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Operations of Silence: Examining Translingual Borderlands

Abstract: In a time of geographical mobility and constant transnational border-crossings, multilingualism has become a widely discussed topic in literary theory. Usually the focus is placed on multilingual practices such as code-switching or self-translation rather than on gaps that arise from untranslatability. Taking as its starting point a TEDxRíodelaPlata talk by the writer Anna Kazumi Stahl, this article argues not only that there are countless reasons why an author might choose any language as a means for creative expression, but also that writing a monolingual text can create a conflict between a homogeneous language system and a heterogeneous cultural reality. While silence can convey distinct meanings depending on factors such as communication situation, personal experience, and cultural background, it can also be regarded as a marker for something that cannot or should not be translated. Inhabiting a borderland where monolingual boundaries are constantly being transcended, the metaphor of silence in Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de un solo día* and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* may well serve both as a symbol of an identity unrestricted by notions of culture and nation, and as an invitation for readers to reflect on the limits of (mono)lingual expression.

Keywords: Anna Kazumi Stahl, border-crossings, multilingual literature, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, silence, translingual literature

In her TEDxRíodelaPlata talk of 2013, the writer Anna Kazumi Stahl emphasizes the important role of chance as a determinant in our lives. By "chance," Stahl means the paths that brought together her German father and Japanese mother, as well as those that lead to her own decision to move to Argentina and subsequently write her works of fiction in Spanish, which is her fourth language (Stahl 2013). Stahl is a prime example of a writer who migrated to a foreign language not because of any obvious political, personal, or economic reason, but because she could not choose between the languages she grew up with. Her choice of language, she claims, has helped her gain distance from her roots and has enabled her to look at things from an outsider's perspective (Stahl 2013). By purposefully choosing a language that is not connected to her personal past – a language that might also make her work widely unavailable to audiences in the non-Spanish-speaking world – the author challenges conventional theories of language as a

marker of social identity. She also raises new questions for the study of multilingual literature, as the field's main focus still lies on speakers of various languages who write in English.

Taking this idea as its starting point, this article seeks to raise questions about challenges facing multilingual authors of monolingual texts, as well as examining the limitations imposed upon them by language itself and the possible meanings silence can convey in their texts. Juxtaposing the mute character in Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de un solo día* (2002) with Shirley Geok-lin Lim's autobiographical notes in *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996), this analysis aims to explore whether silence can serve as a code when language lacks the accurate words to express what an author is trying to convey.

1 The problematic and distinct meanings of the prefix "trans-" in the terms "transcultural" and "translingual"

In his introduction to *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft*, Steven G. Kellman argues that writers who choose to write in a language other than their native tongue "flaunt their freedom from the constraints of the culture into which they happen to be born" (Kellman 2003, ix). While he describes the process of migrating to another language for creative expression as a rebellious act that might provide authors with more artistic freedom, Kellman's remark calls for a more critical reflection on the term "culture" and for a closer examination of the differences between the dynamics of culture and language, and the problems that might result from those differences. Although there are manifold definitions of what the notion of culture entails, it is generally understood as the shared practices, values, and meanings of a society, while cultural identity is often defined through a shared other.[1] In times of globalization, mobility, and constant transnational border-crossings, the limitations of this understanding of the concept have become less obvious because social values are subject to constant renegotiation. However, the term "transcultural" could also prove to be problematic in that it assumes an ideal condition of globally shared values, while many culturally diverse authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Yoko Tawada point out issues of misunderstanding, discrimination, and the

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1 For some core concepts, see Spencer-Oatey (2012).

difficulties of expression in situations where their personal background makes them a minority.

As James Clifford suggested, "if we rethink culture and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel, then the organic, naturalizing bias of the term culture – seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, and dies, etc. – is questioned" (1997, 25). Taking this argument a step further, we could replace the term "travel" with "movement." Favouring the spatial concept of routes as the determinant for the creation of cultural identity and accepting culture in the sense of what Stuart Hall has called a "fluid" condition (2003, 224–225),[2] it seems more accurate to consider culture as a notion that undergoes constant changes resulting from the decisions individuals take rather than being a static construct which is defined by national boundaries. While the prefix "trans-" in "transcultural" advocates a globalization of values, the concept of translingualism, according to Steven G. Kellman (2000, ix–x), refers to the ability to express oneself in and across multiple verbal systems.

In times of constant transnational movement, there are countless reasons for why an author might cross national or linguistic borders. In fact, long before the rise of international virtual communities, streams of transnational labour and student migration existed, in addition to groups of people seeking refuge from war and persecution. All of these cases have resulted in close relations between people from different backgrounds who speak different languages. Although the majority of translingual writers have chosen to exchange their mother tongues for world languages such as English or French, there are also some who have opted to use less widespread languages, such as Dutch or Portuguese.[3] The increasing number of multilingual writers challenges the concepts of national literature, migrant literature, and world literature. Their works do not necessarily fit into the genre of "world literature" as many of their names are relatively unknown, and their works do not succeed in crossing many borders in order to reach readers in other parts of the world. Equally, writers who decide to write in their second, third, or fourth languages are not necessarily always migrants either. Instead, they often regard themselves – in the words of Shirley Geok-lin Lim – as "deterritorialized" (quoted in Quayum 2003, 89), composing what Ottmar Ette has described as "literature with no permanent residence" (Ette 2004, 88–96; my translation).

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2 Referring to the (post-)colonial Caribbean experience, Hall describes cultural identity as "a matter of becoming," a constant transformation in the course of the "continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (2003, 224–225).

3 Some examples to be mentioned here are the Somali Dutch-American writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Chinese-Dutch writer Lulu Wang, and the Ukrainian-Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector.

Yet, despite geographical mobility being a common aspect of modern life, the idea of a necessary connection between language and cultural identity, in the sense of a sole "mother tongue" – a concept that has been promoted mainly out of nationalist interests (Yildiz 2012, 6–10) – still presents a significant obstacle to a more open approach to multilingualism. As their languages have allowed them to experience more than one culture, polyglot authors often find themselves in a borderland between places to which they feel connected to a greater or lesser degree. Within this borderland, their several languages become one unique tongue whose wide range of expressions transcends the limits of monolingual boundaries.

However, when multilingual speakers try to express themselves through monolingual speech, they often find themselves lost in a gap where one language fails to express things accurately and other languages cannot be used to express them. Thus, in order to accommodate an audience that is unfamiliar with some of their other tongues, multilingual authors of monolingual texts sacrifice a good deal of the range covered by their authentic creative voices. Yet the negotiation between the authors' multiple languages often results in the construction of their own individual systems of communication. Rather than being a stable condition, the gap that challenges the author's means of expression can appear or disappear, increase or decrease, corresponding to each specific situation. It is, above all, the conflict between a homogeneous language system and a heterogeneous cultural reality that challenges multilingual writers to innovate creatively in order to express the inexpressible.[4]

Following the Bakhtinian theory of the hybrid utterance (Bakhtin 1981, 304), the process of code-switching, often found in Chicano and African literature, juxtaposes two different languages within a single text.[5] By producing sentences that are neither entirely one language nor the other, this method not only suggests that the author's identity can be read as what Itamar Even-Zohar has defined as a polysystem – a structured whole whose pieces are both independent and hierarchically linked to each other (Even-Zohar 2012) – but also reveals the importance of the writer's other tongues.

In many contemporary works of fiction, such as novels by young African writers like Tendai Huchu, the phenomenon of translanguaging has become even more common than code-switching. The term, which represents a relatively new approach to bilingualism, was defined by Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García, and Wallis Reid as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without

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4 In order to describe alternatives to monolingual expression, a variety of terms have emerged – including "postmonolingualism" (Yildiz 2012), "plurilingualism" (Zarate, Levy, and Kramsch 2008), and "code-meshing" (Young and Martinez 2011).

5 For a more detailed study of code-switching, see Gardner-Chloros and Weston (2013).

regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015, 283). Unlike code-switching, the alternating use of two or more different languages is unintentional and does not follow a hierarchical order, but rather represents the intuitive output of a multilingual mind. Other writers have felt the need to point out the necessity of self-translation by adding semantic layers. The possibilities range from the translation of cultural references, such as the Nigerian proverbs in the works of Chinua Achebe, to metatextual references, to descriptions of the physical exertion of the body when using different languages, as demonstrated in the works of Yoko Tawada. As a consequence of the constant movement between language worlds, writers pick up new aesthetic practices that can no longer be communicated through monolingual speech.

The juxtaposition of different languages offers an ideal way for multilingual authors to solve the conflicts that arise from untranslatable emotions, situations, and expressions; but, at the same time, the perception of the resultant hybrid texts could prove to be problematic for readers who are not familiar with a similar degree of cultural or linguistic mobility. While an author can provide metareferences in the form of translation to help readers interpret multilingual utterances, there always remains the problem of untranslatability. If it is indeed, as Friedrich Schleiermacher believed, the case that "not a single word in one language will correspond perfectly to a word in another" (2012, 46), translation can hardly ever be anything more than a paraphrase. Even more than that, explanations provided by an author could be read as an attempt as to shape the reader's interpretation. Ideally, multilingual writers would, as Steven Kellman proposes (2000, 16), "transcend language in general and utter everything." The only way to truly achieve this, Kellman continues, would be to find a way "to pass beyond words to silence and truth" (2000, 16).

2 Interpreting silence

Kellman's plea for a way of transcending language in order to provide writers with a wider, if not endless, range of expression refers to an ideal communication situation in which silence is interpreted by every reader in exactly the way it was intended by the author. However, while silence often arises out of the void where a term or idea cannot be accurately translated from one language into another, not speaking can also convey distinct meanings depending on factors such as a person's personal experience or cultural background. Thus, silence can be interpreted as politeness, a lack of important things to say, a means of saving face or

of intimidating, or a sign of respect. In addition, even if there are no actual words, the silence has to be pointed out by other characters or the narrator for the reader to actually become aware of it. Depending on the markers provided in the text, the reader is free to interpret the silence on the basis of their own individual expectations and experience or the guidance provided by the author.

The following analysis of Anna Kazumi Stahl's *Flores de un solo día* and Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* aims to compare two concepts of silence in the works of translingual authors, both of whom, although rather different in their approach, explore the possibilities of silence as an alternative to self-translation.

2.1 Anna Kazumi Stahl, *Flores de un solo día* (2002)

In *Flores de un solo día*, Anna Kazumi Stahl explores the expressive possibilities of silence through the protagonist's mother, Hanako, who has lost her ability to communicate with others as a result of a serious fever she had as a child. The fever could be read as an allegory for the trauma she suffered from being separated from her family at the age of seven during World War II. As a consequence of her experiences, she cannot find words to describe what she feels.

Repeatedly, it is mentioned that Hanako lives in her own universe. It is suggested that isolating herself from the outside world makes it easier for her to deal with her inner feelings. She is described as totally absorbed in her silence to the point of laughing without a sound. The isolation is mirrored in Hanako's reluctance to leave the house. Almost to the degree of agoraphobia, she gets extremely stressed when she has to go outside. Yet whenever she manages to build up an emotional connection with another person, her condition improves: she seems more relaxed leaving the house and also interacts more with her environment. With Hanako, Anna Kazumi Stahl not only proposes that silence helps the character to become more connected with her inner self; she also emphasizes the connection between language, mobility, and interaction. When the protagonist, Aimée, travels back to the US to relearn the language of her childhood, her mother, Hanako, isolates herself in the closed space of her home as well as under the cloak of her muteness.

Although Aimée travels from Buenos Aires to New Orleans looking for her roots, seeking to trace her family's history by questioning people who seem to know answers but are reluctant to provide them, in the end it is her mute mother who helps her find the key to her identity. Contrary to the belief of others, Hanako turns out to be capable of communicating, despite being unable to speak. Through little clues she includes in her ikebana creations, the ancient Japanese

art of flower arrangement which provides the family income, Hanako guides her daughter on her quest to find her father.

By reflecting on the character's silence from various perspectives, even to the point of uncovering Hanako's wordless voice, the author not only exposes the problematic ambiguity of possible meanings that are read into silence but also demonstrates how easily non-verbal communication can be dismissed when one is too focused on the spoken word. In addition, the fact that, throughout the novel, Hanako's muteness is repeatedly read by others as a mental disability stresses the connection that is often drawn between language skills and intellectual capacity, as is manifested amongst other things in the simplistic way some people communicate with foreigners. Despite her seeming very confident in her reclusive life, Hanako's silence feels passive, mirroring the stoic way in which she accepts her destiny, allowing her mother-in-law to send her away after the death of her husband. This silent obedience is juxtaposed with sudden fits of rage and a secret life that is eventually uncovered by her daughter. Only through her Japanese flower arrangements can Hanako finally find a means to help Aimée tell her story; this is particularly remarkable because it allows her to communicate without words and yet still in terms of her own cultural background.

2.2 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996)

In her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, the Asian-American writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim describes how she barricaded herself as a child behind her silence. Her refusal to speak, she concludes, served her as a kind of self-protection. Growing up in a large family where two different languages were spoken, the future author felt torn between the Hokkien Chinese of her father's family – a language of exclusion, which marked her out as a foreigner in her home town – and the Malay of the assimilated Chinese, which was her mother's native tongue. When Lim was eight years old, her mother abandoned the family, and in doing so took away her daughter's mother tongue. The author soon found refuge in English, a language which was unattached to her complicated roots. The stories she read in the new language helped her escape a reality where she felt unwanted. As she could not go so far as to use the new language in her interactions with others, she found herself trapped between the language she could not speak and the other languages she did not want to speak. With her mother absent and the rest of her family speaking a language she refused to accept as her own, Lim intended to create her own parallel world in English. Yet, she concludes, "their loud quarrels and laughter isolated me in a way that silence and books could not defend me"

(Lim 1996, 292). It becomes clear that the author regards her own silence as a (not always effective) tool for self-protection.

When later, as an adult, she moved to the US, where she was able to use the language of her choice, she was constantly reminded of the fact that she was not a native speaker. Her non-native pronunciation became particularly noticeable when she started teaching classes on English literature. Again, as Lim describes in her novel *Sister Swing* (2006), silence became an alternative to "the lip-clopping sentences that couldn't be lightened with American vowels" (Lim 2006, 181). Although her accent labelled her as a foreigner, her silence left her origins unknown. "I came to exercise a discipline of self-abnegation, observing, as it were, monastic rules of silence and abstinence" (Lim 1996, 349), as she puts it in her memoir. What is remarkable is that both situations – Lim's refusal to speak Hokkien Chinese as a child as well as her hesitation to speak English as an adult – present silence as a conscious act while at the same time reflecting on it from two different perspectives. The silence of her time as a young girl in the house of her paternal grandfather isolated the author from her family, but it also protected her from choosing between the languages of her parents to which she felt attached and unattached in equal measure; whereas the silence into which she escaped during her education in the US was experienced as an act of self-abnegation.

2.3 Silence as a neutral meeting place

As Joy Kogawa puts it in her novel *Obasan*, "there is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak" (1981, 1). While the mute mother in Anna Kazumi Stahl's novel is physically unable to speak, she succeeds in transcending language by creating her own non-verbal means of communication through the art of flower arrangement. By transferring this tradition of her Japanese youth into her life in Argentina, Hanako has created a place for herself within a different cultural environment without having to give up her roots. However, this otherness separates her from her surroundings, and this exclusion is stressed through her uneasiness to leave the house. The physical exclusion and the barriers to communication can both be read as metaphors for her being an outsider. Hanako's isolation in Buenos Aires is juxtaposed with her secret love affair in New Orleans, which is gradually uncovered by her daughter. While her working space functions more as a refuge which allows her to blank out her environment, the house where she used to meet her lover can be considered a place where she could not only express but also exchange ideas. In the sense of a silence that cannot speak, Hanako's muteness can be interpreted as a reaction to the trauma of double displacement through separation from her family and then from her lover.

Silence can be understood as a metaphor for exclusion, but at the same time it can also be regarded as a means of resistance in the sense of refusing to use a foreign tongue in order to avoid exclusion, as is described in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's memoir. Both her father's native Hokkien Chinese in Malaysia and her accented English in the US would have highlighted her as the member of a minority, a marginalization she intended to resist. In addition, silence can also be the marker for a state of transition during which new layers of identity have to be negotiated. When, following the disappearance of her mother, Lim refrains from speaking her father's language, her silence can be regarded a liminal stage which marks not only the author's passage to adulthood but also an identity crisis which eventually leads to her choice of a whole new language for herself (English). One might even conclude that, while language can be regarded as an allegory for the negotiation of culture, silence can serve as a symbol of an identity undefined.

Both authors make use of silence in order to stress the processes of identity negotiation, particularly with regard to entering translingual borderlands, instead of attempting self-translation between the cultures and languages that are entailed by their origins as well as by the paths their lives take.

3 Conclusion

In giving space to the untranslatable, or inexpressible, by providing various layers of possible meaning, silence could be understood as an even wider playground for heteroglossia where readers have to work in order to uncover meaning in silence.[6] Throughout their interpretations of the text, not only do the layers of the author's identity come into play; readers' backgrounds also contribute to their understanding. While readers are also involved in the interpretation of different cultural codes in works that include translations, due to the fact that they have to translate the idiosyncratic symbols of multilingual texts in order to make meaning out of them, silence offers greater freedom. It serves as a marker for something that is absent rather than a guideline for interpretation. The absence of something that the writer struggles to express because of emotional ties and experiences linked to another language system, can also transmit a stronger

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6 While the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia refers to the coexistence of different language varieties, it could be argued that there is an underlying conflict of different languages in texts written by multilingual authors – a discourse which readers will be able to assimilate according to their own experiences of distinct language systems. For Bakhtin's view of heteroglossia, see Bakhtin (1981, 269–360).

sense of the inadequacy of monolingual expression. Thus, non-speech turns into "cannot-speak": the writer fails or refuses to translate the contradiction between multilingual thinking and monolingual writing.

In the search for a fluid language which can express all the layers of a multi-lingual writer's identity accurately, silence can provide a space for turning points in the process of reflecting and becoming, almost like a multilingual contact zone. As Ottmar Ette has emphasized, literature per se is not bound to a permanent residence, neither in a spatial nor in a linguistic sense (Ette 2004, 184). In a time of constant national and linguistic border-crossings, there is a growing body of work by transnational authors waiting to be explored. Their movement between languages demonstrates both the freedom of geographical mobility and the price it inevitably entails.

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