

THE TRANSLATOR AND  
THE PHOTOGRAPHER:  
CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN  
*THE HISTORY OF WATER*

Beverley Curran

The moving water will not show me  
my reflection.

The rocks ignore.

I am a word  
in a foreign language.

-- Margaret Atwood, "Disembarking at Quebec"

**Introduction**

In Noëlle Janaczewska's bilingual *The History of Water/Huyên thoai một dòng nước* (1995), the Australian playwright muddies any sense of translation as a "transparent medium of fluid exchange" (Cronin 111) in her dramatic examination of the movement between cultures, languages, history and private memories. In the play, the translator is a Vietnamese refugee learning to live in Australia; that is, in global and national terms, she moves from Vietnamese to English in the process of a cultural "translation of the less powerful other who is transported into the same to be alienated from the self in an imperializing gesture" (Godard 159). Because of the movement that is intrinsic in her linguistic and personal development, the visibility of the translator fluctuates; she may be as sharply distinct as a photograph, or as ephemeral as a ghostly frisson.

Within the field of translation studies, the invisibility of the translator has been the subject of critical scrutiny, specifically by Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), which looks at the history of English language translation over the past 300 years, from the seventeenth century until the late twentieth century. Venuti attributes the translator's invisibility to the profession's relative lack of prestige among the literary arts and to the widespread practice of "transparency" in English translation, which renders a text fluent, and the performance and presence of the translator erased. The *trompe l'oeil* of transparency, or effortless readability, allows the translation to "pass" as original and renders the translator

invisible (Venuti 2000 341). As Venuti points out, one of the few places where a glimpse of the translator has been possible is in the preface to a translation, although often the “rhetorics of submission” (Robinson 2; in Simon 50) applied in the preface continue to obscure the translator’s identity. “The Task of the Translator” served as Walter Benjamin’s introduction to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*. I will turn to that essay by Benjamin, which locates the specific task of the translator and the translation as testimony that ensures the memory of a work of art, thus extending its afterlife. Benjamin’s essay seeks to establish a connection between the life of a work of art, and its afterlife, or its history post-publication, which moves forward through time and is distinguished by its relativity, and its autonomy from human history. That is, in distinguishing translation from the work of art, and thus tacitly the translator from the artist, Benjamin is not proposing just a theory of translation, but an historical model.

The “The Task of the Translator” will be read in a different accent by rubbing it up against Benjamin’s later work, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936). By considering these essays together, I believe the invisibility of the translator can be extended beyond Venuti’s notion of self-effacing professional modesty or a transparent translation praxis to include a concept of the translator as a ghost/writer extending the afterlife of a literary work of art --or a life-- into a web of relationships that extends beyond “human” history. Rather than rehashing the binary opposition that polarizes the author and the translator, Benjamin’s two essays provide a frame for a ghostly portrait of a translator that fades and flickers like a moving image, thus implicitly linking the translator and the photographer as producers. I suggest that the growing frequency of the translator performing within literary texts is crucially linked to the escalating importance of television and film images in late modernity, that is, to the “commodity production of a more visual character, which can “replicate images endlessly and beam them virtually anywhere” (Slater 4; in Cronin 81) and which acquires the authenticity of private memory because they infiltrate and mingle with it.

### “The Task of the Translator”

I will now turn to Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Task of the Translator,” because it offers a number of interesting positions from which to view the portrait of the translator as ghost/writer although it is really more concerned with the process of translation than its agent and the translator haunts Benjamin’s essay without really coming into focus. Benjamin defines translation as a “mode” (70) rather than a product,

which is why he is justified in all but ignoring the role of the translator, for his interest in the process is not limited to the particulars of producing a single translated work. Rather, he is interested in a process that looks at new ways of “seeing” history as the “progressive movement of translations” and the “transcendental structure of translatability” implicit in a work of art as a “mode of temporality.” Beatrice Hanssen describes Benjamin’s rather nebulous position:

[I]ndividual translations were dependent on the original’s fame, they were its latest manifestation... While the translation unfolded, unfurled, perpetually renewed, and transformed the original, it at once sprang forth from it, finding its condition of possibility in the original’s afterlife. This reciprocal, mutual interdependence between translation and original is what Benjamin qualified as a natural or “vital connection” (*ein Zusammenkang des Lebens*) flowing forth from the work’s ‘natural life,’ (I 71; GS 4: 10-11; in Hanssen 32)

“The Task of the Translator” follows the movement of history in the process of translation; for Benjamin, history is “at work” in translation. But what of the translator, the agent of this task? It seems to me that the nature of the translator is at the heart of the difference between a work of art and a translation, because the reader *is* the writer. The translation blurs producer and receiver, dissipating the exclusive aura of authorial creativity, because certainly the task that the translator is undertaking is not an act of repetition but reproduction. Benjamin is concerned with the relationship of original and translated text as poetic language performing history. Still he sets the stage for a consideration of the translator as ghost/writer when he says that a translation issues from an original “not so much from its life but from its afterlife” (71); and more importantly, when he states that translation’s “ultimate” task, is to express “the central reciprocal relationship between languages” and identifies this task as performative:

It cannot possibly reveal or establish the hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. This representation of hidden significance through an embryonic attempt at making it visible is of so singular a nature that it is rarely met with in the sphere of nonlinguistic life.  
(72)

Thus Benjamin asserts translation as an “original” process that enacts the representation of something that is hidden; and that ‘something’ is not only the reciprocity of language, but the obscured reader/writer who is the agent and part of that process.

This elusive figure of the translator can be disconcerting, especially if “a translation [is] meant for readers who do not understand the original” (Benjamin 69), and a monolingual reader of a translation is expected to trust the translator as a reliable “narrator.” Not only the monolingual but also the monotheistic have been wary. As Michael Cronin explains, “Translation has been viewed with profound suspicion by monotheism from Judaism to Islam to Christianity [...]. The fear of the imaginative interposition of the translator who will alter, deform or mutilate the sacred wholeness of the original” (Cronin 108). This is indicative of the cult value of a sacred text whose translation must be considered identical, rendering the original “unconditionally translatable” (Benjamin 82). And yet, the most exacting fidelity in reproduction could be viewed as a forgery, as it is in other art: “Along with forgery and ghosting, translation is the only kind of writing that will be condemned for giving signs of what it is” (Rée 223). If translation is a likeness, then, it is a ghostly one that has undergone a transformation.

Benjamin points out that *change*, not likeness, is the essential characteristic of translation, and that that change is not just in the movement from one language to another, but in the drift of meaning that occurs over time: “Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” (73). Translation is ultimately a creative act of testimony, suggests Benjamin, “far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages” (73); rather “of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process (*Nachreife*) of the original language and the birth pangs (*Wehen*) of its own” (73).<sup>1</sup> Benjamin’s depiction of translation may make it sound as if the medium is more Messiah than messenger, but it is nevertheless not difficult to agree that delivery from one world, one linguistic sphere, to another, is the task of the translator. Located in the afterlife of a book, birthing it in a new language and thus giving it new meaning, the translator is an illusionist that allows what was not there to be read to appear; thus the translation is a linguistic example of *trompe l’oeil*, or what Susan Stewart might call the “triumph of surface over materiality and time”:

not that it seems to be what it is not, but that it presents the illusion of not being:

no author, no history, and hence no capacity for decay or death [...] *trompe l’oeil* attempts to bypass the limits of representation. (275)

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<sup>1</sup> Paul de Man, in his discussion of Benjamin’s essays is critical of the English and French translations. See p 85 for his objections to Harry Zohn’s choice of “birth pangs” and “maturing process.” Others have noticed lapses in Zohn’s translation, such as Susan Ingram’s 1997 article, “The Trouble with Harry, or Producing Walter Benjamin’s Anglo-American Reception,” but de Man’s translation has not been without its critics.

Or, just as Benjamin describes the magician hidden in the medical practitioner in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the oscillating reader/writer is concealed in the translator, each role haunting the other from another linguistic world.

### **“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”**

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin begins with a discussion of modes of production. He remarks that significant changes in modes of cultural production have had a profound effect on how we conceive of a work of art. With this in mind, I will apply some of the thoughts from this essay to a consideration of the translator as an agent of cultural reproduction and link it not only with print and the creative writer, but with the image and the photographer.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin identified translation as a mode governed by the “translatability” of the original (70). In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he suggests that the authority and authenticity of the original are challenged by the autonomy that photographic reproduction has from its subject, and the mobility it enjoys. The camera can surpass the naked eye, and can assume any number of points of view with the aid of such processes as enlargement or slow motion (222); furthermore, the reproduction allows the original to be relocated. “The Task of the Translator” speaks of the vital reciprocal relationship between original and translation “copy,” the former giving rise to the latter, while the latter extends the life of the former. In “Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin says that the original testifies to the history of its experience. The translation, too, offers testimony, although not of a direct experiential kind. In discussing the distinction between these two forms of testimony, Benjamin implicitly collates translation with photography when he calls the latter a “mode of remembrance” (228): The portrait was the focal point of early photography, primarily to remember those dead or absent. In the paradigmatic shift at the turn of the century, that mode of remembrance had gone public: the deserted street, in the wake of a crime, is photographed to establish evidence. Just as the paradigm shift blurred the photographer as a private or public archivist, so, too, in the literary realm, with more access to modes of cultural production, such as newspapers, the distinction between author and reading public became less defined: “At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (234).

There is a sense, too, of acceleration, which Benjamin notes in reference to film. “[T]ransitions in literature [that] took centuries, in film have taken place in a decade”

(234). Benjamin detects a cleavage between film and stage performance, which aligns film with translation through the illusionary nature of “the second degree.” The equipment free aspect of reality witnessed on the screen is the height of artifice in the same way that a transparent translation is an “occult” practice. Even more occult, perhaps, is the agent of these operations. Benjamin conjures up the magician and the surgeon, maintaining the former is still hidden in the latter (235). He further suggests that the magician maintains a “natural” distance from the patient, whereas the surgeon, through the operation, “penetrates” the patient. In Janaczewska, this “penetration” will qualitatively shift into an aquatic operation that emphasizes the porous relationship between things. Benjamin continues comparing the magician and surgeon to

painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the camera consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (236)

This seems to be what has been asked from a transparent translation, as well. However, I believe that there is evidence that such demands have changed, at least from those whose voices have been dubbed out public histories, their bodies erased. The transparent translation is a protective shield, just as generic or visual representations of “ ‘whole, systematized bodies’ [...] do the cultural work of staying ‘the fear of the unwhole body, of the altered body’ ” (Davis 57; in Smith 133), be it essential or textual.

### **The Translator and the Photographer**

This discussion will now move to Australia, where the translator seems most conspicuous by his or her absence in the critical scrutiny of a nation with a colonial past, a multilingual indigenous population, and a multicultural immigrant one. English asserts a peculiar exclusionary power in shaping national and personal identity in Australia, that is summed up, perhaps, in the scene from *Walkabout* (1971), where the lost and thirsty brother and sister make first contact with the young Aboriginal man. As the girl says, with some irritation, “We are English. Do you understand? This is

Australia, yes?" The scene clearly indicates that English is neither the exclusive nor the "original" language of Australia, but also suggests its assertion has been a way to ward off fear of the unknown of the colonized land and its people; and other proximate lands with different languages and writing systems.

The relationship between visuality and textuality has been defined as oppositional in the same way that the literary artist and the translator have been polarized; "the dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself" (Metchel 43; in Watson & Smith 19). What happens when the word is translated and the image is a photograph? "Every picture tells a story. But what if it doesn't?" begins Janaczewska's play, *The History of Water/Huyền thoại một gòong nước*, locating a character's urge to be released from narrative rather than the desire to write herself in. Although in the play the Translator and the Photographer muse about what they do with words and images, at its heart is a disappearance: "Someone disappears from a ferry across an unnamed body of water" (10). This play is not a search to establish personal or cultural identity, according to the playwright, who has stated her resistance to

endless configurations of [...] autobiographies and family histories. While I appreciate that biography and autobiography are important genres in post-colonial societies, in that they are often the first places from which marginal voices are permitted to speak and be heard, I think we have too many self-portraits on our stages and screens. As a genre I find the 'autobiography of difference' limited—aesthetically and intellectually [...]. I may be interested in languages, questions of translation and the intricacies of learning foreign languages as subject matter and metaphor, but English is the only language in which I write, because it's the only one I know well enough. <sup>2</sup>

If Janaczewska is resisting identity issues in her dramatic writing, she shares Marlatt's interest in place and its resonance with all the histories that have occurred in and crossed it. The site of the story sets the stage for the dialectic between translated word and photographic image to dissolve in the recognition of the performativity of both processes. The translator in performance has an embodied existence but she is nevertheless difficult to "understand." Like the term "performance" itself, with its

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<sup>2</sup> From an e-mail interview conducted in December, 2002.

complex and multiple meanings, the translator on stage --as a woman, migrant, bilingual speaker, language learner, Vietnamese, Australian-- works “against notions of easy access, decipherability, and translatability” (Taylor 49). She is not easy to read, because Janaczewska’s play is drifting away from narrative towards other possible processes of making meaning.

The Translator, a Vietnamese woman named Hà, enters first, followed by the Australian Photographer, Kate, who is the first to speak. They introduce each other to initialize their interactive relationship.

HÀ She is a photographer. There to capture the world in black and white.  
And occasional colour. [...] On film. Taken in unguarded moments. For  
all to see.

KATE She is a translator. There to interpret and transcribe the voice of  
another world. There to render comprehensible what would otherwise  
be incomprehensible. (15-16)

Like the provocative statements that begin Benjamin’s essay on translation, it is not certain how much irony is at work in these straightforward pronouncements. The photographer attempts to elaborate this definition of the translator by reducing it to “a question of cultural identity. We don’t feel we really have one ... or it’s not solid enough,” but is quickly challenged by the translator: “That doesn’t make sense to me. How can you not have enough identity?” (16). Janaczewska may not want to play identity politics herself, but from the onset, this play suggests that the anxieties of Australian identity are at play in the cultural role of the translator, which is scrutinized as Other in order to find an image of national self. Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch has identified “the convict moment, the complex moment of transport” (182) as an abiding Australian national myth. Does it have an afterlife in the “doubled occasion of bondage and release” that marks the migrant escape from war and containment upon arrival?

### Search and Identify

In Janaczewska’s play, the translator and the photographer conflate in the figure of the traveller. For Kate, in search of identity, “going overseas is so important [...] I needed to find out where I was in the world. Who I was in the world” (16); this “I” a national reference as much as a personal one. That Kate wants to go to Asia rather than Europe speaks of a recent development in terms of identity and sense of place; since the 80s, Australians have been encouraged to “view themselves as part of Asia rather than



identifying with their European heritage: that is, to privilege geography over history” (Lo 53). Janaczewska is working across porous national borders in an Australian response to Canadian critic Northrop Frye’s question, “Where is here?” The local evoked by Kate, that is, Perth, is connected with the past elsewhere; with “three generations of West Australian wheat farmers” on her mother’s side, and a “bleak headland on an unrelieved expanse of salt marsh” in South East England where her father comes from. Kate says she grew up in Perth, but then she describes the geography of that bit of England with its ancient beaches “where invaders and immigrants have, since pre-history, waded ashore” (17). The local Hà remembers is rooted in a village on the Mekong, where her family has lived and fished for hundreds and hundreds of years, although by family, she means her father’s family. In spite of this ostensible stability, there is a sense of insecurity, too, for “in Trà Vinh, I clung to language and water, because I knew that whatever else was lost, they’d always be there” (18). What is left unspoken here are the unsettling conditions of war; the anchors that Hà naïvely chooses to salvage certainty will not hold.

In October 1942, in an earlier war, Kate’s father was sent to the “Far East” to fight the Japanese. He was fighting on the margins of a map that located Europe in its centre; in geographical terms, of course, moving to Australia was even more distancing. War fought on her own soil is what moves Hà to leave Vietnam and seek refuge in a “migrant reception hostel” (18). There is a telling difference in the word choice of an “immigrant” from Britain and a “migrant” from Vietnam that has grown even more distinct; a difference that contrasts the “race- and nation-inflected privilege” of “voluntary mobility [...] with the forced, or at least more uncomfortable and complicated, trajectories of migrants, exiles and others who travel without tenure” (Gedalof 189).

The stories of Kate and Hà share space with projections of maps of Australia and Vietnam, and English and Vietnamese words dissolving into each other; and they are performed in English and Vietnamese. “Hybridized linguistic codes,” according to Eva Johnson, “have an especially powerful effect when they are performed as stories told directly to the audience, which is then implicated in the process of intersubjectivity” (18). What strikes me is that linguistic virtuosity is not on display here, even by The Translator, who often leaves her words untranslated and frequently consults the English-Vietnamese dictionary in her suitcase. As a migrant she has not had the leisure to learn: “But I soon realise that if I don’t speak my own words, people will speak theirs for me” (24). The task of the translator seems to have come a long way from Benjamin; it has become a gritty operation; a pressing matter of personal survival to extend a life

into another language and culture. The translator is not someone serving as a medium so that two languages remain separate but understandable. Here language and life elide in the translator; about life lived in more than one language. And yet, Benjamin still seems relevant, especially when we recall the “behaviour of his prose” (Bartolovich 193). “The Task of the Translator” escapes a definitive reading, like the process it discusses and enacts. This entanglement of form and content gestures towards the entanglement of larger relationships, just as the inclusion of an epigraph, in French, of a Vietnamese poet Nguyen Trong Hiep, to the *Arcades Project* intertwined Paris and Berlin with Hanoi (Bartolovich 190), and thus metropolitan modernity with imperialism.

### The Reticent Translator

The Translator and the Photographer code-switch throughout the play, but it is never made clear to an anglophone audience just what is being said in Vietnamese. Although a collaboration with friend and colleague Phuong Tuy Tran, Janaczewska’s play does not employ her as a translator to pacify monolingual viewers. There is no clear sense of what the translator is saying in Vietnamese; whether she is translating what has been said before by Kate, or perhaps what she herself has said before in English; or something else entirely. Thus the performance resists its own immersion in an anglophone Australia and its official semblance of linguistic unity. It demonstrates what Joanne Tomkins sees as “striking resistance to authenticity in Australian theatre [in its] highly interrogative approach to representations of Australia” (117): it has never been “just an Anglo-Celtic nation” (117), and the appearance of migrants from Asia is not a recent phenomenon, in spite of its stereotype in the Vietnamese “boat people” (Tomkins 118). The gaps in understanding that occur when Vietnamese is spoken are likely to create pockets of anxiety in an audience more used to accent as a theatrical representation of the foreign. “In a sense, accent becomes the foreign language [...] For scriptwriters and producers, the beauty of accent in these situation is that you have the exotic thrill of difference without (up to a point) the discomfort of incomprehension” (Cronin 11). When the audience experiences lapses in understanding they briefly enter the “slipzone of anxiety and imperfection” (Naficy 12) that marks the liminal status of an external exile.

Still, the audience does not have to navigate through these linguistic challenges on a daily basis as Hà must in order to speak her own words. This applies both in Australia and in overseas travel. It is significant, I think, that the translator, the one

who must bridge language, is the character who does not speak English as a native language. The more people speak English as a global means of communication, the less insistence there is on an anglophone learning another language. Kate, the Photographer, spends her travel in Vietnam “Recording Asia” without recourse to words. Janaczewska is perhaps commenting here on the dependency of the gaze in the (anglophone Australian) traveller. As Michael Cronin points out, “the predominance of the visual” noted by such critics as Mary Louise Pratt and Sara Mills fails to link it “to the question of language, or more precisely, the absence of common language [...] [T]he experience of travel in a country where the language is unknown to the traveller will be heavily informed by the visual.

### Cross-Sensual Translation

While Kate records Vietnam with her camera, just as so many photojournalists have done to introduce television viewers to that country through images, she recalls memories of her younger self through her nose. As an 8-year-old, leaving Perth for the first time to visit the fishing community of Blakeney, Kate compares the old house in England

with our disinfected, laminex-surfaced Australian home. And the house smelt of steamed jam puddings, clay pipes, furniture polish, soup and salt air. But to me it just stank. Vile. Filthy. Foul. (27)

It is not the first “disgusting” olfactory memory of England Kate remembers in the play. She recalls the humiliation of accepting an unwrapped “dried-out bundle” of seaweed from the postman.

He asks me what it is, and I’m so embarrassed; I don’t know what to say. I think it’s disgusting. Dirty. Filthy. No one in our family eats it --not even Dad, although he goes on and on about how the smell reminds him of when he was a boy in England. (23)

While the present of seaweed triggers nothing but revulsion in Kate, its smell functions to stimulate the *mémoire involuntaire* in her father. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin mentions this term coined by Proust in connection with the role chance plays in the activation of certain memories, and identifies scent as its “inescapable refuge”: “A scent may drown years in the odor it recalls” (186). The package then is not just sent from another place but another time. While it triggers somatic memory in Kate’s father, Benjamin also points out that what is most enduring in the *mémoire involuntaire* is

“what has *not* been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has *not* happened to the subject as an experience” (162-3, my emphasis). This is where what we have read, seen in a photograph, or heard through story leaves a powerful trace in us.

Travelling to England, where there is a common language shared, to meet family, might suggest that the only significant distance in this trip would seem to be geographical, but for Kate, there is no familiarity in this “return.” Janaczewska is not just considering the obvious translation from one culture and language to another, but the intra-lingual and -cultural journey, as well, that is a milestone in Kate’s personal life, but also in the case of Australia’s sense of identity. The original, with its aura of authenticity and authority, is, in Kate’s eyes, simply old, washed-up: it “seemed like the end of the world to me” (23). When she is offered a “rainbow drop” by one of her relatives, she has to “correct them; tell them that they are called “freckles” (35). She reverses the “historical” shock of difference between the landscapes of England and Australia, by feeling comfort in the “bright sun and vivid colours of Perth” in November and alienated from the cold monochrome bleakness of Blakeney, which recurs in a nightmare Kate has had “ever since I was a child --since I went to that place. Maybe it’s Blakeney... maybe it’s every place I’ve ever been afraid” (23). What seems certain is that Blakeney is a somatic memory stored in touch and smell, not contained in a photograph; something not contained in the photographs Kate recalls of “everyone dressed in their Sunday best; posing formally for the camera. Parents behind, children in front. Everyone in their place” (51).

### A River Runs Through

An echo of Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* can be heard in Hana’s sense of the English word, “river,” a term shared by English speakers, but which has different meanings based on personal emotional and experiential connotations. Language is no longer used *in situ*; it has been dislodged and drifted until it is no more united in intention than cultural memory in modernity. In *The English Patient*, Hana locates her river precisely: “I want to take you to the Skootamatta River, Kip,” she tells her lover, hoping to share her love with that thought; her wish “for a river they could swim in” (129). But Kip “had a different sense of rivers” learned in war, not serenity; each one he met “was bridgeless, as if its name had been erased, as if the sky were starless, homes doorless” (129). This word will not seduce him even in the mouth of Hana, his lover. Words themselves are mercurial, translated by “the river that is trade” (145), that

triggered the demand for movement across the globe, the conquest for commodities. In Janaczevska's play, Hà recalls the first river she saw in Australia:

[It] was a creek in East Hills. Full of decomposing mattresses, rusting car chassis and beer cans. And I thought: what an awful place I've come to; this is what they call a river! For a long time after I arrived here, the largest river I saw was Prospect Creek. And I thought how different it was from Vietnam, where even a creek is a wide body of water --as wide as... oh, as wide as Georges River [...] [T]he English word river became very small." (27)

Why, she wonders, even bother to name them? Kate explains that regardless of size, any body of water is important in "the driest continent in the world. Every one needs a name" (28). What does not get discussed here is where the names come from, although it is clear that neither Prospect Creek nor Georges River are "original" names. Even the designation of "river" or "creek," says Paul Carter in *The Road to Botany Bay*, was a kind of wish fulfilment among early colonial explorers, to linguistically translate place into what they hoped it would become: "they were expected to translate its extension into objects of commerce [...] When, in 1846, [Major] Mitchell dignified a succession of ponds in south-west Queensland by the name 'river', it was as a potential highway to the Gulf of Carpentaria that he valued them, and, equally important, as a gateway to what would be invariably be associated with rivers in Europe --fine pastures" (56-7).

Clearly, taking possession of the land was linked to "demonstrating the efficacy of the English language there" (58). These names were intended for those who understood the language. Hà, as a child in Vietnam, did not speak English. Her "map of the world was a collection of postcards kept in a tin. [...] Most of the postcards were given to me by American soldiers, so after a while I began to see America as the centre of the world and Vietnam as a distant place; somewhere in the Far East of the world's imagination" (23). Hà's consciousness admits new worlds through postcards, and they disrupt the comfort of "home" and thus erase its meaning. Hà is not yet watching television, but low-tech images from elsewhere, mediated through Americans, render the local inadequate and create a split between self and place. "I began to feel detached from my world. As if I were in a small boat drifting out into the open sea; watching my life disappear over the horizon" (23-4). Hà is speaking of the colonization of her space even if her language has not been colonized; her experience is of "being banished [...] from the view of those who belong to the same culture as the mapmaker" (Mignolo 1995 5), and being assimilated into that process.

Like *The Translator* and *The Photographer*, Vietnam is a type: “an ideal subject for generalized colonialism. A widely unknown people but an exceptionally famed name (Minh-ha 170). In the process of moving to Australia, there is a further split between the images of her childhood and the language of adulthood, along with the realization that she only knows Vietnam now as a thing of the past. “I know all the economic and political headlines, the events that constitute news, but I don’t know what’s really happened: how the details of people’s lives have changed” (32). Benjamin commented on how in the wake of World War I experience was utterly contradicted by the

strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn experience now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath the clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (“The Storyteller” 84)

Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* lets us know that these contradictions, these changes carried through language, continue, through the new word Kip “heard in the theory rooms and through his crystal set, which is ‘nuclear’” (277). More recent memory might recall reports and photographs from the war in Vietnam of the effects of something called “napalm.” News is a *bad* translation, according to Benjamin, because it “cannot transmit anything but information [...] the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content” (69-70). Kate, who has been to Vietnam more recently, can offer only visual details: “Barefoot children in ragged clothes hold out their palms for money. Grandmothers in black silk trousers stroll arm-in-arm, telling stories and catching up on news. Students cycle. And Westerners take photographs” (38). The photograph seems to capture more than information, but does not necessarily reveal more. Janaczewska seems to suggest that rather than offering clarification, the translator or photographer are prone to lapses in understanding.

### **Making Love with a Dictionary**

The experiences of Hà and Kate, of the translator and the photographer, leak into another level of narrative: a story of disappearance and investigation and a closer connection suggested by the intimation of a shared lover. At the inquest, Kate recalls that the officer in charge opened the suitcase and found “[h]is passport and everything inside. His notebook and a dictionary and a camera and the book I’d bought him...

Graham Greene's "The Quiet American" (28). Kate calls the missing person The Man from Hanoi: "He speaks Vietnamese, French and Chinese. We talk to each other in French. The only language we share. His fluent. Mine hesitant and full of grammatical mistakes" (44). Kate assumes that The Man From Hanoi is "fluent," but in fact, she is only guessing based on her observation he speaks better French than she does. Again there is a sense of inadequacy; in this case, not with place, but linguistic lack.

Kate also recalls, through the reference to Greene's novel, another Vietnam, when it was *Indochine* and French was the ubiquitous "foreign" language. The Man From Hanoi confides to Kate that "a good French/Vietnamese dictionary costs almost a year's salary" (46). Hà speaks of a lover, too, someone she fell in love with "because he knew so many words. I was seduced by long words, sentences, and perfect pronunciation" (50). When he leaves her, she explains, "[H]e told me I didn't want him, I wanted a dictionary" (50). From the possibility of a shared lover, or a sideshadowing experience of love, the translator and the photographer come even closer to conflation through words. Early in the play, Kate talks of her desire to "photograph my thoughts. Running all over the place. Wild. Wild like the rain. But I couldn't find a way to photograph them, so I chose the closest thing I could find. Now I photograph water" (24). As the play ends and with it, the exchange of memories, Hà takes Kates words in her mouth, with a difference: "I wanted to translate my thoughts. Running all over the place. Wild like the rain. But I couldn't find a way to translate these thoughts, so I chose the nearest thing I could find. Water" (53). What appeared to be a story about establishing identity, through travel, language, or image, slips away:

HA No camera was there to record what happened on the ferry.

KATE And no translator was there to interpret the sequence of events for us.

HA If a camera had been there, do you think we'd know what happened.

KATE All the cameras in the world can't change the fact that he stepped out of the frame and the picture changed.

HA Maybe in looking for the story, we're looking in the wrong place? (55)

Or maybe we are looking for the wrong story. Maybe we don't know what the "translator" really means. From the invisible ghost/writer to the embodied performance, from re-reading to tentative first steps into another language, the portrait of the translator is full of contradictions. Instead of assuming understanding, perhaps we should be thinking about how little we understand and anticipate resistance. Displacing the author, as Doris Sommer points out, is not the same as being in his or her place (Sommer 1999 23).

We no longer can rely on one semantic authority.

## Conclusion

The invisible translator in this essay carries with it a critique of how disappearance or subservience or marginalization allows injustice to be forgotten. As Frederic Jameson says in "Modernism and Imperialism," the "traces of imperialism can be detected in Western modernism, and are indeed constitutive of it; but we must not look for them in the obvious places" (qtd in Bartolovich 168). The writer and the critic and the translator all have the potential to "imagin[e] alternatives to capitalism" (Bartolovich 169) but are hampered when critiques are "tamed by reinscription into more palatable narratives, such that identity crisis displaces domination and the endless play of signifiers elbows exploitation from view" (169). In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin enacted the process of translation in the suggestive way he chose to write. In his provocative but elusive essay, his style poses the problems of comprehensibility. It is difficult to elucidate the task of the translator, but one can sense its formidability through Benjamin's essay. As Crystal Bartolovich explains, Benjamin's writing project is to "direct us to look further, to the place beyond our current vision, around the corner (between the lines), and especially to reassess the certitude that we really see all of what is there, right before our eyes [...] [W]e have to remain attentive to the unsaid and invisible" (194). We have to ask why the translator is invisible despite his or her ubiquity. In an officially monolingual country, the presence of the translator makes visible what is hidden by policy.

Janaczewska's translator is not found like Benjamin's translation outside of the "language forest" but located in the thick of it, like a river running through, not fixed nor even hailing from a single exclusive source. On the edge, in Asia, in Vietnam, there is the allure of the exotic and the erotic, perhaps, but moving closer as a cultural migrant, the translator, finds herself lost in the "Flood of Boat People," and the "New Wave of Refugees" (49), headlines in Australian newspapers which assert "monolingual and monorhythmic measures of worth" (Sommer 111) in their choice of words. What needs to be taken, suggests Janaczewska's play, are the tentative steps into a new language and culture without fear. Just as the photograph irrevocably changes our perception of a work of art, using words in a foreign language alters our sense of place and identity in crucial ways.



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