

# P A R T I

## Cultural (Un)translatability and Narratives of Identity in Representations of Ibn Rushd/Averroes

Al-Andalus is also Averroes.

—Jabbar Yassin Hussin (*Memorias olvidadas*)

Nothing is translatable.

[. . .]

Everything is translatable.

—Emily Apter (*The Translation Zone*)

We have not finished burying Averroes.

—Abdelfattah Kilito (*La langue d'Adam*)

In a 2006 invited lecture at the University of Guadalajara (Mexico), the Iraqi author Jabbar Yassin Hussin spoke about East–West relations through a focus on al-Andalus. After mentioning the poets Ibn Zaydun and Wallada and the musician Ziryab, Yassin Hussin declared: “al-Andalus is also Averroes” (*Memorias olvidadas* 38). Known in European languages as Averroes, Ibn Rushd truly has a central role in both the cultural history of al-Andalus and twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses about Islam and East–West relations. The twelfth-century Cordoban physician, judge, and philosopher is arguably the Muslim thinker who is equally well known in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although many readers are familiar with his appearance in the Afterlife as depicted by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, Ibn Rushd also enjoys a representational afterlife in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century

Spanish, Latin American, Arab, and Maghrebi cultures. Famous for having written a commentary on Aristotle that reintroduced the latter's ideas in Europe, Averroes/Ibn Rushd is the site of discussions about the plausibility of cultural translation and the material used in various negotiations of identity.

In part I, I analyze the representations of Ibn Rushd in twentieth- and twenty-first-century narrative and dramatic works from the Hispanic and Arab worlds, understood in the broadest sense. This corpus consists of the following six works, the first three of which are the subject of chapter 1 and the remaining three the topic of chapter 2: Jorge Luis Borges's "La busca de Averroes" ("Averroes's Search," 1947), Abdelfattah Kilito's short story "Du balcon d'Averroès" ("Concerning Averroes's Balcony," 2007), Jabbar Yassin Hussin's short story "Yawm Bwinus Ayris" ("The Buenos Aires Day," 2000), Antonio Gala's television screenplay "Averroes" (1985), Yousef Chahine's film *al-Masir* (Destiny, 1997), and 'Izz al-Din al-Madani's play *Shadharat min al-Sira al-Rushdiyya* (Fragments from the Averroan Biography, 2000). I was motivated to find and bring together this group of texts by reading Borges's "La Busca de Averroes"—meaning either, and both, "Averroes's Search" and "The Search for Averroes."<sup>1</sup> Borges's story and its failed search left me feeling uneasy because of its complex relationship to Orientalism, and thus I began to dig deeper into the story and look for other depictions of Ibn Rushd. Ultimately, Borges's search led me to seek the implications that this group of Averroes-centered cultural productions has for cross-cultural representation in general. I found that representations of Ibn Rushd vary greatly in terms of whether they emphasize limitations (versus potential) for meaningful contact between the realms of East versus West and religious versus secular. Similarly, they vary greatly in terms of whether they take Ibn Rushd as the stuff of narratives of identity and truth or as an impetus for deconstructing the concept of truth. My comparative analysis elucidates how questions of translatability are intertwined with Orientalism and narrative constructions of self. Ultimately I argue that narrative constructions of identity and truth are the foundation for the conceptions of (un)translatability that hamper or encourage intercultural communication. To introduce the cultural context and the broader issues at hand, I begin by addressing the place of Ibn Rushd in historical and contemporary discourses.

Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) was born in Cordoba into a family of Muslim legal scholars. He also became a *faqih*, or expert in Islamic law, but his scholarly work covered a range of topics from philosophy and theology to music theory to medicine and astronomy. Ibn Rushd's reception has also been greatly varied. In the medieval period, his work influenced thinkers from Jewish scholar and fellow Cordoban Maimonides to Christian theologian and Scholastic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas. In Europe Ibn Rushd

became most known for his commentaries on the works of Aristotle, which he read in Arabic translations produced by others. Although in the 1200s Aristotelian and Averroist teachings were banned as heretical at the University of Paris, Latin translations of Ibn Rushd's *Commentaries* reintroduced the Greek thinker to Europe and led to the creation of Scholasticism, in which Christian doctrines were analyzed through reason. Thus, Ibn Rushd is often credited with having introduced secularism into Western Europe and paving the way for the European Renaissance.

To this day, in Europe the Andalusí thinker is held up as a symbol of cross-cultural intellectual inquiry. For instance, the *Rencontres d'Averroès* (Averroes Encounters; also known as *Encuentros Averroes* and *Multaqa Ibn Rushd*) is an annual event inaugurated in 1994 that takes place in Marseille, with occasional coordinated events in cities such as Rabat, Beirut, Montreal, and Cordoba. The event features debates, film screenings, musical performances, and book displays meant to foment interchange between academics, journalists, writers, and artists from around the Mediterranean. The political dimensions of such invocations of Ibn Rushd are quite evident in the case of Spain's *Comité Averroes* (Averroes Committee). With the transition to democracy, the Spanish government sought to improve relations with Morocco. But when tensions between the countries intensified, in 1996 the Spanish government responded by convening a group of Spanish and Moroccan leaders from civil society to meet periodically and discuss barriers to mutual understanding and how they could be overcome. This group was named *Comité Averroes*, using the twelfth-century thinker as an icon of tolerance and shared heritage for promoting cross-cultural dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

In Arab and Muslim cultural spheres, although Ibn Rushd still has many detractors and positive allusions to him are not as visible on an official level, in the modern period he has come to be similarly invoked as a sign of secular reform. Ibn Rushd is held in high esteem today as a legal scholar of the Maliki school of Islamic law; however, certain strains of Islam have rejected his ideas.<sup>3</sup> Ibn Rushd opposed the Ash'ari theology championed by al-Ghazali by arguing that humans do have a degree of agency and that rational deduction should be part of all inquiry, including religious inquiry. The polymath promoted a reconciliation of Islamic theology with Aristotelian philosophy, arguing that religion and philosophy are not at odds but are different ways of arriving at the truth. The supporters of al-Ghazali and other Muslim thinkers of Ibn Rushd's day, as well as some Islamists of today, reject Ibn Rushd's work because of his position in support of both faith and reason.<sup>4</sup>

For centuries Ibn Rushd was largely marginalized in the Muslim theological and philosophical tradition, but starting in the mid-nineteenth century he was taken up again by intellectuals of the *Nahda*, or

Arab cultural revival. As thinkers such as Farah Antun (1874–1922) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935) considered how to reconcile understandings of modernity (linked to Europe) and authenticity (linked to Arab and Islamic institutions and practices), they turned to Ibn Rushd as a model who had successfully negotiated different cultural traditions through rationalism. In this way, Ibn Rushd emerged as an icon of sought-after secularism.

Moreover, as Malek Khouri notes in his analysis of Chahine's film on the philosopher, in the Nahda movement that embraced Ibn Rushd, "discussions around the interpretation of the religious text soon expanded to include wider and even more vigorous debates around breaking away from the sanctification of language and written texts in general" (18). These trends have continued in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as Ibn Rushd has remained central to the work of Arabs and Muslims who invoke him and espouse his ideas to promote secularism and rationalism. For instance, the Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought was founded in 1998 to support rationalism and tolerance in the Arab world, and Fawzi al-Najjar reports that in 1992 a group of Egyptian intellectuals founded the Enlightenment Society (Jam'iyat al-Tanwir) and used Ibn Rushd as the basis for a counterattack on Islamists.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Ibn Rushd has been taken up by prominent contemporary philosophers such as Moroccan Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri (1935–2010) and Egyptians Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935) and Muhammad 'Atif al-'Iraqi (b. 1935), who have been controversial among conservative Muslims.<sup>6</sup> The effort to use Ibn Rushd to promote a progressive Islam that is seen as compatible with secularism continues in the work of younger Muslim scholars.<sup>7</sup> Thus, as Nezar Andary puts it, "Ibn Rushd has come to represent much more than his intellectual contributions to philosophy, history, and the social sciences. Ibn Rushd, like al-Andalus itself, becomes synonymous in [ . . . ] contemporary Arab identity with Islamic pride, secularism, and past Arab glories in science, philosophy, and jurisprudence" (108).

All of the Arab and Maghrebi works on Ibn Rushd are connected to this phenomenon in which the scholar, although marginalized within Islamic tradition, is today invoked as a model of bridge building between the Muslim world and other cultures or of progressive Islam.<sup>8</sup> As a bridge figure, Ibn Rushd is a cultural translator; as a champion of progressive Islam, he embodies a spirit of critical inquiry applied to religion, one that often includes the deconstruction of textual authority. In what follows I discuss the intertwined issues of translatability, epistemology (the study of knowledge), and the construction of meaning as pertains to representations of Ibn Rushd.

## CHAPTER 1

# Borges and His Arab Interlocutors

## Orientalism, Translation, and Epistemology

In modern Hispanic and Arab-Maghrebian literature, Ibn Rushd functions as an icon of cultural (un)translatability. The critical work of Emily Apter is helpful for delving deeper into this issue. In *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Apter notes that “As this book unfolded, it became clear that two opposing principles—‘Nothing is translatable’ and ‘Everything is Translatable’—consistently emerge as poles of translation theory” (8). The goal of *The Translation Zone* is to study the role of translation studies in the development of the discipline of comparative literature and consider how, in an age of war and translation technologies, translation studies can be used to redefine comparative literature. In the process, Apter suggests that there is nothing fully translatable or fully untranslatable, but rather there are challenges to the definitions of language and the human subject.<sup>1</sup>

However, in her next book, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Apter promotes the concept of “the untranslatable” as a means to create an alternative history of ideas that foregrounds mistranslation as a sort of creative spark in the face of dominant configurations of world literature. She notes that in the enthusiasm for promoting world literature, broad projects of anthologizing or literary criticism “fall prey inevitably to the tendency to zoom over the speed bumps of untranslatability in the rush to cover ground” (3). Against this tendency, in which world literature functions as the literary analogue to the dominant model of globalization in which Euro-American products (or Euro-American packaged products) have the greatest prestige and Euro-American financial interests have the greatest power, Apter foregrounds untranslatability. Her argument is directed at literary critics and the publishing industry and their packaging of “world literature.” Although critics and avid readers of world literature may gloss over the

filter and barriers of translation and assume legibility, the discourse of a “clash of civilizations” has created a general assumption of verbal translatability but *cultural* untranslatability.

In the context of enduring discourses of a clash of cultures, and specifically religion understood as culture, the opposite danger to that of a hierarchical (literary) globalization (in which meaning is assumed to be transparent across languages and cultures) is the danger of accepting culture clash as inevitable because of the assumption of incommensurability, incongruity, and untranslatability. Furthermore, this sense of incommensurability is largely one-sided: Euro-Americans (i.e., the West) tend to assume that all things “Third World” or Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American are difficult and in some cases impossible to grasp; although they question whether Euro-American ways are translatable to other parts of the world, they assume that a wholesale transference is desirable. Thus, a topic often discussed in the media is whether Western secularism, democracy, and even rationalism can be translated to Muslim cultures. I would like to assert that translatability, understood both as linguistic translation and in the broader sense of cultural commensurability, is, as Apter suggests in *The Translation Zone*, neither possible nor impossible, neither fully porous nor fully foreclosed, but an issue of degrees and emphasis. Furthermore, I argue that what matters most is not determining whether or not ideas are, in the abstract, translatable but how and why translatability is deemed to be hampered or enabled. What are the assumptions and attitudes that underpin understandings of translatability?

As I discuss further on, in Borges’s Averroes story, underlying conceptualizations of reason and radical difference are what create a barrier to translatability. To varying degrees, the texts I examine here all portray a translator and the process of translation, with the works by Borges and Kilito doing so directly and that of Hussin more obliquely. Thus, they are examples of *transmesis*. The term *transmesis* was coined by Thomas Beebee, by fusing *translation* and *mimesis*, to refer to the representation in fiction of translators and the translation process. As explained by Beebee, who draws from the work of Susan Bassnett, the final product of the translation process usually conceals the power dynamics involved in translation’s production of meaning. Beebee refers to the typically obscured zone that lies between the source text and its target language version as “the black box,” the hidden space of transformation. Texts that contain *transmesis* offer a window onto the process and context of translation because the representation of translation “restores context, positionality, and process to translation and interrogates communication, ‘national language,’ and the principle

of equivalence between linguistic utterances” (Beebee 10). Indeed, the three texts discussed in this chapter offer insight into both linguistic and cultural translatability.

### **Borges and the Orient: Searching Averroes**

Although the interest of Argentine literary giant Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) in various facets of the Orient—from South Asia to the Arab world to Islamic mysticism and the Kabbalah—is well known, relatively little scholarly work on his writings has considered it within the context of the critical concept of Orientalism brought to the fore by Edward Said. Throughout Borges’s oeuvre, his keen insights into the workings of identity construction and his deft irony dismantle many essentialisms, but as I detailed in *Between Argentines and Arabs*, certain ambiguities remain in his representations of the Arab world and Islam, and especially of Arab, Muslim, and Druze immigrants in Argentina.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to some of Borges’s other works, the story “La busca de Averroes” can seem like a clear indictment of Orientalism *avant la lettre*. This 1947 story features a surprise twist epilogue that uses metafiction to point specifically to the construction of the Orient as a process that reveals more about the identity of the constructor than it does about the Orient. Although this story faces head-on the constructedness of the Orient and presents a meditation on the possibility of representing a historical figure from the medieval Islamic world, problematic essentialisms remain. On one hand, an Orientalist conception of Islam lingers; on the other hand, the abandonment of any hope of knowing the other—that is, of any possibility of cross-cultural contact—creates a representational and existential impasse.

Borges’s story ambiguously positions Averroes as both commentator and translator of Aristotle, although the historical Ibn Rushd wrote a commentary based on another scholar’s translation of Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> The positioning of Averroes as Aristotle’s translator and not just “interpreter” (in the broader sense), allows Borges to present the issues of cultural contact through the concrete example of a troubled linguistic translation and allows for revealing transmesism. The story portrays the supposed scholar-translator as he works on a philosophical treatise and is disturbed by an unresolved question in another work in progress: his *Commentaries* on Aristotle. Ironically, as Ibn Rushd engages in the first work in a debate about whether divinity discerns only the general, species-wide laws of the universe or also those that have to do with the individual, in the second work his intellect is restricted by the principles of his specific cultural sphere. Averroes is perturbed by a philological

problem in his commentary on Aristotle: the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*. As the narrator puts it: “no one in the sphere of Islam could conjecture what they meant [. . .] These two arcane words pullulated throughout the text of the *Poetics*; it was impossible to elude them.”<sup>4</sup> No doubt following the lead of French Orientalist Ernest Renan, whose study of Averroes Borges quotes in his epigraph, Borges bases his story on the now debunked idea that medieval Arab culture had no live, nonreligious theater.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he foregrounds “the sphere of Islam,” portrayed as an impermeable and isolated civilization, not taking into account the reality of Muslim societies’ contact with various cultural traditions, especially in medieval Iberia.

Within this closed sphere, Averroes spends the time of the afternoon siesta writing. As he writes, he is still able to feel, as a sensation of well-being, the house that surrounds him. The uninvolved, third-person narrator, trusting in biological determinism, states that Averroes enjoys the sound of the murmuring fountain because “something in the flesh of Averroes, whose ancestors came from the Arabian deserts, was thankful for the constancy of the water.”<sup>6</sup> Averroes has taken upon himself the project of interpreting Aristotle, and this goal arouses in the narrator both admiration and pity. The narrator describes Averroes’s work in the following way: “Few things more beautiful and more pathetic are recorded in history than this Arab physician’s dedication to the thoughts of a man separated from him by fourteen centuries; to the intrinsic difficulties we should add that Averroes, ignorant of Syriac and of Greek, was working with a translation of a translation” (149 [94–95]). This one sentence conveys, on one hand, the narrator’s attitude of superiority toward Averroes, whom he considers equally admirable and pitiable, and, on the other hand, hints at the links between the medieval writer and the narrating writer who, centuries later and through other linguistic filters, attempts to represent his predecessor.

Dramatic irony intensifies the pathos surrounding Averroes as well as the tone of superiority. Twice he is offered the key to understanding Aristotle’s puzzling terms, but he is unable to take hold of it. First, looking out from his enclosed balcony, he sees three children playing: they are acting out the roles of muezzin, minaret, and congregation. But Averroes does not take note of the small-scale theatrical performance before him. Later, he goes to dinner at the house of a Quranic scholar, Farach, and is part of a conversation in which the traveler, Abulcásim, recounts having seen a play in a theater in China. At first Farach thinks these people—the actors—that Abulcásim is describing were insane, and Abulcásim attempts to explain, to no avail, that these people were telling a story through actions and words. Farach responds: “In that



case, [...] twenty persons are unnecessary. One single speaker can tell anything, no matter how complicated it might be.' Everyone approved this dictum" (153 [99–100]). Among those who agree is Averroes, who does not so much as suspect that what this traveler saw is the key to those enigmatic terms *tragedy* and *comedy*.

The topic of conversation between Farach, Abulcásim, and Averroes immediately shifts to high praise for the Arabic language and differing opinions about Arabic poetry. Only at this point does Averroes take an active interest in the discussion. He defends traditional Arabic poetry against innovation using the reasoning that "Time broadens the scope of verses and I know some which, like music, *are everything for all men*. Thus, when I was tormented years ago in Marrakesh by memories of Cordova, I took pleasure in repeating the apostrophe Abdurrahman addressed in the gardens of Ruzafa to an African palm" (154, emphasis added [102–3]). In arguing for the universalism of classical texts, Averroes adds that the writings of the ancients and the Quran contain all poetry, and he diminishes the worth of attempts to innovate. The others listen with pleasure to this vindication of tradition. Ironically placing too much faith in the core texts of his religious and cultural tradition, as well as in the notion of universalism, later that night Averroes erroneously thinks that he has arrived at the meaning of those two troubling words: "With firm and careful calligraphy he added these lines to the manuscript: 'Aristu (Aristotle) gives the name of tragedy to panegyrics and that of comedy to satires and anathemas. Admirable tragedies and comedies abound in the pages of the Koran and in the *mohalacas* of the sanctuary" (155 [103]).<sup>7</sup>

In the next paragraph, the narrator, speaking from the first person for the first time and thus inserting himself in the narrative, describes Averroes looking into a mirror before going to bed. Pointing to the mediated nature of all of his knowledge about the Cordoban philosopher, the narrator states: "I do not know what his eyes saw, because no historian has ever described the forms of his face" (155 [103]). The narrator immediately continues with something about which he is certain: "I do know that he disappeared suddenly" (155 [103]). Averroes and all those people and things surrounding him in this story abruptly disappear, and it is not until the next paragraph that the reader understands why.

In the final paragraph, separated by a few spaces, the narrator explains how he decided to write about Averroes and what his objective was in doing so: "In the foregoing story, I tried to narrate the process of a defeat" (155 [103]). The narrator recounts how various historical figures that experienced failure came to his mind and how he decided that the case of someone who chose to take on a challenge that was impossible for him, but would not have been for others, was

“more poetic” (155 [104]). It was then that he “remembered Averroes who, closed within the orb of Islam, could never know the meaning of the terms *tragedy* and *comedy*” (155 [104]). Then the narrator, with great situational irony, goes on to reflect on the process of narrating this story about Averroes:

as I went along [. . .] I felt that the work was mocking me. I felt that Averroes, wanting to imagine what a drama is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, wanting to imagine Averroes with no other sources than a few fragments from Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my narration was a symbol of the man I was as I wrote it and that, in order to compose that narration, I had to be that man and, in order to be that man, I had to compose that narration, and so on to infinity. (The moment I cease to believe in him, “Averroes” disappears). (155 [104])

In one sense, we have here a poignant realization that one can never fully “know” the Other, and that in trying to do so one is likely to produce a testament to who one is at that moment. Long before the critiques of Abdel-Malek and Tibawi in the 1960s and that of Said in 1978,<sup>8</sup> here Borges points out that often when the Other is “represented” what is really re-presented is the self.

The narrator no longer believes in his ability to know and therefore represent the Other. However, his evaluation of what limits Averroes’s insight remains unchanged, as demonstrated by the recurrence in the first-person epilogue of the phrase “encerrado en el ámbito del Islam”—enclosed or locked within the sphere of Islam. In addition, Borges’s response to his realization—to stop writing about Ibn Rushd—establishes attempts at knowing the other not only as complex and slippery but as futile. By pointing to the textual mediation that is the author’s only channel of access to Averroes, the story rejects the Enlightenment paradigm centered on seeing and knowledge that rests on the assumption that knowing is a transparent, unmediated process. However, it is a limited rejection. First, comprehension through vision is still crucial: the inability to see Averroes’s face through reliance on the existing archive causes the tale to come to a halt. Second, the Borges figure who speaks in the final paragraph maintains his position as knowing subject because he is aware of this mediation and does not duplicate Averroes’s error. Even with the limited rejection of a traditional rational-empirical epistemology, the story offers no alternative way of knowing. Borges’s Averroes simply ceases to exist. Thus, in “La busca de Averroes” cross-cultural representation, rather than stereotypical or objective, is simply impossible, and any attempt at

it only mocks the author. In this way, meaning about the Other emerges as not only infinitely contingent and subjective but simply unachievable.

The narrator's acknowledgment of the unknowability of self and Other posits an infinitely other Other—different cultures that are mutually unintelligible. The two poles create a hall of mirrors that reflect each other “to infinity.”<sup>9</sup> Such a conceptualization makes any cultural translation impossible. Although it is one thing to say that our knowledge of ourselves and of others is built on mistranslated images and translations of translations and is circumscribed by our cultural environments, it is quite another to say that there is absolutely no way to craft even tentative translations and decentered representations.

Many scholarly works have examined Borges's “La busca de Averroes,” with most of them arriving at a version of one of the following conclusions: language and culture are untranslatable (e.g., Daniel Balderston and John Stewart), or (mis)translation is a source of innovation (e.g., Dominique Jullien and Sergio Waisman).<sup>10</sup> However, none of these critical assessments notes the underlying Orientalist bias in the story. In a nutshell, the Borges figure in the story becomes enlightened regarding his limitations, but Averroes never does. The narrator and the Borges figure who speaks in the epilogue try to pick apart the process of the construction of knowledge about the Other, but ironically they remain within the unquestioned position of Western knowing subject, while the “Averroes” that they realize is only a fiction disappears before any moment of insight.

Stewart and Balderston see the story as a commentary on particularity or cultural difference. Stewart in particular latches on to the principle of linguistic relativity popularly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This principle maintains that the structure of a language influences or even determines how its speakers conceive of the world. Stewart takes it to its furthest extent, one with a nihilistic outlook: “The short story presents us with a thesis about the intimate connection between culture and language and the ultimate futility of translation and crosscultural knowledge and comprehension” (321). As Stewart notes, “Borges anticipates many of the most celebrated epistemological and hermeneutical theories of our day” (321), but those theories do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that efforts at cross-cultural communication are pointless, and interpretations of them as such have met with a great deal of debate regarding the ethical and pragmatic implications of such a stance. Though language certainly mediates and circumscribes thought, efforts at intercultural communication need not halt; rather, they should proceed with an awareness of the complexities at hand. These complexities include essentialisms and hierarchies inherited from imperial mind-sets, that is, Orientalism. Yet Stewart

accepts without question the narrative of radical difference in “La busca”: “There Borges reconstructs for us a culture and an age radically different and temporally distant from our own” (320).

Concerned with the relationship between Borges and theory, Balderston argues that “La busca” tells of the impossibility of theory, of generalizing principles. As part of this, he notes that “Averroes’s disappearance before the mirror signal[s] the failure of the narrator’s imagination” (205). Indeed, in a sense the story demonstrates the limitations of rationalism. Borges’s “La busca de Averroes” presents Ibn Rushd as the consummate rationalist whose rationalism fails him. Logical deduction does not serve this Averroes. Furthermore, the Borges figure who speaks in the epilogue is restricted to rational means of constructing meaning, but the rational approach also fails him in his quest toward an understanding of Averroes. As I explain shortly, the works by Kilito and Hussin suggest that the irrationality of dreams and the sense perceptions created by imagination are needed to complete what rational methods alone cannot attain.

In her essay on the idea of the conceptual framework in “La busca de Averroes,” Dapía argues that rather than posit an unsurmountable difference between cultures, in this story Borges is commenting on the difference between Platonic and Aristotelian paradigms. That is, in Borges’s view, the difference between a belief in abstract concepts and general categories as realities that order the universe versus a schema in which particular phenomena are the basis for knowledge. Although some elements of Dapía’s argument have merits, overall I find it unconvincing because it downplays the Orientalism of the first part of the story and the impact of the second part, in which the narrator makes his presence—and his failure—known. Dapía is right to point to the fact that Abulcásim’s description of the theatrical performance he saw in China proves that the cultures at hand are not sealed off from one another. Yet only one of the group, the one who saw it firsthand with the help of a local merchant’s explanation, is able to grasp the concept of theater. Moreover, some of those assembled at this gathering consider Abulcásim to be a disbeliever. This suggests that only someone who has left Islam behind can comprehend unfamiliar cultural forms.

Jullien and Waisman consider Borges’s Averroes story within the framework of translation as a creative process. Jullien observes that “La busca” exhibits an attitude toward translation that is different than that of Borges’s other writings. She notes the difference between the stance Borges takes toward translation in essays such as “Las versiones homéricas” (1932) and “Los traductores de las 1001 noches” (1936) and that which he presents in “La busca.” The two essays

celebrate translation and even mistranslation as a creative act that produces multiple versions, each of which is a worthy innovation. Jullien argues that, in contrast, the story about Averroes “conveys a far more paradoxical, ambiguous, and melancholy view than the triumphant cosmopolitanism prevalent in those essays” (210). In sharp contrast with his attitude toward translation in his other writings, in “La busca,” instead of considering Averroes’s commentary on Aristotle as an inventive version of *Poetics* that paradoxically had greater impact in Europe than correct translations of the same Greek text,<sup>11</sup> Borges portrays Iberian Muslim culture as a closed, dogmatic sphere and focuses on the lacunae in Averroes’s scholarly work, which he describes as a case of “defeat” (“una derrota” [103]). Within Jullien’s reading of the somber attitude toward cultural difference in the story, she comments on the narrator’s reference to a red-haired slave who is harassed by the other slave women: “In this story of cultural miscommunication, the slave takes on a symbolic function, as her obvious physical difference (red hair) and probably cultural difference leads to rejection and persecution by the other women” (212). The story’s reference to the slave is left as a loose end, an unresolved difference parallel to those between Averroes and Aristotle and between the writer figure and Averroes.

Jullien points to the fact that Borges wrote the piece on Averroes soon after World War II and suggests that the historical moment accounts for the much bleaker attitude found in this story (213–214). I would add that in Argentina, where Borges was earning his living as a cataloger in a branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library, Juan Perón came to power a little more than a year before the Averroes story was published. Borges had already made a public statement against fascism within Argentina when Perón was elected president in February 1946. That same year, Perón essentially fired Borges by “promoting” him from his post in the library to that of poultry inspector for the Municipal Market, a position Borges declined. Thus, the year preceding the publication of “La busca de Averroes” was one in which Borges noted the mounting fascism of his country and began to experience political harassment.

Although the historical moment may well be a key factor in the story’s negative outlook, I propose that another question remains: why, at that moment and with that defeated attitude toward cross-cultural communication, did Borges choose to present his ideas via a figure from the Arab Islamic world? Given the way the Orient functions in many of his other works, I interpret the recourse to Averroes as a utilization and reinscription of the Orient as the locus of ultimate difference. In “La busca de Averroes,” the Orient is not only nearly beyond the rational and the real (as is the case in “Abenjacán” as well) but it is actually outside

of the limits of the knowable, of that which can be known empirically and rationally. In this text, the Oriental subject and his Other are unable to understand each other—they are each locked in their own cultural logic. Thus, as occurs in other Orient-themed texts by Borges, the Orient functions as a figure for absolute difference. Even within the setting of al-Andalus, famed for its East-West cultural contact or *convivencia*, the impermeability or untranslatability of Muslim cultures prevails.

In *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*, Sergio Waisman examines various works in Borges's oeuvre—including fiction, essay, and translation—and argues that for Borges translation was a creative act in which the cultural distance of his location in the periphery (vis-à-vis Europe) allowed for irreverence and insight.<sup>12</sup> Here the term *periphery* requires further explanation. Among Latin American countries, Argentina in particular has a complex relationship with Europe. Argentina was a site of settler colonialism in which the indigenous population was nearly annihilated and, from the vantage point of the urban center of Buenos Aires, is often conceived of as nonexistent, other, or inferior. In addition, large-scale European immigration occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For these reasons, Argentine and especially urban Buenos Aires-based identities have been built on the notion of a transplantation of European culture. The crafting of Argentine identity is a matter of negotiation between identification with the center (Europe) and promotion of a specifically Argentine culture through attention to the elements of indigenous and especially colonial-based (*criollo*) ways. Furthermore, as Waisman notes, though Borges was certainly involved in the exploration of Argentine identity and expression, his upbringing, with a British grandmother and nanny and a decade of his youth spent in Geneva and other Continental cities, was highly European (28–29). Waisman proposes, then, that the periphery “is not only geopolitical, but also—and especially for Borges—a theoretical space delineated to challenge many of our basic suppositions about translation and literature” (13). Building on this conceptualization of the periphery, Waisman contends that “Borges narrates a story of defeat, while paradoxically demonstrating the value of otherness itself. Articulated from Borges's periphery, the text seeks to account for the distances between Aristotle, Averroes, and Borges *not* by correcting or denying difference, but by engaging in highly productive processes of rereading/rewriting/mistranslating” (125).

However, Waisman's argument regarding the insights afforded by peripheral status does not hold for the specific case of “La busca de Averroes.” Beatriz Sarlo's assessment of Borges's cultural position between cosmopolitanism and Argentineness is apropos here. Sarlo notes,

regarding Borges's oeuvre: "there is a tension in it caused by mixing with, and feeling a nostalgia for, a European culture which can never wholly offer an alternative cultural base. At the heart of Borges' work, there lies a conflict" (3-4). In this particular story, although the tensions that Sarlo identifies and Waisman names as "Borges' periphery" lead to the contesting of some suppositions regarding translation, culture, and knowledge, those same tensions create a stumbling block for the challenging of other suppositions. If difference allows for irreverence and insight, in "La busca" that only works when the subject is positioned in an Occidental Argentina, like the narrator who reaches insight into identity construction at the end of "La busca." The narrator knows that he can only approach Averroes through the writings of other scholars, but in contrast, Averroes is convinced that he has understood Aristotle's text. For this reason, in the Borges story, Averroes—though acknowledged to be fictional—remains pathetic, and his illumination cannot even be imagined. Averroes remains culturally constrained because the authorial voice, by knowing more than Averroes, attains knowledge and thus power. The emphasis on the authority (in both meanings of the word) of the speaking subject in the final sentence of the story—"(The moment I cease to believe in him, 'Averroes' disappears.)"—makes it clear that the fictional Averroes, precisely because he is imagined as having culturally conditioned ignorance, serves as a means to attain whatever modicum of knowing power is left to the author figure.

In Ian Almond's essay on the representation of Islam in Borges's writings, he contends, with contradictory arguments, that "La busca de Averroes" represents a departure from the Orientalism of Borges's oeuvre. Almond argues that in all of Borges's texts that treat Islam, Islam is linked to failure and restriction and that in some of his works, there is also an underlying fear of Islam. He then presents "La busca de Averroes" as the final result of Borges's evolution away from Orientalist conceptions of Islam and the "East." Almond contends that "The various tones with which Borges addresses his Islamic content differs from story to story; observed and interpreted in the correct order, the dozen stories concerning Islam that Borges wrote between 1933 and 1956 show an increasing awareness of the complexities involved in writing about a collection of metaphors such as 'Islam'" (436). In this passage, Almond clearly espouses the idea that there is a "correct" (and by extension an "incorrect") order in which to read Borges's works. Here and elsewhere in his essay he uses the "correct" reading to try to establish a narrative in which this story is an end point, an arrival in a process of linear development: "It is a key moment in the evolution of Borges's relationship to the Islamic Orient, a final realization of the fictitious

foundations and illusory claims of the Orientalist project” (Almond 451); “Borges’s abrupt breaking-off of the tale in ‘Averroes’ Search’ would, in this sense, be the culmination of an increasing discomfort with Orientalism in general, a ‘coming clean’ as it were with the impossibility of writing about that which we are not” (Almond 453). I disagree with this assessment of the story for two main reasons. First, there is not much of a coming clean because a view of the Muslim world as radically Other persists in the story’s epilogue. Second, the Borges figure that appears in the epilogue is not in fact in the same position as Averroes; rather, he has enough insight to know that he cannot fully know the subject of his inquiry. This very insight, to which Averroes does not have access, allows the speaker to attain a sense of control over the radical alterity that he perceives.

Referring to the various layers of translation and textual mediation in the story (Aristotle-Averroes-Renan-Borges—the reader), Waisman asserts that “the process of translation between each of these simultaneously fails *and* succeeds; it succeeds to the extent that it is undertaken knowing that it will fail” (143). Nonetheless, at least one of the figures in the story’s sequence of mediations—Averroes, marked as he is by extreme difference—does not know that he will fail. Waisman explains that the process of the search—that is, the attempt at translation—constitutes each figure’s identity and refers to “the disappearance of the narrator once he ceases to think about Averroes” (144); however, it is not the narrator who disappears at the end of the story but rather Averroes because he is only a construct in the narrator’s mind and is ultimately inaccessible. Waisman concludes his analysis of “La busca” by describing the hermetic process of the story as one characterized by “failure” but also by “opening, through rereading and mistranslation, which resists closure” (146). Yet given Averroes’s exclusion from the process of insight and the awareness of failure, he is limited to closure.

As seen, since his own era Ibn Rushd has been known as a champion of rationalism, and today he is held as a model of Muslim secularism and/or progressive Islam among many Arabs and Muslims. Ironically, Borges took Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, as an example of a person tragically limited by his religious worldview and as a site for the realization that we are all circumscribed by our cultural sphere and our pursuit of self-definition. To whatever extent Borges’s reflection on Ibn Rushd undoes conventional conceptions of the formation of identity and knowledge of the Orient, ultimately it also re-creates some fixed ideas about the Orient and Otherness. “La busca de Averroes” leaves the reader with a conception of the Muslim world as a nearly hermetically closed sphere—that is, as the site of ultimate difference—and without any hope



of being able to connect with the Other. In sum, rather than point to the difficulties and complexities involved in contact between all cultures, the story closes any possibility of making meaning across the specific cultures and languages of “East” and “West.” It posits a void in the realm of signification and particularly signification between the Arabo-Islamic and the Christian Euro-American worlds. Moreover, it places the Euro-Argentine writer (the Borges who speaks in the epilogue) in the position of the knowing subject: he becomes aware of the limits to his knowledge and cuts off his story, but retains the position of mastery in that he knows more than Averroes. The perceived radical Otherness of “the East” leads to radical untranslatability. In Borges’s story, the champion of reason is not able to harness reason but lies just outside of “Western” reason. The ultimate irony of “La busca” is that while the author figure in the story is aware of the mediation of language and cultural difference, he is unaware or uncritical of Orientalist assumptions and the narratives of identity it thrives on and supports.

### **Ibn Rushd on His Balcony: Owning Language and Translating Identity**

A short story by well-known Moroccan writer and literary critic Abdelfattah Kilito [‘Abd al-Fattah Kilitu] (b. 1945) brings fragmented, self-conscious narrative, postcolonial language and identity politics, and the construction of meaning together with the balcony that Borges imagined for Averroes. In his 2007 story “Du balcon d’Averroès” (“Concerning Averroes’s Balcony”), Kilito engages in a subtle yet clear literary dialogue with Borges’s “La busca de Averroes.” To begin with, the title of Kilito’s story is a direct reference to the scene in Borges’s story in which Averroes goes out on his balcony overlooking the street, a scene that Kilito references in the body of his story. In addition, the crafting of the narrator in Kilito’s story is very Borgesian: the narrator is an unnamed “I” that speaks with the persona of Kilito and muses about an epistemological conundrum. In the case of Kilito’s text, the conundrum centers on a semantically rich yet oxymoronic phrase about language that Kilito-the-narrator heard in a dream, uttered by none other than Averroes. Through various digressions and references to the retelling of dreams as a tedious story genre, the essay-like text presents the narrator’s search for the meaning of the enigmatic phrase that came to him in a dream. Given that the phrase challenges concepts of ownership and belonging as related to language and that the other person who appears in the dream is Kilito’s translator into Arabic, who engages in various forms of language-based identity politics, I propose that the story uses Averroes, as a representative of classical Arab philosophy

and al-Andalus, to meditate on the absurdities of language and identity politics specifically in modern-day North Africa.

Since the late 1980s, there has been growing scholarly interest in the intersection between translation studies and postcolonial studies. One of the works to come out of this type of inquiry is Douglas Robinson's *Translation and Empire* (1997). Robinson points to three roles translation has had in the colonial context: instrument of conquest, notable site for cultural inequalities, and conduit for decolonization and postcolonial writing. Beebee explains the centrality of translation in colonization as follows:

Colonization [. . .] is the largest and most visible cultural and historical surround for translation practices, and one that impels some of its subjects toward conversion through translation. Conversion is a word that—like translation—in English originally referred to a physical or somatic change (and which still does so in the case of inanimate objects, such as a house or car engine), but which also invokes a mental one, such as beliefs about the divine world and the afterlife, or indicates the exchange of one cultural mazeway for another. Translation becomes a hermeneutic exploration of the truth of conversion. (16)

Though mental conversion, or transculturation, gives way to a variety of strategies of expression, such as code switching and polyglossia, the strategy of transmesis (the representation of translation) is of particular significance. In multilingual postcolonial contexts the use of one language versus another and the ways languages are brought together are part of political and cultural power dynamics. Within such contexts, through transmesis “one can report on the subaltern language via the dominant one through translational backformation, the appearance of translators as characters, and other devices” (3–4). The “translational backformation” includes items otherwise hidden in the black box of translation such as socioeconomic power differentials.

Beebee argues that authors from postcolonial contexts have a tendency to use transmesis because it is a vehicle for postcolonial reason (16). In a process that is analogous to that of the textual translator, the postcolonial writer transfers his or her culture to other linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic norms. Thus, when representing translation in postcolonial contexts, postcolonial writers are representing not only the act of translation but also the act of cultural translation that is tantamount to postcolonial reasoning. Here Beebee draws from Gayatri Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), in which she demonstrates that the concept of pure reason is actually built on

Eurocentrism and the historical moment of European global supremacy (Beebee 18). Kant's chief work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), sought to elucidate the relationship between reason and human experience, thus resolving conflicts between rationalist and empirical approaches. Spivak aims to show that reason is implicated in socioeconomic inequities, and yet this complicity should not lead to a rejection of reason but to constant self-critique.

Kilito's "Du balcon d'Averroès" exemplifies the roles of translation and transmesis in postcolonial contexts and in the process demonstrates both the limits of reason and the need to continue pursuing it in tandem with other forms of knowing. From the outset of the story, the narrator, a Kilito figure, indicates that he is puzzling over a phrase he heard in a dream, but he delays revealing the phrase until the fourth page. There the phrase is presented in transliterated Arabic, "loughatouna-l-a'jamiyya," along with an approximated French translation, "notre langue étrangère" (158). The phrase can be transferred into English as "our foreign language," although both of these translations lose the connotations of the Arabic *'ajami*, which, as the narrator explains, is an archaic term that means "a stranger, one who does not speak Arabic" (158–59). In the dream, the narrator is looking out of a window onto a courtyard. Barely visible in the window to his right he senses the presence of Averroes, and in the window to the narrator's left, leaning on the ledge, he sees his translator "A. K.," whom the narrator refers to tongue-in-cheek as the person who "claims" to translate his French-language works into Arabic (160). Across from the narrator there is a closed fourth window that he says serves to add an element of mystery and perhaps menace (160).

Much of "Du balcon d'Averroès" consists of the narrator thinking through various possible interpretations of the phrase—how can a language be both foreign and part of one's own culture?—and wondering about its historical authenticity, that is, whether it was ever actually produced by Averroes. In the process of considering these issues, the narrator presents various moments in Arab history in which the phrase could have been interpreted in a certain way or a particular scholar could have written it. Ultimately the narrator points to Ibn Mansur (d. 1311), author of the foundational Arabic dictionary *Lisan al-'Arab*, who wrote when Turkish and Persian represented a cultural threat to the Arabic language, as the more likely source of the phrase. This historical reference as well as others serve to highlight that the "threat" of other languages encroaching on Arabic has been felt since long before the French colonization of North Africa and that the judgment of others based on whether they use Arabic versus French is small-minded.

The translator figure, A. K., is a key component in Kilito's story because he embodies the type of linguistic pettiness and cultural chauvinism

that the narrator critiques. With a playful, irreverent tone, the narrator describes his distaste for A. K. which stems from A. K.'s attitudes toward language and toward Kilito as a Moroccan who teaches French and writes some of his work in French. For instance, in describing the dream scene of the four windows overlooking the courtyard, the narrator states that although Averroes's phrase shakes him, Averroes's presence nearby barely perturbs him. In contrast, the narrator feels displeasure at the presence of his translator, who from now on will be "a neighbor that he must put up with all the time" (160). The translator annoys the narrator not only because he insists that Kilito himself has cited this phrase from Averroes in one of his books but because of his underlying attitudes: A. K. insists on only speaking to the narrator in Arabic, never in French, and thinks that Kilito looks down on Arabic (162). The narrator links these attitudes to Arabo-centrism when he taunts the translator for supporting the ludicrous ideas that Adam spoke Arabic and that the Arabs invented poetry (163). In short, A. K. stands for the most restrictive and even destructive aspects of identity politics, and specifically of postcolonial identity politics. Ironically, the reasoning the translator uses is actually a version of European nationalist ideology in which allegiance to a single nation is tied to allegiance to a single language. In other words, the concept of nationhood that operates in Arabist Moroccan nationalism is informed by or at least analogous to ideas from the European Enlightenment.

Language politics is a complex, if not thorny topic in Morocco.<sup>13</sup> As Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla explains, it is no coincidence that soon after the start of the nationalist movement in the 1930s, Moroccan intellectual 'Abd Allah Kannun wrote the first history of Arabic literature in Morocco: *al-Nubugh al-Maghribi fil-Adab al-'Arabi (Moroccan Genius in Arabic Literature, 1938)*. This work, which sought to highlight the deep-rootedness of the Arabic literary tradition of Morocco and the contributions of that tradition to Arabic letters and Islam, was a key step in the establishment of a national literary canon for Morocco. For these reasons, Kannun's book, which was published under the Spanish protectorate, was deemed seditious and banned by the French colonial authorities (González Parrilla, "Breaking the Canon" 4-5). In 1956, after decades of being under French and Spanish rule, Morocco gained political independence, and an Arabization program was taken up as a reaction to the Francophone policies of the colonial regime. Questions about the place of the Amazigh languages in Morocco are on the rise and a few writers still use Spanish as their language of literary production; however since Amazigh does not have a strong literate tradition and the use of Spanish in writing has become relatively limited, the main tension in the realm of cultural production has been the choice between