'Trans-', 'Trans-', and 'Trans-'
Re-writing Identities, Re-thinking Otherness in Anouar Majid's *Si Yussef*

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In analyzing *Si Yussef,* this article seeks to challenge the post-colonial orthodoxy of otherness, by showing it as embedded in post-colonial identity. By so doing, it aims to engage in the debate on identity politics by referring to the abrupt changes that influence the notion of belonging that keeps recurring while the reconstruction of identities in a transcultural context is taking place. By drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notions of becoming and deterritorialization, I aim to contribute to the postcolonial debate on otherness by analyzing a transcultural narrative written in English by the American/North African writer, Anouar Majid. As I will show, it can be assumed that translating a certain text from the 'other' language into the 'mother tongue' remains, in its search for belonging, an aspect of transition within identity.

Si Yussef, 1994 [2005], tells the story of an old man called Yussef, told by a young university student, Lamin, and narrated by different characters. It traces Si Yussef's psychological journey into the past of Tangier through a subtle description of Lamin's complexity. Lamin's desire to re-write the idealized past of the city Tangier is certainly crucial to Si Yussef's account of old Tangier (Sbiri 2012: 7). Lamin's first encounter with Si Yussef takes place in Ashab Café in Tangier, and their meetings continue for twelve days, four weeks before the death of Si Yussef. After three months, Lamin learns of Si Yussef's death soon after he arrives back in Ashab Café. The linearity of narrative is constantly interrupted by temporal twists, and it subsequently suggests two possible readings: first to dismantle the discourse of modernity, and second to introduce a new form of memory that re-writes the history of the city of Tangier from a transcultural perspective.

These readings correspond to an engagement in the process of identity construction/reconstruction and which can in part explain the contemporary flux of identities that characterizes the world today. To approach such a flux critically, I will emphasize three main points. First, as the post-colonial subject crosses the threshold of the nation, s/he seems to imagine the lines of her/his belonging beyond national boundaries, as one can find in transculturation. Transculturality in this context suggests what David Attwell terms as a process in both directions

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that stands between cultural destruction and its reconstruction and which bypasses the notion of 'cultural translation' (2005: 18). It also implies a 'moment of conversation' that manifests incommensurability, and points to the singularity of subjectivities in a global context (McLeod 2011: 8-10). The double function that transculturality plays rests in imbuing the postcolonial subject with certain aspects of identity revision.

Such a spatial transition makes it difficult to either acknowledge the historical differences or the intimacy to the new currents in the world today, beyond the merely attenuated model of translation. Secondly, this transition may not be successful if the transcultural writer does not engage in a process of deterritoralization where language is transformed. The third point concerns language itself, and the ways the reconstruction of identity cannot be detached from the transformational process of post-colonial language. As the three points indicate, my purpose in this article is to show that in an engagement with the process of identity construction in a transcultural context, the post-colonial subject becomes her/his *other*. This can best be shown in relation to the three 'trans' indicated in the title of this article, and how they are interrelated to the notion of the post-colonial.

The current flow of identities as an aspect of border-crossing illustrates a cultural lacuna underlying postcolonial studies today, and which is 'threatening to become a fashionable orthodoxy' (Chambers 2008: 58). The process of crossing borders helps us clarify the structural chasms that the postcolonial discourse of otherness creates in a colonial era, and which seem to persist in post-colonial texts today. Perhaps the return to the polar zone of center/periphery, characterizing the act of writing back, can inspire a return also to the 'forgotten', as Chambers reminds us, since this return is not intended 'to complete the picture' but it is designated to question the frame of the picture, 'the pattern, the construction and advances what the previous representations failed to register' (2008: 59).

To write the past or to re-write postcolonial identity remains thus paramount in *Si Yussef*, especially when noting that between the history of Tangier (represented by Yussef) and its memory (inscribed in *les lieux de mémoire*), Lamin remains uncertain of his role when crossing the border of his being the recorder and the translator of Si Yussef's account. Subsequently, there seem to be two different presentations of Tangier where the story of Si Yussef unfolds. Yet both representations remain a rite of passage that problematizes the identities of Si Yussef and his interlocutor. The linearity of the narrative has created a break within Si Yussef's story, and the gap between history and memory may be filled with notions of transculturality. This can be viewed in the ways Si Yussef aims to breach the differences in narrative history through his own memories. As a result, Lamin, the recorder, feels that certain gaps, still, are left unfilled, and it is his duty to 'transculturate' Si Yussef's memory in order to fit into the cultural context of Morocco as a space of transculturality.

To elaborate the shift in focus is to seek a return to the notions of transition-translation of orature as a paradigm that may enable the post-colonial subject to negotiate identity construction in a transcultural context. The importance of this paradigm stems from the double function that translation plays in post-colonial multilingual texts, especially those in which memory is significant to the act of writing. In order for the transition from orature to text to take place, the translator needs to play a role in filling the gap created while the transition from the memory of Si Yussef to Lamin's text is taking place. These gaps may be filled by the translator's own memory; however, at a later stage – which is translation from the vernacular into a colonial language – there is a need for further elaboration as to how to re-familiarize the post-colonial identity with a language that is likely to be transcultural per se.

The transmission of Si Yussef's memory at the oral level (from Si Yussef to Lamin) and then writing it down (not an immediate process) may not give credibility to this narrative and its history, because, after all, the story becomes Si Yussef's, as the narrator notes. Orality, however, remains significant in this transition from the memory of Si Yussef into the text entitled *Si Yussef*. The history of Tangier and the Tanjawi people has been documented by Lamin as part of a transcultural textual memory. Whereas the culture of orality seems to be the space that stands between memory and history in this novel, transculturality becomes the device that bridges memory in a global context. It is not the destruction of memory by history as Nora suggests (1989), but a hybrid space in which *les lieux de mémoire* plays a role by offering a countermemory. Both Lamin and Yussef collaborate in the construction of such a document: Si Yussef with his memory and Lamin with his language, and yet Lamin provides his own explanation (not imagination) of the historical events, and translates, and re-narrates them in a global context.

It could be argued that post-colonial identity is now dispersed and located in the threshold between, on the one hand, orature and its script and, on the other, between the vernacular and the post-colonial language. As I will show from my analysis of *Si Yussef*, translating oral literature such as Si Yussef's own story into a script written in a foreign language assumes that translation becomes its own impossibility in cultural globalization. The move from memory into text sometimes retains the act of writing back as a mere act of reconstructing identity. What I suggest instead is to regard translation as a tool that transitions the construction of identity from the composition of memory into the substantiality of transculturality at a global level. Therefore translation becomes not a process of reading and writing the past, but a mode of constructing a post-colonial identity on a global scale, it is a *becoming*. These processes render the post-colonial identity in the liminal space of "betwixt and between", as Victor Turner tells us (1974: 80), an aspect which occurs when the transcultural subject engages in the process of translating the self into its other.

I have argued elsewhere that post-colonialism has lost its grip in contemporary cultural globalization (Sbiri 2012: 20). This is so because a contemporary engagement with post-colonialism has precipitated a transition within modernity that 'has led to the emergence of "reflexive" or "late" modernity' (Schulze-Engler 2004: 60-1). It is this generation of 'reflexive modernity', which has challenged the notion of otherness and turned the focus from the binary of colonizer/colonized into a more complex, but substantial issue, of re-writing modernity from a transcultural perspective.

Si Yussef seems to be alienated inside his home, and his reliance on Lamin to tell him his story is to begin considering this text as an example of 'reflexive modernity' that integrates both national and transnational responsibilities in transcultural identities. Even though Si Yussef's historical experience seems in contrast, it inspires a credibility that supersedes mainstream historical archives. Lamin resorts to the space of language to re-narrate Si Yussef's story and integrate it into major narratives at a global level. The importance of translation emanates from the need to inscribe identity into history, but the language of translation remains the possible tool to re-write a transcultural identity. This aspect is evident when Lamin meets with Omar, Si Yussef's son, in his office, and discusses with him the possibility of writing a narrative about his father. The conversation begins by Lamin telling of his plan 'to write some kind of document (I said it was a book in order to impress him) to record my brief encounter with his father. So unusual was my gesture that he thought it was a joke' (2005: 114). Lamin clearly indicates that the purpose behind such a document or book is to tell Omar's father's story to the world.

Lamin comments on this meeting by saying that 'Omar believed vaguely and gave [him] enough respect and permission to record these lines. It was awkward for him to know that his father reflected on his life with a young man who is not even a Khaldi' (2005: 114). Neither of his children is willing to reflect on the life of a people on the verge of extinction, for the children of this history will become fathers of an era marked by transculturation and globalization. When Lamin is asked why he chooses to write in English and not, for instance in Spanish, the language that Si Yussef's offspring master, he replies that 'because I want the whole world to know what your father said, Mr Omar' (2005: 115). What Lamin suggests in this particular passage is that the English language offers a significant margin of freedom for speaking to the world. It can be said that English language in North Africa may be seen as a new tool that enables the North African writer and her/his novel to step away from cultural or social constraints (Sbiri 2012). To write a book in English about the memory of the marginalized Si Yussef is to document an era in a place that is no longer available on the map (at least in a symbolic way). Changes do affect territories: countries have been erased and others established; people die, and their offspring emerge as part of an economic and cultural globalization that bifurcates all that is original

and pure. As a result, hybridity becomes the only marker of the newly emergent space. Lamin wants to make of Si Yussef's story a timeless 'register of accurate descriptions of human actions' (2005: 115), and the English language offers incisively new directions for approaching the story of Si Yussef. As Nasri notes, through the modification of English and the insertion of untranslated words and its heterogeneity, 'a new life is given to a true interweaving of plural histories' (2005: 31). Nasri here speaks of multilingualism as characteristic of *Si Yussef,* and one which often indicates a contrapuntal process of identity construction in a globalized world. When identity seeks a renewed construction it systematically indulges in multiple processes of transitions within translation. Because, as Ashcroft maintains, 'language embodies the thought processes and values of a culture' (2009: 105), Si Yussef remains a remainder of a spatial history of both Si Yussef and Tangier.

However interesting the process might be, the language 'is becoming an unresolved nightmare [...] and generating a guilt whose redemption speaks in a shy stuttering voice' (2005: 83). This sense of guilt is projected onto the use of an 'imported' language, a language of *becoming* and dislocated writers. Language thus becomes the alternative home for the imagined community. As an American writer of North African origin, Anouar Majid aims to fill in the empty space of dislocation by writing in the English language. Nevertheless, this aspect emerges, as a consequence of the language's inability to carry the weight it should bear in the memory of the marginal Moroccans, and the new Moors. It is an 'unresolved nightmare' and a 'dilemma' that dwells primarily on the sacredness of the Arabic language, its diction, and its incapacity to utter the unspeakable. To use English might solve the dilemma of the unspeakable, but it might not resolve the writer's displacement, or the possibility that *Si Yussef* may be interpreted out of context.

There is of course a general shift from the question of memory/history into that of identity/language. Yet, I think, they both operate at the same level. The fear, that the English language might fail to make the reader understand the logic of translating the undocumented historical events, is rather directed toward the efficiency of the writer's own translation. When translating takes place, translation also tends to become part of the reader's task. Lennon notes that in such circumstances, the relationship between translation and the text (as memory and its script) often turns the reader into her/his own translator; in other words, the reader is the translator (2010: 75). Nevertheless, to translate the oral into the written assumes two processes of translation, which may lead to historical lacunae and misunderstanding. As a result, it is logical for Lamin to think of erasing such a document, especially when he feels that the interference of the language might contaminate the memory of Si Yussef. In this narrative, it turns out to be a task for the reader to translate/transition these gaps into a less coercive but significant translation, either as a document or as a transcultural text. The English language not only sometimes fails to transmit the narration from orality to scripture because

of the gaps it leaves, but it 'also screams in a long uncompromising whisper' as Lamin notes (2005: 83).

Lamin wants to fill these gaps with as many memories as he can, but his failure to master the language prevents him (2005: 83). To argue this way is to neglect an important aspect of the narrative, which is the insertion of untranslated words. This process not only refers to the complexity of Lamin's identity and the writer himself, but it also foregrounds the possibility of neutralizing the English language, and making it one's own. It has been argued that to use untranslated words in post-colonial narratives written in one of the colonial languages aims at positioning the post-colonial identity independent of the colonial power. It also alludes to the social and cultural specificities of the post-colonial subject (Ashcroft 2001, 2009). On the contrary, Lennon points out that the fact of translating a local story for the contemporary global English reader remains a process of 'untranslation' that shifts the focus of 'our' writers (2010: 143). In other words, Lennon explains that in such circumstances, ''our' writers turn – may have turned – from the U.S.-based literary-critical scene toward those of competing modernities' (2010: 142) which makes globalization a choice for their re-writing. If writing in English 'sounds exotic' in the post-colonial space, probably for the 'English-speaking' readers it becomes a tool that highlights those mechanisms sustaining the act of re-writing modernity in the 'other' post-colonial spaces such as North Africa. This may explain why the writer of *Si Yussef* resorts to the insertion of untranslated words and a glossary at the beginning of the novel. Who could fathom the meaning 'that the story of a new generation would be told in English?' (Majid 2005: 83). As Lamin points out, it is because Lamin seems to become a rebel: to rebel against all that which is national and transnational, to offer a critique of both, the traditional and the global, and to understand all, in order to offer a transcultural reading of the past, the present, and the future. Lamin's fear, as the translator and the 're-narrator' of *Si Yussef,* apparently becomes logical.

Since English remains the mode of production in contemporary North African Anglophone narrative, it also becomes a tool that alienates the North African subject, whereby translation continues to exist as its own impossibility. *Si Yussef* is a narrative that seeks to mirror and echo a North African design of a transcultural literature by making the story of Si Yussef its own translation: from Arabic to English. Yet this design also shows the inability to decipher the complexity of the other major languages (such as Spanish, French, and Arabic) in shaping the identity of post-colonial Tangier. Even though Lamin interrogates Si Yussef's offspring in writing an English novel rather than a French or Spanish one, the persistence and recurrences of Arabic as a major language does not shift the focus entirely into the transcultural zone as a new space for negotiating identities. Lamin seeks to bypass this emptiness that the conversation with Si Yussef left in him by relying on the language, yet the language itself seems to fail

Lamin in achieving his goal. We can note this aspect especially when the translation from Arabic into English becomes the transition of a cultural identity into a transcultural one.

Perhaps this perspective does not resemble the identity that both Lamin and Si Yussef aim to construct. Yet the premise upon which Si Yussef's story is built seems to be conveyed by Lamin's account of the story. Similarly, there seems to be a notion of power shift at the level of language, and from this a redistribution of power, so that the English language, as the new voice, functions so as to raise the narrative of Si Yussef to the level of deterritorialization. It is also used to demarcate this deterritorialized space in Morocco so as to reach a wider audience, that is the English speaking one. This language, however, experiences major shifts in its structure and vocabulary, and these can be viewed in the way the novel's sentences are modified in order to carry the weight of Arabic. Lamin and Si Yussef in this sense may be said to translate their stories, but also transition their identities in a transcultural context: Si Yussef's memory refuses to disappear in silence, and it is Lamin who insists that a new archive remains imperative, since it now includes the different voices, the becoming. Lamin's contribution to translating the orature into a script entitled *Si Yussef* has been affected by the 'wisdom' of the English language, which in turn problematizes his identity as a transcultural, post-colonial subject. To maintain this elaboration is to navigate from the notions of post-colonial rewriting in order to turn into the excluded. Iain Chamber has clearly elaborated this aspect by noting that a return to post-colonial rewriting is

> a return of the excluded [that] clearly offers far more than series of additions to fill in the gaps in the already established historical mosaic. The forgotten do not complete the picture; rather they query the frame, the pattern, the construction and advances what the previous representations failed to register. (2008: 59)

The reconstruction of historical archives from a transcultural perspective contributes to the 'construction' of what 'the previous representations failed to register'. Yet this contribution, as the novel shows, is more often than not complex. The complexity persists as an indication of the negotiation that the minority subject initiates at different levels: at the level of language, at the level of identity, and at the level of belonging, and so on. Similarly this *modus operandi* may reach its ultimate in becoming-minor, and in creating its other self through translation.

Up to this point, I have sought to explain my engagement with the question of 'othering' the self through translation. To further elaborate this I have shown that the first 'trans-' that shapes the title of this article offers an aesthetic that responds to the allegiances construed in postcolonial narratives. *Si Yussef* can be viewed as a transcultural postcolonial narrative that seeks to become a model in

itself, that is a model of becoming. The self-confirmation is pertinent to the construct of a transcultural narrative as it challenges the dominant discourse of post-colonialism. At the same time the challenge bears a sense of negotiating 'multiple modernity' (Chambers 2008: 12). Lamin, to a certain degree, succeeds in becoming part of this process as he starts questioning the foundation of historical narratives constituting national, post-colonial discourses of homogeneity. Since the nation is devised through inventing tradition which the majority should adhere to (McLeod 2010: 81-2), it is such tradition that makes a certain community imagined (Anderson 1991: 6). Yet such a community only problematizes the notion of nation in the sense that performing tradition is designed to reiterate power, and foists the majority history on the transcultural narratives (Bhabha 1990: 145). The parallels Bhabha detects support the assumption that the transition the post-colonial makes, only problematizes the identity in question.

This leads us to think of the second 'trans-' in the title of this essay. To make a transition from the post-colonial to the transcultural requires a set of preconfigured aesthetics in which post-colonialism plays a role. Transition may not be possible without questioning the epistemology of the word transcultural, because, in the words of John McLeod, 'an uncritical advocacy of new vocabularies fails to break significant new ground if one forgets the wisdom of fields such as the postcolonial' (2011: 1). The post-colonial is apparently a 'wisdom' of the old, as can be seen in the novel in the way that Si Yussef constantly questions the new brought about by globalization. The same view can be noticed in how Lamin reacts to the establishment of the Coca Cola plant in the new Tangier. Questioning the new concept depends on the varying effects that this may have on the post-colonial subject, and which probably leads us to question the importance of translation in making the self its other.

Translation, the third 'trans-' in the title, is that which most challenges post-colonial theory, especially as concerns otherness. As a novel written in English by an American North African writer, *Si Yussef* seems to problematize identity politics and belonging, and considers alterity to be a creation of one's own, at different levels. At the level of the structure, the novel transitions the weight of identity construction from the exteriority of representation into a discursive self-representation through narrative. In other words, the novel represents itself. Deleuze and Guattari point out that when an element is no longer representative of other elements in the universe, it is then said to be an *asignifying* element (2004: 9). At the same time, this asignifying element that the novel seeks to construct destabilizes external representations that the minorities used to have in order to conform to the model of the majorities. In this sense, transcultural subjects seem to create a model of themselves, without necessarily being included in the major post-colonial discourse. At the contextual level, *Si Yussef* engages in diverse processes of translation: from orature of memory into its script, and from the

Arabic script into the current novel entitled *Si Yussef*. This crisscrossing has generated a model-in-itself narrative, and becomes a rite of passage. This model occurs when Si Yussef enchanted Lamin's way of listening to his memories.

However, the English text of Si Yussef has no translation of its own in Arabic. At this specific moment, one would ask, for example: what is the meaning of writing a book in English when the origin lies elsewhere? In another tongue! The answer perhaps resembles Robert Graves's[1] questioning the difference between the 'naked' and 'the nude' in his poem. Lamin's claim that he wants to tell Si Yussef's story to the world does not coincide with the alienation that the language has left him with. He barely escapes the confinement of Arabic and its structure in writing his English script. To translate means to transition an identity from the diminutive space it used to hide in into a larger one: that of the transcultural, of becoming; yet such a new position is only marked by a new mode of otherness that he creates for himself. Alterity, as the novel shows, is not a remnant of colonial heritage, neither is it a post-colonial legacy. Otherness is a transition rite that involves two main elements, translation and transculture. This transition rite proffers the medium for the postcolonial subject to engage in questioning the epistemology of post-colonial thinking, which has repeatedly undermined yesteryear's allegiances of minorities in a post-colonial aura, as *being minor*.

To conclude this paper, I have sought to explain how the passage between memory and history undergoes a process of filling and refilling the void in order for the transition/translation to take place effectively. I have also argued that the new mode of history proclaimed in this narrative either by Si Yussef, Lamin, or by both remains a discursive strategy for memory to appear as a counter-account of mainstream memory. Transculturality corroborates this process by showing how cultural globalization affects the movements between memory and history. However, this transition remains a mere process of otherness that has yet to start. Through the word 'trans-', post-colonial thought is deemed to meet the challenges that push toward destabilizing its orthodoxy. At the same time it has shifted power from the binary of minor/major into a more inclusive approach of becoming-minor, in the sense used by Deleuze and Guattari. This could mean that the transcultural writer also participates in the post-colonial debate where her/his identity is revisited, and alterity is reconstructed.

To translate a local text into a transcultural one (through the medium of a global language such as English) is, indeed, to place an identity in a transition rite.

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[1] I refer to Robert Graves' poem *The Naked and The Nude* by way of analogy to the problematic that translation may infer regarding the post-colonial identity and its text. It can be difficult to clarify why one should resort to translation if s/he were to create a textual identity in the mother tongue. Writing In English and then seeking translation of the same text into the mother tongue, such as Arabic, is like trying to make clear the difference between the naked and the nude; i.e. every one becomes her own translator.

Si Yussef can be said to be an identity in transition. Lamin, on the other hand is the mechanism that makes such a transition function. Deterritorialized English is the main tool that bridges this process in a transcultural context, yet it also breaches them as part of a generated otherness.

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