

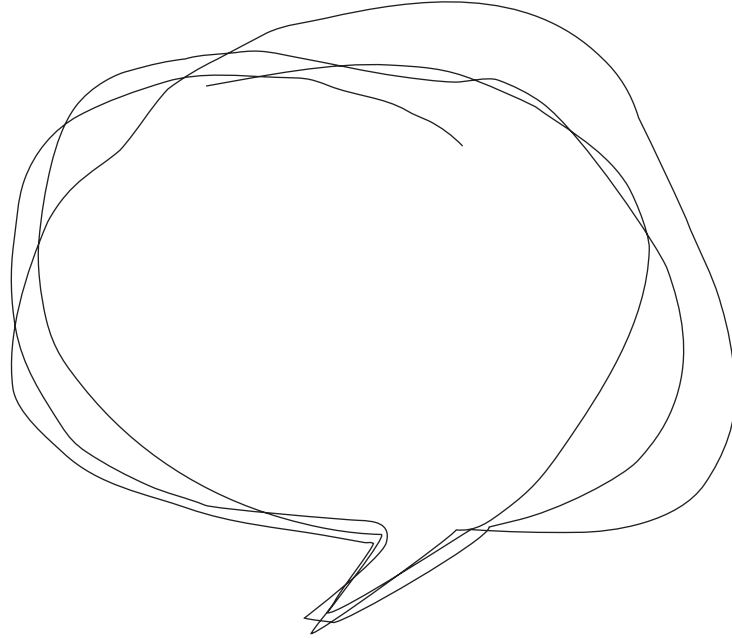
tongues

**On LONGING and BELONGING
THROUGH LANGUAGE**

edited by EUFEMIA FANTETTI, LEONARDA CARRANZA, and AYELET TSABARI

TONGUES





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INTRODUCTION

TONGUES IS A book we dreamt up together, both separately and collectively. At some point or another, two of us walked down a wintry Toronto street speaking of a book just like this one. At another point, maybe in the spring, one of us called another to discuss how this idea could become reality. As immigrants and daughters of immigrants, as racialized women, as writers who lost their mother tongues or their ancestral languages, as English-as-a-second-language learners, we shared a curiosity and passion about language.

We had the unique opportunity to work on this collection of essays during a pandemic. As the world went into isolation, cities locked down, and people were told to stay apart, we had the honour of inviting twenty-three distinct voices who shared our fascination for and love of language to join this conversation. Essays arrived throughout the summer and into the fall—and as our lives shrunk and a restricted world became the new normal, the collection grew in breadth and scope. The essays bridged the distance, anchored and moved us, and eased our loneliness, much like language itself can do. We were reminded of Kai Cheng Thom’s essay where she

defines language as “the fluid within the collective body: like plasma, like blood, like spinal fluid, it carries nutrients and information from one unit to the next.”

Personal, lyrical, and candid, the essays in this collection investigate the intimate relationship between identity and language, confront the pain of losing a mother tongue or an ancestral language, and celebrate the joys and empowerment that come with reclamation. “I use Ojibwe in my work as a way to reclaim my culture, for just as Cedar is rooted in the earth, so my culture is rooted in the language,” writes Ashley Hynd in her essay, “The Seven Grandfathers and Translation.” Others admit to purposely unlearning their mother tongue as an act of survival. As Kamal al Solayle writes in “Tongue-Tied,” forgetting Arabic was “part of a journey of self-reinvention.”

We envisioned an anthology that would celebrate the richness and aliveness of Canada’s language diversity. There are more than seventy Indigenous languages and over two hundred mother tongues spoken in Canada. Some 7.4 million Canadians speak French, and 5.8 million Canadians speak at least two languages at home. Yet the irony of this project was not lost on us. Here we were editing an anthology about language written in one language and one language only, “the winner’s English,” Melissa Bull calls it in her essay, “English Baby.”

The legacy of colonialism is not ignored in these pages, as writers hold English and its colonial violence to account. The contributors to this anthology challenge us to think about the intricate relationship between English and privilege, and how power affects language learning, specifically the experience of learning English in Canada—a predominantly white, settler, colonial nation—and the shame and exclusion that often come with second-language learning. They demand that we think deeply about the languages we acquire, the languages we lose, the ones that are taken from us, and the ones we fight and struggle to reclaim. These essays are transformative. They confront us with the exclusionary, daily vio-

lence of racist, ableist, and cis-normative language. In “It’s Just a Figure of Speech,” Amanda Leduc asks us to consider our complicity with ableist language and how it “reinforces the idea that there is only one way to be in the world.” In “Gender Fluent,” Logan Broecker reflects on how gendered language affects the way we see ourselves and our place in the world, and in “What Are You? A Field Study,” Rowan McCandless magnifies the way that white supremacy and othering appear in everyday talk.

While the scope of this project was such that it didn’t allow for translated works to be included, we hope the many languages that make an appearance throughout the various texts pay tribute to the multilingual Canada we know. We hope they inspire readers to think deeper about the act of italicizing (a choice of marking “foreign” language in texts, which Rebecca Fisseha examines at length in her essay, “Say Something in Your Language”) and its relationship to othering. As for when to italicize, we allowed the writers to make their own choices on the matter.

Welcome to a series of profound, compelling personal narratives that explore the interrelationship between language, power, and privilege. As editors and writers, we invite you to join in and share our curiosity about the multiple ways that language lives and breathes inside each of us.

Leonarda Carranza

Eufemia Fantetti

Ayelet Tsabari



Kamal Al-Solaylee

TONGUE-TIED

The sound of silence is a precious commodity on the streets of Cairo, a city where the official soundtrack might as well be a symphony of car horns and shouting matches among a population pushed to the edge by income inequality and political corruption. And yet, in all the taxi and Uber rides I shared with my Cairo-based older sister, Farida, during a visit in 2019, I was instructed to remain silent. If I talk, she warned me, the driver might recognize my broken, foreign-sounding Arabic and try to scam us. She'll give directions, negotiate fare, and handle any small talk, which at times was anything but. No two Egyptians can share a small space without getting into an argument about the direction of this once-hospitable and safe country. (Hint: wrong direction.)

I welcomed being quiet, invisible even, for a few minutes or, depending on Cairo traffic, an hour or two. Machismo is a default male behaviour in much of this city, so I loved seeing my sister in full command mode while I sat pretty.

The many silent rides over my two-week visit helped me process something I've been struggling to vocalize for years.

I'm a native Arabic speaker who spent fifteen formative years of my life in Cairo with my Yemeni family. I excelled in that language's complex grammar, picked up from a generation of Arabic school-teachers now long dead, and mastered its local variation. When I was a teen, no one could tell I wasn't born in Cairo or that my parents and older siblings spoke a different dialect at home. I spent my childhood consuming a steady diet of Egyptian films and television dramas that made my own parents' Yemeni accents sound unsophisticated—what Egyptians would call *falahi*, or peasant-like. My middle-class Egyptian friends called their parents *mama* and *baba*. At home my siblings and I used the more Bedouin-inflected *oma* or *aba*. I longed to be like other Cairenes I knew, and I pretty much sounded like one whenever I wasn't at home.

And yet here I was, thirty-three years since I had last lived in Cairo, stumbling to finish a sentence at the airport with customs officers or to order off the menu in restaurants. Silence became me. I felt so uncomfortable speaking English in an Arabic setting, and self-conscious enough about my Arabic, that keeping quiet seemed like the safest option. Looking back, I can't blame the state of being a stranger in my own land on external factors. I'm the one who silenced my voice and had actively eroded my command of and access to Arabic through a decades-long process I'm only now beginning to understand. Arabic was my birthright. How did I squander what came so naturally to me? Can I still claim an identity as an Arab when I'm stumped by the very thing that defines it: the language my people speak?

LINGUISTS REFER TO the phenomenon of losing native tongues as first-language attrition, or FLA, a process that happens when people are isolated from other speakers of that language or when another

language dominates. The term *mother tongue* has always implied an umbilical connection to the languages we first learn at home, a fixed identity based on the language you heard the most as an infant. Recent research suggests that, by their first year, infants can distinguish between their parents' language and other languages. In a world where nearly 260 million people do not live in their country of birth and mostly function in a second language, studies of FLA are gaining momentum and testing what we know about how we acquire, use, and lose what is most native to us.

This welcome body of research brings both comfort and understanding for those of us "suffering" from FLA—at least on an intellectual or theoretical level. There's a sense of relief in learning that our "condition" has a name; that what I've come to regard as a personal and private shift is being studied by linguists and psychologists. Look, *oma*, I'm in a textbook!

Theory and practice, however, sometimes connect and often-times diverge. The contours of my own experience of losing Arabic don't always fit into existing research, which, by and large, views FLA as a naturally occurring phenomenon—something that happens with time and acculturation—and mainly dwells on younger learners. If I want to understand why I remained silent during the cab rides in Cairo, or why I excused myself from some tense family discussions on my rare visits to Yemen, I need to retrace the steps that led to where I am today: someone who writes, thinks, and dreams in a language different from the one he was born into.

MY DERELICTION OF Arabic was a conscientious move and part of a journey of self-reinvention I embarked on in my late teens. The *Quran*, the holy book of the Muslim faith in which I was born, is written in Arabic. As I was coming out as a gay man in the early 1980s and reading up on sexual liberation, I needed distance from both the religion and its official text that, I felt, vilified my desires.

English became more than a second language; it drew a personalized road map to freedom, dignity, and sex.

I didn't see being gay as an experience that could unfold in Arabic. The language lacked the vocabulary and textual resources to help me accept who I am, who I choose to love or fuck. If anything, it mobilized hate and discrimination against homosexuality, which only appeared in literature and popular arts as a sin or a Western affliction. The only Arabic word for it while growing up was either *shaz*, which meant abnormal, or *Looty*, a reference to Lot, Abraham's nephew, of Sodom and Gomorrah.

English, on the other hand, had it all figured out. What could be lovelier than the word *gay* to describe how I felt about myself. Happiness and a *joie de vivre* lie at its roots. And what's more aspirational than the gay liberation movement, by then more than a decade in progress? Not even the advent of AIDS around the same time could dull my interest in English as a gay language. The connection between gay men and what was then a deadly disease doubled my access to reading material on my sexuality in Cairo of the early to mid-1980s. Many years later, several LGBT rights activists in the Middle East would point out that AIDS-prevention work allowed them a window to broach sexual rights and support for the queer community. The more neutral-sounding word *methaly*, or *same*, to refer to gay men in particular, grew out of this new health-focused context.

From the time I was about nineteen, I made it a point to stop reading or listening to Arabic, to speak it only when necessary and to upgrade English from second to first language—a process that became more immersive when I moved to England at twenty-four to study literature, eventually earning a PhD in Victorian fiction. Such was my complete adoption of English that I turned down suggestions by potential doctoral supervisors to work on “colonial” literature—Richard Burton's translation of *Arabian Nights* or Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* were often suggested—and pursued such authors as

Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins who were more “purely” English. Arabic language or settings meant contamination, a corruption of my resolve to exile myself from my native tongue and homeland.

All along, I picked up, quite naturally and through exposure to mostly native speakers, a refined English accent, which made me sound, if not posh, then at least educated and middle class in a country defined by class politics and resentments. With each graduate seminar, dinner party, or visit to a gay club, I drifted further away from the world of my mother, an illiterate shepherdess, and my father, a self-made businessman and anglophile whose own command of English had deteriorated once he stopped using it for work. His fate will not be mine.

I rewired my brain to think, speak, and write in one language, burying Arabic deep in the recesses of my mind. I didn’t think of my plans as an elaborate artifice or a makeover, but as a means of countervailing my birth identity and establishing a real, new self. This is the me I deserved. There can be no sexual liberation if the language that oppressed me (and the society and family that spoke it) still lived within me and came out of my mouth. I even took classes in German and Spanish just to keep my native language further at bay. I cancelled my culture before cancel culture became a thing (or a right-wing false alarm).

Years later, while visiting my friend Guillermo in the Basque region of Spain—where the local Euskera language is under threat from Spanish—we got into an argument about our relationships with our mother tongues. We’re both gay men of the same vintage. His family accepted his sexuality; mine wouldn’t. He could live and love in his native tongue; I couldn’t. More to the point, as the number of Euskera speakers dwindled in Spain, the one for Arabic speakers rose alongside the much higher birth rates in the region. Intellectually and politically, I could afford to lose Arabic because I knew the language wouldn’t die with me. For a minority, any minority, the loss

of language equals a loss of a way of life, of their very existence. Extinction begins when a language disappears. I found comfort in (and an excuse for) my attrition of Arabic, when looked at in this wider context. Egypt's population more than doubled between the time I left it (in 1986) and my last visit (2019): from 50.5 million to nearly 103 million. For every person who abandons Arabic, hundreds of thousands more are born into it.

I'd be lying if I didn't confess to a certain jealousy of the way Guillermo talked effortlessly to his parents and childhood friends.

IN 1998, AND AFTER two long-term relationships with men whose first languages were English and German, I met and fell in love with Motaz, a Canadian of Syrian background—who, like me, grew up as a native Arabic speaker. I had been living in Toronto for two and a half years by the time we met, and with the PhD completed and a new life beginning, one thing remained unchanged: my resolve not to speak Arabic. I hadn't factored in meeting an Arab gay man.

I don't believe we ever made a conscious decision or settled the matter over a conversation, but we rarely if ever used Arabic to discuss our relationship. We saved it for ordering food in Lebanese restaurants (so we could get the real stuff and not the watered-down versions they sell to white people) and to tease each other. As he was a modern dancer, I'd call him *Rakasa*—the term Egyptians use, often in a derogatory tone, for belly dancers. To him, I was a *hakawati*, a reference to the storyteller figure in Arabic folklore. This lasted for nearly five years. I speak for both of us when I say that we felt that Arabic would curse our relationship, destroying what we've built for ourselves. We needed to shield ourselves from the homophobia of our shared culture. That much worked out. Our relationship ended for other reasons.

Two more decades in Canada followed and, before I realized it, my Arabic had atrophied to the point where talking to my own fam-

ily who live in Yemen about anything beyond their general welfare became a chore. Before every call, I'd brace myself for the awkwardness that followed. I try, but my vocabulary can't sustain a deep conversation about their emotional well-being, their frustrations, dreams, sorrows.

By the time the war in Yemen started in 2015, and we had to discuss such possibilities as staying alive, claiming refugee status in Egypt, sheltering from air strikes, or selling family assets to survive financially, my damaged Arabic probably made things worse. Who needs a tortured phone conversation with a sibling living in Canada when there's enough pain and suffering in their immediate world? I've abandoned them physically by studying in England and then immigrating to Canada, and psychologically by willing the native tongue that once bound us to atrophy. When they speak of it, my siblings view my transition into English as a combination of self-loathing and a rebellion that has outlasted my younger years. As they became more religious, they started to see my dereliction of Arabic as *haram*. My sister Hoda reads the *Quran* several times a year, a ritual she has maintained for almost two decades. Imagine her disappointment when I told her I didn't own a copy and, even if I did, I probably couldn't read it now. She said she'd pray for me.

As the war intensified over the last two years, so has my desire to reconnect with my family. My material condition and theirs may never match, but Arabic can at least bring us closer, making up for some of the lost decades apart. The first step in this journey is to reclaim my Arabic. Can we actually relearn our own native tongue? What would that look like?

As I pondered these questions, I came across the work of Chinese-American author Yiyun Li, who compares the process of erasing all traces of her Chinese to her two attempts at suicide. "My abandonment of my first language is personal, so deeply personal that I resist any interpretation—political or historical or ethnographical," she

wrote in an essay for the *New Yorker*. “One’s relationship with the native language is similar to that with the past. Rarely does a story start where we wish it had, or end where we wish it would.”

With hindsight, I wonder about Li’s highly personal view of language loss. I wanted to lose Arabic for reasons that relate to sexual politics. I wish to regain it, in part, also because of politics: national politics. As a person of colour witnessing the rise of populism and a return to fascist politics in the West—“Go back to where you came from” may become more than an angry chant from Trump supporters—I’m feeling less secure, less at home, in Canada than ever before. My concerns range from considering living in a place where people who look like me are the majority (the Middle East) to being forced to leave as part of some kind of ethnic rebalancing like the one happening in the United States. I don’t think I’m being paranoid, even though I often am about other things.

Bill C-24 in Canada, which became a law in 2014, creates a two-tier citizenship: one for native-born Canadians and another for naturalized people like me. The law, introduced by the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, makes it easier for the government to strip some Canadians of their citizenship if they’re deemed to constitute a national threat or if they’ve obtained it by fraud. Neither is applicable to me, but abuse of law comes naturally when racial anxieties and fascism enter the picture.

The possibility of losing my place in Canada, and by extension not living in the only language I master, shook me to the core. It unravelled what I spent decades stitching. It also underlined a particular case of imposter syndrome I’ve been keeping on the down low. My continuing erasure of Arabic after coming to Canada happened simultaneously with my expanding portfolio as a commentator on the Arab world and Muslim culture, a role I took on in part out of necessity but also out of career ambition as a journalist and author. Perhaps imposter syndrome is not the exact phrase here. How about

ethnic fraud? I never hid my struggles with Arabic in my books but I certainly claimed more access to the culture and the people than I had a right to, given my inability to grasp the written parts of it in particular.

MY RETURN PASSAGE to my mother tongue has been a disorienting and at times humiliating experience. To do it properly, I started with some online “Arabic for Beginners” resources, which took me further back into my childhood than I was willing to go. I fared better with mid-level Arabic but found it too easy. What I wanted to regain most of all was the ease and comfort of colloquial Arabic (which by definition means Egyptian dialect for me), the kind of natural speech rhythm that my Basque friend takes for granted. I raided YouTube for movies from what has come to be known as the Beautiful Time (a belle époque of Egyptian and Lebanese film and music from the 1940s to the 1970s).

I can’t begin to explain the sense of loss I experienced with every viewing of an old Egyptian movie. How did I deny myself access to such a treasure trove of wisecracking, melodramatic, break-into-songs-every-five-minutes back catalogue? The camp value and the homoerotic subtexts of male bonding alone sustained me for hours. And let me tell you: the young Omar Sharif is otherworldly beautiful. Slowly I began to feel comfortable singing along to the musical numbers, starting with the more popular ones of Shadia and Farid al-Attrash and graduating to the classical Arabic of select songs from Mohamed Abdel Wahab and Umm Kathoum, the two pillars of Arabic music in the twentieth century. I still don’t understand what I’m singing along to at times, but since I do it mostly in the kitchen, I can get away with mouthing the words. I tried to read the first part of the *Cairo Trilogy* by Nagib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Prize-winning novelist, in Arabic, but that proved too advanced. Reading and writing Arabic will have to wait.