wouldn't have pushed myself to think about if I were to try and translate on my own. It was perfect because I was living in a French-speaking country getting more practice with the language. We read translation theory and literary theory and cultural theory and participated in workshops. We were practicing, we were translating books. We had an advisor. It felt like I was really honing something. I was getting to talk a lot about translation and philosophy of translation, and we were all figuring out what kinds of translators we wanted to be. It pushed me to a new level where I felt way more equipped to be able to translate.

What are the kinds of questions a translator asks when they're translating culture?

Foreignizing versus domesticating, which is the opposite of foreignizing, is making something familiar to target readers. Back in the '80s, there was a lot of translation being done and books that were published that erased cultural references from books to make it more readable for Americans. I don't think people are doing that anymore, or at least it's happening to a lesser degree. And now we have footnotes, now we have glossaries, now we have this, now we have that. But it's also a question of how to be generous to a reader and also generous to the culture that you're translating from, and not erasing anything just for the sake of making your target reader comfortable.

Sometimes in the work that you're doing, for example, translating Virginie Despentes's Pretty Things, you're translating subcultures. What's that like?

That is really difficult for me because I don't claim to be part of that subculture. Often, I'm translating things that are about a specific subculture or culture that I'm not a part of and maybe don't have access to. But in the same way that translations work regardless of the content, it's research. Your job is to be familiar with that culture, to learn about that culture or that subculture and then render it accurately. I remember when I was first translating Anne Garréta, a lot of it takes place in night clubs, and my advisor said, "You need to go to night clubs. Now that you're in Paris you have to go night clubs." I was like "Okay..." because it's research. And with Despentes's books, a lot of it was just asking my friends certain questions. There are references to certain bands. So asking a friend, "Do you know this band, who would know this band, what kind of age group am I looking at?" And the slang... I mean, if there's a type of slang used in one subculture in France, that doesn't mean that it's similar to slang and subculture here. I just try to make it sound authentic. It doesn't always mean recreating the same thing. For me it was about looking at a subculture of 20-somethings in Paris, asking "How do 20-somethings in America speak?" Not "How do they speak in France?" and then imitating that.

Besides going to nightclubs, what other forms does this research take?

That's very dependent on the book. With the Moroccan poetry that I was working on recently by Ahmed Bouanani, I was in Morocco for a year. That involved going to his house, going to places he went to, and talking with his family. His poetry has a lot of references to cultural things, like Moroccan legends, Moroccan tales, buildings, the colors of the streets. A lot of that, you can research, if you're an academic with access to various periodicals. I'm not an academic, so being on the ground, being able to see he's talking about this color, is helpful. "Okay, he's talking about the way the minarets look in the sky, he's talking about this legend that no Googling can help me figure out." But if I go ask the librarian at this place, then he can tell me what it is.

That's really cool. So that must've been pretty exciting, to be graduating from college and becoming a translator, traveling and experiencing all of these new things as part of that research.

Yeah. It was also important to me to translate from the French, by authors who lived in places other than the country of France. There are so many places in the world that speak French, where people are writing in French. It's a really amazing thing about the French language. I mean, it's also very unfortunate that this happened because of colonization, but it means that as a French speaker, I have access to so much more literature than if I spoke Hungarian, for example. I wanted to not just focus on France, and I wanted to find works that were coming from a different perspective and a different nation. There's not a lot of books being translated from Morocco. There's not a lot of books being translated from Algeria. There's not a lot of books being translated from Senegal. All of these places where there is French writing, there's just a lot of reticence or, I don't know, maybe lack of initiative on the part of translators and publishers. If I can pitch and get, like, one more Moroccan book published that otherwise wouldn't have been, that's a good thing.

What draws you to translation?

For me it's always been that I really enjoy reading and writing, but I don't think that I personally have something that's worthy to write. I don't have a story that really needs to be told. There's so much good writing already in the world and there are so many stories that do need to be told. If I can help those stories proliferate and be heard, rather than putting my own stuff on paper, which doesn't need to be proliferated and heard, that feels really good to me. I like giving wider access to these texts that I think are really special and that are really important for people to know about.

What do you do to avoid burnout?

One thing I do is read a book that's not work-related for 10 minutes before I go to bed, and sometimes I watch really bad TV. I'm part of a *Bachelor* fantasy league right now. You choose the women that you think are going to go and get roses or whatever and you get points. It's like football... I don't actually know how a fantasy league works. Honestly, I used to stop work at dinnertime and spend the rest of the night relaxing, and I don't do that anymore because I have so much work. My self-care has kind of gone out the window. I think my version of self-care is that I burn myself out and work way too hard and work way too many hours for a certain stretch of time, and then I freak out and go in the other direction and take time off of work and travel, like going back to Beirut. All these things go to the total opposite extreme to balance everything out. It might be more destructive than self-care, but ...

It seems good.

That's what I have right now.

You recently went on a trip to Beirut to give a lecture at the American University. It was the first time you visited Lebanon, where your father's from. What was that like?

Growing up, my dad never spoke to me about Lebanon. He left during the war and never went back. He was 18 or 19. That part of our family's history was something that, growing up, I never really had access to. There were members of my family I saw every week who I couldn't communicate with because they only spoke Arabic, like my grandparents. It was this weird nebulous narrative and I didn't know really what it meant.

I didn't know what it meant to be Lebanese. I didn't have any Lebanese friends. It was half of my story that I never explored, never thought about, or really identified with. My mother's British. I spent a lot of time in England and, as a kid in Southern California I used to get made fun of a lot because I would say "boot" instead of "trunk" or "trolley" instead of "shopping cart," things that made me feel British. When people pointed out that I was saying something that wasn't American, the reason was, "Oh, it's because I'm British." I had this contrast of feeling very British and never feeling Lebanese, or even knowing what it would mean to feel Lebanese. Every time I made a friend who was Lebanese, they said, "Oh, you don't speak Arabic? You've never been to Lebanon? What are you talking about, you're not a real Lebanese." I felt a lot of frustration.

When I went to Beirut, it was strange because I realized there are things about me that actually are very Lebanese. And when I was walking down the street, everyone assumed I was. I mean, I am Lebanese, but nobody... I

didn't stick out. I walked into the American University without being asked for my ID. Every store I walked into, people immediately started speaking to me in Arabic. It was this really nice feeling to be like, "Oh, I'm one of everyone else. I blend in here. I can move around without being noticed as being a tourist or an outsider." That was a really special feeling I'd never had before. I felt like I had permission to feel Lebanese, and I felt like I had permission to call myself Lebanese, in a way that I'd never had before because I suddenly understood more about it and had been there and had seen it, and recognized in myself things that were already there, that were already part of me.

Sitting in cabs with men who looked like my grandfather and hearing the same music that my dad played, it was hard to have to walk into every single place and for people to speak to me in Arabic and to have to immediately say, "Oh, I don't speak Arabic." But everybody there speaks English, so it wasn't like I couldn't communicate. It was like this constant reminder that I'm not fully Lebanese. I wasn't fully immersed in the culture. I don't fully have access to the language. I stopped denying myself this right to call myself Lebanese. Since I got back to the states, the revolution has started, and I'm going to a solidarity protest in Boston, which is something I never would have done before because I would've been so removed from it. I probably wouldn't even be following it in the news. And now I'm not only following it in the news, but I'm wanting to be at a solidarity protest to see other Lebanese people who are like me who are in New England and who also feel removed from it. I'm still kind of wrapping my head around how I can connect with Lebanese people without feeling like a fraud or feeling like an imposter. When I went to this protest in Boston and couldn't read any of the signs or understand any of the chants, it made me feel like I can't actually connect and was still on the outside. I don't know, I'm still wrapping my head around how I engage with that part of myself in a way that feels authentic.

Does it change the way that you see the work that you do as a translator?

That's actually a really beautiful question to posit. I mean, you're right. My way of accessing Lebanese books is through translators because I can't read Arabic and I am told that a lot of the interesting contemporary writing that's being written is being written either in English or Arabic. It's not being written in French. And so, my way of reading that writing that I can't read in English is through a translator. That is a really beautiful thing that I can access thanks to the work of translators. How nice that translators exist!!

What's funny is that I used to think that learning French would enable me one day to connect with Lebanon because I'd be able to translate a Lebanese author from French, and that's very much been proven wrong to me. I've asked, "Who are the French Lebanese authors worth translating?" People always say that writers just aren't writing in French right now. Lebanese authors who were writing in French, because they were writing years and years ago, have already been translated. All the interesting stuff is happening in Arabic. When I realized that, it was this purpose that I had given to translation that was stripped away from me, too.

Recently this German video artist asked me to translate newspaper texts from the '30s that were all in French because it was the time of the French colonists. These texts are about these ruins in the first audio film ever made in Lebanon, and the film took place in these ruins. And so, when I go back to Lebanon, that's my number one priority, to go to these ruins. But it was the only time I've ever worked with an artist. He's basically tracing the journey of this film that's not accessible anymore and no one really knows anything about, but there's all these writings around it. He asked me to translate these texts, and it was this moment of like... It was right when I got back from Lebanon, and it was like, "Oh my God, I get to use my translation skills to learn about something to do with Lebanon and my culture!" It felt really satisfying.

I've felt removed from everything my whole life, and I feel like I don't have a place that feels like home. Home should be yourself. I don't feel I have a good grasp on who I am or how parts of me have shaped me. I think what was so exciting about going to Lebanon was it was sort of like a portal into how I was shaped by these people and language.

Emma Ramadan Recommends:

Five Things That Make Me Very Happy

You know those strawberry candies they have in doctor's waiting rooms sometimes? I love those.

Being in bookstores

I like stepping into a hot shower or a hot bath, a jacuzzi, any of that.

Reading on the couch as all my pets slowly pile on top of me.

A tea latte. Black tea with a little bit of steamed milk.

Name

Emma Ramadan

Vocation

Literary translator, Bookstore owner

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