

Subversive Translation and Lexical Empathy: Pedagogies of *Cortesia* and Transnational Multilingual Poetics

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Bikol:

Pagmundô, pagmunhò, pagbakhò, pagdusò, pagsakit: grief

Paghaya, agrangay: grief with sound

Paghaya, pagtangis: grief with tears

Filipino (Tagalog):

Dalamhati, pighati, lumbay, sakit, hapis

Spanish adapted to Bikol:

Dolor, lamento

English:

Grief, sorrow, anguish

Here is grief in my first tongue, Bikol, the language of the Bikol region in Luzon, one of the three largest islands among 7101 in the Philippines. But in Filipino, originally Tagalog—one of the regional languages elected as the national language in 1937—I would find other words. If I travel around the archipelago with its more than a

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B. Martín-Lucas and A. Ruthven (eds.), *Narratives of Difference in Globalized Cultures*, New Comparisons in World Literature,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62133-3_2

hundred languages, I would find more. Given that we were colonized by Spain for more than 350 years and that the Bikol region was thoroughly Hispanized, the Bikolano knows ‘dolor/lamento’. With 40 years of American colonization and, as a consequence, English becoming the medium of instruction at schools and universities, ‘grief’/‘sorrow’/‘anguish’ can be added to the list. So in the Philippines, we grieve multilingually. Locally, we are translingual. We navigate across different tongues. Back in my first home in the Bikol region, grief is inherently multiple words, multiple sounds, multiple weights in the chest. Multiple stones.

Gapôbatostone

Gapô	Bato	Stone
dusong kasinkinis kan gapo	sakit na singkinis ng bato	grief as smooth as stone
dusong minagatok na sanribong tataramon na nawaran nin nguso	sakit na sumasambulat na sanlaksang salitang walang bibig	grief that shatters into a thousand words without mouth
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Gapôbatostone. Gapô is ‘stone’ in Bikol. Bato in Filipino. Then stone. The multilingual migrant writer cannot be self-contained stone. Writing about grief in the Philippines primarily in English in Australia can be problematic. Is grief in English ‘less true’ than grief in Filipino or in my mother tongue, Bikol? But this is a question that may be asked even by those who live in the Philippines. Filipino poet Marjorie Evasco, who wrote in English first and is now also writing in her mother tongue, Cebuano, explains in an interview (Akella 2014, online): ‘The national

language of the country called Filipino is a legislated and developing language, which is Tagalog-based and is taught in all the schools of the country, and of course reinforced by Manila-based mass media'. The language debate (English versus multiple mother tongues) is ongoing. Regional mother tongues have been decolonizing from English and Filipino, placing themselves at the forefront of literary production, thus changing the old colonial flavour of the literary canon. And when English is used, it is the Filipino's *own* English.

My stone poem (Bobis 2007, 29–31) is in three languages, in three self-contained poems. But when grief shatters, so does the stone now uncontainable, no longer smooth, no longer owned by a specific mouth, in fact mouthless:

gapôbatostonegapôbatostonegapôbatostonegapôbatostonegapôbatostone

Say this incantation. Feel the hard 'g' in the throat for *gapô*, the tiny explosion of 'bh' in lips touching for *bato*, the subtle hiss in stone. And the multiple o's: the glottal ô (*gapô*), the soft o (*bato*), the rounded o (stone). How do they meet in the mouth, in the ear? How do these diverse languages and cultures reverberate in the sensibility, if they do at all? Regularly hearing multiple languages, how do we read these multiple stones in multicultural locations? How do we listen? Do we listen? To what, to whom? And when we read silently, do our eyes include or blur over the 'other squiggles' on paper? Do we extract meaning from the poem only within our own established sounds and meanings? Do we extract the distinct stone—the recognizable grief that is collected, contained and smooth like a hegemonic artefact in the mono-mouth, in the mono-ear? Or do we, because of our multiculturalism, allow ourselves to shatter into a thousand words without mouth? How terrifying to be radically disoriented. To be without mouth. A terrible loss that can come with a terrible grief.

In this chapter I will attempt to avert this grief through subversive strategies for translating linguistic and cultural difference, in order to facilitate my proposed lexical empathy that builds on George Steiner's 'lexical cortesía' (Steiner 1989, 157). According to Steiner: 'Where freedoms meet, where the integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art encounters our own liberty of reception or refusal, *cortesía*, what I have called tact of heart, is of the essence' (Steiner 1989, 55). So I will examine the tactful yet subversive meeting of different languages in a single text, in the process of

writing, reading and teaching. Translation is a journey from one language to the other, thus from one text to another. But what if the different languages co-habit in one text? How can translation begin as a decolonial urge that facilitates an empathetic collaboration among differences, so they can resolve each other into meaning? To answer these questions, I will reference Steiner and Jahan Ramazani as I chart the negotiation of alterity at the ‘micro-level’ and the ‘macro-level’ (Ramazani 2009, 53) of chosen texts by myself (Philippines–Australia), poet Sujata Bhatt (India–USA–Germany) and playwright Guillermo Verdecchia (Argentina–Canada). I will approach these texts as writer, reader, teacher and scholar producing, circulating and receiving language and culture.

These doing-thinking practices will lead this chapter through a ‘grassroots theorizing’, which I conceptualized early on (Bobis 2013a, 145) and later defined thus: ‘theorizing as story-making from the ground up, moving from the specific lived story that creates knowledge and modes of knowledge production, which become a counter-hegemonic discourse to the usual theorizing direction from above: globalized epistemology applied to a specific local experience’ (Bobis and Martin-Lucas 2016, 17). This methodology aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s, described by Susan Hawthorne as a “local” theoretical positioning’ that enables the researcher to draw on her own very ‘specific historical, political and social context’ to develop an embedded critical theory (Hawthorne 2002). It is only in this way, Tuhiwai Smith argues, that the ‘oppressed, marginalized and silenced groups’ (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 186) will gain something from research and from the knowledge created¹ (Hawthorne 2002, 13–14). This stance evokes Walter Mignolo’s *decoloniality* that ‘delinks’ from epistemes historically grounded in the European academy, and instead embeds scholarship in the cultural specificity of marginalized corporeal experience (Mignolo in Bobis 2013b).

These concepts ground this chapter in what I term ‘the lived and livable framework’ (Bobis 2013b), collaborating with scholarship’s expected theoretical framework. It is after all grief in the lived body that began this journey:

¹Hawthorne is quoting from Tuhiwai Smith (1999).

grief that shatters
into a thousand words
without mouth

To shatter grief. In order to find multiple words. But they are without mouth. How to navigate this paradox: with multiple words yet without mouth? Inconceivable. So I will begin with the simpler question: how to be without mouth? How to be silenced? Australians have been rendered dumb when travelling in a non-English-speaking country, unless they are travelling in the original home from where they migrated and they still speak its language. But one does not have to leave Australia to be without mouth. This is what a migrant Australian may experience when buying bread at Woolworth's—even when she is speaking in English—because her 'bread' has an accent that does not sit comfortably with the ear at the checkout. But do Australians born to English not have any accent? In non-English-speaking countries, do they not also fumble over saying a basic need, and swallow back the word for fear of being embarrassed or rejected? Thus a silencing—which is what migrant writers in Australia grieve over when the monolingual publisher/critic/reader decides that their English, thus their literature, is not up to scratch. By monolingual, I do not mean someone speaking only one tongue; I mean someone who hears-and-cares for only one tongue. I mean the monolithic sensibility.

Peta Stephenson contextualizes contemporary Australia as 'a nation formed by invasion and colonisation', and: 'In order for Aborigines and future migrant groups to be "accepted" as members of a single Australian community, they had to stop being culturally distinctive and learn to adopt the assumed monolithic and homogenous Australian culture' (1997 online). Counter-arguments in the new millennium declare that multicultural Australia has come a long way from this historical heritage and that cultural plurality is thriving. But Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka write that 'the hundreds of Aboriginal languages, largely hidden from the view of the dominant English-speaking culture' and, with migration, the 'community languages, some with very large number of speakers' have not resulted in a 'concomitant change in public consciousness of what it means to live with different languages', and 'the country remains locked in an Anglocentric view of the world' (Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007, xvi). As I have observed elsewhere:

There is the initial knee-jerk reaction from the sound of difference. The anxiety of Otherness registers quickly and bodily. But if you are born to and have always lived with other voices in your neighbourhood, do you not grow a plural consciousness? Or do you become more vigilant about your cultural identity and thus block out the ‘outside sounds’? The anxiety of Otherness does not only plague the ear of an Anglocentric collective, but more so the newly introduced voice of the migrant. Sounding Australian to be understood is a cause of anxiety at the supermarket, at work, in the daily negotiations to survive. Sounding Australian to be accepted is an even deeper anxiety tied with settling in, with being psychologically *at home*. This anxiety can be acute in literary production, where conjuring the right voice is paramount – dissonances are highlighted as the migrant writer attempts to ‘settle’ the Other voice of the old home in the new country. (Bobis 2010, 4)

In the 1990s, Sneja Gunew, the frontier scholar on Australian multicultural literature, observed: ‘the charge of incompetence is a familiar one in reviews of works by so-called ethnic writers’ (Gunew 1994, 95). More than a decade later, Mark Davis writes: ‘As Gunew says, it is through accusations of incompetence that critics strive to protect themselves from the voice of the Other, which might destabilise the coherence which underpins their own language and subject positions’ (Davis 2007, 16). I remember submitting a poem to a journal in the 1990s and receiving a lengthy rejection letter explaining how to use the English language. More than a decade later, some critics still ‘quarrel’ with the style of my novels; style is the use of the English language, in this case. But the quarrel is no longer about grammar and correct usage, but about how my sentences are constructed in a particular configuration and tone, thus creating a perceived disfavoured dense, mannered or sentimental style. So who and what prescribe these benchmarks of taste? Do critics exercise self-reflexivity about their own otherness in their critique of that ‘other style’? Is there any awareness that their own taste and sensibility are as other/as foreign to the Philippine landscape, language and experience that I am translating to English in these novels? Unfortunately, served in a national paper, the Australian critic’s own foreign hearing of the foreign is institutionalized. In this respect, it is worth recalling Michelle Cahill’s view that:

Binary fixations of alterity are invariably drawn by arbiters to mark a distinction between what does and does not belong to the benchmark. Yet,

as critics such as Ruth Frankenberg note, the specular currency of Whiteness operates to validate its perspectives through complex processes that are illusory and indiscernible. How many tedious and derivative books by white Australian writers are spared from disparagement and reductive doublespeak? The advantage of White authority in literary production is so blinding and disguised that to unmask it is a fraught process. (Cahill 2014, 209)

Sometimes the issue is a double-bind of gender and culture. Cahill introduces the women poets in the collection *Contemporary Asian Australian Poetry*, pointing out that many of them ‘have remained in the footnotes and peripheries of national canons, including those dedicated exclusively to women’s poetry’ (Cahill 2013, 28). In a recent essay in *Cordite Poetry Review*, she also argues:

More significantly the emergent discourses in a national poetics are economically invested, driven by the neo-colonizing impulse. Every time a review in our mainstream publications – *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* – fails to engage impartially or seriously with the work of those poets marginalized within the national category (presumably because of their differences of race or language or their struggles to lever cultural access), effectively what happens is that Australian Poetry reinforces itself as a monolith, legitimising its own authority while diminishing a possible range of differences. (Cahill 2016, online)

Worse than being reviewed in such a manner is not being reviewed at all. In his book *Bias: Offensively Chinese/Australian*, poet Ouyang Yu observes:

Anything that does not conform to that ‘ethno-politics of an Anglo type’ will be rendered obsolete by this WMS (weapon of mass silence) in which no books by Asians will be made reviewable in magazines, viewable on TV or publishable by white publishers and no decent prizes will be made winnable by Asians, so in the end they vacate the scene by themselves. (Ouyang Yu 2007, 168)

Note the resonances of ‘lament’ among writers and scholars from the 1990s to the present. This is not to say that Anglo-centrism is promoted by all Australian critics/publishers. Some go out on a limb to support writers outside the white mainstream, and in fact make it a rule to engage and disseminate Australia’s plural voices; however, they,

too, are often in the margins of the literary industry, as I will discuss in greater detail further on. While I admire Ouyang's blast of anger, in this chapter I argue in defence of a discipline of courtesy, a tact of heart in the meeting between different sensibilities and languages, as Steiner proposes. He writes:

Lexical *cortesia*, the first step in philology, is that which makes us dwellers in the great dictionaries, both general and specialized ... it enables us to *hear* the unfolding of historical continuity and of change inside words themselves and within the bodies of text in which these words are organic ... it takes an ear for temporal tuning. (Steiner 1989, 157)

An ear for temporal tuning will certainly not privilege a singular mouth and will refuse to atrophy in a monolithic sensibility—what a disaster would it be, to be rendered deaf to the multiple, varied reverberations of the universe? Steiner grounds translation in lexical *cortesia*:

If the poem is speaking out of our own tongue, we seek to ascertain the historical, social, if need be local or dialectal, status of the poet's particular idiom. If the text is in a foreign language – and there is no more concentrated instance of 'otherness' and of its freedom of being than that of our encounters with languages not our own – we do our labored best either to master that other speech or to accept the humbling trust of translation. (Steiner 1989, 156)

How do we accept the humbling trust of a translation? And when we read a poem in its English translation, which is *the poem*? Where is the poem in its original language and do we explore how this sits in the mouth and ear? Unfortunately it is so easy to read the English translation as an English poem (and it has to work in *my* English)—thus the original language and culture disappear. In this case, we may have trusted the translation, but there is hardly any courtesy in the engagement. I would like to move beyond Steiner's lexical *cortesia*. I propose a lexical empathy, but subversively strategized. One can approach this concept as the necessary 'operational empathy' among languages, in order to make meaning together—though I argue that languages make meaning in the body that produces/receives it. In its simplest terms, empathy evokes a bodily process: putting oneself in the shoes of another. So for lexical empathy to work, the reader has to put her/his own mouth-and-ear into the mouth-and-ear of the poem, of the poet, of that language, of that culture.

I propose, then, to unsettle the monolingual reader into empathy, in a translingual poem where Filipino co-habits with English in one text. So the reader must physically meet the untranslated other—must ingest this ‘foreign-ness’ into their mouth-and-ear—to be thus confounded, disoriented, made awkward, rendered momentarily mouthless. This silencing of the reader, so they can listen, is the poet’s aestheticized politics: the creative process begins with the political will to subvert an English-only reading. And the politics is realized in an aesthetic artefact: a poem. According to Liz Lundberg, ‘The structures of language are social structures in which meanings and intentions are already in place, always fighting for power and dominance with rhetorical figures and more violent weapons. Poetry and art works are not isolated autonomous aesthetic objects. The language of poetry has the capacity to question, expose and attack the language of power’ (Lundberg 2014, 172). In the following translingual poem, I aim to disrupt the structures of the language of power, English, and the silencing violence that it wields in the house of the patriarch (see Giffard-Foret 2013).

Siesta

Take me not
in mid-winter,
only to thaw the frost
of your old bones,
imagining how stallions rear
in the outback,
hooves raised to this August light,

*kakaibang liwanag,
kasimputla’t kasinglamig
ng hubad na peras.**

But take me
on a humid afternoon
made for siesta,
when my knees almost ache
from daydreaming of mangoes,
tree-ripe
and just right,

*at bigit sa lahat
mas matamis, makatas
kaysa sa unang balik ng mansanas.***

*alien light,
pale and cold
as a naked pear

plucked from my tongue you have wrapped
in a plastic bag with the \$3 mango
from woolworths

while i conjured an orchard
from back home – mangoes gold and not for sale, and

**above all,
sweeter, more succulent
than the first kiss of the apple.

This poem (Bobis 1998, 8) was my response to the domestic subjugation and violence experienced by Filipinas married to Australians at the time when the Filipina mail-order bride issue was rife. This is not to say that there were no happy stories of cross-cultural unions—which continue to thrive until now. Moreover, I also continue to question the term ‘Filipina mail-order bride’ and how it stereotyped and stigmatized Filipinas (see Piper and Roces 2003; Espinosa 2015). Who coined the ‘mail-order bride’ label, in the first place? Why not, ‘Filipinas who were “pen-pals” with Australian men, then married them’? But then, this could make invisible the ‘mail-order-bride’ attitude and actions of certain Australian men to Filipinas whose accounts told to me reveal that this stigma was their lived life in the new home: their Australian husbands married them to have a housekeeper, a carer, a sex slave (see Elson 1997; Cunneen and Stubbs 2000; Saroca 2006). So I asked, how does one re-instate in this Australian household the disappeared voice, tongue, food, sexual agency and first home? Then, as a poet, I wondered, how do I re-instate my own mouth and render the poetry patriarch (or matriarch) mouthless in the house of Australian national literature—so his only choice is to listen, even for a moment?

And ‘Siesta’ was born. A siesta is a moment: in Spain and in the Philippines, it is an afternoon nap after lunch. The poetic persona claims her siesta as a moment of agency—an ambivalent threshold, a liminal space where everything is unfixed and fluid. Even language is de-territorialized: English in the first stanza is disrupted yet completed in image by the Filipino in the following stanza. Jahan Ramazani writes about ‘the logic of *stanza* as geographic room, [where] the white space

in between functions like a doorway between cultural worlds' (Ramazani 2009, 54). In 'Siesta', this doorway is subversive as English opens into Filipino, which opens back into English that returns to Filipino—as the Filipina delineates the parameters of sex. Take me on my own terms: at siesta when I'm 'at home' with my own food, in my own season, in my own language. Also, the poet says: hey critic, you want poetic pleasure? Have it, but on my terms. And I am not translating that soon. Because I want you to put your reader's mouth-and-ear into the poet's mouth-and-ear. Such an erotic moment. Is empathy erotic then? Perhaps. After all, eros is love.

In 'Ethics and Cognitive Science', Alvin Goldman proposes empathy as simply 'the ability to put oneself into the mental shoes of another person to understand her emotions and feelings' (Goldman 1993, 337–360). An interesting framework that departs from the perception of empathy as primarily a feeling. Mental cognition precedes emotional cognition or affect. Frans de Waal's definition of empathy is the reverse, denoting process: 'The capacity to (a) be affected by and share the emotional state of another, (b) assess the reasons for the other's state, and (c) identify with the other, adopting his or her perspective' (de Waal 2012, online). First affect, then critical knowing of the state of the other, then identifying with and adopting the other's perspective.

Both definitions are relevant to my argument about lexical empathy that may be subversively inspired in this translingual siesta: there must be a mental and emotional cognition of the other. More importantly, it is imperative that the reader adopt the other's perspective. The patriarch, to whom the poem is addressed, is forced to read and act in the Filipina's terms, taken out of his comfort zone and linguistically disoriented and made vulnerable. But the poet also has to have empathy for this disoriented reader: she cannot leave him in the dark. Not only for his sake, but also for the sake of the poem: so it is understood. The footnote is written to translate, as much as to argue and further the subversive stance. Note how

*alien light,
pale and cold
as a naked pear

is the translation of the poem's first stanza in Filipino. It is also the translation of the August winter light by the Filipina to herself: your winter light is the colour of a naked pear, pale and cold. Moreover, this

footnote is more than a translation. It is a completely new poem, a secret revealed about the silencing: to expose how you wrapped my tongue in a plastic bag with the mango from Woolworth's, my tongue a commodity that you could buy cheaply—unlike back home, where mangoes are 'gold and not for sale'. Where we have a whole orchard of them, where both fruit and tongue are precious—and

**above all,
sweeter, more succulent
than the first kiss of the apple.

is the translation of the poem's final stanza in Filipino and, more importantly, the assertion that my fruit and my tongue are 'sweeter, more succulent' than the fruit that you offer me: 'the first kiss of the apple' evoking the sex in your own terms or the language/poem in your own terms that have displaced my mangoes, my language, my season, my pleasure—that have wrapped them up cheaply, muffled them in a plastic bag. So the new footnote poem subversively serves three functions—to translate, to critique, to re-instate voice—to decolonize from the subjugating triple-bind of gender, race and culture. Even the translation must function on my *own* terms.

You might think: but what a confrontational way to foster lexical empathy. We have this notion of empathy as a fuzzy, warm feeling of being nice to the other. No, empathy is not comfortable or self-congratulatory. Empathy is kinship for another's loss and suffering, which inevitably destabilizes us, and like love, empathy renders us vulnerable. Empathy is a critical and ethical re-positioning of who we are and how we relate to those unlike us. Those who do not speak and sound like us—so we attempt, as Steiner proposes, to 'master that other speech' in the hope that we can, as De Waal argues, 'adopt the other's perspective'. To master, as in to learn—not to master, as in to subjugate—that other speech is a tall order. So I simply propose to resolve the poetic experience among poet-text-reader into some meaningful aesthetic completion. But meaningful aesthetic completion is still a tall order. Even if at line/local level, multiple languages empathize with each other to complete the poem, at cultural/global level, navigating difference is always fraught with ambivalences, fractures, slippages and uncertainties. The journey is often threatened by 'The Undertow', (Bhatt 1988, 89–90), as Gujarati poet Sujata Bhatt writes:

There are at least three
 languages between us.
 And the common space, the common dream-sound
 is far out at sea.
 There's a certain spot, dark
 far out where the waves sleep
 there's a certain spot
 we always focus on,
 and the three languages are there
 swimming like seals fat with fish and sun
 they smile, the three languages
 understand each other so well. (Bhatt 1988, 89)

The 'three languages between us'—Gujarati, English, German—'understand each other so well'. But unfortunately we do not: 'the waves keep us back,/the undertow threatens' (Bhatt 1988, 89). What is this undertow that scares us? Perhaps the possibility of failure to understand, to connect—or the possibility of losing power? Is the undertow, in fact, the refusal to understand, underpinned by a language chauvinism that holds fast to our fear of those unknown others, lest they pull us down and we drown? Even so, Bhatt's poem is lexical empathy at its best: it is joyful lexical play, in which 'we take one word at a time' like 'dog' (Bhatt 1988, 89):

કૂતરો (kootro) in Gujarati, *Köter* in Low German
Hund in High German, like hound in English.

Dog	કૂતરો	(kootro)	<i>Köter</i>	<i>Hund</i>
hound	dog	<i>Köter</i>	કૂતરો	(kootro)
કૂતરો	કૂતરો	કૂતરો		
(kootro)	kootro	kootro)		

And there is always the undertow. But chased by the threatening waves, the kootro, köter, hund, dog subvert the chase lexically—the threat is disarmed as the waves join the gambol and 'flood the streets', bringing in seals 'through the bookstores', with 'the common sounds' (Bhatt 1988, 90) that overcome us, 'filling our shoes [and 'our love']

ક ખ ગ
 શ સ્ શ્ સ
 kö kh ga
 sh ksh ્

with salt’ (Bhatt 1988, 90). The private love story of the three languages overcomes the public spaces. We cannot stop languages from doing what they do: blend and compete as sounds, play, chase each other—perhaps chase away even our fear of the undertow. Unless we are in love with the undertow itself. So there is no hope for us. We are already drowning in our monolithic apprehension of the world. Or, we could keep ourselves safe, never daring to dip into the water for fear of failure to understand, to connect, to become vulnerable. So forever, high and dry on the shore: ‘We stand watching, jealous/of the three languages’ (Bhatt 1988, 89). But Bhatt enjoins us to engage: to listen and listen again to the dogs, the seals, the sounds, and to allow our shoes to be filled by them, by the indispensable pleasure of ‘salt’. That shared other ingredient, which binds different flavours and rounds the palate. At this point, Jahan Ramazani’s ‘traveling poetry’ is crucial. He writes:

Whereas travel writing, the Odyssean tale, or, for that matter, the travel poem (as opposed to the traveling poem) involve ‘the territorial passage from one zone to another’² – that is, a macro-level transition, a mimetically plotted border crossing from home to foreign land – the travel in what I am calling traveling poetry often occurs at the micro-level. (Ramazani 2009, 53)

Bhatt’s poem (like ‘Siesta’) is a traveling poem, a transnational poem at micro/local/line level, and at macro/cultural/global level echoing the poet’s own border crossing from her first home in India to the United States and then to Germany, where she now lives. And she teaches us how to travel out from the safe shore, as she teaches us how to read: how to master those other speeches, as Steiner advises—‘one

²Brian Musgrove 1999.

word at a time' if only in small 'common sounds', byte-sized morsels for a start. She instructs us: try them, repeat after me: *ko kh ga sh ksh B*. Find them in your mouth. After all, your mouth and ear know these sounds.

But how do I assure my class of Australian students, who speak and write only in English, that they know or can know these sounds? And for those who know another language from their migrant background enough to use it, which is a rarity, how can they be inspired to confidently bring these other sounds to the class? I will now swap my writer's-and-reader's hat for the teacher's hat, and ask: How can I enable my creative writing students to experience lexical subversion, *cortesía*, empathy, joy? In the swimming culture that is Australia, how can I (who literally cannot quite swim) teach my students to overcome their fear of the undertow?

In 2010, with Belén Martín-Lucas and her University of Vigo students (Literary Studies), I and my University of Wollongong students (Creative Writing) began a border-crossing experiment: the Transnational Story Hub (see website). Our students had to 'swim' two oceans (Pacific and Atlantic) towards each other by co-writing an online story, a process that spanned a whole semester. The teaching experiment developed into a four-year story-making project with Galician and Wollongong participants mostly from the original transnational experiment. I do not have room to discuss this project in this chapter, but suffice it to say that it brought to the fore the problematics of storying self and other across different cultures, languages and disciplines, especially if one group is monolingual (Wollongong: English) and the other multilingual (Vigo: Galician, Castilian, English). I saw the undertow at work through both groups' engagement of difference, and as a co-facilitator of the project, I realized that the lived and perceived power dynamics is the strongest undertow that can pull us down. The practicalities of process can threaten to overcome even those with the best intentions. These realities are discussed, examined and critiqued in the project's book outcome, *The Transnational Story Hub: Between Self and Other* (2016), a collection of essays and creative works produced by the project participants.

While the above project was ongoing, I designed a new creative-writing subject: Writing Across Borders. I was led to this recourse after more than a decade of teaching Australian and mostly monolingual students as a Filipino-Australian lecturer bringing a different sensibility (and texts from different cultures) into the classroom. Student responses

ranged from the indifferent, perplexed, hesitant, timorous, appreciative, joyful, to resentful and sometimes downright hostile. Thus, I had to dream up a subject that attempts to address these responses through creative writing, and critical reading and thinking across borders. Intended as ‘a doing-thinking space’, the subject examines story production, circulation and reception across varied cultures, languages, literary forms and genres. The subject aims to unsettle the students (who will be the next generation of writers, critics and teachers) from the singular self in order to accommodate multiple others. Or, at least, to recognize that there are other sensibilities unlike theirs, and to listen to them with, hopefully, courtesy and a tact of heart. However, having retired from teaching at the end of 2015, I did not have enough time to fine-tune the subject according to what I hoped it could become: grow beyond the Creative Writing Program and cross disciplines, so it could be delivered by creative-writing lecturers team-teaching with those from literary and language studies, with students from these diverse disciplines reading, thinking and writing together in a shared creative-critical space. I had hoped to develop a mode of delivery that could live up to the subject’s aspiration: cross borders.

The first semester of 2013 was an exciting, difficult and revealing teaching-learning pilot for this new subject. There was discovery/re-discovery of the other and the students’ (and my) own otherness; the resisting, stereotyping and welcoming of difference; the challenging of the Anglocentric hierarchy of language and sensibility; then the incessant ‘ethical niggles’ about how we read and write the other, always with multiple creative and critical interrogations, and lessons learned/unlearned. More interesting for me was how the students responded with their bodies: how they put (or not) their mouth-and-ear into the mouth-and-ear of another language and/or culture. Ours was ‘a threshold subject’, where we were always in a liminal state, at the brink of knowing and unknowing, of learning and unlearning, of being and becoming. My mode of delivery was often tested and de-territorialized: this was difficult and sometimes stressful but necessary for developing further strategies in transnational knowledge production and dissemination in the academy, which Jahan Ramazani pertinently challenges:

How would modern and contemporary poetry studies in English – an area now largely subdivided along national lines – look if this transnationalism

were taken to be primary rather than incidental? ... How might the field seem different if the nationalities and ethnicities of poets and poems, often reified by nation-based histories, anthologies, and syllabi, were genuinely regarded as hybrid, interstitial, and fluid imaginative constructs...? ... Unless we transnationalize our syllabi and historical narratives of modern poetry, we may miss such abundant ironies of influence. (Ramazani 2009, 24–47)

Ramazani addresses ‘the transnational and cross-ethnic ironies’ in possible convergences and influences among contemporary British, Irish and American poets read as only of a particular national or cultural affiliation. My students rose to the challenge beyond authors writing in English, as we also studied world literature in translation from other languages, and they discovered a few ironies themselves, even uncanny convergences and insights; moreover, I found myself coming up against my own border crossings as teacher-reader-writer-migrant.

One of the subject’s readings was a play about multiple border crossings: the award-winning *Fronteras Americanas* (1997), a one-man play—autobiography, history, cultural theory and critique, intertextual literature, language play, satire and meta-theatre rolled into one—by the Argentinian-Canadian Guillermo Verdecchia, also the protagonist of the play. I asked the students to do a performance reading of excerpts. At the outset, we kept getting the name ‘Verdecchia’ wrong in our mouths, so after a while we skipped it. I missed my chance. The lesson should have begun with *Verdecchia* as sounds, as byte-sized morsels. Worse, to avert fumbling, I asked if they would rather I read the Spanish parts in between their reading of the English sections. But one student said: ‘Please, can I have a go with the Spanish?’ That little request was a slap on the teacher’s hand. Yes, always let their mouths-and-ears have a go. Let them find the sounds of the other. Perhaps they can find the other’s stories too, and find their own stories of relating with the other.

This is the scene read by the student who asked to have a go:

Verdecchia: I went back to Santiago and looked for some sign of the man who had been shot on the first day of my return. I looked for a scrape, a stain, anything, his shoe perhaps had been left behind.

I wondered who he might have been. I remembered the redness of this shirt, the brightness of the sun. It was five o’clock.

A las cinco de la tarde.
Eran las cinco en punto de la tarde.
Un niño trajo blanca sábana
A las cinco de la tarde. (Verdecchia 1997, 66–67)

Verdecchia's return to Santiago leads him to Federico García Lorca's iconic poem 'Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías' (García Lorca 1960, 101–108), the lament for the dead matador.³ Verdecchia quotes Lorca's lines as he looks for signs of the murdered man. But there is nothing, no means available to identify the dead. No name. So he turns to the only remnant of the tragedy: 'I asked about his shoe—the one I saw on the road—no one knew anything about a shoe although they knew he wore size forty-two just like me' (Verdecchia 1997, 68). But here is identification that is more significant, shocking: *It could have been me*. Empathy: putting himself in the shoes of the dead man. And the student who read the excerpt in the class happened to have the same shoe size! *It could have been me*. The recognition reverberated around the class and we were all silenced. Steiner is right:

In a wholly fundamental, pragmatic sense, the poem, the statue, the sonata [or this play] are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are *lived*. The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and of metaphysical experience, the most 'ingressive', transformative summons available to human experiencing. (Steiner 1989, 143)

Each text is a map of signs, and we either live them or not to reach a destination. In the class, we came to Verdecchia's text for signs of who he is, what his story is, and ultimately, what we reached was *who we are*. Perhaps it was not so much that Verdecchia translated the tragedy in Santiago for us, but that our safe lives in an Australian classroom were 'translated': translocated to the streets of Santiago, into the shoes of the dead. And now we knew: *It could have been me*. Our self-containment was lost. *Gapóbatostone* shattered. Rendered mouthless, we listened to other sounds, other lives, other griefs chasing away the fear of the undertow. We ventured out to that 'certain spot, dark/far out where the waves sleep', where we met the other's language, culture and lived

³Translation of lines from García Lorca's poem: 'At five in the afternoon. It was exactly five in the afternoon. A boy brought the white sheet at five in the afternoon' (J.L. Gili 1960: 101).

life. We listened, we mouthed them, and maybe in that moment of being-with-the-other, we repaired.

The wish to repair. The wish to not shatter. What I hoped to teach the monolingual Australian critics when I wrote the poem ‘Word Gifts for an Australian Critic’ in the 1990s:

Mate those lips,
then heave a wave in the throat
and lull the tip of the tongue
at the roof of the mouth.
Mahal. mahal. mahal.
‘Love, love, love’ – let me,
in my tongue. (Bobis 1998, 9)

I wish to teach Australian critics how to read, teach them the sounds of my language, how to move lips, tongue, throat and lungs to make these sounds. I wish to teach them how we love back home, how we sing, how we remember, and that how as migrant—like their parents or great-grandparents who also travelled from far away to settle in this new home—I too have grieved over the lost home and languages. I wish them to know what this grief and loss mean, how cutting they are:

But if suddenly you pucker
the lips – *lung* –
as if you were about to break
into tears or song – watch out,
the splinter cuts too far too much – *lungggggggg* –
unless withdrawn – *kot* –
in time. *Lungkot*.
Such is our word for ‘sadness.’ (Bobis 1998, 9–10)

In 1991, I left the Philippines writing in three languages: Bikol, Filipino, English. In my early years in Australia, I wrote a full epic poem in Filipino.⁴ Now, to read this epic, sometimes I have to consult a dictionary. It is as if it was not I who wrote this twenty-thousand-word

⁴ *Kantada ng Babaing Mandirigma Daragang Magayon/Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon* (Manila: Babaylan Press, Institute of Women’s Studies, St. Scholastica, 1993, 1997) was the epic poem in two versions, Filipino and English, that I wrote for my Doctorate of Creative Arts at University of Wollongong (1991–1994).

text. Because I have to keep writing-thinking-feeling in English, in order to survive in the Australian literary industry, I have been losing a language. I wish the monolingual Australian critics could imagine the grief over this loss, even if now I can laugh with them:

your kookaburras roost in my windpipe
when I say, 'laughter!'
as if feathering a new word.
halakhak-k-k-k-kookaburra! (Bobis 1998, 9)

Even my laughter has morphed into new sounds, as I live with this push and pull between two homes inside, as I bring Australian literature 'words freshly/prised from my wishbone' (Bobis 1998, 9):

how they flow
east-west-east-west-east
in one bone wishing
it won't break. (Bobis 1998, 10)

In 2016, my fourth novel, *Locust Girl. A Lovesong*, was shortlisted for then won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction. Unlike my earlier novels, this is not about the Philippines, nor was it written to 'translate' the spirit of my first tongues (Bikol, Filipino). I am very happy with the win but was incredulous that I even got shortlisted, and did not believe at all that I would win. I have lost confidence in my writing in recent years. At times before this win, I thought to myself, maybe the critics, judges, literary institutions are right: my work is not good enough. I hope this loss of confidence does not happen to other writers of difference to an extent that it would stop them from writing. That it would silence them. This would be a great loss to literary production in multicultural Australia.

We need to acknowledge the advocates against this possible loss: the small, independent presses and literary journals, the alternative awards, networks and forums, and television and radio programmes that provide a space for different stories and modes of storytelling even in languages other than English. And there are the teachers and scholars who continue to bring these cultural products into the classroom and the public discourse. Notable is the AustLit, 'an authoritative database about Australian literature and storytelling' powered by 'a network of researchers from Australian universities and the National Library of Australia, led by The

University of Queensland' that 'support research into, and the teaching of, Australian literary, narrative, and print cultures and the expansion of knowledge about the place of story in Australian culture in the past and present' (online). These vigilant networks save writers of difference from total invisibility. And sometimes, there are welcome surprises in the mainstream. In the 2016 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, the shortlists and winners of major prizes included several writers of difference whose first language is not English. Moreover, the Indigenous Writers Prize was created for the first time, officially celebrating the voices and stories of Australia's first peoples in the mainstream.

In the media release for the awards shortlist, Senior Judge Ross Grayson Bell is quoted: 'Across all categories, this year's nominees reflect a growing diversity of voices that enriches and broadens the Australian literary canon. By bringing new and fresh perspectives to light, our collective horizons are expanded and our understanding of ourselves, and each other, deepened' ('Shortlists' 2016). So is the 'white ground' shifting? Michelle Cahill, one of the judges for the poetry prize, maintains that the literary recognition of writers of difference continues to be an ongoing struggle, an opinion that could also apply more generally to the whole Anglophone realm. In addition, the Australian nation, still grappling with its colonial history, is only just beginning to recognize its indigenous literatures. Not surprisingly, the celebrated 'Australian multiculturalism' still becomes the topic of contestation, and the other and multiple languages, and the literatures that they produce, are still in the periphery of Australian literature in English. And when these other literature producers write in English, translating their experiences from their first home, they find that the mainstream gate is still a very high wall to contend with.

But I take hope: 'our understanding of ourselves, and each other, [may be] deepened' especially in this age of intensifying conflictual local-global identity politics—if a meeting of diverse voices in the spirit of 'lexical *cortesía*' or empathy continues to be fostered in the mainstream imaginary.

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Narratives of Difference in Globalized Cultures

Reading Transnational Cultural Commodities

Martín-Lucas, B.; Ruthven, A. (Eds.)

2017, XVI, 251 p. 15 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-62132-6