

Mirene Arsanios and Dina Ramadan

## “Anatomies of Languages Lost and Found”

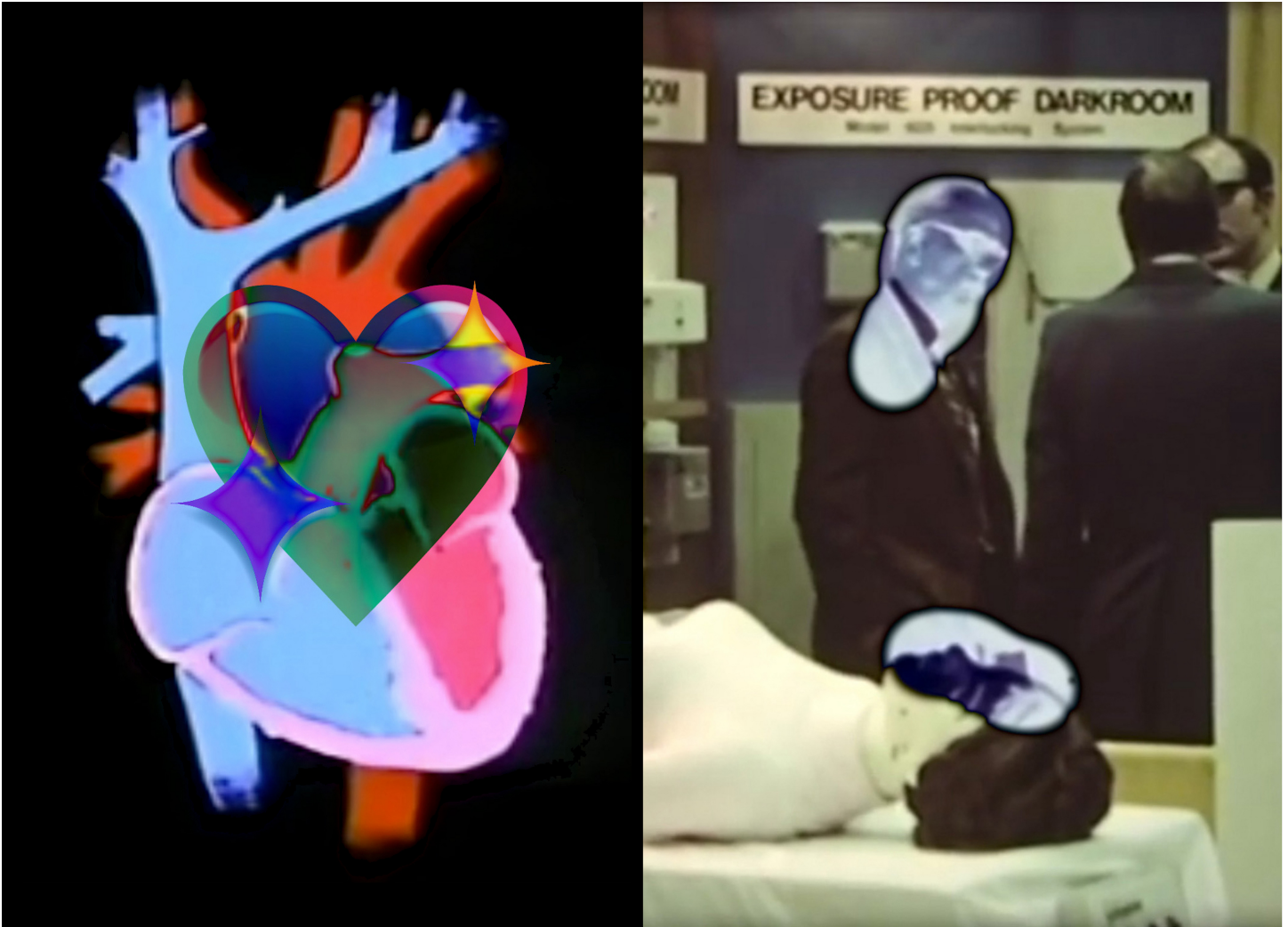
In her collection of essays and stories, *The Autobiography of a Language* (2022), Mirene Arsanios both yearns for the comfort of a mother-tongue and rejects the nationalistic confines of monolingualism. In doing so she develops some of the themes previously explored in *Notes on Mother Tongues* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2020) and *A City Outside the Sentence* (2015), a chapbook produced by Ashkal Alwan. Raised in a number of languages, the New York-based Lebanese writer and founding editor of the Arabic/English literary magazine *Makhzin* floats through the spaces between them in search of an ever-elusive narrative. Spanning significant personal and political changes for Arsanios, *The Autobiography of a Language* is an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of the narrative form, the frailty of the human body, the pain of dislocation and the trauma of lost inheritance. Through experimentation with style and form, language is dissected, its innards turned inside out, its distortions and contradictions laid bare, messy, and tangled.

**Dina Ramadan:** Perhaps we can begin by talking about the time frame of this book. These essays and stories come from very different moments, personally and politically, locally and globally.

**Mirene Arsanios:** Yes, thanks for noticing the temporal arc of the book, which is very heterogeneous! In 2019, I assembled disparate writings into a manuscript. Some of these stories, such as “Awer” (2015), date back to my MFA years at Bard College. Others were prompted by a commission or an invitation (“E autobiography di un idioma” and “Motherless Tongues” were both commissioned by e-flux, for example). “The Good Daughter” and “Last Days of Sleep” were added once the manuscript was already completed. Both of these date to 2019, a year of life-changing convergences—the death of my father and birth of my son. From 2015 to 2020 the world changed multiple times; in 2016 I moved to New York from Beirut; in 2019, the financial system collapsed in Lebanon, followed by the port explosion a year later. These were (and still are) years of exodus, departure, tremendous loss, both in Lebanon and the region at large. *The Autobiography* is an attempt to put into language, even if tentatively, these personal and historical conjunctures. It loosely chronicles the last few years via specific events as they relate to my experience—living in New York in a gentrified neighbourhood, experiencing the privatized medical system in Lebanon during my father’s illness, reflecting on the loss of inheritance and mother tongues, etc.

**DR:** One of the most compelling aspects of the collection is your complicated relationship to confessional writing; you are clearly drawn to it, but simultaneously resist it, at least in its more conventional forms.

**MA:** I reflect on the history of American confessionalism more explicitly in my current manuscript, *The Other Side*



Setareh Shahbazi, *Antedoom*, 2017. Multimedia installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

of *Freedom*, but I think questions of the first person are already present in *The Autobiography*. One of the assumptions around confessional writing is the conflation of the first person on the page and the life of the author. Writing from life doesn't mean that writing is an unmediated, unfiltered experience. In *The Autobiography*, I draw attention to the technologies of the first person, its various constructs, and the ways in which the self is always in formation. One expects truthfulness or a realistic account of an author's life in an autobiography, but what if an essay was fictional or an autobiography written by someone other than the self? I'm drawn to texts—certain stories by Lydia Davis for example, Renee Gladman's prose, Mieko Kanai's short stories, and of course Jorge Luis Borges—that challenge the literary contract between a reader and author, and shift the "order of things" by refusing the conventions of genre from within.

To return to your question on confessionalism, I feel most free as a writer when I use devices to distance myself from my immediate entanglements without letting go of their

emotional charge or affective realities. In "E Autobiography di un idioma," for example, a language tells of her life, in the first person; where she was born, who she loves, how she became who she is. A language is both shared and collectively formed through larger social, political, and historical forces, while remaining inherently singular to those who speak it.

**DR:** I am particularly interested in the way that your experiments with confessionalism insist on situating the subject within a socio-political and economic context. The timeframe of the book is clearly shaped by the crisis of neoliberalism that has been escalating in the last decade.

**MA:** The self is inevitably shaped by socio-political and economic context, although this context, in the confessional tradition you mention, is often unacknowledged, concealed, or repressed for a variety of reasons. When confessionalism sways towards self-centeredness, it fails to recognize the ways in which the self it is so obsessed with—its freedom and ability to

live—is inherently bound to the collective, or how the precarity and violence of neoliberalism affect us all, albeit to different degrees. In his *Prison Notebooks* (1929–35), Gramsci writes that knowing yourself—“as a product of the historical processes”—is the starting point of any critical consciousness. For him, these historical processes have “deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.” In my writing, I excavate this inventory, which is both subjective *and* inherently historical.

**DR:** In the search for and also the struggle against a mother tongue, the stability of monolingualism, English emerges as a bastard language which allows for an exploration of the self.

**MA:** Yes, English is composed of many other languages and is host to countless dialects. I started writing in English in my early twenties while attending The American University in Rome and learned the basics fairly quickly. But after all these years, I still don’t feel like a native speaker. I struggle with prepositions as well as idioms and expressions that still feel very foreign to me. I often feel lost in English, while accepting the feeling of disorientation and makeshift translations that exist in my prose. I am in fact grateful for English’s capaciousness. I can’t think of any other language that tolerates imperfection as well as it does. There’s an inherent generosity to it, a malleability that lends itself to experimentation historically speaking. Without romanticizing it, I enjoy the way English allows its writers to protest it from within. It is able to do this precisely because of its porosity. Juliana Spahr has a great essay, “There Is No Way of Speaking English,” in which she discusses how modernists like Gertrude Stein were themselves raised in a time of mass migration and multilingualism, which in turn, influenced their literary experiments.

To go back to your question, the navigation of a non-mother tongue enabled me to question the foundational beliefs and nationalistic ideologies of the monolingual mother tongue. In this sense, being multilingual can be a tool of critique as well as an exploration of the richness and frustrations of inhabiting tenuous linguistic identities.

**DR:** I am curious about how you play with languages, English but also others, to show their messy inconsistencies in a way that only the non-native speaker can.

**MA:** On the cover of the book, the title, *The Autobiography of a Language*, is overlaid with the phonetic transliteration of the title in Arabic script. The Arabic title is only legible to a reader with a knowledge of both English and Arabic. I was inspired by Aljamiado, a dialect that used Arabic to write in Spanish, invented by Moors in Spain to communicate in secret. I learned about this script in an essay by Vir Andres Hera published in

*Qalqalah* magazine.<sup>1</sup> I am drawn to the invention of scripts that emerge out of necessity but that aren’t considered official languages; being in between languages, in the case of Aljamiado, helped the Moors survive persecution. *The Autobiography* contains stories that use phonetic transliterations of words in Lebanese dialect. I never formally learned Arabic and mainly speak or understand a bastardized Lebanese dialect that sits between multiple languages—the product of both colonization (French) and imperialism (English). My intention isn’t to celebrate bastardization. In fact, so much is missed when the knowledge of a language remains superficial or makeshift, when one doesn’t engage with the depth or internal logic of the language itself. At the same time, “bastard” languages or dialects emerge in response to a situation unfolding in the present and can become immensely creative.

**DR:** It is as if you are conducting an autopsy of language, peeling back its layers, revealing its limitations. There is a real exploration here of the internalness of language.

**MA:** I like how you mention the internalness of language, as if language had an outer body or shell, and an inner body as well—organs, a nervous system, circulatory pathways. There is a piece in the collection titled “The Humanitarians,” that was written for *Antedoom* (2017), an art installation by Berlin-based Iranian artist Setareh Shahbazi, which stages a conversation between a body and its executioner, while discussing histories of defunct militaries. The body is cut open and speaks from its post-mortem condition. The question of how to speak to the dead haunts my writing; what kind of form, language, etc, can travel across realms?

**DR:** Yes, throughout the collection there emerges a need for narrative, as an anchor, in order to give concreteness to extreme experiences, as a means of processing them. This is often in contrast to the frailty and precarity of the body which is failing, degenerating, disappearing throughout.

**MA:** I place a lot of faith in narrative yet also feel suspicious of it. I often think that if I can put something into language and make sense of it, it won’t be as painful. I had a peripatetic childhood, with parents from different countries, and languages and writing came to me as a way of connecting the dots and threading experiences which were not immediately legible to me. I place a strong sense of faith in the possibility of articulation while acknowledging its limits. My mother fell ill when I was thirteen, and although our lives were organized around it, her illness was never openly addressed. I remember how tremendous her death felt to me, like a radical shift in the nature of reality. I had to find language to talk about this rupture, yet still acknowledging the incommensurability of my experience. Becoming a writer was a way of filling in these gaps while knowing that any attempt to mend a wound with words is bound to fail. Narrative emerges from

embodied experiences while also claiming to transcend the very materiality from which it emerges, which presents an interesting paradox. How can writing be pushed to edges where its own liberation from conventions threatens its dissolutions while retaining a certain cohesiveness?

*Mirene Arsanios's The Autobiography of a Language: Essays and Stories (2022) is published by Futurepoem.*

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**Mirene Arsanios** is the author of the short story collection, *The City Outside the Sentence* (Ashkal Alwan, 2015), *Notes on Mother Tongues* (UDP, 2019), and more recently, *The Autobiography of a Language* (Futurepoem, 2022). She has contributed essays and short stories to *e-flux journal*, *Vida*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *LitHub*, and *Guernica*, among others. Her writing was featured collaboratively at the Sharjah Biennial (2017) and Venice Biennial (2017), as well as in various artist books and projects. Arsanios co-founded the collective 98weeks Research Project in Beirut and is the founding editor of , a bilingual English/Arabic magazine for innovative writing. She teaches at Pratt Institute and holds an MFA in Writing from the Milton Avery Graduate School for the Arts at Bard College. With Rachel Valinsky, she coordinated the Friday nights reading series at the Poetry Project from 2017-19. She lives and works in Brooklyn.

**Dina Ramadan** is Continuing Associate Professor of Human Rights and Middle Eastern Studies at Bard College and Faculty at the Center for Curatorial Studies.

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Vir Andres Hera, "Pyramidal  
پيراميدال", *Qalqayah* (2020), ht  
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