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### The Question of Authenticity in Migrant Self-Translation

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# The Question of Authenticity in Migrant Self-Translation

Paola Bohórquez

## Abstract

Through the reading of Smaro Kamboureli's and Ariel Dorfman's translingual memoirs, this essay examines how the trope of authenticity figures in migrant narratives of self-formation in-between languages. With attention to the strategies of self-translation through which each text navigates the disjunction between mother tongue and foreign language, speech and writing, narrated and narrating selves, the essay argues that while both texts do away with mimetic notions of self-representation, each rearticulates the ethos of authenticity as constitutive of the process of writing the self in translation.

This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one.  
Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Contemporary cross-cultural writing and criticism identifies translation as an overarching trope that articulates the production of textual and cultural difference in-between dominant and subordinate cultures, global and local placements, mother tongues and foreign languages.<sup>1</sup> In approaching translation as a wider practice “of cultural representation and interchange, a concrete textual practice of transcoding and constructing meanings cross-culturally” (Karpinski 22), these texts articulate the potential of translation to destabilise the primacy of nation, organic belonging and languages of origin, while simultaneously problematising the production of unequal cross-cultural exchanges between hegemonic and marginalised languages and cultures. While in line with contemporary interrogations of the concepts of fidelity and origin(ality) emerging in the field of literary translation, cross-cultural theory and writing confronts anew the question of authenticity in its attempt to disrupt hegemonic structures of expression.

Questions of authentic representation and referentiality become particularly pressing in translingual self-writing, a form of intercultural memoir that traces the (de)subjectifying effects of the process of second language acquisition in migrant, diasporic and postcolonial contexts. These texts, which provide us with a unique view of the complex trajectory of subject formation in-between languages, raise crucial questions regarding the possibilities and limits of self-narration in conditions of linguistic displacement that disrupt the monolingual grounding of the self in language. Language choice is always cumbersome for translingual writers undertaking a project of self-narration, for who is the ‘I’ that speaks in translingual self-narration? How can this ‘I’ testify to experiences lived in another language? And more importantly, in which language can the subject authentically narrate the process of becoming translingual? In attempting to fulfill the autobiographical promise ‘to tell the truth of the self,’ the translingual writer is often arrested by conflicting loyalties, anxieties of representation and dilemmas of origin and genealogy that trouble the very act of self-enunciation.

Regardless of the writer's choice of literary language, the narration of the translingual life always involves self-translation: a process of textual and experiential rearrangement and ‘re-wording’ of self in which the subject is compelled to come to terms with incommensurable languages which articulate distinct and often conflicting psychic investments, bodily and gendered dispositions, ethical imperatives and cultural configurations. While most translingual memoirs narrate the vicissitudes of cultural and linguistic displacement attendant to processes of exile and migration, others explore the conditions of linguistic in-betweenness characteristic of diasporic forms of emplacement; still others chronicle what it means to be displaced within one's native culture through processes of colonisation and acculturation. Migrant, diasporic and postcolonial forms of intercultural experience shape different processes of second language acquisition which in turn, configure distinctive translingual identities.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I focus solely on migrant translingual self-writing through the reading of Smaro Kamboureli's *in the second person* (1998) and Ariel Dorfman's *Heading North, Looking South: A Bilingual Journey* and *Rumbo al Sur, Deseando el Norte: Un Romance en Dos Lenguas* (1998). In limiting my analysis to the migrant experience of self-translation, I attempt to show that the migrant's unique position of liminality —her immanent experience of loss of the ‘there and then’ of cultural authenticity while simultaneously facing the pressure to acculturate to the dominant host language— confronts her with the impossible necessity of translation as a necessarily agonistic

enterprise. Indeed, positioned between a mother tongue which no longer secures the subject's self-understanding, and an acquired language that typically demands full assimilation,<sup>3</sup> how does the translingual migrant become a subject of self-enunciation?

For the migrant subject who acquires a second language on the prior foundation of a mother tongue, languages are attached to particular geographical placements and embedded in discrete temporalities which infuse both the mother tongue and the foreign language with values and significations which exceed the purely interlingual process of meaning transfer. As Cornejo Polar argues:

The migrant stratifies his life experiences and...neither can nor wants to meld them because his discontinuous nature places emphasis precisely on the multiple diversity of these times and spaces and on the values and deficiencies of one and the other. Fragmentation, is perhaps, then, the norm. (qtd. in Mazzotti 113)

The disjunction between the 'there and then' and the 'here and now' experienced by the migrant subject configures a clear divide between original and foreign languages, between a mother tongue which functions as placeholder of memory and history and an extraneous language identified with self-alienation and loss. For the migrant subject undergoing a process of self-translation, the experience of linguistic incommensurability figures not simply as a semiotic impasse but as an existential deadlock in which the tensions between her distinct spatiotemporal groundings preclude any attempt at a faithful self-representation.

For some migrant translingual writers, the experience of fragmentation constitutes an impassable limit that precludes any possibility of self-translation. As Tzvetan Todorov argues, bilingualism constitutes a condition of "radical dialogism" (16) that configures an insurmountable divide between linguistically articulated selves conceived as parallel identities. Accordingly, a peaceful coexistence between his Bulgarian and French is only possible when "each [discourse] maintains its place within a strict hierarchy" (25), and thus he warns us against the "mad polyphony" (17) that results from attempting an impossible mixing: "each of my two languages is a whole and this is precisely what makes them impossible to combine, what prevents them from forming a new totality" (24). Facing the impossibility of reconciling his two identities into a coherent consciousness, Todorov experiences his double belonging in French and Bulgarian as constituting parallel monolingual identities which allow him to "speak from" either of his languages while precluding any translational exchange between codes. As Todorov makes clear, the recognition that none of his languages "can say it all," that he cannot "be fully said in any of his languages" means that he cannot trust them to convey a truthful image of self: "My double belonging only produces one result: in my own eyes, it taints each of my two discourses with inauthenticity, since each can correspond but to half of who I am; yet I am indeed double. I thus once again confine myself to an oppressive silence" (23).

Yet, I would argue that the experience of fragmentation that sustains Todorov's split linguistic identity constitutes the foundation that grounds the very project of migrant self-translation. Paradoxically then, it is the presumption of untranslatability which fuels the desire for translingual self-narration; or to put it another way, the narrative force of the translingual memoir originates in the crisis of referentiality materialised through the experience of linguistic displacement. In what follows, I engage in a reading of Kamboureli's and Dorfman's migrant translingual memoirs with attention to the translative strategies mobilised in articulating the self in-between languages. As the cleavages between first and second language, monolingual and translingual, narrated and narrating selves are simultaneously thematised and performed, how does the trope of authenticity shape the process of writing the self in translation? And conversely, how does the process of self-translation problematise specular logics in self-representation?

### **The Self as a place of language**

Kamboureli's journal, *in the second person*, is an experimental work of poetic prose that traces the narrator's journey to the United States to pursue graduate studies in American Literature, a return visit to Greece and her migration to Canada as she marries a Canadian writer and becomes a landed

immigrant. Despite this overriding chronological structure, Kamboureli's journal avoids linear narrative as it performs the disruption of the relation of self, language and place through a fragmented text that combines poetry, anecdotes, dreams, theoretical references, readings of her old journals, and references to other women's diaries. Through the use of these various narrative and rhetorical strategies, Kamboureli's journal both traces and performs the emergence of her translingual self and identity as an immigrant woman writer.

Although mainly written in English, the journal contains several Greek poems, phrases and terms scattered throughout the text. Terms such as *léthe*, *ápoikos*, *gynekolói*, *mnéme* and *apousía* are left untranslated within the English passages and without the conventional italicisation that underscores foreign words, though they are transcribed in the Latin alphabet. A few other passages, also left untranslated, are written in Greek alphabet. Through this strategy, the text formally signals the ambivalent and asymmetrical coexistence of languages intrinsic to the process of self-translation while performatively interrupting, for the monolingual English reader, the presumption of intelligibility that grounds the reception of the monolingual text.

The title of Kamboureli's journal already signals a disidentification with the authorial position, a break between an 'I' alternatively placed in English and Greek and a 'you' that shifts between various and not always explicit addressees. To write 'in the second person' means to underscore the asymmetry between the writer and her signature, a key trope in Kamboureli's work, that allows her to explore her linguistic split from the double lens of her gender and immigrant experience. The use of the lower case in her title and the alternation between 'I' and 'i' throughout the journal reinforces a plural and agonistic relation between her various versions of self. Often, the capitalized 'I' articulates the diegetic dimension of the narrative while the lower-case 'i' encapsulates Kamboureli's fragmented, meta-reflexive voices; but this distinction is made problematic as the narrator is less interested in constructing a referential self-story than in tracing "the composite or polyphonic self that emerges out of these different others..., the self that exists within the spaces created between contradictions" (Kamboureli, "Sounding the Difference" 34).

Informed by a deconstructive approach to questions of subjectivity, language, and writing, Kamboureli's journal restages the agonistic relation between the languages of 'there and then' and 'here and now' as a plural conflict between her Greek and English voices, speech and writing, narrated selves and shifting narratorial positions. In problematising the fixed distinction between mother tongue and foreign language that grounds most migrant translingual memoirs, Kamboureli avoids the temptation of positing self-translation as an exile from selfhood into subjectivity, from the language of unmediated self-apprehension to the inappropriable language of fragmentation and self-estrangement. Rather, in the space between Greek and English, new forms of self-difference continuously emerge:

And my own journal? To write. To read. To write (again). A rite of infinitives opens up the eyes, unfurls the self. It is a rite of presentations. The self performs without prior rehearsals. There are no faithful mirrors. My journal recreates me with difference, with writing. I can't hide behind words. Their surfaces expose me. And I can't reveal more than words say. I can't embellish my reflexivity with images, familiar parameters of objectivity. (*second* 18)

In claiming that there is no essential self before or beyond representation, Kamboureli restages the question of referentiality, the framing concept of autobiographical discourse (Eakin 1992). Her various journals, "One in Greek (with many blank pages), one that is very personal (so personal i can hardly recognize myself there) and this one" (*second* 85) superimpose themselves to produce fragmented, discontinuous and often conflicting versions of self which attenuate her authorial voice: "I'm only an amanuensis" (*second* 13).

But if Kamboureli's writing process dismantles the illusion of self-coincidence and mimetic representation, it is also true that she does not reduce the self to its textual renderings, for even if she "cannot hide behind words," she "can't reveal more than words say." As this statement suggests, the

very process of becoming a subject of autobiographical narration engenders a remainder which cannot be discursively articulated. Paradoxically, it is only in continuing to grope for this remainder that Kamboureli can trace the self that unfolds in the hiatus between the multiple narratorial positions available to her in Greek and English.

The notion that the experiential and textual process of self-translation produces a non-discursive remainder constitutes, in my view, a most compelling articulation of the question of authenticity in migrant self-translation. In arguing that “the self is a place of language” (*second* 11), Kamboureli rejects mimetic notions of referentiality, while simultaneously calling into question the post-structuralist dictum that “the subject is merely an effect of language” (Barthes 79). Instead, Kamboureli’s memoir invites us to consider the question of what happens in the subject when she enters into a process of enunciation, to examine, that is, the subjectifying and desubjectifying effects of translanguing self-narration. What emerges in and through this memoir is a “self that writes a text that writes a self” (Bohórquez 169).

Mediated through positionality, power and discourse, Kamboureli’s staging of the “self as a place of language” is “relational, situational and locational” (Anthias 492) and therefore, deeply distrustful of narrative closure and harmonious self-integration. This becomes particularly clear in her highly ambivalent reflections on her accent as a bodily marker of otherness:

I am what Canadians have made of me, those anonymous faces that turn toward me when they hear my accent (not my voice). (*second* 9)

I have no language that defines me now. Only my accent is a reminder of my geography. The accent I can’t hear. My own voice deluding me. (*second* 20)  
exiled by virtue of sound  
its perfection lost in  
the shaping of the letters. (*second* 20)  
(...) i’m stunned do I really speak Greek with an English accent. (*second* 35)

My accent is the sonorous indicator of the scission that gives my self its shape. I want to get rid of my accent but I also want to keep it. (*second* 11)

The theme of accent allows Kamboureli to engage critically with the disjunction between speech and writing, body and language, self-perception and objectified identity and also, on an ethical register, with her conflicted desire to keep and get rid of her accented voice. In all these instances, her accent figures as the conflictual site of incommensurable significations which confront her with the “materiality of the ethnic self” (“Black” 61) through a new experience of embodiment which she can neither fully appropriate nor reject. As her body is read through often rigid categories that codify her as “ethnic woman,” or as “Greek-Canadian migrant,” Kamboureli attempts to resignify her accented voice as an embodied marker of displacement, a corporeal reminder of the historicity of her linguistic attachments.

Significantly, even if her accent serves as “a reminder of [her] geography,” of “the being that was nourished by the mother tongue” (*second* 10), this audible difference is a purely transitional and non-substantial phenomenon that emerges in and through the encounter between languages and therefore, it belongs neither to her Greek nor her Anglo-Canadian selves. Moreover, this bodily difference only becomes accessible to her through “the ear of the other” (Derrida 1): those Canadian anonymous faces who pin her down to her estranged body or the Greek saleswoman who stuns her by revealing Kamboureli’s now accented mother tongue.

Kamboureli’s ambivalence in regards to her accent not only speaks of the challenges entailed in identifying with a voice that lacks discursive authority—a particularly oppressive predicament for a woman professor of Canadian literature—Kamboureli’s ethics of positionality also prevent her from embracing her accent either as exoticised difference or as ethnic otherness, as codified in Canadian multiculturalism policy. For as Kamboureli argues, the Canadian version of official multiculturalism fosters the kind of reified otherness it segregates by codifying ethnicity as a recognizable and

immutable difference that is preserved on condition that it remains insular and apolitical ("Technology"). From this perspective, the demand on the ethnic subject to represent 'authentically' his cultural difference not only becomes the condition of visibility and inclusion, but also and paradoxically, it transforms such representation of difference into a form of 'passing' which, rather than disturbing the center/margin divide, reinforces the hegemonic position of the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. Assimilated as 'other,' the ethnic subject no longer represents a threatening difference, but the expected and normalised stereotype of alterity.

In describing her accent as "the sonorous indicator of the scission that gives my self its shape," it becomes clear that while her marked voice fixes the narrator within the static category of 'migrant,' it still serves as a reminder that in no language can the subject domesticate her otherness. "By bracketing my ethnicity, while still speaking in an accented voice, I wish to articulate the hybrid position of an ethnic who, without seeking to abscond from her origins, seeks to blend together the foreign within and the foreign without" ("Black" 54). Through an explicit reference to Kristeva's ethics,<sup>4</sup> Kamboureli proposes to not fall in love with one's estrangement ("Black"), that is, to break away from the melancholic attachment to the lost land, language and self that characterises the essentialised identity of the ethnic. For rather than a mimetic expression of the split identity produced by displacement, the migrant's melancholic bond to absence constitutes the emblematic form of assimilation promoted by the Canadian multiculturalist rhetoric. In a direct and situated dialogue with the cultural politics of Canadian state multiculturalism, Kamboureli's thematisation of the trope of accent emerges as an allegory for what it means to craft an authentic translingual voice; a voice which, imbued with an accent she cannot hear, refuses to be domesticated as 'other.'

Kamboureli ends her journal with the puzzling affirmation that "the only danger lurks on the act of translation" (*second* 87). What could this suspicion of translation mean for a text invested in tracing the self that emerges in the interstices between languages?

Writing in broken english does not mean translating from one language into another: it is instead a translation of contrasting systems of perception, a simultaneous rendering of the past and present. Broken English is written in the rhythm of a being that lives beneath language. This being exists through violent silence, instinctual knowledge, restlessness. Its language is the bastard child of the coming together of two selves, of two geographies, of two languages. This being suspends itself on the edge of dying and of giving birth. (*second* 9)

Translation is a double-edged sword. On the one side, it is a metaphor for the transitional condition that the migrant embodies, a never-ceasing process of transfer between languages that represent "contrasting systems of perception," temporalities and geographies. On the other hand, translation, as an act of substitution, erases the effect of plurality produced by the encounter between languages and domesticates the text by negating its unassimilable foreignness. In intertextual translation as in self-translation, the danger lies in 'understanding too well,' in failing to see that something is always lost in translation: "Like the materiality of words which cannot be translated or carried over to another language, the materiality of the ethnic self, the materiality of what resides in the margins, must be relinquished in order to survive" ("Black" 61). Understood as a practice of substitution, translation constitutes an act of betrayal that conceals the agonistic process of linguistic transfer and erases the effect of languages working on, through and against each other.

Through the image of a "broken english," Kamboureli articulates the potential of self-translation as a dialogic, open and heterogeneous process that "recreates [her] with difference" (*second* 18). It is a language wrecked by a process of translation that releases a silent remainder, a "being that lives beneath language." But her "broken English" is also a language that in its woundedness, captures her double selves, geographies and temporalities. There is, in both instances, a lack of coincidence between the self and its narration and a refusal to heal the discordance that is experienced both as surplus and left over of the translation process. In exposing the fractures, discontinuities and impasses which have given "[her] self its shape" (*second* 11), Kamboureli's "broken English" becomes a "minoritized language" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) through which she can *authentically* trace the movements that shape her ephemeral, partial and unstable self-in-progress.

### Trauma in translation

Like Kamboureli's *in the second person*, Dorfman's memoir *Heading North, Looking South: A Bilingual Journey*, and its Spanish translation, *Rumbo al Sur, Deseando el Norte: Un Romance en Dos Lenguas*, constitute an experimental project of self-translation in which both subjectivity and textuality are traversed by the problem of language choice in the representation of the translingual life. While Kamboureli's memoir textualises the "self as a place of language" (*second* 11) through a translational strategy that forces her English to inscribe the heteroglossic effect of her linguistic in-betweenness, Dorfman's double self-translation confronts the impossibility of a literal rendition of self by allowing each of his languages to author its own version of his translingual becoming.

Dorfman's complex itinerary of travel and dislocation <sup>5</sup> already complicates the one-way journey alluded to in the title of both his memoirs. For if Dorfman's childhood and adolescence is certainly about "heading south, looking north," the adult Dorfman's journey points to the opposite direction: "heading north, looking south". In the Spanish title *Rumbo al Sur, Deseando el Norte*, the rendering of Dorfman's itinerary becomes even more partial—in the double sense of incomplete and distorted—as the neutral "looking" is replaced by the affectively stronger "deseando" –longing for– which is misleading in terms of the adult narrator's ethical and political engagements. It is also significant that the title resists a fixed spatial location, as it alludes to "dwelling-in-travel" (Clifford 26) between the north and south, which is reinforced by the use of the progressive verb tense. The differences in the subtitles are also suggestive: The sober "bilingual journey" is replaced in Spanish by "Un Romance en Dos Lenguas" –"A Romance in Two Tongues" – which avoids the quasi-technical resonances that the word 'bilingüe' carries in Spanish by choosing the more intimate 'tongue' instead. This subtitle also depicts the relation between his English and Spanish as a romance: the genre of reconciliation, of happy-ending love stories, which foreshadows the theme of compromise as the ethical horizon of Dorfman's bilingual journey.

Dorfman represents an exceptional case in the migrant translingual spectrum. Equally fluent and accentless in Spanish and English, his equilingualism sets him apart from the majority of migrants who typically exhibit uneven competence in each language. Although Dorfman's peculiar trajectory of displacement might explain the cognitive symmetry between his languages, his memoir constitutes an exceptional testimony to the challenges entailed in living between languages imbued with contrasting existential, ethical and political inflections. In fact, through most of his bilingual journey, Dorfman actively resists the fragmenting effect of his translingualism, opting to "shut down" his languages, first Spanish, then English, in a gesture that he describes as "willing [himself] monolingual" (*Heading* 110). While the adult Dorfman eventually embraces the condition of linguistic in-betweenness, subtractive bilingualism constituted, for most of his life, the main coping mechanism through which to maintain a stable and cohesive sense of self in the face of shattering experiences of trauma and loss. The tendency to "shut down" his languages illustrates how his language choices were thoroughly compromised by trauma, but as I would argue, in working through his language split, Dorfman mobilises translation as a signifying practice that allows him to redress the very experiences of trauma that he locates as the organising principle of his memoirs.

Dorfman's balanced translingualism does not explain his atypical choice to translate his own autobiographical work into a second language for, as Roland Barthes reminds us in *Writing Degree Zero*, choice of literary language is a question of affiliation or transgression imbued with ethical, aesthetic and ideological connotations. Keenly aware of his conflicting loyalties and shifting linguistic attachments, Dorfman's double process of self-translation intensifies rather than solves the contradictions between experience and narration, original and translation, between the hegemonic language (English) and the subordinated one (Spanish). Not surprisingly, strong feelings of inauthenticity prevent him from reaching a decision as to which language to use in writing his memoirs:

Whenever I wrote anything about my life, in either language, it simply sounded... false, *falso*, fraudulent, *fraudulento*. And the Spanish, by the way, has that *lento* adhered to its tail, that sense of a

fraud that is slow, that persists, that prolongs itself inside your mind. And the English is, therefore, at least for me peremptory and cutting, something not to be forgiven, that “t” at the end terminating all altercations (...) In a word: jealousy/*celos*, they paralyzed me by making me feel that anything I stated on the paper in one language about the other would not pass the test. (“Footnotes” 207)

Dorfman plays with the denotative and connotative dimensions of Spanish and English signifiers to articulate the disjunction between affect and narration, which he portrays as an agonistic relation between languages that paralyzes him and falsifies his experience. This explains why Dorfman is not clear as to whether his memoir in Spanish is a translation or a re-writing of the original English text. In both his “Preface by way of a dedication” (*Heading* 1) and “Prefacio a modo de dedicatoria” (*Rumbo* 1), as well as in his essay “Footnotes to a Double Life,” he refers to the Spanish text as a re-writing:

For reasons that I prefer to keep under strict lock and key here inside, I then proceeded to choose English as the vehicle for my life, give English first rights –but temporarily, I promised, just to get this damn thing into the world; and then, I turned and murmured to my Spanish, *te voy a dejar que re-escribas por entero el libro*, I’ll let you write your own version of my life. (“Footnotes” 208)

Dorfman chooses “serial monogamy” as a strategy to “get this damn thing into the world,” and for reasons that remain secret, decides to write the first version of his memoir in English. Personified as a possessive lover, Spanish becomes the addressee of this message, in an apparently successful attempt at appeasing his mother tongue’s jealousy and anger. As Barbara Johnson points out, matrimonial metaphors abound in narratives of translation, and translingual self-writing is no exception. In fact, and as I have argued, the demand for fidelity and the anxiety of betrayal largely frame the question of the very possibility of translingual self-narration. In choosing to write an English and Spanish version of his life-story, the dilemma of fidelity and betrayal only intensifies, as Dorfman engages in three distinct, yet interrelated registers of self-translation: the narration of his translingual life-story, his autobiographical work as a project of double self-translation, and the interlingual translation of the English original memoir into the Spanish version.

Already in the passage above, there are significant tensions between the Spanish and English formulations: while the statement in Spanish refers to a re-writing of the English memoir,<sup>6</sup> the English version alludes to the English and Spanish *versions of his life*, which suggests that a truthful rendering of his translingual experience might not coincide with a faithful translation of his original English text. From this perspective, one could argue that Dorfman’s autobiographical project of double self-translation troubles the distinction and hierarchical authority of the original over the translation, as well as the differentiation between mother tongue and foreign language that retroactively confers ontological priority to the language of origin. Despite the fact that the English version chronologically precedes the Spanish reproduction, Dorfman’s self-narrative is structured around two central events experienced in Spanish, suggesting that the choice of language for his ‘original’ text explicitly questions the notion of representational transparency that supposedly could be more easily secured in writing in the language of those experiences.

The issue of referentiality becomes further complicated in examining the narrative framework of the memoirs. Both texts display the same configuration, or to be more precise, the Spanish version is built on the structure set out in the English original. The text is organized as an alternating series of chapters that deal either with “the discovery of life and language” or with “the discovery of death,” so only the places and the dates change in each chapter subtitle. With a focus on the process of his translingual becoming, the first set of chapters follows a chronological order from Dorfman’s birth to his second arrival in the United States as an exile from Chile. The second set deals exclusively with Pinochet’s coup, from the night before the takeover of the presidential palace until the narrator’s exile to Argentina. This means that while the first series of chapters deal with Dorfman’s bilingual journey, the second narrates life events experienced exclusively in Spanish. In commenting on the narrative structure of his



autobiographical project, Dorfman identifies the trope of trauma as the organising principle of his memoir:

The central events that determine the two sequences are both traumatic, moments when death circled me, whether in the New York hospital as a child, or on the streets of Santiago as a young adult. And both these shattering events were lived by me in Spanish. So, why English? ("Footnotes" 212)

Dorfman's question, "why English" implicitly asks whether it is possible to articulate a truthful account of trauma in a language other than the language of the experience. Later in his essay, Dorfman answers his own question by arguing that the English language may have provided him with the necessary distance to revisit these events, making them less painful, or at least tolerable. In imagining his English as an "oblique mirror" through which he could see himself as "an almost fictional object" ("Footnotes" 212), Dorfman suggests that such a skewed perspective might be as revealing as it is misleading, particularly since "those two close encounters with death, were at the origin of [his] conversion to English...they were, in some bizarre manner, the mothers, *las madres* of this very language" ("Footnotes" 212). Indeed, rather than a language artificially superimposed on an experience of trauma which could only be authentically rendered in Spanish, Dorfman's English is intrinsically connected to his trauma experience, his process of psychic survival and the possibility of testimony. Moreover, if trauma constitutes a failure in representation, an event that in its literalness, eludes symbolic articulation (Caruth 1996), one could argue that the experience of trauma necessarily compromises Dorfman's Spanish, the very language in which the gap in meaning was registered. In this respect, Dorfman's choice of literary language, his decision to give English "first rights," constitutes a repetition with difference that simultaneously mirrors and revises the young Dorfman's abrupt and absolute shift into English, the defining gesture of his childhood:

Three weeks later, when my parents came to collect their son, now sound in body but in all probability slightly insane in mind, I disconcerted them by refusing to answer their Spanish questions, by speaking only English. "I don't understand", my mother says that I said- and from that moment onward I stubbornly, steadfastly, adamantly refused to speak a word in the tongue I had been born into. I did not speak a word of Spanish for ten years. (*Heading* 29)

While Dorfman's childhood trauma gives birth to English as his only communicative language, his adult trauma is said to be responsible for his decision to write the original version of his memoirs in English, in other words, trauma gives birth to both his English self and authorial persona. Dorfman's English memoir does not simply narrate his first use of English as a defensive measure against trauma, it replicates the same gesture of self-distancing from the traumatic memory that, in any case, eludes him in its literalness. Dorfman performs once again in English the interruption in the flow of representation that his first shift into English already embodies and which ultimately, reflects the signifying gap produced in his experience by the trauma as lived in Spanish. If his English functions as an "oblique mirror" it is only in the sense that it reflects the disruption in the signification process, not the traumatic event that remains forever inaccessible.

As Dorfman asserts, translational recreation may well be essential to a faithful rendering of the translingual life:

To unveil one's origins, to journey to where it all started, we may need to use a different tongue, create an alter-ego and trust him with the furtive truth we have told no one. You can't journey to your origin without a translator of some sort by your side. And a consolation: the ultimate reconciliation of my languages in this memoir, perhaps in this commentary as I write it. The very fact that I can write it may be proof that they are finally beginning to trust one another. (*South* 212)

Insofar as the English text is anticipated by the promise of its translation, I would argue that it is translation itself, rather than English or Spanish, which is given textual priority. In contrast to most translingual narratives where translation figures as a unidirectional process that grapples with the question of fidelity to and/or betrayal of the mother tongue as the signifier of origin and authenticity,

Dorfman's autobiographical project identifies translation as the condition of possibility of narrating his life story.

While the promise made to his Spanish is "to let it write his/her (?) version of his life," Dorfman is in fact pledged to translation: "It was a trap and my Spanish knew it —or maybe at that time, she, he, it, didn't care. Maybe she knew that once the story had been established in a certain way, once I had told it in English, it would be basically invariable" ("Footnotes" 208). The "trap", I would argue, refers less to the idea that the Spanish version ultimately follows the structure, rhetorical devices and prose of the English version, and more to the fact that the promise of translatability compels Dorfman to choose a standardised form of English that neutralises those idiomatic or local inflections that could be potentially more resistant to translation. Although the Spanish version exhibits some significant examples of what Willis Barnstone calls "writerly translation" (230) —a less literal, creative re-writing— these occurrences have more to do with the narrative demands of certain themes than with a self-reflective translative practice. Given the formal and stylistic symmetry between two memoirs, one may ask whether the promise of translatability made the English memoir resistant to a writerly translation, one that could recreate the source text through the medium of Spanish in order to release, within the original text, "the subversive forces of its own foreignness" (Johnson 148).

### **Reframings of authenticity in migrant self-translation**

Despite their different strategies of self-translation, both Dorfman's and Kamboureli's translingual narratives testify to the challenges entailed in coming to terms with linguistic in-betweenness in its experiential and textual dimensions. Both writers avoid the temptation of engaging in a melancholic restoration of self through the nostalgic idealisation of the mother tongue as the language of authentic self-expression. Instead, they engage in a translingual play of writing that articulates the subject-in-process as it dissolves the fantasy of an organic grounding on language. Confronted with the decentering force of an adopted language which disrupts the sense of embeddedness and attunement that characterises the monolingual form of being-in-language, Dorfman and Kamboureli face self-narration as a necessarily fraught task in which the self who writes effaces itself in the absence of a language that could secure the 'I' as signature or substance. As Kamboureli asserts, in the process of self-translation "you are the exegesis of your own unmaking" (*second* 49).

While both Kamboureli's and Dorfman's self-narratives do away with notions of authenticity predicated on principles of transparency, self-coincidence or unmediated representation, I would argue that the desire for authenticity is ineluctably expressed, yet singularly articulated in both texts. In Kamboureli's memoir, authenticity figures as a sustained commitment to tracing the disjunction between self, life-story and language through an experimental form of self-translation that engenders a material self that lives "beneath language" (*second* 9). This material self does not represent an original and prior identity that resists or survives the translation process. Rather, it is the effect produced by relations of difference and inequality between the languages and cultures she inhabits. Through this sustained commitment, through this fidelity, Kamboureli escapes becoming the 'authentic migrant': one whose nostalgia and desire for origins represent the very reified alterity that the migrant is supposed to embody. Thus, in Kamboureli's account, authenticity figures not as a solipsistic notion of self-coincidence, but as an ethical and aesthetic imperative to recreate oneself in tension with the social codes and discursive regimes that trap the migrant subject in her 'original otherness.'

As I have argued, the fact that Dorfman engages in three distinct yet related registers of self-translation —a translated memoir in Spanish of an original text in English which narrates Dorfman's experiential process of self translation— can only multiply the narrator's anxieties of self-representation. But it is through this endless game of broken mirrors that Dorfman eventually comes to define himself as a "wandering bigamist of language" (2003) and to understand betrayal as the unavoidable condition of fidelity. As Barbara Johnson argues, bigamy is an apt metaphor for the process of translation, for "the bigamist is thus necessarily doubly unfaithful, but in such a way that he or she must push to its utmost limits the very capacity for faithfulness" (143). Dorfman does not dwell on the inevitable losses and failures that plague the process of translation, instead, he recognises that

every experience, every text, every translation is necessarily fragmentary and therefore, the question is not whether the self can be made whole or the text coherent through translation but rather, how the process of translation reveals the fragmented and discontinuous nature of memory, self and narrative.

And yet —and in contrast to Kamboureli, who warns us against the domesticating power of translation (Venuti 1998) when it obscures the tensions, fractures and incommensurabilities that emerge in the space between languages— I would argue that Dorfman’s literal rendition in Spanish of his original English memoir reveals how translational fidelity may paradoxically turn into unfaithfulness. Does the literal fidelity of Dorfman’s translation preserve the ascendancy of the original text? Of the English in which it is written? In the failed promise made to his Spanish “to let it write his/her (?) version of his life”, that is, to engage in a translational rewriting that would allow his Spanish to disrupt the structure and poetics of the original text, Dorfman’s translational fidelity reveals a gesture of unfaithfulness that restages the question of the limits of self-translation.

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<sup>1</sup> Some seminal works in the field of cross-cultural translation studies include: Besemer; Bhabha; Chambers; Cronin; Cutte; Dingwaney and Maier. Israel; Kamboureli, *Borrowed Tongues*; Seyhan.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the migrant subject, for whom the experience of displacement configures a clear divide between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ past and present, mother tongue and foreign language, continuity and rupture, the diasporic subject faces the impossibility of establishing clear lines of demarcation between cultural influences, past and present, public and private, so that “what can be affirmed is not culture, but rather its promiscuity, its impossible margins” (Cheng 100). Similarly, the postcolonial subject experiences his linguistic identity as a hybrid, compromised formation constituted through the conflicted encounter between imperial and subaltern languages. The question of how these diverse forms of intercultural experience shape particular processes of self-translation is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true in the case of the United States where monolingual assimilation into English is strongly imposed despite the fact that the United States has no official language. But even migrant receiving countries with a less conservative language policy tend to advocate or support bi/multilingualism only when it comes to European languages in its dominant variants.

<sup>4</sup> Drawing from Freud’s notion of the *Unheimlich*, Kristeva argues that our fear of foreignness arises from the projection of our own internal otherness, the unconscious, onto the unfamiliar and unrecognizable ‘other.’ This defense mechanism safeguards the subject’s fantasy of unity and cohesiveness from the uncanny alterity represented by the unconscious. Kamboureli argues that, to the extent that the ethnic subject identifies with the dominant culture’s image of the ‘other,’ she fails to confront her own self-division, that is, her lack of coincidence with herself (“Black”).

<sup>5</sup> Born in Argentina into a first generation migrant Eastern-European Jewish family, Dorfman was brought to the United States when he was three years old in the wake of the military government of Ramón Castillo. Nine years later his family was forced to flee again, this time to Chile, after the communist persecution reached Dorfman’s father in the United States. Except from 1968 to 1970 when he lived in Berkeley, California, Dorfman resided in Chile until the Pinochet’s coup in 1973 which forced him and his family into exile in Argentina, a temporary shelter before the threat of Perón’s dictatorship would return him back to the States.

<sup>6</sup> A literal rendition of the statement in Spanish would read ‘I’ll let you re-write the book in its entirety.’

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