



Translingual Empowerment: Exophonic Women's Writing in Catalan and Spanish

Catherine Barbour

To cite this article: Catherine Barbour (2022) Translingual Empowerment: Exophonic Women's Writing in Catalan and Spanish, Parallax, 28:1, 58-73, DOI: [10.1080/13534645.2022.2156689](https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2022.2156689)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2022.2156689>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 28 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Translingual Empowerment: Exophonic Women’s Writing in Catalan and Spanish

Catherine Barbour 

On claiming that a language constitutes ‘the only country without borders’, Bosnian-German writer Saša Stanišić taps into the multifaceted debates surrounding its role in literary practice.¹ Throughout history, the global movement and mixing of peoples, languages, cultures and ideas has triggered diverse, innovative and experimental forms of creativity. Translingual writing, in which the writer adopts a second language, or moves between two or more named languages in their work, is an example of such.² National literatures, conceived of as repositories of the nation since the consolidation of nation-states in the nineteenth century,³ are conditioned and policed according to essentialist markers of linguistic, geo- and bio- politics.⁴ Inclusion in literary traditions, termed literary ‘citizenship’ in a reflection of its relation to national identity, has historically been barred from writers and texts that do not adhere to stringent categorisation.⁵ Located across and between languages and cultures, translingual texts resist this facile classification. Pointing to the plurilingualism inherent in national cultures, they emit fluid, multifaceted, and conflicting transnational cultures and identities that destabilise the bounded, monolingual parameters of the ‘imagined communities’ identified by Benedict Anderson.⁶

In Yasemin Yildiz’s theorisation of the ‘postmonolingual condition’, the ‘monolingual paradigm’, the ideal of communities imagined through one discrete, true language, is being undermined by the increasing visibility of multilingual flows in contemporary societies.⁷ In this essay I will consider the ways in which translingual texts disrupt fixed perceptions of the monolingual community by examining how this relates to gender. Specifically, I will analyse the textual representation of translanguaging, or moving between and across discrete languages, as a vehicle for women’s empowerment in contexts of minoritisation. I take as my point of departure two novels by contemporary exophonic (meaning writing in a second language) women writers of migrant origin based in the multinational state of Spain, namely Najat el Hachmi and Ioana Gruia. El Hachmi and Gruia write in Catalan and Spanish respectively, their distinct adopted languages competing with each other from within the ‘interconnected, multilingual and multicultural political, identitarian and literary polysystem’ of the Iberian Peninsula.⁸ I argue that from very distinct standpoints they corroborate elements of Yildiz’s postmonolingual paradigm and so imagine translingual communities by

exposing translingual practice as an empowering and liberating force for women working against the confines of political, cultural or religious oppression.

In both novels, the adoption of a second language by the woman migrant protagonists in their daily lives and creative practice is enacted on the level of the authors themselves.⁹ *La filla estrangera* [*The Foreign Daughter*] (2015) by Najat El Hachmi, a highly acclaimed Catalan writer of Moroccan origin, is a first-generation immigrant's account of the rupture with her heritage languages and culture, as well as the social and economic capital that comes with competence in Catalan and Spanish, as she navigates xenophobia, religion and sexuality in her experiences of work, study and an arranged marriage.¹⁰ By way of contrast, *El expediente Albertina* [*The Albertine File*] (2016) by Romanian-Spanish writer and academic Ioana Gruia, is a multi-perspectival fictional account of the translingual experiences of two generations of women whose migration or forced exile to the USA, France and Spain was provoked by the political persecution, lack of civil liberties and extreme economic hardship implemented during Romania's communist Ceaușescu regime (1965-1989). Each novel discussed here explores the gradual detachment from the maternal language and culture, as distancing from the significantly termed 'mother tongue' and immersion in a second language becomes a means of escape, growth, and liberation. The characters reject the first language because it has become a 'site of alienation and disjuncture',¹¹ choosing to live, work and write in their second language, which, Steven G. Kellman suggests, allows writers to, 'flaunt their freedom from the constraints of the culture into which they happen to have been born'.¹² To what extent, I ask, can translanguaging within texts act as a catalyst for women's agency and self-realisation? And which communities are represented through translingual women's writing? I probe these issues through a comparative, intersectional feminist analysis of the textual representation of themes spanning women's resistance, mobility, and sexuality.

Examining the location of women within the multilingual community firstly demands consideration of the ways in which discourses of gender and nation mutually construct and enable one another. Nations, like the national literatures they produce, have historically been constructed within racist, patriarchal and heterosexist parameters, according to which factors such as gender, race, class and sexuality are contained, manipulated and suppressed.¹³ When it comes to accommodating cultural or ethnic difference within the nation, this is often demarcated along gendered lines, with specific expectations placed upon women, whose role within the national unit is policed via their labour, bodies and reproductive rights.¹⁴ If the concept of the 'imagined community' in the words of Emily Apter fails to 'avoid reproducing neo-imperialist cartographies', this can be extended to include heteropatriarchal cartographies.¹⁵ In this context, writing by women brings fresh insight, all the more so when informed by migration, second language acquisition, race, and minority languages and cultures. For Julia Öri, the translingual writer inhabits 'a paradoxical location between belonging and at the

same time, not belonging', a balancing act not unfamiliar to women writers navigating the patriarchal constrictions of national literatures.¹⁶ The ambivalent positioning of translingual immigrant women writers resonates to some extent with Patricia Hill Collins' conceptualisation of the 'outsider within' status of Black women, showing how a community's proximity to both the margins and the centre engenders acute familiarity with the inner workings of its power structures.¹⁷

A. Suresh Canagarajah's work on translingualism emphasises the significance of the prefix 'trans', meaning 'across', because of the way it underlines the potential of translingualism to defy bounded constructs of languages and communities.¹⁸ Important to keep in mind is Michael Boyden and Eugenia Kelbert's call for translingual literary studies to move 'away from the translingual writer as a linguistic border crosser with exceptional abilities, and towards theoretical engagements with translingualism as events, assemblages, translation, performances, and visual devices.'¹⁹ Gruiá perceives her own translingual writing as 'aunar imaginarios y ver qué pasa cuando se encuentran todas estas huellas' [bringing together different imaginaries and seeing what happens when all these traces meet].²⁰ To conceptualise the entangling of languages, narratives, histories and modalities inherent to translingual literatures, a useful point of reference is Leslie A. Adelson's theorisation of 'touching tales', which encapsulates the merging of multiple cultural and linguistic traces. As Adelson explains, this unique interaction 'mediate[s] abstract lines of thought pointing readers towards newly imagined (and newly imaginable) cultural effects'.²¹

Convincing nonetheless is Matthew Hart's cautionary intervention on the 'extraterritoriality' of contemporary fiction, which emphasises the extent to which discourses of the global are actually defined by and dependent on state sovereignty, for 'what we think of as "global space" is the product of agreements, conflicts, and compromises between nation states.'²² We might extend the extraterritoriality metaphor to the paradoxical positioning of texts written in an acquired language. If the global reach of a 'world language' such as Spanish undermines the conflation of language and territory inherent to the nation-state, as an adopted lingua franca it ensures that the force of monolingualism prevails across borders.²³ Despite its inherent hybridity, translingual writing could be said to reinforce perceptions of named languages as discrete and bounded symbols of the nation, conforming to Anjali Pandey's suggestion that 'literary production in the 21st century points towards a cosmetic deployment of multilingualism in the service of monolingualism' by reifying the hegemonic language.²⁴ Arguably, writing by immigrants in the national language as a form of linguistic assimilation in fact serves to bolster the political and economic power of monolingual national cultures, reflecting the paradox of national language policies which simultaneously celebrate yet restrain citizens' linguistic diversity – what Robert Moore terms 'reactionary multilingualism'.²⁵

As translingual texts are accommodated and indeed celebrated within a national tradition, they have the potential to map minoritised, migrant cultures on the global stage, or conversely, to obscure them. Translingual cultural products are often lauded and fetishised for their 'exotic' flavour, serving as examples of the 'contact zone', theorised by Mary Louise Pratt as a dynamic site of struggle 'in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power'.²⁶ The oeuvre of both El Hachmi and Gruia has been subjected to such exoticisation, inevitably compounded by their gender in historically conservative and patriarchal literary systems defined by language and national identity.²⁷ Given that the production, reception and dissemination of translingual texts is heavily conditioned by the competing intersections of, amongst others, race, nation, class, gender and sexuality, the positive reception of the work of El Hachmi and Gruia is overall an encouraging sign of the relative normalisation of exophonic writing in the Catalan and Spanish literary fields.²⁸ Both writers have gained access to publishing opportunities as a result of leaving behind languages that have been minoritised within the European context. The fact that exophonic Moroccan-born novelist and essayist El Hachmi has become perhaps one of Spain's most renowned contemporary writers is all the more significant if we consider that she writes in the non-state, systematically oppressed language of Catalan (interspersed with elements pertaining to other languages).²⁹ Even so, it should be noted that Catalan wields considerable cultural capital in comparison to other minoritised languages such as those exemplified by El Hachmi's heritage language of Tamazight, which has been minoritised by the dominance of Arabic in Moroccan society.³⁰

Both El Hachmi and Gruia originally hail from nations that have been relegated to the constructed periphery of Europe, located on its eastern and southern fringes. The neighbouring nation-states of Spain and Morocco maintain a long and rather fraught history of cultural and linguistic contact, epitomised by the Moorish occupation of much of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 until 1492.³¹ Spain and Romania, meanwhile, are both Mediterranean nations where Romance languages are spoken. Romanians and Moroccans currently contribute to two of the largest communities of immigrants in Spain excluding those originating from Latin America.³²

Born in Nador, Morocco in 1979, El Hachmi emigrated to Vic, Catalonia at the age of eight. To date she has published five novels and a memoir in Catalan, and her works have been translated into numerous languages. In 2021 she won Spain's prestigious Premio Nadal prize for her novel *Dilluns ens estimaran* [*On Monday They Will Love Us*], having been awarded the celebrated Ramon Llull prize for Catalan Letters for her first novel, *L'últim patriarca* [*The Last Patriarch*] in 2008. In her critically acclaimed 2004 autobiographical memoir *Jo també sóc catalana* [*I am Catalan too*], El Hachmi asserts her Catalanness with a play on words of 'Catalan too', which can be read as being Catalan as well as Moroccan, and also being as Catalan as any other individual in the community.³³

For her part, Gruia was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1978. She has been a resident of Granada, southern Spain since her late teens. She is an Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Granada and is author of two novels and several poetry collections. Gruia's Spanish-language fiction has yet to appear in translation, rendering her novel *El expediente Albertina* inaccessible to many Romanians whose collective historical memory is its focus.³⁴ Regardless, Gruia maintains a presence in the Romanian cultural scene, as she writes poetry in Romanian and self-translates her Spanish-language poetry into the language. Her poetic works have also been translated to Albanian, Czech and French. Gruia describes herself as a writer in Spanish of Romanian origin or 'Andalusian by adoption', considering herself a Mediterranean writer.³⁵

While El Hachmi emigrated to Catalonia as a child and learned to read and write in Catalan, speaking the Berber language of Tamazight in the home while also maintaining a knowledge of Arabic, Gruia moved to Granada for university study and took up Spanish later in life, beginning her literary career in the language as a result of living in Spain. The works of both writers are not only exophonic, but also display intertextual code-switching, through the inclusion of lexicon or dialogue in various named languages. Disrupting the monolingual flow of the text, these 'wanderwords', to borrow Maria Lauret's term,³⁶ speak to Apter's work on the 'politics of untranslatability' as evidence of multilingual and multicultural influences which may consciously impede understanding and emphasise difference.³⁷ Both the texts analysed here are also 'metalingual', expressing awareness of the peculiarities of communication with linguistic patterns defamiliarised to corroborate Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*.³⁸ This is demonstrated in El Hachmi's work through self-reflexive insight into the untranslatability of aspects of Tamazight as well as the influence of the Berber Amazigh oral tradition, with the multimodal interplay between the written and spoken word further contributing to its translanguing dimension.³⁹ The narrator's 'outsider within' perspective on Catalonia's sociolinguistic landscape also stands as an implicit observation on the politicised tensions between Catalan and Spanish.⁴⁰ Gruia, on the other hand, describes writing in a second language as speaking with a foreign accent - the title of her 2017 poetry collection is *Con acento extranjero* [*With a Foreign Accent*]. *El expediente Albertina* contains dialogue in French as well as French literary references, reflecting the writer's competence in the language. Multilingual inference at a textual level undermines the arbitrary parameters imposed by language standardisation and literary canonisation, though admittedly such experimentation is often exoticised and received favourably in the literary field only through evidence of the author's 'near-native' competence in the primary language, which reifies the role of monolingualism in national identity.⁴¹

Showcasing the dynamics of power relations in the contact zone, *La filla estrangera* and *El expediente Albertina* explore the potential of textual and oral translanguaging to imagine multilingual communities and mobilise resistance

to hegemony in their narrations of the experiences of women working against the cultural and socio-political confines of their circumstances. Textual manifestations of oppression dictated by the competing intersections of race, class, nation and sexuality expose what Hill Collins terms the ‘matrix of domination’ of interconnected systems of power.⁴² Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian argue that the liminal positioning of Romanian literature shows how ‘when reframed intersectionally, as nodal subsystems of a vaster, ever-fluid continuum, so-called “marginal”, “minor”, or “small” literatures acquire an unforeseen and unorthodox centrality’; though they are referring to Romanian-language literature, the same holds true for Gruia’s exophonic oeuvre.⁴³ In *El expediente Albertina*, translanguaging becomes a tool for resistance against the heteropatriarchal authoritarianism of Communist Romania. The novel spans the latter part of the dictatorship as well as the more recent democratic period, tracing the lasting impact of the communist regime on two generations of women. My analysis will focus specifically on the translingual experiences of the main character Laura, a poet and literary critic who escapes persecution during the dictatorship by fleeing to New York, finally settling in Florida, as well as her friend Smaranda, also a writer, who emigrates to Paris during communism. In addition, the translingualism of two young women who emigrate during the post-dictatorship period will be considered: Gabriela, a doctoral student who is researching Laura’s biography, and Albina, an aspiring actress who like Gruia herself moves to Granada in the years following the dictatorship.

As relations with Western Europe and the USA soured in the Ceaușescu years, foreign influences were purged at all levels of society with a view to protecting the cohesion of the nation.⁴⁴ Freedom of speech and cultural autonomy were severely curtailed, with writers and intellectuals forced to adhere to state propaganda that would justify the Communist Party’s aims, a situation with obvious parallels to Spain’s fascist Franco dictatorship (1939-1975) not lost on the Spanish reader. Laura defies the cultural isolationism and the ultranationalistic requirement to use the state language of Romanian by self-translating subversive poems into French and English, languages symbolic of the regime’s Western capitalist enemy. She poses a symbolic threat to the patriarchal regime, in which women were expected to take on the role of wives and mothers, as a woman poet and member of the liberal intellectual elite who is writing her doctoral thesis on Marcel Proust, a representative of Western enlightenment alluded to in the title of the novel. Laura sends her poems abroad for publication and gives clandestine phone interviews with French and American journalists, despite contact with non-Romanian nationals being prohibited. In a society riddled with mistrust in which families and friends inform on each other, speaking in a language other than Romanian serves as a means to undermine omnipresent state surveillance by being unintelligible. However, the act of speaking a foreign language becomes at the same time highly dangerous precisely because of its evasiveness, which is perceived as subversive. Laura and her lover Albert risk having a whispered conversation in French in a café so as to be able to discuss matters they do not want informers to overhear, a means to symbolically reclaim freedom through

the act of translanguaging. However, they must make a point of speaking authentic Romanian in front of the waiter to conform to state nationalism:

En aquel momento el camarero puso las bebidas sobre la mesa y nos miró con desconfianza. Nos apresuramos a darle las gracias con inequívoco acento nacional, por si acaso había olvidado que con el mismo acento le habíamos pedido las bebidas.⁴⁵

At that moment the waiter put our drinks on the table and looked at us suspiciously. We made sure to thank him with the unmistakable national accent, in case he'd forgotten that we'd ordered the drinks with that same accent.

In a foreshadowing of Laura having to flee the country, Albert quotes Proust's *Albertine disparue* [*Albertine Gone*], the volume also known as *La Fugitive* [*The Fugitive*] from which original French-language extracts are included within the text. As Elena Carpariou explains in her review of Gruia's novel, this represents a challenge to state oppression: 'Las palabras de Proust, enunciadas en idioma original por Albert, adquieren la función de un idioma no contaminado, expresión no censurada' [The words of Proust, enunciated in the original language by Albert, acquire the function of a language which is not contaminated, expression that is not censored].⁴⁶ The secret police case file on Laura is later revealed to have the Proustian code name (and feminine version of Albert) *Albertine*, as in the title of the novel, alluding to the perceived threat posed by her translanguaging. Laura is harassed, interrogated and eventually tortured by the state Securitate for her subversive, 'un-Romanian' poetry, subjected to sexist taunts about her appearance and mocked for her extramarital 'affaire', the French term used deliberately to undermine her education, cosmopolitanism, and overt sexuality. One of her torturers mockingly speaks a few words in Latin to her, intimidated by her intellect; as a dormant language which is the linguistic root of Romanian, it does not pose a threat to Romanian nationalism in the way that her fluent French is perceived to. After the fall of the Iron Curtain as the country embraces democracy, former collaborators are depicted attempting to speak French, attempting to present as cultured and cosmopolitan citizens of the new Romania to obscure their past links to the Party. In an atmosphere of surveillance, indoctrination and persecution in which language use is policed in service to the nation, translanguaging presents a tangible threat. Yet for those privileged enough to have been educated in a second language, particularly in a society in which the majority live in abject poverty and women are discouraged from advanced education, it represents a means of rebellion, as well as a potential ticket to freedom.

For the unnamed narrator of El Hachmi's novel, the second language represents a gateway to progressive values and knowledge systems vis-à-vis the restrictive cultural and religious norms she associates with her mother tongue. Crucially, fluency in Catalan also undermines the xenophobia and

racism she experiences as a woman of colour in the racial capitalist society of Barcelona, in which her mother's foreign-sounding accent is shown to limit opportunities for finding a job or accommodation. The narrator (and indeed author) code-mixes untranslated elements of Tamazight within the Catalan-language text, reflecting how translanguaging 'see[s] into question the traditional notions of bilingualism and multilingualism as merely shuttling independently between two or more autonomous linguistic systems.'⁴⁷ She asserts that Catalan is the primary language of her thoughts, while she refers to Tamazight with the possessive as her *mother's* tongue, a language which belongs to her mother, and to which she does not feel the same emotional connection. Her inability to translate certain concepts alludes to detachment from her mother, and therefore the culture of her mother, who is depicted as implicit in perpetuating its patriarchal norms. This alienation from her mother (and mother tongue), a well-documented trope in feminist theory, renders her the 'foreign daughter' of the title, an oxymoron which also speaks to her conflicted sense of belonging as a first-generation immigrant, simultaneously inside and outside the community.⁴⁸ As she embraces secular values, she perceives Tamazight as limiting because so much of the language is influenced by the Islamic religion: 'Em noto tot de sobte òrfena de paraules, expulsada de la llengua.' (I suddenly feel like I am an orphan of words, expelled from the language).⁴⁹ The cultural repression of female sexuality that also features in Gruia's novel manifests here in the absence of Tamazight terminology to refer to pleasure, sexuality and gender-based violence. The narrator's sexual awakening and fulfilment, evidenced by exploration of her body, masturbation and her first sexual relationship, is expressed through Catalan. In a reading of El Hachmi's preceding novel *L'últim patriarca*, Jesse van Amelsvoort illuminates the broader tensions at play in the expression of the immigrant Moroccan woman's relationship to language through the corporeal, for 'on the one hand, the body is made to stand out from traditional understanding of the national body politic, while on the other hand, via the Catalan language El Hachmi expresses an adherence to, or concern with, that particular community.'⁵⁰ Also mediated through Catalan and a sense of belonging to the Catalan community is the protagonist's rejection of the expectation to be a wife and mother. This comes at the hefty price of forceful dislocation from familial ties and cultural heritage.⁵¹ The protagonist laments the loss of orality and cultural idioms inherent to Tamazight whilst discovering the empowerment of the written word through Catalan. Her Catalan education represents a form of linguistic and socio-cultural subversion that alienates her from her family and the immigrant community: 'la que llegeix filòsofs alemanys i novel·les i pensa en una llengua que els que ara m'envolten ni han sentit ni sentiran mai' [she who reads German philosophers and novels and thinks in a language that those who now surround me have never heard and will never hear].⁵² Intellectual nourishment and social critique are key to her emancipation by enabling her to question the oppressive binds of her environment.⁵³ This is fully realised when she makes a defiant break from her mother tongue, which she perceives as quite literally no longer a part of her, by leaving her husband, child and mother to pursue her career:

'jo ja no sóc de la llengua de la meva mare' [I am no longer of the language of my mother].⁵⁴ Significantly in feminist terms, the consequential rupture of her relationship with her mother is much more painful than losing her husband or community. She relates her story in Catalan, the narrative of which is the novel, exposing her experience as an Amazigh immigrant to the Catalan reader, just as literary translingualism in Gruia's novel exports censored voices to an international readership. Speaking and writing in an acquired language ultimately represents a palpable means to resist oppression, reclaim agency and reaffirm belonging.

The professional aspirations, independence and cosmopolitanism of the protagonists of *La filla estrangera* and *El expediente Albertina* achieved via translanguaging are especially subversive given that in both cases they are women subjected to the restrictive patriarchal norms of their respective contexts. The women in both novels gain access to social, educational and professional opportunities in their adoptive societies owing to their wide-ranging linguistic repertoires. Transnational mobility is itself an act of rebellion in Gruia's novel because travel outside the Communist bloc is forbidden to all those not in collusion with the Party. Like in *La filla estrangera*, the female characters in *El expediente Albertina* experience a certain degree of liberation by moving abroad, to France, Spain or the United States. As exiles and migrants, they constantly juggle translingual, transcultural and transnational tensions, and 'encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms.'⁵⁵ Núria Codina gives an especially optimistic reading of the rejection of cultural and linguistic heritage in *La filla estrangera*, emphasising the extent of its emancipatory dimension:

the loss of the mother tongue and of the homeland does not render the protagonists speechless or homeless, nor does it lead to a complete breakdown. On the contrary, this loss becomes extremely productive: it results in a captivating mixture of languages and styles, and it is used as a means of negotiating home and identity, of finding one's own path in life and breaking away from one's parents. While migration is not unproblematic, it is nevertheless a liberating experience.⁵⁶

In both novels, geographical and linguistic mobility is indeed shown to be closely aligned with social mobility, with women gaining increased social status and financial stability as a result. Yet this is a double-edged sword. Many immigrants do not have easy access to the many benefits of competence in the language(s) of the host society, as is witnessed with the narrator's illiterate mother in *La filla estrangera*, who is not given a voice in the text. While the translingual emigrant characters in Gruia's novel must contend with xenophobia, El Hachmi's racialised protagonist is subjected to microaggressions as a result of her race, even if she speaks and writes in 'perfect' Catalan, the prerequisite for national belonging: 'com que parles la seva llengua tan bé o millor que ells gairebé ni se'n recorden, d'on vens i qui ets, gairebé'

[As you speak their language as well as or better than them they almost don't remember where you are from or who you are – almost].⁵⁷ Sara Ahmed conceives of the expectation for immigrants to integrate into society, often facilitated through the national language, as:

a national ideal, a way of imagining national happiness. Migrants as would-be citizens are thus increasingly bound by the happiness duty not to speak about racism in the present, not to speak of the unhappiness of colonial histories, or of attachments that cannot be reconciled into the colorful diversity of the multicultural nation. The happiness duty for migrants means telling a certain story about your arrival as good, or the good of your arrival.⁵⁸

We witness in both novels this burden not only to assimilate to the national language and culture but also the pressure to achieve personal and professional success as a result. On being forced into exile, Laura fears losing her links with her language, culture and creativity: 'era una escritora en rumano, una poeta además, se sentía incapaz de escribir en otra lengua. Si abandonaba el país, perdía la lengua y por consiguiente la escritura. Sin embargo, viviría mejor en cualquier otro lado' [she was a writer in Romanian, a poet moreover, she felt incapable of writing in another language. If she left the country, she lost the language and therefore writing. However, she would have a better life anywhere else].⁵⁹ When she makes a clandestine escape to the United States following state-sponsored torture, she eventually finishes her thesis in English and achieves career success as a Professor of French. Though she continues to compose poetry in Romanian, she finds herself linguistically and creatively isolated from her first language, and eventually resorts to writing in English. Her translingual creative practice allows her to build a new life and work through her trauma, a process studied at length by Yildiz in her work on Turkish-German writing.⁶⁰ Laura's friend Smaranda, a Romanian emigré in Paris, also writes translingually to advance her political activism, publishing an ideologically progressive novel in French which would have been subjected to acute censorship during the dictatorship, and later denouncing a Romanian presidential candidate in the French daily *Le Monde*. Although criticism of the regime in a foreign tongue will not have the same effect on home turf, it allows for exposure of its horrors to an international audience. The professional translingualism of both characters is depicted as instrumental in contesting state censorship, reclaiming silenced voices and expediting the quest for social justice. Yet an individual's relationship with language is intimate, complex and multifaceted, for 'language elicits subjective responses in the speakers themselves: emotions, memories, fantasies, projections, identifications,'⁶¹ and having to take on another language, not necessarily out of choice, entails a degree of loss of the culture and language of origin.⁶²

The post-dictatorship generation in Gruia's novel is shown to have access to many liberties denied their parents, but given the economic challenges facing the newly democratic country, they also take a utopian view of the

opportunities abroad made possible by translanguaging. We see this through the dilemma of the character Gabriela:

sabía bien inglés y español, los había estudiado a fondo en la facultad. ¿Se iría ella también, a Estados Unidos o a España? ¿O se quedaría en Bucarest, dando clases en la facultad por un sueldo de miseria o buscando trabajo en una empresa privada, de traductora quizá? ¿Se “reorientaría” como varios de sus antiguos compañeros, que habían cambiado sus sueños de ser escritores o especialistas en literatura por la seguridad de un sueldo como traductores de folletos y manuales de instrucciones para electrodomésticos?⁶³

she spoke good English and Spanish, she had studied them in depth at university. Would she leave too, for the United States or Spain? Or would she stay in Bucharest, giving classes at the university for a miserable salary or looking for a job in a private company, as a translator perhaps? Would she “reorientate” herself like several of her former colleagues, who had exchanged their dreams of becoming writers or literature specialists for the security of a salary as translators of leaflets and instruction manuals for household appliances?

For Gabriela’s friend Albina, who grew up in the impoverished Romanian countryside, moving to Spain and learning Spanish allows her to further her theatre career as well as pursue a homosexual relationship, unthinkable in her small rural village:

-Me voy a España. En septiembre, creo. Me voy para siempre. Quiero salir de aquí.

-¿Y qué vas a hacer allí?

-No lo sé. Lo pensaré. De momento, inscribirme a un curso intensivo de español. Con un título de actriz en Rumanía sin saber perfectamente español seguro que no haré nada.⁶⁴

-I'm going to Spain. In September, I think. I'm leaving forever. I want to get out of here.

-And what are you going to do there?

-I don't know. I'll think about it. For now, I'm going to enrol in an intensive Spanish course. With a drama degree from Romania there's no doubt I won't get anywhere without knowing how to speak perfect Spanish.

Her translanguaging serves as a means to contest Romania’s engrained heteropatriarchal power structures which perpetuate oppression of women and LGBTQ+ communities. Albina can safely embrace her sexuality and identity in a Spain which despite its enduring suppression of minorities is depicted as comparatively tolerant and accepting. Moving to Spain and learning Spanish

is shown to facilitate creativity and professional advancement. For a young woman marginalised by her gender, sexuality, nationality and rural upbringing, second language acquisition becomes instrumental to regaining agency and self-realisation. Like El Hachmi's protagonist, she embraces the insecurity but freedom of the adopted language, as opposed to the security but restriction of the mother tongue.⁶⁵

The novels of Gruia and El Hachmi express telling thematic similarities, pointing to the 'emancipatory detachment' made possible for immigrant women through the fluid process of translingualism, whether this involves use of a hegemonic language or a non-state language, in a context of religious conservatism, overt xenophobia or violent authoritarianism.⁶⁶ Notwithstanding the pitfalls of linguistic assimilation and the potentially traumatic process of detachment from the mother tongue, the female characters in these texts manage to successfully navigate the binds imposed by the matrix of domination of language, nation, race, sexuality and gender, availing of second language acquisition and diverse linguistic repertoires to challenge oppression and pursue education, career, sexual liberation and social justice. Translingual writers and texts can serve national interests and become somewhat appropriated into the dominant paradigm represented by the national literatures, compounding the totalising force of monolingualism through which communities continue to be imagined. And yet, their ambivalent location and allegiance to multiple competing identities, especially palpable when considered through an intersectional feminist lens, complicates essentialist parameters of languages, literatures and nations. With the usage, prestige and dissemination of named languages acutely underpinned by global capitalist imperialism and colonial legacies, translingual processes fundamentally defy linear perceptions of languages and cultures as discrete and exclusive from one another. Exophonic narrative by women demonstrates ways in which communities can be imagined as both feminist and translingual, undermining the patriarchal and monolingual forces that persevere in nationalisms and the nation-state.

Acknowledgement

This article was completed during a Faberllull residency on the theme of 'Borders' in Olot, Catalonia (June 2022).

Notes

- 1 Stanišić, "Three Myths."
- 2 Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*.
- 3 Santana, *Foreigners in the Homeland*, 20.
- 4 Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, 6.
- 5 Santana, *Foreigners in the Homeland*, 22.
- 6 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- 7 Yildiz, *The Postmonolingual Condition*.
- 8 Pérez Isasi, 'Iberian Studies,' 11.
- 9 Li, "Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language."
- 10 Aalberse, Backus and Muysken, *Heritage Languages*.
- 11 Yildiz, *The Postmonolingual Condition*, 204-205.
- 12 Kellman, *Switching Languages*, xi.
- 13 McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven."
- 14 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 58.
- 15 Apter, *Against World Literature*, 42.
- 16 Öri, "Translingual Paratopia," 99.
- 17 Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within," 103.

- ¹⁸ Canagarajah, "Introduction," 1.
- ¹⁹ Boyden and Kelbert, "Introduction", 133.
- ²⁰ Tarău, "Ioana Gruia." All translations are my own. I would like to thank Richard Huddleson for his assistance with translations from Catalan.
- ²¹ Adelson, *The Turkish Turn*, 22.
- ²² Hart, *Extraterritorial*, 4.
- ²³ Forsdick, Charles, "Global France, Global French," 20.
- ²⁴ Pandey, *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction*, 85.
- ²⁵ Moore, "From Revolutionary Monolingualism to Reactionary Multilingualism," 21.
- ²⁶ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 8.
- ²⁷ Codina, "The Work of Najat El Hachmi," 119.
- ²⁸ See Wright, "Writing in the 'Grey Zone'".
- ²⁹ For an overview of multilingualism in Catalan literature, see for example Rossich and Cornellà-Detrell, *El plurilingüisme en la literatura catalana*.
- ³⁰ Albirini, *Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics*.
- ³¹ Flesler, *The Return of the Moor*.
- ³² Instituto Nacional de Estadística.
- ³³ Pomar-Amer, "Play of Mirrors in the Border", 294.
- ³⁴ This reflects the potential loss for the culture of origin that comes with translingual literary practice.
- ³⁵ Gruia, "Es bueno para una literatura incorporar muchos acentos."
- ³⁶ Lauret, *Wanderwords*.
- ³⁷ Apter, *Against World Literature*.
- ³⁸ See Kellman, *Nimble Tongues*, 12.
- ³⁹ Amazight being the people and culture associated with the Tamazight language.
- ⁴⁰ Bueno, "Una magrebidad hispano-catalana," 112.
- ⁴¹ Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism*, 212.
- ⁴² Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.
- ⁴³ Moraru and Terian, 'The Worlds of Romanian Literature and the Geopolitics of Reading', 5.
- ⁴⁴ Abraham, *Romania Since the Second World War*, 79.
- ⁴⁵ Gruia, *El expediente Albertina*, 21.
- ⁴⁶ Caprariou, "El expediente albertina by Ioana Gruia," 170.
- ⁴⁷ Anya, *Racialized Identities in Second Language Learning*, 25.
- ⁴⁸ Hirsch, *The Mother / Daughter Plot*, 43.
- ⁴⁹ El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera*, 41.
- ⁵⁰ Van Amelsvoort, "Narrating Into Europe", 161.
- ⁵¹ See author interview on this issue: Hernández Velasco, "Najat El Hachmi".
- ⁵² El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera*, 40.
- ⁵³ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 287.
- ⁵⁴ El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera*, 105.
- ⁵⁵ Clifford, "Diasporas," 307-308.
- ⁵⁶ Codina, "The Work of Najat El Hachmi," 127-128.
- ⁵⁷ El Hachmi, *La filla estrangera*, 23.
- ⁵⁸ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 158.
- ⁵⁹ Gruia, *El expediente Albertina*, 161-162.
- ⁶⁰ Yildiz, *The Postmonolingual Condition*, 143-168.
- ⁶¹ Kramersch, *The Multilingual Subject*, 19.
- ⁶² Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, 18.
- ⁶³ Gruia, *El expediente Albertina*, 166-167.
- ⁶⁴ Gruia, *El expediente Albertina*, 128.
- ⁶⁵ Collischon, "Oedipal Struggles with 'Language Mothers,'" 200.
- ⁶⁶ Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination*, 28.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Catherine Barbour  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2916-4717>

Bibliography

- Aalberse, Suzanne, Ad Backus and Pieter Muysken. *Heritage Languages: A Language Contact Approach*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2019.
- Abraham, Florin. *Romania Since the Second World War: A Political, Social and Economic History*. Bloomsbury: London, 2017.
- Adelson, Leslie A. *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Towards a New Critical Grammar of Migration*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Albirini, Abdulkafi. *Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics: Diglossia, Codeswitching, Attitudes and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016.
- Anyà, Uju. *Racialized Identities in Second Language Learning: Speaking Blackness in Brazil*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: The Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso Books, 2013.
- Boyden, Michael and Eugenia Kelbert. "The Theory Deficit in Translingual Studies". *Journal of World Literature* 3 (2018): 127–135.
- Bueno, Josefina. "Una magrebirdad hispano-catalana: escritores amazighs de la inmigración en Cataluña." In *Literaturas hispanoafricanas: realidades y contextos*, edited by Inmaculada Díaz Narbona, 102–131. Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2015.
- Burton, Pauline. "Women and Second-Language Use: An Introduction." In *Bilingual Women: Anthropological Approaches to Second Language Use*, edited by Shirley Ardener, Pauline Burton and Ketaki Kushari Dyson, 1–29. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. "Introduction." In *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms*, edited by A. Suresh Canagarajah, 1–10. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Caprariou, Elena. "El expediente Albertina by Ioana Gruia" (Review). *Hispania* 101: 1 (2018): 169–170.
- Chaffee, Jessie. "An Interview with Najat El Hachmi." *Words Without Borders*, 30 March 2016. <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/an-interview-with-najat-el-hachmi>
- Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9: 3 (1994): 302–338.
- Codina, Núria. "The Work of Najat El Hachmi in the Context of Spanish Moroccan Literature." *Research in African Literatures* 48: 3 (2017): 116–330.
- Collischon, Lúcia. "Oedipal Struggles with 'Language Mothers' in the Work of Contemporary Exophonic Authors." In *International Perspectives on Multilingual Literatures: From Translingualism to Language Mixing*, edited by Katie Jones, Julian Preece and Aled Rees, 183–200. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021.
- El Hachmi, Najat. *Jo també sóc catalana*. Barcelona: Columna, 2004.
- El Hachmi, Najat. *L'últim patriarca*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2008.
- El Hachmi, Najat. *La filla estrangera*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2015.
- El Hachmi, Najat. *Dilluns ens estimiran*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2021.
- Flesler, Daniela. *The Return of the Moor: Spanish Responses to Contemporary Moroccan Immigration*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008.
- Forsdick, Charles. "Global France, Global French: Beyond the Monolingual." *Contemporary French Civilization* 42: 1 (2017): 13–29.
- Gramling, David. *The Invention of Monolingualism*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Gruia, Ioana. *Con acento extranjero*. Olula del Río: Almería, 2017.
- Gruia, Ioana. *El expediente Albertina*. Madrid: Castalia Ediciones, 2016.
- Gruia, Ioana. "Es bueno para una literatura incorporar muchos acentos." *Cultura eres tú*, Centro Andaluz de las Letras, Junta de Andalucía, 1 March 2012. http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/caletas/sites/default/files/autores/anexos/Entrevista_Ioana_Gruia.pdf
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". In *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* edited by Padmini Mongia, 110–121. London: Arnold, 1996.

- Hart, Matthew. *Extraterritorial: A Political Geography of Contemporary Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.
- Hernández Velasco, Irene. "Najat El Hachmi: 'El Islam nunca fue feminista y nunca lo será.'" *El Mundo*, 22 September 2019.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, edited by Sandra Harding, 103–106. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Flujo de inmigración procedente del extranjero por año, país de origen y nacionalidad (española/extranjera); accessed 8 May 2022) <https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=24295&L=0>
- Kellman, Steven G. *Nimble Tongues: Studies in Literary Translingualism*. Ashland: Purdue University Press, 2020.
- Kellman, Steven G. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
- Kellman, Steven G. ed. *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on their Craft*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.
- Kramsch, Claire. *The Multilingual Subject: What Foreign Language Learners Say About Their Experience and Why It Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Lauret, Maria. *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Li, Wei. "Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language." *Applied Linguistics* 39: 1 (2018): 9–30.
- Maitland, Sarah. *What Is Cultural Translation?* London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- McClintock, Anne. "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race and Nationalism." In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, 89–112. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Moore, Robert. "From Revolutionary Monolingualism to Reactionary Multilingualism: Top-down Discourses of Linguistic Diversity in Europe, 1794–present." *Language and Communication* 44 (2015): 19–30.
- Moraru, Christian and Andrei Terian. "The Worlds of Romanian Literature and the Geopolitics of Reading." In *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, edited by Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru and Andrei Terian, 1–32. New York: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- Öri, Julia. "Translingual Paratopia and the Universe of Katalin Molnar." *L2 Journal* 7 (2015): 84–101.
- Pandey, Anjali. *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction*. New York: Palgrave, 2016.
- Pérez Isasi, Santiago. "Iberian Studies: A State of the Art and Future Perspectives." In *Looking at Iberia: A Comparative European Perspective*, edited by Santiago Pérez Isasi and Ângela Fernandes, 11–26. Bern: Peter Lang, 2013.
- Pomar-Amer, Miquel. "Play of Mirrors in the Border. Najat El Hachmi's Subjectivity Formation in Jo també sóc catalana." *Hawwa*, 12: 2–3 (2014): 289–309.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

- Rossich, Albert and Jordi Cornellà-Detrell. *El plurilingüisme en la literatura catalana: retòrica, versemblança, diglosia*. Bellcaire d'Empordà: Edicions Vetella, 2014.
- Santana, Mario. *Foreigners in the Homeland: The Spanish American New Novel in Spain, 1962 – 1974*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000.
- Sommer, Doris. *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Stanišić, Saša. "Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany." *Words Without Borders*, 2008. <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/three-myths-of-immigrant-writing-a-view-from-germany>
- Tarău, Monica. "Ioana Gruia, una escritora en español de origen romano." 12 July 2016. https://www.rri.ro/es_es/ioana_gruia_una_escritora_en_espaol_de_origen_rumano-2550266
- Van Amelsvoort, Jesse. "Narrating Into Europe: Female Migrant Writers' Voice and Representation." *Politique européenne*, 66 (2019): 150–168.
- Wright, Chantal. "Writing in the 'Grey Zone': Exophonic Literature in Contemporary Germany". *German as a Foreign Language* 3 (2008): 26–46.
- Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Gender and Nation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997.

Catherine Barbour is Assistant Professor in Hispanic Studies at Trinity College Dublin. She specialises in contemporary Iberian literary and cultural studies, with particular interests in multilingual literature, migration studies, gender studies and minority cultures. Her work has been published in the *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, *Journal of Romance Studies*, and *English in Education* and she is author of the monograph *Contemporary Galician Women Writers*, published by Legenda in 2020.

https://www.tcd.ie/Hispanic_Studies/staff/cbarbour.php. Email: barbourc@tcd.ie