

'In a season without languages': Translative Process in the Poetry of Ouyang Yu, Vasso Kalamaras, Ania Walwicz and Antigone Kefala

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The title of this paper is taken from Ouyang Yu's poem 'Song for an Exile in Australia', chosen because of its exploration and representation of the migrant gap between body and representation of body, between haptic body (the touchable, corporeal body) and linguistic body (or cerebral body). It asks the question, if I am without languages, if I am unable to translate myself, am I without meaning? Is translation ever really possible? am I always lost in the gap between? This is not merely a migrant question, it is an existential question, but I will concentrate here upon the migrant question.

Ouyang Yu's poem 'Untitled/Because That's the Way It Is' is untitled because, as a Chinese Australian, or, an Australian Chinese, he (and the person addressed in the poem—a double self) is caught in the gap between cultures, between languages and is thus rendered nameless: that is, he is without the means by which he can articulate and communicate meaningful self—a meaning of self that must be founded in community, that is, community as a structure or intimate space of shared knowledge, shared history. Does this then imply that he has no meaning?

The function and significance of naming has been much discussed, but I would like to do so yet again, this time making a Caribbean connection.

In his poetry subsequent to *The Arrivants*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a Caribbean poet and historian, writes/speaks increasingly in the language of the translated African, an afro-Caribbean English. For Brathwaite one of the most important words, indeed concepts, is that of 'nam'. Your 'nam' is your secret name, your soul-source, your greatest possession and that which you keep hidden from your enemies, in case they should devour it and thus devour you. Brathwaite explains in a gloss to *Mother Poem*: that it is a word connected with 'nyam' (to eat), with 'yam' (root food) and with 'nyame' (name of god). So your 'nam' is your symbol of self, being that which is of the soil and of the gods.

On arrival in the Caribbean, the African peoples were renamed by their colonial masters and forbidden to use or be referred to by their African names. Renaming was a means of and a mark of ownership. But although the African slave might be seen to have suffered a loss of self and indeed of community in that process of renaming, Brathwaite suggests that the African did not forget or lose that possession of 'nam', but locked it away so that connectedness with soil and god, with land and language, might not be devoured and self be utterly destroyed. So Ouyang's title of 'untitled' might refer to a loss of name representative of or resultant upon a loss of identity, or it might be a means of retaining possession of self—of 'nam'.

I would suggest that Ouyang's poetry refuses habitation by others—it holds something back, it keeps its central core or essential meaning secret. This is not to say that it is deep or obscure, in fact the opposite: in general Ouyang Yu's poetry is not deep or

obscure: it does not invite exploration or discovery of hidden dimension; it is flat (often prosodic), not only in terms of space, of line, but in terms of sound and tone. It maintains a consistent, persistent anger in which it is difficult for the reader to find a place of entry.

it's like trying to create a world in which to hide yourself
 an english wor(l)d that's neither english nor chinese
 full of your own secret images no known words can penetrate
 or you'd look within yourself across the boundary dividing you
 into two uncommunicative countries, actually you look
 from above that borderland of deeply d(m)isplaced landscapes
 into a sky coming into its own

now that you are t/here
 you are telling me again that you realise for the first and last time
 that you don't belong anywhere because of that big linguistic scar
 that like a genetic racial facial feature
 carves you into two aliens in one
 the one that divides and rules but doesn't belong
 ('Untitled/Because That's the Way It Is')

What do I mean by the flatness of Ouyang's linguistic body? Partly it is a quality of voice, of tone, but it also has something to do with the length of line—you cannot get your eye/hand around it easily—it refuses embrace; and in this particular poem this refusal also has to do with the reference to 'you' which does not include 'you' the reader, but is another I—a double self that speaks to self about possible loss of self, or being lost in multiple selves! In the poem 'Interview with Yu' 'you' is deliberately conflated with 'Yu'. But to return to this idea of flatness, perhaps it could be likened to the image of Ouyang's flat Chinese face ('a genetic racial facial feature'; 'Untitled/Because That's The Way It Is'), virtually featureless to those who are not Chinese.

Does Ouyang offer a translation of himself or must I translate myself in order to touch him, to meet him on common ground? Where is my place of entry to that which does not ask, in fact possibly even refuses entry? What might this refusal, or at least this erected difficulty mean? I will return to this idea of possibly productive refusal at a later point but for the moment I want to look at the notion of translation itself as it applies to the migrant experience itself, and then to the poetic expression of this experience.

In an essay published in 1992, 'Lines of communication: Meaning in the migrant environment', Paul Carter seeks to understand the displaced self of migrant experience through an architectural image or construct of 'haptic' space. He writes:

There should be a proportion between our own size and form and the scale and design of our surroundings. Integration with the built environment is not achieved visually, but haptically: by experiencing the place you live in with your body rather than by simply looking at it through a car windscreen. Haptic spaces are those that satisfactorily externalise our deep emotional need for community; they create places to embrace and inhabit, places that speak to us.

The corollary of this argument is that the inhabitants of environments which lack haptic values are likely to feel physically and emotionally disoriented, literally out of touch... Writers and artists will focus on ... the lack of connection between the environment they inhabit and the words and images available to them to describe it. (Carter 9)

Paul Carter progress from this point to discuss the writing of R.A. Baggio (an Australian of Italian parentage) and the sense in which Baggio's inheritance of story (the stories of his Italian father) do not fit Australian space—the mental and physical topographies are not consonant. Carter refers to Baggio's return home, to the land of his fathers, as 'a temporary haptic reintegration':

Baggio, although born in Australia, has never felt 'at home' in Australia. But the psychic deprivation he feels as a migrant to Australia is not only haptic: it is also linguistic. The instability he experiences arises from a sense of not being *at home in language*; he does not *dwell* in language ... (Carter 12)

Although born on Australian soil, Baggio is not born of Australian soil, because the bones of his fathers do not make that soil and because the language of his fathers does not speak of that soil. (Judith Wright speaks of the impossibility of writing poetry—or of 'meaning' in language—until bone and story are laid down as one in the soil that our foot treads, that our tongue speaks.)

This paper explores poetry as a place in which the haptic and the linguistic coalesce: poetry as a body of language in which the self is momentarily contained or fitted; poetry as a number of 'stills' in the constant process of translating self, a process that although particularly pertinent to the migrant, is integral to our humanity. Ouyang Yu speaks to this connectedness, or in the migrant's case, disconnectedness, of land and language, of soil and tongue:

in a season without languages in Australia
I have lost my weight in undeveloped no-person's land
like a wild devil roaming
I sow my language into the alien soil
where it sends forth strange flowers that no one recognises
and all of a sudden I find my tongue held
between two languages like a vice

in a season of self-exile in Australia
(*'Song for an Exile in Australia'*)

Here the importance of community is signified as that which recognises its own. The missing 'o' in vice (with which the tongue is held) is the gap, the hole, through which voice is lost, finding no comfortable dwelling place. Poetic metre, space/sound, is measured in feet—mind and body, tongue and foot, rhythmically one. This is a theory of language as 'groundation' and an exploration of what happens in psychic and poetic terms when the human being is ungrounded, uprooted, displaced. Or, as Ouyang Yu puts it, when the seed, or language of self is sown in alien soil.

Caribbean reference might again be useful here: Kamau Brathwaite, speaks of groundation in terms of 'possession'—possession of w/Word. When the Africans were uprooted from their native soil and transplanted in the foreign soil of the 'new world', they were not only dispossessed of land, but also of language. They were not allowed to speak in their native tongues, they were not allowed to drum. The drum is not only the vessel of communal human history, for the drummer is the guardian of tribal story, it is also the vehicle by which communication with the gods is achieved, the link with a spiritual world and indeed a metaphoric or poetic world. Without this vital link to a human community of connected knowledges, the African slave was a displaced person.

Meaningful existence is a difficult, sometimes impossible, achievement; but the

English language 'creole' poetry of slave-song and calypso was a means of imagining and creating a new connectedness of community, against the odds. The poetry of subsequent generations—the 'free' descendants of those displaced persons—has sought to bring together that which has been lost and that which was found. There has been a re-discovery of African heritage, but one that is changed, transformed, translated. African community, against the odds, despite the concerted efforts of Christian church, colonial education and the debilitating ethos of slavery, did survive in the Caribbean, and it is this survival, this translation that is now celebrated.

The language and form of that poetry of celebration and rejuvenation is creole, both English and African, something distinct and unique. Brathwaite speaks of this movement of discovery and celebration of meaningfulness as a movement of 'groundation'. In some forms of Afro-Caribbean religious ceremony the participant is 'possessed' by a god; they act as a kind of lightning rod through which the god (spiritual connectedness with our beginnings and our ends) might come to earth. There is a human circle of haptic and linguistic space in which the person possessed speaks in tongues. The possessed participant moves in the rhythm of the god, be it represented in the form of snake, cripple or train, and most often bends toward the ground—touching earth—achieving a vital connectedness between physical and spiritual realms—a haptic space in which word of god is translated into word of human community. That which has been disconnected is reconnected; translation has been effected. That which has been translated is not the same as that from which it has been translated, but this is not to say that there is a master copy and a corrupt copy, it is not even to say that something has been lost, but rather that the body has 'suffered a sea change'. Shakespeare's metaphor is particularly applicable to the migrant displacement of self for it speaks not only of the ocean between lands, but also of that which is 'suffered', not only in the sense of effected by, but affected by.

'The Farmer' by Vasso Kalamaras is image of and tribute to that suffering, beginning with the words: 'They were full of calluses./His hands were full of calluses,/resembling the branches of an old olive tree.' It is dedicated to 'the early immigrants', and appears in a bilingual volume of Greek Australian literature. Vasso Kalamaras' poetry is written in Greek and translated into English. She describes the process of translation in interview with Helen Nickas:

What I do with my translators is, first, I do a literal translation, then I try to imbue it with 'feeling'. The translator then does a freer translation, smoothing out the text, and sends it back to me. If I don't like a word, I tell them so. I am not sure how successful this method is because English is a learned language for me, but I have a feeling for it so I can tell when I receive the translated text whether it has been rendered correctly in English. (*Migrant Daughters* 219)

So in the 'learned language' or the adopted tongue meaning is separated from feeling. The process of translation of a poem attempts to bring haptic and linguistic meaning into a resonant structure; but how well or how accurately that poetic space fits self is uncertain. Perhaps the resultant poem is perfectly resonant of that translated self; somehow, as Antigone Kefala comments of her own work, it is 'un-English' (see interview with Helen Nickas, *Migrant Daughters*, 227-9). It is the apparent inability to translate meaningful, feeling, self that is explored in the poem 'The Farmer':

He scooped a fistful of foreign earth
in his rough workworn hands full of calluses,
and let it trickle through his fingers like tears,

his tears,
black tears full of remorse. God!
How could he love another country?

The earth is source of his anger, distress and confusion. Although like all fertile earth it has 'the scent of a woman's breast/at the time of love', it cannot give him succour, for the link is lost between foot and tongue, the language of meaning imbibed at birth. The image of the farmer bending to caress the alien soil that nourishes him physically but cannot nourish his spirit is a poignant one: 'filling his hands with it, he held it to his mouth/and breathed on it with breath as heavy as his heart'. The farmer is oppressed by absence, by a sense of loss, and by sense of guilt; and yet in that act of breath on soil, perhaps the process of translation, the act of creation has been initiated, in imitation of Genesis, as God's love was breathed into clay and so made humanity, the man breathes upon the soil breaking his muteness to call upon God for aid. Here is groundation. As hand and voice touch soil in God's name, the olive tree (opening image of the farmer's callused hands) might take root in this new soil and bring forth new fruit. The farmer's prayer is Vasso's poem. Although the farmer himself has not found community, Vasso's poem offers a dwelling place in which community might be found.

Unlike Vasso's farmer who might be seen to inhabit a haptic space, Ouyang Yu's poetic persona is intensely cerebral, intellectualising and articulating what the man of the soil feels but cannot express verbally:

translating myself into English
as if I were a language
but am I not a Chinese
am I not that ancient language that
resembles myself, is myself, is the birthmark of my face that
makes you comment to your friends without even looking
that he is Chinese
or dismiss him
as a bloody Chink or Chow
or burst into Ching Chong Chinaman rhyme ...
(*'Translating Myself'*)

In terms of translative process, Ouyang Yu's poetic persona might be seen to conform to the second of three writing/speaking positions suggested by Sneja Gunew and Kateryna Longley, that being 'a position of translation and mediation ... At home in both languages and cultures' (or not at home in either but grappling with both), 'These writers translate one reality into the other and mediate between the two.' The first position might be represented by Vasso Kalamaras' farmer, 'juxtaposing old and new cultures', and the third might best be represented in the voices of Ania Walwicz: 'those who forge new languages and new representations ... They foreground the transgressive possibilities of incorporating elements from other languages and other systems of representation into the more conventional forms' (Introduction to *Striking Chords*, xxi).

Eden Liddelov has described Ania's writing as 'like the baffling prose translations of the foreign poem. It is more rhythmic and breath-borne than "prose", more threatening than "poetry"' (63). The idea of representing the process of translating self in a form that resembles something of a prose translation of a foreign poem is a wonderful example of poetry as a moment of stilled self, fitted into a coalescence of haptic and

linguistic space, yet overlapping those edges:

zabawa play is not play like english child special word
 for play stage english relies few words say what neighbour
 rely on another polish describe exactly in but now i less
 fluent forget what say think hard about before stumble
 fall over words fall over i fall over wywracam waracam
 ('translate')

English and Polish resonate within the poetic mind/body space of Ania's poem: mother tongue refuses burial in the soil of foreign tongue. Within imagistic/metaphoric parameters of the poem, the relationship between the selves/languages would appear to be stratified, the renovation of house intimating a life-game of hide-and-seek—either a stripping away of wall paper to discover layers of self/language beneath present and presented exteriors, or as a painting/papering over, an attempted covering over or silencing. But although at first glance this stratification would appear to be two-dimensional, one of replacing one surface for another, the haphazard and complex nature of 'renovation', in which the stripping away or painting over is 'bit by bit' and cannot be accomplished in a single act (sweep of brush, scrape of pallet knife), imputes a depth to this process of 'translation'. Not only does the reference to digging return us again to posit cerebral language in the soil of bodily experience, it also implies a depth in which languages and selves jostle against each other: the fluid motion of old dress and monolingualism is displaced, distress, disturbed creatively and vitally in the body of self translated in Ania's poem. Although Ania's poem would appear to return, in conclusion, to a two-dimensional or binary division of back and front of head in which the new or acquired language is active and the mother tongue is passive (at back 'old words sleep wait'), effectively her poetry is a body or 'another country' in which sleep is not a euphemism for death but acquires the potential energy of possible, inevitable awakenings. Sleep/silence is the temporary gap that recognises loss but ultimately refuses nostalgic regret. Translation then is not a one-way, one-dimensional or even two-way, two-dimensional process of replacing something with another; but rather it is a creative process in which something unique is born but something which retains and is evidence of dual or multiple mothers.

The notion of nurture and mothering is vital to the translatable/creative process. What Eden Liddelw refers to as the 'threatening' nature of Ania's writing, what amounts to an onslaught or battery of words, bears some correlation to the refusal of embrace I spoke of earlier in regard to Ouyang Yu's poetry. This difficulty, this refusal, this posed threat, is partly a desire to keep possession of 'nam' and partly a demand that you as reader/listener work at understanding—make effort to contribute to the translatable process. Ultimately, as Vasso Kalamaras observed, translation is a shared process, a process of which the beautiful poem 'The Farmer' was the result, and Vasso remarks:

We worked well ... [Vasso and June Kingdon] Now, when I re-read that work, I like it very much. This means that we must have done a good job. We'd often ring each other up at midnight if we thought that we had found the right word. (Interview with Helen Nickas 219)

Of course it's not a funny thing to assume that translatable process would require the resonance of like minds and hearts, perhaps the not-so-funny thing, born of alienation and displacement, is to allow, even for a moment, the possibility that translation

might not occur because there is no liking—no nurturing soil—no proffered community or belonging and recognition.

In conclusion I would like to return to my brief reference to the work of Antigone Kefala, and in particular, to the poem, 'The Peanut Vendor'. This poem indulges in plaintive nostalgia at the same time as it refuses it. The Greek word *amanedes* is the locus of the poem's emotive and formal centre, apparently untranslated; but the untranslated mother tongue rooted in the surrogate mother earth of English in fact achieves translation whilst retaining 'original' identity. For the poem itself acts as a translative vehicle making possible the understanding of the Greek word within the haptic and linguistic space of its dwelling place. Understanding and recognition are achieved, community is discovered. Unlike Ouyang Yu's 'strange flowers' that are unrecognised, this strange flower grown out of alien soil is recognised within shared knowledges that grow out of translative process, a process which is not exclusive to the migrant but is the nature of our humanity. In this particular poem of Antigone Kefala, like those by Ouyang Yu and Ania Walwicz, the reader/listener is necessarily a participant in the translative process. Writing, speaking, sharing of selves creates grounded community. This reminds me of Eric Rolls's story of the search for the great Irish storyteller. Eric remarked first that 'it's necessary to see County Kerry cause that's what talked to us' and then he told us how the story-teller 'began talking in Gaelic—could only think in Gaelic and then translate in English'; 'his English' commented Eric, 'sounded like his Gaelic but we could understand him', perhaps because that understanding was so desperately sought. All our failures might be failures of the imagination, but all achieved communities are grounded in the imaginative process of translation. Poetry, story, song are its dwelling place.

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