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What I Did for Love:  
an Analysis of the Work  
of Josip Novaković  
with reference to a Selection  
of Short Stories in English  
by Non Native Writers

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“When non-native-English-speaking students face two very different ways of meaning-making (...) they are most certainly facing an issue of identity. It is not surprising therefore that some may feel a degree of ambivalence towards writing in the new ways demanded by the Anglo-American discourse community.”  
(Tang, 2012:7)

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## **Acknowledgements**

## **1. Introduction**

This analysis is mainly about searching for identity through language. It revolves around contemporary authors of international recognition, who learned English as a second language and yet chose to write literary pieces in English for very personal reasons, mostly driven by a positive attitude towards the English language.

In the first chapter, attempts at framing World Englishes and literatures in English will be discussed through theories by scholars such as Braj Kachru and James Skinner. The text will then focus on the nature of the act of writing in English for non-native speakers and the motivations leading to such a choice, particularly exploring the aspects of writing due to an attitude of love towards the English language.

The analysis will then focus on the life and work of writer and editor Josip Novaković (Daruvar, 1956) and on his anthology of short stories *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (White Pine Press, 2000). More specifically, the thesis will explore aspects of writing in a second language from five contributions to the anthology: the selected stories are “Not For Sale” by Judith Ortiz Cofer, “Grandma’s Tales” by Andrew Lam, “Every Hunter Wants to Know” by Michail Yossel, “The Winter Hibiscus” by Mingfong Ho and “Mother Tongues and Other Untravellings: A Long Poem in Prose” by Kyoko Uchida.

Finally, the thesis will discuss points raised during two interviews to Josip Novaković, which were both conducted by the author of the paper. The first interview consists in the answers to five questions asked through e-mail interaction (Appendix A),

whereas the second was conducted face-to-face with the author (Appendix B). Both interviews focus on the subjects of writing in a second language, the process of editing *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* and the development of World Englishes in present and future contexts.

The purposes of this work are to find common traits among the selected short stories, understand the influence of a positive attitude towards English on the development of a piece of writing and explore unique stylistic choices made by contemporary non-native writers in English. The analysis will focus on authors who would hardly fall under one of the many labels attributed to second language writing due to their background and education, and yet indisputably provide relevant contributions to global literature in the current dominant lingua franca.

## 2. World Englishes and Literatures in English

Non-native English speakers writing in English, such as Joseph Conrad or Vladimir Nabokov, certainly do not constitute a new phenomenon on the international literary scene. However, research on the subject has proven to be constantly evolving. Linguist Braj Kachru was among the first scholars to produce a model meant to frame the situation in the context of World Englishes. In what is arguably the most cited version of Kachru's model (1992), the tradition-based norm providing speakers occupy the Inner Circle, while populations from former British colonies are included in an Outer Circle, and speakers from countries where English plays no historical or governmental role are encompassed in an additional external area called the Expanding Circle.

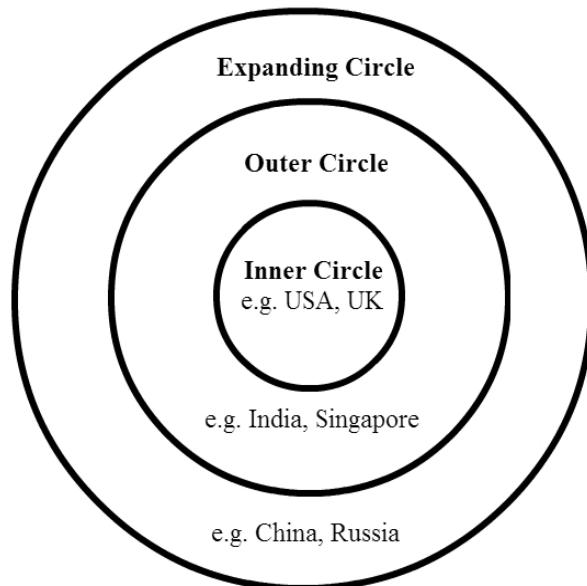


Fig. 1, Bray Kachru's Three Circles Model (own reproduction from Crystal, 1995:107)

Kachru's theory of the three Circles of Englishes underwent a number of changes in time. In 1985, Kachru published his landmark paper on “Standards, Codification, and Sociolinguistic Realism”, in which he first outlined the theory, focusing particularly on “the English language in the Outer Circle”. Five years later, he updated his conceptualization of the Three Circles, and the Expanding Circle, or those regions of the world that were neither settled by users from the Inner Circle nor subjected to British colonial rule, received only brief mention. The Expanding Circle was in fact characterized as having “performance varieties” (1985:13) or “ELF [English as Lingua Franca] varieties” (1990:3), used largely for international communication.

As innovative and ambitious as this theory was, in the years following its publication it proved to be far from flawless. For a start, the model has been accused of carrying within itself an elitarian connotation to favour a privileged group of native speakers, more deserving to occupy a central position in terms of defining rules (Modiano, 2003:186). On this topic, a broad distinction is conventionally made between “native” and “non-native” speakers, which entitles the former category with the role of norm providers, whereas the latter is in a way precluded from being conceived as a pool of language users in their own right. However, is the notion of “native speaker” nowadays still valid and sharply defined? Rampton (1990) observed that the term was criticized by, among others, Kachru himself (Rampton, 1990:97) and that it tends to “emphasize the biological at the expense of the social”, thus confusing “language as an instrument of communication with language as a symbol of social identification” (*ivi*, 98). As a solution, Rampton suggests using *expert* instead of *native*, a categorization which would shift the attention from “who you are” to “what you know” (*ivi*, 99) in the attempt of progressively adjusting to contemporary social dynamics.

Defining the Three Circles is also a process that can lead to ambiguities. Conventionally, the line of separation between the Inner and the Outer Circle can sometimes be blurred, whereas the Expanding Circle, where English is nevertheless widely used as the lingua franca, has generally been considered easier to define (McKenzie, 2010:1-5), since it is assumed that its members are likely to become proficient in English mainly out of practical, professional reasons. It is probably safe to state that the English-ruled world of Economics, including international trading, acted as a centrifugal force which pushed the Expanding Circle to widen its boundaries; as Eddie Tay argues in his essay framing Creative Writing in English within the education context in Hong Kong,

The point is that English language is regarded as instrumental to academic and career prospects rather than a language that is the heart of one's identity. One needs to be wary of overgeneralisation, but [...] it's fair to say that the majority of the candidates are drawn to the course of study because they regard English "as the lingua franca of the business world." (Kay, 2014:108)

However, the last three decades saw phenomena of a wholly different nature redefine the importance of English in professional fields which have little to do with the world of business. Chronological factors are to be taken into account when discussing the theory of the Three Circles of World Englishes, since overlooking the fact that Kachru's model dates back to the 1980s, before the massive impact of social networks, would arguably be a mistake. Kachru could not have foreseen the impact of mass phenomena such as Facebook for the generations which were born after the model was conceived. Within the past two decades, not only has English become fashionable among the societies of the Expanding Circle, but it has consistently shifted from covering work-related

functions to influencing, or in some cases even controlling, free time and entertainment.

Recent history presents some notable attempts at taking measures against the hegemony of English: Alex J. Bellamy cites the case of a campaign led in the early 1990s by a representative of the Croatian Democratic Union party, which aimed at forcing owners of new firms to adopt solely Croatian names. The main argument brought by the politician to motivate such a campaign involved “the ignorant visitor to Zagreb, who, upon seeing all the English names in shop windows, would mistake the Croatian metropolis for some other world centre such as London or New York” (Bellamy, 2003:137). And yet on a general basis, evidence shows that legislating with the purpose of originating linguistic autarchies against the hegemony of English, such as in the case reported above, has so far proved to be inefficient, if not counter-productive; so would be any attempt at framing a language whose speakers virtually implement its structures continuously—a notion even Samuel Johnson proved to be aware of. In the preface to the 1755 *Dictionary* he writes of the 'energetic' unruliness of the English tongue. In his view, the language was in desperate need of some discipline: “Wherever I turned my view”, he wrote, “there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated”. In the process of compiling the dictionary, Johnson recognised that language is impossible to fix, because of its constantly changing nature, and that his role was to record the language of the day, rather than to form it.

If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? it remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language. (Johnson, 1755, Preface)

While Kachru's circles provide a portrayal of World Englishes in general terms, James Skinner explored aspects of anglophone literature, including post-colonial literature and, perhaps more generally, new literatures in English around the world, in his study *The Stepmother Tongue*, first published in 1998. Skinner's ambitious project include a table juxtaposing the *discourses*, as theorized by Michel Foucault and examined in depth by Stuart Hall (Hall 1992:291) of “land” and “language” preceded by either “our” or “their”.

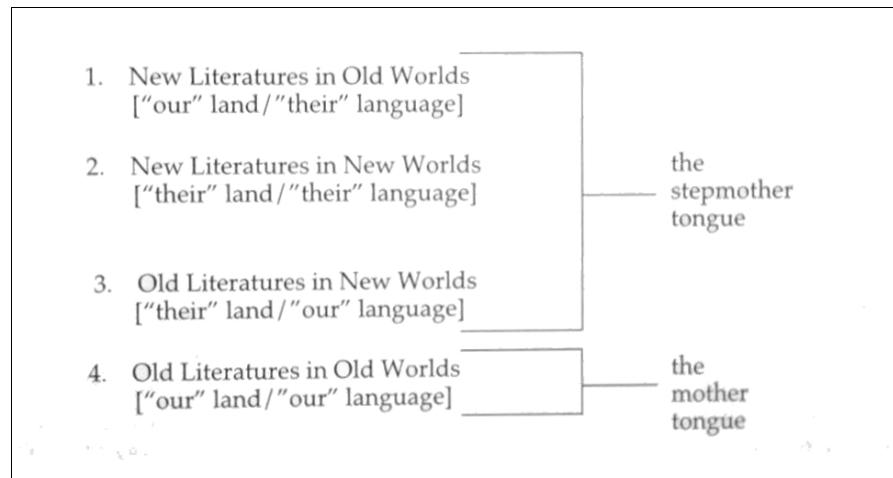


Fig. 2: Literatures in English (Skinner, 1998:12)

Discourses are ways of defining knowledge, along with subjectivities and social practices which inevitably constitute a net of power relations. Figure 2 shows that the notion of “stepmother tongue” rises when “land” and “language” are not both organically perceived as “our”, thus generating the combinations “Our land/their language” (New Literatures in the Old World), “their land/their language” (New Literatures in New Worlds) and “their land/our language” (Old Literatures in New Worlds). In other words, following this theory, writers might resolve to write in the

lingua franca should the discrepancy between the geographical area they belong to and their native language inhibit identification. But what about transnationality and transculture? Even though Skinner briefly mentions other transcultural phenomena, “fascinating exceptions to the rule” represented by writers who, as tellers of “modern migrant tales” (Skinner, 1998:25) learn and commit to English out of purely personal reasons, his text mainly focuses on macro-phenomena which would perhaps better fit in Kachru's Outer Circle. Following the collapse of the British Empire, scholars started focusing their research on novelists and poets from former colonies, whose production had previously been underestimated; the debate over the language these authors adopt is deeply controversial and revolves significantly around a matter of pride, with English sometimes seen under a negative light as the language of the oppressor (Ashcroft et al. 2002:5). However, these dynamics belong to the context of Outer Circle writers and the sentiment of pride would hardly be applied to the activity of writers born and raised within the Expanding Circle, who choose to write in English as a second language due to their positive attitude towards the language itself.

Speaking of legitimacy when writing in English, William Grabe worked on defining second language in terms of fairness and cultural awareness in his article “Toward a Theory of Second Language Writing” (2001). The difficulties a second language writer encounters compared to a native language writer are reprised by Grabe from a collaboration between Tony Silva, Ilona Leki and Joan Carson (1997): in the text, Silva, Carson and Leki listed the differences between second and first language writers in several areas, such as epistemology; the very functions of writing, which might include a wider range of options for a second language writer; the potential topics which are to be explored; and the knowledge storage, as native language knowledge can

originate complexities for second language writers. Plagiarism, as well as issues on memorization, imitation and quotation, are also included in the list. Nevertheless, Grabe argues, in accordance with Silva, Carson and Leki, that these differences are not meant to be interpreted as guidelines second language writers are supposed to follow to change their style and, as a consequence, aspire to the legitimacy which is automatically granted to native language speakers. The list above is instead addressed to teachers and audiences and its purpose is to establish that second language writers are to be interpreted under special criteria, which do not per se mine their right to produce literature.

For polyglot writers, the choice of writing in English depends on a wide range of other reasons and purposes, including editorial strategies. Under some circumstances, the decision over which language should be adopted when writing can be motivated by an interest in conquering bigger markets (and, by extent, a wider pool of potential readers) in a rather short time: for instance, when Slavenka Drakulić, a Croatian writer and journalist from Rijeka, started working on her book *How We Survived Communism And Even Laughed*, she did not consider writing it in Croatian first as a realistic option. “It never crossed my mind that it could be written in any language other than English”, she admitted in an interview (Oikonomakou, 2014:1), although her decision comes across as more practical than emotional. “At the time there were only two translators from Croatian, both booked years in advance. (...) And I was anyway already writing all my essays for the US publications in English, in order to save us all time.” Drakulić also admits relying on the help of experts: “I must say that [the book] was in bad English, but I had wonderful editors.” (op.cit.). Moreover, non-native authors who already write in English, hence avoid to rely on translators, generally receive a warmer welcome from

prominent publishing houses, due to the fact that their work does not need to be mediated in order to be accessible to potential publishers. Simon Prosser, a British expert who has been working at Penguin Books since 1997, stated in an interview by Indian scholar Pavithra Narayanan (2008) that

As most English-language editors and publishers like (for perfectly good reasons) to be able to read the work they take on, it is harder (...) for non-English-speaking [authors] to find publishers in English-language territories. (Prosser to Narayanan, 2008)

Delicate political issues can have a determinant influence in favour of writing in English. That is the case of authors who would likely have to face censorship and potential threats in their homeland, hence the need to write in a language through which a story can be known abroad. Once again, Drakulić provides a suitable example: her 2004 book *They Would Never Hurt a Fly* is a collection of her memories of the trials to Yugoslav war criminals in the Hague which would not have received a warm welcome in the countries involved in the conflict, where such convicted criminals are still considered national heroes by the majority (Drakulić, 2004:40). After all, it is due to her work on the happenings within the territories of the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1995 that Drakulić was proclaimed a traitor and made the decision to move to Sweden, where she currently resides. On the same subject, Josip Novaković (2000) cites the case of Nahid Rachlin, an Iranian author whose short story “Fatemeh” is featured in *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, an anthology which will be extensively analysed further in this study. Rachlin is another example of a writer who “couldn't speak freely in Iran: she

experienced freedom of speech in English for the first time and still writes with that jubilant air of freedom” (Novaković, 2000:13). Novaković also brings other evidence in the form of street writing slogans captured by international media. “(...) we need only look at CNN to see that political graffiti and appeals are mostly in English—in Tiananmen Square, in Kosovo refugee camps—for English is the lingua franca, the language of computers and the first language of the United Nations”(*ivi*).

In 2016, Novaković's statement is still true. After three coordinated bombings occurred in Belgium on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, for which ISIS claimed responsibility, photographs taken at the Idomeni camp for refugees on the border with Macedonia showed children with messages of support, including the phrase "Sorry for Brussels", written both on their bodies and on cardboard placards.

In short, writing in English might not always lead to liberation, but the circulation of visual and auditory material in English has undeniably no equivalence in the world in terms of contributors and audience; and developing a positive attitude towards English through the voluntary act of learning it, to the point of mastering it, can be the spark that ignites new forms of transnational literatures.

### **3. A Matter of Attitude**

Countless writers would not easily fit into any of the categories discussed so far, for their background and professional outcome are, at least partially, incompatible with Kachru's circles or Skinner's classification. There are, for instance, individuals who followed their families as infants to English-speaking countries, experienced the conflict of receiving an education in English while relating to their families in the native language and found in the former language their inner voice as writers; similarly, much could be said as well about those who move to such countries as young adults out of their appreciation of English and a desire to join a community of English native speakers.

The forces driving such artists towards English have little to do with the concept of diaspora and much to do with attitude. According to Gordon Allport, attitude is “a learned disposition to think, feel and behave towards a person (or an object) in a particular way” (Allport, 1954). Therefore, it goes beyond mere perception: it involves, as observed by Peter Garrett, thought and behaviour as well as affect (Garrett, 2010:19). Attitude implicates a process of elaboration from the human brain, a reaction that may evolve into an influence over free will. Are cognition, affect and behaviour part of an attitude, or are they causes and triggers activating an attitude? And is there always congruity between the three aspects? In order to provide an answer to these questions, over which the debate is constantly evolving, Garrett suggests taking the basic construct of attitude, elaborating a narrow definition of it, then exploring the field by building theories over opinions which are generally received with favour by experts (2010:20).

For instance, researchers agree that attitudes can function as both input into and output from social action. The production and reception of language generates a duality, which means that in everyday life language attitudes are expected not only to influence our reactions to other users but also anticipate other's responses to our own language use: in other words, we as speakers are both concerned with perceiving the interlocutor depending on his use of language, and being perceived by the external world as well. An act of speech is not simply the resort to a system of signs or rules or its use in order to communicate, but it also implies taking up a position towards language itself. However, an attitude towards a language does not *per se* match an attitude towards users of the language itself.

In the text *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing: Beyond Babel*, editor Dan Disney pinpoints the key issue in the following question: “how to feel like ourselves in a language we do not quite feel at home in?” (2014:7), challenging and intertwining the discourses of identity, language and home. The question might wrongly imply that feeling “at home” is not possible when writing in a second language, when for some writers such level of intimacy and relief can only be reached through writing in English, due to the very fact that it is not the language they acquired first and yet it became relevant to them, also on the level of affection. “Affects”, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things including other affects” (19:2003). Love, specifically, is undoubtedly powerful, but hardly possible to grasp, define and frame, as the very nature of the feeling which inspired countless literary pieces builds on affects and shifts in form. Love impels action through an embodied, productive and positive disposition and in this case the action is

indeed writing, which, according to Adamson and Clark (2009), is “potentially an act of the most dangerous exposure”, as writing “often becomes an artful and ingenious playing with masks [that] allows one to hide and reveal oneself at the same time, [and] also allows for an intimacy and trust to be established with another... perhaps in a way that no other situation provides” (28:1999). In short, a piece of writing can be the outcome of a form of attraction towards a language.

Travelling, and as a matter of fact moving to an English speaking country, might suggest that the authors of the short stories featured in this study should be seen as people taking part in a diaspora. The term “diaspora” is used to describe a community of people, including both emigrants and their descendants, who live outside their shared country of origin or ancestry but maintain connections with it. However, for these writers, such connections are debatable, and their positive attitude towards English arguably made them join a new category which goes beyond physically relocating, as the feelings which come with physical displacement are phrased into the language mainly spoken in the new environment. Therefore, while a displacement is a factor which certainly needs to be taken into consideration when examining the personal and professional evolution of a writer (Israel, 2000:IX), an unsettling, painful experience seems to be surpassed in importance by the sense of comfort which comes from experimenting forms of writing in English.

The sense of belonging does not come naturally along with forms of love for the English language. It is possible to grasp this concept (and how subjective attitude can be) by observing the case of Marjorie Agosin, an activist who was raised in Chile by Jewish parents and moved to the United States with her family due to the politics of the military government led by dictator Pinochet. “The English language never took on the

texture of my soul, the feel of my skin”, Agosin states in her book *The Alphabet in My Hands* (2000), dissociating English from her body and self. “It showed me the precision of detail, the melody of never-before-heard consonants (...).” However, being appreciative of a language does not automatically lead to identification, and Agosin adds: “after a long while I was able to love [the English] language, because *it belongs to my children* [emphasis added]”. English is perceived by Agosin as something that is part of her affects, but the attitude she has towards her beloved ones is not sufficient for the language itself to activate identification. “I could not be in English what I am in Spanish, and yet I never tried”, she acknowledges, “my mother's language I identified with love. English meant code of silence” (2000:143).

A very effective depiction of the relation between learning a language and falling in love is hidden behind the title of Xiaolu Guo's novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). Each word conceals a multitude of shades and paradoxes, starting from the very first adjective: “concise” refers to the guide book the protagonist and narrator, Zhuang (“Z”), carries with her at all times for the first chapters of the novel. As soon as she lands in London, she immediately realizes her poor English makes her vulnerable and barely able to engage in basic conversation. Yet, lacking in fluency does not prevent her from producing short sentences which go on to constitute long descriptions rich in details from the very first pages. In a way, Z makes up for her flawed grammar by sharing her intimate perceptions of what surrounds her. The term “Chinese-English” does not only refer to the dictionary, but it also defines the nationality of the author and of Z as well, since the latter eventually travels back to China deeply changed by her experiences abroad on more levels than just the linguistic one. However, it is really the complement “for lovers” which envelops the deepest

meaning. During most of her European stay (and consequently constituting one of the pillars of the plot), Z develops a relationship with an Englishman twice her age who covers a number of anomalously juxtaposed roles in her life: the householder providing a sense of security but also the sexual awakener who initiates her to lust, both the helper and the obstacle, the keeper as well as the final releaser. Stating that the “lovers” from the title refers to Z and her partner is therefore a safe, intuitive guess. A further look into the book, however, leads to the slightly unsettling notion that Z also falls in love with a language which at first presents itself as an exhausting challenge, but gradually wins her over. Towards the end of the narration, Z shares with the reader the content of a leaflet promoting the language school she attended, according to which she would have become able to speak and think in English “quite effortlessly” by the end of the course. She wonders if such a statement is true in her case, and answers “Perhaps” to her own question. Her sentimental journey might have made her struggle with English look less sensational, but upon further reading, it is English that truly stays with her after the very last page.

To summarize, writers who choose to write in English are at the same time learners and active performers within the context of language development, thanks to their attitude towards the language. While not disclaiming that some authors perceive English as a wise editorial move in order to achieve fame and others as a metaphorical mouthpiece to fight against restrictions, this study will focus on the work of authors who embraced English after identifying it as *their* language and as an entity to which they belong, to the point that English becomes essential to them in order to perform their form of art on paper. Josip Novaković is to be considered one of these writers.

#### **4. The Role of English in Josip Novaković's "Intimate Exile"**

Novaković was born in 1956 in Daruvar, Croatia, relatively near the Hungarian border. For a writer who decided to relocate to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, America was part of his family's history for at least two generations before his birth: his grandparents had moved from Croatia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Cleveland, Ohio. His grandfather then returned to what had become Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the First World War.

Novaković wrote more than one text with the purpose of illustrating the reasons behind his inner relationship with English as a vibrant form of life. Perhaps the most exhaustive explanation is to be detected in his essay "This Is No Language. (Intimate Exile)", which deals with the struggle of being bilingual by choice. Novaković begins the essay stating he is often asked why he feels more comfortable writing in English rather than in the language he spent his early years speaking: the reader is told about the episode which first had him gravitate towards English at the age of sixteen, when he had to stay in bed for a month due to a sprained ankle, which is why he ironically owes his proficiency in English to his "Achilles' heel" (2006:91). While recovering, Novaković read his brother's books in simplified English, enthralled by his new-found capacity of decoding words in a language he had not thought much of before, and perceived a transformation within his personality. "I wondered whether the new language would change me into a half-man, a half-goat, or a donkey, or, equally astounding, a foreigner": out of a short, amusing list of physical distortions involving animals, the word "foreigner" is perhaps the most striking. Foreigners are humans, and yet the young

English speaker stands out as someone entirely different from the community, receiving the same kind of attention which would be addressed to a deformed limb.

What filters through Novaković's story is his own sense of surprise over the nature of his learning process. Some details, such as the fact that he memorized the dictionary marking the entries he "lusted after" (2006:92) confer to his journey through English a shade of passion which resembles chasing an object of fervent desire, with a romantic connotation. Eventually, Novaković mastered the language to the point that moving to an English-speaking country was no more perceived as merely optional. At the age of 20, when his application for studying at Vassar College, New York, got accepted, he left his country in order to pursue a career in writing, despite the fact that, at the time, he was studying medicine at the University of Novi Sad in Serbia.

Linguistically speaking, several curious episodes took place during his early years in the United States. The first episode he depicts in the essay features a story written in Croatian he decided to mail to a Serb friend back in Zagreb. The feedback he received was unexpectedly negative: "This is not Croatian: too many Serb words, too much strange syntax, and not consistent enough to be mistaken for experimentation." If we compare languages to bridges through which people are offered the chance to bond, exchange opinions and build relations, it seemed as if, by the time Novaković sent his friend his short story in Croatian, the author's original linguistic sphere had been dismantled, not dissimilarly to what tragically happened in Mostar in 1993, when Serbs and Croats bombed and destroyed the Old Bridge, one of the historical symbols of connection between their blood-soaked lands. "In my absence, the Croatian language began to change, partly back to what it used to be, partly, of course, to something new, with new jargon. I was not there; I could not follow those changes; I could not hear the

living language". (Novaković, 1993:27).

The breaking up of what was formerly known as Yugoslavia works as a metaphor for the fragmentation of the English language itself. Novaković is criticized for being a Croat who adopts Serbian words as much as he is later reproached for featuring British words in his writing for an American University. American English presents Novaković with challenges: his "awkward syntax" is pointed out by his new American friends, whose remarks mention "too many winding sentences and misplaced adverbs and wrong prepositions and lapses in diction: too much mixture of the high and low style, and too many British words", perhaps due to the novels devoured during the years Novaković spent in his homeland. In Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's short introduction to her short story "Sisters", selected by Novaković for *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (2000:203), she also states the importance of such classics. "The English I use is (...) deeply entrenched in the British literary traditions I was trained in: the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad [Polish born and raised], and D.H. Lawrence, for example". It is therefore peculiar to observe how, in an American context, British English linguistic traits brought to the surface by a non-native speaker may constitute a double discrepancy.

It is generally not expected from foreigners to achieve the skills which are canonically prerogative of a native speaker, in terms of grammar, syntax and perhaps also regarding the adoption of a specific accent. Therefore, the transition from being understood to being praised generates surprise among audiences of native speakers of English: Heiko Motschenbacher, commenting on the general perception of the contestants at the annual Eurovision Song Contest press conferences, noticed "a behavioural pattern according to which participants tend to apologize for their

(supposedly low) English proficiency levels" and that the described tendency relates to "social norms that are influenced by traditional concepts of English proficiency in terms of native-likeness and grammar correctness" (Motschenbacher, 2013:89). In the field of research on the legitimacy of non-native varieties of English, Samuel Atechi, professor at Yaounde University, had previously observed that there was what he called "the traditional notion of intelligibility", meaning that the production of native English speakers was supposed to be "prestigious, correct", whereas "the non-native varieties, in turn, were seen as substandard, incorrect, unintelligible and in need of remediation at all cost" (Atechi, 2008:121). At times, Novaković himself admits taking advantage of his condition to justify a mistake, apologizing, because "no matter what awkwardness I commit, I can still say, 'what do you expect from me? I am only a foreigner'" (2006:94). Interestingly, the same friends who welcome his attempts at writing with scepticism also have words of praise for Novaković's word associations, with terms paired up "in a strikingly fresh way" which would not come naturally to a native, and yet these considerations, perhaps meant to be encouraging, tend to generate a form of frustration in a non-native mind such as Novaković's, who has the distinctive feeling of being treated as "a comic alien, an aquamarine creature" (2006:93). Once again, elements from the animal world recur in Novaković's associations, and, as a result, the writer cannot help but wondering whether his attempts at writing would always be labelled as superficial simply out of his own background.

Despite Novaković's positive attitude towards English, it is made clear that his perception of the language is not merely idyllic. In the introduction to "Writing in the Stepmother Tongue" (1993), a selection of short stories he collected and edited for the magazine *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, he compares English to a

cat, who chooses its owner “and you don't control it as much as it controls you” (Novaković, 1993:26). English can also act as an evil stepmother to non-natives, ostracising them for their attempts at settling down in an English-ruled environment, as it “does mistreat many foreigners – and serves as a tool of oppression and exploitation. (...) It excludes people from festivities, jokes, and, worse, from justice.” And yet, Novaković concludes the essay “This is No Language (Intimate Exile)” stating that no other attempt at language learning provided him with the enthusiasm he felt while reading tales at the age of sixteen, stuck in bed with an injured ankle. For a language which actively discriminates someone who lacks in proficiency, it is still the only language which does not make him “feel like a linguistic exile”. (Novaković, 2006:95).

Novaković's case illustrates the struggle (and, to a certain extent, the discrimination) of a Croatian by birth who adopted English as the most suitable code for personal expression, also due to the fact that he did not recognize himself anymore as a Croatian native speaker due to the development of the Croatian language following his permanent departure from the country. The case of Courtney Angela Brkić, a second generation Croatian native of Washington D.C., also helps understanding how family roots do not influence a writer as much as actively communicating in a living language on a regular basis. When Brkić went to Bosnia in 1996, in the aftermath of the Bosnian war, to work for a forensic team, she perceived a distinctive sense of not belonging she had not expected to feel. Her “Croatian Catholic blood” did not help her fit in the Bosnian Muslim area Brkić was sent to in the first place, and acquiring the language from her parents at an early age did not prevent her accent from occupying “a sort of limbo, not wholly native and not wholly foreign”, therefore experiencing “the ambivalence of outsiders” (Brkić, Preface, XIII).

It is precisely thanks to this ambivalence, and the consequent wish to move from the dimension of the outsider to the reassuring comfort of the insider, that new literature in English is constantly produced by those who claim their right to narrate stories in a language they mastered and identified as their own. It is within this area of knowledge and introspection that Novaković concentrated his efforts while collecting, along with fellow editor Robert Shapard, *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*.

## **5. Stories in the Stepmother Tongue**

### **5.1 An Overview**

The anthology originated from a feature in the journal *Mānoa: a Pacific Journal of International Writing* (1993). The feature emerged from the collaboration of Novaković with his wife Jeanette and was subsequently expanded with the involvement of professional editor Robert Shapard. Shapard is an expert in various forms of short fiction, including sudden fiction and “Flash Fiction”, which Shapard coined with James Thomas (Shapard, 2012).

In the general introduction to the text, it is stated that the stories featured in the collection were chosen for their quality. According to the editor, “Quality was the primary criterion. Quality needs to be qualified—what struck us as quality; there are different tastes” (Introduction to *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, 2000:17). Nevertheless, some additional patterns are not to be overlooked, since they clearly connect the contributions to the anthology with one another. To begin with, all the authors (including Novaković) have in common a life event, which is moving to the United States, in most cases permanently. Ten out of seventeen short stories are written in first person. Such narrative choice can be perceived as ambivalent: on one hand, it helps the reader embrace the perspective of the writer through identification; on the other, a distance is put between the narrator, who is usually a foreigner adjusting to life in the United States, and the audience. More generally, all the short stories rely quite

heavily on autobiographic details from the writers.

Interestingly, about half the stories give a prominent role to an adolescent, either as the narrator (i.e. “Not For Sale”, “Grandma's Tales”) or as the protagonist (i.e. “The Winter Hibiscus”), maybe due to the fact that learning a language might be identifiable with the stage of life which defines the passage from childhood to adulthood. Both processes present uncertainties and doubts; both are marked with, or even driven by, the desire to communicate and establish relations with others, especially when the “other” is of a similar biological age and perceived as “different” in ethnic terms. In both “Grandma's Tales” and “The Winter Hibiscus”, the teenage Asian American character Saeng is deeply attracted by a Caucasian boy named David, with contrasting outcomes: Lam's crush is reciprocated beyond interracial hostility and even heteronormativity, whereas Saeng's feelings are not reciprocated and as she helplessly watches David driving away from her with a blonde girl she assumes to be a cheerleader, the unrequited love blends in with the perception of herself as an alien, as she bitterly, simply concludes in capital letters that “They Belonged” (170).

Two stories among the five I selected feature the protagonist's grandmother. In “Every Hunter Wants to Know” by Iossel, the narrating voice summons his grandmother through memories of the two of them looking for mushrooms in the woods during his early childhood: the woman offers him a challenge and stimulates his curiosity on a highly symbolic hunt. In this case, a child and an aged relative are brought together in flashbacks, while Lam's story is set during the narrator's teenage years. It is worth observing that, with their venerable age standing as a symbol of experience, an aura of tenderness and fragility opposed to a firm character and their nature of mother of another parent, grandmothers fit in the role of storytellers. To young grandchildren

facing challenges in a communicating system they have not fully embraced yet, a retired relative is a medium to trace roots and at the same time a help in order to identify the self through detachment from the others, those for whom the notions of land and language carry a symmetric connotation in terms of belonging. A grandmother's voice narrating tales from a past now gone contributes to join what was parted by time and, in the case of “Grandma's Tales”, travelling.

Moving to other family members featured in the stories, at least five authors give a prominent role either to a biological father or a paternal figure. In “Not For Sale”, it is an immigrant from Cuba systematically denying his teenage child any experience of leisure out of their house: through the eyes of the teenage narrator who enthusiastically embraced the American customs and shows a fluency in English her parents lack, such a parental figure embodies the obstacle to overcome until a more threatening perspective catches both of them unprepared and outraged—El Árabe, the only featured character from outside the family sphere, willing to negotiate with the narrator's father in order to arrange the marriage between the narrator and El Árabe's son. On the other hand, it is worth observing that father-daughter dynamics, especially regarding common practices in the land of origin, are not systematically conflictual: in Bharati Mukherjee's “Happiness”, for instance, the character of the father concentrates his efforts in finding a suitable Indian husband for his affectionate daughter and the most promising candidate is singled out in the few days preceding the father's death.

The purpose of finding similarities intertwining the short stories is not meant to imply a general uniformity, nor monotony: as a matter of fact, they all differ deeply in genre, register, and more generally, style. Focusing on the five stories I selected, while “Grandma's Tales” is wrapped in an overall sense of surreal and heavily relies on irony,

Ho's intimate depiction of teenager Saeng in "The Winter Hibiscus" by a third person omniscient narrator strikes a chord with the reader for the overall tenderness. Ortiz Cofer's poetic, dreamy pace is highlighted when juxtaposed to Kyoko Uchida's considerations in her brief "Mother Tongues and Other Untravellings: A Long Poem in Prose".

Novaković asked each featured writer to recount their personal experience prior to their stories and the answers to the question "why did you choose to write in English in the first place?" are not "always as obvious as some might think" (*Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, 9). Among the common traits, the co-existence of renouncing and embracing, as well as creating and dismantling, comes to the surface in the introductions.

Both Ho and Ortiz Cofer describe their activity as writers featuring metaphors which juxtapose languages to parts of the human body, such as the heart. Ho also has in common with Lam examples involving food, as if switching from one language to another had to do with the physical sense of taste. To Lam, "the word *chua* (...) which means sour, invokes a more sour taste (...) than the English word sour", also implying repercussions on a physical level: the writer shares how his salivation tends to be more abundant when hearing *chua* instead of sour (28). Similarly, Mingfong Ho recalls that "it was in Thai that [she] would ask for a ripe guava or pickled mango, wixed with sugar or salt or chili sauce" (161).

On another linguistic dimension related to food, Novaković and Iossel play with curious connotations which are implied within the name of a specific type of food or recipe in their native language and is lost in the English translation. In the introduction to *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, Novaković recalls an episode which took place at

the co-op dorm in his early days at Vassar College, when he realized his incapability of ordering eggs sunny-side-up (an expression he was not aware of) without resorting to using the word “eye” from Croatian *jaja na oko*. “Make me eggs so that they look like eyes”, he would therefore explain to the student cook when ordering, and the latter would observe how he was rather “poetic” (16). On the same topic, Iossel mentions gathering with his family *maslyata*, or “the buttery ones” (113) in his short story “Every Hunter Wants to Know”. The *maslyata* mushrooms are known in English as slippery jacks: in Russian, the “buttery” does not refer to the flavour, but rather to the caps being viscid and slick when wet or moist: instead of using an adjective such as “slippery”, which would convey an unappetizing description, “buttery” is preferred.

Most relevantly, all these writers appear to be seeking their identity. It seems that English, out of all the languages they came into contact with through their lives, contributed the most to their quest.

## **5.2 Flying Above the Chaos: Judith Ortiz Cofer's "Not for Sale"**

Judith Ortiz Cofer is a native of Puerto Rico. As a child, she moved to Paterson, New Jersey, due to her father's military career, but subsequently relocated to Georgia. She is the Emeritus Regents' and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia, where she taught undergraduate and graduate creative writing workshops for 26 years. Among her critically-acclaimed activity both as a poet and a novelist, "Not For Sale", explicitly autobiographical, belongs to the sphere of creative non-fiction, a genre Ortiz Cofer described in an interview from 1990 as

(...) a hybrid, a combination of fiction and nonfiction. Even though I write about an actual person, like my grandmother, and a real event, I can't go to any text and get the exact words or exact actions. So I take the liberty of a fiction writer and dramatize it to try to bring out what one does as a poet. My intent is that by putting together certain images and manipulating language something will emerge that is also the truth.

In the brief introduction to the story, Ortiz Cofer gives an account of a life event that occurred when she was ten through a net of flying-related metaphors and biblical references. With her father abroad on a mission, the necessity of finding a doctor for her mother forced her to abruptly engage in conversation with strangers, carrying a written message with a basic request for help. By that point, the visual stimulation as well as the voices surrounding her had the effect of a Christian revelation, and she was finally able to decode the language mainly spoken in the country she lived in.

The passage has traits of a fairytale. However, during an interview which dates

back to 1997, Ortiz Cofer recalls an unpleasant circumstance which bears witness to her initial difficulties:

(...) a teacher who did not know that I did not understand English threw a book over my head because of her frustration. This lesson led me to become a reader and a very serious student of languages, a process that was literally and symbolically painful. I decided that my main weapon in life was communication. I had to learn the language of the place where I was living in order to survive.

“Survive” is an interesting choice of verb. Ylce Irizarry observed that the narrator of “Not For Sale” identifies herself first with “the famous storyteller survivalist of *A Thousand and One Nights*”, then with Anne Frank in her hiding place, waiting and hoping for persecutions against Jews to come to an end (Irizarry, 2016:122). It is presumable that Ortiz Cofer (and by extent the girl narrator) seemingly experienced a multiple form of isolation, exacerbated by restrictions imposed from adults and the (temporary) impossibility to adapt to the interacting codes of the new context.

The character of El Árabe is mentioned from the very beginning. He was given his nickname, stressing his non-American origins, by the Puerto Rican female community of Paterson with whom he interacts the most, due to the nature of his goods (“he did not carry anything men would buy”, 22). By this point, the narrator is frustrated by her forced loneliness, since her father would not allow her do take part in any activity involving her schoolmates and peers. He is the human embodiment of denial, only capable of replying: “No, no, no, with a short Spanish ‘o.’ Final: no lingering vowels in my father’s pronouncements” (22).

Judith Ortiz Cofer is also a poet. Carmen Avecedo Butcher (2003) argued that the use of language she makes in the lines above has little in common with prose. In her

analysis, Spanish vowels are shorter than those in English, making her father's three *No*'s clearly recognizable as Spanish and even more peremptory, while the longer *o* of the English language recurs in the following sentence. The alliteration can be found in the English *no* which precedes *lingering*, along with "the devastatingly assured "ow" sound in *pronouncements*." (Avecedo Butcher, 2003:9)

The narrator seeks relief in reading. It would be reductive to observe that her books keep her company: since they are in English and she is the only member of her family able to speak it fluently, they symbolically represent her ally, companionship and transgression. The powerful discourse of storytelling reaches its full extent: as in a play within the play, Ortiz Cofer depicts a man telling the story (in faltering Spanish) of perhaps the most celebrated fictional storyteller in global literature, Scheherazade. To the eyes and ears of a secluded teenager, the experience is undoubtedly intriguing. Moreover, El Árabe is only welcomed and allowed the access to their apartment while the head of the family is elsewhere, in a discreet form of rebellion.

A very puzzled narrator accepts to wear a ring given to her by El Árabe for free, but it is only when her father breaks into the room unexpectedly and acknowledges the presence of an intruder that the meaning behind the jewel is explained: El Árabe intended the object as a marriage offer to the girl from his own son, in order for the latter to be granted permission to reside in the United States as well. In a twist of events, the outraged father sends the man away and, in the aftermath of the event, he is finally able to defeat his idiosyncrasy towards the English word "Yes", gradually condescending at using it, albeit sporadically, as an equivalent for his native *si*.

Stating that the short story is rich in symbols and references is perhaps an understatement. Allusions to garments and textiles recur throughout the whole narration,

both ontologically and metaphorically, with a meticulous attention to details and colour: El Árabe, a merchant who deals in “mostly linens” and carries jewels around “in a little red velvet bag”, sells the protagonist's family an expensive bedspread “with green threads running through it”; the narrator's mother hides money “in the foot of a nylon stocking”; each altercation between the narrator and her mother end with “the heavy *blanket* [emphasis added] of angry silence falling over both of [them]” (26). The imagery inspires multiple parallels, as if the process of sewing up a narration implied covering up bitter realities. From a lexical point of view, *Señorita* used as *realia* carries more meanings than its most accurate translation *Miss* would cover. Ortiz Cofer presents them as non-equivalent: the former in Puerto Rican Spanish carries within itself the notions of good manners, decency, and obedience which the family does not expect to find outside of Puerto Rico and is firmly intentioned to maintain.

Taking every aspect discussed so far under consideration, “Not For Sale” is at the same time a story about integration and disintegration. It involves a family which is forced to partially sacrifice dynamics which traditionally belong to South America and bias against the social environment they emigrated to. That “yes” the narrator's father comes to terms with, such a simple yet powerful syllable, marks the end of a stasis and the first step towards acceptance.

### **5.3 Andrew Lam's "Money and Honey" in "Grandma's Tales"**

Applying to Andrew Lam the label of diaspora writer seems simplistic, if not forced. It is true that he relocated to the United States and has been writing extensively about the condition of being a Vietnamese immigrant ever since; however, he had to change residence before being legal, therefore unable to decide for himself. Like Ortiz Cofer, his family history has been deeply influenced by his father's involvement with the army —as the son of a general, he grew up in a wealthy environment, until in a tragic twist of events he was forced to abandon his homeland at the age of eleven as Communist forces closed in on Saigon. Subsequently, Lam experienced life in a refugee camp in Guam; in a way, he gained his name and accomplishments as a writer out of elaborating his chagrin over what was lost.

His literary career began in California despite the fact that, just like Novaković, he originally intended to apply for medical school after college; following the end of a relationship, he found solace only in writing and coincidentally made peace with the drastic change he had to undergo between his childhood and early adolescence. In 2015, he explained to interviewer Eric Fish that through his lover, whom Lam met during his freshman year, he had found "a new country, a new home" but the two would split after graduating. "At night I gave in to heartbreak", Lam admitted. "I typed and typed. I bled myself into words; mostly, I suppose, to describe my broken heart. (...) Then one day I wrote something along the lines of this passage: "When one loses someone whom he loves very much, with whom he shares a private life, a private language, a private world, a routine, he loses an entire country. He becomes, in fact, an exile." (...) And it

was then that I realized that I had had my heart broken before as the 11-year-old who stood in the refugee camp in Guam and listened to the BBC announce the end of his world: the loss of Vietnam, friends, relatives, and ultimately a country.” In the preface to Lam's contribution to *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, he also shares his initial opinions over English in terms of sounds, which were anything but appreciative, for he perceived it as “a (...) rather ugly-sounding language—(...) to speak it you risk hurting your throat” (*Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, 28). The reasons behind such an unfavourable opinion might have to do with the fact that the temporary lodging at the refugee camp, which was the first time Lam had to speak English to be understood, coincided with his own voice deepening with puberty, a natural process which led to physical changes he had not been aware of. “I was convinced that the harsh-sounding words had chafed the back of my throat and caused me to sound so funny that my family laughed and laughed (...)" (op.cit). His memories of a tragic, unsettling period blended in with English, but despite the rough start he eventually came to terms with his past and later crowned it “[his] favourite language”. “I think I've grown in love with it over the years” (Fish, 2015), he admits, recognizing the same kind of affection the other writers featured in this study happen to have felt towards English. Before leaving his native country, the only words in English he knew were “money” and “honey”, from the lascivious “no money, no honey” he had heard from prostitutes in the streets of Saigon. At the end of his introduction to “Grandma's Tales”, Lam admits that as an author of prose he later found more “money” and “honey” in English, while if he were to write poetry he would resort to Vietnamese.

As of 2015, “Grandma's Tales”, featured in *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, is the piece of work he favours among his entire production. “I wrote it in three days and it

was feverish writing. I could never get back to that mindset to write something as fabulous (and I mean fabulous in the sense of fable) as that story" (Fish, 2015). It was first published in 1996, and subsequently took its rightful place among Lam's first collection of short stories *Birds of Paradise Lost* (2013). The register is informal and very colloquial, especially at the beginning. The premise on which the narration stands is rather ordinary: two siblings are left home in charge of taking care of their beloved grandmother, while their parents are away celebrating their wedding anniversary. However, circumstances take an unexpected turn from the very opening line, when the reader is informed of the elder lady's sudden death. The kids are helpless spectators as she collapses at the dinner table and, pulling a macabre move but driven by rather noble intentions, decide to freeze her corpse while their parents are away celebrating their wedding anniversary, justifying their acts out of unwillingness to go against Vietnamese funeral traditions. The black comedy element is soon reinvigorated by a surreal plot twist: Grandma comes back to life and is found sitting on her bed by an astonished narrator and his boyfriend Eric, to whom she had previously given her approval and support as her grandson's partner. She looks younger but, most importantly, what immediately strikes both boys is her "accentless, Californian English" (31). The narrator's surprise equals his frustration in the following statement: "I was a little jealous 'cause I had to go through junior high and high school and all those damn ESL classes and everything to learn the same language while Grandma just got it down cold because she was reborn" (31).

The three head to a cocktail party to reunite with the narrator's sister Nancy, whose first sentence addressed to her grandmother is about her English as well: "Grandma, your English is flawless!" (31). The narrator had previously been very

specific with Grandma's linguistic skills: providing a brief introduction of his beloved relative, he had mentioned her age, her background, but most importantly the fact that "she did *not* [emphasis added] speak English, only a little French (...)" (29). Grandma's new-found post-mortem knowledge of English is the aspect which shocks the narrator, his sister Nancy and Eric the most, and it is precisely thanks to such knowledge that she is able to engage the attention at the cocktail party with stories of a time long gone in a place far away. The people are intrigued and moved by her voice, "sad and seductive" (32) and her words, that "came pouring out of her like rain" (32). The poems and tales she shares on such occasion belong to her childhood and, by extent, to the narrator's childhood as well ("[those were] fairy tales she herself had learned as a child, the kind she used to tell me and my cousins when we were young", 32): English thus mediates the transition of remembrance from one generation to the next with the involvement of a wider audience, also allowing the characters to realize how intertwined they will always be.

In the intentionally mysterious ending, Grandma is said to have left the country with a Colombian man met at the party. Her new partner is, certainly not by coincidence, a famous novelist: Grandma tells her grandson that her travelling companion "might even help her write her book" (33), therefore suggesting that the stories from the oral tradition she passed on are likely to be caught on paper soon, which might be a reference to Lam's profession.

Additionally, the reader is told early in the short story that Grandma used to work as a nurse, and that her grandson, the narrator, particularly cherished her stories about helping women giving birth to children with physical abnormalities, such as conjoined twins ("I used to love her stories about delivering all these strange two-headed babies

and Siamese triplets connected at the hip whom she named Happy, Liberation and Day”, 29). Grandma's midwifery skills are symbolically relevant to the plot. Socrates' philosophical method is described as the maieutic method, from the Greek word *maieuesthai*, *to act as midwife*. It is the art of intellectual midwifery, which brings other men's ideas to life; similarly, Grandma formed her grandson in a way that he became a mind prone to narrate through her guide and positive influence as a storyteller.

In her last statement before leaving, Grandma declares that she is willing to travel the world and eventually reunite with what she had parted from in Hanoi. Two days later, the narrator and what is left of his family arrange her funeral in the United States. The story ends with the certainty that “Grandma wasn't around” (34), implying that a corpse in a coffin is not meant to embody, nor cage, the soul of a storyteller. Her spirit, young, restless and capable of effortlessly communicating in the lingua franca tales to be passed on and on, is elsewhere to be found—perhaps, within her grandson, whose last rhetorical question conveys not only a strong reference to Grandma, but also to Lam's personal life. “And wasn't epic loss what made us tell our stories?” (33). It is safe to state that for many of the featured authors it was.

## **5.4 Michail Yossel's “weighty rationales”: an analysis of “Every Hunter Wants to Know”**

To Lam, embracing English implies, at least partially, renouncing to Vietnamese. The voluntary act of sacrifice is less subtle for St. Petersburg-born writer Michail Iossel, who compared the options offered by Russian and English in his personal introduction to “Every Hunter Wants to Know” and explains why he favours the latter over the former, providing reasons which, along with being unconventional, seem paradoxical for a writer. “I felt that (...) I knew too many words in Russian.” Examined alone, it comes natural to wonder how this resonates with the very ambition of the writer, since disposing of a rich vocabulary is usually seen as a major advantage and something to be praised for. However, Iossel shares with the reader a further, bitter autobiographical detail: “the last thing a nostalgia-besotted, half-mad-with-grief émigré writer needs is dealing with his life, the sum of his total losses to date, in a language which, instead of distancing him from his past (...) keeps further stirring it up” (102). In contrast with Lam, who initially rejected English as the language of a painful experience but eventually uses it to reinterpret the sorrow of displacement, Iossel looks back at his past in Russian and finds unbearable to revive it, *unless* he adopts a new code through which he can depict his memories. Languages are, more explicitly than for the other writers featured in this analysis, personified and transfigured into lovers by Iossel: “if you're trying to get over an unfaithful [one], it makes no sense to keep her photo in your wallet!”, he observes. Another point he makes in agreement with what stated by Novaković is his willingness to rely on, to borrow from the title of the critically

acclaimed film by Alejandro Iñárritu, the “Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance” a non-native naturally disposes of: “you cannot always get what you want, when you're finished with a story in a foreign language—but sometimes, fortunately, you wouldn't know it...because you don't know the language well enough always to be able to tell the difference between a triumph and a failure” (102). His literary skills in English rely then on assumptions and imagery constructed within the complex area between certainty and unawareness.

“Every Hunter Wants to Know” is a short story of reflections born out of the ashes of two literary phoenixes “Kavgolovo” and “The Fiery Engine”, two other novellas written during high school with the intention of submitting one of the two as an entry for a prestigious contest. The narration is a kaleidoscope of flashbacks and alternates episodes from at least three phases of the narrator's life in Russia: early adolescence (when he was “thirteen and unhappy”, 103) is intertwined with events from 1957, the year of the launch of the first artificial Earth satellite by the Soviet Union.

The episode Iossel focuses on takes place in 1961, when the narrator was six years old at his grandmother's house in Kavgolovo. In this section, Iossel as a little kid promptly accepts to join his family on a walk to the woods nearby, with the purpose of collecting mushrooms. The symbolism conveyed by the setting is not to be underestimated. It is no accident that so many fairytale characters find themselves having to traverse tracts of woodland full of dangers and threatening entanglements. In modern times, the fairy tale has provided rich pickings for literary critics looking to plunder the depths of symbolism found there: the father of psychic exploration, Jung, as reported by Juan Eduardo Cirlot in his Dictionary of Symbols, argued that the terrors in children's tales symbolise “the perilous aspects of the unconscious: its tendency to

devour or obscure reason.” (Cirlot, 2006:112; Jung, 1956). The forest is a place of magic then, magic that can be dangerous, but also a place of opportunity and transformation. In the tale of Beauty and the Beast, the merchant is directed by invisible forces within the forest to the Beast’s castle, only to be directed by invisible hands to his fate. As for Little Red Riding Hood, straying from the path and into the woods is similarly dangerous and filled with treachery.

In a passage during the family's mushroom hunt, the little boy suddenly believes he is lost. He panics for missing his grandmother's presence, therefore facing the perspective of loneliness in darkness. When he realises he was mistaken and that his grandmother had in fact never stopped keeping an eye on him, he reacts sheepishly, unwilling to admit his dismay (“She didn't notice that I had been lost, which meant that I hadn't been lost”, 112). Iossef focuses on the dissociation between the state of being lost and the perception of feeling lost, which do not match in the case of a little boy exploring the woods under the impression of being left without a landmark or a human guide. Allegorically, it has been argued that those who lose their way in the uncharted forest are losing touch with their conscious selves and voyaging into the realms of the subconscious. On this topic, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim argued that

‘Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious. If we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity.’ (Bettelheim, 1991:94)

Moreover, the whole experience is so overwhelming for the boy that he reaches the

point of vibrantly belonging to the woods as “a natural part of nature which has no memory and survives by instinct: like a mushroom, a plant, or a grassblade” (111).

When he is reunited with his grandmother, he is scolded for clumsily gathering the only mushroom he had found with his bare hands. “Now you've destroyed the roots and there won't be any new mushrooms here next year!”, she explains. Would it be too far-fetched to suppose that a boy capable of self-identifying with a mushroom would grow into an adult who has cut his roots with the country he came from, as well as the language he first acquired? The sentence “The woods were abundant with mushrooms that morning. It was sad to leave them behind” (113) hints at renouncing more than just trees and edible greens. After all, the writer said goodbye to a country and a language which offered him “too many words—too many word choices” (102).

On a stylistic dimension, Iossel, perhaps more than the other authors featured in the anthology, plays with words mediating the two languages he knows. He connects them through their sound, their meaning, thus generating hybrids, compound nouns and fascinating inter-linguistic connections while jumping back and fourth in the timeline of the narrated events. The assonance between *gribnik* (“mushroom gatherer”) and *sputnik* (“guide, fellow traveller”) is so appealing to him that the writer uses it several times, as a beloved childish wordplay (*sputnik* also reminds him of Gagarin, whose fate is intertwined to the epilogue). By the end of the story, Iossel also explains the nature of the unusual title: most children in Russia learn the sentence “every hunter wants to know where the pheasant sits” («каждый охотник желает знать где сидит фазан», pronounced “káždyj oxótnik želájet znát’, gde sidít fazán”) as an easy way to remember the colours of the rainbow, which share the same initials in the correct order. Chromatic fields can become deeply meaningful by referencing memories that are shared by nearly

all Russian citizens and mentioning the mnemonic device is particularly appropriate since the writer is describing a specific memory from his childhood. It is interesting to observe that Iossel translates *сидеть* (sidét') as “to be hiding” instead of the generally accepted “to sit” and that he systematically recurs to transliteration from cyrillic alphabet to latin before translating into English.

Words are combinations or sequences of phonemes conveying meaning. It only takes the fast uninterrupted repetition of a word such as, for instance, “mother”, which traditionally stands for comfort and warmth, to lose such meaning, and unsettle the mind to the extent of acquiring a sinister connotation: “in no time at all the word would be menacingly transformed into something new: what was “mothermo”? (...) Each time, the sudden disappearance of the word's meaning *scared* me [emphasis added]. Where did it go?” (117). Even the astounding power of memories is to be doubted when what is certain is mediated by time and blended with imagination. Paradoxically, when undecided over which story would have more chances to win the contest, the narrator recalls his teacher strongly encouraging the students to write about personal life, and yet, later on, the author repetitively states on purpose that what he writes about might or might not have really happened. For a start, did the little boy really go mushroom hunting? “Maybe I wasn't in the woods with my grandmother, after all. That was such a long time ago”(113), he wonders. He is confident and proud of his ability to remember at the mere age of six, yet later on finds difficult to order episodes chronologically. On the evening of the mushroom gathering, “remembering that it was my birthday, I ran around the yard, filled with excitement”, only to contradict himself in the following paragraph: “when I stopped running around, I remembered that it was of course, not my birthday. My birthday was in July, and there are almost no mushrooms in the woods

until late August”, and even admits being wrong at placing in time historical facts of public knowledge. “(...) It occurred to me that Yuri Gagarin was launched into orbit on April 12, 1961, not in August”, finally informing the reader that the milestone space mission does not coincide in time with the narrator's personal life.

Early in the narration, Iossel stated that “Kavgolovo”, the short story within the short story, was not submitted as a contest entry in favour of “A Fiery Engine”. The narrator ends up winning the competition with “A Fiery Engine”, but his triumph goes almost unnoticed, shadowed by Yuri Gagarin's tragic accident which took away his life the very same day of the winner's proclamation in 1968. Just as being lost is different from consciously feeling lost, winning and being celebrated do not always match; making mistakes at placing memories in time, or even doubting the reliability of such events, does not automatically make them unworthy of being narrated; and having a multitude of personal reasons for choosing to write in English in a moment in life makes such reasons neither permanently valid, nor unforgettable. Especially in Iossel's case, a motivation may evolve along with the language itself, as long as both are kept alive.

## **5.5 Minfong Ho's “fragmentation” in “The Winter Hibiscus”**

A positive attitude towards English does not always lead to a linguistic conflict within a polyglot. This is the case of Mingfong Ho, a Singaporean who was educated in schools in Bangkok and then in Taiwan. She was later accepted at Cornell University, where she earned her Bachelor's and a Master's Degree and started her literary career.

In contrast to Iossel, Ho considers her personality (and even her body) split into at least three linguistic entities, for which English acted as an agglomerating force. Cantonese is to Ho the “language of the heart”, the organ evoking the human sentiment of affection. It carries the notions of growing up, of relatives, of storytelling. Thai is, by contrast, the “language of the hands”, designated to carry out tasks such as playing and buying goods: the basic functions are practical and involve the five senses. Finally, the writer discusses moving her first steps in an English speaking country once she reached the stage (and age) of higher education. English has therefore, at least initially, played a strictly academic role in her life, thus deserving the definition of “language of the head”.

Choosing English does not come without problems which are common to her colleagues as well. Just like Novaković, she came to the United States to pursue her studies. Both Ho and Novaković raise the matter of being regarded with suspicion, and sometimes in awe, by native speakers. Specifically, Ho mirrors the perception others have of her through borrowing the same possessive adjective adopted by Skinner to define what English is to native speakers (“their”). “(...) those who speak only English regard my fluency in “their” language as freakish, an interesting but somehow grotesque mimicry of a language which belongs to them but was only lent to me”. The issue of

belonging is also a *leitmotif* of her short story “The Winter Hibiscus”.

Another side of Ho's life and work she shares with Novaković (and Iossel) is familiarity with the constant apprehension which comes from carrying out a professional task in English. After all, mastering the language does not make these writers immune from imprecisions or involuntary oversights: Ho calls the feeling “uneasy self-consciousness” and remarks that she is constantly “on guard against making mistakes”. One might point out that such a shield, raised to avoid criticism, sounds unnatural and clashes with the concept of serenely reviving a flow of past experiences through writing. But Ho overturns the argument with a syllogism: to her, English is the language of writing; writing had therapeutic effects on her psyche; therefore, English is now to her the language of unity, which allowed her to “bring back what is gone, to relieve what is lost, to make a mosaic out of fragments”.

“The Winter Hibiscus” opens with a remarkable case of pathetic fallacy. Saeng, the teenage protagonist and Ho's alter ego, is on the doorstep of her house, bracing herself to leave in order to take her driving test. Outside the door, the setting offered is that of an autumn scene: the chilly wind blowing, the “bare trees” (162) and the fallen maple leaves are intertwined with Saeng's situation and state of mind. She recalls her attempt to preserve some of those leaves in a schoolbook the winter before, only to see her plan fail when, after being asked to remove them from within the pages by the teacher, she had left them slowly decaying in her room and reluctantly had to throw them away before they had dried up properly. Her instinct for treasuring what is dead and of no apparent value probably belongs to the sphere of the subconscious and can be traced back to her status of refugee from Laos who has been residing in the United States with her parents and brother for four years at the time in which the story is set.

While her father and her sibling are barely mentioned, her mother, a former teacher turned housewife, has a prominent role. At the beginning, Saeng is presented with a mission which, if accomplished, would benefit her entire household, that is her driving test. Her mother, Mrs. Panouvong, notices Saeng is standing motionless by the door and asks her daughter to join her while she works in the family garden, since her daughter is early for the exam. The dialogue between the two is a remarkable example of two different attitudes towards languages: Mrs. Panouvong asks Saeng two questions (“Bai sai?” and *luuke ji fao bai hed hand?*”) in Laotian for which Ho does not provide a translation, so that the English-speaking reader has to make the effort of guessing the meaning solely through Saeng's answers, which are, respectively, “To take my driving test” and “There's no rush”. It is revealed that, after four years, the protagonist feels “more comfortable now speaking in English” and since her parents would not adopt English at home, the four members of the family had accepted a communication compromise: “[Saeng's] parents would continue to address her brother and her in Laotian, and they would reply in English”. Interestingly, Ho acknowledges the existence of accidental gaps and offers a solution: “each side [would slip] into the other's language to convey certain key words that seemed impossible to translate”. However, only the first two questions posed by Saeng's mother are kept in untranslated Laotian. With the exhortation “Come help your mother a little. *Mahteh, luuke*—come on, child” (164), Mrs. Panouvong manages to persuade her daughter to contribute with her to keeping the vegetable garden healthy, since the word *luuke* (“child”) evokes in Saeng's mind “the voices of her grandmother, and her uncle,(or) her primary-school teachers” that make her surrender, “as if there were an invisible chorus of smiling adults calling her (...”). In this sense, Laotian may have in Saeng's mind the same role Ho assigned to Chinese, the

language she identifies with her beloved ones who were by her side during childhood. The rest of the dialogues of in the story are entirely reported in English, perhaps for the sake of fluency and comprehension. Ho then introduces the character of Mrs. Lambert, the wife of the Lutheran minister who sponsored the Panouvongs and still contributes, more indirectly, to their welfare, asking her son David to assist Saeng with her driving lessons, by making his car available to the girl.

So far in the analysis of the selected stories featured in *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, the fairy tale element has been detected in various forms. Perhaps more subtly, “The Winter Hibiscus” might be read as a contemporary version of Perrault’s Cinderella, with the role of the fairy godmother embodied by both Mrs. Panouvong and Mrs. Lambert. These special helpers, being popular tropes in fairy tales, are supposed to provide aid for the protagonist with a certain detachment from the overarching plot (Jorgensen, 2007:224). In this narrative, the women are unaware of the crush Saeng has developed on David, in virtue of his attractive looks, his status of senior student at their school and his encouraging, kind disposition: these features altogether contribute at making him the stereotype of the American born-and-raised teenager Saeng interfaces with on a daily basis. It is Mrs. Lambert herself who offers David’s car to Saeng in the first place, while Mrs. Panouvong, out of gratitude to the Lamberts and filled with hope and expectation, gives Saeng a twenty dollar banknote with which the girl is supposed to buy David lunch at McDonald’s, the “epitome of everything American” (166).

Despite all the support, the plan cannot be put into practice, as a consternated Saeng first fails the test and then, in rapid succession, finds herself staring helplessly at David as he drives away with “someone blond and vivacious”. She notices that the two are “so carefree, so casual—so American” (170) and is deeply hurt by the “recognition

that They Belonged, and she didn't" (*ivi*). Saeng reacts to her own dismay by categorically rejecting the idea of taking the driving test again in the future.

The turning point of the narration takes place on the walk home, when Saeng notices a greenhouse and instinctively goes in. She is welcomed by "an elderly woman behind the counter", the third fairy godmother of the modern tale, who tours Saeng around as she looks for plants which remind her of her life before landing in the United States, "plants that she had not even realized she had known but had forgotten" (175). Perceiving "a shot of recognition so intense, it was almost visceral", Saeng is shown the hibiscus, before which she cannot help whispering "*Saebba*", almost reverentially. The identification that follows is an out-of-body sensory experience: through sight, touch and smell, the girl also singles out "yet another old friend", a Madagascar periwinkle which seems out of place in a pot, since "at home it just grew wild"—arguably a metaphor for Saeng herself; calling jasmine for its Laotian name, "*Dok Malik*", is so pleasant that she ends up "savouring the feel of the word on her tongue".

Ho's operation is not dissimilar to what Proust recounts in *In Search of Lost Time*, with the addition of the linguistic element contributing to the protagonist's epiphany. The moment of revelation on existence Proust experiences while eating the *madeleine*, a cake he used to eat during childhood, is an episode often cited in the neuroscience of learning and memory. Nevertheless the act, which ultimately leads to the recapturing of memories belonging to his days as a child in the village of Combray, is not an instantaneous process: as Douwe Draaisma (2004) has pointed out, the narrator actually faces a struggle to make sense of his feelings at the moment of tasting the *madeleine* (Draaisma, 2004:33). In the same way, Saeng is gradually brought back in time through smelling the flowers surrounding her. To Proust, it is as though the

gustatory memory needs to make contact with the visual one, and they do not quite speak the same language; to Saeng, olfactory memory, along with the tactile and the visual, are ultimately combined with the co-existence of Laotian and English within her brain and end up summoning visions of her grandmother.

In a swirl of memories, senses and examples of linguistic mediation with repercussions on a physical level, Saeng is suddenly pervaded with “a wave of loss”(175), a feeling which so far has been mentioned by all the authors taken into consideration. Ho's main character, as a consequence of such impetuous distress and disorientation, reaches a climax and starts weeping, eventually resolving to buy the hibiscus, spending almost the entire amount of money her mother had given her hours before. At first, her mother is appalled by her relatively expensive purchase, but after acknowledging the outcome of the driving test and understanding the allegorical (and emotional) value of the plant, she suggests moving it from the vase to the family garden, and her comment “Look how rootbound [the hibiscus] is, poor thing” (177) might convey an endearing reference to her daughter.

While Iossel focused on a mushroom which was removed from the ground with all its roots out of inexperience, Saeng's hibiscus, in a parallel, is carefully, even lovingly, established in its new surroundings by her mother. As a consequence, Saeng can finally make peace with, and perhaps appreciate, an environment she had come to despise after failing to fit in. Her final positive considerations over taking a new driving test in spring carry the same hope addressed to a flower which is expected to blossom, even in adversity.

## **5.6 Kyoko Uchida's “arrival and departure” featured in “Mother Tongues and Other Untravellings: A Long Poem in Prose”**

Kyoko Uchida, who was born in Hiroshima, spent her childhood moving back and forth between Japan, the United States, and Canada. She currently holds an MFA in creative writing from Cornell University and her debut poetry collection *Elsewhere* was published in 2012 by Texas Tech University Press. As of 2014, she lives in Brooklyn and works for a non-profit organization.

Her production is focused on continents, seasons and languages—spoken or otherwise—mapping the geographies of longing, loss, grief, and conflict. Her poems are about itineraries and distance, at the intersection of shared fragilities and efforts to communicate. In the search for precise definitions, the poems attempt to go to the essential core of each place, each yearning and absence. In the brief commentary which precedes “Mother Tongues and Other Untravellings: A Long Poem in Prose”, Uchida's contribution to the anthology, she associates Japanese to her parents, as Ortiz Cofer did with Spanish and Ho with Chinese. Perhaps the most striking allusions are of a metaphorically logistic nature: Uchida states that English was vital to her in the process of “claiming a place for [herself]”, while attempting to “negotiate a space in which [she] had control over events and landscapes” (234).

Uchida also tries to put into words the unsettling feeling she experienced while back in Japan. The awareness of non-belonging to a physical space increased to the point that she reaches a bitter conclusion: “on both sides of the Pacific I was a foreigner, speaking both languages without an accent, without a home”, which resonates with what

Brkić had to say upon being linguistically caught somewhere between the United States and the Balkans (Brkić, 2003:VIII) and with Agosin's comment about existing “in two languages, in two classrooms, split in half and belonging to no one” (Agosin, 2000:143). For Uchida, being fluent in a language is equal to settling down in a familiar place, which does not necessarily need to be defined with a name nor, most relevantly, co-inhabited by others. And yet, such an exclusive space does not imply loneliness. The mediation between Japanese and English, with the “rich shadow in the contours and rhythms of each” results in “a dialogue between language and loves”, for the loving attitude towards both is ever-present.

In order to analyse what Uchida named “A Poem in Prose”, a general definition of the prose poem as a genre is perhaps necessary for understanding the specific text. In the first issue of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, editor Peter Johnson explained, “Just as black humour straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels” (Johnson, 1992:6). While it lacks the line breaks associated with poetry, the prose poem maintains a poetic quality, often utilizing techniques common to poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, and rhyme. The prose poem can range in length from a few lines to several pages long, and it may explore a limitless array of styles and subjects. Uchida builds her narrative on the role her family played alongside her through her linguistic journeys, both with English and Japanese. The former becomes her “brother tongue” (236), significant to both her and her sibling but forbidden at home, not as in Ortiz Cofer's case due to a lack of fluency from her parents but instead “for fear of losing our mother tongue”, as if Japanese were a physical entity, maybe a souvenir, to be kept close not to forget it

somewhere. In fact, Uchida's mother admittedly studied British classics and “said *often* with a British accent”. Nevertheless, just like Ho's Saeng, who was slightly bothered by her mother's pronunciation of the hamburger *Big Mac* (“Bee-mag”), Uchida also highlights some phonetic peculiarities of her mother: “her tongue not quite fitting around the *th*, the *v*”. The difference between the two daughters lies in the acceptance of the two cases of bizarre pronunciation: Saeng never really points out to her mother the oddity in her take on McDonald's signature product, while Uchida's mother's mispronunciation is not overlooked (“my sister and I tried to correct our mother's pronunciation. (...) In silence she suffered our impatience, our unforgiving daughterhood, the hard candy arrogance of smooth *ls* and *rs*”).

In the introduction to *Stillness* (2003), Courtney Angela Brkić, describing what she felt upon working in Bosnia, put a distinctive emphasis over accents: her own was forged by her “roots, [which could be detected] in the rocky, harsh landscape of Herzegovina and the mountains of Dalmatia”, so that “[her] accent was a strange amalgam of those speeches, thwarted by an American tongue”(2003:Preface,XIII). Uchida's experience is not entirely dissimilar: as a ten-year-old girl brought back to Hiroshima, with her mother and father respectively from Yamaguchi (“where the vowels were softer, the lilt slow”, 236) and Himeji, she had learned Japanese in the United States “without dialect or accent”. For this reason, not only is the Hiroshima variation unsettling due to its harshness (“the tongue has become hard and rough as the oyster shells gleaning on the docks all winter”), but it also singles her out among her peers, who do not hide bias against her diversity. (“*you don't sound like us* (...), they said in the perfect standard Japanese they accused me of speaking”). If her physical appearance, especially her small stature, forced her to perceive herself as different from

the mass in a derogatory sense in the United States, Japan reserved for her, at least initially, the status of a linguistic outcast; and the mother figure, who embodied comfort for Ho's Saeng and home for Ortiz Cofer (and in both cases solely spoke the language of origin) is surprisingly presented with the same challenge her daughter has to embark on: “the [Hiroshima] dialect was something we learned together, for the first time, like classmates, or sisters at the piano” as an “unmistakeable music” to “immigrants in a foreign land” (237). The two eventually manage to grasp the accent and make it their own, and the dialect ends up joining American English in the family's linguistic vault.

## **6. A Conversation with Josip Novaković**

In March 2016, Josip Novaković was available for an interview. Within the following two months, initially using email to correspond and eventually arranging a meeting in Lovran, Croatia, he provided details over the nature of his work, his attitude towards English and his accomplishments over the last three decades.

The idea from which *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* developed came from Novaković. After all, just like his acquaintance and fellow writer Mikhail Iossel, he wrote in English as a second language and was interested in finding other similar examples of short stories in the field of creative writing. He explained that roughly half of the stories featured in the anthology came from professional editor Shapard, while he selected the other half, including “Not For Sale” and “Every Hunter Wants to Know”. While some of the contributions had already been published, others were instead selected after the two put a call on *Poets & Writers* for stories written by non-native English speakers, and out of about 300 entries they ended up publishing ten on a special feature of *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* (1993). Subsequently, Novaković and Shapard made additional research and realized that in the meantime several other writers showed up on the international literary scene, which led them to expand their project. Novaković admitted that he did not see eye to eye with Shapard in terms of editing the stories. While Shapard's editing style was described as “more aggressive”, Novaković insisted on keeping the narrations as original as possible, since each detail “added to the flavor, and that each person evolved his or her own dialect fusing the native language with English” (Appendix A, 61). He also added that it is

“important to keep some original words as a reminder that whatever happens in the story couldn’t have happened in English, so we read the story as some sort of translation, and at the same time we get a few sounds and flavors of the original. Writers coming from elsewhere should write with an accent, the way they speak, if possible” (op.cit.). Novaković cited diversity, as well as quality, as the main criteria that were adopted through the selecting process, leaving out stories written with political orientations or intentions, and treasuring mostly creativity and sense of irony. He observed that, on a general basis, when “there is a genuine interest towards the language itself, the outcome is more subtle, more playful, and generally better” (Appendix B, 66)

Two tendencies are arguably traceable behind the selected short stories. One is oriented to a linguistic form of seeking, or a quest for a context to fit within; the other sets the priority on escaping from a place, with English as the most suitable alternative to the language of birth. To a question on whether the two tendencies were to be considered in complete opposition, or maybe one could be consequential, or even intertwined, to the other, Novaković answered observing that many people chose English before going to the United States as a way to liberate themselves, and nevertheless, after moving, some of them instinctively looked for a community to which they could belong, also on a linguistic level. He cited the case of Hispanic communities who still opted for Spanish, and writers from such communities who ended up including the Barrio language in an American English period.

One of the aspects which characterize the short stories is the strong bond the main characters have with their families, which not only leads the writers to feature relatives in their plots, but also plays a role on the essence of a style of storytelling which often relies on family traditions. On the subject, Novaković argued that,

especially for writers coming from the Southern Hemisphere, joining a society where families are mostly atomic-based leads to a desire to keep close to relatives, also in virtue of the fact that economy is not so flexible and members of big families naturally help each other. Immigrants therefore tend to tell family tales, which involve forms of folklore and tribal customs. Novaković also ascribes the factor to the lack of “an American experience of childhood”, which might leave the writers without what he calls “original strength”. Upon starting to write, Novaković himself realized that he came from “the oral tradition of the Balkans” and relied on themes which are heavily featured in the history of his country of birth, such as war; on a general basis, he still considers plots involving conflicts more engaging.

All the authors of the five stories from *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* selected for this analysis came to the United States at some point—some during their childhood, others as teenagers, others in their twenties. Even considering globalization, English as the lingua franca and the Expanding Circle constantly gaining new members, Novaković believes that writing literature in English and obtaining international recognition would hardly be possible in the case of a writer who never leaves his or her country of birth. Experiencing life in an English speaking country leads to grasp “the life, the speed of a living language” (Appendix B, 66), otherwise vibrant pieces of writing are unlikely to be put together. For this reason, Novaković gave up writing in Croatian after crossing the Atlantic Ocean. He felt that Croatian was changing, mostly out of political dynamics, and he had not been part of the evolution, to the point that nowadays, paradoxically, even the translations of his books seem unfamiliar to him. Curiously, he recalls reading editions in English of classic novels by authors such as Tolstoj, Balzac and Flaubert, which is perhaps why he acknowledged that his stories

“sometimes sound as translations” (Appendix B, 68). Additionally, he observed that American English has been invigorated and reinvigorated by languages spoken by immigrants, with Spanish and Yiddish playing a particularly prominent role.

More than fifteen years have passed from the first edition of *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*. The immigrant style of literature in the adopted tongue has become a worldwide phenomenon even for other languages—Novaković cited Germany as an example referring to the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize, a literary award established in 1985, given to a piece of writing in German whose author is not a native speaker. On this subject, Novaković added that “Germans, who used to be almost a hermetic literary culture, [...] enjoy the flavors of different tongues in German, just as they enjoy the flavors of different ethnic cuisines” (Appendix A, 63). It is perhaps worth observing that the word *flavor* (spelled in American English) often recurs in Novaković's comments. Not dissimilarly to Lam and Ho, the editor also perceives a strong relationship to sensory stimulation and experimenting with a language.

Considering the increasing influence of English-ruled social networks, and, perhaps more importantly, the rise of educational systems teaching in English to students from an early stage of their lives in countries belonging to the Expanding Circle, Novaković agreed on foreseeing a growing number of non-native English writers in the next decade, as immigrant writers often choose to “write in the language in which they live, and if they live in English, they write in English. [...] So much communication takes place in English that people who don't live in anglophone societies sometime write in English”, and, as a consequence, “there are as many Englishes as there are people.”

## **7. Conclusion**

The analysis was aimed (and hopefully succeeded) at proving that a positive attitude towards English, combined with curiosity and the ability to create strong narratives, can overcome linguistic barriers and symbolic borders. Genuine interest is therefore effective to the point of overcoming the acquisition of English as a native language, and flowing into English from another language is not to be interpreted as a deterrent: to some, it can effectively become the most suitable medium for storytelling and sharing experiences.

The writers, scholars and editors featured in this study all experienced a form of displacement. They all perceived loss, and English was deeply influential in their attempt at filling the void left by a permanent departure. They all, at least at an initial stage, spoke another language within their everyday context, and built their stories on their childhood and relatives, adding elements from internationally-acclaimed fairy tales. They had to fight the status of alienation which derives from a specific foreign accent and the cultural notions it brings along, as well the related inferiority complex which might undermine the hybrid in the sphere of self-awareness. Eventually, they managed to integrate linguistic elements which delivered authenticity and flavours and, as a result, they contributed to enrich the English language as well, playing with sensory details and imagery which allowed the narration to be felt beyond the simple appreciation of formal features.

Learning a language can be a demanding process. To these writers, English is neither a gift received at birth, nor something borrowed. Patience, love and the desire to

own an identity led them to rightfully conquer words in a language they consciously learned, in contrast with the acquisition of the first language.

In conclusion, such voluntary acts of love for a specific means of expression, which exceed a mere need to communicate to the point that they originate forms of art, should always be encouraged and legitimated. In spite of the inequalities and stereotypes that globalization in its current form provokes and amplifies, local and transnational evolution of English offers exciting and potentially liberating opportunities. The notion of “speaking English” is often likely to involve using other language features that do not conform to existing ideas of native-speaker models, and successful communicators, in a twenty-first century definition of the term, are able to move between contexts and communities. It would therefore be a desirable outcome if in future it were no longer necessary for expert speakers to state their non-nativeness, as their use of language will change as they adapt to different environments and will thus make further untenable the idea of fixed norms of correctness.

The conception of “English” will continue to evolve as the language becomes increasingly decentralized, and writers who acknowledge English as essential to their work belong to a category which transcends diasporas, Circles of World Englishes and Literatures from Old or New Worlds alike: the positive attitude they share towards English is palpable and their journey through this language, combined with their personal dimension and origins, brings out innovative literary hybrids which will hopefully gain increasing international, and intercultural, recognition in the future.

## A Personal Statement

I do not recall a specific life-changing event which turned me into the anglophile I acknowledge to be today. By stating this I do not mean that I am unable to say *when* it happened, since I am aware that the appeal of English as the language that would better suit my personal expression has been growing, slow but inescapable, roughly since the age of twelve.

As any Italian kid born in the last two decades of the last century, my first words in English were learned around the age of eight. I still have some clear memories of the English room at the end of the corridor in the prefabricated that constituted my elementary school. It was brightly coloured, entirely covered in posters and scattered with basic vocabulary written in big, clear font by the teacher, whose voice or features I do not recall as easily, due to the two pregnancies which made her work with our class rather discontinuous for the three years of the ministerial programme.

It was with middle school that my interest towards English drastically changed. My notebook was neatly organized, the exercise book filled with correct answers. I dreamt of double decker buses and red telephone boxes and my brain piled up lyrics of pop songs about fun and heartbreaks and skateboarders—nothing cathartic, but since they finally made sense to my ears I felt empowered and part of something apparently bigger than my early teenage everyday life. Surely the teacher rejoiced of my achievements, but at the time no one had really illustrated me the inestimable ways English would have improved my academic life for the following decade. In hindsight I had somehow subconsciously grasped the potential of a whole culture that to my peers

was limited to a school subject, with homework and grades. Prior to this analysis, I had yet to find non-native writers whose motivations and feelings towards English matched mine: then, the name of Josip Novaković emerged and my perspective over the subject was finally translated into words.

To this very day, I accepted there are some old linguistic habits my knowledge of English will never really overcome. As Novaković himself puts it, “English, which at first came so quickly and easily, melodiously, in the long run proves highly evasive in its shadings”. The exhausting search for synonyms I often undertake to express a simple concept is a consequence of the fear of repetition typical of Italian compositions. My average sentence is, at the very least, slightly longer than what any native could come up with. As soon as I manage to grasp the meaning of a collocation and memorize it, I run across another one I had not known about. Register, more than anything, never fails to remind me my inescapable condition of frustrated amateur.

But despite all the above listed bumps in the road of learning, I do not go a day without practising my English. It is within me and around me, in all its varieties and applications. I am still undecided whether to consider it as a stepmother, or, as Julia Alvarez stated in the introduction to her story “Joe” (*Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*, p.220), a “godmother”. In my life, the role that best suits for English is that of an affectionate friend—one who helped me introduce myself to a Danish boy while taking lessons at a summer school in Oxford in 2006, make online transactions, laugh at formidable jokes and sing songs while savouring the lyrics between the tongue and the palate.

Anyone would agree that such a bond deserves to be kept alive and reciprocated.

As for me, this study is a way to give back at least a part of what I have been given.

## **Appendix A: Transcript of the Email Interview to Josip Novaković**

May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016

10:02

*1. The stories collected in “Stories in the Stepmother Tongue” were selected with Robert Shapard. How would you describe the editing process? Did the collaboration with a native speaker originate any debate, especially for what concerns language-related issues?*

Yes, our main disagreement was over grammar – word order, articles, etc. He worked as a professional editor in addition to being an English professor, and he was tempted to edit the stories according to the Chicago Manual of Style. I insisted that even skipping articles, as for example the Russians speaking in English do, added to the flavor, and that each person evolved his or her own dialect fusing the native language with English. I think that is the most delightful thing, the intonation, the accents—which you can't see but can feel on the page through diction, word order, etc. He had a steady address and reputation, so it was good to have him advertise to solicit the manuscripts etc. First we did a special edition of Manoa Magazine and then expanded it into the anthology. We combined stories published for the first time and others. We published in the magazine the first story by Edwige Danticat, for example, and by Samrat Upadhyay. He actually turned Danticat down, which is ridiculous.

*2. Although most of the featured stories belong to fiction, the plots inevitably involve some personal details and/or experiences lived by the writers. While choosing the short stories, did you experience some form of identification or at least sympathized with any of the characters depicted by the selected authors?*

Yes, especially in the story dealing with culture clash, immigration, etc.

*3. I noticed that some stories, Nahid Rachlin's "Fatemeh" to name one, tend to feature realia, while for instance Ha Jin's "Saboteur" opts for keeping the whole narration strictly in English words; and yet, both stories are set in the native countries of the respective authors and are written in third person. What is your opinion over realia in terms of narratives?*

Oh, I think it's important to keep some original words as a reminder that whatever happens in the story couldn't have happened in English. . . so we read the story as some sort of translation, and at the same time we get a few sounds and flavors of the original. Writers coming from elsewhere should write with an accent, the way they speak, if possible.

*4. More than fifteen years have passed since "Stories in the Stepmother Tongue" was published. In your opinion, has anything changed in the perception the worldwide literary community has of non-native writers who adopt English for their profession?*

Oh, I am afraid, more than 20 years have passed now. In the meanwhile, a lot has changed. Ha Jin for example has since then won all the conceivable awards in the U.S. There have been many anthologies of non-native speakers. Sandra Cisneros and other hispanic writers have become superstars, at least in the academic world. And moreover,

this immigrant style of literature in the adopted tongue has become a worldwide phenomenon even for other languages—so for example, in Germany, now there's a prize for the best novel of the year written in German as a second language. And Germans, who used to be almost a hermetic literary culture, where it was unimaginable that a non-native would dare to use the soulful language, well, even they now adore writers who have immigrated, and enjoy the flavors of different tongues in German, just as they enjoy the flavors of different ethnic cuisines in their otherwise horrifyingly bland cuisine. Nearly every language of a major country right now is being injected with the vigor of foreign tongues.

*5. Considering the increasing influence of English-ruled social networks, and, perhaps more importantly, the rise of educational systems teaching in English to students from an early stage of their lives in countries belonging to the Expanding Circle, would it be possible to foresee a growing number of non-native English writers in the next decade?*

At the moment, about 12 percent of American population is foreign born, and 21 percent of Canadian population is foreign born. More and more foreigners choose to keep writing in their native tongues especially if they come from the major ones, such as Spanish and Arabic, but many choose to write in the language in which they live, and if they live in English, they write in English. In Quebec, some write in French, and I think the French there enjoys a certain vitality of the influx of foreign voices. In the Middle-Ages, lingua franca was Latin, and theologians, hardly any of whom grew up with Latin, all wrote in Latin as the second tongue. I do foresee that more and more people will write in English. So much communication takes place in English that people who don't live in anglophone societies sometimes write in English.

## **Appendix B: Transcript of a Conversation with Josip Novaković**

May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016

20:47

(SM=Sara Moschin, JN=Josip Novaković)

JN: You know, what's funny is that basically half of the stories come from my friend—

SM: Really?

JN: And the other half from me. In this selection I chose Iossel, and others I chose you are not including in your analysis, such as Codrescu, Ha Jin, Rachlin, Palakeel (that was his first published story). Manrique (we used to play tennis together, he used to play with white gloves). Samrat Upadhyay also came from me, I was the first one to publish his stuff, first in the magazine then here, and then he became, well, the best known Nepali writer in English. Ortiz also came from me. I remember he wrote in English as a spiritual connection claiming that it was his second language, even thought the connection with him was stronger than Navaho. He still thought it was a colonial language.

SM: You stated in *Intimate Exile* that you came to the States after “falling in love” with English...

JN: Yeah, through rock music, mainly. Jimi Hendrix, the Doors.

SM: In this collection there are writers who came to the States during their childhood, others as teenagers, others (including you, if I may) in their twenties. You stated that the stories were chosen out of their “quality”. Any additional reason?

JN: Well, of course, we looked for diversity as well. Basically, stories, for example from the subcontinent, India, are very debatable because for many people from there English is the strongest language. You speak Hindi at home, until the age of school, and then you speak English. However it does come early enough and it becomes the superior language. Nepal he encountered started learning English at ten and it became the strongest language to him, because of education, maybe hypereducation. Nevertheless it was my idea that they had to be represented. We had a debate about that. And then there are pure immigrants, Iossel, or Persian with a very strong, almost ugly accent, and now she has a major career, maybe out of the guilt complex from the States—Iran has been such a victim of the States. For those Americans who do not understand my connection with the guilt complex, I usually say, “listen, I come from a country which got rid of slavery in 1948 and got colonized from North, West, East and South.” I have more in common with black people than white people in that sense. Croatians don't want to talk about it out of pride, still I am not hiding it. It gives me in a way a certain critical distance from the colonialist guilt.

SM: One of the things I wanted to do with this anthology was to establish some connections and links between the stories. Or maybe complete oppositions. I could not help but notice two tendencies. One is oriented to a linguistic form of seeking, or a quest if you like, for something to belong to, a context to fit within. The other sets the priority on escaping from a place, with English as the most suitable alternative to the language

of birth. Are the two tendencies in complete opposition, or maybe one could be consequential, or even intertwined, to the other?

And does this dualism in purpose influence the quality of writing?

JN: Good question. Well, first of all I tend to think that politic-oriented intents (writing with a political mission) usually makes the writing worse. One tends to lose the sense of irony. But if there is a genuine interest towards the language itself, the outcome is more subtle, more playful, and generally better as a consequence. Many people chose English before going to the United States as a way to liberate themselves; then, after going to the States, they look for a community to which they can belong, also on a linguistic level. There is for instance the case of Hispanic communities who still opt for Spanish, others choose to write in English, and also writers end up including the Barrio language in an American English period.

SM: I actually chose this anthology because it's recent, but at the same time not so recent. Considering globalization, English as the lingua franca and the Expanding Circle constantly gaining new members, could you see writing literature in English obtain international recognition even if the case of a writer who never leaves his or her country of birth?

JN: I think that if you never experience life in an English speaking country you end up having way too many handicaps. You need the life, the speed of a living language which would inevitably be missing. I mean, theoretically it's possible, but vibrant pieces of writing are unlikely to be put together under such circumstances. I did [write in English] in medical school, when I was already into moving to an English speaking country. With the subjects I did not find challenging, I would take notes in English. Then, when I

moved to the United States, for a while I considered writing in Croatian, but the language back in Croatia was already changing due to political reasons and I did not find it interesting; and besides that, my typewriter did not have all the weird symbols.

SM: You mean Gaj's Latin Alphabet?

JN: Yeah. In English it's all more automatic, I do not need to look at the keyboard while typing.

Speaking of the editions of my books on the Croatian scene, the current situation is a little frustrating for me, too. I can follow the translations of my books and they seem so different to me from what I write, they never sound good, that is not my rhythm. Maybe out of the fact that I've been away for so long and the language changed in the meantime. Anyway there are many Englishes, you know. You have the Hindi English, the Russian English which the tendency of omitting articles. Each country has its own peculiarities coming into English, but even more than that, there are as many Englishes as there are *people*. With immigrants you immediately assume that, out of the fact that they are immigrants, but you know, even in Croatian I had my own way.

SM: Should we never attempt at creating categories then, and just consider writers individually?

JN: Well, in a way, but —

SM: that was meant to be provocative.

JN: Sure, but you know, beyond that people can still be grouped.

SM: Back to writing for political reasons, since you mentioned it, are you familiar with Slavenka Drakulić?

JN: Ah, sure.

SM: There's this book, about the trials—

JN: Yes, *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*.

SM: Right. That was originally written in English. There you can see the difference in quality you were talking about. It's not meant to be derogatory, but her style in that book has nothing to do with the short stories you collected, for instance.

JN: Yes, and she used to have more humor. *How We Survived Communism and Almost Laughed*, for instance. Her irony there was probably a way to distance herself from Communism. And that book was really entertaining.

SM: Shirley Geok-lin Lim mentions the influence that British literary classics had on her formation. Since the writers we're focusing are mostly active in the United States, could reading British literature be seen as an additional obstacle for a foreigner writing in American English?

JN: I see... Being critical of the Colonialist Empire and that aspect of the language, and at the same time embracing its influence enthusiastically. That may co-exist. Well, in my case I read most classics in translation. I read Tolstoj, Balzac and Flaubert in English, which is perhaps why my stories sometimes sound as translations. And then Beckett, and... It might be shocking in Europe, but British literature in the States it's just a fragment in the education system, considering the impact that writers such as Hemingway had on American English. There's just so much American literature. And in any case, I think American English has been especially invigorated by languages spoken by immigrants. British English was less opened to import words from immigrants who were ghettoised, or despised, and had to ascend to a level of "proper English". In the

States, Polish, Spanish, even Yiddish came in.

In general, I guess every writer is affected in a different way and it is not always easy to determine what they read just from their books. Coming from Croatian, I couldn't help but notice that recently there was a revision of my native language through American and French minimalism. Efficiency and clarity. Many people write short sentences, and that's something new. Maybe out of cultural inferiority complex? Once I was in the States, for me it was a conversion experience. I really had to express myself simply and give up long, convoluted sentences with lots of dependant clauses. Like, "What do you mean with what you write?" "I have no idea, I am figuring out what I mean" "And who has the patience for that?". Anyway, you could still write long sentences in English, too. I'm thinking of Dickens now: as long as one does it well, it's clear. It's enjoyable to read Dickens because of his acrobatic approach. The same with Fielding.

As for words kept in the first language of the writer, it's subjective. I remember Iossel reading Rachlin from the anthology and saying, "Why does she immediately have to say *chador*, like, at the beginning of the short story?". At the time, he was really into writing in English. He hardly wanted to use any Russian. However, he still can't escape the theme of Soviet Union, really.

SM: Speaking of subjectivity, an aspect which is in common for most of the entries in "Stories in the Stepmother Tongue" is the strong presence of family members. Even though their influence on the main character takes various forms and attitudes, their relevancy to the plot is undeniable. Why?

JN: If you come from an older, more established culture, and then you go to the New World where families are mostly atomic-based, you tend to stay close to your relatives,

also in virtue of the fact that economy is not so flexible. That's part of why some immigrants do have a blueprint of their families and tend to tell family tales. Everybody in this field kind of looks back to some forms of tribal customs. And you learn stories from your family.

As for folklore and storytellers in general, when you look back to your culture, you would look for some kind of original strength, since you cannot really compete with, or rely on, an American experience of childhood—you did not have one. So when I began to write I remember thinking, “wait a minute. I come from the oral tradition of the Balkans” and I went to Yugoslavia to find some storytellers and use their techniques. Up until I realized it's not really about the technique, it's about themes—in my case, war. I needed a war. And then in the 1990s a war came.

When you think about it, war is deeply rooted even into Greek classics—the Iliad, to name one. The mythology is strong. I got to this storyteller in Belgrade and he told me the following story: “look at that barn, it's where my father and grandfather were shot by the Germans. When I was seven, the Germans came, I remember trembling and shivering in bed. I hid under the blanket. A German came in my room, put a hand on my forehead, went away and came back with a glass of water and two white pills. I remember it was extremely bitter, and thought I would die. And then they went away.” he was shocked. Later he reconstructed the whole episode: he was probably ill and got treated with aspirin by a military doctor. The episode itself is extraordinary and complete. There's the element of surprise, the villain who turns out to be the good healer. I thought, “well, only war can give you a story like that.”

Back to family traditions, I'm also thinking of “The Woman Warrior” by Maxine Hong

Kingston. She's a good example of writing in English as a second language, even though she grew up in the States she was raised in a Chinese-speaking family and wrote about her grandparents who worked on building railways. She really found sources of storytelling within her relatives. Perhaps more so than people who do not belong to immigrant families. This phenomenon, the representation of immigrants, now is strong in Canada and the States. Some use it to their advantage, not always in a positive light.

SM: And can you tell me something more on how *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* was initially conceived? By the way, is there any reference to *The Stepmother Tongue* by James Skinner in the title?

JN: Not really! I did not know about the text by Skinner, actually. The idea behind the whole project came from me, and also from Iossel, he spoke English as a second language just like me. For the *Manoa* journal special, Robert Shapard and I combined stories published for the first time and others. He's been an influential editor (at the time, he had coined the term "flash fiction" with James Thomas and started the whole phenomenon). We put a call on *Poets & Writers* for stories written by non-native English speakers: we got more than 300 and we ended up publishing 10 of them. Then to fall up we made additional research and so the anthology was a fusion of what we had collected before the add on *Poets & Writers* and what we were sent after. We realized in the meantime that there were so many other writers showing up on the scene, and that is how "Stories in the Stepmother Tongue" saw the light. By then, we did have enough stories, so we thought about publishing a series of anthologies, which unfortunately did not happen mostly due of issues related to publishing houses.

SM: I see.

JN: However, I must admit that I do not see myself as an editor. In fact I'm afraid I've forgotten my role as an editor during this interview. It's because I actually love writing in a second language, and discussing.

SM: And in the end it's all about love, you need to love what you do in order to have a good outcome. Is the profession of teacher and writer clashing with the role of editor?

JN: You know, in editing you have a finished product on which you can basically make some adjustments. Essentially, I think teaching compared to editing is in a way more aggressive. When you teach and you're going into the process of writing, you can suggest this possibility, or that possibility, you can start from the middle, or maybe the introduction... If the story is starting from scratch... Well, teaching is more provocative. If you're a writer, sometimes I would say, "why would I brainstorm your plot when I could brainstorm mine? And if I exhaust your imagination, what will be left of mine?". It's about balance.

SM: I see. As far as I'm concerned, the interview is finished. Thank you very much!

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