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“Can I say this?” I would ask my American partner every time (everytime) I doubted the use of a preposition or felt like I was misusing an adverb, as if playing with toys that weren’t mine. I’d shatter the words to (into) pieces, break sentences halfway, distort names I’d overheard. Were we at the station or in the station? Was I coming (going) into the apartment or in the apartment? My partner’s answers felt like momentary forays into (to) the land of the grammatically rich, a temporary visit I’d pay to proper English before being thrown back out to where I came from—a place impossible to map onto (into) a single nation, language, or sentence.

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Quando yo ero chiquitita, yo preguntaba, mama, yo que sere—my mom would sing to put me to sleep. Although Spanish is my mother-tongue (mother tongue), it isn’t my first language. At home, my Venezuelan mother and my Lebanese father settled for French—Lebanon’s colonial language –as the family’s lingua franca. Untethered to a single country, I grew up “abroad”—an outside to an inside I had no memories of (from). Raised in a privileged cosmopolitanism of sorts, I went to French schools and American colleges and like millions of others, I ended (up) in English—“the language of the future,” my mother would call it. English is malleable, supple (redundant), shape-shifting like capital.

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There are many reasons writers wind up in a language that isn’t their own; many scenarios in which the transmission of a mother tongue is compromised by colonial and imperial histories. Etel Adnan is an Arab author writing in American. North African writers Abdelkebir Khatibi, Assia Djebar, and Kateb Yacine, all wrote in French. As part of colonial legacies, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen massive movements of global migration (specify) and displacement due to war and economic hardships (specify). Across these transnational histories, languages are abandoned, taken up, and bastardized. The nation-state and its enforcement of a single language spoken within (often) (arbitrary) borders unify a (“same”) people separated from others (“foreigners”). But before the creation of the modern nation-state, and still today, different languages and dialects were (are) spoken on (in) a shared territory (examples).



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I am not alone in English, no longer (only) a foreigner (stranger). Many contemporary writers write in languages that aren't native to them; many have renounced their mother tongue and abandoned their mothers. Even if you're a monolingual writer—someone who speaks and dreams in a single language—there will always be another language to remind you of an otherness you aren't reckoning with: your own.

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In my writing, I address this predicament. It gets messier when I take on the role of the (an) editor—someone whose task is to bring a text to completion, rid it of its redundancies, and help compose arguments cogently (pretentious). With writer and academic Ghalya Saadawi, and poet Iman Mersal, I edit *Makhzin*—a bilingual literary magazine in English and Arabic, and permutations in between. We publish prose, poetry, fiction, and essays around themed issues. The upcoming issue is on dictatorship and language. Most texts we receive or have published so far are written by ESL writers, or, as the editor of this article suggests, ENL—English as a new language. Often, I edit these texts. “The blind leading the blind [sic],” my partner would say. How do you (I) edit a text in a language you (I) don't have full command of? When an author asks, “Can I say this?” I must fight my own (internalized) (oppressive) inclinations in trying to get a text as grammatically neutral as possible. What linguistic standards am I applying when editing? Who are these corrections for?

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Editors are gatekeepers, checkpoints between the reader and the writer that the text needs to cross in order to be published. Editors (repetition) work for an imagined constituency, advancing editorial agendas and cultivating a readership to which they deliver a consistent product. Occupying this position comes with (a) responsibility. The editors mediate, at times, translate, between the reader and the writer. With translation comes politics, questions of transparency and opacity, of accessibility and refusal. When editing ENL writers, how to resist translating them to (into) “New Yorker” (italicize) English? When writing, translating and editing, how to not perpetuate the patriarchy of the monolingual nation-state, the colonizer? How to preserve the texture and poetics of a voice translating itself without celebrating the error or failure of the “outsider”—all tropes assigned to the non-Western other, or that we, non-Westerners, sometimes deliberately occupy.

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My friend, a poet I have great esteem for, reminds me that in the workplace, grammatically correct English might prove handy; not everyone can afford errors. She's right. The problem lays in



the values informing the categories of “good” and “bad” English. Can idiomatic idiosyncrasies not be (considered) “errors”? The problem perhaps isn’t with (in) English itself. Many Englishes are direct responses (departures) to (from) the supremacy of standard English. *If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?* James Baldwin asks in the title of his seminal essay.

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For four years I have asked to be corrected by the man I was with. He could make wondrous things with (for) the English language. He helped me get my texts up to standard, rid them of redundancy and awkward phrasing. I knew that I would never have the same intimacy with English, the same friendship. English, to me, was always (already) foreign. I felt (a)shamed for (of) my flawed syntax, the words I made up everyday (examples). The man corrected me and I stood corrected. I would send him texts that would return pristine, ready for publishing. I was female, he was male, I was ignorant, he had knowledge. Within these binaries, little was exchanged. We both stayed where we were, entrenched in positions that I (we) was (were) unwilling to undo. In retrospect, more than being edited by a man, I (italicize) was (constantly) (unforgivingly) editing (deleting) myself.

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*Makhzin* exists within the economy of the self-run magazine of poetry (slash) prose (slash) fiction. For better or worse, the economy of informal publishing, self-publishing, and small presses, relies on friendship and free labor. We are editors, writers, counselors, and always, to some degree, InDesign and Microsoft Word amateurs. When we edit a friend’s text, we are co-authoring it. On good days, this makeshift economy is a dance of solidarity. In being more than one, one can never fully be one—an editor, a writer, a reader, a lover. These (pre)positions are contingent and manifold, and while experiencing them, I (you) am (are) aware of the values and parameters at (for) play within each. In this dance, I always try and welcome (certain) erasures, replacements, revisions, and additions. I like to think that we’re all working for (toward) a shared text. Within (repetition), these constellations, friendships, and conversations, English is in formation: it becomes something it wasn’t before we (I) met (you).

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You wait for me on (at) the other end of this sentence. It might take me a while. Seemingly, a sentence is a straight line but in reality, it isn’t. There are detours in a sequence; algorithms involve dimension. I digress. I take (momentary) refuge in an afterthought (a parenthesis). When I’m lost in a sentence I’m lost in (on) the world. A mistake or an error is maybe that: the crumbling of an order, a border, a navigation system. Suddenly, I’m where I’m not supposed to be, outside (beside) the nation-state (hyphen).



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