



Platform 008

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## INTERVIEWS

### Forensic Transgressions

Mariam Monalisa Gharavi in conversation with Mirene Arsenios



Leung Chi Wo, *I'm still me even after all that's happened*, 2012. Photograph.  
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Maryam Monalisa Gharavi's work gathers the complexity and nuance often present in histories of migration and displacement – histories that force a particular attention to the conditions and uses of language, its ideology, and its poetry – and she approaches these issues, directly or indirectly, through writing (poetry, essays, critical writing) and visual art (film/ videos, performance, installation). Since 2009, she has maintained a blog called 'South/South', which is now hosted at *The New Inquiry*, where she is also an editor. Two books, *American Letters* (Zero Books, 2015), a collection of epistolary fiction and *Algaravias: Echo Chamber* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2016), a literary translation, are forthcoming.

**Mirene Arsanios:** In 2009, in Rio de Janeiro, you started a blog called 'South/ South', which was transplanted to *The New Inquiry* in 2012. Can you briefly introduce 'South/ South' and what prompted it?

**Maryam Monalisa Gharavi:** 'South/South' is a crossing point for several ideas. At its broadest it allows for an extended questioning and critique of the dominance of western universalism. There are many 'Souths', inclusive of – but not limited to – the nations of the Global South and the southern hemisphere, and the American South. Their autonomous cultures are undervalued. Their systems of knowledge are undervalued. Their connectedness to each other is undervalued. The spirit of address is solidarity or speaking nearby and never far. But there is no single approach in style or content at all except that the concerns of those on the receiving end of big-scale '-isms', like imperialism and colonialism, is an animator. I don't believe in harbouring illusions about power.

'South/South' started when I was doing dissertation research for one year in Brazil. There are so many restrictions on a form like a dissertation. The soul constantly tries to escape its rigid planks. Everything else becomes interesting! But I had a long-standing interest in the way political and material life zigzag in and out of each other, and the blog became an open space of thought for that. For example, I think the very first post was about these new walls or so-called eco-security barriers being constructed around several favelas in Rio. The connection to walls elsewhere was so obvious that the residents of these communities dubbed theirs the 'Gaza wall'. Well, this connection is already interesting at a surface level. What I became affected by was the nature of what sustained all of this. There's the idea of a wall, and secondarily the way that idea is marketed and sold, but there's also an indivisible material and aesthetic life belonging to it. And there's a whole historical legacy dating back at least to Roman law that informs separation and security today.

But the blog is a starting point, an open repository where a lot of my ideas first take shape. It happened spontaneously and without any ambition, and I have let it evolve as it has needed to.

**MA:** You recently translated a book of poetry by Waly Salomão, a Syrian-Brazilian poet. Can you say more about *Algaravias: Echo Chamber*, and what led you to Portuguese?

**MMG:** I first learned about Waly Salomão while living in Brazil as a student. The university was the least interesting part of the experience, since no one seemed very happy to be there and the material wasn't interesting. We had a mandatory Portuguese class – which turned out to be otherwise useless – with an assignment to present the work of an important Brazilian of the twentieth century. At the time, I was renting a room from a Brazilian woman whose husband was a literature professor before he died, and she offered Salomão as a subject of study. I was instantly drawn to his poetry, and ended up tracing his footsteps all over the bookstores and public squares of Rio de Janeiro where he would give huge outdoor readings. Poetry quite literally stopped traffic at the time.

There was something vibrant in Salomão's work that drew people in, even though he was also accused of writing too intellectually. In any case, I gave this little presentation on him and the Portuguese teacher hated it. She was absolutely livid I had chosen someone who wasn't an emblem of true 'Brazilianness' in the same way that Ronaldo, the soccer player, or Gisele Bündchen, the model, were. If I recall, she threatened to fail me. But that early encounter cinched closeness to Salomão's work and history for the next decade, not least of all because he died suddenly a few blocks from the apartment I was renting just before I was set to meet him. I couldn't

have known at the time that tracing his trajectory would take me as far as Arwad, Syria's only island, which was his father's ancestral home.

*Algaravias: Echo Chamber* took its title from the derogatory word that the Spanish called the 'cackle' of the Arabs. It's also the name of a plant known for messy branches. That a first-generation Brazilian experimental poet reclaimed and subverted the corrupting cackle from Iberian xenophobia struck me as noteworthy. And it was a shift away from how Romantic and Modernist and even Tropicalist poets had imagined the 'Orient'. I was drawn to how Salomão's poetic style was enlivened by this history that both included him but was much bigger than him, and that he never used it reductively or simplistically or vaingloriously. He did a lot of other things, too. His day job as a lyricist kept his kids fed. He wrote other books, and was part of a group of artists that transformed art in Brazil. But that book in particular stuck with me.

**MA:** In 'Jet-Lagged Poem', Salomão ponders departure and arrival: 'To travel, for what and where to/ if we become unhappier/ upon return?' In 'My Algeriance', Cixous says: 'I have said elsewhere that when I departed, it was a pure departure: without return and without arrival; I departed...I went to France without thinking about it: I went to non-Algeria. So that when I arrived in France, I did not find myself there, I did not arrive there. What is more I have never managed to arrive in France.' 'Jet-Lagged Poem' stalls in a zone between here and there, the virtual and the physical. Can you say more on that in-between?

**MMG:** Salomão lived through several military regimes in Brazil. Those years were rife with the contradictions of political authoritarianism: the isolating and dogmatic nature to the dictatorship on the one hand, and aggressively optimistic efforts at 'modernization' at all costs on the other. That contradiction played itself out in ways that are familiar to us. We have an idea of what it's like to live through periods of mass social repression *and* networked realities *and* militarized landscapes *and* near-infinite

consumer choices. It's a conjugated and multivalent reality that he's dealing with. There's a proliferation and explosion of choice but a deep and lasting loneliness common to nearly everyone. I don't think it's a coincidence that Salomão's self-described birth as a poet happened while he was imprisoned for marijuana possession. Prison is a stalled zone, as you say. What I find powerful is that for him, the act of searching requires an artist to be still. Stillness and limitation and non-arrival isn't conventionally associated with wild and hellishly beautiful art.



Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, *Sanctuary*, 2014. Film still, 16mm film transferred to video.

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**MA:** Your project *Austerity Abécédaire*, alphabetically redefines a set of words related to finance and economy. *Contract*, for instance:

**contract**

experience-as-text

language that wills itself not to be forgotten

nor erased

anemic division of labor

code and authority faced with petty theft;

or, embargo and prohibition

see also: sanction

*antonym* aphasia

Is translation a contract?

**MMG:** A contract has the force of law behind it. It is a written fiat in which the universal claims to authority become private. The sovereign and the governed privatize among themselves. That's what I meant by an 'anemic division of labor'. So I think translation is the opposite of a contract because the private becomes universal. In the serious encounter with the other, from beyond the realm of common language, something else is happening to the task and labour of translation, beyond the contractual.

**MA:** In your upcoming book *American Letters*, Henry James, Franz Kafka, Frida Kahlo, Luis Buñuel, Federico García Lorca, among others, write letters to or from the United States of America. These letters become a space of projection where the author works out his or her relationship to the American myth via an addressee. Was writing these letters a way to negotiate your own relationship with America?

**MMG:** I'm invested in the fictions America tells itself about itself. That's a given. But I'm rarely thinking about my own particular relationship to it when I'm working on the

book. The epistle allows a very specific point of contact with history. I was intrigued by the urgency and contingency of an authorial presence in letters that is often evaded in formal writing. The real and symbolic power of the United States is transmitted in the exchanges in a highly personal and nuanced way, from the decomposition of Kahlo's miscarried foetus in Detroit to Lorca's witnessing of the decomposing market crash on Wall Street. An outsider looks *in*, and then looks even more inward. The person and the environment are co-constituted. Of course, what I'm writing is fiction. The landscape and scene for each letter is imagined and speculated on. In that sense you could say there's an intractable emotional interior that is close to me.

My method is very forensic – I prefer that to 'objective' – at the beginning. In some cases I'm literally holding the original letters in my hand as I try to conjure the style and pitch and precise tone I need to convey. Beckett's letters are housed at Boston College and you can go and thumb through his Western Union telegrams. It's a mundane thing that becomes surprising and thrilling the more you push forward.

**MA:** Each letter is written in what we imagine to be the voice of the author. The way you ventriloquize a voice, an epoch, and a historical style, is fascinating. When you were writing these letters, who were you addressing them to?

**MMG:** Conceptually the book evokes the reverse of the seal of the United States, *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one) to pose instead, *Ex uno, plures*. Out of one, many.

But I don't write for the many. I don't write for a crowd. My audience is an individual – first myself, but after, an unknown.

**MA:** The relationship between sender and receiver is also one of the premises of *Bio*, a net project in which you erase and re-write the 'bio' portion of Twitter every day for

an entire year. In *Bio*, stored information is made unavailable to the reader. In *American Letters*, the reader is invited to read the letters, but these aren't ultimately addressed to her/ him. Can you talk about the ethic of sending and receiving in these two projects?

**MMG:** That's an intriguing observation. I care about art that looks back at its own frame and form questioningly. If Twitter is, in its most simplistic conception, about communicating and corporate stockpiling in massive data storage centres, then *Bio* is concerned with incommunicability and singularity and material that escapes storage and handling. In the case of *American Letters*, a letter privileges a private, diary-like exchange that's at odds with the public front of an outsider's relationship to a nation or historical entity, and that contrast is of value to me.



Maryam Monalisa Gharavi, *Sanctuary*, 2014. Film still, 16mm film transferred to video.

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**MA:** In his letter (written by you) addressed to Milena Jesenská, Kafka says: 'You ask



why, given the chance to be anything I am not now, I would choose to be an emigrant to America'. In his poem 'Who Am I, Without Exile?' Darwish asks precisely such a question. Kafka's phrasing suggests a negative ontology (*I am not*). Darwish's question is centred on the subject, I am. Can these two different phrasings of an exilic subjectivity still speak to current mass migrations, the one afflicting Syria for instance?

**MMG:** A lot is made over the distinction between 'I' and 'other', and its geopolitical cousin, 'here' and 'there'. I think it's an incredibly reductive and uninteresting distinction. Émile Benveniste, the linguist – who was born in Aleppo, Syria, by the way – thought that the basis for subjectivity was a dialectical relationship. We say 'I' because we know there is a 'you', and we say 'here' because we know there is a 'there'. Our consciousness of these matters is a mutually embedded co-presence of *I, you, here, and there*. Kafka and Darwish are a wonderful pairing because they both intuited this, even though Kafka never left Prague for any meaningful length of time and Darwish was thrown into political exile since the age of seven when his village was occupied and destroyed in 1948.

The condition of being in exile is very specific, and in fact governments depend on that 'case by case' basis when they decide whom to grant asylum. But maybe it's the one condition that inspires universal identification, since otherwise, why would people gasp in recognition at Gregor Samsa, who becomes a stranger in his own home? Why would Darwish's exile narrative be so recognizable to so many, whether or not they have been forcibly evicted from their land?

There are many impossible political scenarios in the world but borders are not one of them. They exist and behave as they do because they serve the powerful, and most people, beyond the limits of knowability in their own lives, grasp this.

**MA:** In your essay 'Neologism: How Words Do Things With Words' (2013), you have a wonderful sentence about English: 'English, on the other hand, skims the surface of language. It clings to elastic forms of artifice like Lycra to polyurethane'. Arabic 'is an ocean – it captures incredible depths. It boasts a root system that is clear and precise in its exacting mathematical beauty'. You also say that if there were an artificial language built for hybridity and neologism, it would look a lot like English. Hybridity, appropriation, mutation, permutation, all positive and emancipatory sounding words, have come to be associated with capitalism, its ability to absorb, rearrange, and repurpose almost everything. In *Austerity Abécédaire*, you tackle English's relationship to imperialism.

### **english**

alternative economic currency

idiom of the call center and

p.a. system

airport default

(who does the totalizing effect of

language serve?)

angelinos who live twenty years without

speaking it

(pennsylvania dutch?)

there are americas

there were holy roman empires

Why write in English? Do you write in other languages too?

**MMG:** English is a loveable monster. José Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagy manifesto in Brazil in the 1920s claimed not entirely satirically that cannibalization of outside and inside influences was the country's greatest strength. There's an analogy there with English. It's the ultimate cannibal. It absorbs, it adapts, it enriches itself. It wants to dominate. Not for nothing it's the language of an empire. But it doesn't and can't prevail in everything.

I was made an immigrant at seven. That choice wasn't mine, it was made for me. So English isn't my mother tongue even if it has become a default primary language. I'm lucky that my parents insisted on Persian at home and whenever they had enough money would send me back to Iran to be raised there in a patchwork way. If I want to write a script in Persian – which I did for the film *Sanctuary* – I do. And after years of training in other languages I can write in them, sometimes competently and often poorly, if I wish to. English is where I feel I can transgress with abandon.

But I don't know if writing creates the immediacy of a relationship with language as much as speaking it. There's the standard cliché about becoming as many people as the languages you speak. There's something to that. You grow larger. Hopefully as your empathy grows so does your humility. And I love that a language can take you somewhere without travel, or when you do travel, a dormant language can reappear

with marginal effort.

**MA:** You're in Palestine working on a new film. What is it about?

**MMG:** It's a single-shot reenactment of a Brazilian film experiment from the 1970s. The original shot is about four minutes, but involves improvised body movement that is quite tricky to remake. I'm working with a choreographer to do a spatial mapping of the body movement, which a dancer will learn and reenact. The relationship between liveness and film is something I've been thinking about for a long time. It has the potential to produce surprise and friction, and I look for both in art. This is the first time I've conceived of remaking or choreographing something that was once spontaneous and improvisational. Reenactment changes the alchemy of what it enacts. The 'original' and 'copy' get transformed in the process. Jérôme Bel, the French dancer and choreographer, called improvisation an overestimated practice, that it's naive to assume freedom and authenticity on the part of an improvised performance. I wonder if laboured improvisation wouldn't be a better way to put it. I was also thinking of Georges Bataille's *acéphale* or headless person, since my performer's head is engulfed. And I was thinking of enclosed, tight spaces. Since I am making this work in Ramallah, and based it here specifically, it is impossible not to feel constriction, even if life at first view appears normal and unfettered.

**Maryam Monalisa Gharavi** is an artist, poet, and theorist born in Tehran, Iran. See Gharavi's translation of 'Jet-Lagged Poem' by Waly Salomão on *Asymptote Journal*, [here](#).

## About the author

### [Mirene Arsanio](#)

Mirene Arsanios's writings have appeared in both arts and literary magazines such as *Bidoun*, *Cura*, *The Rumpus*, *Ink & Coda*, and *Enizagam*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Bard College and runs 98editions, a small Beirut press dedicated to cross-genre writing.