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Translations of Mohamed Sehaba

Yolande G. Schutter

University at Albany, State University of New York, yschutter@albany.edu

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Introduction to the Translations of Mohamed Sehaba

YOLANDE SCHUTTER

Mohamed Sehaba, Algerian poet and cultural journalist, was born in 1952 in Oran. He has published a number of books of poems in Algeria and in Paris throughout his lifetime of writing. Sehaba still currently resides in Oran. The following poems are from his collection *Les chants de l'amant oranais* (L'Harmattan, 2000), translated as *Songs from the Oranais Lover*. These are poems that deal with themes of abandonment, possession and dispossession of nation and language, the power of names and naming, and the choices and tensions inherent in the different possible paths forward for Algeria and its people.

As with many of his contemporary poets, Sehaba never loses sight of his physical surroundings, the beauty and impersonal dangers and forces of the sea, the presence of light, sand, wind, and rivers—even the birds overhead. This environment is braided with memory, human connection and disconnection, the movement and stagnation of time, and the ability and inability for language and poetry to speak to the Algerian (post)colonial condition.

Though hopelessness is threaded throughout his work, Sehaba maintains an openness—to experience, to live, to receive:

We will not leave this country
so long as the wind discovers more names for you
without demanding proof,
so long as the obstacle liberates the bird
and leaves the river to slide across your back.

This openness is inseparable from the capability of language to create possibility:

We had chased them
because they held the words
still tangled with seaweed, with earth
or attached to spears.
[...]
Wake them, since here is yet another force
that the words, where paths cross,
can wrest from the beast
[...]
Let's call them each by their name:
it is us who should still
rub our eyes at their stars,
we the receivers.

This possibility of language to encompass the impossible is furthered one more step by the following translations.

Four Poems

by Mohamed Sehaba

translated by Yolande Schutter

OUVERT CE MONDE

Ouvert ce monde après d'infinis abandons.
Rien que l'isthme froid, rien que la mer
qui lâche tout et n'étreint que le mort.

Ma table est vide. Les minutes ne se redistribuent
ni aux souvenirs, ni aux rendez-vous.

Ouvert le temps qui baille
comme une bouche en dieu,
le temps délivré à ne plus se faire comprendre.

Je me blottis dans mon chemin
pour confondre la mort avec la proche naissance,
je mime l'envol,
mais à vrai dire je vrille dans ma chute.
Rien ne retient.
Je mime la vie,
mais à vrai dire je suis la statue
qui roule vers d'inutiles rivages.

Je vous touche, et vos épaules me sont de sable.
Et cette musique me ronge
sans me rappeler ni femme, ni vin, ni vent:
ma peur s'est frayé une écoute solitaire.

THIS WORLD OPEN

After infinite abandonments this world open.
Nothing but the cold isthmus, nothing but the sea
that abandons everything and embraces only death.

My table is empty. The minutes are not reallocated
to memories, nor to gatherings.

Open is the time that yawns
like the mouth of god,
time relieved of making itself comprehensible.

I huddle in my path
to confound death with impending birth,
I mime flight,
but to tell the truth I twist and turn in my demise.
Nothing holds back.
I mime life,
but to tell the truth I am the statue
that rolls towards useless coastlines.

I touch you, and your shoulders are sand to me.
And this music eats into me
reminding me neither of woman, nor wine, nor wind:
my fear cleared for itself a lonely audience.

CE PAYS

Nous ne quitterons pas ce pays
tant que le vent te découvre encore des noms
sans te demander de preuves,
tant que l'obstacle libère l'oiseau
et laisse la rivière glisser sur le dos.

Qu'avons-nous à redire
sur la nonchalance des jours ici,
sur la langueur des momies,
sur le sable des paroles que le hasard mâche?

Ce n'est pas là que l'enfant dresse le bûcher
à celui qui en nous tremble pour sa clarté.

Notre passé n'a pas de rendez-vous avec les miroirs ici.
Nous n'avons rien à changer sur les chemins.

THIS COUNTRY

We will not leave this country
so long as the wind discovers more names for you
without demanding proof,
so long as the obstacle liberates the bird
and leaves the river to slide across your back.

What do we have to repeat
on the nonchalance of the days here,
on the lassitude of mummies,
on the sand of words¹ chewed by chance?

That is not where the child sets the pyre
for the one who trembles for his clarity inside us.

Our past does not have a meeting with the mirrors here.
We have nothing to change on the paths.

¹ Sehaba uses the French word “parole(s)” throughout his work. It is a difficult word to translate, and I have done so differently depending on the context. Its possible translations include “word”, “promise”, “lyrics”, “speech”, and “speaking”. What is most notable is its inherent bridging of language and orality.

VEILLEURS DANS L'EXIL

Nus et brisés
pour la lumière qu'ils attendent.

Leurs jours nocturnes
passent la nuit ensemble
à se regarder,
à craindre que leurs langues
prennent feu.
La mort vide en secret
la cruche habituelle
et leurs noms dissouts
prennent le large.

Quel métier autre que l'exil
calmerait l'apparition
de leur destin accroché aux ruines?
Quel port au bois encore vivant
où leurs ombres peuvent avant l'aube
se rattraper?²

NIGHTWATCHMEN IN EXILE

Naked and broken
for the light they wait for.

Their nocturnal days
spend the night together
looking at each other,
afraid that their tongues
will catch fire.
Empty death in secret
the habitual idiot
and their disbanded names
take to the open sea.

What job other than exile
would calm the appearance
of their destiny attached to ruins?
Which still-living wooden port
where their shadows could save themselves
before dawn?

² "Se rattraper", which I have translated as "to save oneself", can also mean "to catch up", "to make amends", "to make up for", and "to catch hold of".

LES REVENANTS

Nous les avons chassés
parce qu'ils avaient la parole
encore mêlée d'algues, de terre
ou accrochée aux lances.

Ils dorment à nos portes, recroquevillés,
les messagers que nous avons dépassés
quand nous étions environnés de trop de lumière.

Éveillons-les, car voilà encore une force
que la parole, où les routes se croisent,
peut arracher à la bête
pour nos larmes à la tête levée.

Appelons-les chacun par son nom:
c'est nous qui devons encore
frotter les yeux à leurs étoiles,
nous les recevants.

Écoutons-les qui disent déjà:
"Nous voilà revenus, voilà les miroirs
pour l'orgueil de ne rien tuer."

THE REVENANTS

We had chased them
because they held the words
still tangled with seaweed, with earth
or attached to spears.

They sleep at our doors, hunched,
the messengers that we had overtaken
when we were surrounded by too much light.

Wake them, since here is yet another force
that the words, where paths cross,
can wrest from the beast
for our tears on raised heads.

Let's call them each by their name:
it is us who should still
rub our eyes at their stars,
we the receivers.

Listen to them who say already:
"Here we are returned, here are the mirrors
for pride to kill nothing."

Translator's Note: Mohamed Sehaba's Algériance

Négritude, first coined in its current usage by Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, was part of an effort to define the undefinable, an identity untraceable to its cultural roots due to slavery, violence, and forced migration. Césaire's first major exploration of the concept was in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939):

my negritude is not a stone
 [...]
 my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
 [...]
 it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
 it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky (Césaire 43).

As a friend and colleague of Césaire's, Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor also found the concept of Négritude to be useful to him in understanding his own cultural and sociopolitical identity and history in a (post)colonial continental African context.

Senghor, over the course of his long career, expanded upon the concept of Négritude. First, he did so in order to work through the complexities of long-colonized Black Africa and the myriad of ensuing consequences associated with the (post)colonial condition. But this initial expansion of the term exhibited a glaring absence: what about not-Black Africa? Namely, North Africa?

As Senghor amended his working definition of Négritude, he arrived at a new term altogether: Africanité. Meant to include the non-Black Muslim, Berber, and Judaic communities residing primarily in North Africa, Africanité represented for Senghor a new path forward. In "The Foundations of 'Africanité,' or 'Négritude' and 'Arabité'" (1967), he writes, "If we hope to build a *united Africa*, we must do it solidly and for that we must find it on points of cultural convergence, not on our political differences" (Senghor 168, emphasis his own). Africanité was intended as a path towards the unification of a pan-African identity and the ability of the African continent—and diaspora—to work together amongst themselves, but also to work in a mutually beneficial manner with the European metropole. North Africa was crucial to Senghor in its "mediating role [...] between Europe and Africa, a role that is their ['Arabo-Berber thinkers'] natural vocation" (Senghor 167). This was, for Senghor, the way for Africa, African peoples, and people of African descent to progress towards a productive and harmonious future post-colonization and slavery and take part of the so-called modern world.

Senghor uses *métissage*, often translated as hybridity, to demonstrate this unification. But this coming-together, this "convergence" beyond differences, has proven impossible. In the case of Algeria, its war for independence and its 20th- and 21st-century poets, this type of *métissage* is actually revealed to be dishonest and weak. Senghor's and Césaire's exploration of terms that work to encompass impossible identities, however, developed into many other fruitful forms: Arabité, Berbérité, and, eventually, Algérianité and Algériance.

Hélène Cixous's essay "My Algérie: In Other Words 'To Depart Not to Arrive from Algeria'" (1997) describes her experience in Algeria as a Francophone *pied-noir* of Jewish descent. It is certainly a different experience than that of Francophone Arabic poet Mohamed Sehaba, but it points towards an Algerianness that describes them both. Cixous writes that her experience in Algeria "engendered [a certain writing] that does not settle in, it does not inhabit its house, it escapes, it goes off without turning back" (Cixous). She elaborates: "For a year I felt the ground tremble, the streets repel me, I was sick. Until the day I understood there is no harm, only difficulties, in living in the zone without belonging" (Cixous).

Sehaba, and his poetry, also live within this zone:

Open is the time that yawns
like the mouth of god,
time relieved of making itself comprehensible.

There remains fear, confusion, and loss, but Algérie is not muddled by these complications, rather, it is defined by them. Sehaba describes "exile" as a "job" with the ability to "calm". If Algérie is anything, it is a space of constant exile, a space of translation, of movement and of crossing over.

This translation is a connective tissue between Algeria's past and its potential future: As if there were something stronger than wars, repression, forgetting, resentment, the centuries of misunderstanding, something gentler, more ancient, more immediate, more fleshy, more free, a force independent of all struggle that laughs at championshipings, claims and reproaches, and which I would call Algérie (Cixous).

Sehaba writes

After infinite abandonments this world open.
Nothing but the cold isthmus, nothing but the sea
that abandons everything and embraces only death.

At first, these lines seem hopeless. The world is "open", yes, but it remains abandoned. There is nothing left "but the cold isthmus, nothing but the sea / that abandons everything" so that "only death" is "embrace[d]". But abandonment is also exile, and exile is a space of possibility as well as the condition of Cixous's and Sehaba's Algérie. What is left is "the sea" and "the cold isthmus"—the narrow connection between two larger wholes. The "isthmus" is "cold" but it is also a passage or path whose condition of in-betweenness and translation is its very power: "We have nothing to change on the paths" writes Sehaba.

Sehaba does not seek to answer questions with his poetry, though he asks many. Instead, he uses it to explore his untethered identity. His Algérie, unlike earlier conceptions of Négritude and Africanité from which it has developed, does not seek to bring together beyond difference. Rather, it is difference, "Naked and broken", an "exile" of identity and language, and a passage between—it is itself a translation.

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