# Charting Agency in Digital Context: Agents and Networks in the Making of Arabic to English Literary Translations in an Online Magazine

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## Abstract

This study centers around recent developments in the concept of agency in literary translation, particularly within the framework of digital initiatives. It identifies the development of agents in translation theory as a necessity proposed by contemporary sociological approaches to emphasize the roles played by both human and non-human entities involved in the translation of foreign texts. While these approaches define agents as active participants who assert their empowerment within institutional structures, they often fail to explain how agents exercise their agency when operating outside these structures, particularly beyond Western/European paradigms of literary translation.

Through an ethnographic case study of *Words Without Borders* (WWB)—an online literary translation magazine founded in 2003—this thesis explores how this cultural initiative has broadened the concept of agency in response to cultural and political struggles in the early 21st century. It specifically focuses on the role of agents involved in the translation of contemporary Arabic literary texts outside the dominant Anglo-American publishing industry. Drawing on interviews with translators and editors, alongside analysis of documents and paratextual elements, this study probes how these agents navigate their roles to influence visibility for both themselves and Arabic literature among English-speaking audiences.

The research puts sociological definitions of agency in translation theory to the test, arguing for a deeper, more context-sensitive understanding of agency that aligns with the cultural sociology realities of today. *Words Without Borders* exemplifies how agency is not a static starting point but an evolving, dialectical process shaped by recognition and negotiation with cultural others. This thesis also critically examines the roles of non-human agents within literary translation, particularly digital platforms and their paratextual affordances, viewing them as extensions of human agency rather than independent actors.



**Keywords:** agents, actor-network theory, online translation magazine, Arabic-English literary translation, ethnography

## Résumé

Cette étude se concentre sur l'évolution récente du concept d'agentivité en traduction littéraire, en particulier dans le cadre des initiatives numériques. Elle reconnaît la nécessité du développement des agents dans la théorie de la traduction, tel que le propose les approches sociologiques contemporaines, pour souligner les rôles joués par des entités humaines et nonhumaines dans la traduction de textes étrangers. Si ces approches définissent les agents comme des participants actifs qui affirment leur pouvoir au sein des structures institutionnelles, elles omettent souvent d'expliquer comment les agents exercent leur pouvoir lorsqu'ils opèrent en dehors de ces structures, en particulier au-delà des paradigmes occidentaux/européens de la traduction littéraire.

À la lumière d'une étude de cas ethnographique de *Words Without Borders* (WWB) - un magazine de traduction littéraire en ligne fondé en 2003 - cette thèse explore la manière dont cette initiative culturelle a élargi le concept d'agentivité en réponse aux luttes culturelles et politiques du début du 21e siècle. Elle se concentre tout particulièrement sur le rôle des agents œuvrant dans la traduction de textes littéraires arabes contemporains en dehors de l'industrie dominante de l'édition anglo-américaine. S'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des traducteurs et des éditeurs, ainsi que sur l'analyse de documents et d'éléments paratextuels, cette étude explore la manière dont ces agents négocient leurs rôles de façon à influencer leur visibilité et celle de la littérature arabe auprès de publics anglophones.

La recherche met à l'épreuve les définitions sociologiques de l'agentivité dans la théorie de la traduction, en plaidant pour une compréhension plus profonde et mieux contextualisée de l'agentivité, en accord avec les réalités de la sociologie culturelle d'aujourd'hui. *Words Without Borders* montre que l'agentivité n'est pas un point de départ statique, mais un processus évolutif et dialectique engageant les cultures autres comme des objets de reconnaissance et de négociation. Cette thèse examine également de manière critique les rôles des agents non humains dans la traduction littéraire, en particulier les plateformes numériques et leurs affordances paratextuelles, en les considérant comme des extensions de l'agentivité humaine plutôt que comme des acteurs indépendants.



Mots clés : agents, agentivité, théorie de l'acteur-réseau, magazine de traduction en ligne, traduction littéraire arabe-anglais, ethnographie

To my mother and father, with whom I trace the paths.

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The final stages of this thesis were written during the genocide against the people of Gaza. At times, continuing academic work felt trivial in light of such immense human suffering. However, witnessing their resilience, their love for life, and their commitment to education, even in the most difficult circumstances, reminded me of my own privilege. This experience underscored the

importance of continuing the work, not as a direct response to their suffering, but as a testament to the enduring value of intellectual and scholarly pursuits. May their courage and struggle not be forgotten.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1. Rethinking Literary Translation Agents in Digital Context

In her 2024 Ottaway Award acceptance speech for her website *ArabLit*, M. Lynx Qualey invoked a metaphor that resonates deeply within the literary translation community today. Paraphrasing a Twitter thread by the Korean author and translator Anton Hur, Qualey said that: "literary institutions should be more cloudlike: that literary weight should not settle into giant buildings fixed in place, but that they should be able to move, to change shape, to change with writers and literary movements instead of trying to fix them in place."

The cloudlike metaphor, used in reference to open-source digital platforms like her website *ArabLit*, forms the basis of her critique of the traditional, rigid structures of the literary publishing industry, particularly in English-language literary hubs in the US and the UK. These rigid structures often impose unconscious hierarchical control over cultural flows or, in more problematic instances, produce translations that are extractive and commercialized—especially from regions with colonial or exploitative histories—treating literature as a commodity to be extracted and repackaged for Western markets. By doing so, these rigid structures place a significant heft on the creativity and autonomy of literary translation practitioners to talk about what they believe is important, leaving them feeling unheard and unseen.

As a corrective, Qualey and Hur, along with many others in the literary translation community on Twitter who showed support by retweeting this sentiment over 500 times, see potential in open digital spaces, that operate in the digital clouds outside of traditional publishing houses. They see these spaces as valuable allowing them to creatively engage with their work to meet the needs and demands of different contexts, literary traditions, and even transforming literary movements. Indeed, literary translation in the digital age, as Cronin (2014) suggests, has

the potential to create new structures within the World Republic of Letters. He explains that this transformation is driven by the collective responsibility and actions of what he calls "cybercitizens" (p. 114)—individuals who, through their online engagement and contributions, influence and reshape how literature is translated, shared, and understood on a global scale.

In translation studies, traditional institutions and commercial publishers have been extensively studied, while the impact of digital publishing on literary translation and its practitioners has been comparatively underexplored. This thesis aims to fill this gap.

### 1.2. The Journey of This Thesis

The origins of this thesis bear little resemblance to its final form, a testament to the profound evolution that usually occurs in any creative process. I initially wanted to write a thesis exposing English-language literary institutions and their disadvantageous treatment of Arabic literature and authors, focusing on how their profit-first models often determine hegemonic literary translation practices, holding little to no consideration for literary merits, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and cultural misrepresentation. But as I went deeper into the subject, my perspective began to shift. I realized that focusing solely on the shortcomings of traditional literary institutions risked reinforcing the very power dynamics I sought to critique. By emphasizing how these institutions perpetuate the marginalization of foreign literature, I found myself inadvertently upholding the notion that Arabic literature remains inherently minor and subjugated within a rigid, unchanging literary system. Even more, I would be overlooking the fellow translators and colleagues who are actively working to rectify this imbalance and challenge the dominance of traditional institutions. This realization prompted a significant reorientation of my research. Rather than focusing on the constraints of publishing houses, my thinking shifted towards exploring not only what is possible but also what is already happening.

This isn't to downplay the flaws within the English-language publishing industry, where power dynamics often lead to editorial decisions that compromise the authenticity of translations from Arabic (Said, 1990; Booth, 2008; Hartman, 2018), and diminish the visibility, agency and creativity of translators (Booth, 2008; Allen, 2010). Indeed, translation can act as a form of violence, influenced by power dynamics, geopolitical contexts, and varying cultural needs (Dingwaney & Maier, 1995). However, if I were to focus solely on the lack and neglect within the industry, I would be overlooking the significant efforts and progress being made by dedicated translators and editors who are actively working to challenge these dynamics and reshape the landscape of literary translation.

During my time at the School of Translation and Interpretation, I became increasingly captivated by the ways in which empowered individuals—often translators or authors—use translation as a political act of resistance. These acts challenge the unconscious hegemonic practices of the publishing industry and the dominance of cultural imperialism. Scholars such as Venuti (1995), Gentzler (1996), Robinson (1991), von Flotow (1991), Tymoczko (2007), and Boullata (2003) have all underscored translation's potential to subvert dominant narratives, emphasizing its capacity to serve as a tool for cultural and ideological resistance.

Moreover, this view is supported by the works of Milton and Bandia (2009), who argue that translation is not merely a linguistic act but also a cultural product shaped by socially embedded practices. These scholars highlight how translation can be utilized by various agents—including patrons, translators, editors, publishers, and institutions—to drive literary innovation and social change within a given society. Buzelin (2006, 2007a, 2007b) further extends this discussion by exploring how collective agency within translation networks contributes to the creation of new cultural forms and practices. Buzelin’s work underscores the importance of

understanding the collaborative efforts behind translation, particularly in the context of digital and open-access platforms where such collaborations are often more visible and dynamic.

My interest in this topic is deeply rooted in both academic inquiry and personal experience, where I have witnessed the transformative power of translation in cross-cultural exchanges. These experiences have shown me how marginalized voices can be amplified through acts of linguistic and cultural mediation, making translation an essential practice in the fight for cultural equity.

This inquiry is particularly relevant in today's globalized world, where digital platforms have revolutionized the way literature is produced, disseminated, and consumed, offering new opportunities—and challenges—for literary translation. As we navigate an era marked by increasing cultural homogenization and the persistent influence of Western cultural hegemony, understanding translation as a form of resistance is not merely an academic exercise but a critical tool for fostering greater cultural diversity and equity.

Given the significance of these dynamics, my research seeks to delve deeper into the intricate processes and interactions that shape literary translation within these digital platforms, specifically the online magazine *Words Without Borders* (hereafter WWB). This inquiry has led me to formulate several research questions that will guide the study:

### 1.3. Research Questions and Objectives

The overarching research question guiding this study is: **How do Arabic-to-English literary translations happen in WWB?** This broad inquiry is broken down into two sub-questions. The first sub-question focuses on the emergence and distinct characteristics of the magazine itself and the people who are involved in making the translation possible: **How does WWB function as a digital publisher and who are the agents involved?** Rather than merely analyzing the documentary evidence of what texts are available on the magazine's website and drawing

general conclusions about the editorial practices, this study delves into the forms, roles, and agency that shape the translation process. This leads to the second sub-question, which adopts a micro-sociological perspective: **How do human and non-human agents within the WWB platform collectively shape the process of translating Arabic literature into English?**

In alignment with these research questions, the thesis sets out to achieve several key objectives. Firstly, it aims to enrich the field of translation studies by examining the production processes of literary translations, particularly by investigating the roles and interactions of the agents involved, as inspired by the work of scholars like Buzelin (2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012), Haddadian-Moghaddam and Khalifa (2024), and Luo (2020). Secondly, this research explores the relatively under researched phenomenon of literary translation agents' visibility and agency in digital literary translation platforms, such as WWB, offering new insights into the dynamics and unique characteristics of online literary translation through an ethnographic case study. Lastly, the study contributes to the body of research on Arabic-to-English translation by focusing on the agents' perspectives within the translation process, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by translators and other stakeholders in the digital age. These objectives form the foundation of the methodology that will be discussed in the subsequent section, ensuring a coherent and comprehensive exploration of the topic at hand.

Having established the research questions that guide this study and outlined the objectives, I firmly believe that the methodology and data chosen for this research are crucial to addressing these inquiries effectively. In the following sections, I will present the methodology and data briefly.

### 1.4. Reasons for Choosing the Data and Methodology

Established online in 2003, *Words Without Borders* was described by its founders as the only magazine of its kind at the time, exclusively dedicated to literary translation on a global scale.[1] The magazine pioneered the genre of online literary translation, setting itself apart from traditional, book-based English-language publishers. Producing 12 issues annually, it has maintained its strong and enduring presence in English-language literary circles. Since its inception, WWB has published work by more than 2,600 contemporary authors from 139 countries, translating their works into English from 140 different languages, and collaborating with 1,600 translators, including 33 who work with Arabic. This diversity in published works, languages, and contributors makes WWB an excellent case study, particularly in exploring how professional status might influence the practices and strategies of the agents involved.

Given the relatively recent emergence of online literary translation magazines and the limited scholarly attention they have received, I have chosen an ethnographic case study as the methodological approach for this research. This methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of the processes of making translations available from the perspectives of the agents involved. An ethnographic case study emphasizes interviews, field notes, and evidence gathering from published texts, which provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics within WWB.

### 1.5. Road Map of Vocabulary

In this thesis on translating contemporary Arabic literature into English for online spaces, it is crucial to briefly explain some recurring vocabularies throughout the manuscript to ensure clarity and coherence. Terms indicating certain places or linguistic and cultural identities, such as

[1] From an interview with the founder at the website the *Big Think*, published in 2009.

Arabic literature, the Arab world, the East, The West, and the Anglo-American literary scene, are not merely incidental labels. Fernando Coronil, in *Beyond Occidentalism* (1996), emphasizes that geographic terms are not neutral; they serve to "create the illusion" of representing a "distinct external reality" (p. 52), arguing for the importance of examining such representational practices that might contribute to creating regions, borders, and relations and might risk reifying these constructs. Translating languages such as Arabic into English is not merely a linguistic exercise but a deeply political act that can reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies and power relations. When researching Arabic to English translation, it is crucial to consider these classifications and clarify how they will be used in order to avoid affecting the representation and reception of the source material. Both Arabic and English, as languages and cultural markers, carry with them histories of othering and risks of Orientalism and Occidentalism. Equally important is the recognition of these dynamics in the study of cultural communities in online phenomena. While we might think that online spaces are virtual and borderless, a space for imagined communities in Anderson's sense, these cultural and linguistic classifications did not appear in a vacuum and reflect existing realities. Scholars such as Nancy Baym (2015) in *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* highlight that the internet is not a culturally neutral space; rather, it reflects and amplifies existing cultural dynamics and power relations. Thus, as used throughout the study, the following terms serve as organizing categories that lend efficiency and clarity to the research.

***The Arab World***

The first term to define is the "Arab world," which is used in this thesis primarily to describe the origin of the literature examined in this research and serve as organizing categories that lend efficiency and clarity to the study. Politically, the term refers to the geopolitical territory of the 22 member states of the Arab League, located in North Africa and the Middle East, founded post-World War II. Culturally, the Arab world is united by the Arabic language and a shared

historical experience, although it exhibits significant diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, and local customs. The term is used in scholarly works and media in the West to convey specific connotations: the Arab world as an opponent to the West (Said, 1978), highlighting the power dynamics in their shared histories of colonization, wars, and contemporary economic exchanges, as well as cultural and migration flows. Currently, the term is used as a point of reference for Arab people to "claim a proud heritage, cultural identity and intellectual roots" whether they live geographically in the Arab League countries or elsewhere (Mehdi, 2017, n.p.).

Many scholars, including the Lebanese British historian Albert Hourani (1991) and British Yemen-based Arabist Tim Mackintosh-Smith (2019), find it insightful to focus on the shared language of the Arab people when describing their territories and their creativity. Language both shapes and reflects a people's worldview, even if some local inclinations are not uniformly shared by everyone. By examining language, one better understands the broader cultural and historical context, which leads us to the following term.

***Modern Arabic literature, text, and author***

The term "modern Arabic literature" refers to literary works written in Arabic, irrespective of the author's geographical location or ethnic identity. These works are composed in the period following the Arab Cultural Renaissance (Nahda), as opposed to traditional texts (Starkey, 2006). The Nahda, occurring from the mid-19th to early 20th century, was a pivotal period of cultural and intellectual revival that significantly influenced modern Arabic literature.

This era in Arabic literature is characterized by themes ranging from the global political struggle against terrorism to the quest for social justice and the moral quandaries of postmodernity. It has also seen a rise in the number of female authors and a willingness to engage with topics traditionally considered "taboo" in the Arab world, such as sexual orientation, religion, and tradition.

The importance of specifying "modern" for this thesis is because modern Arabic literature was largely overlooked by major Anglo-American academics and publishers. This neglect can be attributed to several factors, including the dominance of Orientalist perspectives that favoured classical and religious texts over modern secular works, a point further discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis, and the geopolitical tensions that often-framed Arab cultures as static and monolithic and oppositional to Western values. Ignoring modern Arabic literature, as argued by Edward Said in the "Embargoed Literature" (1995), not only contributed to the marginalization of contemporary Arab literary voices but also exacerbated the cultural divide between Arabs and the Western world, perpetuating the perception of these groups as fundamentally oppositional.

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition and appreciation of contemporary Arabic literature in the West in terms of translations and research, as I further show in chapter 1. This thesis contributes to the body of work that focuses on contemporary issues of Arabic literature pertaining to online production and dissemination, furthering the understanding and appreciation of modern Arab literary voices, their cultural significance, and the efforts of translators and cultural intermediaries, and the rising interest in diverse and non-Western narratives.

When referring to Arabic literature, text, or author, and building on Hourani and Mackintosh-Smith's hypothesis on the centrality of the Arabic language, I specifically mean works originally written in Arabic that require translation. This distinction is crucial in translation studies: examining linguistic transfer as defined by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) versus cultural translation as interpreted by Trivedi (2005). This thesis aligns with the former, focusing on the transfer between languages and cultures, which allows for a detailed investigation into the roles of translation agents, editorial decisions, and collaborations on online platforms. Such works include those authored by Chaldeans and Assyrians in Iraq or Syria,

Amazigh in North Africa, or writers who, while residing in other countries, retain their national identity, such as Arab-Americans or Arab-Canadians.

Conversely, this study excludes Arabic literature written in languages other than Arabic, such as French, English, Spanish, or German. While these works often arise from the experiences of Arab writers in the diaspora, under colonial influence, or in multilingual societies, and are undoubtedly significant, they fall outside the scope of this research. For instance, literature written in French in North Africa or English in the diaspora is not considered here. Various factors, including political considerations, cultural dynamics, and market demands, can influence the decision to write in a language other than Arabic. Therefore, such works necessitate a separate line of inquiry to fully understand their unique contexts and implications.

Finally, I recognize that the terms "Arab world" and "Arabic literature, text, or author," when used in the singular, do not fully reflect the diverse mosaic of local histories, identities, traditions, and dialects across the region. Despite their inherent limitations, I employ these categorizations as heuristic tools, mirroring the terminology utilized by the subjects of my case study, including the magazine itself. This usage serves to facilitate a shared linguistic framework, enabling a more cohesive analysis while acknowledging the underlying complexity and heterogeneity of the Arab cultural and literary landscape.

### *The West*

I use terms such as "West" and "Western culture" to denote nations rooted in Western European and North American cultures, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and other European nations. These terms encompass historical, cultural, and philosophical foundations tracing back to Greco-Roman civilization, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and industrialization. They are often used in scholarly literature to establish a dichotomy with the East, where the Arab world is predominantly situated, as Said

(1979) discussed. However, overusing these terms risks perpetuating us vs. them narratives, promoting essentialism, and reducing complex cultures to monolithic categories, leading to oversimplification and misrepresentation of cultural identities (Said, 1979; 1985 & Coronil, 1996).

In this thesis, I use these categories following postcolonial approaches to translation theory, where they serve as a convenient shorthand to discuss large-scale patterns of cultural exchange, historical interactions, and geopolitical influences shaping translation practices in Western countries, the target cultures of translation. Scholars like Lawrence Venuti (1995) and Susan Bassnett (1990) have used these terms to highlight Western hegemonic practices' influence on translation norms and the marginalization of non-Western texts. They employed these terms to critique power dynamics in translation processes and advocate for equitable practices that respect cultural diversity. Therefore, whenever I use "West" or "East," it is mostly in the literature review under the umbrella of postcolonial theories.

Since one of the goals of this thesis is to avoid repeating the same narratives and conclusions about Arabic literature being perpetually a victim in English translations, I find it more precise to use "Anglo-American literary field" or "system" when discussing specific translation practices and influences within the English-speaking world. This term helps avoid broader, problematic binaries. It allows for a more focused analysis of translation dynamics in a specific cultural and linguistic context, recognizing society's potential for change and evolution.

***Anglo-American literary field/system***

In this thesis, I use the term "Anglo-American literary field" or "system" to refer to the contemporary sociocultural context of the receiving language of literary translations from Arabic, which is English. I use "Anglo-American" to refer to the linguistic similarities and central roles of the US and the UK in the international English-language literary and cultural landscape

(Bassnett, 1998, p.81). As part of their historical and current roles as imperial powers, the US and the UK have collaborated to establish English as the indispensable language of globalization and cement its influence on global literary markets. They host the most important centers for literary publishing, circulation, and movements in English worldwide. Given the hyper-central position of English globally, literary translation has become marginalized and neglected in these two nations, with translated works making up only a tiny percentage of the books published in the US and UK. Accordingly, these two countries, and by extension English, act as gatekeepers, determining which voices are heard and how they are represented globally. Moreover, their publishing houses, literary agents, cultural institutions, and media outlets wield considerable influence over what gets published and translated, thereby shaping global literary trends and standards (Casanova, 1999).

On the other hand, scholars such as Esther Allen (2007) argue that while English can be considered an "invasive species" with its hyper-central dominant position globally, it also serves as a vital vehicle for translators to facilitate global communication and forge literary translation communities. By translating works into and out of English, translators introduce diverse voices to a broader audience, enriching the literary landscape and fostering empathy, dialogue, and collaboration across linguistic boundaries. This is particularly significant since many people in the world do not know each other's languages but are more likely to know English.

***Systems and/or Fields?***

In this thesis, I use the terms "system" and "field" to analyze the sociocultural context of literary translation. However, these concepts originate from different theoretical traditions and carry distinct implications. Consequently, I clarify my approach to using them interchangeably, while also acknowledging the theoretical nuances of each term.

The term "system"[2] is primarily associated with the cultural studies approach, particularly in the work of Itamar Even-Zohar (1990) and André Lefevere (1992/2017). Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory views literary translation as part of a larger literary system, influenced by the dynamics between central and peripheral cultural positions. Lefevere expands on this by examining how ideological, economic, and cultural constraints govern the production and reception of translated texts. Within this framework, a system is understood as a network of interdependent elements operating within a hierarchical structure. This approach emphasizes the status and role of literary translation within specific cultural contexts, such as the US and UK (Heilbron, 1999; Jacquemond, 1992).

In contrast, "field" is a sociological concept derived from Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural production. In this framework, a field is a social space structured by power relations, where agents (translators, publishers, critics) compete for cultural capital and symbolic power. The notion of field is employed to analyze the global circulation of literary texts, as explored by Casanova (1999) and further developed by Heilbron and Sapiro (2007). It highlights the hierarchical and competitive nature of literary translation on a transnational scale, where languages and cultures are positioned within a world literary space.

Although "system" and "field" originate from different theoretical traditions, they converge in their aim to map the sociocultural forces shaping literary translation. Both concepts offer tools for understanding the positionality of literary translation within cultural hierarchies, whether on a national or global scale. I use them interchangeably to provide a comprehensive analysis of the production and reception of Arabic-English literary translations, navigating between national systems and global fields.

[2] While I acknowledge Luhmann's concept of "system" (1984), widely used in the sociology of translation to describe self-organizing communication systems, I use "system" in the cultural studies sense by Even-Zohar and Lefevere, which focuses on literary hierarchies, to avoid confusion in this thesis.

Specifically, “system” is used when discussing the internal dynamics within a cultural context (e.g., the role of translation in US and UK literary systems), while “field” is applied to examine the global circulation and power relations influencing Arabic literature in translation. By doing so, this thesis bridges cultural studies and sociological approaches, offering a more nuanced understanding of the forces influencing literary translation. Further theoretical elaboration is provided in the next chapter.

### 1.6. Thesis Structure

The main body of this thesis consists of five chapters and a conclusion. In the following, I provide a detailed description of the content of these chapters, which follow a classical thesis format.

**Chapter 1** is the current chapter where I introduced a summary of the thesis, the research questions, data, and methodology.

**Chapter 2** introduces the concept of translation agents, framed within cultural sociology, to explore the intricate relationship between translation and its cultural context. It emphasizes that translation is deeply embedded in social and cultural frameworks, shaped by the actions and interactions of various agents—translators, editors, publishers, and institutions. The chapter integrates theories from Lefevere, Bourdieu, and Latour, offering a comprehensive analysis of how cultural and social dynamics influence translation processes, particularly in the context of Arabic-to-English translations. The chapter sets the foundation for the subsequent analysis of Arabic-English literary translation, highlighting the roles and strategies of translation agents within this specific context.

**Chapter 3** contextualizes the research within the Arabic/English language pair, offering a comprehensive review of the forms, roles, and practices of agents in Arabic to English literary translation—a field with a complex history and unique challenges that limit the visibility of

Arabic translations and the agency of translators in the English-speaking world. While substantial scholarly work exists, it seldom focuses on the agents' perspectives, making it essential to explore this literature to inform the analysis.

The chapter traces the development of these agents across three paradigms—the orientalist, academic, and professional—each reflecting significant shifts influenced by political events and sociocultural developments in the Anglo-American context. These shifts have fostered the emergence of new academic fields where "accidental agents" have worked to challenge orientalist practices. Additionally, technological advancements have diversified publishing options, including mainstream and indie publishers, each with distinct characteristics and practices.

Despite the growing presence of Arabic literature in English translations online, there is a notable gap in scholarly knowledge regarding the production processes, forms, roles, and agencies of their agents. This chapter identifies and addresses this gap, highlighting the need to understand how digital platforms shape the translation and dissemination of Arabic literature.

**Chapter 4** presents the methodology behind this research study. It details the process and reasons for choosing an ethnographic case study as the research design, explaining why it is suitable for the context of this agent-oriented thesis and for addressing the research questions. Two sub-units are identified as the focus of the case study: the magazine, including its agents and paratextual elements of the Arabic content, and the production process of five Arabicthemed issues. This dual approach ensures a robust, multifaceted analysis that integrates cultural and social dimensions. To achieve this, two types of qualitative data are utilized: discursive data, gathered through semi-structured interviews and comments from observing the magazine's physical and virtual presence, and paratextual data, focusing on Arabic-related collections (titles, forwards, endnotes, contributors' links). Content analysis, derived from the codes collected from

the interviews and comments, and from the description of the Arabic paratextual elements is used to identify patterns and themes to understand the agents involved, their roles, agencies in the process of making English translations of Arabic literature available in the online magazine.

**Chapter 5** comprises detailed accounts of sub-unit one of the case study the magazine. It describes the magazine in practical historical, political, social, and publishing circumstances, exploring its unique characteristics as a digital magazine publisher.

The major human agents (staff and Arabic language contributors) and the Arabic collections as the end-product are introduced, then described and discussed through their paratextual elements (titles, forwards, endnotes, and contributor's links). The chapter ends with a discussion of how the magazine positions itself as an active agent for social change and innovation in the Anglo-American literary translation scene, with a focus on ethical considerations. It also discusses how the magazine sustains itself by delegating roles to other language-specific and temporary agents.

**Chapter 6** focuses on the second sub-unit of this case study, which is the process of making specific Arabic language collections in the magazine. To this end, it identifies numerous actors and emphasizes the centrality of certain human and non-human actors over others. By using actor-network analysis, the chapter reveals that the roles and positions of these actors can change based on practical, social, and translation actions, rather than being fixed. Building on actornetwork theory's concept of translation, several processes are identified. These processes transform scattered actors and resources into different projects and outcomes, similar to cloud formations that change shape and do not reform the same way again. This non-structured, temporary framework for making translations releases Arabic to English literary translation and its agents from the heavy weight of institutions and rigid theories, allowing for flexible and adaptive agency to achieve the final goal.

The chapter concludes with the idea that we need to deepen our understanding of translation agents and agency in today's cosmopolitan context. The analysis shows that agency is not a singular or fixed starting point, nor a universal solution for all literary translation problems in a given society; rather, it is profoundly social and dynamic.

**Chapter 7** synthesizes the key insights of the thesis, addressing how the processes, challenges, and roles of agents in literary translation, particularly on digital platforms like *Words Without Borders* (WWB), have been explored. It underscores the influence of both human and nonhuman actors, such as editors, translators, and paratextual elements, in shaping the translated works and their reception. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics of translation in a digital and globalized world, while also pointing to the broader cultural and representational shifts that digital platforms facilitate. Additionally, it acknowledges the limitations of the study and outlines directions for future research, particularly regarding the impact of emerging technologies and comparative studies across different digital platforms.

# Chapter Two: A Cultural Sociology Approach to Agents of Literary Translation

## Introduction

This chapter outlines the concept of literary translation agents, which serves as the guiding framework for this study and informs the analysis within a cultural sociology perspective. This approach is grounded in a firm conviction regarding the interdependence between translation and its cultural context. In translation studies, it is increasingly acknowledged as axiomatic that literary translation between two cultures is deeply embedded in the social milieu in which it occurs, both shaping and being shaped by its broader contextual dynamics. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that cultural contexts are not static but are actively shaped by human agents—individuals who play a pivotal role in bringing translations to their final form as cultural products.

In Section 2.1, I position my analytical framework within a cultural sociology approach to translation studies, integrating culturally focused concepts and analysis with sociological methodologies. In the case of Arabic-to-English translations, issues of cultural identity, ideology, discourse, and their intersections are particularly relevant, as I will elaborate in the following chapter (Chapter II). However, to avoid determinism and the redundancy of rehashing established ideas in the field, I propose a framework that complements concepts from cultural studies with methodologies from the social science, and particularly as applied in the sociology of translation. Moreover, the integration of cultural and sociology concepts and tools is essential to understand new cultural trends such as online publishing.

In Section 2.2, I conceptualize literary translation agents in relation to agent-structure dynamics. Three theories are of interest, to various degrees, to the focus of this thesis. In Section 2.3 I discuss Lefevere's theory of *rewriting*. Then, I introduce Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*

and *capital* and Latour and Callon's *actor-network theory*, as being interpreted and applied by literary translation scholars, namely Wolf and Buzelin. These concepts are discussed in section 2.4 and 2.5, respectively.

Proponents of these three theories believe that the roles, actions, and influence of literary translation agents are shaped by the complex interplay between individual agency and the broader social, cultural, and material structures within which they operate. Each theory offers a distinct perspective on how these agents navigate and negotiate their positions within the translation process, contributing to the production and dissemination of translated texts.

Finally, in Section 2.6., I explore how literary translation agents are discussed and conceptualized in the digital context.

**2.1. Cultural sociology**

Before delving into the central concept of this study—agents of literary translation—it is important to clarify that this thesis adopts a cultural sociology perspective for understanding and translating phenomena. This approach, as articulated by Milani (2022), aligns with the scholarly contributions of Pym (2006), Wolf (2006, 2007, 2010), and others who have long advocated for the integration of cultural and sociological frameworks in both conceptual and methodological terms. To better define cultural sociology, it is helpful to clarify what it is not. Milani (2022) argues that cultural sociology differs significantly from the sociology of culture, which, using traditional sociological analysis, often views culture as a reflection of social dynamics, structures, and institutions. Cultural sociology, instead, positions culture as a central, active force when conceptualizing and analyzing social life, emphasizing the influence of cultural trends, ideologies, discourses, and value systems on social actors, actions, and interactions, such as those involved in the process of making translations. The scope of cultural sociology thus lies in exploring the reciprocal relationship between cultural factors and social factors, where culture is

not just a product of social forces but also a driving influence that shapes social practices, identities, and power dynamics.

The distinction between these two approaches is not merely semantic but fundamentally epistemological. Sociology of culture suggests a clear distinction between cultural factors as "the ones that are observed" and social factors as "the ones used to explain the cultural factors," leading to fragmented and "toolbox" approaches in translation studies (Pym, 2006, p. 14-15). Cultural sociology challenges this separation. It posits that in translation, cultural and social practices are deeply intertwined, and thus they should not be separated in theoretical conceptualization or in methodological analyses. In her entry "Sociology of Translation" in the *Handbook of Translation Studies*, Wolf writes,

> The often-posed question of whether Translation Studies is presently working within a "social turn" or whether this is part of the "umbrella" paradigm of the "cultural turn" seems less relevant if we follow the perspective on translation elaborated during the last few decades. We then see that cultural and social practices and consequently their theoretical and methodological conceptualization – cannot be regarded as detached from one another. If we focus on "the social" but neglect the conditions that shape translation as a cultural practice in terms of power, ideology and similar issues, the creation of a new sub-discipline within Translation Studies called "sociology of translation" will simply outsource the problem of methodology. It is therefore important that the questions pertinent to translation viewed as a social practice be placed at the core of the discipline. (Wolf, 2010, 341).

This integrated approach is particularly effective in the study of Arabic-to-English translations as it introduces sociological methodologies and tools into the field, addressing an existing gap and enriching the dominant cultural studies analytical frameworks. These frameworks are often inspired by concepts such as Orientalism (Said, 1978), hegemonic discourses (Faiq, 2004b), geopolitical conflicts (Ettobi, 2008), and the commodification of literature (Kelley, 2014). My intention is not to undermine these frameworks but to emphasize their role as external factors that have influenced—and will continue to influence—literary

translations between Arabic and English. As Allen (2020) notes, the question of culture must be central to any translation analysis pertaining to Arabic. To this end, I propose that an important issue in contemporary translation theory is the recognition of literary translation as a social practice, embedded within the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs. Pym (2006) suggests that the best way to address fragmented sociocultural analyses is to focus on mediators—translators and other agents involved in the translation process (Wolf, 2007a, 2007b). Expanding on this idea, Milani (2020) emphasizes that the study of social factors must include a network of agents, such as translators, editors, publishers, and institutions, all of whom interact within specific sociocultural and political frameworks that are constantly evolving.

The rise of the internet as a cultural force has significantly transformed the landscape of literary translation, facilitating both the communication and publication of translated works on a global scale. The internet, with its apparent non-hegemonic structure, offers a unique platform where translations can flourish, unencumbered by many of the traditional constraints imposed by dominant cultural and political forces. This digital shift challenges long-established frameworks of literary translation, raising important questions about whether these older paradigms still hold sway and who now leads these efforts in the evolving translation landscape.

As Wolf (2012, p.134) articulates, translations occur within an "open system," continually influenced by a variety of external factors and constantly interacting with its environment. This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of translation, emphasizing that it is not a static or isolated process, but one deeply embedded within a broader social and cultural context. Just as translations do not take place in a vacuum, the agents involved—translators, editors, publishers, and other stakeholders—do not operate in isolation. Their decisions and actions are shaped by prevailing ideologies, beliefs, values, power dynamics, and the social structures of their time.

To fully grasp the complexities of the translation process in this digital age, it is essential to integrate both cultural and social dimensions into the analysis. Such an integrated approach offers a more holistic understanding of translation, moving beyond deterministic frameworks that may oversimplify the interplay of factors involved. By combining qualitative cultural perspectives with quantitative sociological data, this methodology provides a nuanced and comprehensive framework for understanding translation as a socially embedded practice. This dual focus on cultural and social analysis not only deepens understanding of the contexts in which translations are produced and disseminated but also sheds light on the roles and interactions of the various agents involved. Accordingly, the next section explores how these agents—translators, editors, publishers, and institutions—are conceptualized within this framework, examining their influence and the networks they form in shaping the translation landscape.

### 2.2. Conceptualizing translation agents from a cultural sociology perspective

In the field of translation studies, the concept of translation agents has evolved significantly, particularly as the discipline has broadened its focus from purely linguistic concerns to encompass wider cultural and social dimensions. The term "agent," originating from the social sciences, has inspired sociological approaches within translation studies and has become an umbrella term encompassing various forms, elements, and concepts. Milton and Bandia (2009) use translation agents to refer to the individuals and entities involved in the translation process, including translators, editors, publishers, and other intermediaries who influence the selection, interpretation, and dissemination of translated texts. They also attribute a mix of cultural and social elements to these agents, including patronage, power, ideology, habitus, and networks. In the following sections, I trace the development of the concept of translation agents from cultural approaches to the more nuanced perspectives found in the sociology of translation.

Lefevere (1992/2007), a pioneer of the cultural turn in translation studies, played a crucial role in expanding the scope of systemic approaches, namely the polysystem theory by Even-Zohar (1990), which emphasized the central role of translation within the target culture's literary system. Lefevere personalized systemic approaches by highlighting the roles of "those in the middle, the men and women, who do not write literature, but rewrite it" (Lefevere, 1992/2017, p.1). Rewriters, including translators, editors, and compilers, wield substantial power in shaping the trajectory of foreign literature. Their decisions—whether through translation, critical reception, or (re)publishing—determine not only which works are preserved and promoted but also how these works are interpreted and valued by readers. This agency underscores that the survival and success of literary texts often depend more on the strategic interventions of these rewriters than on the texts' intrinsic literary merits alone.

However, it is important to recognize that rewriters often operate within ideological constraints or institutional motivations. Lefevere (1992/2017) insists that their power and agency are shaped by the prevailing political, social, or cultural ideologies of their time, and so certain works or authors may be suppressed or promoted depending on how well they align with the dominant discourses and narratives. For example, in the Victorian era, British colonialism significantly influenced the literary canon. Works that supported or reflected colonial ideologies were often promoted and widely disseminated, while those that critiqued or challenged imperialism were marginalized.

Similarly, Venuti (1992) presents a nuanced understanding of translators as an agent embedded within complex cultural and social frameworks. He highlights that while the translator operates within discursively constructed and socially determined contexts, their work is not entirely predetermined or unconscious. The translator engages in a continuous process of self-monitoring, consulting cultural rules, and drawing on various resources, which allows for critical

reflection and political action. Although translation is shaped by intertextual and ideological factors, Venuti (1992, p. 11) argues that a socially conscious and politically active translator can intentionally select foreign texts and use strategies to “deterritorialize” the target language, thus resisting and potentially transforming existing cultural and social hierarchies. Both scholars, Lefevere and Venuti, though not explicitly using the term "agent," attribute to individuals and entities the power to influence, take action, drive social transformation, and ultimately exercise agency in the translation process (Snell-Hornby, 2010, p. 369).

Simeoni (1995), through the use of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, was one of the first to clearly advocate for an agent-grounded approach in the study of translation, offering a mechanism to analyze the relationship between agents and structure. He defines this agent as “the ‘subject,’ but socialized. To speak of a translating agent, therefore, suggests that the reference is a ‘voice,’ or a pen (more likely a computer today), inextricably linked to networks of other social agents” (p. 452). Simeoni’s contributions provided a framework that has enabled cultural turn scholars to conceptualize these agents and their interactions within social structures. This shift in perspective emphasizes the importance of agents’ roles, perspectives, innovations, and experiences in studying literary translations, moving beyond merely textual analysis of translation trajectories.

Buzelin (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010) expands on Simeoni’s vision of the agent as a single translator, noting that agents of translation include any actors involved in the translation process, whether human (e.g., translators, editors, publishers) or non-human (e.g., digital tools, documents and contracts, institutional frameworks, cultural events). According to her research, an agent, despite having a defined role in the translation process, may also assume the roles of other agents as necessary or preferred. For instance, a translator can also act as a publisher, editor, or cultural mediator, tailoring their approach to support a specific source text and its

author or to meet the target audience's needs. While Simeoni often describes an agent as a singular entity, Buzelin argues that an agent should be considered part of a network. The roles and impacts of agents are understood through their interactions and connections with other agents within the translation process's social fabric. Buzelin refers to this interconnected social fabric as a network, emphasizing its crucial role in the production and dynamics of translation.

These definitions of translation agents, although varied in their nuances, highlight the roles of selection, reduction, and augmentation, thus rendering transformation and change an unavoidable consequence of translation—a potential rooted in the concept of agency (Tyulenev, 2016, p. 19). However, the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the concept of agency within the field of translation studies suggest that there is no clear consensus on what agency is or what constitutes agency in this context (Khalifah, 2014). Therefore, my use of the term "agency" aligns more closely with its general meaning—referring to the ability to act, make a difference, and influence social outcomes. For example, a translator might resist the pressure to produce a more "marketable" translation that aligns with Western tastes by maintaining the original text's cultural integrity, thereby using their agency as a form of resistance.

The extent of an agent's agency is often determined by the context in which they operate (Milton & Bandia, 2009). For example, a translator working within a rigid publishing industry may have less agency due to the commercial and ideological constraints imposed by publishers. Conversely, translators working within more open or alternative publishing platforms might experience greater agency, allowing them to take more creative or innovative approaches to their translations. Furthermore, the agency of individual agents is often interdependent with that of other agents within the translation network (Buzelin, 2007a). For example, the decisions made by an editor or publisher can either enhance or limit the agency of the translator. This

interdependence highlights the collaborative nature of literary translation, where the final product is the result of the combined agencies of multiple agents.

This leads to a discussion on the interaction between agency and cultural and social structures. In the following section I will explore three scenarios that are among the most prominently used in the study of literary translation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how translation agents interact with and are influenced by the broader systems within which they function.

### 2.3. Agents and rewriting

In the theories of literary systems, Lefevere's concept of "rewriting" posits that translations are far from neutral or objective renderings of a source text but are instead shaped by extraliterary elements, such as the roles of institutions, individuals, power dynamics, cultural influences, and ideological considerations that can influence or control literary translation. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding in translation studies that translators and other agents are "situated" within particular social and cultural frameworks. Their decisions are informed by the dominant ideologies of their time and place, and by their own beliefs and values. Consequently, translation becomes an ideologically charged activity where the choices made by agents reflect not only linguistic considerations but also a desire to promote or resist certain ideas, norms, and worldviews.

To avoid simplistic and deterministic analyses, Lefevere developed a nuanced framework wherein a literary system is influenced by elements he terms "control factors." These factors are designed to align the operations of a literary system with other societal systems and the prevailing ideology and power dynamics within a culture. The control factor comprises two main components: (1) categories of expertise, consisting of literary professionals who operate within the literary system, and (2) patronage, consisting of individuals or institutions providing support

from outside the literary system. This dual structure ensures that literary production is shaped not only by internal literary judgments but also by external sociocultural forces.

Lefevere designates patronage as the first element of the control factors. He writes that "[patronage] is to be understood as the powers which help or hinder the writing, reading, and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere, 1992/2007, p. 12). While patrons are not directly involved in the making of a translated text, they regulate systems and participate in the production and distribution of texts through financial and institutional support. Lefevere's patrons are primarily concerned with the ideology of literature rather than its poetics, delegating authority to professionals where poetics is concerned (Lefevere, 1992, p.12). Patronage is composed of both concrete elements, such as persons and institutions, and conceptual ones, such as ideology, economics, and status. At any given moment, one or more of these conceptual elements can motivate a person or institution to either facilitate or impede innovation within a literary system.

Patronage manifests in two primary forms: undifferentiated and differentiated. Undifferentiated patronage features a single patron influencing power, ideology, economy, and social status within a society. This form is prevalent in totalitarian regimes, where translations must conform to the prevailing cultural and ideological frameworks to receive support. In contrast, differentiated patronage characterizes societies where power, ideology, economy, and status operate more independently, not concentrated under a singular patron. This arrangement allows the conceptual components of patronage to function separately, enhancing the likelihood of a translated work accessing the literary market compared to environments dominated by a singular patronage. For example, a publishing house with a distinct ideological agenda might publish works regardless of their financial viability, while another, focused on profit, may opt to publish works irrespective of literary system demands. This differentiated model, prevalent in modern societies in Europe and North America, facilitates the inclusion of a wide range of texts,

featuring diverse themes, ideologies, and perspectives, into the literary system, despite potential challenges (Lefevere, 1992/2007, p.15). *Words Without Borders* (WWB) exemplifies this form of differentiated patronage. By prioritizing ideological considerations over economic motivations, WWB has successfully introduced more literary translations to the insular Anglo-American literary system. This example illustrates how patronage can be a productive force in expanding the literary landscape.

Finally, Lefevere introduces categories of expertise as a crucial component of his model, focusing on individuals with specialized knowledge or skills within the literary system, distinct from external patronage. This group encompasses authors, translators, critics, reviewers, literature teachers, and academics, all characterized by Lefevere as rewriters. Despite the potential implication of a secondary or minor role suggested by the term "rewriting," Lefevere underscores the significant influence these rewriters exert on the literary system, especially in translation processes. He contends that, contrary to any perceived subordinate position, these individuals have a profound capacity to drive change within the system. Their involvement and contributions to the concept of poetics play a pivotal role in shaping literary and cultural landscapes.

Lefevere defines poetics as comprising two components: (1) an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters, and situations, and (2) a broader conception of literature's role in society (Lefevere, 1992/2007, p.56). He argues that the act of rewriting a translated text adheres to the prevailing notions of literature's purpose, its poetics, and the broader societal ideals, its ideology. Thus, Lefevere's analysis suggests that rewriters engage deeply with both the literary form and its societal implications, marking their central role in the cultural and ideological fabric of their context. From Lefevere's analysis on poetics within literature's societal role, it is clear that engaged individuals, including authors, critics, and translators, are

instinctively interacting with their society's prevailing ideologies. Their work often contests the era's dominant ideological narratives, particularly by introducing foreign or translated texts into what is described as an insular Anglo-American literary system.

Therefore, Lefevere's effort to separate ideology from poetics seems more like an academic exercise than a distinction clearly recognized by those active within the literary system. Experts utilize literature to forge new social, political, or literary discourses, establishing a crucial connection that underlies several conclusions of this thesis. Motivated by a variety of personal, interpersonal, and societal factors, translators, alongside other social agents, make significant adaptations to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps. Their efforts aim to not only navigate these divides but also effect transformation within the Anglo-American literary system, broadening its receptiveness to literary translation. In this study, I probe the norms and constraints influencing the dynamics between the literary system and the broader cultural contexts of the US and the UK.

While Lefevere's theory emphasizes the role of extraliterary factors such as ideology, power, and beliefs in shaping the translation (rewriting) process within the target culture, Bourdieu's sociological framework complements and deepens this perspective by introducing the concept of habitus.

### 2.4. Agents' habitus and capital

Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1996), refers to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals (translators or publishers) acquire through their social environment. These individuals, to maintain their professional standing and influence, must adhere to certain societal conventions and norms, which are learned through their education, professional experiences, and the social trajectories of their careers. While Lefevere focuses on how categories of expertise decisions are influenced by the external power structures and the ideological motivations of the

patrons who exists outside of the literary system, Bourdieu's theory focuses on the power dynamics that emerge from the interactions and socialization between social actors within the literary system or what he calls the "field".

The concept of habitus is particularly useful for analyzing the role of translation agents because it highlights the interplay between individual agency and social structures. Simeoni (1995) argues that while translation agents operate within specific social and cultural constraints, their habitus enables them to navigate these limitations in ways that are both influenced by and responsive to the broader social context. This implies that translation agents are not merely passive recipients of cultural norms; rather, they actively engage with and shape these norms through their work.

In the context of translation studies, habitus is the internalized framework that guides translators and other agents' behavior and influences their choices within the translation process, namely how they approach the translation task, the strategies they employ, and the decisions they make at each stage of the process (Inghilleri, 2005). For example, modern translators face the challenge of adapting to various norms depending on the project, context, or patron requiring them to be proficient not only in terms of linguistic skills but also technological tools. This general concept of habitus can also take a specific form: the activist habitus. According to Wolf (2012), activist habitus activates agents to be deeply aware of the power dynamics and ideological forces embedded in the texts they translate and the contexts in which they operate. Agents who adopt an activist habitus understand that their work is inherently political as they navigate through complex sociopolitical environments. The choices they make—whether in selecting which texts to translate, determining how to frame cultural references, or deciding what ideological elements to emphasize—can significantly influence the target language audience, inflecting social change (Wolf, 2007a; Milton & Bandia, 2009).

Wolf (2012) also argues that this activist habitus is characterized by a self-reflective approach, where translators critically examine their own positions, biases, and the potential impact of their work. They are not merely conduits of linguistic transfer but are actively involved in the process of shaping meaning and contributing to the discourse on important social and political issues. This involves a deliberate and conscious effort to use translation as a tool for advocacy, whether by promoting marginalized voices, challenging dominant narratives, or fostering cross-cultural understanding in contexts of conflict and inequality. In the context of globalization, where cultural and linguistic boundaries are increasingly fluid and where issues such as war, terrorism, and human rights abuses dominate the global agenda, the role of the translator becomes even more critical (Cronin, 2003). The activist habitus demands that translators engage with these global issues, using their skills to influence public opinion, support social movements, and contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable world. This may involve translating works that challenge oppressive regimes, expose human rights violations, or give voice to those who are often silenced.

The relationship between habitus and capital is dynamic and reciprocal. The habitus of translation agents informs how they acquire, use, and convert different forms of capital to navigate the complex social and cultural structures that define the field. Capital*,* in Bourdieu's framework, extends beyond economic resources to include cultural, social, and symbolic forms (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996). These forms of capital encompass cultural knowledge, networks of relationships, and prestige, all of which translation agents leverage to gain influence and achieve their goals within the literary field. While Wolf (2012) did not explicitly discuss the types of capital held by translators in her analysis of their habitus as activists, she emphasizes the importance of considering the capital they possess or compete for to achieve success in the field. In the context of online translation activism, Chang (2020) identifies the volunteer student

translators in her case study as possessing cultural capital in the form of educational, linguistic, and technological qualifications. Moreover, these students also had significant social capital. In my case study, I apply this concept to identify the types of capital accumulated by the agents whose work at the online magazine exemplifies an act of resistance. Similarly, Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2018) emphasize the importance of technological tools in the revision process within the volunteer-based literary translation imitative. The use of digital platforms for collaboration and communication between translators, revisers, and proofreaders is central to the production of high-quality translations. The ability to navigate these digital tools has become a form of capital that enhances the agency of translation agents in the digital context.

While Bourdieusian approaches offer valuable insights into the role of the translator, they often reduce the concept of agency to the individual level, primarily focusing on the translator's role (Buzelin, 2005). This perspective tends to overlook the network of mediators involved behind the making of a translation and lacks the necessary linkage to analyze the complex interactions between multiple, diverse actors. Bourdieu's theory, while robust in exploring individual agency and relate it to various capitals, does not provide a clear mechanism for connecting various agents within a cohesive network, which is essential for understanding the collaborative nature of translation. Moreover, Bourdieu's theory overlooks the final products—the texts themselves—as it primarily emphasizes the social structures, power dynamics, and positions of agents within the literary field, rather than the textual outcomes of the translation process. However, for this thesis, focusing on the analysis of the final product is essential to effectively measure agency in the digital context.

This gap can be effectively filled by incorporating actor-network theory, which has more recently been applied in translation studies (Buzelin, 2005; Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2012; Luo, 2020).

## 2.5 Agents and networks

Actor-network theory (ANT) provides a framework for examining how a network of agents—both human and non-human social actors—interacts and evolves to produce project in nonhegemonic structures (Latour, 1987). According to Buzelin (2005), ANT allows researchers to explore how various actors, including translators, editors, publishers, and non-human elements such as the source text and technologies, are interconnected and how their interactions shape both the translation process and the agencies involved. While ANT doesn't impose predefined categories for actors, its strength lies in its ethnographic methodology and the flexible procedures it advocates for tracing these complex networks and interactions. By "following the actors" and "examining inscriptions," such as documents, emails, and other forms of communication, the research is able to trace the interactions, negotiations, and struggles that take place among the agents involved in the translation process (Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2012, p.39).

To operationalize ANT in my analysis, I begin by identifying the key human and non-human actors within the network involved in producing specific Arabic-themed issues in the magazine, examining their collaborations and conflicts throughout the production process. Next, I map the actions and interactions between these actors using the concept of "*TranslationANT*" by Luo (2020). Drawing on Callon's (1986) work, Luo (2020) developed his analytical concept to examine various actors—both human and non-human—who were enrolled, aligned, and mobilized to produce a translated text. This process is broken down into several stages or moments that collectively shape the translation project. Below is a summary from Luo's (2020) study of these network translation actions:

**Problematization:** This stage involves defining the nature of the problem and identifying the roles that different actors must play to address it. In this moment, the primary actors outline

the tasks and set the goals that will guide the translation process. This stage is crucial because it establishes the framework within which all subsequent actions will be taken.

**Interessement:** following problematization, interessement is the process where the primary actors attempt to "interest" or recruit other actors into the network by aligning their goals with the objectives of the translation project. This often involves weakening or severing these actors' existing connections to competing networks or interests, thereby ensuring their commitment to the translation process.

**Enrollment:** this action follows interessement and involves defining and coordinating the roles and actions of the actors who have been successfully recruited. It is at this stage that the network of actors begins to take shape, with each actor assuming a specific role within the overall process. The success of this stage depends on the ability of the primary actors to manage and direct the contributions of all enrolled entities effectively.

**Mobilization:** as the final stage, mobilization, is where the translation project reaches its fruition. All the actors—now aligned and enrolled—are mobilized to produce the final translated text. This stage involves the actual transformation of inputs (such as the original text, linguistic resources, and cultural contexts) into outputs (the translated text), marking the completion of the translationANT process.

The above stages, while presented sequentially, are not always linear; they can overlap, regress, or even coexist, reflecting the complex, dynamic nature of translation as a networked activity.

The strength of ANT lies in its ability to capture the dynamic and ongoing nature of the translation process, viewing it as a continuous negotiation and tension between various actors (Buzelin, 2005; Luo, 2020). I use this theory to delve into the complexities of translation

production, examining how different agents with varying degrees of social power, social capitals, and ideologies influence one another and contribute to the development of the network.

### 2.6. Agents of literary translation in the digital context

In the evolving landscape of digital platforms, the role and agency of literary translators is surprisingly scant. For instance, Gambier (2016) surveys significant influence of technology on translation practices, such as localization, audiovisual translation, and the rise of nonprofessional translation activities like fan translation and crowdsourcing yet does not address the role of online platforms in influencing the process of literary translation. While Gambier (2016) does not address the role of online platforms in literary translation, Cronin's (2014) concept of 'cybercitizenship' offers a valuable lens through which to explore the evolving role of translators in the digital age.

The concept of "cybercitizenship," as discussed by Cronin (2014), provides a framework for understanding the evolving role of translators in the digital age. Cronin emphasizes that the digital era transforms the identities and responsibilities of individuals, including translators, by redefining their relationships with cultural communities. Digital platforms create global networks that transcend traditional national and linguistic boundaries, positioning translators as key players in the creation and dissemination of global knowledge. In this context, “cybercitizenship” entails a form of global engagement where translators do more than just mediate between languages—they actively participate in the construction of global digital identities. This expanded role brings ethical considerations to the forefront, as translators navigate the complexities of digital spaces, grappling with issues of power, representation, and access to information.

Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2018) build on this idea by exploring the expanded roles of translators within digital publishing initiatives. They highlight how digital platforms empower

translators to take on additional responsibilities beyond traditional translation tasks, such as revising, editing, and marketing their translations. This expanded role can be seen as an exercise of agency, where translators have greater control over the text and its reception. However, this also introduces complexities, as the collaborative nature of digital production can blur the lines of individual responsibility and authorship, potentially diluting the translator's influence.

Freeth (2022) adds another layer to this discussion by examining the challenges that come with these new digital opportunities. While digital platforms indeed provide translators with avenues to assert their presence—such as through social media engagement or participation in online literary communities—Freeth argues that these opportunities do not automatically lead to greater visibility or influence. Even when translators actively engage in digital paratexts, their agency can still be constrained by external factors like publishers' strategies or platform algorithms that prioritize certain types of content. This finding suggests that while digital platforms hold the potential for increased agency, they also present significant challenges that translators must navigate carefully to assert their presence effectively.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have outlined the foundational framework of this study, focusing on the concept of agents of literary translation through a cultural sociology lens. By integrating cultural and sociological approaches, I have emphasized the interconnectedness between translation and its broader cultural context, highlighting the role of human agents in shaping the translation process. This chapter has discussed key theoretical perspectives, including Lefevere's theory of rewriting, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, and Actor-Network Theory, all of which provide valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural influences in translation. These discussions set the stage for the subsequent chapter, which delves

into the specific context of Arabic-English literary translation, exploring the roles, strategies, and agency of translation agents in this unique cultural and linguistic domain.

# Chapter Three: Agents of Arabic-to-English Literary Translation from Colonial Times to the Digital Age

## Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual background for my research by examining the state of Arabic literature in English translation through the practices of the diverse agents involved, spanning from the colonial to the digital era. It has two aims. First, it delineates the evolution of literary translation agents' forms, roles, and practices in relation to broader socio-cultural changes. Second, it identifies a critical gap in the existing scholarship: the examination of these agents within the domain of online literary translation, particularly concerning Arabic literature, has been largely neglected.

While early English-speaking orientalists like E.H. Palmer became interested in Arabic literature during the nineteenth century, it was only after Arabic-speaking nations gained independence in the mid-20th century that the translation of modern Arabic literature (MAL) into English truly flourished (Jabra, 1971). As Anglo-American powers rose post-World War II, understanding the Arab mentality and culture through contemporary literature became strategically important (Young, 1980; Bayat, 2001). Consequently, the correlation between translation activities and geopolitical events has become a focal point in the relevant literature, often emphasizing Arabic-English translation as a site of encounters, tensions, conflicts, and fraught relationships (*cf.* Said, 1994; Faiq, 2004; Clark, 2006; Theroux, 2008; Ettobi, 2008; Hartman, 2018). Within this context, translators (and by extension other rewriters such as editors, reviewers, and publishers) are frequently viewed with suspicion, a sentiment encapsulated in the phrase "*traduttore*, *traditore*" [3](Allen, 2010, p. 472, italicized in the original) or, at best, regarded

[3] The Italian phrase *traduttore, traditore* (translator, traitor) emerged from cultural rivalry with the French, initially applied by Italians who believed French translations of Dante distorted the original work's beauty or accuracy; it

as guilty of complicity (Al-Dabbagh, 2015). Collectively, they are often described in such negative terms without a closer examination of their practices, which stems from the belief that they are not merely linguistic mediators but active participants influencing the cultural and political ramifications of translated works, or agents in their own right.

Despite this context, MAL is generally being translated more into English[4], driven by factors such as the relationship between Arabic literary translation and the global novel's emergence (Allen, 2010; Khalifa & Elgindy, 2014; Hutchins, 2019) and the commercialization of Arabic literary works (Booth, 2008; Kelley, 2014). The growth of Arabic studies and the professional development of translators (Allen, 2020), supported by renewed cultural initiatives and book fairs (Abou Rached, 2020; Al-Dabbagh, 2015; Büchler et al., 2011; Büchler & Khalifa, 2021; Pickford, 2016), also contribute to this trend. However, as Arabic literature gains prominence, there remains a significant gap in research on the role of digital platforms in this process. The intricate dynamics involving the agents and processes of making literary translation that facilitate this cross-cultural exchange—particularly with the internet's influence—are underexplored.

This chapter sets the tone and contextualizes my research through a literature review that examines the critical role of agents in influencing the translation of Arabic into English across four evolving paradigms: Orientalism, academia, commercial contexts, and online platforms. These paradigms are analyzed against significant socio-cultural shifts that link the Arab world to Anglo-American cultural spheres. While adopting Hutchins' (2019) paradigm concept to discuss

has since become widely used in translation studies to reflect the historically fraught distrust of the translator epitomized in this classic phrase.

[4] Data from the Three Percent Translation Database highlights that 230 new Arabic titles were translated, accounting for 4.65% of all translations tracked, trailing behind major European languages like French, Spanish, and German.

substantial trends or shifts in the Arabic-English translation field, this chapter extends beyond his model. Although Hutchins' work recognizes similar geopolitical, social, and literary trends, it is primarily shaped by his background as an Arabic literary scholar and translator, which may limit his perspective to those of a practitioner within the field. This chapter aims to broaden the analysis by considering additional factors and viewpoints that might not be as prominent in Hutchins' work.

The **orientalist paradigm** (section 3.1) traces back to the recent history of colonialism, where translators from the eras of British imperialism and North American missionary activities not only exoticized Arabs, but also manipulated textual representations to serve their imperial interests. Their writing and practices often neglected to acknowledge Arab identity, either by omitting terms such as 'Arab' and 'Arabic' or by avoiding translation altogether. This erasure allowed Orientalists to control the portrayal of Arabs and their intellectual and literary traditions, thus reinforcing stereotypes and leaving a lasting impact on contemporary translation practices.

The **academic paradigm** (section 3.2) examines the evolution of Arabic-English translation agents within the modern Anglo-American academic context, particularly in the period following World War II. This period marked a transition from the initial omission of Arabic within the orientalist paradigm to its limited acknowledgment in area studies. This shift gave rise to "accidental agents" – academics, who laid the groundwork for the specialized subfield of Arabic-English literary translation. Simultaneously, the historical erasure of Arabic influences has led to a significant scarcity of Arabic literary texts within the discourse of postcolonial studies, anthologies, and university courses.

The **commercial publisher paradigm** (section 3.3) explores the expansion of Arabic English literary translation beyond academic motivations and university presses into the public sphere. This paradigm examines the intersection of economic models with literary translation

practices, focusing on how commercial publishers, both mainstream and independent, as well as cultural initiatives, including online platforms, are shaping the landscape of literary translation.

### 3.1. Orientalist paradigm

As representation and knowledge production, literary translation is influenced by paths of human history and cannot be compartmentalized into temporal fragments. To understand the evolution of modern Arabic-English literary translating agents (translators, editors and publishers), it is essential to highlight the historical, socio-political and philosophical elements influencing Arabic-English translation as a practice. Focusing on the most recent history, this section provides an overview of nineteenth-century orientalists and how their practices and strategies influenced the reception and appreciation of modern Arabic literature. In multiple instances, Edward Said (1978) refers to *orientalism* as a school of translation and interpretation, and accordingly to the orientalists[5] as translators and interpreters, who not only claim to represent the voices of the Orient who cannot speak for themselves, but also pretend to have the "authoritative translations" of all things Orientals for their fellow citizens (p. 203-222).

I argue here that English-speaking orientalists, whether British travellers and scholars influenced by Europe's imperialistic *mission civilisatrice,* or American Protestant Evangelicals intent on spreading their religion, exhibit similar attitudes towards the Arabic language and literature. The former group often translated and presented Arabic works to an English readership in an ethnocentric manner, effectively erasing the 'Arabic' identity embodied by these texts and subsuming them under a generalized 'Oriental' label. In contrast, the latter group largely neglected the rich literary heritage of the Arab world, focusing instead on translating and

[5] The term "orientalist" refers to Western scholars, writers, and academics who study, interpret, and represent the cultures of the Eastern world, particularly the Middle East and Asia. In Said's critique, Orientalists are often seen as imposing their own interpretations and biases onto the cultures they study, thereby perpetuating stereotypes and colonialist perspectives.

promoting Western literary works, specifically Christian-focused religious and philosophical texts, into Arabic. These divergent, yet similarly problematic approaches have contributed to the need for actual engagements with Arabic as a language, a culture, and a literature. This ethnocentric past has established a tone in modern engagements with Arabic literature, including academia, the anglophone publishing industry and book markets, which tends to overlook the diversity and richness of Arabic literature. Such practices may obscure certain nuances of Arabic literary works, but also dim the agency of its translators, who are often constrained by these prevailing attitudes amongst readers and book markets. As the socio-political situation in the world evolves, the roles of translators continue to undergo shifts as well.

### 3.1.1. Translation agents under British imperialism

Conventionally, Arabic-English translations were carried out by translators, who did not have the same training in the history and culture of Arabic language as what would be expected from modern day literary translators. The authorship Arabic translation by British orientalists, such as in the works of Bernard Lewis (1941), A. J. Arberry (1948, 1960), and C. Edmund Bosworth (2001), is often discussed in two ways. Abed (2016) argues that first it is represented in the historiographies written by a group of post-WWI British scholars, which focus on the positive role of British Orientalists in documenting, recording, and translating Arabic literature and history (p. 40). It is primarily concerned with British orientalists' personal and professional lives and scholarly work. Second, multidisciplinary studies were combined to form the corpus of European *Orientalism*, which fictionalized and (mis)represented Arabs, replacing them with an Oriental representation of language and culture. In response to the European distillation of Arab identities, native scholars, such as A. Abdel-Malek (1963), L. A. Tibawi (1964), Talal Asad (1973), and most notably Edward Said (1978), sought to examine the merits of the orientalists' *seemingly* neutral and objective authorship, exposing its discourse as "a style of thought based

upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978, p.2). These critical studies; however, did not denounce European scholarship completely. Said in his book, for example, praised the work of later scholar Louis Massignon (1935) and ethnographer Clifford Geertz (1973), as well as wrote the forward to Raymond Schwab's (1950) *Oriental Renaissance*, reflecting an evolution in the western scholarship towards the other. However, despite Said's diplomacy, the word orientalist became "one of the most charged words in modern scholarship," polarizing scholars into two camps - orientalists' defenders and their critics (Macfie, 2002, p.4).

Etymologically, an Orientalist is judged to have extensive knowledge of languages and literature of the Near East and the Orient. According to Lewis (1982), in England, the term orientalist meant an Arabist and was used similarly to "Iranist or Hispanist or Germanist," all of which denoted "a scholar professionally concerned with the language, history, or culture of a particular land and people" (In Abed, 2016, p.49). However, this 'neutral' definition of orientalist could no longer be sustained given European political control of the Arab-speaking population. The political context is best explained by Foucault (1980) as the coercive practices of state machinery that sought to hegemonize Arabs and turn them into 'colonialized subjects.' The discursive practices of an Orientalist were therefore no longer limited to learning Eastern languages and understanding local literature, but were consciously or unconsciously, accompanied by logocentric practices of *us vs. them*. These practices made it necessary for Said and others to redefine and expand the term Orientalist to include practices "justifying and accounting for the subjugation of" primitive and disturbingly different individuals such as "blacks, Arabs, [their] women and many others" (Macfie, 2002, p.4).

These practices of representation were typically used to ignite Victorian readerships' fascination with the Orient as equally captivatingly romantic and terrifying barbaric, in turn

influencing the reception of Arabic literature in the English version (Shamma, 2014). Publishers such as John Murray, Macmillan, and Routledge were prominent in producing books that catered to the Victorian readership's fascination with the Orient. These publishers often sought out manuscripts that offered narratives set in exotic locations, featuring characters and plots that aligned with the prevailing Victorian perceptions of the East—in addition, publishing houses, literary journals, and magazines also promoted writings about the Orient. Journals like The *Cornhill Magazine*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, and The *Strand Magazine* provided platforms for authors to serialize their works or publish essays and articles discussing Eastern cultures and societies. These publications helped to shape public perceptions and fuel the Victorian fascination with the Orient (Patten, 2014). The financial backing for writings that perpetuated Orientalist narratives during the Victorian era often originated from wealthy patrons or institutions who sought justification for their agendas related to exploration, expansion, colonialism, or cultural exchange (Scott, 2010). These patrons and institutions saw value in promoting a particular discourse of the Orient that aligned with their interests and ideologies.

In an attempt to analyze and account for Orientalists' discursive practices, Said (1978,p.12) coined the term Orientalism[6] to refer to an overarching colonial and imperial discourse that is "not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions;" but rather is "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts". Considering this,

[6] A lengthy discussion on account the history of orientalism as knowledge production is beyond the goals of this thesis. For an alternative reading, R. Irwin (2006) *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* provides a historical account on orient-occident relations that covers a long period and a wide geographical terrain. Although Irwin acknowledges the importance of Edward Said's earlier work *Orientalism* (1978) for his historical study, he critiques Said's argument on the basis on perpetuating the divide. Since Irwin comes from histography tradition, he could not completely refute Said's arguments. The latter was built on theoretical and practical approaches that are in accordance with the school of new criticism.

orientalism "not only creates, but also maintains; it is rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different (or alternative and novel) in the world; it is above all a discourse … Produced and exists in uneven exchange with various kinds of power" (Said, 1978, p.12). It was at this point when the Arab as 'colonialized subjects' became the cultural other. They were brought into being as contained, "static," "unchanged," "fixated" subjects, or "objects without history;" and therewith, represented in such a manner to justify and maintain colonial and imperial domination (Niranjana, 1992, p.2).

As a literary critic, Said (1985) gave an example from a literary history point of view. He noted that Orientalists have different approaches when studying an occidental literary text as opposed to an oriental one. Said argued that an occidental literary text commonly gained "some of its identity from its historical moment, interacting with the attentions, judgments, scholarship, and performances of its readers." Every time someone reads or reinterprets Shakespeare, for example, the Bard's work is reconstituted, often within institutions that already deemed him a great playwright. Conversely, when an Arab text is read in English "this privilege was rarely allowed" or viewed as "mainstream academic thought" (Said, 1985, p.92). Instead, Arab texts are confined to "the fixed status of an object frozen once and for all in time by the gaze of Western percipients" (Said, 1985, p.92).

This discourse, and what it allows us to assume about the other, was heavily influenced by the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment—a philosophical movement that established the Declaration of Universal Human Rights based on an objective moral code. With the Enlightenment, reality came to be perceived as objective, and knowledge derived from this reality was regarded as unproblematic, neutral, and universal. Within this context, Orientalists' discursive practices, including translation, functioned as a "transparent" mode of representing

something that supposedly already existed, although the "original" was, in fact, constructed through translation. These practices not only undermined the intellectual status of the colonized but also positioned the colonizer within history, endorsing a teleological, hierarchical model of civilization. This model, as Hegel noted, marked a modernizing moment for which non-Western cultures were deemed unsuited or unprepared (Niranjana, 1992, pp. 2-3). This coming of consciences negates the acknowledgment of the *Other* as an equal; and therefore, refuses to engage with it in cultural and intellectual dialogue. This moral complacency allowed the West to think in manners of "us" are not like "them;" and therefore, they deserved to be not only ruled over, but also stripped of voice and agency.

Furthermore, this context highlighted the orientalist's objective "mediating," and "interpretive role," as if "the orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself" (Said, 1978, p.290). Thanks to their expert knowledge of oriental languages, orientalists became the gatekeepers to all future Arab-related knowledge. Illustrating this form of linguistic gatekeeping, orientalist T.B. Macaulay[7] stated in *Minute*: "who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." The author stated this despite confessing in the same essay that he had "no knowledge over Sanskrit or Arabic," and his assessment was formulated after reading and conversing with Orientalists and colleagues he identified as "men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues" (Macaulay, 1835). This outrageous assessment of two ancient bodies of literature exemplifies the extent to which Orientalists often reflected a sense of Europeans moral, cultural, historical and social superiority.

[7] Thomas Macaulay was a historian and an official under the British Empire in India between (1839- 1841). He worked in anglicising the endian educational system. (Niranjana, 1992, p.30)

Another example is a form of linguistic manipulation that applies translation strategies that shift in accordance with the goals, societal experience, and cultural effects they want to produce. William Edward Lane, for example, selected a specific translation strategy when he translated *Arabian Nights* (Vol I, 1839; Vol II, 1840; Vol III, 1841). Lane, in these copies, used radical literalism in an attempt to "place Orientalism on a scientific and rational basis" (Said, 1978, p.122). According to Shamma (2014), radical literalism allowed Lane to "gather information" by focusing on "disparities and divergences" of Arab cultures that might "look fundamentally different" (p.15). Literalism as a translating strategy on its own is not a negative one. It was recognized by the German Romantics (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1813), and more recently, by the poststructuralists (e.g., Venuti, 1995), as a desirable literary and ethical translation. However, the use of literalism by Lane in this instance demonstrates that orientalists understood and were responding within the context of a colonial period.[8]

Another example of linguistic manipulation is R. A. Nicholas, a translator of ancient Arabic and Persian poetry, who spoke neither language. In *Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose* (1922), he made attempts to reproduce some rhythmic prose of the Quran but ultimately stopped, finding Quranic verses "obscure, tiresome, uninteresting" to most European readers, and thus, "quite unworthy to be named in the same breath with the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament" (in Arberry, 2017, p.207).[9] He also attempted to translate a famous poem by the pre-Islamic poet *Ta'abbata Sharran*, previously translated into German by Goethe. However,

[8] Shamma (2014) gives more examples to prove the changing of strategies. For example, he analyzed Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840-1922).

[9] I mentioned this specific example from R. A. Nicholas translation of the Quran because Nicholas is treating it as a spiritual/literary text. The literature on translating the Quran is quite vast, which discusses the issue from different theortical point of view that makes it outside the scoop of this thesis. For further reading on the translation of Quran refer to Salah Basalamah and Gaafar Sadek (2020), *Debates Around the Translation of the Quran*.

Nicholas applied a translation strategy of radical fluency—an approach opposite to literalism—sacrificing cultural representation in the process.

Such a strategy of radical fluency produced a transparent and acceptable image of the Arabs and their consciousness, which risked "presenting Arabic culture as an autonomous one, its autonomy being as valid as that of any other culture, including theirs" (Boullata, 2003, p.31). Nicholas justified his approach by stating that he did so to translate the Arabic *ode* in a way that was "at once intelligible and attractive to English readers," which he claimed was "probably beyond the powers of any translator" (Arberry, 2017, p.205). While these translators worked under the umbrella of patronages that, in the British context, still operated within an Orientalist ideology and viewed the other as radically different, their poetics reflected a significant agency in shaping how Arabic culture was presented to Western audiences. However, this agency often came at the expense of accurately representing the original work.

In conclusion, British Orientalists, often needing to be trained in literary translation and deeply embedded in the colonial mindset, played a pivotal role in shaping Western perceptions of Arabic culture and literature. Their work, marred by biases and a tendency to portray the Arab world through a lens of exoticism and superiority, significantly influenced the reception and interpretation of Arabic texts in the West. Similarly, Orientalists from North America, influenced by their own cultural and ideological backgrounds, exhibited a different form of superiority. They often neglected the nuances of Arabic languages and their translations, thereby perpetuating a sense of cultural hegemony in their approach.

### 3.1.2. Translation agents under North American missionaries

Unlike Europeans, North American missionaries rarely translated Arabic texts into English. Said distinguishes American Orientalism from its European counterpart, citing two main factors. Firstly, European nations, especially Britain and France, have a deeply rooted tradition of

Orientalism, shaped by their historical interactions with the Orient, including their oldest and most significant colonies (Said, 1978, p.2). Secondly, Orientalism is intricately woven into many facets of European culture, a level of cultural integration not seen in the United States until after WWII (Said, 1978, p. 2). Said characterizes American intellectuals before WWII as "cultural isolets," engaging with the Orient sporadically and mainly for theological purposes (p.290). Echoing Said's observations, Tolbert (2021) views the differences between American and European Orientalism as relatively minor, attributing this to the infiltration of European colonial knowledge into early American thought. However, he agrees that theological knowledge and missionary activities were fundamental to American Orientalism. He points to the American Oriental Society (AOS), founded under Massachusetts law in 1842, as one of the oldest American societies dedicated to studying Asian and Semitic languages, literature, and the Biblical history of the Near East. His analysis of AOS reveals that American Orientalism was primarily missionary in nature, with early members being more ministers, theologians, and missionaries than Orientalists or philologists in the British sense. Their philological research predominantly supported missionary activities (p. 33).

Furthermore, at the start of the nineteenth century, American Protestant Evangelicals, emboldened by the *Great Awakening*, adopted the British logocentric approach to colonialism and empire-building (Altman, 2018). Even before the Declaration of Independence, interest in Arabic language and literature in the United States was theologically driven, intended to complement the study of Semitic languages and the Old Testament. McCarus (1987) notes that this interest was a response to the widespread Anglo-American focus on "returning to the Bible itself for purposes of exegesis" (p.13). Consequently, many universities in the United States and Canada included Arabic philology in their curricula.

After forcefully converting the American Indians (*cf.* Cheyfitz, 1991) and successfully concluding the American Revolution, American missionaries "guided by an obliviousness to local realities" and "almost unshakable self-righteousness" came to the Middle East "to liberate the millions of supposedly perishing souls" living in the Arab provinces under the Ottoman Empire (Makdisi, 2008, pp.15-17). These missionaries believed that spreading Evangelical Protestantism could only be achieved by supporting the *Reformation* principle of "unconstrained individual freedom of conscience," which led to refusing to accommodate or tolerate other cultures and religions (Makdisi, 2008). The latter promoted establishing a 'global translation enterprise' to render the Christian Anglo-American Bible in vernacular languages. In 1891, members of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the first missionary agency that worked in the Arab world, sent their evangelizing mission to greater Syria (including Palestine and Lebanon). These missionaries were inspired by earlier pioneers such as Pliny Fisk and Levi Parson, who in 1819 had embarked on their mission with the goal of "claiming the lands of the Bible from what they described as an empire of sin." Their efforts were driven by a profound conviction that their militancy was spiritual in nature (Makdisi, 2008, p.16).

In accordance with *Reformation* principles that insist on the importance of each man reading the Bible in their own language, these missionaries translated the Bible into vernacular Arabic. However, their efforts to evangelize the local population failed due to their *either/or* logic and their "commitment to the inherent superiority of their [American] culture" (Kaoues, 2013, pp.15-16). American 'translating agents' figured only among theological scholars who

were not interested in translating Arabic into American English, but instead were determined to have their thought translated into Arabic.[10]

When the Arabs rejected Protestantism, the heads of these missions chose to make inroads through culture and 'liberal education' (Tibawi, 1966; Hourani, 1962). Consequently, they built seminaries and colleges, such as the Near East School of Theology (NEST) and the Syrian Protestant College, which later became the American University in Beirut (AUB).[11] Their interest was never in translating Arabic into English, but to infiltrate Arab societies to disseminate liberal ethics, exporting American ideas and ideals. Douglas Little's (2002) examination of North American involvement in the Arab world reveals that a lack of sufficient involvement has contributed to repeated policy blunders. He argued that this involvement is often misguided by "American Orientalism," which he defines as a unidirectional "tendency to underestimate the people of the region and to overestimate American's ability to make a bad situation better" (Little, 2002, p.314). Similarly, the establishment of the American University in Cairo (AUC) was a culmination of efforts by American missionaries and educators who sought to bring American-style higher education to the region. The origins of AUC can be traced back to the American School of Oriental Research in Cairo, which was founded in 1908 to promote the study of Egyptian archaeology, history, and culture. In 1919, the American School merged with the Syrian Protestant College to form the American University in Cairo. The merger brought together the resources, expertise, and institutional support of both institutions, laying the foundation for the new university. This endeavor was driven by a desire to modernize and Westernize education in Egypt while also promoting American values and ideals (Tignor,

[10] There is a whole literature that discusses the translation practices that were implemented by the missionaries as linguistic policies in order to implement and advance the American imperialism agenda. For further reading on this topic F. Kaoues, (2013), H. Sharkey (2012), and B. Anderson (2011).

[11] To further read about these two educational institutions and how they interchange between science and religion, and between Protestantism and American culture read B. Anderson (2008) and F. Kaoues (2013).

1989).[12] Notably, the university's press later became a pioneering agent in promoting modern Arabic literature, which I discuss further under 'accidental agents.' Whether under British imperialism or American missionaries, orientalists, translators, and other agents of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were acutely aware of the imperialist ideology of their time, which influenced how they handled alterity in their texts. Consequently, their translations and representations of Arabic texts were considered accurate, acceptable, and successful within the context of the receiving culture. Both maintained an orientalist mindset that frequently led to the *erasure* of Arab identity, language, and culture—a term that Derrida uses to describe the process by which texts and meanings are subject to loss, suppression, and rewriting (Derrida, 1978). This mindset often resulted in Arabic being dismissed as a distinct language, culture, and literature; instead, it was amalgamated with other Asian languages.

Western Orientalists commonly replaced terms like 'Arabic' with 'Oriental,' and 'Arabs' with 'Muslims' or 'Mohammedans' in their writings. This practice, critically examined in the context of Said (1978), mirrors his concept of linguistic manipulation.

### 3.1.3. Navigating Orientalism and early modern agents

A century later, in the early twentieth century, Anglophone *Orientalism* remained influential, with little significant evolution in the power dynamics of Arabic-English literary translation. Scholars in Anglo-American universities continued to focus on philology-based methods for translating and editing classical Arabic literature. According to Allen (2020), this trend began to shift gradually around World War II (WWII), allowing for two European schools of thought on the Orient – Russian and British Orientalism - to pivot their focus towards modern Arabic literary texts, each adopting a distinct approach.

[12] Notably, the university's press later became a pioneering agent in promoting modern Arabic literature, which I discuss further under 'accidental agents.'

The first, often characterized by a more neutral tone, is exemplified by Soviet-East European scholarship, notably Russian Arabists such as A. E. Krimskiy (1871-1942) and Ignaty Krachkovsky (1883-1951). Both displayed a profound interest in modern Arabic literature. Krimskiy's major study, *History of Modern Arabic Literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries,* published posthumously in 1971, primarily analyzed and translated early modern Arabic literature. Krachkovsky, on the other hand, was deeply influenced by his interactions with Arab intellectual modernists, particularly his friendship with Lebanese-American writer Amin Rihani, a pivotal figure in the Mahjar (diaspora) school of writers (Allen, 2020). He advocated against the narrow focus on classical Arabic texts, emphasizing "the importance of modern Arabic literature" in the contemporary era (Gould, 2012, p.328). However, both scholars represented Soviet-Russian scholarship on the Orient and their work thus falls outside the scope of this thesis.

The second school originates from contemporary scholars within the British academy, frequently referencing H.A.R. Gibb (1895-1971) and M.M. Badawi (1925-2012) as foundational figures, albeit with two different approaches. Badawi's work was notably shaped by the epistemological frameworks of the literary criticism departments in which he was educated, contrasting with Gibb, a modern Orientalist, who is regarded as a natural successor to the tradition of British Orientalism.

M.M. Badawi is a prominent literary scholar in the field of English and Arabic literature and criticism. Born in Egypt, he received his PhD at the university of London on Shakespeare. He then became a professor of English in University of Cairo, and Oxford University. Later, in 1967, he was recruited as the first lecturer in modern Arabic at the new Middle East Centre at St. Anthony Collage, where he taught Dr. Roger Allen, a translator and scholar of MAL at the University of Pennsylvania, among others. Badawi's work has been instrumental in bridging the

gap between MAL and English-speaking academia. His contributions span a broad spectrum of critical studies, such as *Commitment in contemporary Arabic literature* (1972) and *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (1985). Additionally, Badawi has curated anthologies such as *Early Arabic Drama* (1988). A significant aspect of his legacy includes translations that have made seminal Arabic works accessible to a wider audience, notably the translation of Naguib Mahfouz's *The Thief and the Dogs* (1984), undertaken with his student Trevor Le Gassick, marking significant advancements in the appreciation, and understanding of Arabic literary traditions.

On the other hand, Gibb, a renowned British philologist and an expert in Semitic languages, made significant contributions to the field of Arabic literature. He began publishing ground-breaking articles on Arabic literature in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies as early as 1926 and held prestigious academic positions at universities such as Edinburgh, London, Oxford, and Harvard. However, his perspectives on Arabic literature were heavily influenced by the prevailing orientalist mindset within Anglophone academic circles of that time. For instance, in his *Arabic Literature: An Introduction* (1926), Gibb expressed skepticism about the appeal of Arabic literature (both classical and modern) to non-specialists and questioned the cultural and commercial viability of translating or publishing these works. He approached Arabic literary texts primarily from an ethnographic standpoint, treating them more as "social documents" than as works of literary significance (Gibb, 1974, p.161). Gibb sometimes conflated 'Arabic' with 'Asian Islamic' literature, portraying the Orient as a homogenous, unchanging entity that epitomized the cultural *Other*. Interestingly, Gibb consistently preferred identifying as an Orientalist rather than an Arabist. This preference was notable, especially considering that by the time of WWII, as Said observed, “an Orientalist is less likely to call himself an Orientalist” (1978, p.53). Gibb's stance reflected a broader trend within the field, where scholars often

grappled with the evolving definitions and perceptions of their disciplines. He later proposed to replace the word 'orientalist' with the neologism an expert in Area Studies in order to intimate that the two (orientalism and area studies) "after all were interchangeable" (Said, 1978). Quoting Gibb's address at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, *Area Studies Reconsidered* (1963), Said highlighted this modern trend in studying the Orient. Thus, the modern orientalist/translator is a "Western expert on the Orient," whose job is "to prepare students for careers in public life and in business," and as such was "a traditional orientalist *plus* a good social scientist" (p.106-07).

M.M. Badawi and H.A.R. Gibb approaches to Modern Arabic Literature (MAL) exemplifies a broader, evolving context in the study and translation of MAL into English in contemporary times. This context highlights paradigm shifts within Anglo-American academia from traditional Orientalist perspectives, which primarily focused on classical Arabic texts and were often criticized for their essentialist and exoticizing views of the Orient, towards the establishments of academic programs that are region-focused, nuanced, and provide rich engagements with modern Arabic literature and culture. This early focus in sociology-oriented area studies delayed its development within the critical frameworks of postcolonial studies, which only began to emerge in the late 1980s. Consequently, the subfield of Arabic-English translation emerged thanks to the efforts of new generation of Arabic scholars. However, its development was not as organic as that of translations involving European languages, owing to the histories of Orientalism and specific sociopolitical power dynamics that impacted its reception and reach.

### 3.2. Academic paradigm

Following World War II, significant transformations occurred within the Anglo-American cultural and academic landscape, characterized by the establishment of new programs and academic domains in response to the global push for political and economic realignment. At the

same time, the West's relationship with the newly independent Arab states was marked by a blend of contention and complexity, catalyzing an acknowledgment and investigation into contemporary Arabic language and culture. This emergent interest, initially facing a dearth of resources in English language, found its primary institutional home within departments of culture and social sciences, specifically in Area Studies, rather than within Comparative Literature departments (Bayat, 2001; Ernest, 2013). After colonialism, the study and translations of MAL predominantly persisted within academic circles, motivated chiefly by ethnolinguistic knowledge and read primarily by specialists.

By and large, those involved in producing Arabic literary translations are embedded within the academic milieu. Arabic language and literature scholars (Arabists) frequently embark on translation projects to fill the gap in teaching materials and resources. As Allen (2010) observes, "almost all practitioners" of literary translation at this initiating phase are Arabic scholars of one kind or another, with responsibilities in the academic sector. For these academics turned translators, the significance of patrons and patronage remain as pivotal as it has always been for the earliest translators of literature in ancient times. Tymoczko (1999) highlights this enduring relationship during this post-colonial time, observing that the role of patrons has evolved from wealthy aristocrats to modern institutions like governmental granting agencies, university presses, and publishing houses. These contemporary patrons are subsequently shaped by the demands and influences of readerships, critical (academic) establishments, and government officials. Tymoczko (1999) proceeds to argue that collectively, they not only set the parameters for what is translated and how, but also exert a considerable influence on what gets published; thus, perpetuating the age-old tradition of patronage in steering the direction of literary and translation practices.

In the US, the funding to support the study and translation of modern languages and literatures initially came from the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, which aimed to foster a modernist trend in education to strengthen the post-war American education system. The Act, initiated in response to augmenting political strategies with improved human capabilities and educational advancements, specifically targeted perceived deficiencies in modern foreign languages within American educational systems fostering the advancement of postsecondary education.

The US Department of Education website (n.d.) stated that the Act came about in response to the need to ensure the availability of "trained manpower of sufficient quality and quantity to meet the national defense needs of the United States" (para 4). Similarly, the UK's response, inspired by the NDEA's success, came with the Hayter Report (1959–1961), which reviewed the workings of the UK's monetary system at the time and made recommendations for its improvement through new educational programs. According to University of Oxford website (n.d.), the report stated: "UK universities should follow the US model in putting greater emphasis on contemporary languages and societies such as Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies in the UK" (para 12). The report recognized a deficiency in these modern languages skills and recommended increased funding for research, education and translation. Notably, the persistence of the term 'Oriental' in the 1959 Hayter Report echoes its historical depth in Oriental studies and the substantial influence of Orientalism within academic traditions.

This term's usage reflects a long-standing tradition of categorizing and studying cultures under Eurocentric frameworks, a context from which Arabic studies and other modern languages gradually emerged. This historical backdrop highlights how deeply entrenched Orientalism has been in shaping academic disciplines and influencing the focus and methodology of language studies over time.

As a result, new programs emerged, focusing on fields of study deemed 'urgently' needed, such as Contemporary Arabic Studies and Soviet Studies. In the humanities, these include contrastive linguistics and comparative literature, which address the need for in-depth analysis and understanding of different linguistic and literary traditions. In the social sciences, Area Studies are emphasized, particularly those focusing on strategic regions such as the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Universities responded by training and hiring specialists in modern languages and literatures and offering fellowships to doctoral students to advance research in these critical areas. Languages, however, were not treated equally at these Anglo-American universities, or at best, they were treated differently. Unlike literary translation from European languages, which are central to Anglo-American Comparative Literature departments; and thus, important to the development of world literature. Allen (2013 & 2020) notes that Arabic (also Chinese) does not receive the same level of emphasis and is even marginalized in 'the world republic of letters' despite the large number of speakers and the ancient literary traditions (Casanova, 1999).

Therefore, literary translation training, in languages from the global North (European regions, or languages of regions where European powers were previously established), is more prominent than for languages from the global South, namely Arabic. For example, Gentzler (1993) documented the emergence of new literary translation workshops within the literary departments in American universities as a result of these fundings with the focus mainly on European or Latin American literatures. He found that these training opportunities significantly elevated the status of literary translation in the English-speaking world from a craft to a profession. These training courses established literary translation as an important and respected platform for introducing new literary texts into English, enhancing cross-cultural understanding and literary collaboration.

According to Gentzler (1993), the University of Iowa was at the forefront of this movement, with Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle inaugurating the first series of literary translation workshops in 1964. These workshops aimed to expand creative writing courses to include 'international writers'—mainly those associated with European languages—and to explore the intricate principles of translation. The directors of these workshops were instrumental in establishing the International Writing Program (IWP), which officially started in 1967. A prominent attendant of this program was the poet, writer, and anti-war activist Robert Bly, who, along with William Duffy, went on to implement literary translations in the journal *The Fifties* as a way to modernize and innovate the anglophone "literary system" of that time (Gentzel, 1996, p.116). The workshops also led to founding the biannual online journal of literary translation, *Exchanges*, in 1989 by poet and translator Daniel Weissbort.

The establishment of these workshops at the University of Iowa was part of a broader ecosystem of initiatives aimed at promoting literary translation in the US and the UK. In the years that followed, similar workshops and professionalization efforts gradually emerged in other universities across the US and the UK. For instance, in 1965, the University of Texas received a $150,000 grant from the Ford Foundation to establish The National Translation Centre (NTC), which later published *Delos* (1968), a journal focusing on the history and aesthetics of translation. That same year saw the launch of the first issue of *Modern Translated Poetry*, providing a platform for translators to display their "creative work" (Gentzler, 1993, p. 5). British universities followed the American model by introducing translation courses as an option at graduate and postgraduate levels.

Round (1998, pp. 14-15) notes that post-1960s, translation training in the UK did not evolve in universities in a traditional manner, nor as part of linguistic training, but rather within

composition classes – akin to creative writing classes in the US. He highlights this trend with the early decision by the University of Essex to drop language-specific departments (namely English, French, Spanish, and Russian) in favor of establishing a Language Center and a Literature Department. This shift enabled the study and translation of (European) foreign literary texts within a truly "plurilingual and comparativist context... in which they could and did grow" (Round, 1998, p. 15). Indeed, other UK universities followed this trend, notably the Precinct Centre at the University of Manchester, which later became part of the School of Languages, Linguistics, and Cultures, and the University of Edinburgh, both of which offered dedicated postgraduate programs in translation.

These developments towards translation training paralleled trends in global capitalism, open markets, and the commercialization of literature, leading to the mid-century period of fervent literary translation of European literature (Casanova, 1999) or 'Boom' of Latin American literature in Anglophone book markets (Allen, 2013). Professionalization for US and UK literary translators, with the formation of organizations such as the Translators Association (TA, established in 1958 in the UK), the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA, founded in 1978 in the US), and the PEN Translation Committee (PTC, created in 1959) have played significant roles in supporting literary translators. also arose. In a sense, these associations functioned as a union in the face of the commercialized publishing industry, advocating for translators' rights, fostering solidarity among members, and negotiating better terms and recognition for their work. However, the integration of Arabic into these prominent literary circles was gradual (Allen, 2003). For instance, ALTA did not host a special session for Arabic translation at its annual meeting until 2001, 23 years after its founding (Allen, 2003). Similarly, the PEN Translation Award recognized its first Arabic novel only in 2011 (Pen America Website).

In a sense, these programs and organizations continue to mirror hegemonic *Anglicism* in translation practices and the prevailing *Eurocentrism* in contemporary translation theory, often sidelining perspectives from non-European languages (Venuti, 1992; Hermans, 2006; Tymoczko, 2007). Such a situation raises a critical question: why do these disparities persist? Upon reviewing the relevant literature, my analysis suggests that the core reason for the slow integration of MAL in the Anglo-American academic and non-academic literary circles stems from its initial recognition as a geostrategic language. This perspective has led to the pursuit of MAL and its English translations for ethnolinguistic and educational purposes, rather than for its inherent literary merits. MAL, during the post-colonisation era, is predominantly recognized within the social sciences as part of Area Studies programming. This situation was further exacerbated by its exclusion from critical engagement in Post-Colonial Studies; a discipline that gained prominence for examining Third-World literature and culture during the 1980s-90s. Albeit, the situation started to change as more experts in MAL, who were also translators, began to advocate for its intrinsic value to global literary traditions.

### 3.2.1. Modern Arabic literature and area studies

In the aftermath of WWII, the Arab world also underwent its own set of substantial changes, marked by a drive for emancipation from European colonial powers, namely Britain and France, and a quest for autonomy that affected its cultural production as much as its political life. Efforts toward political autonomy and expressions of nationalism and cultural identity through literature became intricately entangled with, and at times undermined by, the ascendance of the United States as a global power (Jabra, 1971). The US, along with its ally, the UK, saw strategic benefits in the Arab region, primarily centered around energy resources, the containment of Soviet influence (during the Cold War), and the political conflicts in the region of that time, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (since 1948) and the spread of radical Islam

(since 1979). Within this context, Arabic was recognized as a 'critical' language, and its translations initially significantly benefited from collaborations between the Anglo-American government, including armed services, and academic institutions (McCarus, 1987). As the Arab world navigated the complexities of post-colonialism and endeavored to define its identity amid shifts in global power, the expanding influence of the United States became increasingly evident, extending beyond politics to deeply permeate cultural knowledge.

This transition represented a pivotal moment where political dynamics intersected profoundly with academic and cultural discourse. Edward Said highlighted this era as one characterized by the "twinning of power and legitimacy" (1994, p. 291), a phenomenon further bolstered by the global dominance of English as the lingua franca.[13] As a result, English language scholarly discourse on modern Arabic literature and culture led to translations that either departed from the original texts and contexts or were not representative. It subtly shaped perceptions of and narratives about the modern Arabic language, sometimes perpetuating a discourse that casts Arabs as the quintessential *Other* (Allen, 2003). This othering is especially evident in Arabs' representations in other domains such as in films and mass media, and the commercial publishing of literary translations (Allen, 1988; Said, 1990; Shaheen, 2001, Naaman, 2010).

Yet, despite the limitations and constrains within Anglo-American academic circles and discourse, the emergence of new literary scholars specializing in Arabic studies—whom I refer to as "accidental agents" later in this section—has spurred significant changes in the translation of Arabic literature. First, these scholars aim to enrich the quality and quantity of their teaching

[13] This mention of the rise of English as a lingua franca is not intended as a critique of the phenomenon, as that topic is beyond the scope of this thesis. The purpose here is rather to illustrate how the widespread use of English universally has narrowed the gap between Anglophone translation practices and book markets in the US and the UK. For more details on the critique of the rise of English as a lingua franca, see Bourdieu, P. (1999). Language and Symbolic Power. Harvard University Press.

materials. Second, they acknowledged, for the first time in English-language translations, the literary merits of MAL and its authors, thereby trying support external advocacy for more accurate representations of Arab culture beyond academic institutions. Without their critical input within these programs, this transformation would not have been attainable.

The paradigmatic transformation, driven by the dedication of these 'accidental agents,' seamlessly connects to Rafael's (1999) observation of an epistemological shift from *Orientalism* towards *Regionalism* within Anglo-American academic circles, marking a significant evolution in the appreciation and study of MAL. Rafael (1999) notes a significant transition in post-war Anglo-American academia, moving from a purely Orientalist approach to a more (geographic) regionalist perspective in the study of foreign languages and literatures, especially those from non-European regions, including the Arab world. As a result, Arabic became a material reality on the map instead of a generalist and imaginative existence withing the Orient. Building on this observation, Rafael presents *Regionalism* as a philosophical concept that highlights a specific locality or region as a beacon of enticing otherness; thus, providing a deeper understanding of the transition's implications. This distinct form of otherness is simultaneously exoticized and made accessible, allowing for its sacralization and commodification. This dual process not only underscores the region's uniqueness, but also integrates it into broader cultural and economic contexts, making it a subject of reverence and market interest. Consequently, *Regionalism* plays a crucial role as a vital complement to the ideologies of post-Enlightenment and postcolonial modernity by enriching and extending these frameworks (Rafael, 1999).

While it has traces in Orientalist discourse, approaching the social and cultural life of a region for commodification is an important point of departure. He argues that *Regionalism* disrupts the traditional oriental/occidental dichotomy, complicating the dominance of powerful centers. This disruption stems from understanding regions not merely as sovereign or

independent entities, but also as part of a continual historical development of regionalities regimes. These regimes dynamically shape and reshape the relationship between the periphery and the core, thereby redefining the local in ways that are indispensable, rather than merely supplementary, to centers of power. To this end, originalist perspectives might open space for dialogue between the periphery and the center, or between the East and the West, leading to transformative changes (Rafael, 1999).

The shift from *Orientalism* to *Regionalism* has also facilitated a transition from a purely humanities-centric approach to one that incorporates ethnography and the social sciences into the study of contemporary cultures, including literature. This evolution has paved the way for the emergence of Area Studies, offering a more specialized focus that prioritizes practical training and the application of language and cultural knowledge across various domains. This transformation has turned Orientalists, who may not have initially been proficient in speaking Arabic, into Arabists with a comprehensive approach to Arab studies, underlining the importance of both speaking and reading Arabic texts. Hence, institutions that were initially founded to train Orientalists have gradually evolved into Middle East centers and departments, thanks to the NDEA Act of 1958 and the Hayter Report (1959–1961), pivoting towards training experts with a nuanced understanding of specific regions (Hutchins, 2019). For example, the establishment of scholarly associations such as the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) in 1966, and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) in 1973, heralded a new era in Arabic studies.

Additionally, the NDEA played a crucial role in establishing and expanding modern Middle East Centers at various universities. For instance, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, established in 1954, experienced significant growth in the post-NDEA era, becoming a leading institution for Middle Eastern Studies. Similarly, the Middle East Center

at the University of Pennsylvania, founded in 1965, was part of this broader expansion, spurred by the NDEA. The evolution of higher education programs in these Middle East Centers, along with the increased availability of funding for student exchange programs in the Arabic-speaking universities, such as the American University of Cairo, ultimately led to significant positive outcomes, enriching the academic landscape, and fostering greater cultural understanding.

Translations, including literary translations, from modern Arabic initially found their place within Area Studies departments. Tessler et al. (1999) note how Area Studies moved towards prioritizing practical training and the application of language and cultural knowledge in domains such as diplomacy, legal advisory, policymaking, national security, and economic strategy, reflecting a broadened scope of academic and practical interests. This practical training encouraged the integration of translations across "every field of human activity," a development that underscores the growing intersection between translation practice and theory and Area studies (Brisset, 2010). This convergence of translation practice and theory and Area Studies not only amplifies the production of knowledge, but also enriches our understanding of the cultural Other (Gambier & Doorslaer, 2016). It is within the departments of Area Studies that MAL have carved a niche in Anglo-American academia.

### 3.2.2. Accidental agents

As more translations were produced, exposure to the Arab world inevitably increased as part of globalization processes, as such, certain individuals, especially literary scholars, emerged 'accidental agents.' Making use of Rafael's (1999) terminology, their translations emerge as byproducts of their professional responsibilities, a concept I elaborate on at the end of this section. As Rafael (1999) insightfully points out, Area studies have a unique and somewhat accidental nature. The value of Area Studies programs lies in their capacity to cultivate a shared experience of exploring otherness through creating material and intellectual spaces such as

dedicated centers, associations, magazines, and more. Hutchins (2019) summarizes this by noting that it is common for cross-disciplinary Islamic Civilization and Middle East courses to incorporate translations of contemporary novels and short stories. He further argues that the growing interest in these regions led to the establishment of modern Middle Eastern literature courses and translation series in both the US and the UK. This context underscores how translations and the study of contemporary Arab literature have evolved as significant components in understanding and engaging with global cultures. The following section will delve into how these accidental agents have contributed to the broader discourse on Arab literature and its reception in the West.

This development of area-specific programs, along with ongoing cultural exchanges through media and other globalization processes, has significantly influenced the roles of literary translation agents in the Arabic-English translation field. This impact has transformed translators' roles from being Orientalists, who interpret the cultures and languages of others to exert colonial power, to becoming engaged academics in a post-colonial context, prioritizing cultural awareness, genuine curiosity, and pursuit of productive knowledge and dialogue through literature. Consequently, their agency extends beyond merely translating classical Arabic literature; they now delve into modern literary texts, benefiting their careers as translators and enhancing their classroom teachings. Essentially, the evolution of Area Studies and the emergence of accidental agents within this field mirror a broader narrative of academic evolution and cultural engagement. Most importantly, it signifies a departure from any tendencies of Occidentalism when studying the field of Arabic-English translation, highlighting a shift from a narrow, Orientalist perspective to a more inclusive, globally aware, and culturally sensitive approach in both academia and literary translation.

A prime example of the impact of area-study programs and the rise of the accidental agent is Denys Johnson-Davies (1922-2017), celebrated as the doyen of translators of MAL into English. Born in Vancouver, Johnson-Davies was a student at The School of Oriental Studies in London where he specialised in Arabic. He writes that "it required the Second World War to persuade the powers-that-be that eastern languages were worth encouraging … it was only then that the government arranged for special scholarships to be given to those willing to take up such languages" (2006, pp.5-18). Subsequently, he moved to St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where he furthered his education in Arabic as part of the Middle Eastern Studies program. Intriguingly, Johnson-Davies recalls that his colleagues in these programs included notable figures such as Arabist Bernard Lewis, Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs Abba Eban, and Stephen Naish, whose father was a missionary in Lebanon. For Johnson-Davies, what set him apart from those mentioned was his keen interest in modern Arabic writings, a direct result of his interactions with Arabic as a living language and with Arab professionals and writers, both during his years at the BBC and his time in Cairo. Additionally, his own literary inclination as a short story writer further enriched his understanding and appreciation of the genre. He describes this experience:

> As Arabic gradually became less of a closed book, I tried to find out whether there was any sort of literary renaissance in the Arab world… I learned that the short story was being practiced by a small number of writers… During this time I translated [my first] one or two of stories of [Mahmoud] Teymour's short stories and was able have them to published in some of the 'little' magazines, such as International Short Story and The Wind and the Rain, that were being produced at that time. (Johnson-Davies, 2006, p.20)

Furthermore, his friendship with Tayeb Salih led to Johnson-Davies translating two of Salih's early short stories, which were published in 'Encounter' magazine in January 1962 and November 1966. These stories were later republished together with Salih's first novel, *The Wedding of Zein*, which Johnson-Davies also translated. This novel, along with the short stories,

were published by Heinemann as part of their Arab Authors Series in 1968. Johnson-Davies was, in fact, the principal editor and translator for other titles in the Heinemann Arab Authors Series, which have since ceased publication due to lack of funding. Johnson-Davies, who dedicated sixty years to translating Arabic into English, was described by Edward Said as "the leading Arabic-English translator of our time" and lauded by Naguib Mahfouz for having "done more than anybody to translate modern Arabic fiction into English and promote it" (cited in Boullata, 2007, p. 78).

Another distinguished figure in the field of MAL translation is Roger Allen (born 1942), a prominent scholar and translator, who also reviewed many of Johnson-Davies' Arabic Writers series. Allen's academic journey began under the mentorship of M. M. Badawi at Oxford in 1964 and was significantly influenced by the Hayter Report's advocacy for Modern studies. In 1968, following an initiative funded by the NDEA, Allen was appointed to University of Pennsylvania. There, he was tasked with initiating the very first university course on MAL in an American university. However, as Allen (2003) noted, he faced a major challenge: the available material was "not a terribly representative sample", being limited to translations from the Arabic classical period, such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (p.2). It also included contemporary English writings by Arab Americans, like G. K. Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923) and A. Rihani's early literary works (1911–1921), along with a few isolated novels and short stories mostly from Egypt, translated into English by previous diplomats and other professionals who were knowledgeable in Arabic as a language, but not deeply involved in literary translation as a practice. Allen lists some notable examples:

> The translations by E.H. Paxton and Hilary Waiment of the first two volumes of Taha Husayn's al-Ayydm (London, 1932; Cairo, 1943), Aubrey (now Abba) Eban's translation of Tawfiq alHakim's Yawmiyydt nd'ib ft al-arydf (London, 1947), Desmond Stewart's translations of al-Sharqawi's al-Ard (London, 1962) and of Fathī Ghanim's al-Rajul al-ladhl faqada lillahu (London, 1966) and Trevor Le Gassick's pioneering translation of Mahfuz's Zuqdq al-midaqq (Beirut, 1966). (Allen, 1994, p.165)

Recognizing the need for more contemporary material, Allen proactively sought out and translated newer Arabic texts, thereby enriching the course and making significant contributions to the field of MAL translation. In addition to his translation work, Allen authored several influential books, including *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2003), now considered a standard reference in the field. This work stands in stark contrast to H.A.R. Gibb's *Arabic Literature - An Introduction* (1974), which, as one of the few Orientalists works to show interest in the Arabic Renaissance, tends to be viewed as a social document rather than as a literary achievement. Allen notes that at this stage, translation from Arabic was improving but by no means representative or systemic.

Another example of this trend in the field of Arabic literature and English translation is the career of William M. Hutchins, born in 1944. Hutchins is an American academic and translator renowned for his translation of *The Cairo Trilogy* by Naguib Mahfouz, which later won the Nobel prize for literature in 1988. His academic journey took root at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, a hub for Oriental studies established in 1919. According to Hutchins (2019), his successful exploration into contemporary Arabic literature began when Marshall Hodgson, the founding of centers for Middle Eastern Studies at multiple American Universities, established a course named "Islamic Civ" at the University of Chicago, as part of the US federal government's Great Society programs in the 1965. Later, the NDEA Title VI Critical Language Fellowship (starting in 1958 as part of the Great Society programs) played a crucial role in Hutchins' academic progression, funding his PhD program and alleviating the

financial challenges of his early academic pursuits. This financial aid was crucial, Hutchins (2019) declared, as the costs, even at the relatively modest rates of the 1960s, were beyond his means. He completed his PhD in the Institute, majoring in the Arabic and Islam section.

At the Oriental Institute, Hutchins was part of a pivotal shift in the department's approach to Arabic Studies. The move from a traditional philological focus to a modern linguistic methodology within a decade reflected a broader transformation in the field. Hutchins (2019, n.a.) explains that the philologist at the institute was part of a transitional generation, incorporating both the ninth century al-Jahiz and the twentieth century Tawfiq al-Hakim into his classes. This change was indicative of the evolving nature of Oriental Studies during that time and marked a generational shift in the academic approach to Arabic Studies in the US.

During the 1970s, in addition to human contributors, there were accidental agents in the form of translation projects and university-based presses, which played pivotal roles increasing the translation of modern Arabic poetry and fiction. For instance, the Project for the Translation of Arabic (PROTA) has notably advanced the translation of modern Arabic poetry and fiction. Collaborating with premier academic presses in the US, PROTA has been crucial in bridging the gap in teaching materials for modern Arabic literature. To put it in Allen's words, PROTA and its anthologies were instrumental in the proliferation of Arabic literature translated into English. He states:

> there are now sufficient published novels and anthologies of poetry, drama and short stories to devote entire courses or at least significant segments of them to individual genres and themes. I could not help thinking back to the start of my teaching career in 1968. (Allen, 1994, p. 165)

The PROTA's Project director, Palestinian poet and critic Dr. Salma Khadra al-Jayyusi, who holds a PhD from the University of London, UK, and has extensively taught modern Arabic

literature at various Anglo-American universities, led the initiative. John Moore, from Columbia University Press, invited her to curate a comprehensive anthology of modern Arabic literature. This partnership produced *Modern Arabic Poetry* (Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed. 1987; Columbia University), which immediately hailed as a significant contribution to the study of MAL in the English-speaking world.

Allen (1994) notes that the success of this anthology has been a catalyst for the creation of additional anthologies and individual works. This success has been achieved through collaborations between PROTA and other university presses, further expanding the reach and impact of modern Arabic literary works. Among these new anthologies at the time are *The Literature of Modern Arabia: An Anthology* (Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed. Routledge, 1988; University of Texas, 1990); *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed, Columbia University Press, 1992); and finally, *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen ed, Indiana University Press, 1995). The first two anthologies are recognized as valuable additions to the corpus of translations from two significant regions of the Arab world: the Arabian Peninsula and Palestine, respectively. The latter anthology is distinguished as the first of its kind in the genre of drama, marking a pivotal moment in the representation of this literary form from the Arab world in English translation. The other small anthologies produced by PROTA featured collections centered around specific authors, showcasing their poems or short stories.

Throughout their distinguished careers, pioneering figures such as Johnson-Davies, Allen, Hutchins, and Jayyusi have significantly impacted the presence of Modern Arabic Literature (MAL) within Anglo-American academia. As literary scholars, they dedicated their work to promoting a more nuanced engagement with MAL, presenting aspects of Arabic literature in ways previously unexplored in the Anglophone context. Their efforts laid a solid

foundation for future contributors, including scholars, translators, and publishers, to further enrich and expand upon their pioneering work. These translators and editors, in collaboration with university presses—mainly in the US—have also been instrumental in establishing and teaching Modern Arabic Literature courses, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the field in academic settings.

### 2.2.3. Post-colonial studies and the absence of modern Arabic literature

Despite their triumphs, these translators have encountered significant hurdles in their journey towards achieving broader recognition and appeal for MAL, aiming to attract the attention of other literary scholars and the wider reading public beyond a niche 'expert' audience. The literature indicates that this hurdle is caused by the omission of, and lack of true engagement with, MAL in Post-Colonial Studies. Post-Colonial Studies, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, aimed to scrutinize the impacts of colonialism and imperialism in order to address the ethnocentric biases that are prevalent in Western academies toward non-Western states and cultures. Regarding translation practices, Dingwaney (1995) highlights that, before defining translation as "an enabling means for discussion [of] cross-cultural texts, one must examine its potential pitfalls — the violence" (p. 3). Hassan (2002) notes that the post-colonial violence in MAL is perpetuated by its exclusion from post-colonial critical analyses and discussions. This oversight has led to several detrimental effects on its translation; it has constrained the flow and volume of translations on a global scale (Jacquemond, 1992), limited the visibility of those involved in its translation, production, and dissemination (Aboul-Ela, 2001), as well as prompted polarized 'us versus them' narratives between the source culture and the target culture (Faiq, 2004; Al-Dabbagh, 2015). Moving forward, I analyze examples from relevant literature that demonstrate the absence of Arabic from Anglo-American Post-Colonial Studies and World Literature departments, the significant effects of this absence on its translations in contemporary

English, and inevitably the effects on its agents. The discussion then shifts to specific translation issues, examining how such unintentional neglect impacts the field of Arabic-English translation.

The exclusion of Arabic literature from post-colonial discussions is both ironic and perplexing for several reasons. Firstly, since the post-World War II era, Arabic literature has undergone a renaissance, resulting in a wealth of modern Arabic literary texts, both in their original form and in English translation, including works by Anglo-Arabs. This renaissance, often driven by translations from the West, has not only modernized Arabic literature, but also enhanced its international literary significance (Ettobi, 2008). Modern Arabic literature reflects the complexities of the Arab world's post-colonial realities through themes of decolonization, social issues, and political upheaval, aligning it with contemporary literary movements observed in Indian and Latin American literature (Jabra, 1971; Hussein, 1989). This increase in literary production naturally led to a surge in translations, particularly in genres like novels and short stories. For instance, in 1972, M.B. Alwan compiled a comprehensive list featuring approximately 12 Arabic novels and around 200 Arabic short stories translated into English. Often, these translations were published in various periodicals by accidental agents (Young, 1980). The absence of Arabic literature from post-colonial discourse is particularly unjustifiable considering that Anglophone readers have long been familiar with Arabic literature, having developed an early appreciation through works like *The Thousand and One Nights*, a cherished part of Anglophone literary tradition (Allen, 1988).

Additionally, Hassan (2002) articulates a deeper irony. He notes that Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which incisively critiqued European misrepresentations of the Orient, particularly in the Arabic-speaking Levant, was instrumental in inaugurating Post-Colonial Studies (Hassan, 2002). Yet, despite Said's influence, post-colonial scholarship often overlooks Arabic literature. This oversight is compounded by the foundational contributions of scholars like Frantz Fanon,

who focused on Algeria, and Albert Memmi, who concentrated on Tunisia. Their work reinforces the foundations of post-colonial scholarship and anthologies, making the marginalization of Arabic literature in these contexts ironic and significant, especially given its acknowledged importance in the geo-strategic orientations of area studies.

According to Hassan (2002), MAL has, from its inception, faced a marked absence from the engagement of post-colonial theory and departments, a result of its colonial *erasure*, with Western Orientalists frequently substituting 'Arabic' with 'Oriental' and 'Arabs' with 'Muslims' or 'Mohammadans' in their writings (for example, Salmoné, 1884) —a practice critically examined in the context of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

He further explains that in the context of postcolonial studies, Arabic is not the only major language marginalized; Chinese is also notably excluded (*cf.* Casanova, 1999). The exclusion of both languages, as he writes, is deeply rooted in "language politics and cultural memories," entrenched in the East-West colonial dynamics. This perpetuates a neocolonial hegemony by privileging the languages, and consequently the literary canons, of previous major colonial powers, namely Britain and France (Hassan, 2002, pp.45-46). Initially, post-colonial scholarship tends to focus predominantly on literatures composed in English or French: the languages of these former colonial rulers. While post-colonial theory provides valuable "conceptual and ethical frameworks" for Western readers to engage with colonial literature and certain postcolonial texts, it ultimately reinforces Eurocentric biases, leading to what Hassan terms "theoretical imperialism" (Hassan, 2002, p. 46).

Corroborating Hassan's hypothesis, M.A. Muharram (2012) underscores the conscious absence of Arabic fiction from major postcolonial anthologies, particularly those published by advocates for the marginalized *Other*. Muharram (2012) points out that, despite contemporary Arab authors fitting Ashcroft's definition of "writing back" as they "challenge both the

traditional canon of the colonizer and dominant literary and cultural norms," and despite the availability of some translations, their critical body of work remains notably underrepresented in English (p.136). His analysis of seminal works, such as *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989), *Colonial and Postcolonial Fiction: An Anthology* (1999), *An Anthology of Colonial and Postcolonial Short Fiction* (2007), *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (2007), and *The Arnold Anthology of Post-colonial Literatures in English* (2009), reveals the significant omission of modern Arabic fiction from academic discussions and post-colonial curricula and courses perpetuating a narrow definition of postcolonial literature, instead primarily focusing on Commonwealth literature.

Such exclusion, he finds, touches on the complexities and challenges of representing modern Arabic in Anglophone world. The diverse voices and perspectives of modern Arab women and men writers are neglected, reinforcing a sense of Orientalism and its "racist assumptions" that Arab intellectuals are incapable of challenging Western texts and representations (Muharram, 2012). This discussion resonates with the critical inquiries of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?,* where she interrogates the role and responsibility of intellectuals in representing marginalized groups. Spivak's poignant question - "why should such occlusions be sanctioned in precisely those intellectuals who are our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other?" - underscores the paradoxes and dilemmas inherent in the advocacy for diversity and recognition of the *Other* (cited in Muharram, 2012, p.130).

Inspired by Muharram, I searched for Arabic in the broader context of post-colonial theory, particularly in relation to early post-colonial translation texts, only to find that it was also not mentioned. Discussions on MAL, the complexities of Arabic-English translation, and their importance within the post-colonial framework are strikingly missing from seminal textbooks on

post-colonial translation studies, such as *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) and *Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era* (2000). In these foundational works, "the Americas, Africa, and, most significantly, India were the preferred fields of study" (Brisset, 2010, p. 73). Notably, the latter work omits any reference to Arabic, despite including languages from regions beyond the Commonwealth, such as the Dutch East Indies, Latin America, and even China, highlighting a significant gap in the representation and study of Arabic literature within post-colonial translation discourse. However, as translation studies have progressed in include different frameworks and perspectives, there has been a notable inclusion of Arabic in publications using post-colonial and post-structural methods. An example of this trend is *Cultural Encounters in Translation from Arabic* (2004) by Said Faiq, and *Literature in Translation: Teaching Issues and Reading Practices* (2006) by Carol Maier and Françoise Massardier-Kenney.

Naaman's (2010) contribution, further supporting Hassan's hypothesis, introduces a critical perspective to the ongoing discourse regarding the omission of MAL within AngloAmerican post-colonial scholarship and its impact on book markets and publishing practices. Her comparative analysis of Arabic and Anglo-American peer-reviewed journals and periodicals reveals a significant temporal divergence in scholarly focus; Anglo-American journals primarily focus on classical periods, while Arabic publications are more attuned to contemporary issues. Specifically, Naaman notes that from 1990 to 2010, only about half of the articles in the *Journal of Arabic Literature* by Brill—approximately seventy—address modern topics.

Another example she mentioned includes other notable journals, such as *Middle Eastern Literatures* (formerly *Edebiyat*) by Routledge and *Arabica: Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* by Brill. These publications show a marked preference for classical rather than modern

texts, featuring articles in both French and English. She concludes that these Anglo-American academic journals primarily engage in either detailed philological analysis of classical Arabic texts—a reflection of the field's traditional focus on philology and ancient literature—or adopt a cultural studies approach that similarly emphasizes classical literary works.

She concludes that the discrepancy in scholarly attention between classical and modern Arabic literature and its limited representation in academic journals has restricted the visibility and recognition of contemporary Arabic literature and its authors. This absence suggests that MAL rarely undergoes the critical review process necessary to gain a broader readership, curtailing its visibility in Anglo-American book markets where literary translation is already scarce. Consequently, this literature not only struggles to attract and reach an audience beyond what is typically referred to as 'specialized readers,' but also makes it challenging for English speaking translators, publishers, editors, and readers to keep up with evolving literary trends and new voices emerging from the Arab world. This situation is particularly relevant since there is only a slight chance for younger Arab writers, especially women and men from lesser-known regions outside Egypt and Syria, to get their work published in English. Namaan states:

> Because translations from Arabic into English make up only 1 percent of all international translations, the likelihood that an Arab writer, particularly a lesser-known or younger writer, might get his or her novel published in English is very slim. (Namaan, 2010, p.451)

Naaman's approach emphasizes the crucial role of scholars and translators *not* from the Arab world in disseminating Arabic literature and intellectual contributions. By stepping beyond the traditional academic settings, these cultural mediators can significantly enhance the visibility and integration of Arabic narratives and criticisms in Anglophone Post-Colonial Studies. This strategy aims to enrich debates and broaden the available reading materials, addressing the disparities in academic representations and discussions. Through increased translations, Naaman

advocates for a more balanced and inclusive examination of Arabic intellectual outputs, which could lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Arabic contributions to global cultural discourses. This initiative promotes cultural exchange and challenges and expands the existing frameworks within which Post-Colonial Studies operate.

Expanding the presence of Arabic-translated texts beyond their traditional role as exemplary documents and sources for a specialized reader in Political Science, History, and Area Studies courses to reach the mainstream English-speaking literary audience requires navigating the intersection of commercial interests and literary production. This task involves the Anglo American publishing industry and its well-established profit-based models. Literary flow between Arabic and English poses a complex challenge, explored by examining how conventional economic publishing models intersect with literary practices. It raises a crucial question: what are the implications when commercial interests converge with the literary texts of the *Other*? The subsequent discussion delves into a shift toward a more entrepreneurial approach to literary translation from Arabic, moving beyond traditional academic confines and highlighting the emergence of new agents such as publishers, editors, magazines, funding agencies, and intercultural institutions attempting to rectify mainstream publishers' practices.

### 3.3. Commercial publisher paradigm

This section explores the transformation of Arabic literary works in English from their original academic orientation—primarily aimed at students and specialized readers—to their broader dissemination within commercial markets and the resulting implications for translation agents. This transformation is crucial for understanding current dynamics in the translation of Arabic literature. In this context, translations often oscillate between two distinct attitudes: embargo and commodification. According to Said (1990), certain Arabic literary works are deliberately excluded from translation or circulation in Anglo-American markets due to their

perceived political or cultural sensitivity or because they do not conform to mainstream stereotypes of Arabs. Conversely, commodification involves the commercialization and potential dilution of cultural content, reducing it to a market-friendly product that monetizes stereotypes (Kelley, 2014). These dynamics are particularly pronounced within the Anglo-American context, where New York and London—often considered centers of global literary production (Casanova, 1999)—dominate the landscape.

In both scenarios, translation agents—translators, editors, and publishers—must navigate the pressures of marketability, often at the expense of cultural authenticity. As a result, these agents are often rendered invisible or perceived as complicit in these processes, raising critical questions about their roles and responsibilities within the global literary market. Their agency, as Cronin (2003) suggests, plays a pivotal role in ensuring fair representation and cultural diversity in a globalized world marked by asymmetrical power relations. This crucial role is particularly evident in the efforts of independent publishers and the growing trend of online open-source publishing. To fully grasp the influence of commercial publishers and their impact on translators and texts, it is essential to consider Jacquemond's (1992) analysis of the political economy of Arabic-English translation.

### 3.3.1. The political economy of Arabic-English translation

According to Jacquemond (1992), literary translation is a doubly complicated cultural product that cannot be separated from the political economy of its context to which translators and publishing outlets are also subjected. The political economy of translation generally refers to how translation activities and practices reflect global trade and cultural hegemonies. However, this dynamic can be counterbalanced through conscious efforts and risks taken to ensure fairness and accurate representation in the translations of Arabic literature. Independent publishers, literary magazines, and some translators often assume such roles. I will explore the political

economy of Arabic-to-English translations through the three intertwined factors identified by Jacquemond (1992), along with case studies and examples, before discussing efforts to counteract this constraining reality.

The first factor is that the post-colonial English literary scene exhibits an Anglocentric bias that marginalizes Arabic voices. This bias creates an imbalance in the literary flow between Arabic and English, causing many significant Arabic works to go unnoticed and untranslated for an English-speaking audience. Numerous scholars have documented the scarcity of translations of modern Arabic literary works. These sources concur with Said's critique (1990) that this shortage may be perceived as a cultural embargo on Arabic literary products by English language publishers. To clarify this imbalance or embargo, Jacquemond (1992) conceives of global translation activities existing within a relational dynamic where languages and cultures are hierarchical between the Global North and Global South nations.

Most translation activities occur at the center of this international market, predominantly among Northern (or Western) languages, reflecting the economic and cultural ties between these regions. This dominance is part of a broader trend where cultural and intellectual productions from economically powerful areas are widely disseminated and translated. In contrast, translations from Southern (or non-Western) languages into Northern languages are less common and characterized by significant inequalities, including the volume of translations and the cultural reception and valuation of these translations in Northern literary circles or book markets. Intellectual productions from the South, including literature, receive limited exposure in the North, often confined to niche audiences. This marginalization reflects and reinforces the economic and cultural dominance of Northern languages and perspectives, transforming literary texts into cultural commodities that are imported when there is a need, a market, or a profit opportunity (Aboul-Ela, 2001; Allen, 1994; Booth, 2008; Kelly, 2014).

Secondly, according to Jacquemond (1992), translation processes occur between Arabic and English—two markedly different languages and societies—each embedded in a unique cultural landscape shaped by wars, prevailing prejudices, colonial legacies, and orientalist attitudes. This context significantly influences translation practices, affecting the selection of works and their presentation to Western audiences. When Arabic literature, especially in its modern form, is selected and translated, it falls under the influence of a master discourse characterized by a binary paradigm of alterity prevalent within major Anglo-American media outlets and publishers (Faiq, 2004b). This discourse portrays Arabic as a controversial language inherently different from English, presenting comprehension challenges for non-specialized readers and reinforcing the notion of alterity between Arabic and English literary traditions. This perspective not only highlights linguistic and cultural barriers but also subtly perpetuates stereotypes about the complexity and accessibility of Arabic literature, echoing the Orientalist ethos. Consequently, this discourse may discourage mainstream and commercial publishers, whose survival relies on profitability, from broader engagement with Arabic literary works as they perceive it as risky.

Thirdly, in such a context, translators, publishers, and institutions—both as producers and consumers of translations—may exhibit attitudes that fluctuate between Jacquemond's terms "exoticizing" and "naturalizing" (p. 140). Exoticization portrays the source text as distinctly foreign, maintaining its otherness. At the same time, naturalization involves making the foreign text appear familiar and assimilated into the target language culture, reinforcing existing power structures and cultural hierarchies. Literary translation can thus reproduce or challenge the target language community's dominant ideologies and cultural norms. They may be perceived as "violent, appropriative, and subversive" in their handling of source texts (Faiq, 2004b, p. 5).

Conversely, as Al-Dabagh notes, translators and publishers are "guilty until proven otherwise" (Al-Dabagh, 2015, p. 792). Therefore, the political economy of Arabic-English cultural exchange necessitates a vigilant, self-reflective approach by translators, editors, and publishers. To clarify this imbalance, Jacquemond (1992) envisions global translation activities within a cultural world system, as Heilbron (1999) described, existing in a relational dynamic where languages and cultures are hierarchical.

These perspectives not only inform but also distort Western publishers', specifically mainstream ones, engagements with Arabic literature, influencing the selection and presentation of works translated from Arabic. Hartman (2012) critiques the translation practices of Arab women writers into English, highlighting how changes—such as the retranslation of Hanan al-Shaykh's *Misk al-Ghazal* to *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1989), which rearranged its chapters—cater to Western stereotypes about Arab oppression, thereby distorting the original narratives and the portrayal of Arab women. Marylin Booth (2008; 2020), on the other hand, highlights the violence inflicted on both the translator and the text in the process of translating *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), where the author's and publisher's alterations, aimed at making the novel more accessible to Western audiences, not only stripped the translation of its cultural and political depth but also undermined Booth's professional integrity and agency as a translator. This intervention not only domesticates the text but also disempowers the translator, diminishing the richness and authenticity of the original narrative.

### 3.3.2. Independent publishers and magazines

Translators alone, especially in Anglo-American literary circles, cannot make a living solely by translating literature, let alone fund their projects to fruition (Authors Guild, 2022). Thus, as Tymoczko remarks in an article asserting the perennial need for a patron to assist in making literary translation and translators recognized and visible:

> Patrons – once wealthy aristocrats – now take the form of presses, publishing houses, universities, and granting agencies, dependent on such groups as a readership, a critical establishment, or government officials. Patrons determine the parameters of what is translated just as they determine the parameters of what is published. (Tymoczko,1999, p.31)

The critical issue, as Tymoczko points out, lies in the significant power these patrons wield over what and how texts are translated, a power that is shaped by the ideology to which they subscribe (Lefevere, 1992/2017). In the mainstream publishing industry, where commercial interests dominate, this patronage often aligns with market-driven ideologies that prioritize profitability and wide appeal. As a result, translations supported by mainstream publishers are frequently selected based on their potential to fit into established market trends, often catering to the tastes and expectations of a broad, Western audience. In contrast, independent publishers, while still acting as patrons, often operate under different ideological frameworks. These publishers tend to prioritize literary value and cultural capital over commercial success (Buzelin, 2006), allowing for a greater degree of freedom in the selection and translation of works. For example, independent publishers might choose to translate works that challenge dominant cultural narratives or that represent underrepresented voices, even if these works are not expected to achieve high sales. This approach reflects an ideological commitment to diversity, cultural exchange, and the preservation of literary authenticity, which can often result in translations that remain more faithful to the original texts.

Interlink Books and Garnet Publishing have played pivotal roles in bringing diverse Arabic voices to a global audience, effectively challenging mainstream narratives through their focus on literary works that offer nuanced and authentic perspectives. Interlink Books, for instance, has published *Palestine's Children* (1984) by Ghassan Kanafani, a collection that captures the depth and complexity of Palestinian children's experiences, deliberately countering the stereotypical depictions often found in Western media. Similarly, Garnet Publishing has introduced readers to

significant works like *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) by Mourid Barghouti, a memoir that offers a poetic and insightful reflection on the Palestinian experience, thus contributing to a more informed and empathetic global understanding of the region.

Among the independent publishers that contribute to this essential cultural work, Comma Press stands out for its distinctive editorial approach, particularly in its relationship with translators. Unlike mainstream publishers, who may prioritize commercial viability and treat translators as mere intermediaries, Comma Press recognizes translators as key agents in the literary production process. This recognition is critical, as it empowers translators to engage deeply with the text, ensuring that the cultural nuances and literary qualities of the original works are preserved in the translation. For example, Comma Press's anthologies, such as *Madinah: City Stories from the Middle East* (2008), *The Book of Gaza* (2014), and *Iraq + 100* (2017), serve not only to showcase diverse narratives from the Middle East but also to challenge the reductive portrayals that are often perpetuated by mainstream publications.

This collaborative approach, where translators are involved early in the editorial process, contrasts sharply with the practices of many mainstream publishers, who may give translators less influence over the final product. By engaging translators as active collaborators rather than passive conduits, Comma Press and similar independent publishers ensure that their translations resonate authentically with their intended audiences. This focus on collaboration is emblematic of a broader commitment among many independent publishers to uphold the integrity of the original works while promoting cultural diversity. The result is not only high-quality translations but also a more nuanced and respectful cultural exchange, which stands in stark contrast to the often reductive or exoticizing tendencies seen in mainstream publishing.

Literary periodicals and magazines also play a vital role in this independent publishing ecosystem, particularly in identifying and promoting emerging voices from the Arab world. For

instance, *Banipal* magazine has been instrumental in showcasing contemporary Arabic literature by translating and publishing works from various genres, including poetry, short stories, and novel excerpts. Founded in 1998, *Banipal* has dedicated itself to enhancing the visibility of Arab writers by regularly featuring translated works and providing biographical information about the authors, thus fostering a deeper appreciation for Arabic literary culture among English-speaking audiences.

However, despite their essential role in promoting Arabic literature, independent publishers face significant challenges, as noted by scholars such as Büchler et al. (2011), Büchler and Khalifa (2021), and Miller (2015). These challenges often stem from limited financial resources, which can impact various aspects of their operations, from translator compensation to the marketing and distribution of the final product. This financial constraint can result in lower visibility for the translated works and restrict their access to a broader audience, undermining the very mission of these publishers. Additionally, the sustainability of independent publishers is often precarious, as they rely heavily on niche markets and may struggle to secure consistent funding and revenue streams. This financial instability not only affects the job security of translators but also threatens the publisher's ability to continue producing new works. The case of *Banipal* ceasing production in 2022 due to financial difficulties is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of independent publishers, despite their critical contributions to cultural diversity and literary innovation.

### 3.3.3. Open spaces

While the previously mentioned publishers, both mainstream and independent, including magazines like *Banipal*, have established an online presence, what sets the next section apart is the focus on open-source and free-access platforms. These platforms complicate the traditional literary translation process, which has historically been reliant on profit-driven models.

Opensource digital publishing outlets for Arabic literature in English translations have revolutionized how a global audience accesses and appreciates these works. These platforms include online literary magazines, e-books, digital anthologies, and dedicated websites that host translated Arabic literature. For instance, websites like *ArabLit Quarterly* offer digital issues that feature contemporary Arabic literature, translated essays, and reviews. Additionally, e-book platforms such as Kindle and iBooks have made it easier for readers to access a wide range of translated Arabic works, often at a lower cost than print versions. These digital formats provide a flexible and convenient way for readers to explore Arabic literature, as they can be accessed on various devices, from computers to smartphones. Several Anglophone magazines, such as *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*, *Words Without Borders*, and *Asymptote*, publish Arabic literature alongside works from other languages. While these publications do not focus exclusively on Arabic literature, they provide valuable platforms for showcasing Arabic literary works to a broader audience. These magazines offer curated selections of poetry, short stories, and essays, highlighting the richness and diversity of Arabic literature within a global context.

However, there are also disadvantages to consider. The overabundance of digital content can make it difficult for individual works to stand out, potentially leading to lower visibility for specific authors and translators. Additionally, the lack of a physical presence can sometimes diminish the perceived value and authenticity of the literature. Furthermore, digital platforms may face challenges related to digital piracy and protecting intellectual property. Despite these drawbacks, digital publishing remains a powerful tool for disseminating Arabic literature to a broader audience, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

**Table 1**

*English Language Literary Translation Agents Practices Over the Eras*

| Era/Paradigm | Agents Involved | Key Practices and Characteristics | Sociocultural Context |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Orientalist Paradigm (Colonial Era)** | British Orientalists<br><br>North American Missionaries | - Exoticized and manipulated Arabic texts to serve imperial interests. - Erased Arab identity in translations. | - Dominated by imperialist ideologies.<br>- Literature used to reinforce stereotypes and control representations. |
| **Academic Paradigm (Post-WWII to 1960s)** | Academics, 'Accidental Agents'<br><br>Cultural and governmental organizations | - Translation driven by the need for teaching materials. - Supported by Area Studies programs. | - Emergence of Modern Arabic Literature (MAL) in Anglo-American academia.<br>- Integration of Arabic into Area Studies. |
| **Commercial Publishing Paradigm (Post-1960s-1990s)** | Mainstream and independent publishers<br><br>Academics<br><br>Professional and emergent translators | - Mainstream publishers focused on marketable texts, often diluting cultural authenticity. - Independent publishers prioritized literary value and cultural capital. | - Shift from academic to commercial motivations. - Introduction of Arabic literature to broader audiences. |
| **Digital Age/Online Paradigm** | Online Platforms | - Increased accessibility of Arabic translations via online platforms. - Focus on opensource and digital formats. | - Global reach and democratization of access to Arabic literature.<br>- Challenges in visibility and intellectual property. |

### 3.4. Research gap

Given the transformative impact of digital publishing and the shift toward open-source platforms, a significant gap emerges in our understanding of how these new models influence the field of literary translation, particularly regarding Arabic literature in English translation. While traditional and independent publishers have long navigated the challenges of market-driven

constraints, open-source platforms present a different set of dynamics—one less tied to profit but still fraught with challenges related to visibility, intellectual property, and the perception of literary value.

This raises critical questions: How does Arabic literature in English translations happen in these open-source platforms? What are the implications for translators among other agents? By exploring these questions, this research aims to fill the gap in the existing literature on the impact of digital and open-source publishing on the translation and global dissemination of Arabic literature, particularly how these platforms might redefine the role of translators and the accessibility of diverse narratives.

**Summary**

This chapter explored the historical and socio-cultural evolution of Arabic-to-English literary translation, highlighting the diverse agents involved from colonial times to the digital age. The aim was to challenge the common notion of translators—and by extension, other agents—as either traitors to the original text or invisible figures, emphasizing that translation is not merely a literal transfer of words but an act of interpretation. Agents engaged in translating Arabic literature must navigate not only textual and cultural differences to ensure the translated work resonates with the target audience, but also the sociocultural contexts that may resist foreign literature or wants to commodify it.

This chapter situated the evolution of literary translation agents within cultural trends and events—such as the rise of Anglo-American powers post-World War II, the emergence of new academic departments, and the professionalization of translation through the publishing industry—highlighting the norms and strategic moves made to increase the availability of translations. During the colonial era, orientalists often exoticized Arabic literature to serve imperial interests, manipulating textual representations and reinforcing stereotypes. In the

postcolonial academic context, however, the focus shifted towards integrating Arabic studies into Anglo-American academia, with scholars and translators—sometimes inadvertently—advocating for the literary merits of modern Arabic literature.

The commercialization of Arabic literature saw various attempts by publishers and editors to balance economic models with cultural representation, though this balance was often genuinely pursued only by independent publishers. Meanwhile, the online paradigm has led to a noticeable increase in the presence of Arabic literary translations available online, particularly in open-source platforms such as online magazines. While the full effects of this shift are not yet fully understood, it nowadays represents a significant and observable phenomenon in the distribution of translated texts.

# Chapter Four: Examining the Translation Process and Agents in an Online Magazine

## Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this research to answer the research question: how do Arabic to English literary translations happen in the online literary translation magazine *Words Without Borders*? As introduced earlier, this central question addresses several aspects of literary translation agents and process.

The research is grounded in three core objectives: first, to examine how WWB came to be and what its strategies in facilitating the creation and dissemination of Arabic literature on its online pages; second, to investigate the intricate processes involved in translating Arabic texts into English, exploring the roles and contributions of the various actors involved in the magazine's operations; and third, to analyze the final presentations of the text in their digital medium through analysis of paratexts. Each of these objectives is interwoven with the broader goal of understanding the cultural and social factors influencing literary translation in a globalized context.

To achieve these objectives, the chapter is structured into three key sections. The first section (section 4.1) describes and provides justification for the selection of WWB as a site for the case study. The second section (section 4.2) breaks into many subsections as it outlines the research design and procedures, detailing the choice of an ethnography-inspired case study combined with qualitative methods to deeply analyze the roles and interactions of translation agents at WWB. This section also describes the different qualitative sources and data collected. In the final section (section 4.3), I discuss the analysis methods, including coding and thick description, and highlights the importance of triangulation for ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

By integrating these components, this chapter provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex processes involved in making Arabic literature accessible to a global audience through WWB, emphasizing the interplay between cultural, social, and digital factors.

### 4.1. Positionality and reflexivity

While my status as a native Arabic speaker and a translator, along with my familiarity with local literary communities—through engagement in both online and in-person translation networks, active participation in literary events, and collaborations with fellow translators—facilitated rapport with the participants in this study, it also situated me within complex dynamics. While I had not worked directly with any of the participants before, which allowed me to approach the research with a degree of critical distance while still benefiting from shared cultural and professional contexts, many factors—such as my identity as an Arabic speaker, our shared ideological stance on the representation of Arabic literature in English, and our mutual investment in literary translation as a means of cultural mediation—inevitably shaped our interactions. According to Holmes (2016), researchers inherently bring their linguistic resources and cultural identities into the research context, influencing both communication patterns and power relations. This section is necessary to acknowledge how my positionality, not only as a native speaker of Arabic but also as a translator, might have shaped my interactions with participants and the interpretation of data. By reflecting on these dynamics, I aim to provide transparency regarding my role in the research process and its potential impact on the study's findings.

Given the status of literary translation in English, particularly the challenges of increasing the visibility of Arabic literature, this study is situated in a context where translation functions as both a creative practice and a form of cultural mediation. Consequently, the individuals who

participated in this research are also perceived as "allies," as their work in expanding the availability of translations is often framed as an act of advocacy for Arabic literature in English. At the very least, they demonstrated a keen awareness of its underrepresentation. This context along with my identity as an Arab fostered a sense of solidarity, leading them to perceive me as an ally—someone who not only understood the cultural and linguistic concerns but also actively contributed to the same cause and as an insider. Building on this shared sense of purpose, the participants' recognition of my positionality shaped the ways in which they engaged with me throughout the research process. This shared cultural and ideological alignment influenced not only the depth of our interactions but also their openness in sharing experiences and insights. This dynamic resonates with Holmes' (2016) assertion that researcher identity is integral to multilingual and intercultural engagement, as it affects how participants perceive power relations and the authenticity of the researcher's intentions. Within this framework, my cultural identity and perceived commitment to the promotion of Arabic literature positioned me as both a cultural mediator and an empathetic listener. This alignment facilitated a collaborative environment where participants felt understood and validated, thereby enriching the data collected.

However, my linguistic and cultural positionality, along with my professional expertise, shaped epistemological hierarchies and raised critical questions about knowledge construction. As an "insider" sharing ideological and cultural frameworks with participants, my role may have influenced both interactions and the way knowledge was produced. Consequently, participants might have framed their narratives to align with perceived expectations, potentially affecting the authenticity of the data. This highlights the complexities of researcher authority, where identity and perceived expertise shape the research process. Furthermore, this positionality risked reinforcing a singular, advocacy-driven narrative—one that could marginalize alternative viewpoints, obscure the actual practices of agents in digital contexts, or overstate their role.

In addition to these epistemological considerations, the retrospective nature of this study introduces the possibility of memory bias. Because much of the research was conducted in an ethnographic style in 2019 but written after the fact, my recollections of interactions, events, and participant narratives were inevitably shaped by selective memory and subjective interpretation. As time passed, certain details may have been emphasized while others faded, potentially affecting the accuracy and balance of the accounts presented. To mitigate this, I employed triangulation by drawing on multiple data sources, including interview transcripts, participant observations, and archival materials. This approach helped validate recollections, ensuring that insights were not solely reliant on memory but were cross-checked against documented evidence.

To address epistemological biases and the risks associated with my insider positionality, and memory biases, several deliberate strategies were implemented throughout the research process. Reflexivity played a central role, with a continuous practice of documenting cultural assumptions, participant interactions, and the influence of my positionality in a research journal. Efforts were made to diversify participant perspectives by intentionally reaching out to individuals with varying degrees of involvement and differing views on Arabic-to-English literary translation. The sample ended up included both native and non-native Arabic speakers from various parts of the world, ensuring linguistic and cultural diversity. Additionally, a balance was maintained between female and male participants, as well as between those in different professional positions within the field of literary translation.

Additionally, engagement with contradictory narratives was a critical aspect of the research, as counter-narratives were actively examined to avoid reinforcing a singular perspective. To further maintain epistemological integrity, preliminary interpretations were shared with participants, inviting feedback to validate narratives and ensure multivocality.

Transparency regarding my role and cultural identity was upheld throughout the research process to acknowledge power dynamics. Moreover, theoretical frameworks such as cultural sociology and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) were critically applied to maintain flexibility in epistemological stances and prevent rigid or predetermined interpretations. Ethical reflexivity and contextual sensitivity were also prioritized to avoid romanticizing or over-advocating for the cause of Arabic literature in translation.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) served as a reflexive methodology, providing a decentered approach to knowledge production. By mapping actor-networks, the study minimized hierarchical authority and treated all human and non-human actors as influential agents within the network. Translation actions were traced to understand mediations and transformations, while controversies within the network were examined to expose underlying power dynamics and competing epistemologies. The research emphasized relational agency, recognizing the dynamic and fluid interactions between actors rather than treating identities as fixed. Materiality and technological mediations were also analyzed, particularly in relation to digital platforms, which played a crucial role in shaping translation practices. Reflexive positioning within the network was key to acknowledging how my interactions influenced the flow of information and narrative construction. Mapping translation chains helped reveal layered mediations and avoided hierarchical epistemologies. Additionally, integrating diverse voices through network narratives ensured epistemological plurality, preserving multiple perspectives within the research. By contextualizing human and non-human agency within cultural, political, and technological frameworks, the study avoided essentializing cultural identities and instead provided a more nuanced account of translation processes.

Ultimately, the combination of reflexive practices and ANT methods enabled the research to navigate the complexities of insider positionality while maintaining epistemological rigor. This approach decentered authority, exposed power dynamics, and incorporated diverse perspectives to ensure a balanced and critically engaged knowledge construction. By foregrounding reflexivity and networked methodologies, the study upheld ethical integrity and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of Arabic-to-English literary translation within an intercultural and multilingual context.

### 4.2. Justification for the selection of *Words Without Border*

*Words Without Borders* (or WWB), an online magazine founded in 2003, has distinguished itself as a key player in the Anglo-American publishing industry, specializing in literary translation. At the time of its inception, WWB was uniquely positioned as the only platform in the Anglo-American publishing landscape dedicated to this specialization. The magazine's novelty provided an unprecedented opportunity to explore the phenomenon of online literary translation, particularly as it sought to address the cultural gap in the availability of foreign literature for the Anglo-American audience. This mission underscores the proactive and deliberate stance of WWB's founders and editors, who have consistently emphasized the significance of their role within the broader context of the translation industry.

One of the primary objectives of this research is to study the creation and dissemination of Arabic literature in open spaces. WWB has made substantial contributions in this area by providing a platform for contemporary Arabic literature, much of which had never been previously available in English. The magazine's commitment to translating and publishing new Arabic texts surpasses that of other literary translation magazines, such as *Asymptote* (established in 2011) and *Exchanges* (online since 2013). Through its extensive focus on Arabic literature, WWB offers valuable insights into the cultural and literary landscapes of the Arab world,

aligning seamlessly with its mission to broaden the literary horizons of the Anglo-American readership. This makes WWB an ideal case study for examining the processes involved in making Arabic literature accessible in open, online spaces.

The second research objective is to investigate the translation process itself. WWB places strong emphasis on the role of translators, acknowledging their critical agency within the Anglo-American publishing industry. The magazine's commitment to producing high-quality translations ensures that the nuances and subtleties of the original texts are preserved, offering readers an authentic literary experience. By analyzing WWB's translation practices, this study aims to uncover valuable insights into the complexities and challenges inherent in translating literature across different languages and cultural contexts. The magazine's dedication to transparency in its translation processes further enhances its value as a resource for understanding the intricacies of literary translation.

The third research objective is to explore the various actors involved in the magazine's success. WWB benefits from a diverse array of contributors, including writers, translators, and editors from around the globe. This diversity reflects the magazine's inclusive approach and its commitment to representing a wide range of voices. By examining the contributions of these actors, the study seeks to elucidate the collaborative nature of the magazine's operations and the strategies that have been instrumental in its sustained success.

WWB serves as an excellent site for this case study, not only due to its professional status but also because of how this status might influence the practices and strategies of the agents involved. Since its inception, the magazine has consistently produced 12 issues annually. Between 2003 and 2020, the magazine published work by more than 2,600 contemporary authors, from 139 countries, translating their works into English from 140 different languages. The magazine collaborated with 1600 translators (33 from Arabic). This impressive output is

indicative of WWB's operational efficiency and its ability to attract and collaborate with a wide range of contributors. The magazine's credibility is further validated by its professional recognition, notably winning the Whiting Literary Magazine Prize in 2018—a testament to its impact and reputation within the literary world.

### 4.3. Research design

In this section, I detail the procedure for conducting my research. I explain and justifying the use of an ethnography-inspired case study as a research method to explore the process of Arabic-English literary translations within WWB. I also describe the data and sources used. Covering the period from 2003 to 2020, it utilizes qualitative data including interviews with the magazine's agents, observational notes from site visits and translation events, and archival materials like mission statements and paratextual elements. This combined approach offers a detailed, context-sensitive analysis of the cultural and social dynamics shaping the translation process in the magazine.

#### 4.3.1. An ethnography-inspired case study

My research design integrates a case study method with ethnographic models to examine the process of making Arabic-English literary translations within the online magazine WWB. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration that combines cultural and sociological perspectives, facilitating the triangulation of theory and methods. By merging these approaches, I aim to provide a comprehensive, context-sensitive analysis that captures both macro-level cultural dynamics and micro-level social interactions that shape the translation process.

While traditionally distinct, case studies and ethnographies can be effectively merged in studying translation phenomena (Koskinen, 2008; Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014). A case study offers a detailed examination of a specific subject, such as an individual, organization, text, or process, within its real-life context, particularly where the boundaries between the subject and its

context are blurred (Yin, 2009, p. 18). This flexibility allows researchers to employ a wide range of sources, tools, and approaches. Ethnography, in contrast, provides a holistic view of a particular culture or community, often involving direct observation and prolonged immersion, with the researcher's experience forming a critical part of the research process (Koskinen, 2008). Modern ethnographies, however, have evolved to include methods such as qualitative interviews and the analysis of written documents, making them adaptable to various contexts, including virtual environments (Hine, 2000). This is where the boundaries with case studies start to blur.

Building on the work of scholars like Buzelin (2006, 2007b), Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012), and Marin-Lacarta & Vargas-Urpi (2018), my research applies an ethnographic model to examine the process of making Arabic-English translations in the digital context of WWB. These scholars have shown the effectiveness of integrating ethnographic models with case study methods in studying contemporary translation phenomena, particularly focusing on the process. For instance, Buzelin's work on Montréal-based independent publishers and Haddadian-Moghaddam's study of an Iranian publishing house employ a mix of sociological approaches—namely, Bourdieu's field theory and Latour's actor-network theory—to analyze the roles and interactions of various agents involved in the translation process. Their work bridges the gap between theory and practice through participant observation, field notes, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of written documents, including translation drafts.

Extending these approaches to digital contexts, Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2018) explore the creation of two translated digital books within a Barcelona-based self-publishing initiative, focusing on the roles and agency of translators. Their case study, which involves participant observation, field notes, reflective diaries, and semi-structured interviews, also incorporates digital data such as email correspondence and paratexts of the published works, demonstrating that sources can vary according to context.

In dialogue with these scholars, my research adopts a similar approach in examining a contemporary phenomenon: the process of making Arabic-English literary translations in the online magazine WWB. However, my research differs in several keyways to better fit my specific objectives. Given that my thesis leans into both cultural sociology and the social aspects of translation, I have allocated considerable time and space to exploring not only the magazine's cultural context but also its evolution from its inception in 2003 until the last date of data collection in 2020. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how the magazine's evolving mission statement has shaped its editorial strategies.

To achieve this, I employ a retrospective approach, retracing the steps of the agents involved in the creation of specific translation projects, particularly Arabic-language issues, from their inception to their final presentation on the magazine's platform. The richness of the archived materials is central to my analysis, as they provide valuable insights into the magazine's evolution and the roles of various agents. Interviews with these agents frequently reference these archives, further justifying their inclusion in my study.

This method is not only justified but also validated by similar sociological studies. For instance, Jones (2009) used actor-network theory to analyze post-war Bosnian poetry translation networks, and Bogić (2010) combined Bourdieu's and Latour's sociological concepts to trace the translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* into English. Both studies relied heavily on archival materials, demonstrating that retrospective analysis can yield valuable insights into the roles and networks involved in translation processes. This makes it a sound methodological choice for uncovering the complex dynamics at play in an online magazine context.

To achieve a comprehensive, material-based, and context-sensitive analysis of the translation process at the magazine, I focus on archival materials, supported by interviews and published texts. The retrospective gathering of information from multiple sources provides the

necessary reliability through triangulation. This includes interviews with different agents involved in the creation of specific translation projects and the analysis of multiple translation projects, specifically focusing on Arabic-language issues (referred in this study as "collections"). Additionally, the examination of paratextual elements contributes to a rich, contextual understanding of the social dynamics at play. This multifaceted research strategy is designed to offer a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between various human and nonhuman actors, their roles, and the socio-cultural contexts that influence the trajectory of literary translation in a digital space.

### 4.3.2. The validity of a single case study

While a case study does not prescribe a specific method of analysis, it represents an empirical research strategy that allows for the exploration of contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). The selection of a single case study can be strategic, drawing on a variety of data sources to produce a rich, contextualized analysis of the translation phenomenon. This approach effectively captures both the subjective experiences of participants and the broader social, political, intellectual, and economic environments in which translation occurs (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p. 205).

In translation studies research, a single case study can be sufficient to draw distinctions "between what is universal and what is culture," provided that the case study is not narrowly equated with a single unit of analysis, such as translated texts, translators, authors, or translation institutions (Toury, 1995, p. 74). Therefore, a single case study should encompass multiple levels of analysis to capture the complexity of the translation process within its broader cultural and social context. These levels of analysis are considered "sub-units," transforming a single case study into "an embedded case study," leading to "more fruitful results," particularly when

"comparing and contrasting several units from a variety of angles" (Susam-Sarajeva, 2001, p. 171-172).

In alignment with Susam-Sarajeva's framework and to ensure the validity of my research, I explore my case study from three perspectives or sub-units:

1. **The Magazine:** I trace its evolution since its inception, rather than focusing solely on its operations and settings. To achieve this, I utilize archival materials such as the magazine's mission statement, editorial strategies, and Arabic-themed issues (or collections), supplemented by observations of the physical settings and interviews with staff, editors, translators, and contributors (referred to as agents).
2. **The Agents:** The perspectives of these agents, particularly regarding their roles, visibility, and processes, are primarily explored through in-depth interviews.
3. **The Final Product:** I analyze the final product—the translations—through their paratextual material, such as editorial notes, introductions, and visual elements, to provide a product-oriented perspective.

### 4.4. Data description

This section outlines the data gathered for this case study, which centers on WWB's website, beginning with its establishment in 2003 through to the final day of data collection in 2020. The data includes these types: discursive, data and archival material. The discursive dataset includes excerpts from semi-structured interviews with key agents involved in producing and curating Arabic-to-English translations for the magazine, such as the managing director, editor-at-large, senior editor, and various Arabic language translators and guest editors. These individuals were identified through their contributor bio page on the WWB website. Additionally, this dataset incorporates notes taken during site visits to WWB's physical location in New York City and interactions with staff at ALTA conferences in 2019 and 2020.

The archival dataset also comprises two components. The first includes records of WWB's mission statements, which track the magazine's editorial policies and goals as they

evolved over time, highlighting shifts in focus and strategy. The second component focuses specifically on Arabic language-related content within the magazine, including a detailed analysis of Arabic language paratextual elements to assess their presentation and integration into WWB's broader offerings. Together, these datasets provide a comprehensive understanding of WWB's engagement with Arabic literature in translation and the translators involved. The following sections will explore each type of data in detail.

### 4.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

#### *Participant recruitment*

The originality of this research is based on interviews with eighteen (18) participants: three (3) of the magazine's staff who act as patrons (the executive director and two senior editors) and fifteen (15) Arabic language translators who act as the experts (8 male and 7 female). I followed a random sampling[14] technique to select the participants. Initially, I sent an email to the magazine's principal founder (Alane Salierno Mason) who often participates in various promotional interviews for the magazine, explaining my intentions to interview her and introducing my research topic. She redirected me to contact the magazine's executive director at the time, Karen Phillips, as someone who would have more up-to-date knowledge and a deeper awareness of the day-to-day operations at the magazine. Phillips, in turn, expressed initial agreement to participate in the study and introduced me to the prominent inhouse full-time editors, Susan Harris and Eric Becker. I then sent the necessary consent forms (Appendix A) and obtained the magazine staff's consent before proceeding with the interviews.

I used a different approach for choosing the Arabic language translators. I used the magazine website's archives to establish a comprehensive list of Arabic language translators—

[14] Random sampling is considered probability sampling because everyone in the population has an equal chance to be included (Berg, 2004). However, random sampling cannot be used to draw population generalizations.

thirty-three (33) in total—who participated in the magazine between 2003 to 2020. I send an invitation email to all 33 listed translators using publicly listed email addresses and social media accounts. Fifteen (15) responded to my informal invitation email, agreeing to be part of the study. I requested that participants sign the same consent form that was sent to the magazine's staff (Appendix A) before the meeting and provided them with a sample of the interview questions prior to our meeting.

In the consent form (Appendix A), I introduced myself and summarized the project and its objectives. The form clearly stated that the interviews would be recorded, and participants were offered anonymity; however, all interviewees preferred to use their legal names in the study. The majority of the interviews were conducted via *Skype* or telephone calls; two interviewers were conducted in-person.

***Interview Process***

Semi-structured interviews[15] were selected for this study due to their open-ended nature, which allows for flexibility in responses and fosters deeper reflection for both the researcher and the participants (Gill et al., 2008, p. 172). This format enabled a thorough exploration of the complex dynamics within the translation process, offering participants the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences in ways that might not be possible in more structured formats. During the interviews, I adhered closely to the questions outlined in the interview guide (Appendix B), but the open-ended format allowed the conversations to evolve naturally. This flexibility facilitated the collection of rich, nuanced data, enabling me to draw connections between the insights gained and the broader sub-units of my case study, with a particular focus on how these processes materialized within the digital context of the magazine.

[15] Semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method commonly used in ethnographic approaches. This method relies on pre-determined questions that enable room to probe and pursue unplanned, unpredictable, or complementary responses that are insightful or unexpected (Berg, 2004).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored securely in .pdf format on a password-protected computer to ensure data integrity. While the interviews were primarily conducted in English, participants occasionally reverted to Arabic, especially when referencing specific places, periods, authors, books, or commonly used expressions. These segments were left untranslated to maintain the authenticity of the original discourse. The interview questions were carefully crafted to align with the sub-units of analysis outlined in the research strategy, divided into three main sections: the magazine itself, the agents involved, and the translation process.

***The magazine***

The first sub-section of the interviews aimed to contextualize the broader environment in which WWB operates, especially in relation to the translation of foreign literature, with a particular focus on Arabic. This section included questions such as, "What might *Words Without Borders* be?" and "How do you perceive the situation of foreign literature in the English language book market?" These inquiries sought to uncover the participants' perspectives on the conditions that may have prompted the rise of online literary translation platforms like WWB. Further, by asking questions like "Why did you choose to do work for a literary translation magazine?" and "What are the borders you are trying to cross in the magazine?" I aimed to elicit reflections on the ideological motivations and practical considerations that influenced their involvement with WWB. This provided a nuanced understanding of the magazine's role, its position within the broader literary ecosystem, and the underlying ideologies that motivated its establishment.

**Agents, roles, and *visibility***

The second sub-section focused on the roles and visibility of agents within the WWB translation process. The purpose of this section was to demystify the oft-invisible process of

translation, as emphasized by Buzelin (2007b), and to explore how these roles manifest in the digital context of WWB. For example, questions such as “What is your role in WWB?” and “What specific role do you play in the translation process at WWB?” were designed to uncover the participants' perceptions of their responsibilities and contributions. Additionally, questions like “How visible do you feel your role as a translator is within the magazine?” and “Do you believe that the digital format of WWB influences the visibility of translators’ work compared to traditional print publications?” sought to assess the extent of the translators’ agency and recognition within the magazine, and how the online format may impact their visibility. This sub-section also included inquiries about the challenges faced by translators in asserting their agency, such as “What challenges do you face in asserting your agency as a translator when working with WWB?” and “How much creative freedom do you feel you have in your translations for the magazine?”

***Translation process***

The final sub-section of the interviews examined the specific steps and challenges associated with the translation process, from text selection to publication on WWB’s website. This section sought to capture the practical aspects of producing translations, including decisions related to paratextual materials such as notes and images. For example, interviewees were asked, “What steps are involved in preparing translations for the website?” and “How do you decide on paratextual materials like notes and images?” Additionally, to explore the collaborative nature of the translation process, participants were asked, "Can you give specific instance where collaboration with other agents (editors, other translators) influenced your translation work?” and “How are final decisions about the translation’s presentation (e.g., title, footnotes) made, and what is your role in this process?” These questions aimed to shed light on the collective and

collaborative nature of the translation process and to assess how the translators navigate the complexities and power dynamics inherent in their work.

These sub-sections were intentionally structured to correspond with the broader sub-units of my case study, ensuring that the insights gained through the interviews would directly inform the analysis of the magazine's role, the agents involved, and the translation process within an online literary context.

### 4.5. Research notes

Buzelin (2007b) classifies research notes as discursive data, collected throughout the research process. While the primary operations and interactions for WWB occur in the digital space, the magazine also maintains a small office in New York City and plays an active role in literary translation community events. This physical presence, though limited, provided an opportunity for crucial observational data during my visit to WWB's office, where I conducted interviews with Karen Phillips, the executive director, and Eric Becker, the senior editor. These face-to-face interactions added valuable insights that supplemented the virtual data, offering a more nuanced understanding of the organizational dynamics and editorial processes at WWB. Additionally, my interactions with Susan Harris, the editor at large, at ALTA conferences in 2019 were particularly informative. At these events, Harris represented and promoted WWB through her participation in roundtables and pitching sessions. Observing the magazine's active engagement with the broader literary translation community during these events allowed me to gather observational notes that provided a more contextualized analysis of the interviews.

This approach proved valuable, as Berg (2004) notes that interview participants often struggle to recall the full details of all the projects in which they have been involved. By supplementing interview data with direct observations from these key events, I was able to cross reference and corroborate the information provided by the interviewees, ensuring a more

comprehensive and reliable analysis of the agents' roles, the visibility of their contributions, and the translation processes within the context of WWB.

### 4.6. Archival material

The archival material collected for this study consists of various versions of the mission statement and paratexts pertaining the Arabic issues published in the magazine during the time period (2003-2020). The decision to focus on archival material was made after interviewing the magazine staff, and it turned to be a true reflection of the unique nature of the magazine as both a genre and a digital platform. Figuring out what type of data best suits the case study as the research progresses is a normal practice. As Saldanha and O'Brien (2014, p. 227) argue, "the research process in case studies tends to follow the iterative pattern of qualitative methods."

When I inquired about managerial documentation such as contracts and editorial strategies, I was informed that no formal contracts exist between the magazine and its contributors, as the magazine does not purchase or own the rights to texts. Instead, consent to publish is given through email exchanges and is directly stated as a paratext at the bottom of the published text. Moreover, given the magazine's outward orientation as a publisher and its adoption of an open access model, which welcomes contributions with minimal gatekeeping, the editorial guidelines are clearly stated in its mission statement. Analyzing these guidelines is valuable for contextualizing the roles and interactions of the agents involved in the translation process. This is not to say that the magazine lacks managerial documents. However, at a certain point in the research, it becomes necessary to draw a line in terms of data collection. I find that the data gathered, including these archival materials, alongside interviews and notes, provides sufficient evidence to answer my research questions comprehensively.

Regarding translation drafts, it also became apparent that they are not relevant to this study for several reasons. Translations are submitted in English, and editors provide minimal

proofreading, allowing translators considerable freedom and trusting them with the integrity of the content.

***Mission statement***

Different versions of the mission statement were obtained using the *Wayback Machine*[16], a digital archive that allows researchers to examine older versions of websites. Through this tool, I traced the development of WWB's mission statement and editorial guidelines over time, identifying two major versions: the original 2003 version and an updated version from 2009. Screenshots of these versions have been documented (Appendix C) for further analysis. This source is integral to understanding how the magazine WWB's editorial practices have evolved, reflecting shifts in focus and strategy over time. By examining these variations, I can identify significant reforms, eliminations, and innovations within the magazine that have influenced the role of translations and translators. Combined with interview data, this analysis offers a comprehensive understanding of how WWB's digital structure has impacted the translation process and the agency of translators working within this framework.

***Paratexts***

Paratexts refer to the various elements that accompany a text, contributing to its presentation, interpretation, and reception, ultimately enabling a text to stand on its own (Genette, 1997). In translation studies, these elements often include titles, covers, prefaces, footnotes, translator's notes, illustrations, typography, and promotional material such as book reviews and interviews, but are not part of the main text itself (Batchelor, 2018). Traditionally, paratexts are important because they provide additional context and commentary, influencing the reader's understanding and engagement with the text. In translation studies, however, they

[16] The Wayback Machine is a digital archive of the World Wide Web, accessible at https://archive.org/web - allowing users to view historical snapshots of websites.

acquire an additional function. Analyzing paratexts allows researchers to explore the decisions and strategies employed by translators, editors, and publishers in presenting a translation. This analysis can reveal the cultural, ideological, and commercial factors that influence translation practices and the roles of various agents involved in the translation process (Batchelor, 2018).

In the context of digital platforms, paratextual elements play a crucial role in shaping the translation process and the final presentation of e-versions. They are not just additional components but integral to the entire workflow, from translation to publication. Paratexts ensure that the translation is not only accurate but also culturally and contextually appropriate for the target audience (Marin-Lacarta & Vargas-Urpi, 2019). Furthermore, in the digital age, paratexts also contribute to the visibility or invisibility of the translator, influencing how the translator's work is perceived. Paratexts can either highlight the translator's role and expertise or render the translator invisible, affecting their recognition in the literary field (Freeth, 2022).

Analyzing paratexts in a magazine helps researchers trace the interactions between translators, editors, and publishers, revealing how decisions are negotiated and how the translator's work is presented. This analysis is essential for understanding the dynamics of agency, power, and visibility in the translation process. It illustrates the roles and contributions of different actors involved in the translation workflow (Freeth, 2022).

For this thesis and given the nature of the magazine as a genre, my analysis of the final product focuses on the production of an Arabic-themed issue as a container for different translated texts. The paratextual material that I gathered includes elements presented around the issue: the title of the issue, guest editors, introductions, images, titles of the texts and their translators, and notes. These elements are often organized around a specific theme, topic, or linguistic group, providing a broader context for understanding the editorial and cultural objectives of the publication.

**Table2**

*Arabic themed issues in Words Without Borders between 2003-2020* [17]

| Issue Title | Date of Publication | Guest Editor | Number of Texts |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Checkpoints: Literature from Iraq** | 2003-10 | staff | 17 |
| **The Road To Damascus** | 2005-06 | staff | 10 |
| **Words Cannot Be Weighed: Literature From Egypt** | 2006-01 | staff | 14 |
| **Writing Palestine** | 2006-11 | staff | 12 |
| **The Arab Spring Part I** | 2011-07 | staff | 6 |
| **The Arab Spring Part II** | 2011-08 | staff | 6 |
| **Iraq Ten Years Later** | 2013-04 | staff | 12 |
| **New Palestinian Writing** | 2015-05 | staff | 6 |
| **Crossing Boundaries: Morocco's Many Voices** | 2016-03 | staff | 3 |
| **Divided Countries** | 2017-07 | Alice Gauthier | 5 |
| **Under a Different Light: Writing by Tunisian Women** | 2017-12 | staff | 7 |
| **Turning the Kaleidoscope: Writing from Lebanon** | 2018-07 | staff | 6 |
| **No Center: Omani Writers on the Question of Identity** | 2019-05 | Ghayde Ghraowi and Ahd Niazy | 6 |
| **The Comic Edge: Arabic Humor** | 2019-10 | M. Lynx Qualey | 7 |
| **Claiming a Place in the World: Life Writing by Women in Arabic** | 2020-03 | Sawad Hussain & Nariman Youssef | 4 |
| **Defying Expectations: Arabic Young Adult Literature.** | 2020-04 | Elisabeth Jaquette | 3 |

### 4.7. Coding and data analysis

In conducting a case study, particularly within the field of translation studies, data analysis is a critical phase that requires careful planning and execution to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. This section will outline the use of coding and content analysis, as well as the role of thick description, in analyzing data collected during a case study.

The data analysis process commenced with the coding of interview transcripts, notes, and archival material through qualitative content analysis. Coding is defined as a systematic labeling

[17] By staff the magazine often refers to in house editors such as editor at large or the senior editor.

and reduction of a flow of data into categories or codes identifying patterns and themes and representing their frequency in a phenomenon (Popping, 2017). Coding is particularly suitable for case studies as it facilitates a gradual movement between different data types and units, allowing for the comparison, contrast, and identification of patterns—or the absence thereof—across sub-units of analysis (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014). The coding process was conducted using *Tams Analyzer.*[18]

To help taming the raw unstructured data from the multiple sources, I performed a first phase of coding involved descriptive codes, which focuses on summarizing the basic content of the data into general themes or patterns informed by the research's theoretical and contextual background. Then, I applied an analytical coding to these data which involves going beyond merely describing the data to understanding and interpreting it in a deeper, more theoretical context. This process involves categorizing data into themes or patterns that I have identified through close and careful examination of the descriptive codes and their content. Saldanha & O'Brien (2014) consider that the main function of analytical coding is to explore relationships, draw connections, and generate theoretical insights that go beyond the surface-level description, and allows for the construction of meaningful categories that reflect the complexity of the phenomena under study.

### 4.7.1. Revealing truth through codes

The analysis yielded 350 codes, categorized into two main groups: "magazine" and "process." These categories emerged from the data described in the previous chapter and were essential in addressing the overall question posed by this thesis: how do the processes and practices within the online literary translation magazine *Words Without Borders* shape the roles

[18] Tams Analyzer is a qualitative data analysis tool for Mac that helps researchers code, organize, and analyze textual and multimedia data, facilitating the identification of patterns and trends in qualitative research: http://tamsys.sourceforge.net/

and contributions of literary translation agents from Arabic and influence the making of translations? From the early stages of coding, it became evident that the magazine deserved substantive focus. This focus extended beyond simply describing the magazine as a website or medium where translations are published or as an operational entity akin to a traditional publisher. Instead, the online magazine uniquely embodies both aspects, functioning as both a publisher and a publication. Therefore, I dedicated a sub-unit of my overall ethnographic case study to the in-depth exploration of this dual role. As an online publication, WWB is a transnational repository for foreign texts in translation spanning different genres, languages, and geographical regions. It showcases diverse literary voices in the English language. WWB also functions as a resource for educational material, a repository of translators and ST authors alike. At the same time, WWB also embodies the general operational dynamics of a publisher house, hosting semi-structured editorial strategies, which I elaborate on further in the analysis below. Understanding this dual nature is crucial for comprehending how WWB functions within the broader context of literary translation in the Anglo-American context and identifying the forces and ideologies that influence its relationship with agents, the relationships and interactions among them, and, eventually, the translation trajectories. Six code families were identified within this category. The following table details each family and its description and relevance.

**Table3**

*Families of codes used to analyze the category of "website"*

| Topic/family | Description | Relevance |
|---|---|---|
| **WWB-History** | Codes and excerpts directly talk about the status of literary translation in the Anglo-American literary system, or into the English language in the US and the UK, leading to the establishment of WWB, and how it evolved over time. | Understanding WWB's history is essential for my ethnographic case study as it provides socio-cultural context. This perspective illuminates the status and challenges of literary translation in the Anglo-American system, the factors behind the magazine's establishment, and its evolution. This context is crucial for analyzing the magazine's practices. It also affects the roles of agents, their positions, dispositions and interactions. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **WWB-Publication** | Codes and excerpts that cover various aspects of the magazine as a unique digital product (website) that contains products, including mission statement, position and impact, sustainability, editorial practices, and content. | Analyzing WWB as a publication offers a comprehensive view beyond a text. This family code examines its role, strategic positioning, sustainability, editorial practices, and content, including the translated texts. This analysis is crucial for understanding the magazine's viability and impact. It also highlights how these factors affect the roles and interactions of agents involved in the translation process within the magazine's ecosystem. |
| **WWB-publisher** | Codes and excerpts related to the human patronage (founders, funders, staff), ideological patronage, economic patronage, its physical and virtual location, and other operational backers that make translation possible on the magazine's website. | Examines the human, ideological, and economic patronage that supports WWB's existence, identifying the characteristics of this online publisher. Explores the structural and operational dynamics, including the roles and interactions of agents, to understand how these factors influence the magazine's ability to produce and disseminate literary translations. |
| **Arabic contributors** | Codes and excerpts related to the Arabic language agents/experts involved in the making of translations | Examines the roles and relationships of Arabic language translators recruited by the staff to produce translations. This analysis is crucial for understanding how these contributors influence the translation process, the selection of texts, and the overall quality and authenticity of the translated works. It also sheds light on the cultural and linguistic challenges faced by these translators and how they navigate their roles within the magazine's ecosystem. |
| **Arabic content** | Codes and excerpts specifically related to the published Arabic texts, themes, and their final presentation. | Identifies selected, translated, and presented Arabic texts on the website. Assesses content diversity and addresses ethical issues of representation and curation, including the interaction with experts' subjective perspectives. This analysis is crucial for understanding the magazine's approach to curating Arabic literature, ensuring cultural authenticity, and addressing ethical considerations in translation and representation. |

In parallel, it became evident that a separate category for the process was necessary to capture the complex interplay among various individuals and entities involved in making translations for the online magazine. This category identifies various humans, including magazine staff, translators, and non-humans such as technology and other entities, and locates them on a map of production teams of five Arabic-related issues in the magazine. By examining the process of interactions and negotiations among these agents, we gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that drive the translation process at WWB. This analysis clearly shows the role of power dynamics, decision-making hierarchies, and technology in democratizing agents' work. In addition to tracing the intricate process of producing issues of WWB, I also analyzed the paratextual elements as artifacts of the experts (translators) rather than viewing them as attributes of the magazine's layout only, as they are designed to offer valuable space for the perspectives of these experts.

**Table 4**

*Families of codes used to analyze the category of "process"*

| Topic/family | Description | Relevance |
|---|---|---|
| **Agent role(s)** | Codes and excerpts that include both human and non-human agents involved in translation processes. | Maps the agents and their collective role in making specific translations issues in WWB. |
| **Agent network** | Excerpts detailing how interactions between various agents contribute to the creation of networks essential for the translation and dissemination of texts. | Explores the dynamics of network formation, focusing on how these interactions facilitate or hinder the translation process, reflecting ANT's focus on relational dynamics. |
| **Collaborative processes** | Excerpts that shed light on the collaborative interactions, or *translations* to use Latour's term, among all agents. | Examines the different types of collaborations of the publication process, highlighting the interdependence each agent, their ways of maintaining quality and over coming challenges within the literary magazine. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Digital influence** | Excerpts related to the impact of digital tools and platforms on the translation workflow, including how these technologies mediate human actions. | Discusses the agency of non-human elements and their transformative impact on the operational and editorial strategies of the magazine. |

**Summary**

This chapter serves as a foundational component of the thesis and sets the stage for the subsequent chapters on analysis. The chapter outlined the methods used to examine the process of creating translations in WWB. It focuses on the various agents involved, their actions, and their interactions. The chapter justifies the selection of WWB as the site for this case study by highlighting its unique position in the Anglo-American publishing industry, particularly in the field of literary translation. WWB's commitment to making Arabic literature accessible to a broader audience provides an ideal platform to explore the cultural and social dynamics that are integral to online translation practices.

The research design is detailed, emphasizing the integration of ethnography-inspired methodologies to provide a comprehensive analysis of both the cultural factors—such as the forces of globalization and the widespread use of the internet in the early 2000s—and the cultural trends that gained prominence, particularly after the declaration of the global war on what was termed the "axis of evil." The chapter underscores the importance of thick description in offering a culturally and contextually rich account of the translation practices within WWB. By categorizing data into themes related to the magazine's history, publication practices, and the role of agents, the analysis reveals the intricate dynamics that shape the translation process in a

digital environment. Triangulation, achieved through comparing findings from various data sources such as interviews, documents, and observations, enhances the validity of the

analysis. This cross-referencing approach helps build a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the case.

# Chapter Five: Words Without Borders: An Emergent Agent for Literary Translation

## Introduction

This chapter seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of how *Words Without Borders* (WWB) functions as a digital publisher for Arabic literary translation. By addressing the question of WWB's role as an agent in the digital publishing landscape, particularly concerning Arabic literature, this chapter draws on both cultural and sociological theories to unpack the complex dynamics at play, including the sociocultural context of its emergence, its characteristics, and the individuals, editors, and translators who are involved. Through this multifaceted exploration, the chapter aims to illuminate how WWB navigates its role as a cultural and literary intermediary, fostering a more inclusive and globally connected literary ecosystem.

The analysis is grounded in a cultural conceptualization of agents, specifically utilizing Lefevere's theory of rewriting, which emphasizes the active role of translators, editors, and other mediators in shaping the final translated product. Additionally, the chapter engages with Bourdieu's sociological framework, particularly his definitions of agents and their roles within literary fields.

By intertwining these cultural and sociological perspectives, this chapter not only explores the operational strategies of WWB but also delves into the implications of these strategies on the broader landscape of Arabic literary translation in the digital age. Through this lens, the chapter illuminates how WWB navigates the challenges of translation and publication while fostering a more inclusive and globally connected literary culture.

### 5.1. Cost of not translating

This section shows the intrinsic link between ideological patronage and literary production, asserting that literary translation and its associated activities are inherently political. However, by 'political,' I do not refer to translations driven by specific political agendas or discourses, nor to the ethnocentric translation norms that often characterize the translation of the *Other*—particularly Arabic language authors. Instead, I refer to the ethical and political stance adopted by some editors and translators in the U.S., including the founders of the magazine, at the wake of the new millennium, a period marked by significant political upheaval. These individuals sought to actively resist the insularity of the English language media, public and political discourse, and literary production. This resistance is rooted in a deep conviction among the magazine's founders and their cultural and intellectual community about the transformative power of literature in translation. They believe that by engaging with difference and confronting the tangible realities and sense of estrangement embodied in the literature of others, one can reexperience and redefine their own immediate reality and identity. As Steiner (1975/1998, p. 381) aptly notes, "Otherness, particularly when it has the wealth and penetration of language, compels 'presentness' to stand clear."

The English-language literary industry has historically been self-sufficient and insular. English, as a global language, is less dependent on importing cultural goods from other languages, which exacerbates this insularity. As France observes, "English-speaking countries, secure or complacent in their linguistic dominance, today translate proportionally far less than their neighbors" (France, 2000, p. xix). It is well-known that only 3-4% of all books published in the US and the UK are translations, with literary works making up an even smaller portion of this figure, and Arabic literature representing an even smaller proportion within this percentage.

Anglo-American publishing practices, in particulate, have often exhibited what Venuti describes as a "complacency" mindset that spreads "imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home" (1995, p.17). But the sociopolitical events of the early 21st century—most notably the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent War on Terror, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq—catalyzed a profound shift in Anglo-American intellectual consciousness, prompting a search for solutions. These events exposed the deep-seated ignorance and misunderstandings that existed between the West and the Arab world, making it increasingly clear that such homegrown cultural insularity was no longer tenable. For many in the West, particularly in the US and the UK, these events shattered the illusion of a world neatly divided into 'us' and 'them,' prompting a more nuanced and urgent inquiry into the complexities of the cultural *Other*.

Questions like "Why do they hate us?" began to dominate public discourse, with stories about that part of the world, written by Americans for Americans, spreading widely in Anglo American media. During this period, the Arab world, which had long been an area of academic and cultural interest—as it was for orientalists and area studies departments—suddenly became a focal point of intense public scrutiny to re-know oneself. There was a strong sense that these previously marginalized groups needed to be known and understood, not just academically or geopolitically, but as an existential imperative. This shift can be interpreted through the lens of dialectics, which examines the tension and resolution between opposing forces. Events like 9/11 disrupted the existing cultural and ideological 'thesis,' forcing intellectuals in the US and UK to confront its antithesis—the misunderstood and often demonized Arabic speaking *Other*. This confrontation required a new synthesis, leading to a re-evaluation and broadening of the Anglo-American perspective towards a more nuanced understanding of different cultures.

In the absence of answers beyond the repetitive narratives perpetuated by mainstream media, editors and translators in the US feared deepening insularity and the risk of reinforcing

old stereotypes and misconceptions. They recognized the urgent need to counter this trend to prevent further isolation of Anglo-American societies from engaging with diverse global perspectives. The lack of access to narratives from these regions had severe consequences, evident in the rising xenophobia within their own society. In this context, using cost as an excuse for the lack of translations in the book industry was no longer acceptable, as the repercussions of not translating proved to be far greater. In this context, a group of female editors, positioned as intellectual elites within established US-based publishing houses, felt compelled to act. They founded the open-access online magazine *Words Without Borders* (WWB) with the aim not only to rectify the imbalance in the English-language literary industry but also to establish new norms that bring agency to literary translation as both practice and discourse. This initiative was seen as a vital means to break cultural insularity and broaden the perspectives of the common English language reader.

Although I was unable to interview the principal founder, Alane Salierno Mason, directly, the magazine *Words Without Borders* has been discussed and featured in numerous articles and interviews.[19] Notably, in a 2009 interview with *Big Think*—a platform dedicated to promoting critical thinking—Mason provided insights that remain highly relevant. She described *Words Without Borders* as "a cosmopolitan literary endeavor" that "really spoke to people," particularly referring to the funders, supporters, and advocates of literary translations in the U.S., especially those based in New York City, who were drawn to the magazine's idea and mission. The use of the term "cosmopolitan" suggests a project that reflects the ethos of cultural openness by transcending national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, hence *Without Borders* in the title. This term frequently appears in interviews with the magazine's editors and staff, highlighting not only

[19] "Words Without Borders" appeared nearly 53 million times in Google searches between 2003 and 2020.

their commitment to fostering cross-cultural dialogue through literature, but also aligning their believes with the ideologies of this patronage.

It was an early goal for the founders to align themselves with what Alane calls "grassroots literary ferment" community that was forming in the early 2000s in the US (*Big Think*, 2009). The magazine became part of a broader movement of resistance in response to cultural and political shifts, which was reflected in the rise of funding opportunities for various literary projects (*Grantmakers in the Arts*, 2010). For example, literary magazines such as *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, *The Believer*, *The New Yorker*, and *Guernica* began to feature more literature in translation. There were also literary festivals, such as the Brooklyn Book Festival and Los Angeles Times Festival of Books in the US, and Hay Festival in the UK, which sought to bring in foreign authors. Moreover, some of the small and independent presses that emerged or gained recognition during this period, such as Archipelago Books and New Directions, further exemplified this growing trend of embracing diverse literary voices.

As the analysis of this border context shows, WWB is more than just an open access literary magazine, or an independent publisher with the mere aim to translate marginalized voices; it is an embodiment of what Wolf (2012) refers to as the "activist habitus" within the realm of literary translation. The concept of “activist habitus” highlights the role of translators, editors, and publishers who are not merely conduits of linguistic transfer but active participants in shaping cultural and ideological landscapes. This perspective aligns closely with the mission and editorial practices of WWB, which not only consciously challenges the insularity of the English-language literary industry by promoting underrepresented voices from around the globe, but also its constant transformation and adaptability to an unpredictable world. This analysis lays the groundwork for further exploration of WWB's role as an agent of change within the literary field, which I will delve into in the subsequent sections.

### 5.2. Type of publisher: Non-profit with a magazine front

According to Buzelin (2006), the nature and focus of a literary translation publisher often serve as indicators of its growth and identity. For WWB, this identity is intrinsically tied to its outward-looking mission of championing literary translation, its strong commitment to diversity and the inclusion of marginalized voices, and its status as a non-profit organization. Unlike independent publishers that also advocate for marginalized literature, WWB operates under a unique model that allows it to pursue its objectives without the constraints typically associated with commercial viability. Its online magazine serves as the primary public-facing platform, offering a distinctive approach to the dissemination of global literature.

#### 5.2.1. Financial freedom, patronage, and professionalism

WWB is registered as a charitable organization, which grants it greater autonomy in pursuing its mission, free from the pressures of traditional stakeholders, commercial and mainstream publishing houses. This structure enables the magazine to maintain a diverse funding base, including significant contributions from governmental organizations, cultural institutions, and personal donors committed to promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity. The financial stability overseen by Executive Director Karen Phillips is crucial for WWB to continue its mission of advocating for and curating global literature in English. According to Lefevere's (1992/2017) concept of patronage, financial and institutional support can significantly influence literary production within a literary system. In the case of WWB, however, patrons do not impose direct censorship or dictate content. They do not interfere with text selection or editorial strategies, which are instead entrusted to literary experts like the editors Susan Harris and Eric Becker. These experts manage the magazine's daily operations and maintain a delicate balance between literary merit and political considerations, particularly when selecting translation projects that align with broader social justice and political themes.

WWB's funding from organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City Cultural Funding reflects a broader strategy of cultural diplomacy, where the arts are leveraged as tools of soft power. Von Flotow (2018) notes that translation, particularly of high culture like literature and poetry, is often used to improve international perceptions of the U.S., especially in the wake of contentious political actions such as the Iraq invasion. This form of cultural diplomacy aims to promote mutual understanding, mitigate stereotypes, and export American cultural values globally. While these government funds do not impose direct editorial control, they can subtly influence the projects WWB prioritizes, especially those that align with cultural diplomacy goals.

Private foundations and cultural initiatives, such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation, also play a critical role in shaping WWB's content and direction. These foundations operate on the belief that social change and justice can emerge from the arts, humanities, and creative expression, offering a counterbalance to the soft power emphasis of governmental funding agencies. Their support enables WWB to amplify marginalized voices in the English language, fostering a global cultural exchange that challenges dominant narratives. However, this support also places WWB in a delicate position, requiring the magazine to balance its commitment to literary merit with the socio-political agendas of its funders. This balancing act is particularly evident in the evolution of WWB's content, especially regarding Arabic literature. As the magazine has grown and developed a stronger, more defined identity, the focus of its Arabic content has shifted away from predominantly political and social justice issues towards a broader emphasis on literary themes. This shift reflects the magazine's ability to navigate the complex dynamics between its mission and the expectations of its patrons.

Individual donors also play a crucial role in sustaining WWB's activities, contributing through annual fundraising campaigns, such as the prominent WWB Fall Gala in New York

City, or through one-time donations made via the website. These donors, including private patrons of the arts and literary enthusiasts, are vital to maintaining WWB's financial stability.

### 5.2.2. Organizational structure

Structurally, WWB is designed to diffuse power across various levels, fostering an inclusive and democratic environment. In this sense, WWB operates not just as a publisher of foreign literature, but as an active agent leading cultural and social change. The Board of Directors, comprising professionals from diverse backgrounds, provides more than strategic oversight for the magazine to grow. These individuals act as consultants with backgrounds from various literary, publishing, and cultural fronts, bringing an up-to-date expertise that helps shape the magazine. Their contributions reflect Bourdieu's idea that the power of institutions comes not just from economic capital but also from the social and symbolic capital that these board members bring. Meanwhile, the three full-time, salaried staff manage the magazine's daily operations with a level of professionalism akin to larger, for-profit publishing houses. The well compensated executive director Karen Phillips plays a pivotal role in communicating between the board and the editorial staff, and in ensuring the organization's financial health and maintaining its editorial vision.

Beyond the administrative and strategic layers lies the heart of WWB—the editorial team. This team is responsible for curating the magazine's content, ensuring that each issue reflects the magazine's commitment to diversity, inclusivity, and literary excellence. The focal members are Susan Harris, the editorial director, whose extensive background in translation publishing and global literature has been central to shaping the magazine's thematic issues and overall editorial quality. Alongside her is Eric Becker, the senior editor, who brings a wealth of experience as a translator and literary advocate. Together, they manage the intricate process of content selection, securing copyrights, and recruiting and working closely with part-time translators, guest editors,

and contributors to ensure that each piece aligns with WWB's mission of bringing underrepresented voices to the forefront of the English-speaking literary world.

This editorial structure, supported by the board's expertise and the executive director's leadership, allows WWB to operate with a level of autonomy and integrity that is rare in the publishing industry. It ensures that the magazine can navigate the delicate balance between financial sustainability and editorial independence, all while continuing to push the boundaries of literary translation and cultural exchange.

### 5.2.3. Power of online publication

WWB pioneered a new approach to literary dissemination by establishing a monthly digital magazine dedicated to international literature. This shift towards an online platform marked a significant transformation in the accessibility of global literary works, allowing readers from across the world to engage with texts that might otherwise be unavailable in their local bookstores. By embracing the digital format, WWB has been able to publish a diverse array of genres, including those that are traditionally less commercial, such as poetry and graphic novels. Importantly, WWB focuses on publishing excerpts rather than full-length texts, providing readers with curated glimpses into works that may otherwise go unnoticed in the Anglophone world.

One of the key strengths of WWB's online platform is its ability to support and promote genres that are often overlooked by traditional publishing houses due to their perceived lack of commercial viability. For instance, poetry—a genre that struggles to find a foothold in the profit driven world of print publishing—has become a central focus for WWB. As Eric Becker notes, "But poetry is something that we've really doubled down on in recent years... because poetry is something that, from a business standpoint, is not lucrative." This commitment to poetry, along with other non-mainstream genres like graphic novels and audio content, underscores WWB's dedication to fostering a rich and diverse literary culture. The digital platform not only provides a

space for these genres to flourish but also enables the inclusion of multimedia elements that enhance the reader's experience.

The magazine's website, wordswithoutborders.org, serves as the epicenter of its digital operations. This site includes not only the magazine itself but also an extensive archive, the WWB Daily Blog, and a wealth of other literary resources. With an average of 45,000 unique visitors each month and approximately 94,000 page views daily, WWB has successfully harnessed the power of the internet to reach a broad and varied audience. Since 2008, the site has seen a remarkable increase in traffic, with annual visits growing by 166%, indicating an average annual growth rate of 16.6%. This substantial growth highlights the effectiveness of the digital medium in expanding WWB's reach and influence.

The significance of being an online publication is further emphasized by Eric Becker, who remarks that "being a digital publication provides [WWB] with a greater potential to reach a wider audience than a printed magazine would, especially one based in New York City." This potential is not limited by geographical boundaries; instead, WWB's online presence allows it to engage readers worldwide, breaking free from the physical and logistical constraints that traditionally limit print publications. However, he also acknowledges the challenges inherent in the digital realm, particularly the overwhelming abundance of online content that can make it difficult for any single publication to stand out. Despite these challenges, the digital platform remains a powerful tool for broadening the magazine's reach.

### 5.2.4. Weight within the literary system

WWB occupies a unique and influential position within the Anglo-American literary system. Despite its non-profit status, WWB's professional standing is evidenced by its alignment with reputable cultural institutions and its active participation in the literary community. This professionalism is reinforced by its membership in key US-based organizations such as the

Community of Literary Magazines and Presses (CLMP) and the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA). At these events, WWB's presence is palpable, with activities such as pitching sessions hosted by editor-at-large Susan Harris.

The magazine has earned significant recognition within the literary community, further solidifying its position as a vital contributor to the Anglo-American literary system. Among the awards WWB has received is the Whiting Literary Magazine Prize in 2018, which honors outstanding literary magazines that demonstrate excellence in publishing, advocacy for writers, and importance to the literary community.

In addition to its role as a literary magazine, WWB positions itself as a key provider of literary samples for major English-language publishers. This function was part of the founders' original vision, as reflected in an interview with Susan Harris, who noted that the magazine was initially conceived as "an industry publication," aimed at presenting excerpts of non-English works to English-speaking editors and publishers, facilitating the discovery of new voices and stories that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

Karen Phillips emphasizes this role, explaining that WWB provides essential literary samples for editors who may not speak the language of the original work. This service is particularly valuable in a globalized literary market where editors need to evaluate works in languages they do not speak. By offering these curated samples, WWB plays a pivotal role in the cross-cultural dissemination of literature, enhancing the visibility of non-English literary works within the Anglo-American market. WWB's engagement in various book fairs and literary festivals not only promotes its mission but also strengthens its network with publishers, literary agents, and translators worldwide. These activities, coupled with the magazine's ongoing collaboration with key literary institutions and its function as a sample provider, affirm WWB's significant weight within the Anglo-American literary system.

### 5.2.5. Social capital first

Social capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1993), refers to the resources available to individuals or groups through their social networks and relationships. This concept highlights the importance of social connections in creating opportunities, fostering trust, facilitating cooperation, and shaping norms and dispositions. In the context of WWB, social capital is not merely a supplementary asset but a foundational element that underpins its operations, success, and influence within the global literary community.

WWB's strong network of editors, translators, writers, and collaborators exemplifies this social capital, which is often prioritized over the symbolic capital typically associated with independent publishers that gain prestige by publishing certain prominent names (Casanova & Brownlie, 2021). The magazine's social capital is reflected in its extensive network of contributors who enhance its content and broaden its reach. By frequently partnering with respected guest editors, WWB injects fresh perspectives and diverse voices into its publications.

These collaborations, particularly with Arabic language translators and guest editors, have enabled WWB to curate themed issues that explore specific cultural or linguistic contexts, thereby strengthening its ties within the global literary ecosystem.

This accumulation of social capital eventually translates into symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu (2008), symbolic capital can be evaluated through factors like antiquity, location, editorial prestige, and associations with prestigious awards such as the Nobel Prize in Literature. Although location might seem less relevant for an online magazine, WWB's base in New York City—a major publishing hub—adds to its symbolic capital. The proximity of WWB's founding members, board of directors, executive director, and key editors in New York City, where they regularly interact in both formal and informal settings, reinforces the magazine's embeddedness in the literary community.

WWB's symbolic capital is further demonstrated by its role in publishing authors before they achieve major recognition. For example, Jon Fosse's *Night Sings Its Songs*, translated by Sarah Cameron Sunde, was published by WWB in 2006, years before Fosse won the Nobel Prize in 2023. Similarly, Jokha Alharthi's *Bitter Orange*, translated by Marilyn Booth, was featured in WWB shortly before Alharthi won the Man Booker International Prize. These examples underscore WWB's ability to recognize and promote literary talent, contributing to its growing symbolic capital and cementing its role as a crucial player in the global literary landscape.

### 5.3. It is all about the people: Agents' roles and visibility

In translation studies, agents are central figures who actively shape the translation process and its broader impact. As defined by Buzelin (2006, 2007b, 2010) and Milton & Bandia (2008), these agents are not merely intermediaries but active participants who engage deeply with the socio-cultural contexts surrounding literary works. They draw on their expertise in poetics—the literary norms and conventions of a system (Lefevere, 1992)—to influence how texts are translated, perceived, and integrated into new cultural settings. These expert agents, or "categories of expertise" according to Lefevere, possess specialized knowledge that allows them to mediate effectively between different literary traditions. In the case of WWB, the magazine's success is rooted in the collaborative efforts of two main types of agents: the editorial team and the translators who often serve as guest editors. In line with Buzelin's conclusions (2007b), this analysis finds that these agents manage a multiplicity of roles, which sometimes overlap and interconnect, contributing to the magazine's dynamic and diverse output.

#### 5.3.1. Main editors

Susan Harris, the editorial director of WWB, has been integral to the magazine's growth since its inception in 2003. With a rich background in translation publishing, including her role at Northwestern University Press where she founded the Hydra imprint, Susan Harris's expertise in

global literature has been pivotal. She is responsible for shaping thematic issues, guiding content, ensuring editorial quality, recurring translators, securing rights, and scouting for texts. Her extensive network of translators, particularly on the Arabic literary scene, has been instrumental in curating diverse and high-quality translations for the magazine. Her role also extends to community outreach, where she actively participates in book fairs and translation meetings to discover new talent and maintain WWB's strong connections in the literary world.

One of the key strategies Susan Harris employs is collaborating with well-established translators, particularly Arabic language academics like William Hutchins and Marilyn Booth, with whom she has cultivated strong relationships through academic and literary circles. Reflecting on this partnership, William Hutchins notes, "Susan Harris is a friend, and I met her at a conference. I've corresponded with her for years and years." Marilyn Booth, who balances her busy career as an academic and translator, admits that she typically doesn't have time to seek out publication opportunities in magazines like WWB. However, she has contributed translations to WWB because Susan Harris specifically requested her involvement. This strategy underscores the significance' of personal and professional relationships ensuring the high quality of the magazine's content. These relationships have proven crucial in securing contributions from translators who, despite their demanding schedules, feel supported and valued in their work with WWB. Susan Harris' ability to maintain and nurture these connections ensures that the magazine continues to attract a diverse range of voices, thereby expanding its influence and maintaining its status within the literary community.

Eric Becker, the senior editor at WWB, joined the team in 2015 to assist Harris with editorial operations. He brought with him significant experience as a translator of Brazilian literature, and his work with the other major literary translation magazine *Asymptote*, has been recognized with prestigious awards. His advocacy for foreign literature is evident through his

cofounding of the Pessoa International Literary Festival. At WWB, Eric Becker supports Susan Harris in curating issues, selecting content recommended by guest editors, and managing the magazine's digital presence. Like Harris, Becker is deeply involved in outreach efforts, representing WWB at literary events and fostering relationships with translators and contributors. His work highlights the importance of building bridges across cultural and intellectual borders, a mission that is central to WWB's success.

Both editors play pivotal roles in transforming the social capital of WW into symbolic capital. Their proactive approach in curating texts through an extensive network of relationships, combined with the magazine's unwavering commitment to high-quality translations, has positioned WWB as a vital platform in the global literary landscape. This strategic curation has enabled the magazine to feature emerging authors long before they gained international recognition, like the one mentioned above, demonstrating WWB's critical role in identifying and promoting literary talent, thereby enhancing its own symbolic capital in the literary world.

### 5.3.2. Arabic language translators and guest editors

This section of the analysis describes and discusses the Arabic language translators who are involved with the online magazine *Words Without Borders* (WWB). I explore their forms, demographic and professional backgrounds, and examine their habitus within the digital literary translation field, reflecting on findings that expand on the concept of habitus in literary translation. The analysis reveals that the Arabic language translators participating in this open-access platform, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, do not necessarily subscribe to the overarching tone of grassroot activism associated with the magazine's mission. Instead, their involvement appears to be guided more by professional development, personal connection with Arabic literary tradition, or simply as an intellectual exercise rather than a unified activist or political agenda. The significance of this finding lies in its potential to reshape our understanding

of the motivations and practices of literary translators, particularly within digital platforms like WWB. It challenges the assumption that activism is the primary or only driving force behind literary translation in this context of open spaces and calls for a more nuanced appreciation of the diverse economic and social factors that influence translators' engagement.

Building on this understanding of translators' motivations and habitus, it is important to consider how these elements interact with the structural and editorial dynamics of WWB. The analysis shows that the role of Arabic language translators extends beyond mere linguistic translation; they also often serve as guest editors, further amplifying their influence on the magazine's content. Susan Harris and Eric Becker, central figures in the magazine's editorial team, have explicitly acknowledged the critical agency of these translators in shaping the magazine's offerings, as they bring specialized expertise in selecting and translating works that align with WWB's mission of fostering cross-cultural understanding through literature. As Eric Becker noted in an interview, "most of our publications would not have been possible without the kind of expertise and commitment we receive from these individuals." Their involvement is not only about translation as a technical task but also about making editorial decisions that reflect their deep understanding of both the source culture and the platform's mission.

Furthermore, the diverse backgrounds and habitus of these translators contribute to significant variations in their motivations for participating in WWB. These variations are reflected in the selection process, where each translator's unique cultural and professional experiences influence the types of texts they choose to translate and how they approach the task of translation. For some, the motivation may stem from a desire to showcase lesser-known voices from the Arabic-speaking world, while others might be driven by a commitment to promoting cross-cultural dialogue, or even advancing their own professional careers. This diversity in motivation enriches the magazine's content, ensuring that a wide range of perspectives is

represented, and that the selection of works is not monolithic but rather reflects the intricate interplay of individual agency, habitus, and editorial vision.

The professors and established translators like Adnan and Paula Haydar, Humphrey Davies, William Hutchins, Marilyn Booth, Sinan Antoon, Jonathan Wright, and Kareem James Abu-Zeid were initially sought after by WWB for their expertise, especially during the magazine's early issues. Their established reputations and academic backgrounds provided a solid foundation for WWB to build its credibility in the literary world. These translators' visibility within the academic and literary communities also lent prestige to the magazine, helping it to attract a broader readership and more diverse submissions.

On the other hand, emerging translators such as Elisabeth Jaquette, Ghayde Ghraowi, and Sawad Hussain were given the opportunity to curate specific issues, allowing them to gain visibility and establish themselves within the literary translation community. This opportunity not only broadened WWB's thematic scope but also provided these translators with a platform to showcase their work and expand their professional networks. The agency they exercise in this process is significant, as it allows them to influence the direction of the magazine's content and contribute to the shaping of global literary discourse. In turn, these translators-turned-guest editors reached out to other translators within their networks to participate. Among my participants, translators such as Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp serve as key examples of this dynamic.

The editorial policies at WWB are carefully designed to encourage the agency and visibility of Arabic translators, empowering them not only as linguistic mediators but also as cultural ambassadors who actively shape the narrative and thematic focus of the magazine's content. This is particularly significant given the diverse demographic backgrounds and professional experiences of these translators, which reflect a broader range of literary perspectives and motivations for their involvement with WWB.

This diversity in motivation and background enriches the translations published by WWB, offering readers a more nuanced and multifaceted view of modern Arabic literature. By allowing these translators to exercise their agency and bring their unique perspectives to the editorial process, WWB not only amplifies underrepresented voices but also ensures that the magazine remains a dynamic and influential force in the world of literary translation. Table 5 shows a breakdown of the demographic and professional backgrounds of the translators interviewed for this study, highlighting the wide-ranging experiences they bring to their work with WWB. In the following subsections, I examine in greater detail how these personal motivations, structural constraints, and editorial influences intersect in the work of specific translators and guest editors at WWB. By focusing on individual cases, I demonstrate how personal commitment to literary exchange operates within—and at times challenges—the larger dynamics of global literary circulation.

**Table 5**

*WWB Translators' Demographic and Professional Information*

| Name | Location | Profession |
|---|---|---|
| Alice Guthier | UK | Independent Translator, Editor, Researcher, Curator |
| Adnan Haydar | USA-Lebanon | Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature |
| Chip Rossetti | USA-UAE | Doctoral Student in Arabic Literature, Former Editor |
| Elisabeth Jaquette | USA-Egypt | Independent Translator, Former Executive Director of ALTA |
| Ghayde Ghraowi | USA-Lebanon | Doctoral Candidate in Arabic Humanities |
| Humphrey Davies | UK-Egypt | Award-winning Translator |
| Jonthan Wright | UK | Former Journalist, Full-time Literary Translator |
| Kareem Abu Zeid | USA-Egypt | Award-winning Freelance Translator |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Marcia L. Qualey | Morocco-Egypt | Editor, Translator, Critic, Founder of ArabLit Website |
| Marilyn Booth | UK | Professor of Contemporary Arab World |
| Paula Haydar | USA-Lebanon | Assistant Professor of Arabic |
| Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp | UK | Freelance Translator specializing in Children's Literature |
| Sawad Hussain | UK | Educator, Translator |
| Sinan Antoon | USA-Iraq | Associate Professor, Accomplished Translator, Poet, Novelist |
| William Hutchins | USA | Former Professor of Philosophy and Religion |

**Personal Connection and the Politics of Circulation**

Within this complex network of motivations, one recurring theme among the translators I interviewed—particularly those who identify as being of Arabic origin or as Arabic speakers—is the importance of personal connection to the literature they translate. For many, this connection is deeply rooted in their own cultural and linguistic heritage and forms a key part of their translatorial habitus. The act of translating is often perceived as a means of cultural mediation, allowing them to introduce works they value to new audiences. This personal engagement is not merely sentimental; it reflects a commitment to representing the complexity and diversity of Arabic literature beyond the reductive narratives often encountered in mainstream publishing. However, this personal motivation operates alongside a critical awareness of the structural forces shaping the global circulation of Arabic literature. Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi American novelist, poet, translator, and academic, offers a particularly incisive critique of these dynamics. Reflecting on the post-9/11 publishing landscape, Antoon underscores how geopolitical interests, market forces, and Gulf state capital have increasingly influenced which Arabic literary works are translated into English and made visible in the Anglophone world.

He explains:

> "Even though there is a positive change [in print publishing] after 9/11, there is a kind of neo-Orientalism in approaching all things Arabic and Islamic. It is what I call forensic interest... While there have been some positive developments, by and large, there are many, many great literatures and great names and great works that are not translated. On the other hand, there is a mixture of Orientalism and a simplistic way [of approaching the literature], and there are translations that are driven by the news. There are some works that have been translated as a response to an immediate interest in what is happening politically. And there is another new development that is very complicated and very dangerous: the changes taking place in the cultural landscape in the Arab world."

Antoon highlights the growing influence of financial power and cultural investments from wealthy Gulf countries in shaping the priorities of translation funding and publishing:

> "What ends up happening—and I am not saying the books are not worth it, they are good, and they deserve it—but what happens is the priority for translation is being influenced heavily by capital from Gulf governments. So, you notice that the majority of translations that are happening now are from the shortlist of the [International Prize for Arabic Fiction] Booker. So the situation is very complicated."

He goes on to emphasize how these factors determine which authors and texts gain visibility and access to global readerships:

> "Unfortunately, the way literature circulates has to do with geopolitics and economics. We cannot ignore that. So that has played a role in who gets the audience and who gets the most exposure. These book fairs in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi bring editors and publishing houses. There is cooperation between Frankfurt Book Fair and Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. So, there are things happening behind the scenes that are influencing the map of Arabic literature in translation, especially in the Anglophone world."

For Antoon, despite the wealth of literary production in the Arab world, "there remains a narrow set of themes that international publishers focus on," ultimately shaping the range and diversity of works that reach English-speaking audiences. Due to his critical awareness of the complex dynamics influencing Arabic literature in translation, Antoon actively publishes his translations online, including through *Words Without Borders* and *Jadaliyah*—a magazine he co-

founded—in an effort to bring greater visibility to literary works from the Arab world that have gone largely unnoticed. In particular, he is committed to highlighting Iraqi literature, which he views as especially underrepresented in global literary discourse.

While Paula Haydar does not feel she has faced significant obstacles that Antoon has mentioned in translating the Lebanese or Palestinian authors she is interested in, her work is deeply rooted in a personal connection to the Arabic literary tradition, particularly that of Lebanon. Haydar emphasizes that publishing in platforms such as *Words Without Borders* gives her an opportunity to extend her personal commitment to Lebanese authors beyond the confines of academic publishing. "Publishing in an open-access magazine like WWB allows me to share these voices with a broader audience," she reflects, "especially those readers who might not otherwise encounter contemporary Lebanese or Palestinian literature. It's about making space for these stories in global conversations, not just within scholarly circles but in everyday literary life." In Haydar's case, this connection is exemplified through her translation of an excerpt from Jabbour Douaihy's *Checkpoint 201* (2018), a work that grapples with the complex histories and social realities of Lebanon.

**Intellectual exercise and personal relations**

Under the category of Intellectual Exercise, translators who are Anglophone with strong academic credentials—such as Marilyn Booth and William Hutchins—or who are well-established in their translation careers—such as Humphrey Davies, with 19 published translations, and Jonathan Wright, with 18—demonstrate a different orientation toward their work with Words Without Borders. Identified by Büchler and Khalifa (2021) as among the most prolific translators of Arabic literature into English, these individuals approach translation primarily as an intellectual and professional endeavor. Unlike Sinan Antoon, whose translations are often shaped by an explicit political commitment, or Paula Haydar, whose work is motivated

by a desire to amplify lesser-known voices and gain broader exposure for them, these translators engage with Words Without Borders more as an extension of their long-standing involvement in the Anglophone literary and academic fields.

Many of them have enduring professional relationships with key figures in the magazine's editorial team, particularly Susan Harris. In this context, their participation can be seen, at times, as an act of collegial reciprocity—offering translations as a favor to the editors, rather than as part of a personal mission to advocate for specific authors or political causes. Their established presence within the literary translation community, along with their connections to prominent publishing networks, means they do not face the same challenges in securing publication or visibility that other, less established translators might encounter. Instead, their contributions often reflect an ongoing intellectual engagement with Arabic literature and a professional commitment to the craft of literary translation.

**Professional development**

For many emerging and mid-career translators, Words Without Borders offers not only editorial agency but also valuable opportunities for professional development. The platform provides visibility and legitimacy within the field of literary translation, which can be particularly beneficial for those seeking to establish or advance their careers. By publishing shorter works—whether excerpts from novels, short stories, or poetry—translators are able to showcase their skills to a broader audience, including potential publishers.

Sawad Hussain speaks directly to this strategic use of Words Without Borders as a professional steppingstone. She explains,

"The reason I choose to publish short stories or excerpts online is with the aim of catching publishers' attention to get them interested in the larger body of work. So, for example, right now I am really very forcefully trying to pitch Najwa Binshatwan's short story collection, which is called An Ongoing Coincidence. Najwa is a Libyan author who doesn't have much exposure at all, even though she was the first Libyan author ever shortlisted for the Arab Booker."

For Hussain, *Words Without Borders* serves as a critical platform for building an author's reputation and generating interest among English-language publishers. This approach highlights how translators like her leverage online, open-access venues to promote both their authors and their own careers as literary translators. Publishing excerpts and short stories can create momentum for larger projects, including securing deals for full-length works in translation.

However, while this model of operation empowers translators by giving them visibility and editorial agency, it is not without its disadvantages. Some translators express concerns about the limitations and potential for exploitation inherent in this open-access publishing framework. Alice Guthrie, for example, has collaborated with the magazine on multiple issues but points out that, although she is compensated for her translation work, the payment often does not reflect the significant labor involved. Similarly, Kareem James Abu-Zeid acknowledges the platform's importance, particularly for emerging translators publishing shorter pieces, but finds Words Without Borders limiting in terms of long-term career progression. He contrasts it with other platforms, such as Two Lines Press, which has transitioned from producing anthologies to publishing full-length novels in translation. According to Abu-Zeid, WWB's current publishing model—focused on short-form content—can feel restrictive for translators seeking opportunities to work on and be recognized for larger projects.

In this way, while Words Without Borders offers a valuable entry point and an important space for professional growth, especially for translators building their careers, its structural limitations underscore the ongoing challenges faced by literary translators seeking sustainable, long-term advancement within the field.

### 5.3. Arabic content: Trials of agency

WWB has dedicated significant effort to showcasing Arabic literary works since day one, with over 226 new, never been published before literary texts being presented on its pages. The

evolution of Arabic content in WWB reflects not only the magazine's growing sophistication but also the increasing agency and influence of its translators and editors. From its inception, WWB has made deliberate editorial choices to engage with the most pressing issues of the time, heavily relying on the expertise of its translators to shape the content. As the magazine grew, the thematic scope expanded, moving beyond immediate political concerns to embrace a more diverse representation of Arabic literature. This shift is largely attributable to the evolving role and agency of the translators, who have been instrumental in bringing authentic and varied voices to the magazine's platform.

In the early years, WWB's Arabic content was heavily shaped by the geopolitical landscape, with a focus on conflict and identity. One of the earliest Arabic-focused issues, *Checkpoints: Literature from Iraq* (October 2003), is a prime example of this. The issue, curated during the height of the Iraq War, highlighted nine texts by Iraqi authors, showcasing poetry, fiction, and interviews that conveyed the complex identities and experiences of Iraqis during conflict. The translators involved in this issue, many of whom had deep connections to the region, played a crucial role in selecting texts that authentically represented the struggles of Iraqi authors. Their agency in this process ensured that the narratives chosen resonated with both the sociopolitical context and the lived experiences of the authors.

As WWB matured, its thematic focus began to broaden, thanks in large part to the increasing involvement of diverse translators and guest editors. For instance, the *Writing Palestine* issue (November 2006) featured 15 texts across genres, underscoring the magazine's ability to provide a platform for Palestinian voices. The translators' deep cultural ties ensured that the content was not only politically relevant but also culturally resonant, reflecting a broader spectrum of Palestinian experiences. This issue marked a shift towards more nuanced

representations, moving beyond the binary narratives of conflict to explore the rich tapestry of Palestinian literature.

A notable shift in the magazine's approach can be seen in later issues, such as *Turning the Kaleidoscope: Writing from Lebanon* (July 2018). By this time, WWB's editorial policies had evolved to include more diverse genres and media, such as graphic novels, reflecting the magazine's growing confidence in exploring non-traditional formats. This shift was largely driven by translators who advocated for the inclusion of these genres, recognizing their importance in the contemporary Arabic literary landscape. The agency of these translators was crucial in expanding the magazine's thematic focus, allowing WWB to provide readers with a richer and more varied literary experience.

The involvement of diverse agents in WWB's production process is also evident in more recent issues, such as *No Center: Omani Writers on the Question of Identity* (May 2019). This issue focused on the complexities of identity in Oman, a country often underrepresented in global literary discourse. The decision to focus on Omani literature reflects the translators' influence in bringing lesser-known narratives to the fore, further diversifying the magazine's content. The thematic evolution towards exploring underrepresented regions and voices within the Arabic-speaking world demonstrates the growing impact of translators in shaping the editorial direction of WWB.

### 5.4. WWB, a Publisher with an evolving mission: Habitus

The analysis reveals that the initial literary activist tone, which vigorously campaigned for foreign literature in the English language, has gradually been moderated in favor of broader accessibility and mainstream appeal, particularly as other competitors, such as new literary translation magazines, have started to emerge. This shift is evident in various aspects of the WWB's translation practices: the evolution of its mission statement, the hiring of full-time

specialized editorial staff, and the transition from geographically based themes to more literary and thematic ones. This evolution can be seen as a move towards a more cosmopolitan avant-garde approach—where the focus shifts from a purely activist stance to one that is innovative, experimental, and thematically challenging, often breaking away from established norms and conventions, bringing more visibility and relevance to the act of translation to a wider range of readership.

The initial 2003 mission statement of WWB emphasized the critical role of literary translation in bridging global cultural divides, particularly during periods of conflict. It highlighted the urgency of addressing an "increasingly interdependent world, rife with ignorance and incomprehension of other cultures" (Mission Statement, 2003). The statement also underscored the imbalance in global translation practices, noting that "50% of all the books in translation now published worldwide are translated from English, but only 6% are translated into English" (Mission Statement, 2003). This concern over the dominance of English-language literature and the invisibility of non-English works drives the magazine's mission to diversify the literary landscape. Literary translation is framed not as a "static, elite phenomenon," but as an active tool for fostering "international communication" and "cultural engagement beyond consumerism," with a clear goal to "de-Americanize globalization" (Mission Statement, 2003). This reveals the magazine's ideological stance: viewing translation as cultural activism that challenges English-language hegemony and advocates for a more equitable global exchange of ideas.

By 2010, the mission statement had shifted to a more practical approach, focusing on promoting "the finest contemporary international literature" and making it accessible to English speaking readers (Mission Statement, 2010). This evolution reflects a strategic pivot from an earlier, more activist-oriented stance towards one that prioritizes accessibility and quality in

order to reach a broader audience. Insights from interviews with key figures at the magazine, such as Eric Becker, reveal that this change was partly driven by the need to compete in an increasingly crowded field of literary translation platforms. He expressed, "even though we are a non-profit, our work is not political, and we are not advocating for any government-to-government relations or promoting governmental agendas. Instead, our goal is to engage ordinary readers with ideas and perspectives that are not typically available in mainstream publishing, whether in digital or print formats." This approach underscores the magazine's commitment to broadening cultural understanding by making diverse voices accessible to a global audience, without aligning with specific political or governmental objectives.

The magazine clearly understood its evolving role within Anglophone literary circles, evidenced by the expanded scope of its activities. The mission (2003) and (2009) listed specific international authors, including award winners, featured in English translation for the first time, and detailed collaborations with other publishing houses. This strategic positioning not only broadened the magazine's reach but also received recognition from key literary institutions, enhancing its reputation within the global literary community. For instance, collaborations with well-established publishers and the inclusion of WWB translations in academic syllabi have underscored its commitment to enriching the literary landscape with diverse, global voices. The shift in WWB's mission statement broadened its reach and impact, enhancing its sustainability by engaging with educational systems and leveraging partnerships.

WWB continues to uphold its ideological commitment to producing politically engaged literary translations. Drawing on Lefevere’s framework, WWB intertwines its core objectives with a vision for a world characterized by cultural omnivorousness and a deep-seated ethic of tolerance, aiming to foster a "cosmopolitan consciousness" through the power of literary

translation (Pym, 2021, p.42). While these cosmopolitan inclinations were already hinted at in the 2003 mission statement, they became fully realized and articulated in the 2010 revision.

For instance, WWB has consistently prioritized the inclusion of voices from marginalized cultures, particularly those engaged in some form of political tension with the United States. This is evident in its special issues that focus on regions like the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where the literature often confronts and critiques global power dynamics and cultural hegemonies. This focus reflects WWB's commitment to amplifying narratives that challenge dominant perspectives and provide readers with insights into the lived experiences of those on the peripheries of global political discourse.

However, as the magazine evolved, its editorial policies began to shift. Initially, WWB was resolute in its commitment to only publish works that were translated into English, maintaining a clear boundary between source languages and the target language. This approach aligned with its goal of promoting cross-cultural dialogue through translation. Eric Becker, a key figure in the editorial team, acknowledged this early dogmatism, stating, "We used to be dogmatic about not publishing anything written in English." Over time, however, WWB recognized the value of expanding its scope to include literature originally written in English, especially from regions and writers who might still be considered marginalized or underrepresented in mainstream Anglophone literary circles. It was seen by the founders and editors as a way to overcome the "Americanization" of global culture, particularly in terms of visibility, voices, and themes. Yet, it is worth mentioning that despite these efforts, the magazine continues to adhere to an Americanized version of the English language in its editorial policy. This reflects the complex balancing act between resisting cultural homogenization and operating within the linguistic norms that are most accessible to their target audience, underscoring the

inherent challenges in truly decolonizing global literary practices while ensuring the broadest possible reach.

This evolution in WWB's editorial approach demonstrates its ongoing commitment to cultural omnivorousness and the ethics of tolerance. It also highlights the magazine's adaptability and its willingness to reassess and expand its strategies to stay true to its mission of fostering global understanding through literature. This shift from a rigid focus on translation to a more inclusive embrace of diverse literary forms—regardless of the original language—reflects a mature cosmopolitan vision that is responsive to the complexities of the global literary landscape.

In the context of WWB's evolving mission, the concept of the literary translation activist habitus in cosmopolitan times can be understood as a set of dispositions and practices that merge cultural activism with a global, inclusive outlook. This habitus is characterized by a commitment to challenging linguistic and cultural hegemonies, particularly those imposed by dominant global powers, while also embracing the cosmopolitan ideal of fostering cross-cultural understanding and empathy through literature. At its core, this habitus involves a deep engagement with the socio-political contexts of the source cultures, particularly those marginalized or in conflict with Western powers. It is not merely about translating texts, but about selecting and presenting works that have the potential to disrupt dominant narratives and introduce Anglophone readers to perspectives that are often sidelined in mainstream discourse.

The literary translation activist habitus in cosmopolitan times also acknowledges the complexities of working within an interconnected, yet unequal, global literary market. It balances the desire to resist cultural homogenization with the practical need to reach and resonate with a wide audience, often using globally dominant languages like English. Moreover, this habitus is adaptive, reflecting an awareness of the changing dynamics of global literature. It moves beyond

rigid definitions of activism to include the broader cosmopolitan goal of creating a more inclusive and diverse literary world. This involves not only promoting translations but also recognizing and integrating the voices of marginalized English-speaking writers into the global literary conversation. The literary translation activist habitus in cosmopolitan times, therefore, represents a nuanced and strategic approach to cultural activism, one that is both idealistic in its vision and pragmatic in its execution, striving to make literature a vehicle for global understanding and ethical engagement. This framework encapsulates the evolution of WWB as a publisher, showcasing how the magazine has adapted its mission and editorial practices to stay relevant and influential in a rapidly globalizing world, all while maintaining a commitment to the core values of literary activism.

Agency, in sociological and cultural terms, refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently, make choices, and exert power within their social environments. It involves the ability to influence and shape one's own life, as well as the broader societal structures and cultural narratives in which one is embedded. In the context of literary translation, agency becomes a crucial concept as it pertains to the roles that translators, editors, and publishers play in the production and dissemination of literature across cultures. Within WWB's evolving framework, the agency of translators and editorial staff is particularly significant. These individuals are not merely passive conduits for texts; they actively lead the change of the magazine's outlook. The literary translation activist habitus, as it operates within a cosmopolitan framework, imbues these agents with the responsibility to challenge cultural hegemonies and advocate for marginalized voices. This agency is reflected in the deliberate selection of works that address political and cultural tensions, as well as in the nuanced editorial decisions that balance the magazine's activist roots with its broader cosmopolitan aspirations. By exercising their agency, the individuals involved in WWB contribute to the creation of a more diverse and

inclusive literary landscape, one that not only crosses linguistic boundaries but also challenges and redefines them.

**Summary**

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of *Words Without Borders* (WWB) as a digital publisher, focusing on its role in promoting Arabic literary translation. It examines the sociocultural and historical contexts of the magazine's emergence and how it acts as a cultural intermediary in a globalized literary ecosystem. The chapter draws on cultural and sociological theories, including Lefevere's theory of rewriting and Bourdieu's sociological framework, to explore the active roles of translators, editors, and the broader cultural impacts of their work.

The chapter opens by discussing the political and ethical implications of not translating certain languages, particularly Arabic, into English, highlighting the historical insularity of the English-language literary industry. WWB's founding is framed as a response to this insularity, positioning the magazine as a platform to foster cross-cultural dialogue, especially in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent political shifts in the West.

Sections of the chapter delve into WWB's operational strategies, including its status as a non-profit organization, the significance of its funding sources, and its editorial structure. It underscores how WWB's online presence has revolutionized the accessibility of global literature, promoting underrepresented voices from around the world, particularly through excerpts of diverse genres like poetry and graphic novels. The chapter also explores the agency of translators and editors in shaping the magazine's content, as they act as cultural mediators who influence the selection and presentation of literary works.

The role of social and symbolic capital is emphasized, particularly through WWB's network of collaborators and its strategic presence in the literary world. The chapter discusses

how the magazine's ability to feature emerging literary talents before they achieve international recognition strengthens its standing within the Anglo-American literary system.

The chapter concludes by examining WWB's evolving mission and the broader implications of its work in fostering a more inclusive global literary community. It reflects on the balance between the magazine's initial activist stance and its current focus on making diverse global voices more accessible to a mainstream audience. WWB's role as a key player in the global literary translation field is cemented by its ongoing commitment to cultural omnivorousness and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding.

# Chapter Six: The Making of Arabic to English Literary Translations in Five Issues at the Online Magazine WWB

## Introduction

This chapter delves into the intricate process of producing English translations of Arabic literary texts within the context of WWWB. Building on the broader sociocultural analysis presented in the previous chapters—where I examined the roles and functions of WWB, the nature of the texts it curates, and the individuals who contribute to its success—this chapter shifts focus to a micro-level analysis. Here, the emphasis is on the 'making' of translations, scrutinizing the steps taken by various agents involved in this process and the ways in which their actions culminate in the final translated product.

The primary objective of this chapter is to illuminate how translation production is carried out within a digital publishing environment, particularly within WWB. Despite the pivotal role of translation in global literary exchanges, detailed studies that investigate the everyday translation practices within such a context—especially in projects leading to English translations of Arabic literary works—remain sparse. This chapter seeks to fill that gap by applying the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework, as adapted by translation studies scholars like Buzelin and Luo, to dissect the translation processes in selected WWB issues.

ANT, with its roots in the work of Bruno Latour, provides a useful lens for analyzing how various human and non-human actors collaborate, negotiate, and transform literary texts. In this chapter, I will explore how translation within WWB is not merely an interlinguistic transfer but a complex transformation involving a network of actors, including translators, editors, texts, and technological tools. By tracing the genesis of specific Arabic-themed issues published between 2017 and 2020, I aim to uncover the dynamic interactions that occur within these networks, shedding light on how translated texts are produced and positioned within a web of paratexts.

This analysis is grounded in three types of data: interviews with key stakeholders, paratextual materials from the magazine, and the translated texts themselves. The issues selected for this study offer a representative cross-section of WWB's approach to translation. Each issue presents unique challenges and opportunities that reveal much about the broader cultural and social dynamics at play in the translation of Arabic literature into English.

The structure of this chapter is organized around several key phases of the translation process, as observed in these case studies. These phases include the initial selection and problematization of translation projects, the recommendation and interessement processes that stabilize the translation network, and the multifaceted transformation of texts through editing and the integration of paratextual elements. By analyzing these phases, I aim to demonstrate how translation networks at WWB are characterized by their flexibility, collaboration, and the fluid boundaries of human agency. The chapter will conclude with a synthesis that revisits the implications of these findings for the field of translation studies, particularly in the context of digital publishing and the role of paratextual elements in shaping the reception of translated texts.

In this exploration, I contend that while non-human actors—such as digital tools and platforms—are indispensable in the translation process, they do not possess independent agency. Instead, they function as extensions of human agency, facilitating and enhancing the work of translators and editors without replacing their crucial role. This argument, which aligns more closely with the views of Haddadian-Moghaddam, challenges the Latourian perspective that attributes agency to non-human actors. By focusing on the agency of human actors within the network, this chapter aims to reassert the importance of intellectual and creative labor in the production of translated texts.

Ultimately, this chapter aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the translation process within digital literary contexts, offering insights that are not only relevant to

the study of Arabic-English literary translation but also to broader discussions in translation studies and digital humanities.

### 6.1. Selection of translation projects

The five issues selected to be analyzed for their making process at WWB are: *Against the Grain: Writing from the Subback Festival* (2017), *No Centers: Omani Writers on the Question of Identity* (2019), *The Comic Edge: Arabic Humor (*2019), *Claiming a Place in the World: Life Writing by Women in Arabic* (2020), and *Defying the Expectations: Arabic Young Literature* (2020).

The selection of these five is intimately connected to the nature of my research, which employs an ethnography-inspired case study as an "iterative" model (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2014, p.227). These five issues emerged organically from discussions with the translators and guest editors who participated in the interviews. Their involvement in them at the time of the interviews—some issues in the production phase, others finished and published, and some waiting in the queue to be published—provided a unique opportunity to delve into the translation process with insights from those actively engaged in it. I am following the actors retrospectively. This direct connection ensures that the analysis is grounded in real-time experiences, providing a detailed and contemporary perspective on the challenges and opportunities during the making of Arabic-English translations.

A key commonality among these five issues is their recency, with publication dates spanning from 2017 to 2020. This timeframe is significant as it reflects a contemporary moment in Arabic literary production and its translation into English. Moreover, these issues were all curated by guest editors commissioned by the magazine. In contrast to earlier periods of the magazine, when issues often curated by the editorial board and focused on nation-states or sociopolitical events in the Arab world—such as *Road to Damascus* (2005), *Writing from*

*Palestine* (2006), *The Arab Spring I* and *The Arab Spring II* (both in 2011), and *Iraq, Ten Years Later* (2013)—, this later phase reflects a more targeted and thematically cohesive strategy, breaking away from the ethnocentric models that previously dominated Arabic translation in traditional publishing. The involvement of guest editors, who often double as translators, adds complexity and depth to the curation process, where text selection is shaped by both literary merit and the translator's personal taste. This dual role offers a unique perspective on the balance between the agency of translators and the editorial decisions influenced by a commitment to introduce the target audience to new literary forms.

### 6.2. Multiple phases of the translation process

In the following section, I present the different phases required to finalize a translation project, aka an issue, at WWB, from the initial stages to publication, and the forms and roles of actors involved. Rather than simply describing these phases, I analyze them within the framework of *translation* actions as outlined by Luo (2020) in accordance with actor-network theory. In this context, *translation* does not refer to the interlinguistic transfer process. Instead, as defined by Latour, it is synonymous with 'transformation' or 'movement' (Buzelin, 2007b). This concept captures how actors—both human and nonhuman—engage with one another within a network to transform and translate a text. The *translation* actions identified in this case study include problematization, interessement, transformation, and a unique action specific to the magazine's production process, which I term "recommendation".

#### 6.2.1. Problematization leads to certain selections

The process of curating an issue for the magazine begins with the realization of a need or problem by the magazine's editors and guest editors, identifying the necessary entities for the project. The analysis reveals two scenarios: some issues, like *No Centers: Omani Writers on the*

*Question of Identity* (2019) and *The Comic Edge: Arabic Humor* (2019), emerged because the editors have identified gaps in their content. Other issues were proposed by translators-cum-guest editors who sought to diversify and strengthen their own translation repertoire. Regardless of who initiates the theme, the process remains dialogic, collaborative, and non-hierarchical, with guest editors playing a key role in finding texts and scouting translators for each theme.

In the first scenario, the issues *No Centers* and *The Comic Edge* were selected because the editorial board, including Susan Harris and Eric Becker, had their ears wide open, staying attentive and receptive to the buzz surrounding them. However, their intention was not merely to secure a deal before others within a competitive small market or to capitalize on a mainstream language, as Buzelin (2007b) suggests. Instead, their primary motivation was to ensure that the magazine remained contemporary, relevant, and engaging. By choosing these themes, they aimed to push the boundaries of what literary translation could offer, introducing fresh perspectives and challenging the status quo. This approach reflects a commitment to innovation and a desire to keep the magazine at the forefront of cultural discourse, continuously resonating with and captivating its audience.

*No Centers* was driven by the editorial staff's realization of the scarcity of Omani literature in English translation and the desire to highlight lighter, more playful narratives. Becker notes, "Marcia [founder of ArabLit] had written about the dearth of Omani literature, and it struck me as a significant gap. I wanted to make an issue on this topic for a couple of years now. So, when Ghayde [co-guest editor] joined our fellowship program, I proposed that he curate an issue on Omani literature." Although not his original pitch, Ghayde embraced the project, describing it as "more like a commission." It is worth noting that in the same month the Omani issue was released, one of its contributors, Jokha Alharthi, along with her translator Marilyn Booth, won the 2019 Man Booker Prize. This achievement underscores the editors' keen sense of emerging

talent and relevance, especially considering that the editorial board plans and sets an issue a year and a half to two years in advance.

Similarly, *The Comic Edge* was conceived by Susan Harris to challenge stereotypical perceptions of Arabic regions. She recalls, "I had come up with that idea several years ago because Arabic regions are frequently associated with war and only negative topics in the US. The idea that people in Arabic regions could find things funny or actually have humorous literature would come as a surprise to many." Recognizing Marcia's deep connection to the Arab literary world, Harris reached out to her, resulting in a collaboration based on trust built through prior translations and meetings.

Sometimes, the problematization phase involves identifying "long term logic of exchange" such as opportunities for collaboration and mutual benefit (Buzelin, 2007, p.141). For example, Susan Harris aimed to establish a partnership with Shubbak Festival[20], organized by Alice, the guest editor for *Against the Grain*. By offering to publish the translations in the magazine's *Against the Grain* issue, Harris leveraged this partnership to enhance both the festival's visibility and the magazine's influence.

This last pattern extends to issues in the second scenario. Sawad, the editor of *Claiming a Place in the World*, admitted that her motivation for the issue was to catch publishers' attention for larger book projects. She recalls, "a colleague and I, Nariman Youssef, pitched the idea of Arab women's autobiographies, which should be coming out in March. We met with Susan Harris to discuss the project," a meeting that took place during the pitching session for WWB at the London Book Fair. Moreover, Elizabeth, another translator-cum-editor, connected her work with WWB to her need to build a literary network in New York City after studying in Egypt for

[20] London's largest biennial festival of contemporary Arab culture, founded in 2011.

three years. She recalls, “I moved back to New York and saw that *Words Without Borders* was having their gala. I wrote to Susan Harris to meet. That was kind of the entryway for me into the literary translation community.” Eventually, Elizabeth proposed the issue *Defying the Expectations*, which was adopted by the magazine’s editorial team.

The problematization phase is foundational in shaping the trajectory of each issue. It identifies what needs to be done for the project to happen. While for the editorial board at the magazine the need is to find and identify an expertise who can curate a representative and a successful issue on the theme in question, while for the translators the problem is solved by finding a space and editorial support at the magazine to publish their translations. This phase ensures that each issue is rooted in a well-defined purpose, reflecting both the thematic focus and the strategic goals of WWB. Ultimately, problematization sets the stage for the complex, collaborative process that follows, guiding the creation of issues that not only fill existing gaps in Arabic-English literary translation but also push the boundaries of what such translations can achieve within the global literary landscape.

### 6.2.2. Recommendation: Leveraging personal networks

This phase is distinctive to the WWB editorial process as a magazine, often led by guest editors and potential translators who, as Harris describes, "know things, have access to things." Unlike the initial proposal of a thematic issue, the recommendation process occurs after a theme has been established. It is crucial for the flow of the other phases, but also for maintaining a consistent translation network, as the magazine does not accept direct submissions from individual translators. Within this framework, guest editors, informed by the magazine’s focus on work from diverse backgrounds, stylistically innovative texts, and thematically challenging content, contribute not just their specialized expertise but also a deep understanding of the

literary landscapes, linguistic nuances, and cultural systems of the regions they are translating. These insights are crucial, as they often surpass the immediate knowledge available to the magazine's core editorial team.

The recommendation process, however, does not result in an immediate collection of source texts ready for translation. The works recommended by guest editors undergo further scrutiny and selection by the editorial team, specifically by Harris and Becker. As Eric Becker elaborates, "Once the editorial team finds the proposal [of an issue] interesting, they request a more formal proposal that includes details about the author, their works, writing style, and the specific texts being considered." Following this, the editorial team commissions sample translations to assess the work's suitability for publication, ensuring alignment with the magazine's high standards and objectives.

Guest editors conduct meticulous research and leverage their networks to compile texts they find compelling and believe will best fit the theme of the issue. They then present these selections to the magazine's editorial team for final consideration. For example, Marcia's work on her project was profoundly influenced by the context and contacts she had developed over a decade of experience in Arabic literature. She explains, "Initially, I consulted about 25 authors whose opinions I respect, asking for their thoughts on what they found humorous. I weighed their recommendations against my own preferences." Similarly, Ghayde's extensive research for the Oman issue involved investigating both regional and diaspora writers before pitching the idea to the board. He describes his approach: "My process began by exploring what was available online and in English translations. I then spent about a month in Beirut, visiting bookstores and inquiring about Omani authors I had discovered online. I reviewed untranslated works and prepublished anthologies to gauge the available material. Additionally, I reached out to editors and organizers within the Arabic literary community for further insights and recommendations."

This iterative process of discussion, evaluation, and selection ensures that the final products align with the thematic goals and the magazine's broader editorial vision, while also accommodating the diverse subjectivities involved in the selection process.

Contrary to what might be assumed, recommendations are not always purely meritocratic; they are often shaped by existing alliances, friendships, and personal networks, making the selection process inherently subjective. For example, some texts published by the magazine have never appeared in Arabic and are either discovered online by the guest editor or result from personal relationships between the guest editor and the author.

Moreover, many issues under discussion feature translators who have also served as guest editors for other issues, reinforcing a system of reciprocal collaboration. For instance, Alice was asked to contribute a text by a Syrian female author to Sawad's *Claiming a Place in the World* issue. In turn, Sawad contributed to Marcia's humor issue, translating *Run, George!* by Najwa Bin Shatwan. These individuals often refer to each other as friends and collaborate on various projects outside of WWB, highlighting the intertwined nature of their networks.

The analysis reveals that guest editors and translators often propose more texts than are ultimately published. The final selection for each issue results from negotiations between the main editors and guest editors, with each party bringing their own agendas and constraints to the table. This negotiation process highlights the collaborative yet complex nature of producing a WWB issue. In the following sections, I will explore this process in greater detail.

This phase concludes once the proposed issue is approved and a selection of texts is chosen for translation. As Becker describes, "The process typically starts at least a year in advance, and once samples [of selected texts from the recommendation phase] are reviewed, we narrow down the selection to five or seven writers, then commission full translations for the issue.

### 6.2.3. Interessement: Getting texts and people on board

Interessement, as conceptualized by Luo (2020), is the phase where a focal actor attempts to attract and stabilize the participation of other actors—whether human or non-human—by strategically defining their roles and positioning them within a network. The objective is to align these actors with the goals of the translation network, while simultaneously deterring any competing influences or networks that could divert their involvement. This process is not merely about recruiting actors but actively shaping the network's structure by creating a framework within which these actors operate, thereby stabilizing the network's goals.

In the context of WWB, this process is meticulously managed by the magazine's editorial staff, who play a central role in formally recruiting and stabilizing various actors within the network. This recruitment can occur both directly and indirectly through mechanisms such as agreements, permissions, rights acquisition, and the establishment of timelines. These tools not only serve to enroll the actors but also to maintain their engagement within the network, ensuring that the magazine's vision is consistently realized.

For example, when Harris and Becker negotiate a theme with a guest editor and reach an agreement, they formalize this collaboration by immediately securing a timeline and setting a projected publication date—often a year or two in advance. This proactive planning is formalized in an agreement that outlines the scope of work and deadlines. Although this agreement is not legally binding, it is crucial for stabilizing the relationship as it is upheld by mutual trust and the desire to maintain a professional reputation within the translation community. Notably, there is no formal payment involved; guest editors and translators, receive only an honorarium. This arrangement highlights the voluntary nature of the work, driven largely by reasons behind the financial incentive.

Simultaneously, WWB engages in the crucial task of securing translation rights directly from source text authors or their publishers, particularly in cases where the authors are unreachable due to reasons such as death. As Harris explains, obtaining the rights to publish often means that "either the book has not been published in the original language or that the publisher only acquired rights for that language." This scenario allows the author to negotiate English language rights independently, and in return they can negotiate it with the magazine.

Sometimes, the work makes it in a book format and in English, but then the magazine will make "arrangements with an English language publisher for a book that's coming out after the issue is published". In this sense, it would be good publicity for the coming book.

The transparency of this negotiation process is often reflected in the final presentation of the text through a footnote, ensuring proper acknowledgment of the translation rights. This practice is exemplified in the paratextual footnote for Taghreed Najjar's *Against the Tide* (2014), translated by Elisabeth Jaquette (see Figure 3).

The flexibility in rights agreements is another significant aspect of the interessement process. While these rights are not exclusive, meaning the author or translator can publish their texts or translations elsewhere—typically with a publisher rather than another magazine—this flexibility rarely results in alternative publications. This could be attributed to the complexities and time required to secure a publisher's attention and finalize a book project, which often takes a year or more. However, securing rights through WWB has, in some cases, facilitated subsequent publishing opportunities. For instance, Elisabeth Jaquette's translation excerpt from *The Queue* (2016) by Basma Abdel Aziz first appeared in the magazine before Jaquette negotiated a book deal with Melville House. Similarly, when Amazon Crossing expressed interest in Mortada Gazar's piece *While He Was Sitting There* (2018), translated by Claire C. Jacobson, Harris acted as a volunteer literary agent, connecting the author with the publisher.

The project ultimately proceeded with a different, more established translator, William Hutchins.

By managing these processes, WWB's editorial staff not only align the actors with the magazine's goals but also actively construct the network by defining and stabilizing the roles of each participant. This structured yet flexible framework allows for the fluid movement of texts and people within the network, ensuring the magazine's sustained success in the translation community.

### 6.2.4. Transformation 1: Editing as a mechanism of cultural adaptation

Transformation, as conceptualized by Luo (2020) within the context of translation networks, refers to the actual process of modifying and adapting the original text to produce a new version that is culturally, linguistically, and contextually appropriate for the target audience. Therefore, transformation is not just about altering words; it involves a deeper engagement with the text, where the roles of various actors—both human and non-human—are strategically redefined and stabilized within the translation network. The goal is to ensure that the translated text aligns with the expectations of the genre and the target audience while retaining the integrity of the original content.

In the context of WWB, a text undergoes two levels of transformation. The first level is textual, involving rounds of edits and proofreading on the English text. The second level concerns the contextualization of the final translated text within a web of paratextual elements on the magazine page, which is discussed in the following subsection. Regardless of the type, transformation is intricately managed by the magazine's editorial team, expanding the scope of their roles. This involves not only making linguistic adjustments but also addressing cultural nuances and sensitivities that are critical to the reception of the text in a different cultural context. The editorial staff thus act as key agents of transformation, ensuring that the translated work resonates with its intended audience while maintaining fidelity to the source material.

One clear example of transformation actions within the translation network in WWB within is the adaptation of British English to American English. This process goes beyond mere lexical changes and involves a comprehensive transformation that includes adjusting idiomatic expressions, cultural references, and even tone to better suit the expectations of an American readership. Alice, guest editor of *Writing Against the Grain* and translator of a piece[21] that appeared in the issue *Claiming a Place in the World,* provides a concrete example of this process. As a British translator, Alice notes that the editorial process of her texts involves Americanizing the texts in matters "beyond taking the 'u' out of 'colour' and 'flavour.' I can recognize subtle Americanisms like this. But at one point, I wanted to say 'Antom' [plural 'you' in Arabic], and I wrote 'you lot'—that's completely British English, and you cannot say that in American life, so I chose 'y'all.'" However, the editor gave her constructive feedback to change this because 'y'all' in American English would sound like it comes from specific areas in the US, such as the South.

Similarly, Sawad, co-editor of *Claiming a Place in the World* who also translated a piece[22] for Marcia's humor issue, highlights editorial changes from British English to Americanization. In the mentioned text, some vocabulary changes included altering 'graveyard' from her original translation to 'cemetery,' and 'sidewalk' into 'pavement.'

The editorial decision to focus on American English reflects a broader acknowledgment within the translation community of the importance of aligning with the linguistic norms and expectations of the dominant English-language market, which is centered in the United States. Translators like Alice and Sawad recognize that this rigor in Americanizing their texts is crucial for appealing to publishers who are primarily operating from the US. This editorial process

[21] *Six Proposals for Participation in a Conversation About Bread* (2020) originally by Rasha Abbas
[22] *Run, George!* (2019) originally by Najwa Bin Shatwan

reaffirms that the English language center continues to reside in the US, and translators working with WWB are generally appreciative of the guidance and feedback provided by editors to ensure that their work resonates with an American readership.

A more nuanced examples of transformation in the editorial process is seen the handling of culturally sensitive issues in title selection. The debate over whether to title a humor issue as "Arab Humor" or "Humor in Arabic" highlights the complexity of cultural representation in translation. The guest editor's concern about focusing on the Arabic language rather than Arab ethnicity reflects a deep understanding of the cultural and social implications of language use.

Marcia, an editor involved in this decision, explains, "We're still arguing about the title because it's a humor issue. It's about humor, writing in Arabic and whether it should be Arab humor or humor in Arabic is an argument that we're having. What's your side of this duty? Arab humor in Arabic because it's not about the ethnicity of Arabic. Right? There are non-Arabs who are writing in Arabic. Um, yeah, I guess we'll see. I mean it's their magazine."

Rather than creating tension as is often the case between Arabic translators and English language publishers—where, as seen in Booth (2008), translations were manipulated by publishers and authors to fit Western expectations, resulting in the domestication of texts—this focus on American English is seen as a necessary and positive adaptation that enhances the marketability of the translated texts. It allows the work to reach a broader audience while adhering to the linguistic standards that are most likely to succeed in the global publishing industry. This approach confirms the centrality of the US in the English-language publishing world and highlights the strategic decisions made by translators and editors to navigate this landscape effectively.

In these examples, the editorial decision to emphasize the language rather than ethnicity is a transformative action that redefines the scope of the issue. By choosing a title that highlights

the linguistic aspect, the editorial team ensures that the content is inclusive and sensitive to the diverse identities of Arabic-speaking authors, many of whom do not identify with a specific ethnic label. This transformation involves careful negotiation of cultural identities and ensures that the magazine's presentation of the content aligns with contemporary understandings of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity.

### 6.2.5. Transformation 2: Translated texts within of web of paratexts

After texts are reviewed, edited, and proofread, they undergo a final and critical transformation in preparation for publication online. This process involves the careful integration of the translated texts within a network of paratextual elements curated for each issue and presented on the WWB webpage. These literary translation-specific paratextual elements—including prefaces, contributor bios, footnotes, copyright notes, and sometimes images—are far more than mere supplements or "thresholds of interpretation" (Genette, 1997). The analysis reveals that these elements are central to the production process of the final product, echoing the findings of Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2019) and Zhang et al. (2024), who emphasize that these elements are essential not only for the reception of translations but also for the creation process. In the digital context, the roles and functions of paratextual elements are significantly amplified, creating a more dynamic and interactive literary experience.

The fluid and dynamic environment of digital spaces allows WWB to dedicate prefaces, often authored by guest editors who are also translators, that not only contextualize the texts but also showcase the editors' intellectual and creative agency in framing the issue. These prefaces are more than introductions; they are crucial to how the literature is perceived and understood. As Pym (1996) argues, this fulfills the ethical responsibility of translators by making visible the choices, challenges, and methodologies that underpin the translation process. These prefaces serve not only as a means of contextualization but also as creative non-fiction pieces that are

copyrighted, emphasizing the translators' creative and intellectual ownership. This ownership is crucial in digital environments, where intellectual property can be more easily disseminated and shared, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the translator's contribution in tangible ways.

Moreover, these prefaces are not owned by the magazine but by their authors, further underscoring the creative and intellectual rights of the translators. For instance, in the 2019 issue on Omani literature co-edited by Ghayde, the preface emphasizes "unsettledness" as a theme, challenging reductive national categorizations and presenting the works within a broader discourse on displacement and identity. Similarly, the 2020 issue co-edited by Sawad addresses the politics of representation in life writing by Arab women, resisting voyeuristic and stereotypical readings often found in Western publishing. Through careful selection and framing, these translators reshape how these works are perceived, presenting them as rich, multifaceted narratives that transcend traditional boundaries.

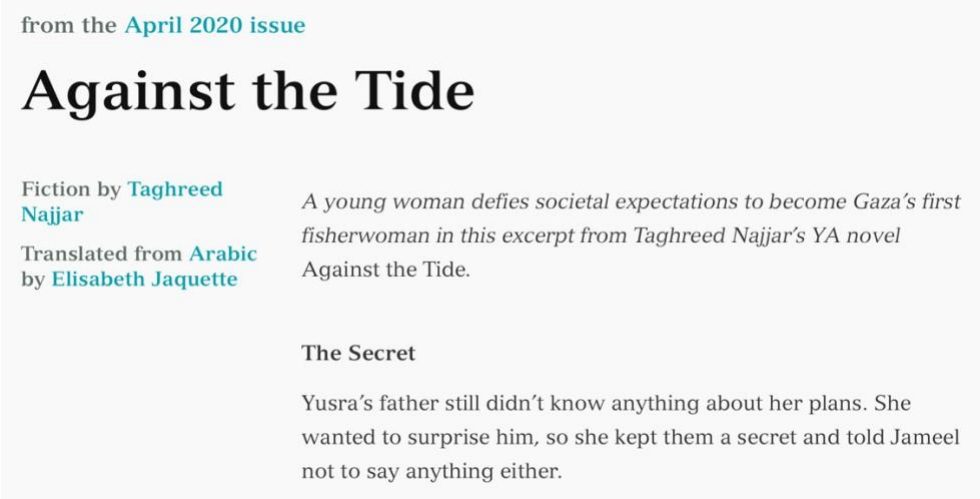
The impact of these prefaces extends beyond mere contextualization; they actively participate in the construction of meaning and understanding, redefining the boundaries between translation and authorship. By curating these thematic and contextual frameworks, translators in their role as guest editors assert a powerful influence on the reception of the works, challenging traditional hierarchies and empowering the translator as a co-creator in the global literary dialogue.

Contributor bios on WWB, specifically those for guest editors, translators, and authors, further illustrate the critical role of paratextual elements in transforming the presentation of the final product. There is no single translated text on the magazine's webpages that appears without including contributor bios next to the title. These brief profiles introduce readers to the key translators and authors, highlighting their vital roles in the creation of the translated work. By

doing so, contributor bios disrupt the conventional hierarchy that often privileges authorship over translatorship, challenging the historically invisible labor of translation as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Contextualizing the text through contributor bios*

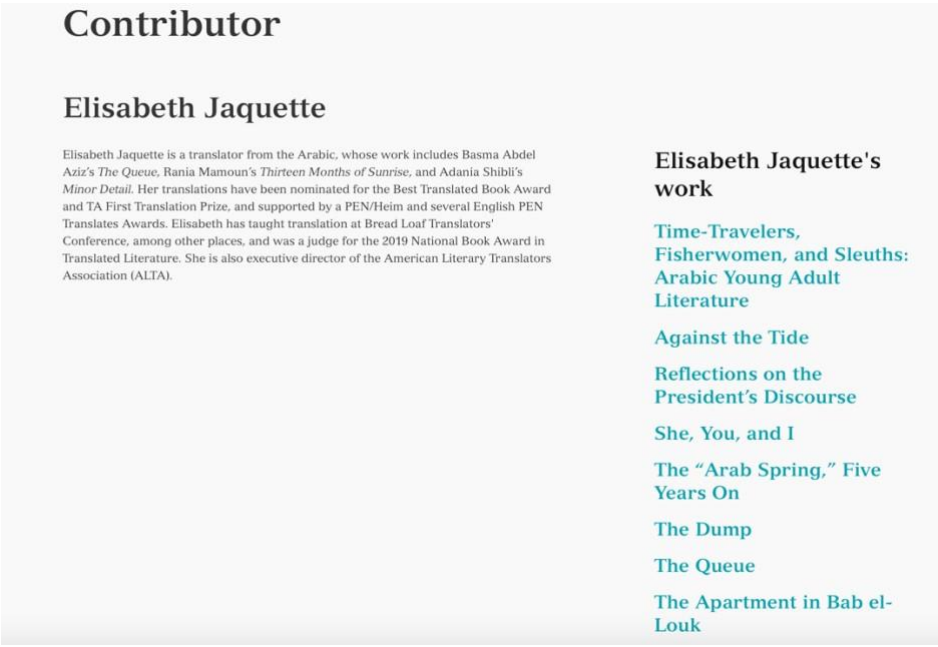



At just a click's distance, for example, if the reader clicks on Elisabeth's name, the webpage immediately redirects them to a dedicated page introducing the translator, detailing her background and expertise in Arabic literature, and providing links to other texts she has produced for the magazine, as figure 2 shows. This functionality highlights a significant shift in the production of literary translation in the digital context: it's no longer just about the text, but also the people, their visible networks and overall contexts. This function is in line with the magazine as a publisher's overall objectives; Harris indicates that "we need to give the readers as much context as possible to help them, we want to help them navigate the text." The reader's experience is enriched by this interconnected web of information, where the translator's expertise and body of work are made visible and accessible. This integration of paratextual elements ensures that the translator's role is not an afterthought but a central part of the literary experience, acknowledging the translator as a vital co-creator of the final product. In digital environments, where paratexts are more integrated and interactive, the roles of guest editors and

translators become more pronounced, offering the readers an experience of translated as a complex, interpretative act rather than a mere linguistic transfer. This shift not only enhances the reader's appreciation of the translation process but also empowers translators by recognizing their contributions as co-creators of the text, whose decisions significantly shape the final product.

**Figure 2**

*Translator's contributor bios*

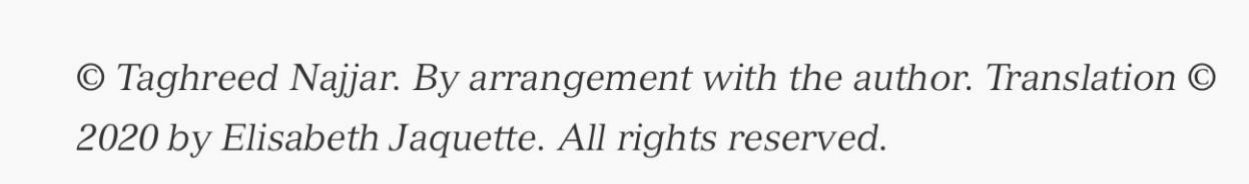



Copyright footnotes appear at the end of every translated text on WWB, serving as essential paratextual elements that contribute to the integrity and transparency of the publication process. These footnotes do more than merely provide legal information; they highlight the collaborative nature involved in selecting and translating texts, underscoring the shared intellectual property between the original author and the translator while respecting the creative agency of both. Moreover, these footnotes lend a sense of seriousness and credibility to the texts, addressing the challenge that online publications often face in being perceived as less prestigious than their print counterparts. By making the copyright information a visible and integral part of

the text, WWB reinforces the legitimacy and importance of the translated works. Two examples of such paratextual elements are provided in Figure 3: one from *Against the Tide* and another from *Communism in Style*. These examples illustrate how copyright footnotes explicitly acknowledge the intellectual contributions of both the original authors and the translators, thereby reinforcing the ethical and collaborative dimensions of translation work.

**Figure 3**

*Copyright as a paratextual footnote*





### 6.3. Mapping Arabic to English literary translation as an actor-network

#### 6.3.1. Consistent network structure at WWB

In contrast to the difficulties often encountered in tracing agents within hierarchical or opaque networks, as is often the case with commercial publishers (Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2012), the study of translation networks in the context of producing five Arabic-themed issues at WWB reveals a remarkably transparent and consistent structure. This structure is not merely a static framework for translation actions, nor is it disorganized as might be assumed with online

content. Instead, it represents a dynamic and interdependent network that seamlessly integrates both human and non-human actors, each playing a pivotal role in the overall process.

The network begins with an idea informed by the broader literary context of contemporary Arabic literature, particularly its English translation. This idea is then transformed into an issue through ongoing collaboration and negotiations between the focal actors—the magazine's main editors, Harris and Becker, and the guest editors, Alice, Marcia, Ghayde, Sawad, and Elisabeth—who are brought on board by Harris to execute the concept. This process is formalized through documents of agreement, extending Harris's role from editor to administrator, bringing it closer to that of a publisher.

Once the texts are selected, the guest editors initiate the translation process, recruiting other translators to collaborate. This collaborative approach is not a matter of capability but reflects the magazine's emphasis on collective effort and providing equal opportunities to a diverse group of translators. The translators are contacted either by the magazine or through the guest editors' personal networks, but they are officially recruited through an agreement and being paid an honorarium by the magazine staff. Simultaneously, the guest editors/translators are asked to contribute prefaces describing and contextualizing the translations. These prefaces also go through rounds of edits, often with assistance from Harris, Becker, or a part-time English language editor. While the individuals involved in the process may vary, the structure of the network remains consistent. Finally, the paratextual elements, including the prefaces, contributor bios, and other relevant information, are collected from the various actors, fact-checked, and sent along with the texts to the designer/web developer for publication on the magazine's website. This process highlights the fluid yet structured nature of the WWB translation network, which remains stable and effective despite the variability in individual participants.

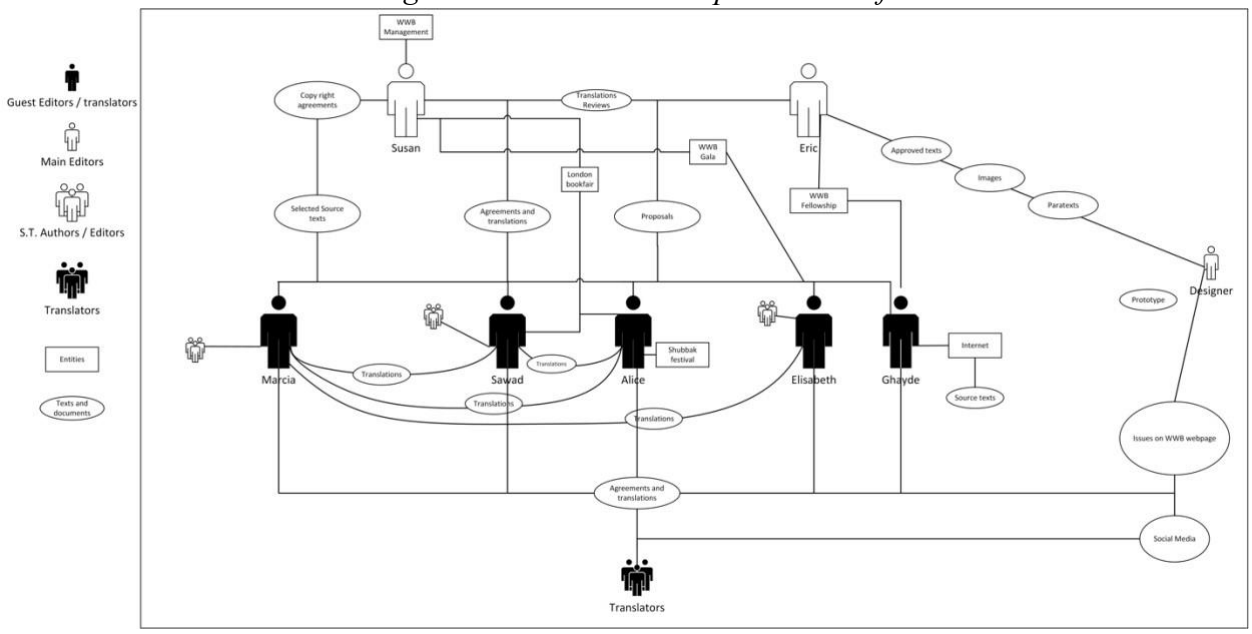
The consistency of the translation network at WWB is marked by the intricate interplay between human and non-human actors. Each actor's role is interdependent on others within the larger network, creating a system where contributions are mutually reinforcing. For instance, the translator's work is shaped by the availability and selection of texts, the feedback loops established with editors, and the cultural guidelines provided by consultants. Similarly, the final presentation of the translated work on the digital platform is the result of collaborative efforts between editors, translators, and designers, ensuring that the translation is both visually and contextually appropriate for the target audience.

However, this consistency does not imply rigidity. The translation network at WWB is characterized by a high degree of adaptability, enabling it to respond to the unique demands of each translation project resembling a rhizomatic structure in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1980)—a concept characterized by non-linear, non-hierarchical connections that allow for flexibility and resilience. Within this structure, power and agency are distributed among the various participants, or to use ANT term actors, ensuring that no single actor dominates the process. Instead, influence and decision-making are diffused across the network, allowing it to function effectively and adapt to the specific needs of each project.

The analysis shows that the adaptability is a key strength, allowing WWB to maintain its reputation for producing high-quality translations across a wide array of issues.

**Figure 4**

*Translation network: connecting the main actors in the production of Arabic issues at WWB*




### 6.3.2. Human actors: Emerging roles and fluid boundaries

Such a flexible network allows human actors to move beyond static, predefined roles. Instead, their roles are dynamic and fluid, evolving in response to the specific demands and challenges of each translation project. This fluidity is a hallmark of the translation network, reflecting the complex interplay between various forms of agency and the shifting boundaries of responsibility among different actors.

This is well exemplified in WWB, where translators often assume multiple roles that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of their primary responsibilities. Initially, a translator may focus on the linguistic and cultural transfer of the text, but as the project progresses, their role often expands to include project management or coordinators guiding the overall direction of the translation. They also scout for texts, revise other translations, or negotiate with authors. This flexibility highlights the multiplicity of their agency and underscores the inherently collaborative nature of the translation process.

The involvement of less visible yet equally critical actors, such as web designers and developers, further exemplifies the fluidity of roles within the network. While these actors may not be central in the early stages of translation, their agency becomes increasingly significant as the project approaches completion.

Moreover, as Buzelin (2006, 2007b) and Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012) emphasize, the roles of human actors in translation networks often involve negotiating and redefining their boundaries in collaboration with others. This negotiation process is critical to maintaining the network's stability and functionality. For instance, in the issue on Omani literature, the success of the translation network hinged on the ability of the main editor, Eric Becker, along with the translators, guest editor Ghayde, and digital tools, to work collaboratively while continuously adjusting their roles to meet the project's demands. Ghayde's agency extended beyond his linguistic expertise to include cultural negotiations, collaborations with bookstore owners, and the review of online texts to identify suitable works that aligned with the issue's theme. This example demonstrates how agency is distributed and exercised across the network, with each actor contributing to the project's overall success. In this sense, the translation network within WWB operates as a site of continuous role negotiation and expansion, where actors redefine their contributions in response to evolving project needs. When they are unable to fulfill certain roles, they delegate these responsibilities to others who can. This dynamic interaction between human actors illustrates how power and influence within the network are not fixed but are continuously reconfigured through the translation process. The fluid boundaries between roles allow for greater flexibility and responsiveness, enabling the network to adapt to the complexities of each translation project.

Thus, understanding the emerging roles and fluid boundaries of human actors in this translation network provides valuable insights into the collaborative nature of literary translation.

By recognizing the multiplicity of roles and the dynamic exercise of agency, we can better appreciate the complexity of the translation process within digital and literary contexts. This perspective not only enhances our understanding of the network's functionality but also sheds light on the broader implications of translation as a collaborative and multi-dimensional practice.

### 6.3.3. Non-human actors: Reasserting human agency in post-colonial translation networks

It goes without saying at this point when analyzing the making of literary translation that non-human actors in the translation network of WWB—such as emails, online platforms, and social media tools—are not passive tools. They are indispensable for the smooth operation of the translation process. However, while these actors are undeniably essential, the question that remains as a point of contention among literary translation scholars is the degree to which these actors possess agency. Scholars like Buzelin (2005) and Luo (2020), drawing from Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT), argue that non-human actors—such as technology, texts, legal documents, and even socio-cultural events—possess their own agency as long as they "make a difference in the network," actively influencing the course of translation projects. Luo (2020) pushes this argument further by suggesting that making a difference can also involve altering the decisions made by human participants, thereby contributing directly to the outcome of the translation. While Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012) acknowledges the significant role of nonhuman elements within the network, their perspective seems to lean more towards seeing these non-human agents as components that facilitate and extend human agency rather than possessing independent agency, thereby emphasizing the centrality of human agency in the translation network.

While I acknowledge the crucial role that non-human actors play in facilitating and extending the actions of human agents, I contend that these non-human actors do not possess independent agency. Instead, they function as sophisticated extensions of human agency,

enhancing the capabilities of human actors and enabling them to perform their roles more effectively. This argument directly challenges the Latourian perspective in the context of literary translation, as advanced by scholars like Buzelin and Luo, which posits that non-human actors possess their own agency by virtue of their ability to "make a difference" within the network.

Attributing agency to non-human actors risks diluting the concept of agency to the point where it loses its analytical utility. Agency, when understood as the capacity to act with intention and purpose, is inherently tied to human cognition and intentionality. Non-human actors, such as technology, texts, and socio-cultural events, lack the cognitive faculties necessary to form intentions or make purposive decisions. To argue otherwise is to stretch the definition of agency to an extent that undermines its coherence. Buzelin and Luo's assertion that non-human actors possess agency because they can alter decisions made by human participants conflates causality with agency. While non-human actors can influence outcomes, they do so only as tools and mediums directed by human intentions and actions. For example, emails facilitate the rapid exchange of ideas, proposals, and feedback between editors, guest editors, translators, and authors. In this context, emails act as both communication tools and historical documents, allowing for quick decision-making and serving as records that can be revisited to ensure transparency and consistency. However, the influence of emails in this network is entirely contingent upon the actions of human actors who draft, send, and respond to these communications. Without human interaction, emails remain inert, unable to influence the network independently. The power of emails lies in their capacity to extend human agency, enabling faster and more efficient communication, but not in any autonomous agency of their own.

Similarly, the ability to search online for texts and translators has transformed the way WWB curates content. Online databases, literary forums, and academic resources broaden the

scope of potential material and talent, allowing editors to access a diverse range of texts and review translator portfolios quickly. However, the algorithms and search parameters that filter information do not possess agency on their own. They are tools created and manipulated by humans to achieve specific outcomes. The final decisions regarding which texts and translators are selected rest with the human editors, who use these non-human actors to extend their reach and effectiveness.

In the specific context of WWB, the operation of non-human actors such as emails and online platforms is entirely contingent upon human agency. These actors, while powerful and indispensable, serve to amplify and extend the capabilities of human agents rather than replace them. The true drivers of action within the network are the human actors—editors, translators, and authors—whose intentions, decisions, and actions shape the outcome of the translation process. This perspective aligns more closely with the views of scholars like Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012), who emphasize the centrality of human agency in translation networks. By framing non-human actors as extensions rather than independent agents, we maintain the focus on the intellectual and creative labor that human actors contribute to the translation process. This approach not only preserves the integrity of the concept of agency but also provides a more balanced understanding of the role of technology and other non-human elements in modern translation networks.

### 6.4. Cosmopolitanism, Digital Transformation, and Human Agency: A Critical Examination of Translation Practices on Digital Initiatives

In his essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin (1923/1968) reconceives translation as a transformative act driven by the translator, who have the capacity to shape the event beyond mere linguistic equivalence. Benjamin argues that translation is not merely about finding word-for-word matches between languages but is a mode of writing that fosters change and mutual

exchange among texts, languages, cultures, and subjectivities (or, as this thesis has shown, agents). In his attempt to move beyond the German Romantics' conception of translation as a confirmation of a divine, scriptural role—where meaning serves as the fixed guide— Benjamin positions translation as a temporary and provisional practice for reconciling the inherent foreignness of different languages and cultures. In this view, translation is an act of constant becoming and should not be bound by the rigidity of institutions, whether it be linguistic equivalence or, in the case of late modernity, the publishing industry. Translation, once again, should be open to new possibilities with new forms of interaction and cultural exchange.

Benjamin's concept of *provisionality* in translation challenges traditional views that often place finality and accuracy at the core of the translator's responsibility. By defining translation as a process that is open-ended and evolving, Benjamin anticipates the possibilities for innovation and cultural intervention that we now see manifest in digital translation practices. His ideas are particularly relevant in today's digital context, where the pace of cultural exchange and the flexibility of digital tools allow for translations to evolve through collaboration and multiple iterations. This dynamic space for translation, especially in digital platforms like WWB, invites ongoing revisions and transformations, which aligns with Benjamin's view that translation should not be seen as static or final.

The analysis of the case study showed that the digital context significantly reshapes how translation operates, both as a discipline and as a practice. The digital age introduces new challenges and opportunities that push translation beyond pure interpretation or linguistic transfer. Translation is deeply embedded in social practices shaped by the globalized flow of information, culture, and technology. Digital platforms like WWB demonstrate how translation functions as part of a larger sociocultural system, involving complex networks of human and

non-human actors—including translators, editors, readers, and digital tools, often with unpredictable outcomes.

Technological advancements throughout history have continuously shaped translation practices, from the invention of the printing press to the development of computers and online communications. However, despite the growing number of literary translations published solely online, and the fact that the literary translation community is very strong and active online through collectives and collaborations (Marin-Lacarta, 2024), there are still few studies and theoretical frameworks that fully examine the impact of these digital platforms on the process of making literary translation. The history of digital literary translation is still young, and current studies are just beginning to scratch the surface in understanding how online spaces, collaborative networks, and digital tools are reshaping the creative, cultural, and ethical dimensions of translation in the digital age.

One of these studies is by Cronin (2014), who presents two compelling yet competing ideas. On one hand, he suggests that digital spaces enable the rise of cybercitizens—individuals whose actions within these online environments work to challenge and rectify discourses of cultural hegemony that are no longer acceptable in a globalized world. These cybercitizens, including translators and other cultural agents, use the openness and connectivity of the digital world to challenge dominant cultural narratives, promoting more equitable and diverse representations across languages and borders. Through collaborative efforts and open platforms, translators can act as global citizens, contributing to a more inclusive cultural dialogue that resists homogenizing forces. However, Cronin (2014) also cautions against the potential dangers posed by these digital tools, particularly in what he terms "problematic transparency". While digital platforms promise openness and accessibility, this transparency can sometimes obscure the complexities and nuances inherent in the translation process. The ease and speed with which

information and texts are shared may lead to a superficial engagement with the cultural and ethical intricacies of the source material, reducing translation to mere linguistic transfer without properly addressing the cultural contexts or the power dynamics that shape how texts are received and consumed. In this sense, digital tools might foster an illusion of transparency, where the surface-level accessibility of texts hides the deeper, often unresolved, issues of cultural representation, appropriation, or misinterpretation.

These two ideas—the empowerment of cybercitizens and the risk of problematic transparency—reflect the paradox of translation in the digital age. Translators—along with other agents such as editors and publishers in a digital magazine—may find themselves caught between the need to make texts readily available in a fast-paced digital environment and the reality that the complexities of language, culture, and context cannot always be easily conveyed. To navigate this tension, the agents of WWB have developed creative strategies that balance accessibility with preserving the subtleties of the source text, relying on each other's expertise (habitus) and agency. For example, they engage in negotiations with fellow translators and editors, making deliberate yet collaborative choices about which aspects of the original work to emphasize. Additionally, they leverage the flexibility of digital tools not only to present texts in new and innovative ways but also to reflect the collaborative nature of their work through paratextual elements. In doing so, they ensure their translations retain depth and nuance while remaining accessible to global audiences.

In the specific context of Arabic-to-English literary translation, these dynamics are further intensified. Arabic translations face a dual challenge: not only are they constrained by perceived market biases that often limit the quantity and quality of translated works (as critiqued by Said, 1990), but they are also subject to the invisibility of the translator within the marketplace, where translators and other agents are often deemed guilty until proven otherwise.

Allen (2010) challenges the notion of translation as an act of treason, asserting that translators should be recognized as creative agents rather than mere conduits of linguistic transfer. In his view, the creative contributions of translators are frequently undervalued and overlooked, yet they are central to the success of literary translation as a cosmopolitan endeavor.

Thus, Arabic-to-English translations on platforms like WWB should be understood as part of a larger cosmopolitan effort—one that actively advocates for cross-cultural dialogue by resisting simplification and embracing complexity, while recognizing the critical agency of translators. Cosmopolitan literary translation, in this sense, is not merely a process of crossing linguistic boundaries but a deliberate act of cultural and political engagement. It advocates for the visibility of marginalized voices, including the one of the translators themselves, particularly those from Arabic literary contexts, and resists hegemonic forces that would otherwise obscure or homogenize these narratives. Translators become advocates themselves, ensuring that the socio-political and cultural nuances of the original works are thoughtfully conveyed to global audiences. Through this, translation evolves into a global conversation that fosters mutual exchange, disrupts cultural hierarchies, and challenges dominant narratives. This advocacy driven approach to cosmopolitan translation aligns with the broader themes of this thesis, highlighting how digital platforms amplify underrepresented voices and position translators as active agents of cultural resistance and intervention. This is what I will be discussing next.

### 6.4.1. The cosmopolitan nature of literary translation in the digital age

I argue here that the study of literary translation, especially in today's digital context, requires the adoption of not just sociological tools but also sociocultural concepts such as cosmopolitanism to fully understand and conceptualize translation phenomena. In today's world, where multiple subjectivities constantly intersect and interact, translation emerges as an

inherently cosmopolitan endeavor. Inasmuch, as Cronin (2003) discusses, cosmopolitanism is a key framework for understanding the role of translation and translators in globalized societies.

Simply put, cosmopolitanism refers to the notion of being a citizen of the world, emphasizing global interconnectedness, openness to the *Other* with an ethical commitment to cross-cultural understanding. Beck (2006) [23] defines cosmopolitanism as the ability to relativize one's own perspective and see oneself from the perspective of cultural others. This ability, as Pym (2021, p. 38) notes, is integral to the act of translation, where "cosmopolitan competence... forces us to develop the art of translation and bridge-building." Furthermore, Pym, drawing on Delanty (2009), highlights the dialectical nature of translation process through the lenses of cosmopolitanism. He writes that cosmopolitan translation, as part of the cosmopolitan imagination, is "a process of self-constitution through the continuous opening up of new perspectives in light of the encounter with the Other" (2021, p. 39).

Bielsa (2014) adds to this by emphasizing that cosmopolitanism is not mere imagination, but is embedded in the material practices of communication, particularly in relation to arts and world literature. She critiques the idealistic assumption in globalization theory that meaning can be easily transmitted across borders without distortion. Instead, Bielsa stresses that translation is an active, material process where meaning is not merely transferred, but produced and transformed through cultural and linguistic interactions. This perspective highlights the role of agency in translation—specifically, the agency of translators, editors, and other cultural actors who make deliberate choices about how to represent and adapt texts for new audiences.

In this context, agency is central to the cosmopolitan process because the individuals involved in translation are not passive conduits. Rather, they are active agents who navigate the cultural, political, and linguistic complexities involved in transmitting and transforming

[23] Originally published in 2004 in German, English translation appeared in 2006.

literature. The translators working for platforms like WWB appear to exercise their agency by making deliberate decisions about how to recontextualize the original text in ways that aim to resonate with a global audience while striving to preserve the cultural integrity of the source material.This demonstrates how cosmopolitanism is not an abstract concept but is produced through the material actions of agents who mediate between cultures, facilitating cross-cultural encounters that transform both the source and target texts.

This notion of agency in cosmopolitanism is aligned with broader discussions in translation studies, where agency refers to the ability to act intentionally and influence outcomes. Understanding how translators, editors, and other participants shape not only the translated text but also the cultural meanings and power dynamics involved in cross-cultural exchanges is crucial. Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012) Haddadian-Moghaddam and Khalifa (2024), and Khalifa (2014) both highlight the importance of agency in fostering critical thinking and even resistance, particularly in post-colonial contexts. In these instances, the act of translation is about negotiating power dynamics while making deliberate choices that brings visibility to a foreign text in new cultural settings

### 6.4.2. Human agency as a helix

Human agency in the digital context of WWB can be viewed through the metaphor of a helix, symbolizing the intertwined, dynamic, and evolving nature of agency in the process of translation. This structure, which mirrors dialectical processes, is not static; rather, it reflects the continuous negotiation between opposing forces—thesis and antithesis—that culminates in synthesis. In the context of human agency, the helix serves as a powerful metaphor for network resilience and adaptability, particularly in spaces where financial viability is not the primary driving force. Instead, the digital platform thrives on culturally driven and collaborative efforts to sustain and expand cross-cultural communication through translation.

The metaphor of the helix also resonates with processual sociology in that agency within the network is in a constant state of becoming. This understanding of human action as an evolving and adaptive process further reinforces the notion that WWB's sustainability hinges on the continuous synthesis of opposing forces. As translators and editors engage with both external pressures, such as the need to attract readership, and internal goals, such as maintaining literary diversity, they redefine their roles within the network. This dialectical process, symbolized by the helix, shows how human actors in WWB are not passive participants; rather, they are constantly shaping and reshaping their positions in ways that ensure the platform's endurance despite the absence of commercial pressures.

In this context, Actor-Network Theory's emphasis on the interconnectedness of actors provides a robust explanation for the platform's resilience. The helix captures how human actors—whether translators, guest editors, or contributors—interact with both material and nonmaterial elements of the digital platform, adjusting their practices to align with the platform's values while pushing back against market forces. The collaborative model of agency, free from the constraints of traditional market logics, ensures that WWB thrives, sustained by human actors who are deeply invested in the shared mission of cultural exchange and literary resistance.

### 6.4.3. Digital platforms as an extension of human agency

In my research on the translation practices within WWB, I explored how non-human actors—such as digital platforms, paratextual elements, and technological tools—are integral to the translation process. These non-human actors facilitate human collaboration, enabling translators and editors to carry out their tasks efficiently. However, my findings align with the perspectives offered by Haddadian-Moghaddam (2012), Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2019) and Marin-Lacarta (2024) demonstrating that non-human actors in the translation process act as neutral mediators and tools rather than possessing independent agency.

One of the most significant findings in my study is that non-human actors, such as the digital platform of WWB, play a crucial role in facilitating collaboration between translators, editors, and guest editors. This is particularly evident in the case of Arabic-to-English translations, where multiple agents are involved in the production of a single translated text. The digital platform allows for the sharing of drafts, communication between actors, and management of paratextual elements such as author bios, translator notes, and footnotes. In this sense, the platform itself acts as a neutral space where human actors can collaborate and share information, but it does not influence or guide the translation decisions in any meaningful way. Similar to the findings of Marin-Lacarta and Vargas-Urpi (2019) in their study of the non-profit digital publishing platform ¡Hjckrrh!, the digital infrastructure of WWB serves as a mediator that supports the workflow but does not participate in decision-making. In both cases, non-human actors like digital platforms are essential for enabling human interaction, yet they remain passive participants in the process. They do not possess agency or make independent decisions; rather, they function as tools that human actors use to achieve their objectives.

For instance, translators on the WWB platform rely on digital tools to exchange drafts with editors, but the platform itself does not contribute to the discussion of cultural nuances or linguistic challenges. The translation decisions are made entirely by the human agents, who utilize the platform to streamline their workflow. This mirrors the workflow observed in ¡Hjckrrh!, where translators used email and digital drafts to communicate, but the actual translation decisions were negotiated between human actors, with non-human tools serving as facilitators.

Another key aspect of non-human actors in WWB is the role of paratextual elements, such as translator bios, author introductions, footnotes, and contextual notes. These paratextual elements are critical for framing the translation, particularly in cosmopolitan literary translation,

where cultural context plays a significant role in shaping the reader's understanding of the text. However, as with digital platforms, these paratexts serve as extensions of human agency rather than possessing agency themselves. Paratexts in WWB are created and curated by human editors and translators, who use these elements to guide the reader's interpretation of the translated text. For example, a translator working on an Arabic-to-English translation may include footnotes to explain cultural references or political nuances that may be unfamiliar to the English-speaking audience. While these paratextual elements are essential for shaping the reader's experience, they do not possess the capacity to negotiate or adapt in the way human agents do. Instead, they act as static tools that human actors manipulate to achieve specific outcomes.

### 6.4.3. Technology and the impediments to cosmopolitan translation

Cosmopolitanism facilitated by technology in the late-modern era is becoming increasingly shallow and consumerist. WWB presents itself as a platform for promoting cultural exchange by making global literature accessible to an English-speaking audience. However, like other platforms that aim to represent the "Other," there is a critical tension between fostering cross-cultural engagement and inadvertently promoting a form of cultural consumption that reduces the rich diversity of non-Western cultures to digestible products for Western readers. This tension reflects concerns discussed by Srikanth (2010) in her critique of WWB, where she highlights the potential risk of platforms like these becoming sites for the "collection" of the non-Western Other, where translated texts can be consumed without deeper cultural understanding.

Srikanth's discussion of cultural consumerism warns that English-speaking readers of WWB may engage with translated texts as commodified experiences, much like museum visitors collecting mementos of their encounters with different cultures. Readers may approach these translations as opportunities to momentarily "brush" against another culture, taking away only surface-level impressions of unfamiliar realities. As Srikanth points out, without critical

engagement, readers can reduce translated texts to "keepsakes" of their cosmopolitan consciousness, akin to souvenirs purchased at a museum shop. In my findings, this consumerist approach also exists within WWB, where readers are offered quick access to translations from diverse languages and regions but may not be encouraged to engage deeply with the complex sociopolitical and cultural contexts of the original texts.

# Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to explore the processes, challenges, and opportunities associated with literary translation in an increasingly digital and globalized context, particularly focusing on the online magazine *Words Without Borders* (WWB). By addressing the overarching research question: how do Arabic to English literary translations happen in WWB? which included these sub-questions: How does WWB function as a digital publisher and who are the agents involved? And, How do human and non-human agents within the WWB platform collectively shape the process of translating Arabic literature into English? the study has offered new insights into the sociology of translation.

At the outset, this research sought to explore the dynamic roles of translators and editors involved in producing Arabic-to-English translations for online platforms. A central objective was to understand how the platform's collaborative and digital nature reshapes these roles and how paratextual elements influence the reception of translated works. Additionally, this thesis aimed to trace the evolution of translation practices at WWB from its inception in 2003 to 2020, focusing on how editorial decisions and the platform's cultural positioning shape the production and dissemination of literary translations.

The central research problem was framed by the increasing digitalization of the literary translation field and the need for a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms mediate the relationships between texts, translators, and readers. This study employed Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to analyze the roles of both human and non-human actors, examining how these actors come together to shape the final translation products presented on the WWB platform.

### 7.1. Summary of key findings

This study has uncovered several important findings, which collectively address the research objectives and contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation on translation studies, digital platforms, and literary dissemination.

First, the analysis demonstrated that translators and editors occupy fluid and multifaceted roles in the digital context. In particular, guest editors who are also translators act as key mediators, recruiting other translators and shaping the overall cultural and linguistic strategy of the Arabic-language collections. This points to a decentralization of the traditional translation hierarchy, where editors have as much agency as translators in shaping the final product.

Second, this research revealed the centrality of paratextual elements—such as the design of the webpage, contributor bios, and accompanying images—in framing the readers' understanding of the translated works. These elements do not merely supplement the translation; they actively participate in creating meaning and guiding the reader's interpretation. The paratext serves as a bridge between the original text and its new audience, highlighting the crucial role of digital design in shaping the experience of translation.

Third, the study traced the cultural transformations that have occurred through WWB's translation practices. The platform has played a pivotal role in amplifying underrepresented voices, particularly from Arabic-speaking regions, by facilitating access to these works in English. This has not only broadened the visibility of these authors but also contributed to a shift in the cultural discourse surrounding translated literature. WWB's role as a mediator between the Global South and Western literary markets reflects broader cultural shifts towards decolonizing the literary translation process.

These findings hold significant implications for the study of translation in digital environments. The identification of translators and editors as fluid agents highlights the nonlinear

and collaborative nature of translation in the digital age. Rather than viewing translators as solitary actors working in isolation, this thesis demonstrates how the digital platform functions as a site of collaboration, negotiation, and co-creation. Editors, translators, and even web designers collectively shape the final product that reaches readers, pointing to the hybrid nature of literary production in the 21st century.

The influence of paratextual elements underscores the importance of considering nontextual features when analyzing translated works. In a traditional print context, paratextual features may include book covers, introductions, or translator's notes. In the digital context, however, these features become even more integrated into the reader's experience. This finding expands our understanding of how translations are not only linguistic but also visual and interactive phenomena, shaped by design choices that affect interpretation.

Additionally, the research highlights the role of platforms like WWB in fostering a more equitable literary ecosystem. By providing a space for marginalized voices, the platform contributes to a broader cultural transformation in the field of translation, advocating for greater diversity and representation. The findings suggest that digital platforms, when used effectively, can serve as important tools for cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural exchange, contributing to the ongoing project of decolonizing literary translation.

### 7.2. Contribution to knowledge and limitation

This thesis contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on digital literary translation by offering an in-depth analysis of how digital platforms influence the translation process. While previous studies have examined the role of translators and editors in traditional print contexts, this research extends these discussions into the digital realm, providing new insights into the collaborative and multimodal nature of online translation.

Moreover, this study has developed a novel approach to analyzing the impact of paratextual elements on translation reception. By applying Luo's (2020) theory of paratextuality to a digital platform, this thesis demonstrates how these elements function not just as supplementary features, but as active participants in shaping the reader's experience. This provides a more comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms mediate literary translation, contributing to both translation studies and digital humanities.

As with any research project, this thesis has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study focused on a single digital platform, WWB, which, while significant, may not fully represent the diversity of translation practices across different digital environments. Future research could expand on this work by comparing WWB to other digital platforms that engage in literary translation, such as Asymptote or Exchanges, to name some.

Second, while this thesis utilized archived materials and interviews with key actors, it was limited by the retrospective nature of the research design. A real-time ethnographic study of the translation processes at WWB might provide additional insights, particularly in capturing the fluid and often unpredictable nature of collaboration in digital spaces.

Finally, the focus on Arabic-English translation, while necessary for the scope of this study, leaves room for further exploration of how other language pairings might be mediated differently on digital platforms. The findings of this study are specific to the Arabic-English translation context, and further research could explore how different linguistic and cultural factors influence the translation process in other language pairs.

### 7.4. Directions for future research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research emerge. One potential direction is a comparative study of different digital platforms to better understand how various design features and editorial strategies influence the translation process across diverse contexts. Such a study could also examine how different platforms navigate issues of cultural representation and authorship.

Additionally, future research could delve more deeply into the role of non-human actors in the translation process. While this thesis has focused primarily on human agency, a more detailed exploration of how digital tools, algorithms, and platform design shape the translation process would enrich the discussion of agency in translation networks.

Finally, further research could explore how translation practices evolve in response to changing digital environments. With the rise of new technologies such as AI-assisted translation and machine learning, it would be valuable to investigate how these tools interact with human translators and editors in digital contexts. This line of inquiry would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving nature of translation in the digital age.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of the roles of translators, editors, and paratextual elements in the context of digital literary translation. By focusing on the case of Words Without Borders, this study has highlighted the collaborative and multimodal nature of the translation process in digital spaces. The findings emphasize the importance of considering both human and non-human actors in shaping the final translation product, as well as the broader cultural implications of these practices. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital translation and offers new perspectives on how translation mediates cross-cultural exchanges in an increasingly globalized and digital world.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Consent form

uOttawa

Université d'Ottawa
Faculté des arts
École de traduction et d'interprétation

University of Ottawa
Faculty of Arts
School of Translation and Interpretation

**Consent Form**

**Title of the research: Arabic Literature Gone Digital: Online Literary Translation Magazines and Their Agents**

Researcher: Norah Alkharashi, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa in Canada.

Under the supervision of Professor Marc Charron, School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa in Canada.

Coordinates:

I am invited to participate in the above-mentioned research as part of Norah Alkharashi's Ph.D. thesis at the School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa, Canada.

The purpose of the research is to study the literary translation of contemporary Arabic literature into English in the 21st century. The focus is on the literary texts published in the online-based literary translation magazine *Words Without Borders*, and the translators and editors who actively participate in it. The research aims at highlighting the social practice of digital magazines as well as the translators and editors who publish in them in hope to bring awareness to the importance of literary translation between Arabic and English, as well as to the roles played by the translators and editors who work to make texts available in English translation.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of answering questions in a semi-structured interview. All interviews will be conducted online, using Skype or similar application. The length of the interviews will be between 45 minutes to an hour. The interview will be scheduled at a later time with the researcher that works best for both of us. The interview will be one on one. I will also be asked later for some follow up questions or clarifications if needed. All interviews will be audio-recorded.

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**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that my name and profession will be known, and this may cause me to feel inconvenienced. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these inconveniences by protecting my identity if I choose not to be identified.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study will help the community of literary translation by bringing more visibility to literary translators and their work. My participation in this study will provide me with a space to voice my work, concerns, hopes, and worries about literary translation in English. My participation will also bring more awareness to the grass-roots work that is being done to gap cross-cultural (mis)communication.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain confidential if I choose so. I understand that the contents will be used only for thesis writing and future academic publications. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected by not using my name or any references that can indicate my identity if I choose so.

**Anonymity:** will be protected by giving me a pseudo-name (for example, translator 1) and it will not be shown in the potential publications if I choose so.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected through the interviews will be recorded and then transcribed. Both versions will be kept in an encrypted flash memory at the researcher's desk on campus. And in the future, in an encrypted file in her personal computer. The data will be kept for at least for five years from the day they are acquired.

**Voluntary Participation**: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be deleted and not use in the study.

**Acceptance:** I do not have to sign the consent form at this moment, but I will have to give my verbal consent at the beginning of the interview, which will be recorded. I will also indicate if I choose to be anonymous or if I choose to be identified in the data collection and in the writing process.

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No, I choose not to be identified (use of pseudo-name)
Yes, I choose to be identified (use of real name)

I should print or save a copy of the consent form to keep for my personal records.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Researcher's signature:

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**Appendix B**

## Interview questions

This interview includes six main questions, which cover three folds. The first set of two relates to translating and publishing on online platforms. The second set pertains your roles and relationships when attempting a translation project from the Arabic. Finally, the last two questions address issues related to translating and publishing contemporary Arabic literature into English. There are no right and wrong, answer from your own experience as much as possible. Supplementing the answers with personal anecdotes, observations and outcomes or short-comes would enrich your answer and eventually the analysis.

Thank you again for participating in this project.

**A. background questions:**

a. age, hometown, occupation
b. what works related to literary translation have you done?
c. how did you get involved with Words without Borders?

**B. research related questions:**

**Set 1: The magazine**

Q1: What *Words Without Borders* (WWB) might be?

***follow up questions:***

1. How do you perceive the situation of foreign literature in English language book market?
2. Why did you choose to work in a literary translation magazine?
3. What are the borders you are trying to cross in the magazine?
4. How does WWB produce translations?
5. How does the magazine sustain and support its translation projects?
6. What other outlets and distribution channels are available to publish literary translation online?
7. How does this magazine relate to these outlets or other traditional publishing formats (books, anthologies, journals and magazines)?
8. Who are the readers you are targeting?
9. Do cultural struggles and/or geopolitics of the region still affect English translations of contemporary Arabic literature?

Q2: How does the online platform work for *WWB*?

***follow up questions:***

10. Why the format of an e-magazine?
11. How publishing literary translation have changed with the online publishing?
12. Would you say that publishing in *WWB* have exposed translated literature to wider audience and opportunities?

13. What is WWB doing for the literary translation scene from Arabic?

**Set 2: Agents, roles, visibility and challenges**

Q1: what is your role(s) in *WWB*?

***follow up questions:***

14. How did you initially get involved with *Words Without Borders* (WWB)?
15. What specific role do you play in the translation process at WWB?
16. Can you describe your typical workflow when translating a text for the magazine?
17. Can you elaborate more on your participation in the production and publishing process?
18. What are the key responsibilities you have in your role as a translator/editor/agent at WWB?
19. Would you say that WWB have changed the relationship between the main actors (author, translator, editor/publisher) in the production process?
20. what gains are you hoping for from your work in *WWB*? Visibility? Network?

Q2: How would you describe your visibility and recognition?

***follow up questions:***

21. How visible do you feel your role as a translator is within the magazine?
22. In what ways does WWB acknowledge or promote your work as a translator?
23. Do you feel that the magazine provides sufficient recognition for your contributions? Why or why not?
24. How does the visibility of your work at WWB compare to other translation projects you've been involved in?
25. Do you believe that the digital format of WWB influences the visibility of translators' work compared to traditional print publications? How so?
26. 
27. In what ways does WWB acknowledge or promote your work as an editor or translator?

Q3: What challenges have you faced when working with the magazine?

***follow up questions:***

28. What challenges do you face in asserting your agency as a translator when working with WWB?
29. How much creative freedom do you feel you have in your translations for the magazine?
30. Have there been instances where you felt your translation choices were limited or guided by the magazine's editorial team?
31. How do you navigate potential conflicts between your translation choices and the editorial direction of the magazine?
32. Do you think your role as a translator at WWB differs from your role in other publishing contexts? If so, how?

**Set 3: Making process**

Q4: What is the typical process for translation and dissemination?

***follow up questions:***

33. How are decisions made regarding which texts to translate and publish? What role do you play in this process?
34. Can you describe a specific instance where collaboration with other agents (editors, other translators) influenced your translation work?
35. What input do you have in the selection of paratextual materials (e.g., notes, images) that accompany your translations?
36. How are the final decisions about the translation's presentation (e.g., title, footnotes) made, and what is your role in this process?
37. How do you handle disagreements or differing interpretations during the translation and editorial process?