

## **borrowed tongues. life writing, migration and translation**

Eva C. Karpinski, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, ON, 2012, 282pp., ISBN 978-1-55458-357-7, CAN \$39.95

*Borrowed Tongues. Life Writing, Migration and Translation* constitutes an impressive and original contribution towards engaging a broad range of autobiographical texts written by migrant, diasporic and colonially displaced women through the critical lens of translation theory and intersectional feminist analysis. With great originality, Karpinski proposes that the critical tools of Translation Studies, as they have been honed in the last twenty years by deconstructionist, hermeneutic, feminist and postcolonial scholars (Derrida, 1988; Godard, 1989; Spivak, 1993, especially; and Ricoeur, 2006), be employed towards illuminating the politics of language in the life writing practices of women historically and geographically assigned to multiply determined margins of class, ethnicity, gender and race. The book as a whole argues that migrant texts invite us to understand strategies of cultural self-definition beyond oppositional logics and in terms of 'contingent identifications and mobile alliances', which require new 'ways of thinking about language and identity in new transnational contact zones, premised upon recognition and heterogeneity' (p. 227). To this end, Karpinski unpacks the multiple imbrications through which the constitution of the 'authentic'—self-contained and self-possessed—autobiographical subject has been historically tied to normative inscriptions of citizenship, framed by the monolingual constitution of the colonial liberal nation-state—even in its multicultural incarnations.

Karpinski articulates translation and life writing through one another, suggesting that both be understood not as derivative and marginal writing practices in relation to a hierarchically posited 'original' text or an 'ideal' self-contained authorial I, but as *borderline* practices that actively participate 'in the production of difference through language' (p. 7). *Borrowed Tongues* underscores how migrant writing is by necessity trans-lingual and in translation, because it spans the tension between two 'exiles'—exile from a (assumed lost) 'mother tongue' and exile from the (assumed more authoritative) 'borrowed tongue' of the host country. Karpinski eloquently shows that 'the migrant as translingual subject unsettles the priority of both mother tongue and borrowed tongue' (p. 21), arguing that a productive condition of exteriority to both is what spurs the writing, enabling us also to read between the lines a set of potential interventions within dominant regimes of

citizenship, even when the writing itself appears to follow a trajectory of assimilation and domestication of the foreign self.

After a comprehensive introduction, which maps out how the critical terminology of life writing and translation studies can be combined to address the textual (and) survival strategies of women writing across, between and against (imposed) national borders, the four chapters offer a close reading of an aptly selected group of eight texts, examined in pairs according to a main thematic thread. Chapter 2 examines two early twentieth-century narratives of female acculturation into Anglophone North America, respectively, in the United States (Antin, 1997[1912]) and in Canada (Salverson, 1981[1939]), and shows how each author relies on ambivalent strategies of cultural translation that make tactical use of habits and stereotypes from one's own source culture (Russian Jewish for Antin and Icelandic for Salverson) to negotiate some measure of gendered agency in the differentiated multicultural grids of the United States (Antin) and Canada (Salverson). Chapter 3 explores the ethics of translation involved in narratives relaying maternal histories of migration in the daughters' accounts of immigrant maternal subjectivity (Kikumura, 1981; Kojder and Glogowska, 1995). Karpinski highlights the logic of encryption (Derrida) at work in both Kikumura's and Kojder's texts, insofar as each daughter/writer's attempt to make sense of her mother's cultural, linguistic and generational otherness morphs into an attempt to make sense of her own life (a form of encrypted autobiography) in which translation plays a key mediating role. Chapter 4 contrasts *Lost In Translation* by Hoffman (1989) and *In the Second Person* by Kamboureli (1985), two texts that are explicitly language-conscious and deconstructive, and that enact two profoundly different affective orientations towards understanding the self's constitutive embeddedness in translation. According to Karpinski, Hoffman's autobiographical novel displays a melancholic relation to an unachievable ideal of language fullness (and full subjectivity) forever lost in the passage of migration, whereas Kamboureli's more obviously experimental text (its form hovers somewhere between the long poem, the journal and the epistolary novel) displays an attitude towards language and the subjectivity it shapes and relays as an ongoing process of translation. Thus, whereas in Hoffman translation is profoundly an experience of loss, in Kamboureli it is configured as an experience of ongoing, provisional and constantly negotiated transformation. The last two books examined, Philip's (1991) *Looking for Livingstone* and Kincaid's (1996) *The Autobiography of My Mother*, are both books written by Caribbean diasporic writers living, respectively, in the United States and in Canada, which confront the violence of colonial translation and its radically alienating effects, turning imperial English against itself, and foregrounding 'a political contestation around language and representation that defines [the authors'] predicament as postcolonial writers' (p. 220).

Karpinski's analysis is exemplary for the attention she pays to textual detail and each book's material inscription within differentially configured regimes of

multiculturalism in Canada and the United States. She produces substantive and thick<sup>1</sup> readings that make visible the multiple constraints and painful negotiations of foreignness and belonging through which these narratives acquire poignant significance. In attending to such a wide variety of texts Karpinski surfaces the valuable lessons that migrancy narratives have to offer towards undoing what she calls 'the terrors of monolanguage'; that is, the idea that language is 'owned' and can thus be deployed as a 'legitimate instrument of exclusion' from full subjecthood and access to citizenship. Overall, *Borrowed Tongues* persuasively foregrounds how migrant women's life writing contributes to our understanding of the 'political dimension' and 'material consequences' at work in the subject's relationship to language. 'Such narratives', Karpinski argues, 'allow us to repoliticize ... effects of plurality' (p. 224) towards new epistemologies of being.

## references

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**1** I borrow the term 'thick' from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who argued for the necessity of 'thick descriptions' in anthropological fieldwork. Both in anthropology and in cultural studies at large 'thick descriptions' have come to designate accounts of social behaviour and of modes of cultural agency that are profoundly mindful of the multiple contextual layers from which they originate. For Geertz (1973), the goal of a 'thick description' is to help us gain access to 'an unfamiliar universe of symbolic action' not for the sake of extracting 'sweeping abstractions' but in order to allow us to 'learn from' and 'converse' with the 'subjects' of our cultural analysis (24–25). The analyses Karpinski offers in her book allow us to do precisely that: converse with, and learn from, the life writing strategies of the women she is examining.

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