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Mary Besemeres

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# Mixed Mother Tongues: Memoirs of Interlingual Childhoods

By Mary Besemeres

Childhood involves entering “a stage which we did not design” and playing “subordinate parts in the dramas of others” (in the words of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre). What happens when the script of the “drama” a child is born into is spoken in more than one language—when the main players, one’s parents, come from different, even mutually hostile speech communities? While mixed race memoir is an increasingly recognized field, memoirs of mixed mother tongue families are a less familiar genre of life writing. This article considers Irish author Hugo Hamilton’s memoir *The Speckled People* and Algerian-born French writer Leïla Sebbar’s *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* as compelling examples of the mixed mother tongue genre, which explore how parental languages may be imposed or withheld, and the effects of this on children’s lives.

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Childhood involves entering “a stage which we did not design,” joining an “action... not of our making” and playing “subordinate parts in the dramas of others,” in philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s apt metaphor (248). Following this metaphor’s logic, what happens when the script of the “drama” a child is born into is spoken in more than one language—when the main players, one’s parents, come from different, even mutually hostile speech communities? While mixed race memoir is an increasingly recognized field,<sup>1</sup> memoirs of mixed mother tongue families are a largely unexplored genre of life writing. I use “mixed mother tongue” as shorthand for “different parental languages,” not to indicate an author’s own bilingualism; in the case of one of the texts discussed here, the author was raised monolingual, in her mother’s language only.<sup>2</sup> Mixed mother tongue memoirs represent interlingual rather than necessarily bilingual or “translingual” childhoods (see Kellman, *Switching; Translingual*). The genres of mixed race and mixed mother tongue memoir are not mutually exclusive: many of the same texts can be read as interlingual, interracial, or transnational narratives. Racial identity is key, for example, to Philippe Wamba’s *Kinship: A Family’s Journey in Africa and America*, a memoir of growing up as the son of a Congolese father and an African American mother, which also deals with Wamba’s immersion in Kiswahili as a teenager in Tanzania, his and his brothers’ shared English, their parents’ shared French, and encounters with relatives’ Kikongo and Lingala in Zaire. Similarly, Tamim Ansary’s *West of Kabul, East of New York* reflects on ethnoreligious and national identities in contrasting the worlds of his Afghani father’s Dari and his Finnish American mother’s English. The primary focus of *Dreams from My Father* is Barack Obama’s multiracial heritage, as the subtitle *A Story of Race and Inheritance* spells out, but it does enter mixed mother tongue terrain when it addresses relationships with Luo-speaking Kenyan relatives and with an Indonesian stepfather whose first language was Javanese.<sup>3</sup> This article considers two texts that are more insistently and pervasively preoccupied with legacies of parental languages than Wamba’s, Ansary’s, or Obama’s: Hugo Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* (2003) and Leïla Sebbar’s *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003). Hamilton and Sebbar depict interlingual families dwelling in the field of recent or imminent, devastating interethnic conflict—World War II and the Franco-Algerian War, respectively. The intergenerational “postmemory” (Hirsch) of war that suffuses these memoirs makes their portrayal of interlingual families particularly compelling.

Hamilton’s *The Speckled People* evokes the author’s childhood perspective as the son of a German immigrant mother and an Irish nationalist father, growing up in English-speaking 1950s Dublin. Hamilton’s father was raised an English speaker in West Cork, but as an adult embraced Gaelic, forbidding the use of English in his household, while the author’s mother’s use of German with her children marked them as foreigners in the street. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (“I don’t speak my father’s language”), Leïla Sebbar, the daughter of a French mother and an Algerian Arab father, writes of the meanings Arabic had

for her as a child in 1940s and 1950s Algeria. She heard it as insults shouted at her in the street by Algerian schoolboys, but also as the medium of her father's loving speech with his own mother and sisters. Sebbar's inability to speak Arabic as a child in Algeria epitomized her ambiguous position as the daughter of an Arab father yet a perceived colonial outsider in a country on the cusp of a war of independence. With their revealing fragments of family talk and shared fascination with the impact on children of "mother" and "father" tongues, Hamilton's and Sebbar's texts lend themselves equally to a reading in terms of "broken dialogues" in life writing. The relation of children to parents in each narrative is figured in terms of thwarted dialogue, whether monologic suppression of the child's voice or withheld speech, a parental silence that leaves the child's voice unanswered.

Hamilton's memoir is narrated in a voice like a young child's, but edged with a subversive irony: "When you're small you're like a piece of white paper with nothing written on it. My father writes down his name in Irish and my mother writes down her name in German and there's a blank space left over for all the people who speak English" (3). The lines convey a child's internalization of an adult viewpoint—here, a tabula-rasa view of child development—along with a subtly implied critique of that perspective. So much of what children say echoes adult speech that their utterance is often classically "hybrid," in Mikhail Bakhtin's term (358), combining distinct layers of meanings. This makes it a rich source of inadvertent irony—one that Hamilton's text mines to the full. The book's title, *The Speckled People*, is an English version of what Hamilton's father calls his family: "the 'brack' people" (7). "Brack" is an Englishing of the Irish *breac* ("speckled" or "flecked"), the father explains to his sons, as in the Irish English for raisin loaf, "barm brack," from the Gaelic *bairín breac*. The narrator concludes, whimsically, that they are "Irish bread with German raisins" (7). He and his brother are made to embody this "speckled" quality in public by wearing emblematically Irish Aran wool sweaters, bought by their father, over lederhosen sent from Germany by their mother's relatives.

Hamilton's childhood name, later changed by him to the more international-sounding "Hugo," was the unmistakably German Johannes—Hannes for short. Speaking as the child Hannes, the narrator tells us that before the birth of his younger sister, Maria, a young girl named Áine was brought over from the Gaelic-speaking region of Connemara to look after him and his older brother, Franz, with strict instructions to speak to them only in Irish. But Áine inadvertently lets drop the odd word of English around them: for example, *stone mór* ("big stone") and *stone beag* ("little stone") (29). When Hannes unthinkingly repeats the English "stone" in his father's hearing, his father is outraged, shouting, "She's here to speak Irish to them" (28), and is only reluctantly talked out of confronting Áine by his wife, who promises to speak to her later on his behalf. Ironically, she has to do so in English: "My mother spoke to Áine the next day. She's not able to speak Áine's words. So in the words of the Garda

[the police] and the workers, my mother tells her never to speak the words of the Garda and the workers to us again” (28). Hamilton describes the confusion that results from being forced to choose between languages hedged with such hazards:

So we have to be careful in our house and think before we speak. We can't speak the words of the Garda or the workers, that's English. We speak Aine's words from Connemara, that's Irish, or my mother's words, that's German. I can't talk to Áine in German and I can't talk to my mother in Irish, because she'll only laugh and tickle me. I can talk to my father in German or Irish and he can speak to the Garda and the workers for us. Outside, you have to be careful, too, because you can't buy an ice pop in German or in Irish, and lots of people only know the words of the Garda and the workers. My father says they better hurry up and learn Irish fast because we won't buy anything more in English. (28–29)

English, the language of the state and the local vernacular, is declared foreign by Hamilton's father, making their house a kind of small-scale state within a state, the borders of which, however, are porous and hence dangerous.

Able to speak English but with a limited knowledge of Irish, Hamilton's mother feels at home only in German, the family's intimate shared language. Her exclusive use of German with her children intensifies their mutual closeness in tandem with her husband's ban on English, which quarantines mother and children alike from deeper interaction with other Dubliners. The passage just quoted gives a sense of the father's militancy, his wife's awkward mediating role, and the cultural contradictions their children live with. The cost his language campaign exacts is spelled out more fully in the scene that immediately follows.

In one of the memoir's more troubling episodes, when Hannes's brother Franz sings a snatch of a song in English as he balances on a garden wall, their enraged father deliberately knocks the boy off it, breaking his nose:

My father stopped digging and told him to stop.... But Franz kept on saying “walk on the wall” because that was his song and he couldn't forget it. Then my father jabbed the spade into the mountain and it stayed there, standing up on its own while he went over to Franz to hit him. He hit him on the back of the head so that Franz fell off the wall and his face went down on the bricks. When he got up, there was blood all around his nose and his mouth... He opened his mouth and then said nothing for a long time, as if he had forgotten to use his voice and I thought he was going to be dead. Then he started crying at last and my father took him by the hand very quickly and brought him inside. (29–30)

The passage forcefully conveys Hannes's fear and confusion through a small child's choice of words, as in the word "mountain" for the big pile of dirt the father leaves his spade in, the chant-like phrase about his brother's helpless transgression ("that was his song and he couldn't forget it"), and the frightened, blurted, "I thought he was going to be dead." By means of narration that seems to witness without overt commentary, the text portrays a man in the grip of a fervor that blinds him to the needs and rights of his children.

This scene is a pivotal one in the depiction of both parents. The father takes Franz inside to their mother, who cleans his face and holds him, saying repeatedly, "Mein armer Schatz" ("My poor treasure"—untranslated in the text). She looks at her husband "as if she could not believe her eyes. 'His nose is broken,' she said.... My father said he was very sorry but the rules had to be obeyed. He said Franz was speaking English again and that had to stop. Then my mother and father had no language at all" (30). Still in the style of a child's voice but with a poetic compression of meaning, the lines represent the parents' stand-off as a moment where the family's multiple languages break down—an echo of Franz's open-mouthed speechlessness after his fall. The father's hurry in getting Franz inside to his mother hints at guilt and concern, but his insistence that "the rules had to be obeyed" reasserts that his rule is non-negotiable. He returns resolutely to his digging outside while the mother, crying, holds the children so hard that Hannes "thought my bones would crack" (30). She proceeds to pack some belongings, telling Franz, Hannes, and their little sister Maria that she will take them "back to Germany" (31). As she reaches the door with baby Maria on one arm, the suitcase and the two boys in tow, her husband intercepts them, reminding her that she has no money and affirming that her home is now in Ireland. Defeated, she sits on the suitcase and cries. "She's just a bit homesick" (32), the father reassures the children as he "smiles," kisses his wife's hand, and puts on some German music, which fills the house. This crisis is represented as a provisional failure of the marriage's interlingual and cross-cultural alliance, as vaunted by the father. Its resolution is highly precarious: the German music is a conciliatory gesture but also a manipulative one that recasts the wife's sense of entrapment in terms of homesickness, an emotion that cannot be helped and is nobody's fault.

*The Speckled People* evokes a childhood lived out among contrasting voices as well as languages, a Bakhtinian polyphony that characterizes almost every page. The father's voice is heard much of the time in the form of "speeches" and the laying down of "rules"—forms of utterance that clearly tend toward monologue (see Bakhtin 279). By contrast, the mother's voice tells "stories"—a more open-ended, interlocutive genre—which often unfold dialogically in response to her children's questions. Unlike for the father, then, for the mother the child's own voice, indicative of his or her own thinking and feeling, matters. We see her mediating between her husband and others when any of his rules are broken, and both advocating and embodying the qualities of "laughter and inner strength"

(Lee) in a way that obliquely calls his authority into question. An account of a family visit to Connemara brings out this latent tension. At a dinner where the tenacious survival of the Irish language in Connemara is celebrated over whiskey and songs, a woman present raises a dissenting voice, complaining of the local poverty and of vacationers from Dublin who want people here to “stay living in thatched cottages with no toilets inside” (*Speckled* 182). Hamilton’s father counters this with an eloquent speech in Irish to the effect that “toilets inside the house and food on the table were no good if you lost the language” (182). During the night, he accidentally falls into the pit latrine outside and has to be pulled out, with difficulty, by his host. When he resurfaces after this ordeal, for the rest of the following day his children struggle not to laugh at the sight of him. Their father looks at them with “hard eyes” whenever they emit a half-suppressed “snort,” and their mother tells them that “it’s not nice to laugh at people’s misfortune” (184). She goes on: “It’s not fair... Because your father made such a good speech last night... and then he fell into the toilet” (184). Her own words set her off laughing uncontrollably, and she runs upstairs to contain her outburst, a diplomatic retreat that still gives her laughter—in the narrative at least—the last word.

In the memoir’s retrospective viewfinder, there is often something comic in the father’s language crusade, as much as it could be traumatic. Hamilton recounts his engineer father’s quixotic attempts (when not working for the Irish electricity board) to sell German goods to Dublin shopkeepers, and his fierce insistence, “hard for business,” that they call him “Sean Ó hUrmoltaigh” (108), his Gaelic rendition of the “John Hamilton” he was born with. He enrolls his sons in an Irish-language school, where they stand out as the only native Irish speakers, and to limit further their exposure to English he refuses to let them play with neighbors’ children, instead bussing in Irish-speaking children of acquainted families from elsewhere in Dublin as suitable playmates. These specially selected children, however, keep stubbornly reverting to English, the vernacular of the street.

The father’s imposition of Irish and the threat of violence he relies on to maintain it as the family language enacts an ironic reversal of the larger history of Irish struggle against English cultural and political dominance, in which he himself is so deeply invested. Through fragments of story and overheard conversation, the narrative gradually yields a picture of John Hamilton’s own early experience as a boy growing up in Cork, who felt doubly shamed by having been born lame and by the fact that his own father (Hugo’s grandfather) died a sailor in the hated British navy—in the narrator’s words, which evidently draw on his mother Irmgard’s explanations rather than any direct revelations of the father’s own, “the time when he was a boy and nobody liked him except for his mother” (285–86). These passages suggest that Hamilton senior embraced an oppositional nationalist identity as a young man at least in part to counter and overcome this double stigma. They hint at a vulnerability buried beneath his domineering style.

Although the father insists on cultural unity through his Irish-only policy, with an exception made for German precisely because it is *not* English (symbolically an allied language, given the English-German conflicts of the World Wars), Hamilton recasts the spoken universe of his childhood as irreducibly plural. He presents it as marked not only by a mandatory Irish and by a maternal, half-magical, half-shameful German, but also by a worldly and alluring English that infiltrates the household via the radio in songs hummed along to by mother and children when the father is out, becoming a hidden tool of rebellion against his regime. Notwithstanding its hostile presence on the streets in the speech of other Dubliners taunting Hannes and his brother as Germans, and its historical role as the colonizing language in Ireland, English is figured here as a source of personal liberation. Hamilton's second memoir, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, makes clearer that English is the future writer's medium: the adolescent Hugo secretly writes stories in English and practices speaking the language in front of the mirror.

German is evoked in *The Speckled People* as the language of warmth in the household, associated with the mother's affection, her storytelling, and the delicious *Kuchen* she bakes. But from the moment her children go outside, it becomes a stigmatizing symbol of their alienness in Dublin, the reason why local boys call Hannes and Franz "Nazis", in one disturbing scene staging a mock trial of them as "Eichmann" and "Hitler." A local butcher calls them to attention in his shop with a mocking *Achtung*. At the same time, German is the language of Irmgard's homeland, a place where her sisters still live and which the family finally visits and the narrator finds himself deeply drawn to. Yet Germany remains the site of his mother's traumatic wartime experiences as the daughter of an anti-Nazi family, which she obliquely conveys to her children through fairy-tale-like stories that are also cautionary tales about whom to trust, contrasting "word people" (people who can negotiate verbally) with "fist people." Throughout the memoir, we see her trying to incline her husband away from being a "fist" person toward being a "word" person when faced with breaches of his language regime.

Hannes experiences the languages around him as having multiple and often conflicting meanings, but his mother's fundamental contrast between word and fist people goes deeper, Hamilton suggests, than his father's fierce binary between Irish and English, or even his childhood self's confusion among Irish, German, and English. As his mother's experience in Nazi Germany indicates, the distinction between monologic violence and a capacity for dialogic negotiation cuts across ethnicities, nationalities, and language communities.

The word *breac* ("speckled") is used by the narrator's father to proclaim his family a microcosm of a new Irish-speaking Ireland, forged from diverse parts (himself and his German-born wife) but unified through a shared language and identity. Implicitly, Hamilton turns this meaning on its head to argue for a culture that is comfortable with and actively encourages plurality. The memoir's

title uses his father's term to articulate a resistance to the way Irmgard and her children were treated in Dublin. Hamilton senior was preoccupied with fighting the English colonizers at the level of language, whereas his children were victims of local xenophobia against them as German speakers. The central social drama of their lives—being the children of a German immigrant mother in a post-World War II English-speaking city—was missed by their father, who forced them into a fight that had, in effect, long been lost, and that undermined their ability to claim inclusion in the society they were born into.

The limits of Irmgard's power to intervene in the children's social exclusion are evident in her response to the mockery they face on the street: she urges them to resist silently, using "the silent negative" that she herself used in Nazi Germany as a girl when she was forced in public to make the "Heil Hitler" salute. This strategy, understandable in the light of her experience, is shown to be ineffective here, disempowering them further in the face of their peers' hostile taunts. How she does help them, however, is in the humor and ingenuity with which she deals with their often repressive father. In a memorable scene, one night Hannes, Franz, and Maria smuggle the family's hot dinner of mashed potato up to their room on impulse and plaster the ceiling with it—permanently. But they escape punishment: "[M]y mother wouldn't let him hit us. Instead of getting angry, she said you couldn't punish a thing like that because it happened only once in a lifetime. My father was still frowning, but then she put her arm around him and said it didn't matter going without mashed potato for one day. She said they were lucky to have children with such imagination. She smiled and said you had to have an imagination to do something as mad as that" (125). Their mother seems to recognize that the children are in their own anarchic and creative way unconsciously rebelling against their father's strictures. On this occasion, he backs down.

In a review of *The Speckled People*, Colm Tóibín quotes Irish historian Joe Lee, who writes of the widespread Irish rejection of Gaelic in the twentieth century: "It is unusual for descendants of a destroyed culture to join in the disparagement of a lost language. It smacks of a parricidal impulse" (qtd. in Tóibín). Tóibín comments, wryly: "It does indeed. It offers Hugo Hamilton a whole new way to kill his father, not only by telling the story of his own persecution in the name of the destroyed culture... but by doing so in an English sonorous and refined." Another of the book's reviewers, Patrick McCabe, praises its portrayal of "at last a good—if flawed—Irish father." The father evoked in Hamilton's memoir is no alcoholic absentee like the feckless father of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, to whom McCabe is perhaps alluding, but, given the anxiety he instills in his children, to call him a "good father" seems too simple. The point, elided in Tóibín's ironic attribution to Hamilton of "a parricidal impulse," is that Hamilton explores how a loving parent whose radical nonconformity showed a certain courage could nevertheless be oppressive, and an aim in itself salutary—the transmission of an endangered cultural heritage—could become damaging

in the hands of someone blind to others' separateness. As Terry Eagleton aptly puts it in his review of *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, the narrator "detests his father with a tender love." *The Speckled People* grapples with the perverse overmolding of a child's thought-world by one parent who dominated the household, and conveys the strengthening and ultimately freeing effect of the other, frequently overruled parent. The book explores the complex impact on individuals of larger ideological forces linked to specific cultural histories, from utopianisms and hatreds to resistance, and sheds light on the author's quest for autonomy and belonging, or, in Bakhtin's term, for his own authentically "dialogic" voice.

Whereas Hamilton evokes a context where several languages made competing claims on him, Sebbar portrays a complete exclusion from the local language, showing how her lack of Arabic made her, in effect, a foreigner in her own country at the same time as she belonged to its colonial elite:

Nous, ses enfants et sa femme, étrangers, dans le quartier populaire, "indigène", musulman, où il était le maître absolu de l'école et le bienfaiteur des habitants, hommes, femmes, enfants, son peuple, pères, mères, fils et filles de son peuple, de sa langue, de sa terre. Et nous? Enfermés dans la citadelle de la langue française, de la république coloniale.

(We, his children and his wife, foreigners, living in the working-class, the "native," the Muslim district, where he was the school's absolute master and a champion of those who lived there, men, women, children, his people, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters of his people, of his language, of his land. And we? Enclosed in the citadel of the French language, of the colonial republic.) (*Je ne parle* 31)<sup>4</sup>

These lines highlight the striking incongruity between Sebbar's father's close ties to other families in the *quartier populaire*, for whom he regularly acted as an advocate with the colonial authorities, and the cultural and political chasm that divided his wife, daughters, and son from the same community. The Sebbar family lived in the French schoolhouse where so-called "native boys" (*garçons indigènes*) were taught by both parents. When Leïla and her sisters stepped out of this "citadel" on their walk to the colonial girls' school they attended, they were trailed by Algerian boys, who hurled insults at them in Arabic, responding to their "foreign" appearance, their uncovered hair, and their short dresses revealing bare legs. In an earlier text describing the same experience, Sebbar recalls "hating" the boys: "Je les haïssais" ("Si je parle" 1182). Here, she qualifies her description of their shouted words with the adjective *seducteurs* ("seductive"; *Je ne parle* 37), as though to acknowledge the implicit adolescent sexuality of the scene. These unmistakably sexual curses—"la violence répétée du verbe arabe, le verbe du sexe" ("the repeated violence of the Arab verb, the verb for sex"; 42)—were the only words Sebbar heard directly addressed to her in Arabic in

her family's town of Hennaya. Yet she also heard Arabic as a language of welcome and warmth whenever the family visited her father's mother's house in the Mediterranean port town of Ténès. Her grandmother and aunts would praise her French mother's beauty and elegance, gently touching her arms, and warmly, with repeated gestures, urge the children to eat the heaped sweets they had prepared. Leïla would come to recognize the Arabic word they said that meant "eat." Sebbar's father, she tells us, would translate some of what the women said, for his wife and children's benefit (106).

As an adult living in Paris, speaking to her father on the phone in Lille (where he and his wife moved after the Algerian War), Sebbar reports asking him repeated questions about his past—questions that he deftly evades, changing the subject. Her lopsided dialogue with him on the phone and on the page brings to mind Maxine Hong Kingston's challenge to her Chinese-born father in her memoir *China Men*: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (18). Sebbar recalls as a child overhearing her father speak with villagers concerned—she surmises in retrospect—for his safety from Algerian partisans (*les Frères*), for whom he was a traitor for working in the French colonial system, even as he was also blacklisted as a potential insurgent by the local French settler nationalist organization (*l'Organisation armée secrète*). In fact, in 1957 her father was imprisoned for several months at Orléansville for suspected links to insurgents. Of his talks in Arabic, Sebbar writes: "Mon père riait, en arabe, avec des hommes inconnus" ("My father laughed, in Arabic, with men I didn't know"; 19). Sebbar conveys how she was excluded from that laugh, that "warm complicit smile" that she saw on her father's face. Her remembered frustration as an eavesdropper on these Arabic exchanges is, I think, deliberately reproduced in the reader through Sebbar's characteristic use of anonymous dialogue in the text, writing about some characters for pages without naming them, leaving one to guess at times who is speaking and why. This is particularly the case when the narrative digresses for several chapters into the closely imagined tale of an insurgent, the son of the Sebbar family's housemaid Fatima, and his encounter with Sebbar's father Mohamed, when both are imprisoned at Orléansville (90–91). Sebbar later admits she has invented the entire story of their meeting. These semi-fictional chapters represent a novelist's response to her father's exclusion of her from his Arabic-speaking past.

Sebbar presents her childhood self as an inadvertent observer of her father's double life: a representative of the colonial system as a schoolteacher married to a Frenchwoman, yet also an Algerian intellectual who sympathized with the independence movement. The memoir is shot through with regret that he did not let his daughter in on the profound doubleness he lived with, supplemented by an awareness that his withholding of Arabic was intended to shield her from the war he knew was imminent: "L'interdit de la colonie, mon père le fait le

sien, que ses enfants ne connaissent pas l'inquiétude, qu'ils ne se tourmentent pas d'une prochaine guerre de terre, de sang, de langue. Son silence les protège" ("The colonial prohibition [of Arabic], my father made it his own, so that his children wouldn't be anxious, wouldn't torment themselves with thoughts of the coming war over land, blood, language. His silence protected them"; 22). Sebbar's experience of the Algerian boys' obscene shouts and aggression toward her as a perceived foreigner—or a provocative ethnic and gender anomaly—shows the limitations of her father's strategy of protective silence. As she writes, "Mon père, avec lui, nous séparait de sa terre, de la langue de sa terre. Pourtant tout autour de l'école c'était l'arabe. Les murs n'étaient pas si épais" ("My father, with himself, separated us from his land, from his land's language. Yet all around the school it was Arabic. The walls weren't so thick"; 42). Implicitly, this passage raises the question of whether the Sebbar children might have been better prepared for the coming war and their own precarious cultural footing and future exile if, through at least some access to language, they had been given a stronger stake in Algerian Arab society.

Sebbar imagines, poignantly, that had her father been able to communicate with his children in Arabic, he would have told them stories of the town where he was born, and would have laughed with them and taught them the "throaty words" ("les mots de gorge"; 21) of the language of the street, suggesting that laughter was rare in their francophone lives at home, perhaps not part of their mother's conception of how girls should behave. This is borne out in an earlier autobiographical essay, where she writes, "Mon nom par ma mère, c'était plutôt la réprimande, la colère, le rappel à l'ordre, la déception. Ma mère institutrice" ("My name [called] by my mother was usually a reprimand, anger, a call to order, disappointment. My mother, the teacher"; "Si je parle" 1186).

As noted earlier, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* is one of a number of published writings that return to the field of Sebbar's childhood, highlighting different elements and asking to be read as pieces of an evolving, multilayered narrative.<sup>5</sup> Here I want to refer particularly to the earliest of these, which has a closely related title, "Si je parle la langue de ma mère" ("If I speak the language of my mother"), since it supplies insight into what remains only implicit in the longer narrative—namely, Sebbar's relationship to her French mother, to the French language, and to French colonial society in Algeria. The earlier work touches on the racist attitudes of French settler girls at her school, who interrogate her about her Arab name and father, and mock her thick curls as "Arabs' hair" (1183). It suggests the distant, didactic style of her elegant, self-contained French mother, whose inhibiting effect on her own sense of self as a girl Sebbar appears to identify with the colonizing her Algerian father underwent through his French education: "my mother's language did violence to me, as it did to my father" (1186). *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* nuances this representation in recalling her mother's cordial non-verbal interactions with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Likewise, in an interview with James Adam Redfield about

the book, Sebbar says that her father “talked in the language that was my native language and his wife’s language which was also a language of love for him—French is a language of love, after all” (qtd. in Redfield (59)).

In her essay “Les mères du peuple de mon père, dans la langue de ma mère” (“The mothers of my father’s people, in the language of my mother”), Sebbar reflects on her conflicted response to the question she was asked in an interview by film-maker Agnès Varda: “Would you have preferred to have an Arab mother?” (386)<sup>6</sup> The essay expresses her sadness at not having had more contact with her Algerian grandmother and at having foregone the greater warmth and closeness of mother-daughter relationships characteristic of Arabic-speaking cultures. It is an open lament that she was never able to speak with “the women of my father’s people” (389) in their own language. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, the remembered figures of the family’s maids Aïsha and Fatima, to whom the child Leïla was close, take on the quality of surrogate Arab aunts or even mothers. As Carine Bourget insightfully puts it, “Sebbar’s affiliation with Arab women through her particular attention to them in her creative work becomes the substitute for the broken linguistic and cultural filiation with her Algerian family” (132).

Bourget writes of how Sebbar’s memoir reflects an “ambivalent” “relationship with Arabic” (127). I read it as exploring her childhood confusion and adolescent ambivalence about Arabic but embracing the language’s associations in retrospect, and implying, rather, a continued and complex ambivalence about French, at once the language of her parents’ loving marriage and her own early family life, her education and later academic career in France, and her sole medium as a writer, yet also a colonizers’ language that separated her from her father and his people.

In response to her persistent questions, Sebbar’s father finally shares with her verses of an Algerian Arabic-French creole song once sung by his sisters, together with his French translation of the words (109). At first, he laughs off the notion of reciting this *charabia* (“nonsense”) to her on the phone, expressing an apparent reflexive colonial attitude that such creole is uneducated, illiterate women’s speech. Later, however, he does enclose the words of the song in a letter, reluctantly sharing traces of his mother tongue with her. Sebbar recalls his telling his wife and children the legend of how Ténès, his birthplace, came to have inhabitants with blue eyes such as his own—a story of French nuns marooned there in 1802 who were taken as wives by local chieftains, the Mother Superior eventually becoming a kind of saint figure (despite not converting to Islam) known as Imma B’net (“mother of daughters”), who was famed for her goodness to the poor (114–17). The father’s retelling of this story, presenting himself as one of Imma B’net’s many descendants, offers his children a symbolic bridge between his own culture and ancestry and those of their mother, between Arabic and French, Algeria and France, otherwise riven by colonization and looming war. Yet, un sentimentally, Sebbar has him tell this story while

driving his family home from Ténès, immediately before their car is stopped on the road by some hostile Algerian youths who suspect the passengers are European tourists because of the women's clothes and—Sebbar conjectures in retrospect—the fact that his wife is sitting in front with him, where an Algerian Arab woman would sit in the back, if traveling by car at all. Speaking with the young men in Arabic, he manages to convince them otherwise, but once home in Henaya he tells his children regretfully, “We won't be returning to Ténès... for several years” (117).

## Conclusion

In its portrayal of Sebbar's enclosure in a francophone “citadel” in an Algerian town of the 1940s, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* reveals how a monolingual family life lived in a profoundly interlingual context cuts off possibilities for social connection, however fragile they might be, given the fault lines of ethnopolitical tension. Yet *The Speckled People* suggests that submerging children within a mother or father tongue, however endangered, to the exclusion of the local lingua franca, however hated, also limits their chances of taking part in the wider conversation—or, in MacIntyre's term, the “drama”—they were born into. Ultimately, however, Sebbar's and Hamilton's memoirs are concerned less with the intercultural benefits of bilingualism or even the loss inflicted by a denial of a parent's language than they are with the monologic effects—and the dialogic potential—of how language ideologies and choices are actually lived and embodied across generations.

School of Literature, Languages & Linguistics, The Australian National University

## Notes

1. Perkins, “Australian Mixed Race” and “Introduction”; Elam; and Dagbovie-Mullins. See also Smith and Watson on “postethnicity narratives” (157) and Parker on particularist and universalist claims on the self in auto|biography (106–36).
2. As Karpinski has shown, in postcolonial and migrant contexts, the concept of “mother tongue” may simplify or misrepresent the situation of children whose native language is not the same as their “mother's tongue” (e.g. 176, 183).
3. Other examples of mixed mother tongue memoir include Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education* (father Czech American, mother Irish American), Saira Shah's *The Storyteller's Daughter* (father British Afghani, mother Anglo-Parsee Indian), Samantha Wood's *Culúa: My Other Life in Mexico* (father Australian, mother Mexican), John Hughes' *The Idea of Home* (father Welsh Australian, mother Ukrainian), and autobiographical novels

such as Barbara Trapido's *Frankie & Stankie* (father Dutch, mother German) and Claire Hajaj's *Ishmael's Oranges* (father Palestinian, mother British Jewish). Essay-length contributions to the genre include David Malouf's "As Happy as This" (father Lebanese Australian, mother British Jewish), Roxane Farmanfarman's "The Double Helix" (father Iranian, mother American), Francisco Goldman's "Moro Like Me" (father Jewish American, mother Guatemalan), Nina Mehta's "From Here to Poland" (father Indian, mother Polish American), Philippe Wamba's "A Middle Passage" (father Congolese, mother African American), Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn's introduction to *Half and Half* (father Irish American, mother Chinese), Ian Buruma's "The Road to Babel" (father Dutch, mother British Jewish), Anita Desai's "Bicultural, Adrift and Wandering" (father Indian, mother German), Nicholas Papandreou's "Split Self" (father Greek, mother Polish American), Andrea Witcomb's "Growing Up between Two Languages/Two Worlds: Learning to Live without Belonging to a *Terra*" (father British Portuguese, mother Australian), Mary Besemeres's "Between *Żal* and Emotional Blackmail: Ways of Being in Polish and English" (father Australian, mother Polish), and Saskia Beudel's "Ground Glass" (father Dutch, mother Australian). See also the essays by Leila Sebbar referred to in this article.

4. All translations from Sebbar's texts are my own.
5. These texts include the very similarly named essay, "Si je ne parle pas la langue de mon père."
6. Bourget points out that Sebbar's repeated use of "periphrases" in her memoirs (such as "la langue de mon père" and "la langue de ma mère") "to name languages without spelling out their names replicate[s] the genitive construction that is used in the *kunya*," an Arabic style of referring to people via their parents' or children's names: for example, as the "father"|"mother" of a son—*Abou|Oum* (son's name)—or as the "son"|"daughter" of a father—*ibn|bint* (father's name). As Bourget elegantly puts it, in echoing Arabic syntax these periphrases are "the writer's means of creating the filial and linguistic links that were displaced by the French language" (127).

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