



BRILL

JOURNAL OF LITERARY  
MULTILINGUALISM 1 (2023) 37–54



brill.com/jlm

# Unmooring Literary Multilingualism Studies

*Rachael Gilmour* | ORCID: 0000-0002-1602-1717

Professor of Contemporary Literature and Postcolonial Studies,  
School of English and Drama, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK  
*r.h.gilmour@qmul.ac.uk*

## Abstract

This article asks what it would mean for literary multilingualism studies to start by challenging dominant paradigms that govern conceptions of what “multilingualism” means, along lines suggested in applied linguistics in moves towards language practices of the Global South. It takes a cue from Alison Phipps’s call to decolonize multilingualism: turning away from fluency in “too many colonial languages” and towards more contingent ways of being in language, typified by the linguistic “unmooring” experienced by those who become refugees. It finds its model in the poetry of Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, born in Baddawi camp in Lebanon, as a means to reflect on multilingualism beginning from the space of the camp.

## Keywords

literary multilingualism – decolonial – refugee writing – Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

Multilingualism is in the news again, as I write from London in the spring of 2022. Vladimir Putin has invaded Ukraine under the pretext of ‘liberating’ Russian speakers in the east of the country, and UK and US news sources are turning to language to interpret Ukrainian social realities and the politics of the conflict (Bilewicz, 2022; Pluzhnyk, 2022). British and American news channels interviewing Ukrainians who have fled across the border to Poland have found no shortage of people among them able and willing to speak English; still, though, many have struggled with information and visa application forms issued by the British Home Office, which are not available in Ukrainian (Bychawski, 2022). Meanwhile, the online language-learning platform Babbel has made its services free to Ukrainian refugees wanting to learn Polish, German, or English,

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/2667324X-20230104

© GILMOUR, 2023 | ISSN: 2667-324X (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

while Duolingo reports a 1216% rise in people signing up to learn Ukrainian (Babbel; Delgado, 2022). Less (and far less sympathetic) coverage is meanwhile being given to the refugees who continue to arrive on the English coast via the perilous English Channel crossing from northern France in small boats, fleeing some of the world's other most dangerous countries and war zones—Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen—or to the forms of language they speak (Refugee Council, 2021). The newly passed Nationality and Borders Bill now makes it possible for the UK government to 'offshore' refugees arriving via this route, transporting them more than 5000 miles to Rwanda.

Even this brief snapshot, from a devastating few weeks' news from this corner of the Global North, points not just to the diversity of phenomena and experiences held under the umbrella of multilingualism but also to the political stakes of parsing it. It takes in institutionally taught and accredited multilingual competence, focused on English as a 'global language'—such as in the British Council, which, in partnership with the Ukraine Ministry of Education and Science, has been actively promoting English in Ukraine's universities since 2014, in relation to Ukraine's aspirations towards Europeanisation and internationalisation (Bolitho and West, 2017). Equally, it points to the diverse linguistic realities in a place like Ukraine where two named languages, Russian and Ukrainian, exist in complex political relation to each other, but also in a translanguaging relationship in actually existing language communities that is not easily reducible to either/or (Tovares, 2019). Those kinds of language practices do not figure on the radar of for-profit global digital language-learning platforms, developed by computational engineers, geared to particular kinds of multilingual praxis between distinct named languages (Gramling, 2021). These companies nevertheless are stepping in to offer language-learning support—a generous move, albeit one which is unarguably good for the brand—in some situations (though not in others) where people have been suddenly forced into new multilingual relations through displacement. The desire people feel to learn new forms of language may be motivated or compelled by pragmatic social need; it may also reflect other kinds of urges, of identification or longing, including towards the possibility of solidarity held in the urge to learn the language of newly arrived refugees.

At the same time, flickering in the background of the news reports, we can make out what Alison Phipps has called experiences of linguistic "unmooring"—multilingualisms that are born of sudden disruption, uprooting, loss. As she writes, "The unmoorings—the loss of both anchors—of multilingualism are myriad and are occurring at the levels of self and personhood, kinship and family, community, work, environment, market, politics (local/global)" (2013: 99). As Phipps points out, it is "the migrants, the refugees and asylum seekers

who live amongst us” who are most likely to be unmoored in these ways—those for whom “words do not do what they want them to do,” and “there is little choice about words and how they might work in any intersections with the bureaucratic and state powers which determine the status, safety and security that might offer moorings” (100–1). These are unchosen multilingualisms, born of necessity, such as the need for what Phipps has called elsewhere “Home Office English” (2019: 47). Phipps’s words speak to the present moment and are a reminder of all the multilingualisms arising out of conflict or climate catastrophe. They provoke the question: What would it mean for our field to focus attention on multilingualism from below, on multilingual subjectivity and creativity born of unmooring, on migration and displacement? On the multilingual spaces of ‘third countries,’ refugee camps, or detention centres? What would this do to our thinking about language, readerships and questions of literary production and literary form?

The Palestinian poet, translator, and academic Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, who was born in Baddawi camp in northern Lebanon, reflects in his work on the refugee camp as a multilingual space which acts on language in particular kinds of ways. Baddawi was established in the mid-1950s as a site for Palestinian refugees displaced by the Nakba: a permanently impermanent place that has been home to generations in families like Qasmiyeh’s, and which has hosted successive waves of ‘new’ refugees since, most recently from Syria—not only Syrians but also displaced Palestinians and Iraqis living in Syria, who have found themselves “refugees once more” since the outbreak of the most recent conflict (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015).<sup>1</sup> In an interview for the *Asymptote* blog, Qasmiyeh considers the “linguistic and dialectal dimension” of the camp as a living place of refugee-refugee exchange:

Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi dialects are now uttered in the same space, in camps that have transcended the “gathering” sign to become the “gatherer”; the active participle, the doer whose main presence is dependent on being occupied and used. [...] This (dis)order has always attracted me to my camp. It attracts me for it is the dialect that we at times suppress to conceal who we are. It attracts me when such dialects are exaggerated or perhaps elongated to occupy a place that is neither theirs nor ours. The shibboleth has never been clearer.

KWEK, 2017

---

<sup>1</sup> On the permanent impermanence of Baddawi camp, see Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013: 131–43).

In Baddawi camp, one named language, Arabic, dissolves into multiple Arabics (“Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi dialects”) being spoken in “the same space” in unruly relation. It is hard to keep people or forms of language apart in the cramped confines of a camp like Baddawi, one square kilometre with a population of more than thirty thousand people; even as “shibboleths” stand between them to mark insider from outsider. We might ask what conception of multilingualism would be sufficient to account for the complexity of these linguistic realities. Qasmiyeh thinks of the camp acting on language through its material and social organisation, which is reciprocally shaped by the operations of language within it. He thinks of it, too, as a place where people imagine and perform themselves through language: as camouflage, to stake a claim, to identify, to exclude. Language, in turn, is shifted by these acts, being “suppress[ed],” “exaggerated,” or “elongated” into new forms. In circumstances of material deprivation and physical restriction, in a camp regulated and structured by the dictates of the Lebanese state, UNRWA, and UNHCR,<sup>2</sup> language is a location of (dis)order that both replicates and exceeds the constraints of camp life. As I’ll go on to explore in more detail, Qasmiyeh’s poetry articulates a way of being in and understanding language that emerges from the vantage point of the camp.

Research in literary multilingualism has often been more or less explicitly aligned with a political commitment to language diversity in the name of social justice. In American studies, it emerged in the 1990s in the context of English-only language politics and with a focus on African American, Jewish American, and Latinx writers in particular, resistantly pointing up linguistic unmooring as a different kind of American origin-story and casting Americanness as inescapably multilingual, transnational, and porous.<sup>3</sup> Scholars in our field are often explicit in their contestation of monolingualist constructions of global publishing and the nation-state.<sup>4</sup> But, as we know, this is frequently in tension with our disciplinary locations as scholars employed in English departments, modern languages departments, or in comparative literature, in universities in the Global North or shaped by the expectations of Global North scholarship, working on and between named languages; and, we might add, often possessing prestige multilingual competencies, in historically dominant

---

2 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA); United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). On the relationship between UNRWA and UNHCR in Baddawi camp, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh (2017: n.p.).

3 For example, North (1994); Sollors, ed. (1998); Sommer (2004); Cutter (2005); Wirth-Nesher (2006); Miller (2011); Lauret (2014).

4 In addition to many of the above, examples include Lennon (2010) and Yildiz (2012).

languages, reflecting particular kinds of education and elite language trajectories. Phipps has written resonantly of her realisation, born out of her efforts at decolonial practice, that “my own multilingualism, with which and for which I had toiled with a fiercely resistant pride, was simply that of one who is fluent in way too many colonial languages” (2019: 2). The question, then, is how to bridge the distance between the whole continuum of multilingual experience in language practices on the ground, and particular models of language and multilingualism driven by academic disciplinarity, institutionalization, and the logic of global publishing. What do we need to do to think our field differently?

One answer might be to look to applied linguistics in the Global South, and what it tells us about the origin, nature, and limits of some commonly accepted ideas about language. In *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*, Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook consider how the invented idea of ‘languages’ as bounded entities came to be projected onto, and then ultimately to determine, how people use and interpret their own and others’ language resources; tracing the specifically colonial, imperial, and ethnonationalist histories which underpin the idea of “the language” as a singularity, and its real-world effects (2007: 1–41).<sup>5</sup> And as their more recent work (2012; 2020) explicitly argues, this has implications, too, for multilingualism, insofar as it remains founded in this view of language and conceived as the multiplication of monolanguages. As they point out, in many Southern contexts such concepts as “a language,” “mother tongue,” or “multilingualism” may not be much help in reflecting how people actually use language, which “can be better described as forms of *multilanguaging*” (2020: 55, citing Makalela, 1–8).<sup>6</sup>

In many African contexts, where multilingualism is a “lingua franca,” “languages are so deeply intertwined and fused into each other that the level of fluidity renders it difficult to determine any boundaries that may indicate that there are different languages involved” (Makoni and Pennycook, 2012: 447). Equally, in what Emi Otsuji and Pennycook (2015) call “metrolingualism,” commonly a product of modern, mostly urban everyday interaction, people of diverse linguistic backgrounds share, combine, and play with systems of

---

5 Although it is important to note how monolingualisms differ in their ideological construction and effects. As Gramling points out, not only is “Brazilian monolingualism, which is a strongly expressed ideology too [...] quite different in its effects, designs, and ethnicizing/racializing logics than is US American monolingualism or Turkish monolingualism,” but we also need to take account of the “decolonial potency” of other local articulations such as “Bangla, Tamil, Diné, or Kurdish monolingualisms” (2022: 4–5).

6 On Global South perspectives, see also Heugh and Stroud (2018).

meaning as ways to define themselves through language, in ways that are not necessarily defined by ethnicity, nationality, or geography. These multilayered, dynamic, and fluid ways of experiencing and practising language point to the limits of concepts and terminology that continue to assume languages as distinct, homogeneous, bounded entities, even in the plural: bilingualism, multilingualism, code-switching, plurilingualism, polylingualism, and so on. These terms continue to have meaning for our field, of course, just as a language as a singularity does. These are ideas invested with real meaning and significance by history, politics, and social practice, as well as holding “durable power” for the many people who use them, for whom “traditional, perhaps conservative constructions of languages” matter “in everyday interactions, in personal imaginings, and in forms of desiring” (Gramling, 2021: 31). But it is worth asking: what would it mean to take Global South *multilingua francas*, or contemporary urban metrolingualism—rather than a particular understanding of ‘languages’ originating in the European nation-state—as the model for the field, as the prism through which to view literary multilingualism?

Makoni and Pennycook take aim at assumptions about language that underpin and shape the cultural-political world, which also determine our critical fields: theirs, applied linguistics; and by extension ours, literary multilingualism. And they try to show how we might think them otherwise. After all, received ideas about literary language, too, are shaped by networks of political, raciolinguistic, institutional, and global publishing power, which determine and permit certain kinds of language practice and disallow others.<sup>7</sup>

A critical literary multilingualism studies will be able to attend to those ordinary ‘multilingualisms’—or metrolingualisms, creoles, translanguaging practices, *multilingua francas*—which live (and have always lived) outside university classrooms and libraries, outside circuits of global publishing, often in the shadow of classed or raciolinguistic violence; alongside and in relation to institutionally sanctioned multilingualisms of various kinds. It will think about how all these linguistic practices make their way into literature, which will also entail paying attention to the real-world materiality of literary production. Global publishing markets favour the novel, the form which has so far predominated in literary multilingualism studies, raising questions which will continue to concern us, such as the kinds of multilingualism in the novel which do or don’t travel (for example in Brian Lennon’s [2010] “strong plurilingualism” versus Rebecca Walkowitz’s [2015] “born translated” novel). Anjali

---

7 On raciolinguistics, see Alim, Rickford, and Ball (2016); Rosa and Flores (2017).

Pandey (2016) coins the term “linguistic exhibitionism” for the tokenising of South Asian languages in prize-winning Anglophone novels, which perform a superficial multilingualism while simultaneously espousing a monolingualist, Anglocentric logic.

But we should also be encouraged to think about different kinds of publishing or circulation practices that operate with different forms, at different scales, and/or in relation to different ideas of linguistic community, whether that means local networks of small presses (what Francesca Orsini [2015] terms the “multilingual local”) or the transnational digital reach of online poetry.<sup>8</sup> In other words, as our understanding of multilingualism becomes diversified and contested, so too do our understandings of literary multilingualism and our objects of study. In English-medium writing on refugee experience, for instance, Anna Bernard (2020) has recently suggested that three genres dominate—poetry, graphic narrative, and verbatim theatre—because of their modes of production and because of the kinds of engagement they ask of their audience. To these we might add the proliferation of short story anthologies published in direct response to the refugee ‘crisis’ of 2015 in Europe and the US travel ban of 2017 (Bond, 2019). These are all literary forms (among others) which, therefore, a critical literary multilingualism studies needs to take into its purview in order to be able to ask how they figure (or don’t) the linguistic unmooredness which is attendant on becoming a refugee, and which is therefore a predominant multilingualism of the world today. As David Gramling has argued, ‘multilingualism’ in fact stands for a complex of ideas, practices, and experiences with no fixed valency or politics. But we can, at the same time, aspire to a particular conception of it: one which is “renewed, human-centred, community-responsive, macroeconomically inconvenient, planetary-rather-than-global” (2021: 37).

### Dialect and the Shibboleth: Yousif M. Qasmiyeh’s *Writing the Camp*

I want to think now about what such an understanding of multilingualism might look like in literary studies by briefly considering Qasmiyeh’s first poetry collection, *Writing the Camp* (2021). Lyndsey Stonebridge has described Qasmiyeh as a poet of the “borderline condition,” writing of “the newest lost

---

8 For other recent reflections on what centring alternative visions of language and languaging might do for the discipline of world literature, see Helgesson and Kullberg (2018). On language in digital social networks, see Jacquemet (2019).

isle in the poetics of statelessness, the permanent refugee camp” (2016: 1336, 1348). *Writing the Camp* dwells on Baddawi camp as a material and existential space, from which it departs—to other camps, on journeys, lorry and boat crossings, into the border regimes of Europe and the wider geographies of the Palestinian refugee diaspora—and to which it returns. The collection is written in what Qasmiyeh has called a “third language”: an English which is refracted through Arabic etymologies and through the world of the camp (qtd. in Stonebridge, 2016: 1354).

The camp in *Writing the Camp* is a place of “dialects”: a term for the ways of speaking, living in, and understanding the world that are produced by camp life. “Dialects” for Qasmiyeh are the language of the camp, a sign of the different and shifting communities of refugees who call the camp home, the “Palestinian, Syrian and Iraqi dialects” that intersect within it (Kwek, 2017). But rather than being synonymous with the linguistic in the restricted sense, “dialect” is a multimodal container for all the layered ways of making meaning in the camp, for its symbolic life, as it is practised in language, rituals, memories, gestures, bodily practices. In this sense “dialect” is a conscious and constantly evolving archive of camp life, what Qasmiyeh has called “an act of continuous archiving whereby refugees themselves (consciously) narrate the camp in their daily presences in ways that not only instate their solitude but are also essential to remember who they are” (2020: 53). As a keyword which echoes and repeats across the collection, “dialect” more broadly comes to represent the layered aporetic meanings and mysteries of life in the camp, and even ultimately to stand for the camp itself.

Yet, as a form or practice of language, “dialect” is an outrage to notions of linguistic purity which tether the camp to ideas of untainted inheritance. In the poem “Dialects,” Qasmiyeh writes: “At secondary school, one teacher in particular never liked my dialect since it did not, according to him, convey enough Palestinianness” (2021a: 110). In the camp, language may be a tempting place to locate an imagined “Palestinianness” that remains untouched by grief, loss, and displacement. But this is a chimaera born of the teacher’s “obsess[ion] with his own purities,” whose own language is in fact just one more “dialect” among others (2021a: 110). In the prose poem “Contamination,” the speaker is again told “that my dialect is not as pure as it should be”: “According to them, I have failed to preserve what I have inherited. But in truth I have inherited nothing. I just heard noises and without even knowing how or why, I accumulated some in my pockets and ran away. I robbed them in daylight” (2021a: 8). Language is no longer (if it ever was) something to be retained or passed down, but the poem reframes conceptions of linguistic lack, loss, or “contamination” into the active work of language-making as a survival practice: opportunisti-



cally stealing away with and ingesting what you can, and making it your own: “I swallowed what became mine quickly” (2021a: 8). And in “Contamination,” this reads like a triumph of sorts. As the poem concludes: “I smile without letting my dialect know that I still do not know what it might sound like in the singular”: (2021a: 8).

“Dialect” in Qasmiyeh’s poetry is defined not by singularity, nor by ethnicity, history, or geography, but by the time and space of the camp. The permanent impermanence of the camp is captured in a language of suspended temporality: the “pending places that are called camps” are distinguished by “time [...] suspended between dialects” (2021a: 61, 63).<sup>9</sup> Both the camp and its dialects are characterised by an interplay between tenuous kinds of permanence and that which is improvised, or repurposed, and constantly being remade. Both are built of heterogeneous materials that are not necessarily of their makers’ choosing but nevertheless reflect their ingenuity and agency, their losses and hopes. In “Thresholds,” a father builds the “first threshold to our house,” a way of claiming land and of building onto the space allocated for dwelling (2021a: 15). The threshold is an ambiguous space, the meeting point between interior and exterior, private and public, both an exit and an entrance (2021b: 60). The poem asks: “For whom are these thresholds created?” It answers: they are built for the people of the house, who then “become the people of the threshold,” granted the power it bestows, to welcome or to exclude. And they are for visitors, for whom the threshold is a place of welcome, there to “baptise the feet” of those who enter, as well as a barrier that might “sacrifice” the visitor “at the builder’s doorstep” (Qasmiyeh, 2021a: 15, 16). The threshold’s construction becomes a claim not only on space but on time, a site the symbolic proportions of which outstrip the house to which it is notionally attached:

A solid place or a conspicuous marker for residents and foreigners alike to visit whenever they feel like it; a place which suddenly becomes more central in our existence than the house or home itself.

[...]

Our threshold shall not die.

It shall always be there for the enterers, the exiters and above all the escapees.

Blessed is the stone of men and beasts!

2021a: 15, 16

<sup>9</sup> For more on the temporalities of Baddawi camp, see Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013).

The threshold as a place of both welcome and exclusion stands for the camp itself, and the place of language within it. As Qasmiyeh writes in the titular prose poem “Writing the Camp”:

The camp is never the same albeit with roughly the same area. New faces, new dialects, narrower alleys, newly-constructed and ever-expanding thresholds and doorsteps, intertwined clothing lines and electrical cables, well-shielded balconies, little oxygen and impenetrable silences are all amassed in this space. The shibboleth has never been clearer and more poignant than it is now.

Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds share the camp, the same-different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet.

2021a: 59

“Ever-expanding” inside its own tightly bounded confines, the camp is constantly being reshaped by the hospitality offered to new refugees, producing multiple versions of itself, born of the constant influx of “new faces, new dialects.” At the same time, though, the “shibboleth” is always there to mark the boundary within the camp’s cramped environs. In “Refugees are dialectical beings,” Qasmiyeh writes: “My cousins in Nahr Al-Bared camp have always preserved their dialect to the extent of preserving it with their fists” (2021a: 64). Nahr Al-Bared was destroyed by the Lebanese army in 2007, its inhabitants relocated to other camps including Baddawi: it is the disappeared camp whose dialect remains as its trace to be “preserved.” And so the paradox of “dialect” is to be protean and unfixed, while at the same time containing “shibboleths” that distinguish insider from outsider, even violently, and even when the place to which they ostensibly belong no longer exists. The mythological relationship between language and land, central to European-derived ideas about language but also to invocations of linguistic “Palestinianness” grounded in a homeland that is elsewhere, comes under pressure throughout *Writing the Camp*. What happens to language when the place it comes from is destroyed? How do we think about language from the vantage point of a place that is permanently impermanent? How does language reflect a “home” that is simultaneously here and somewhere else?

In their academic work on Baddawi camp and on refugee-refugee forms of humanitarianism, Qasmiyeh and his collaborator Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh have turned to Jacques Derrida’s concept of “hostipitality.” Hospitality, says Derrida, is only ever conditional, never absolute. To be able to offer hospitality one must be in a position to do so, to be “master of the threshold” and able

to determine who may come across it (Derrida, 2000: 6). Thus, hospitality is always “parasitised by its opposite, ‘hostility,’ the undesirable guest which it harbours as the self-contradiction within its own body” (2000: 3). As Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh put it:

Hospitality, as such, is never absolute: the possibility of rejection—and overt violence—is always already there. A neighbour can only ever welcome another neighbour in a conditional way—to offer welcome is always already to have the power to delimit the space or place that is being offered to the Other.

2017: n.p.

As Derrida himself notes, he parses European hospitality through European languages—in French, with turns to English, by way of Kant and Heidegger’s German and Benveniste’s Indo-European researches. Centring the language-world of the camp, Qasmiyeh and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh turn instead to the etymology of the Arabic *aljiran* (neighbour). The term signifies relations, both spatial and moral, defined in the Qur’an and the prophetic tradition by “proximity, neighbourhood and charity;” but it is also a contested term that provokes opposing meanings. In *Lisan Al-Arab*, “the authoritative and encyclopedia Arabic dictionary,”

[T]he neighbour is thus:

The one whose house is next to yours, the stranger, the partner, the beneficiary, the ally, the supporter, the spouse, the intimate parts, the house that is closer to the coast, the good, the bad, the hypocrite, the changeable, the kind.

FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH and QASMIYEH, 2017: n.p.<sup>10</sup>

Hospitality in language is as ambivalent as any other kind. In Baddawi camp, refugee-refugee relations are characterised by generosity and welcome, but also conflict over scarce space, resources, and opportunities, in which “a hierarchy of refugee-ness” has emerged such that “established residents describe ‘Other’ refugees ‘as’ refugees, clearly differentiating between the camps’ natives (the original, authentic refugees) and the newcomers (somehow inauthentic and challenging the rights of ‘established’ refugees)” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2017: n.p.). In such circumstances, “dialect” readily becomes “a

10 Yousif M. Qasmiyeh’s translation.

knife," a shibboleth severing insider from outsider (Qasmiyeh, 2021a: 64). But *Writing the Camp* is conscious of the shibboleths of English, too, as a language of global human rights law, of NGOs, of aid agencies; in Britain, taken to demarcate the inside/outside of national belonging while also being a language of the rejected asylum claim and the "Reporting Centre" (Qasmiyeh, 2021a: 19, 31). Poems in *Writing the Camp* re-evaluate an English lexicon of border security: fingerprinting, foreigners, contamination, invasion. To be welcomed in language is as ambivalent as any other welcome and comes with the same conditions. As Qasmiyeh writes: "I think of their language in order to die next to them. This does not mean that we will ever die together. Nor is it a statement of love. It is, above all, an attempt to stay silent" (2021a: 81).

In "Language, Home and Threshold," Qasmiyeh describes his first encounter with English, in Baddawi camp as a child, through the acronym UNWRA, which is "the English for those who cannot read English but can still see difference: from rations received seasonally bearing the letters U-N-W-R-A, from recycled school books doubly and triply sealed with those five letters" (2021b: 59). UNWRA is the visually distinct sign of English stamped on camp life, standing for the international aid that both sustains and circumscribes it. But it is also, for Qasmiyeh, an early sign of how language travels: stripped of its status as an acronym, absorbed in the camp "into a fully-fledged Arabic word," "carrying a meaning in one language extracted from traces of another" (2021b: 59). This ambivalent image of his "earliest English"—a language of external authority, a tool for survival, a sign of difference, something that claims the referential solidity of an acronym while becoming at the same time "two languages sit[ting] side by side"—becomes a sign for his poetic language to come, a poetry "continually in translation," not unidirectionally from Arabic into English but ambivalently occupying the threshold between them. "Language, for me, will always be at the threshold," Qasmiyeh writes: not a threshold that he is the master of, with "the *mine-ness* of possession," but a threshold he crosses in poetry looking for a way to be "reattache[d] to a place in language," figuring this relationship as a "pact with what is not mine topographically, strictly speaking, though given access to wander within its parameters" (2021b: 61).

This necessary slippage between place and language is encapsulated when Qasmiyeh considers the Arabic word *bayt*: "house (also home)." Polysemic, densely layered with meanings,

In Arabic [...] *bayt* is not merely a word. It is in essence a contract between the occupants and the place for neither party to relinquish the other until the day comes. Where one rests is where one rests completely.

This is the Arabic premise as inferred from what a *bayt* is. That is why it is classically taken to mean the home and the tomb. You live, and you die, in the place. The three letters *b-y-t* (with the muted middle sound) resemble a middleness that is all-encompassing, where all gravitates to the middle. Within the middle lies the dweller and the dead in the very same spot.

2021b: 61

House, home, tomb, interiority, place of living and dying, sacred and profane, place of “the now-time and the hereafter.” The power of *bayt* is such that in English translation, Qasmiyeh writes, he seeks to nullify it, shearing it of its “afterlives,” to render it “as benignly as possible for the sake of holding on to the secrets of a language that I claim to be mine” (2021b: 61). But in his poetry, *bayt*'s secrets become part of its temporal architecture, written in “as though it were the pending tomb, a deferred time that I am now living in retrospect” (2021b: 61). As Qasmiyeh writes in “Refugees are dialectical beings,”

In the camp, going to the cemetery is going to the camp and going to the camp is going to the cemetery.

In Baddawi, reaching the camp only occurs through the cemetery.

Is the cemetery not another home, host and God?

In entering the camp, time becomes suspended between dialects.

2021a: 63

### Conclusion: Hope, Hospitality, and the Dialect to Come

Hospitality, Derrida writes, is always hovering “on the threshold of itself,” cancelling itself out in the gesture of offering itself.

It does not seem to me that I am able to open up or offer hospitality, however generous, even in order to be generous, without reaffirming: this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home [...] on condition that you observe the rules of hospitality by respecting the being-at-home of my home.

2000: 14

Nevertheless, he calls us to imagine a hospitality to come, impossible (“hospitality can only take place beyond hospitality”) but necessary, that can be completely open to the other (2000: 14–15). Qasmiyeh's language practice, in the

same way, is angled towards the future, towards a dialect to come that is the analogue of the hospitality to come envisioned by Derrida:

Taught to speak in dialect, I pronounced what I heard, never as things that were, but as a supplement to what a dialect would be one day, free of shibboleths, with a place for an other as he is. Through dialect, rehearsing is what I have been doing for a long time, for a second tongue where mispronunciation is the law and where meaning is susceptible to (and suspicious of) all places we call home, thresholds and corners. To be suspicious in writing is to write memory anew as though it had never existed. It is in meaning (according to its Arabic pattern, the word *ma'na*—meaning—is technically a place!) where language and place meet as a filiation that knows no stasis.

QASMIYEH, 2021b: 61–62

This way of thinking about language, starting from the place of the camp, allows Qasmiyeh to imagine a de-essentialised dialect of the future, shorn of any claims to ownership or “being-at-home.” Eschewing the conventions of belonging in language—of ‘mother tongue,’ ‘native speaker,’ ‘correctness’—his is a gesture of longing towards a shared medium that is nobody’s possession, a “second tongue” in which “mispronunciation is the law.”

Qasmiyeh’s aporetic, visionary, and unapologetically radical poetic vision is refracted through what Phipps calls “unmooredness” as an experience of language, parsing its dynamics and its political, philosophical, and aesthetic potentialities. In *Writing the Camp*, “dialects” are as various, complex, tenacious, and fragile as the camp itself, and represent a way of understanding language not as an entity that might be singular or multiplied but as a practice: “‘Dialects’ is not a plural,” writes Qasmiyeh (2021a: 64). In an obvious way, this points towards the insufficiency of seeing languages as bounded systems coterminous with national borders—how could this be squared with the language-world of Baddawi camp, which sits within the borders and jurisdiction of the Lebanese state but occupies a completely different space of language, history, and imagination?—but also tries to look past them. Qasmiyeh’s staging of language simultaneously recognises individual named languages as social and political realities, and frames a way of being in language that refuses their either/or relationship, orienting itself towards a future beyond it: “what a dialect would be one day, free of shibboleths, with a place for an other as he is.”

It is this attempt to think about more equitable ways of understanding and using language—which I’ve suggested is represented in Qasmiyeh’s poetry, and which is also to be found in applied linguistics grounded in ques-

tions of decoloniality and Global South ways of knowing—which a critical literary multilingualism studies can and should concern itself with. And I say this not least because we are committed to making the claim that literature is a space for the working-out of conceptions of what it means to be a speaking subject, to use language, to understand what language means to us individually and collectively and in the world. In this respect, we might see the practices of our field as contributing to what Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny term the ongoing “struggles to reclaim linguistic forms and practices stamped out by the repressions of colonial regimes,” and thus to find ways to “hope” (2017: xv).

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Yousif M. Qasmiyeh and Broken Sleep Books for permission to quote from *Writing the Camp* (2021).

### References

- Alim, H. Samy, John R. Rickford, and Arnetha F. Ball. *Raciolinguistics: How Language Shapes Our Ideas About Race* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- Bernard, Anna. “Genres of Refugee Writing.” In *Refugee Imaginaries: Research across the Humanities*, eds. Emma Cox, Sam Durrant, David Farrier, Lyndsey Stonebridge, and Agnes Wooley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 65–80.
- Bilewicz, Michal. “Even Russian-Speaking Ukrainians Don’t Want to Be Evacuated to Russia or Belarus.” *Washington Post*, March 7, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/07/ukraine-russian-speakers/>.
- Bond, Emma. “Assembling the Refugee Anthology.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 23 (2) (2019), 156–72.
- Bolitho, Rod, and Richard West. *The Internationalisation of Ukrainian Universities: The English Language Dimension*. British Council Ukraine, English for Universities Project, 2017. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/internationalisation-ukrainian-universities-english-language-dimension>.
- Bychawski, Adam. “UK’s Website for Ukrainian Refugees Not Available in Ukrainian.” *Open Democracy*, March 24, 2022. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/homes-for-ukraine-sponsor-application-language-technical-issues-tlscontact/>.
- Cutter, Martha J. *Lost and Found in Translation: Contemporary Ethnic American Writing and the Politics of Language Diversity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

- Delgado, Kasia. "The Britons Learning Ukrainian: 'I Want to Welcome Refugees into Our Country and Show We Care.'" *inews*, March 22, 2022. <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/brits-learning-ukrainian-to-welcome-refugees-1532355>.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Hostipitality," trans. Barry Stocker with Forbes Morlock. *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5 (3) (2000), 6.
- Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena. "Refugees Helping Refugees: How a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon Is Welcoming Syrians." *The Conversation*, November 4, 2015.
- Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena. "Representations of Displacement from the Middle East and North Africa." *Public Culture* 28 (3) (2016), 466–7.
- Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena, and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh. "Refugee Neighbours & Hospitality: Exploring the Complexities of Refugee-Refugee Humanitarianism." *The Critique*, January 5, 2017: n.p. <http://www.thecritique.com/articles/refugee-neighbours-hostipitality-2/>.
- Gramling, David. *The Invention of Multilingualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- Gramling, David. "On Re-electing Monolingualism: Fortification, Fragility and Stamina." *Applied Linguistics Review* 13 (1) (2022), 1–18.
- Helgesson, Stefan, and Christina Kullberg. "Translingual Events: World Literature and the Making of Language." *Journal of World Literatures* 3 (2018), 136–52.
- Heller, Monica, and Bonnie McElhinny. *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
- Heugh, Kathleen, and Christopher Stroud. "Diversities, Affinities and Diasporas: A Southern Lens and Methodology for Understanding Multilingualisms." *Current Issues in Language Planning* 20 (1) (2019), 1–15.
- Jacquemet, Marco. "Beyond the Speech Community: On Belonging to a Multilingual, Diasporic, and Digital Social Network." *Language and Communication* 68 (2019), 46–56.
- Kwek, Theophilus. "In Conversation: Yousif M. Qasmiyeh on Language and Liminality." *Asymptote*, February 15, 2017. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2017/02/15/in-conversation-yousif-m-qasmiyeh-on-language-and-liminality/>.
- Lauret, Maria. *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
- Lennon, Brian. *In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- Makalela, Leketi. "Introduction: Shifting Lenses." In *Shifting Lenses: Multilingualism, Decolonisation and Education in the Global South*, ed. Leketi Makalela (Cape Town: CASAS, 2018), 1–8.
- Makoni, Sinfree, and Alastair Pennycook. "Introduction: Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages." In *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*, eds. Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007).



- Makoni, Sinfree, and Alastair Pennycook. "Disinventing Multilingualism: From Monological Multilingualism to Multilingual Francas." In *The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism*, eds. Marilyn Martin-Jones, Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 439–53.
- Makoni, Sinfree, and Alastair Pennycook. *Innovations and Challenges in Applied Linguistics from the Global South* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).
- Miller, Joshua L. *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- Phipps, Alison. "Unmoored: Language Pain, Porosity, and Poisonwood." *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 1(2) (2013), 96–118.
- Phipps, Alison. *Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2019).
- North, Michael. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- Orsini, Francesca. "The Multilingual Local in World Literature." *Comparative Literature* 67 (4) (2015), 345–74.
- Pandey, Anjali. *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).
- Pennycook, Alastair, and Emi Otsuji. *Metrolingualism: Language in the City* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).
- Pluzhnyk, Oleksiy. "Ukraine's Language Is a Vital Weapon in Our Fight against Russia." *The Spectator*, March 15, 2022.
- Qasmiyeh, Yousif M. 2021a. *Writing the Camp* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021).
- Qasmiyeh, Yousif M. 2021b. "Language, Home and Threshold: Digging in Arabic and English." *PN Review* 260, 47 (6) (2021), 59–62.
- Qasmiyeh, Yousif M. "Writing the Camp, Writing the Camp Archive: The Case of Baddawi Refugee Camp in Lebanon." In *Refuge in a Moving World: Tracing Refugee and Migrant Journeys Across Disciplines*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (London: UCL Press, 2020), 52–73.
- Qasmiyeh, Yousif M., and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. "Refugee Camps and Cities in Conversation." In *Rescripting Religion in the City: Migration and Religious Identity in the Modern Metropolis*, eds. Jane Garnett and Alana Harris (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 131–43.
- Refugee Council. "An Analysis of the Likely Outcomes for People Crossing the Channel in Small Boats." November 2021. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/channel-crossings-and-asylum-outcomes-november-2021/>.
- "Quick Help: Babbel Supports Ukrainian Refugees with Language Courses." <https://press.babbel.com/en/releases/quick-help-babbel-supports-ukrainian-refugees-with-language-courses>.

- Rosa, Jonathan, and Nelson Flores. "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective." *Language in Society* 46 (5) (2017), 1–27.
- Sollors, Werner, ed. *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
- Sommer, Doris. *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
- Stonebridge, Lyndsey. "Statelessness and the Poetry of the Borderline: André Green, W. H. Auden, and Yousif M. Qasmiyeh." *Textual Practice* 29 (7) (2016), 1331–54.
- Tovares, Alla V. "On Doing 'Being Ordinary': Everyday Acts of Speakers' Rights in Polylingual Families in Ukraine." In *Translinguistics: Negotiating Innovation and Ordinarity*, eds. Jerry Won Lee and Sender Dovchin (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 228–40.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- Wirth-Nesher, Hana. *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).