Developing a Sense of Place

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A sense of place: From experience to language, from the Polish traveller through a Spanish saint to an adaptation of a Zimbabwean play

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In a volume about ‘developing a sense of place’, this is an essay which questions the enterprise, in agreement with the philosopher Michel de Certeau, who advocated the notion of a space rather than a sense of place, and furthermore advocated that placeness as a site of freedom (Certeau 1984, 131). Theoretically, the notions of a ‘place’, and therefore ‘placeness’, are contested ideas (see, for example, Freestone and Liu’s edited 2016 volume Place and Placelessness Revisited). Here I pose some questions relating to the notion of translating physical experience which connects to a place but becomes something different and more complicated. This will include a linguistic translation of a bodily and physical experience into words that can then be shared by a community and indeed develop a sense of communality of a kind. My starting position is therefore to reject the physical in favour of the metaphorical, not to say metaphysical, hoping, after Certeau, that this will become an essay about a sense of freedom and fidelity, in translation but also in life. In this essay, therefore, I will attempt to hold in one space different notions of a translation of the experience of a place and placeness using three very different examples: a novel about travelling, St Teresa’s visions and my own adaptation of Stanley Makuwe’s play Finding Temeraire.

Olga Tokarczuk’s ‘novel essay’ – or essay novel – entitled, in English, Flights, won the International Booker Prize in 2018. The book, as its blurb on the back page says, is about ‘travel in the twenty-first century and human anatomy, broaching life, death, motion and migration’. The
volume, initially published in Polish in 2007, was translated into English by Jennifer Croft, who shared the award with the writer. As a scholar and a creative person whose first language is Polish, I have to admit that I have found some of the translating solutions used in the novel challenging, despite the excellent voice of the work’s English version. I have found it curiously ‘straightening’ of Tokarczuk’s convoluted and ambiguous language at times. Maybe it makes it even ‘better’ or more accessible to an English reader.

For a start, the work’s Polish title, *Bieguni*, feels very different from *Flights*. ‘Bieguni’ is not a proper word in Polish, or at least not a word anybody would know in Poland (Tokarczuk explains in the novel that ‘bieguni’ is the name of an ancient nomadic tribe, which may or may not be the case, but in any event, I have never heard of it and neither has anybody I have spoken to). ‘Bieguni’ sounds as if, etymologically, it has something to do with ‘running’ (‘biegac’) but also with the word ‘poles’ as in ‘the North Pole’ (‘bieguny’ would be the plural of ‘the Pole’). The title therefore sounds strangely uncanny, foreign, exotic, and yes, evokes a sense travel of the kind Tokarczuk writes about that is not easily definable – the very title immediately suggesting something out of the ordinary. ‘Flights’ on the other hand – well! ‘Flights’ just sounds like ‘flights’ – to do with a journey but of an ordinary kind, to do with planes, and airports, and maybe flights of fancy, and maybe even escapes, but the word is just an existing word and has lost the connotations of strangeness that the original title had.

This chapter will not critique that award-winning translation of the award-winning novel. Instead, it will reflect on the nature of words and what they can describe and what they cannot describe, trying to think through some of the relationships between places, emotions and translations. In connection with this, I will also briefly examine my own experience of attempting to evoke a sense of place by adapting the play *Finding Temeraire* by the Zimbabwean Stanley Makuwe, about life in a colonial mining settlement, Mashava, in Rhodesia and in the early independence years of Zimbabwe. Mashava exists as an actual historical place but the intense engagement of the two characters in the play and in my film is of course fictional. Makuwe’s writing choice included placing a female character at the heart of the piece with sparse descriptions of the place. The play, and later my adaptation of it, becomes also a mythical space in which the grand political narratives play out as the background to the profound intimate dramas in the foreground; the play is therefore about how the political and the historical affect the personal in the particular place. In this specific case it was not an issue of an adaptation
to screen – although it was that too – but rather, I would argue, it was indeed a translation, not just from the play onto the screen, but rather, from one semiotic system to another, from one way of thinking about the place and its meaning to another.

There have been very many works on cinema and adaptation (e.g. Andrew 1984; Cohen 1979; Corrigan 1999; Stam 2000), but here I am trying to focus in particular on the process of ‘describing’ and ‘naming’ a particular place and what it might mean in terms of some kind of notion of accuracy, both historical and geographical, and epistemological truth. I am also interested in the ability of writing to describe physical experience as an enabling procedure – enabling knowledge but also facilitating deep enjoyment, or psychoanalytical *jouissance* (of which more later). As we will see directly, there is controversy about the above and the question is indeed: is it true that writing and naming enhances experience? Or does it take away from it, making it too concrete and obvious?

The case study of my own work that I am using here is just one example but the questions asked have broader significance, also in terms of establishing the relationship between the experience and the description of it, and here the particular translation that occurs between the two, between the author (and therefore the reader and the viewer) and the place and the experience described. I will also briefly offer a few reflections on what psychoanalysis might have to offer and contribute to this conversation. Before I proceed, however, I need to make a disclaimer. I will be mentioning here the thinkers and writers whose work I have found useful for this discussion, regardless of gender, but I will be purposefully favouring female voices in the discussion.

A relationship between bodily experience and speech was of course crucial at the outset of psychoanalysis. In *Autobiographics in Freud and Derrida* (1990), Jane Marie Todd makes a connection between a bodily symptom and an autobiographical statement: ‘the hysterical body is a text, in fact, an autobiographical text. Every symptom tells a story about the patient’s life, or rather several stories’ (Todd 1990, 5). Todd further points out that the work of a psychoanalyst is really that of a ‘translator’, a translator of symptoms: ‘It is the task of the psychoanalyst to work with the patient, to collaborate on a *translation* of this secret and motivated language of the body into the conventional language of the words’ (p. 5; my emphasis). Freud calls this collaboration, this task of translation, ‘an analysis’. Todd further glosses ‘analysis’ as the name given to ‘an autobiographical practice whose principal purpose is neither to testify nor to confess (one’s sins or one’s devotion), though both modes may be part of an analysis. The work of analysis is autobiographics as *cure*’ (pp. 5–6).
One could take issue with the above, or with many other matters – one of these being Freud’s at times patriarchal attitude to females, which I have discussed elsewhere (Piotrowska 2019). I am putting a marker here but bracketing the discussion in order to focus on another question: is translating one’s experience into words always therapeutic? It is interesting to note the moment of ‘translation’ from bodily experience to language which, psychoanalysts believe, has a curative effect but could also have other effects if that ‘translation’ enters a public space: psychoanalysis names (artistic) sublimation as a way of channelling (indeed translating) one’s frustrated sexual energy into a creative activity. Lacan famously took away the ‘frustrated’ element and suggested that there is enjoyment (jouissance) in talking and writing which is equal to sexual satisfaction. In the introduction to her recent book on sex, Alenka Zupančič argues: ‘The point that Lacanian psychoanalysis makes, however, is more paradoxical: the activity is different, yet the satisfaction in talking is itself “sexual”’ (2017, 1), meaning further that it need not have roots in its ‘sexual origin’. She says further that it is narrating the experience that makes it special and not the other way around: ‘the satisfaction in talking contains a key to sexual satisfaction (and not the other way around)’ (Zupančič 2017, 1).

Freud and those who followed certainly wanted to relieve the symptoms of his suffering patients, but the main objective of psychoanalysis has been for more than a century the project of gaining knowledge, in terms both of self-knowledge on the part of the patient/analysand and also of the knowledge which can then be shared with others through language in order to advance our collective knowledge – or non-knowledge – of who we are, as humanity or perhaps as merely Western civilisation. That was emphatically not Lacan’s idea, not at the moment of enunciation and even less so towards the end of his life. In addition, Zupančič and other members of the Slovenian school of psychoanalysis and philosophy have emphasised the profound links between psychoanalysis and philosophy, the inherent contradictions notwithstanding (Zupančič 2017, 2). Jacques Lacan, of course, by pronouncing that ‘the unconscious has a structure of language’, did in some way inadvertently confuse the issue, as the phrase was promoted by structuralist thinkers (including structuralist film theorists), who focused on languages as a system of signs, ignoring the body and its experience.

Nonetheless, there is much we can learn from semioticians. Umberto Eco in Experiences in Translation (2001) reminds us that in order to translate anything from one system of meaning to another there must be at least some points of convergence, some mega-system of meanings that
is accessible by all despite different ways of expressing it. He therefore makes the following point:

If, in order to translate a text $\alpha$, expressed in a language A, into a text $\beta$, expressed in a language B (and to say that $\beta$ is a correct translation of $\alpha$, and is similar in meaning to $\alpha$), one must pass through the metalanguage X, then one is obliged first of all to decide in which way $\alpha$ and $\beta$ are similar in meaning to a text $\gamma$ in X and, to decide this, one requires a new metalanguage Y, and so on ad infinitum. (Eco 2001, 12)

Roman Jakobson (1971, 261) identified the type of translation that Eco discusses as interlingual translation (‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language’), which he distinguished from intralingual translation (‘rewording […] of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language’) and intersemiotic translation (‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems’ – in which we can include the translation of experience into language). The terms ‘intralingual’, ‘interlingual’ and ‘intersemiotic’ will be useful in the following discussion of translation.

**Flights**

This seems simple enough but the narrator of *Flights* creates a meta-system of meaning significantly different from the obvious ways of thinking about links between experience and its physicality and language. Tokarczuk early on puts a curious disclaimer into her novel – which, as I have mentioned, is all about travel. Sensationally and provocatively, she believes that the translation between experience and language fails.

In the English paperback the book is over 420 pages long; some of its sections are almost baroque in their richness and curious phrasing, despite the translator’s valiant efforts to make the language ‘straighter’; and yet the female narrator (who incidentally is never named and has many similarities with the author, although is not the author) questions the whole project of actually ‘describing’ things through language. She says the following:

Describing something is like *using it* – it destroys; the colours wear off, the corners lose their definition, and in the end what’s been described begins to fade, to disappear. This applies most of all to places.
Enormous damage has been done by travel literature – a veritable scourge, an epidemic. (Tokarczuk 2018, 75; my emphasis)

Tokarczuk’s narrator then goes on to confess that she too ‘in her youthful naivete, once took a shot at the description of places’ (p. 75) but discovered soon enough that they never worked, that they always betrayed the experience. She bemoans: ‘The truth is terrible: describing is destroying’, and then elaborates:

Which is why you have to be careful. It's better not to use names: avoid, conceal, take great caution in giving our addresses, so as not to encourage anyone to make their own pilgrimage. After all, what would they find there? A dead place, dust, like the dried-out core of an apple. (Tokarczuk 2018, 75)

To Tokarczuk’s narrator, the (intersemiotic) translation of an experience always fails.

In order to avoid this danger, therefore, in a book about travel and different places, the narrator focuses on people and stories and not the places in which they happen. She mixes fiction and facts, and real places with made-up ones. Her aim is to disturb the viewer, and maybe to inspire, but not to convey any concrete knowledge. The narrator of course at times offers brief locators but her main effort is descriptive and non-linear. In addition, the narrator/storyteller of Flights offers airports as liminal spaces in between concrete destinations of travel. Rather than being a nuisance, and dreaded terminals that most passengers would prefer to avoid, in Tokarczuk’s novel they begin to become mythical places where one meets extraordinary people, including philosophers, attempting to direct the weary traveller to a way of thinking about the world which might avoid the constant disappointment built into any journey.

One such mythical group comprises travel psychology scholars who are somewhat related to psychoanalysis (‘travel psychology has not cut all ties with psychoanalysis’; Tokarczuk 2018, 81). A certain young female lecturer attempts to interest airport passers-by in her lecture address, and the superiority of motion and fluidity over constancy, consistency and stability which in any event are but an illusion related to fear. As this becomes a spontaneous airport conference, she explains that travel psychology ‘studies people in transit, persons in motion, and thus situates itself in opposition to traditional psychology, which has always investigated the human being in a fixed context, in stability and stillness – for example, through the prism of his or her biological constitution, family relationships,
social situations and so forth’ (p. 80). The narrator’s key philosophical point is that if a translation of the experience is bound to fail, you might just as well abandon any attempt at fidelity to it and instead have fun in creating – well, enjoyment. She does not use the word *jouissance*, of course, but we are clearly in the same territory as Župančič’s postulates.

Tokarczuk sows more seeds of confusion. In *Flights* the lecturer goes on to say that the fundamental concept in travel psychology is desire which lends ‘movement and direction to human beings’ (p. 81) and that the destination is never reached (nor is the desire, of course). It is clear here why the reference to psychoanalysis was introduced into the discussion, for ‘desire’ is the very basis of psychoanalytical thinking. I shall return to this later in this chapter.

In *Flights* another lecturer – this time male – at the same ad hoc airport symposium offers further insights to the way this novel-essay or a fragmentary narration is constructed. Tokarczuk makes the reader ‘listen’ to his presentation, which insists that it is impossible to build ‘a consistent cause-and-effect course of argument or a narrative’ (p. 83), and which suggests instead that in order to reflect human experience more accurately it might be necessary ‘to assemble a whole, out of pieces of more or less the same size […]. *Constellation*, not sequencing, carries truth’ (p. 8; my emphasis).

This thought seems to be a key idea of the whole book – things do not come in a sequence, they come and go, feelings come and go and impressions come and go. Life and the world are fluid – experience is transient. Even though actual physical places might appear constant, they are far from it; they are in constant flux, which is why any attempt to describe them with words will fail miserably. The unsaid theme of the book is also its anti-establishment stance, anti-stability, anti-coupledom, anti-predictability of any kind. Its anti-description stance is indeed a stance against translation as an epistemological project.

Soon after the beginning of this airport presentation, the narrator of *Flights* gets bored, decides that the lectures are too long and walks off, to find her own adventures which she then retells us as a series of short stories, without particularly describing in any detail the physical locations where they occur, but rather focusing on the curious characters and events which surround them – with no sequencing and no chronology. She uses what traditional theories of narration might call ‘flashbacks’, but she returns to the stories at times with no warning and no special reason. There are 116 stories in the book, and they are at times overindulgent and clearly luxuriating in the pleasure of writing, perhaps more so in Polish than in English.
What the writer does structurally, therefore, is indeed a kind of constellation of storytelling (rather than the established ‘fragmentary narration’), in which she undermines the process of ‘describing’ at the outset but then, as a writer, has no option but to describe something – moments, characters – even if she tries to undermine the importance of writing. The language persists and she states that she detests that it does – but of course that very annoyance at it is the source of her jouissance too.

To my mind, it is most interesting that Tokarczuk mentions the notion of ‘describing’ as ‘destroying’ and then mentions psychoanalysis. In the systems of the latter, the process of describing/naming/writing is, as previously stated, of crucial importance: without it the psychoanalytical subject cannot come into being at all, and is stuck in the non-linguistic hell of the Real. To even evoke psychoanalysis in a work so angrily dismantling any logical systems is perhaps a signal to the reader that not everything is what it seems. The narrator of Flights is not exactly an unreliable narrator – she is very reliable in her method, which is quite perverse since, in a very long book devoted to travel and the places one visits during these travels, she appears to insist on undermining her own project; but she is a sort of constellational unnamed narrator – the author sticking at least to her dislike of naming places and things.

The stories told by Tokarczuk’s narrator span centuries and have something important in common, namely their attention to the body. Whilst the blurb for the book speaks about anatomy, and there are indeed some gruesome stories about obtaining and preserving body parts, the main striking qualities of Flights are its reflections about bodily experiences, bodies perishing or being preserved, bodies of potential lovers being replaced or at least replaceable, bodies of unborn infants being wrenched out of the bodies of their mothers and then kept in jars with chloroform.

The narrator, after a hundred-page interlude of adventures and reflections, gets back to the airport travel psychology-cum-philosophy lectures, just in time to confirm the importance of the body, in case the bewildered reader has missed what else is at stake here – and what is at stake is the very sense of the place which is our existence on this planet:

Once the gods were external, unavailable, from another world, and their apparent emissaries were angels and demons. But the human ego burst forth and swept the gods up and inside […] Only in this way can the gods survive – in the dark, quiet nooks of the human body, in the crevices of the brain, in the empty spaces between the synapses. This fascinating phenomenon is beginning to be studied.
by the fledgling discipline of travel psychotheology. (Tokarczuk 2018, 181; my emphasis)

The sudden mention of theology in Tokarczuk’s constellatory narrative is unexpected. The narrator makes a leap and the reader is purposefully confused yet again and realises that the journey is after all not in the physical world alone. If the describing of physical places is hopeless and impossible, language may still have a role in describing the fleeting moment of defining who we might be on the one hand, and commenting on our clumsy communications, on the other.

**St Teresa: Jouissance through language**

A conversation about the body and language often becomes a conversation about God, it seems, which brings me to the psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva’s peculiar novel *Teresa, My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Ávila* (2014), which is not a project entirely dissimilar to *Flights* in so far as it was written by a female author, it focuses on a lone female narrator (and indeed the main protagonist is a single woman), and it consists of fiction and philosophical sections. It is also very long. Therein the similarities end. Whilst the unnamed narrator of Tokarczuk’s novel repeatedly states her suspicions vis-à-vis language and states that it must be used only as a gesture of despair (in order to share and despite knowing that it is a failed project), Kristeva’s main notion is that St Teresa’s complicated life, her suspected epilepsy, her mental health issues, her problematic relationships with others in her daily life and, finally, her deep pain and pleasure, her jouissance (as Lacan described it in Seminar XX), come only because of her writing and through it. The experience is secondary – the writing is primary. Meaning can only come through writing. Without the description, the interpretation, the creation of the narratives, not only would Teresa of Ávila have been totally forgotten after her lifetime, but also, and importantly here, she would have lost this precious jouissance in her lifetime. Her experience was not enough to make her happy or make sense of her life; it was the writing, the description of it, that made it become real at all. Kristeva’s argument, and her thesis, is therefore exactly the opposite to that of Tokarczuk: whilst the latter says that experience is always superior to its narrativising, the former praises the process of writing:

And so I arrived at this conclusion: Teresa’s ecstasy is no more or less than a writerly effect! Spinning-weaving the fiction of these
ecstasies to transmute her ill-being into a new being-in-the-world, Teresa seeks to ‘convey’, to ‘give to understand’ the link with the Other-Being as one between two living entities: a tactile link, about contact and touching, by which the divine gifts itself to the sensitive soul of a woman, rather than to the metaphysical mind of a theologian or philosopher. To sense the sense, to render meaning sensible: in Castilian, Teresa’s writing and her ecstasy overlap. (Kristeva 2014, 105)

Teresa of Ávila in her writings, which she began to carry out only at the behest of her male confessors, in order to help her soften her pain and improve her health, describes a variety of places she visits during her ecstasies and which she perceives as actual and not imaginary. There are other interesting things to reflect on also as the times of St Teresa were brutal. This is sixteenth-century Spain with the accusations enunciated by Luther and the Reformation against the Catholic Church on the one hand, and the threat of the Illuminati on the other. According to Kristeva, Teresa of Ávila was lucky in so far as she had the protection of her priestly father confessors, who supported her and understood that she was sailing quite close to the winds in a political climate that forbade certain forms of mysticism. Those could even be seen as heresy and lead to severe repercussions. On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church at the time did need something different and attractive to hold on to the congregations shaken by the Reformation. In the misfortune of her bad health, Teresa was therefore very lucky to have met some people (men) who would support her and it was very lucky indeed that she was able to write. In other words, she was in a position to intersemiotically translate her bodily and spiritual experience into words.

The places she describes are gardens and castles of her body and there was a real danger that her descriptions would be considered both too sensuous and too mystical at the same time, heretical in short. The Holy Inquisition did take some interest in her visions but her writing, interpreted by the father confessors, convinced them she was not one of the Illuminati but a legitimate visionary who could document her experiences in her writing to the benefit of the Church. But the truth appears quite different: Teresa translates her deep autoerotic enjoyment, her jouissance, into words and that saved her. Kristeva sees this process of translation as crucial:

Hunting for the mots justes, for an exact image of the touching-touched body thrown open to the plenitude of Other-Being, Teresa adds to the water fiction of the Life and later works of
fiction of overlapping dwelling places inside a castle: heaped, penetrable, ostensibly numbering seven but consisting of a host of doorless rooms and cellars, porous spaces separated as if by the stretches of translucent film. (Kristeva 2014, 106; emphasis in the original)

Finding Temeraire and Repented

If St Teresa in Kristeva’s book could inhabit one of the stories told in Flights, so could Primrose, the main character of Stanley Makuwe’s play Finding Temeraire, which premiered first at the Harare International Festival of the Arts in May 2017 (directed by me) and was then performed in New Zealand, where the Zimbabwean author now lives (directed by somebody else). In an act of intersemiotic translation, I then adapted it to the screen as a medium-length experimental film entitled Repented (2019). Here the issues were plentiful, for a male Zimbabwean author wrote a strong female character and asked a European female director (me) to direct it. Makuwe wrote a very powerful female voice and asked me to direct the play in order, he said originally, to give the play the right emotional engagement with the material. The play was written in English, and not Shona, the initial process of translation taking place in the writer’s mind – as the characters lived in colonial times, it is possible that English was indeed their main shared tongue. Nonetheless, in my experience of Zimbabwe in contemporary times, people would mostly speak Shona to each other in intimate circumstances, despite English being one of the legal languages. Stanley Makuwe takes pleasure in his mastery of the English language.

Of course, I was excited and flattered to be asked to direct the play; nonetheless, I was aware of some of the difficulties, which can be spelled out as follows. In his Introduction to Orientalism (1978), Edward Said discusses one particular scene, from the French writer Gustave Flaubert, which symbolises the encounter between the West and the subaltern, and in broader terms, the encounter between the coloniser and the colonised. The scene features the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem, who may have been Flaubert’s lover too. Said comments: ‘He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was “typically Oriental”’ (Said 1978, 6). Said goes on brilliantly to construct an argument, used in due course by Spivak, and employing some of Gramsci’s ideas, on hegemonic
forces in culture and society, ascertaining that West–East and West–South relations at that point in time rested on a strategy of ‘flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing the relative upper hand’ (Said 1978, 7; emphasis in the original). Rereading the above quote today, what is very clear, almost embarrassingly blindingly clear, is that the colonisation taking place in the encounter between the prostitute and Flaubert is not only a colonisation of a subaltern non-Western subject by a dominant Western one, but it is also, or perhaps primarily, an intergender encounter of an all too familiar kind: a man buying a woman, penetrating a woman, taking things from her that he needs, including her voice, which he then makes his own. Said’s poignant point equates in some way a woman and the subaltern in the colonial encounter: and perhaps it is also true that a non-Western woman has been the most likely object of such a colonisation.

In regards to Finding Temeraire, a male writer wrote a voice for a subaltern woman (an inter-gender, interlingual translation) and asked a European woman director to translate it for stage and film (an intersemiotic translation). I was slightly anxious, but I considered the situation and was seduced by the beauty and strength of Makuwe’s work, so I put other doubts aside. Between us, Stanley and myself that is, I think we managed to subvert and circumvent the inter-gender and intralingual issue of the female voice being written by a man.

Finding Temeraire takes place in a former mining village called Mashava. The play is a two-hander, consisting of a woman visiting an ex-lover for revenge. Primrose carries on long monologues about the past, before actually revealing her own identity as that of Temeraire’s former lover and the mother of his son. Faced with his coldness and the indifference of the world, she has had a psychotic breakdown, murdering her baby soon after his birth. The play’s construction works in a way which in part is indeed similar to Tokarczuk’s ‘constellation’ in so far as the main character retells a number of short stories of their life in pre-independence Mashava. Without actually describing the settlement, she offers vignettes which give the reader (or the theatre-goer) a sense of the place. These vignettes include stories of the whites-only club they all visited despite not being white, a story of a prostitute calling herself Dolly Parton who was the reason a great fight broke out in the club, the bizarre colonial couple Baas and Madam Clipston (who had a large dog Madam Clipston got too fond of so that Baas Clipston shot it), and other episodes.

These stories evoke the sense of the precolonial settlement with roles assigned and with no possibility of any fluidity whatever of the
kind that Said (to name but one) and Tokarczuk ask for. In the play the stories have the role of preparing both the viewer and Temeraire for the revelations to come. Temeraire does not recognise Primrose as his former lover in the first instance – some 20 or even 25 years have elapsed since they were lovers and she has spent that time in prison, plotting her revenge. Even though Temeraire is the reason for her action and the core of her being, his role in the play is that of a listener and a passive responder; he too is a shadow of his former self. The play, like *Flights*, opens with a description of loneliness which leads into a story. The arrival of the woman is an intrusion, an unwanted visit – on the surface – but in another way this is a deeply yearned-for interruption of the loneliness. Temeraire, who remains silent for most of the play, begins it this way:

I am Temeraire, once the plumber of Mashava. It is like this. I am killing cockroaches when this woman comes to my house. At that time the afternoon sun is hot but not too hot. […] It is a long time since I spoke to someone who knows the people and the places I knew, so I just talk to her like I know her and I don’t have to ask her who she is or where she came from. (Makuwe 2017, 1)

The stage direction after the first short introduction is ‘a crumbling house’, and the very first words uttered by Primrose relate to the settlement’s state of decay – ‘the Compound’, she calls it, now infested by cockroaches:

**PRIMROSE**

When did cockroaches start coming to Mashava?

**TEMERAIRE**

Every year they keep coming. We have seen more this year than any other time.

**PRIMROSE**

There were no cockroaches in Mashava. Not in Westernlee. In the Compound one all the houses would be scrubbed and sprayed.

(Makuwe 2017, 1)
In the initial scenes, we also learn that his garden has grass and no flowers, as flowers are harder to grow and need a lot of water, continuing the theme of abandonment and decay. We also learn that many houses are empty—in the Compound, which presumably means where the white people used to live. Primrose asks straight out: ‘where are all the white people?’ and Temeraire just says, ‘They left.’ But this is all the description Makuwe gives us about the actual physical place in which the dramas unfold: that the houses were cleaned and scrubbed under colonial times and that now they are infested and neglected. I will come back to the cockroach presence in the play, but for now let us just consider the character of Primrose and her long monologues both before she physically overwhelms Temeraire and afterwards. Her stated plan is revenge. Once she has tied him and gagged him, she appears to be preparing to hurt him further (‘She circles him, like she wants to tear him apart’; Makuwe 2017, 11). She enjoys taunting him too: ‘Tell me, Temeraire. Are you afraid to die? Are you afraid of death? Do you fear hell?’ (p. 11), although she also appears to still be considering whether torture might be enough. (‘Not so fast. Your type dies better in a slow cooker’; p. 11). And then: ‘Temeraire, I am not here to kill you. I’m here to piss in your face’ (p. 13).

Crucially, before any of her torture can take place, she demands that he talk to her—for it appears he never really talked to her in the past:

PRIMROSE

You don’t want to talk.

She sharpens the knife.

PRIMROSE

Ooh, today you will talk. I swear, you will talk.

(Makuwe 2017, 14)

The story Primrose tells Temeraire (as well as the audience) is that of an almost classic subaltern woman not only not being listened to by anybody but also really not knowing how to translate any of her experiences or emotions into words. She describes how in the past, as a very young woman, she never learnt how to find pleasure in talking (never mind writing). This is reminiscent of (post)colonial melancholy, as Ranjana Khanna (2003) would say, and its ‘metaphorisation’, that is indeed the
ability to describe emotions, being the negative ones, which will lead to violence (of which I have written extensively elsewhere, for example in Piotrowska 2017). The only jouissance Primrose knows is a simple bodily pleasure – which, when corrupted, turns into a full psychotic episode and physical violence. There is nowhere to go and when she is abandoned by all with her unwanted baby son, she first strangles him with a scarf she shows Temeraire and then drowns him in the white men’s sewage pond.

Somehow through the journey of describing, for the first time perhaps, her emotions and her suffering, Primrose arrives at a point where she is able to move beyond her despair and her fury – and eventually forgive Temeraire. Despite Tokarczuk’s mistrust of descriptions and naming, of emotions as much as places, the naming does work. When Primrose leads Temeraire to the sewage pond to look for their son buried there 25 years ago, clearly a metaphorical gesture of despair, she demands that he name him. Naming is crucial after all, for without naming, the experience is meaningless and does not last. Words do matter:

Do you have a name for your son, Temeraire? […] Name him. Name him now so that we call him by name. (She waits. He says nothing.) When you call someone you call them by name. You can’t just say, ‘hey you, hey you,’ as if you are one of those white people whose shit swallowed your son’s dead body. There has to be a name, Temeraire. This is your son, not your garden boy. You are the father. Name him. (Makuwe 2017, 22)

Temeraire, who by now has totally lost the power of speech, fails to name their dead son, and the word he eventually enunciates is the one word which by now really matters to him: her name, ‘Primrose’. In the epilogue, we learn that he found other words in the end, words of love, and that somehow, Primrose and Temeraire are together again.

‘Found footage’ in translating, adapting and betraying

In her review article ‘The Politics of Translation’ (2018), Marina Warner argues that translation has always been a political issue, in terms of decisions made but also, more simply, who translates whom and why. She reviews a number of contemporary volumes on translation, including Mark Polizzotti’s Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto (2018) and Mireille Gansel’s Translation as Transhumance (2017). In general terms, Warner points out that:
Two fundamental quarrels run through these books: the first over claims about fidelity and felicity, the second over cultural appropriation and consequent monolingualism (the continued expansion of the Anglosphere). How to honour the character of the source of the language and its relation to cultural difference? Should a translator respond like an Aeolian harp, vibrating in harmony with the original text to transmit the original music, or should the translation read as if it were written in the new language? (Warner 2018, 22)

Certainly Croft’s translation of Bieguni makes it very English, without losing the work’s inherent curiosity, although a native speaker like myself might have some issues with its tone at times. Perhaps to object is irrelevant, for the gain is so much greater than any potential and perhaps questionable loss. I cannot comment on the translation of Kristeva’s novel, as my French, whilst good, is not native at all, so I do not hear the dissonances in the same way, but it seems to be closer to the original. Inside that work, of course, there are Kristeva’s translations from the Castilian Spanish of Teresa’s writing. An adaptation is a different matter, although perhaps not entirely different: we are still looking at two semiotic systems that need translating. Umberto Eco’s most basic point of the possibility of a translation at all is relevant here, for adaptation in Jakobson’s terms is intersemiotic.

Robert Stam, in his classic work on adaptation, quotes the author Salman Rushdie to define his own position: ‘an adaptation is […] less a resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process. Intertextual dialogism, then, helps us transcend the aporias of ‘fidelity’” (Stam 2000, 64). Later in the volume, in his discussion of Robinson Crusoe, Stam celebrates ‘hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, ideas, politics, movies, songs’, and concludes, ‘artistic innovation […] occurs on the transnational borders of cultures and communities and discourses’, and ‘it is only in the eyes of another medium […] that a medium reveals itself fully and profoundly’ (Stam 2000, 362, 364–5). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review critiques of Stam’s view and my case is very different – it was a collaboration with a Zimbabwean writer which in some ways was simple and respectful to the original. In other ways, particularly in the screen version, my work did take Makuwe’s play in a slightly different direction, I hope without changing the spirit of his work.

My main innovation regarding the theatre production of Finding Temeraire was nothing out of the ordinary regarding the writer–director
collaboration. Amongst other things, I lowered the ages of the main characters for reasons of my own – the actors Charmaine Mujeri and Eddi Sandifolo are my trusted collaborators and I had confidence they could pull off the difficult parts. I also thought it was possible to imagine the characters from 20 or 25 years ago as young rather than already middle-aged then – and in fact questioned the initial suggestions of their ages as written by Stanley Makuwe. My vision was that Primrose would have been a very young woman indeed, naive in her infatuation with Temeraire.

The key issue of the adaptation/translation of Stanley Makuwe’s play was indeed the addition of another level of intertextuality to the piece – and that was through the use of black and white archive footage not necessarily directly linked to the proceedings, or rather linked thematically and conceptually but not in any way actually connected to the physical place of Mashava. This seems a very simple idea now, and almost obvious, but it was neither of these two things when I presented it as a plan to the film’s editor, Anna Dobrowodzka. We then experimented with introducing split screens to the film, in order both to offer different perspectives on the narrative and also to translate the historicity of it onto the screen, at times alongside the live action of the drama between the two main characters. All of the footage we used would have been shot during colonial times in Rhodesia and in South Africa by those who were either supporting the oppressive regime or directly hired by representatives of it to obtain relevant footage. We felt that the introduction of the split screens, with the archive footage not directly linked to the place in which the action occurred, offered in fact more of a sense of place than any literal or faithful use of the actual footage could do – notwithstanding the fact that there was not any footage directly linked to Mashava. In addition, and very importantly, the colonial archive as ‘found footage’ in conjunction with the words uttered by Primrose was more successful at ‘translating’ her experience, which is only partially spoken about in the play, namely the experience of a young black woman whose only currency is her bodily beauty and affective labour. The concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 139) come to mind here also, as within the hierarchy of the women in Mashava, and in many other colonial settlements, a woman like Primrose was really at the very bottom of the pile.

The final element of this discussion of translation is the notion of ethics and fidelity regarding using the archive as ‘found footage’ and also, more generally, the freedom a translator might have. Thomas Elsaesser in his essay ‘The Ethics of Appropriation’ (2015) reminds us:
the origins of found footage films, as opposed to compilation films, are usually located within the Marcel Duchamp tradition of Dada and conceptual art, of Surrealism and the *objet trouvé*, the found object. The point of such a stranded object, left behind by the tide of time, is that it is made beautiful and special by the combination of a recent loss of practical use and its perishable or fragile materiality. (Elsaesser 2015, 32)

The situation here is both different and similar: different because the archive and the split screens have a direct role to play in the film, which is not to do with beauty but rather to do with truth and knowledge – and indeed the writing and describing of what life may have been like in the past. However, this appears to be only a part of the story: the characters of the play *Finding Temeraire* remember the place of Mashava as a good place. True, it is to do with them being young at the time, but there is also a certain ambivalent and ambiguous nostalgia which they both seem to evoke and which Makuwe has captured in his play. The nostalgia might indeed be for the rigid, predictable and fixed, as opposed to the independence which has brought with it cockroaches – a most bizarre image in Makuwe’s play which resonates uncomfortably with known colonial insults towards the local population. Now, they stand for a dirty mess and lack of order – even though the order of the past was a denigrating and, in the end, a hated order. In our appropriating of the archive footage we also wanted to convey what was being missed – as it was not just the profound injustice and oppressiveness of the place, it was also parties and dances and fun, almost as a gesture of defiance on the one hand but also, painfully, a re-enactment of the systematic inequality, some of it perhaps again in the vein of Elsaesser:

Appropriation, as the ambiguous name of a certain kind of love that raises issues of ownership, is perhaps most tersely expressed in the title of Eric Lott’s study of how immigrant – mainly Jewish and Italian – entertainers from Europe appropriated African-American folk music, comedy routines and blackface minstrelsy: Lott called his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) and this is indeed the terrain of affective-emotional ambivalence, within which appropriation becomes so seductive, also in the cinema. (Elsaesser 2015, 32)

Finally, then, we can dismantle Tokarczuk’s early despair over an inability to describe anything faithfully, or somehow, over one’s lack
of skill to be faithful to experience when one attempts to translate it. Polizzotti (2018) is adamant that it is good to abandon any idea of faithfulness to the ‘original’ or originating work: ‘A good translation’, he writes, ‘offers not a reproduction of the work but an interpretation, a re-representation, just as the performance of a play or a sonata is a representation of the script or the score, one among many possible representations’ (2018, 53).

Marina Warner reminds us further that ‘many émigrés have performed acts of translation themselves, going into voluntary exile from the demands – the oppression – of the mother tongue’ (Warner 2018, 23). Was this also Makuwe’s decision? Perhaps the fact that his beautifully written work was written in the language of the colonisers has given him a sense of power, in a way not dissimilar to our use of the ‘found’ footage and split screens. The philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998) observes the power of language and reflects on his own position in it as a stranger and a master at the same time. He also brings forth the notion of the importance of language as the carrier of the law. His own position is precisely that of a colonised subject and as such he states that:

all culture is originarily colonial. [...] Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations. [...] First and foremost, the monolingualism of the other would be that of sovereignty, that law originating from elsewhere, certainly, but also primarily the very language of the Law. [...] The monolingualism imposed by the other operates by relying upon that foundation, here, through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One, that is to the hegemony of the homogeneous. (Derrida 1998, 39–40)

Derrida writes here as somebody whose supreme power of expression lies in the language which is in fact the language of the coloniser, as he was an Algerian child in Algeria going to a French school, and then higher education in France. There is no other language that he could in fact call his own any more, at the time of writing the words quoted or at any other time – French was not his mother tongue and his mother tongue was lost to him forever. His ability to write and name both his thoughts and ideas and also very much his emotions was his strength and our gift from him. As for the search for truth, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was Derrida’s friend and an intellectual sparring partner, maintained that we cannot help but lie in our various translations in the name of the search
for truth, and that the harder the story, the better it is to tell it as fiction for ‘truth has a structure of fiction’ (Lacan 2006, 684).

Any adaptation is a translation from one semiotic system to another and indeed any creative work at all is a translation of kinds – of physical and bodily experience, of places we visit, people we love and histories we try to tell, looking for our place in the world.

It is the following thought that might be appropriate to conclude these reflections with: language might be inadequate to describe experience but it is the only thing we have at our disposal. It gives us an opportunity not only to record a sense of place, actual and metaphorical, but also, if we are very lucky, to create a tremendous enjoyment, *jouissance*, out of it – for those who write and for those who read.

**Notes**

1. Here ‘using it up’ might be better.
2. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an African-American lawyer and thinker, in the late 1980s and 1990s famously pointed to the ineffectuality of Western (white) feminism and stressed different forms of discrimination converging often in a multi-fronted prejudice against women of colour in particular (Crenshaw 1989, 139). Prejudice is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, ability and sexuality, and intersectionality has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat (feminist) hierarchy, hegemony and other forms of exclusivity and dominance.

**References**


Elsaesser, Thomas. 2015. ‘The Ethics of Appropriation: Found Footage between Archive and Internet’. Keynote address at the Recycled Cinema Symposium DOKU.ARTS.


