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UNMOORED: LANGUAGE PAIN, POROSITY, AND POISONWOOD

Abstract:

This paper considers the experience of unmoored multilingualism through autoethnographic reflection, literary fiction, and anthropological inquiry. Drawing from the work of Elaine Scarry, Simone Weil, Anne Carson, and Tim Ingold, Phipps contemplates the embodied relationship between pain and languages, movement, and the porosity of language worlds. Phipp's exploration of these abstract concepts is shaped by a collage of voices from asylum seekers, refugees and their advocates, and through the voices of fiction, which tell of pain and porosity in unmoored languages. In particular, the paper draws from Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* and Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*, as well as from Phipp's own personal experiences.

Keywords: language pain ♦ ontology ♦ subjectivity ♦ poetics ♦ trauma ♦ Blin ♦ Tigrinya

Unmoored

Holding on

Know what hand pushes
the boat out, the scent
of a shadow on worn wood—
something or nothing
gently perceived.
As an old violin
retains its voice
when played by others.
so a boat unmoored at dawn,
drifts like a half forgotten dream
between green islands.



There is comfort in the shape.
the cradling image—that holds meaning
and beauty too, as in all things
where need determines shape
and you have use of the vessel.

(Joy Mead)

The organisers of the symposium *Multilingual, 2.0?* offered the following tantalising statement in their invitation to contribute: “It is becoming clear that the very nature of multilingualism is now increasingly unmoored—even from the frameworks that were applied to it in the 1990s.”

In this paper it is the concept of unmooring languages that I seek to explore. I do so moving into a discursive mode, which works between poetic voice and academic argument in order to seek, in language, to replicate something of the experience of unmooring language. I do not claim that this “works” but rather offer it as a mode of witness and expression to the experience.

To be moored requires twin anchors. To be moored suggests safety, what Gerald Manley Hopkins, the English poet, describes as follows:

Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
 And out of the swing of the sea
 (Hopkins 1918)

Certainty, security, safety, steadiness. Confident in the order of things; that people and things are where they are expected to be; that the world is known and can be controlled; and can be understood. Confident in the language(s) of people and place. This is the moored world.



Unmooring occurs when one or both of the twin anchors are raised. Monolingualism and multilingualism as anchors being raised and raising both anchors means movement, a possible loss of control, a move into what may be unknown, however charted. It may be a movement that is chosen or it may be the frightening, enwinding drag of a storm. To be unmoored suggests

possibility—potential pain, insecurity, escape, freedom, hope, danger, release and a sea-ward flow.

I'd like to argue that the languages used to *language*, in this flow—not the languages for the mooring, where the challenges are different—have to attempt to work through the loss and possibilities, the pain and the hope that unmooring determines and which I believe are now radically unpredictable in the turbulence of a tossing sea.





The unmoorings—the loss of one or both anchors—of multilingualism are myriad and are occurring at the levels of self and personhood, kinship and family, community, work, environment, market, politics (local/global). All of these aspects have attracted considerable scholarly attention (Adejunmobi 2004; Fishman 2001; Kelly and Jones 2003; Kramersch 2009; Phipps 2007; van Lier 2004) though what I sense in the discussion is a focus on the geopolitical questions and on

professional academic insecurities of loss, as departments close and ex-Vice-Chancellors betray their linguistic insecurities—rather perhaps than focusing on the intimate contexts of family broken up, unmoored, split apart in the tossing and turbulence and flotsam and jetsam which create myriad forms of migration and mobility.

The unmoorings, with their contradictions, creative forms and emerging symbolic systems, are experienced multilingually. Kramersch argues that:

To survive linguistically and emotionally the contradictions of everyday life, multilingual subjects draw on the formal, semiotic and aesthetic resources afforded by various symbolic systems to reframe these contradictions and create alternative worlds of their own. (Kramersch 2009, 29)

These unmoorings with their contradictions, creative forms and emerging symbolic systems are experienced multilingually and monolingually at one and the same time but are also felt deeply and ontologically. The habituated actions humans have with words are recast, awkwardly, pleasurably, painfully, across multiple boundaries of gender, social class, culture, transforming perception.

Producers, both human and non-human, do not so much transform the world, impressing their preconceived designs upon the material substrate of nature, as play their part from within in the world's transformation of itself. (Ingold 2011, 6)

And for an understanding of this playing of language and ontology, certainly for my own purposes, I need the help of the poets—those workers at the edges of what is possible in language, those creators of new possible worlds on the horizons of stormy seas, on from the shelter of havens, those movers of perception.

Carson takes as her epigraph the words of Gertrude Stein for her *Autobiography of Red* and uses them to speak of the pleasure of “refiguring being” through language when unmoored:

I like the feel of words doing
As they want to do and as they have to do.
(Carson 1998)

In a later interview about this she describes this feel of words “doing what they have to do.” She compares these endless possibilities in language to the art of impressionism:

It’s about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, you know as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that things are placed next to each other. You can also do that with language. (McNeilly 2003, 12-25)

What Carson does is destabilise language itself, and its normative hygienic conventions (Cameron 1995). In the words of Murray, using the metaphor in play here, Carson thus “unmoors the underlying conditions of intelligibility and authority”... (Murray 2005, 101-122)



But that kind of unmooring is not equitable; it is not just a pleasurable experience for classicist scholars and those with the leisure for poetry, because the unmoored are more often than not the migrants, the refugees and asylum seekers who live amongst us. And for such as these, for the “wretched of the earth” Fanon tells of with such critical insistence (Fanon 1965), words do not do what they want them

to do and there is little choice about words and how they might work in any intersections with the bureaucratic and state powers which determine the status, safety and security that might offer moorings. It is these very groups who offer us the clearest possibility for conceptualising multilingual being and what happens to language under the pressure of the pains of unmooring, those who are from contexts where there is no concept at all, can be no concept, of what it might mean to be monolingual.



As I have thought about these aspects I have realised this presents a serious challenge to me as a scholar. I can take my critical understanding of these issues so far but if these are indeed ontological questions, and if I am an anthropologist in my training, perhaps in the words of the poet Rilke: Ich muß mein Leben ändern. I have to change my life, or—to switch back and forth from the anchor of poetry to that of prose—in the words of Luce Irigaray, I have to “elaborate a different subjectivity” (Irigaray 2008, 133).

For me, this triple challenge of scholarship, poetry and authenticity has meant stepping into the turbulence of social action and change. I have moved to “Occupy multilingualism.” This has meant unmooring my own languages. I love to speak French and German. I worked hard to learn the languages in which I am fluent and have earned a living as a professional teacher of these in universities, I worked hard to be able to more or less “pass,” when I speak them. I’d like to keep on with learning Portuguese, and I enjoying the thrill of hearing, from these, into Spanish, Italian, Dutch.

But these are all languages implicated in the oppressing of millions of people, they bear the marks of the violence that has been inflicted in treaties and laws passed, in documents signed, and speeches made which have taken land and languages from peoples. These languages belong to a different understanding of

the possibilities of multilingualism. And as a result of what were deeply felt intellectual understanding in myself, I decided, together with my family, to open my home—the one Irigaray speaks of—to those who are unmoored and have no where to live, but whose languages are not English and whose status is often determined in languages they do not speak.

In 2006 we opened our home and began participating in what we might call Multilingual, *minus* 2.0. I began to try to understand in every aspect of my life what it might mean to be multilingual from below, what it might mean to be deeply in relationship with those who are not like I am, who are entirely other in their privilege and position, but to do so not in the lecture hall, but at my table, in my bathroom, in the intimacy of domestic proximity and intercultural negotiation.

Such a view is also represented in the work of Luce Irigaray, who explores questions of boundaries and porosity in much of her theoretical writings, but in her later work has come to a position which challenges the intimacy and protected space of the home, the language of home, the language with which our subjectivities are elaborated.

To open a place for the other, for a world different from ours, from inside of our own tradition, is the first and most difficult multicultural gesture. Meeting a stranger outside of our own boundaries is rather easy, and even satisfies our aspirations, as long as we can return home and appropriate between ourselves what we have in this way discovered. To be forced to limit and change our home, or our way of being at home, is much more difficult, especially without being unfaithful to ourselves. This requires us to elaborate a different subjectivity from that which has for centuries been ours, a subjectivity for which coexistence and exchange only took place between those who were alike and inside a single tradition. (Irigaray 2008, 133)

As languages began to be spoken in my home, which I am ashamed to say I did not know existed, I became more fully aware of the problems of the language disciplines—the way the multilingual categorisations created symbolic systems, which privileged colonial multilingualism and world trade languages, or the languages of international security, but rendered other multilingual worlds invisible.

Most traditional disciplines are grounded in cultural world views which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems. (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 65)

In retrospectively considering this move I have come to realise that I am attempting, clumsily, to work within the values for conduct elaborated as decolonizing methodologies by indigenous scholars. For instance, as elaborated as part of the Kaupapa Maori practices. These are not prescribed in codes of conduct for researchers, but are instead woven into the values for Maori researchers in cultural terms:

1. Aroha ki re tangata (a respect for people).
2. Kanohi kitea (the seen face, this is, present yourself to people face to face).
3. Titiro, whakarongo...korero (look, listen ... speak).
4. Manaaki kit e tangata (share and host people, be generous).
5. Kia tupato (be cautious).
6. Kaua e tajaia te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the *mana* of the people).
7. Kaua e mahaki (don't flaunt your knowledge).

(Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 2nd: 119-120)

I am not claiming any moral high ground here or that I am somehow getting it right, mostly mine is a tale of incompetence and failure. But I do believe that the ways of conducting research into languages have become unmoored with the unmooring of multilingualism. I propose that we will find ways forward from our precarious positions only by listening to and trying out restorative and non-extractive methodologies such as those which have been elaborated by unmoored subjectivities. It is through multilingualism from below, and through the methods from below that we may have some meaning as, perhaps for the first time, we also find ourselves as insecure, as part of what Butler terms the "precariate." (Butler 2004)

Pain

This experience, I can tell you, hurts. Anne Carson describes this hurt as “decreation” and sees this struggle for existential understanding as being the place where we experience the “ancient struggle of breath against death”—in her poem, appropriately, for my unmoored argument here, entitled “No port now” (Carson 2006).

For Carson and for Simone Weil (1997; 2005), whose influence is palpable in Carson’s work, and for Elaine Scarry (1985) there is both an affirmation that what is most meaningful in life can be conveyed in language and also an acknowledgement that under the pressure of pain language will revert to a cry of pain. It will disintegrate.

This ancient struggle, this place of decreation, where our intimate language leaves us and is reconfigured in the expressions of pain, in fragments of broken language and sound, is a way for us to think through multilingualism as it is unmoored and the unmooring is experienced. It presents an opportunity for us,



perhaps, for some us, to participate in this process, in what I would call the contact with the nerve endings, the tender points of speech.

One of the many people who came to live with us was an unaccompanied minor from Eritrea in the horn of Africa, one of the most oppressed countries in the world. She has two “mother” tongues,

Blin and Tigrinya, she has four scripts that she works in, and at least six languages. There are different tonalities and different relationships to language and power from her multilingualism from below, than those which have dominated the professional context of my multilingual world “above.” During the time she has lived with us we discovered that she had experienced multiple forms of oppression and hardship. She was also age-disputed—not that she understood what this meant or how this was possible, given that the information was communicated to her in a language she didn’t understand (Phipps 2012, 33). Whilst living with us she was taken into detention from our home and issued

with removal directions and a plane ticket for her deportation. When she was released it was as our daughter. A long and difficult campaign for justice for her has dominated our lives for the last four years.

This strange experience of motherhood has led me into a situation of mother tongue pain. Because of course I did not speak as a mother the languages of my daughter. I was pitched, in the course of a matter of weeks, into a situation of linguistic exhaustion, of auto-didacticism, of attempting to learn a language, which in the context of speakers of her languages in the UK I was not allowed to pay for because to pay would constitute illegal employment for which



deportation and detention are the punishment. And Berlitz, Rosetta Stone and the many publishers of the world's "lucrative" languages, do not of course have materials for these languages, any more than I can sign up for an evening class.

This is an extract from a reflection I wrote describing this mother tongue pain:

Painfully slowly I'm using my pen to trace the shapes of the Ge'ez script as I begin to learn Tigrinya....one of the mother tongues of my foster daughter. The irony is intense. A daughter tongue. It curves beautifully as I trace out the contours that would make the pointing of her name. I am hopelessly bad at this. It is a bodily technique of literacy I am applying. In the silence and my immense struggle to voice the consonants and vowels that are so remote from my phonetic experience. [...]

I'm taking a line for a walk, as Paul Klee would say, and it's taking me all over the world, imagining the country of her other belongings, the images I've pulled up online, the way she laughs encouraging, delighted, at my pathetic attempts; the intensity of the use of this script in Pentecostal worship, down the road where she and other the exiles gather in hope. I smile as I realize I know the words for peace, for mercy, for hope but not for war, death, torture or hell. She teaches me to chant the script he hu hi ha hiey h ho - le lu li la liey l lo. My foster daughter is teaching her mother's tongue. A tongue to foster; a daughter's tongue. (Phipps 2012, 33)

The experience I am charting here is described by the anthropologist Tim Ingold in his discussions of skill and knowledge.

To the skilled practitioner absorbed in an activity, the things he uses are available and ready to hand. So long as the activity flows smoothly, their objectness melts into the flow. [...] Only when the instrument fails to respond to the demands of the moment does the practitioner run hard up against it, in its brute facticity. [...] In this sense, humans alone are haunted by the spectre of the *loss* of meaning that occurs when action fails. It is not in their construction of meaningful worlds, then, that the singularity of human beings resides, but rather in their occasional glimpses of a world rendered meaningless by its dissociation from action. (Ingold 2011, 80)

State disputation of the origins of asylum seekers often takes place through a reference to language, belying a basic suspicion of multilinguals and promising potential deportation to those who are multilingual, as their stories of persecution are disputed on the grounds of the languages they speak, and when or where (Eades 2005, 503-526; Eades et al 2004, 520-526). To be multilingual is to be inherently untrustworthy, to be slippery in narrative, too complex to categorise for the monolingual decision-makers. Multilingual asylum seekers are those the State would far rather had stayed back in Africa or Afghanistan, grateful recipients of our charity and aid and development interventions.



As a non-speaker of my daughter's tongues I watched, a helpless professional linguist, as first her age was disputed, then her languages, her origins. Unmoored multilingualism does this to us as "expert linguists." It renders us mute, numb in the face of both the suffering and the possibility, the presence amongst us seen perhaps for the first time, of the fragile edifices of our scholarly endeavours.

There were court cases—campaigns, trying to demonstrate and prove through bizarre processes of recording fragments of language onto tape, and sending



them overseas to Belgium and Sweden—that she was indeed who she said she was. That she was innocent until proved guilty and not guilty until proved innocent. Much of the time she did not wish to speak of what had happened to her, to repeat the story endlessly for various bureaucratic agents.

And much of the time, in our pain and love for her, nor could we. And this I believe is because, as Elaine Scarry says, pain is language-destroying:

Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject. Word, self and voice are lost, or nearly lost...
(Scarry 1985, 35)

In her book the *Body in Pain*, Scarry speaks of the way, in our vulnerability, we become reliant on others to do our speaking for us, to take up our voices with “tack and immediacy” and to speak of what it is that they believe we are experiencing: to translate our pain back into speech. What I saw in our situation were generous others engaged in multilingual advocacy on our behalves.

Ours became an example of Simone Weil's *Infallible Cry*: “Why am I suffering?” (Weil 2005); a cry that is infallible because there is no human answer to it. There is the possibility of



confident use, such as that represented by Carson's exquisite destabilising of language as poetry, but as I am also discovering through aligning my life with the lives of refugees, there is also the situation of the linguistic disintegration. To speak is disallowed, the language paths are blocked, or peter out as the linguistic colonial highways suck up all the investments. Instead there is a mute, resistant, tentative, momentary, fragmentary emergence into speech.

To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*.
(Scarry 1985, 13)

Porosity

I have come to realise through this re-alignment of my changed life, that human beings are porous, much as Bateson describes, when he maintains that "the mental world--[...] is not limited by the skin" (Bateson 2000, 467). Virginia Woolf described herself as "a porous vessel afloat on a sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays." (Woolf 1985, 133) Now, because after five years we have managed to trace my daughter's family to the Sudan where they are living as refugees, I have met my daughter's youngest sister, who is teaching me her mother tongue: *Azi einei ayo; azi zni ayo, azi afuncha ayo....*she says, and runs away, laughing.

Afloat on sensation, a sensitive plate, I find tears are the only expression of the pain-in-joy that is the leaky experience of travelling to Sudan and meeting my daughter's mother, the mother of my daughter's tongues. This is a woman who can now believe that her daughter is not dead, but alive and living in an English mother tongue too, now, a language she does not speak any more than I speak *Blin* or *Tigrinya*. She puts her hands to my face, wipes my tears, wipes her own, mingles them together and returns them to my cheeks and hers. "[...] Mental life [...] is porous, open to the air and light" (Scarry 2001, 34), or in the words of a poet:

Never in my life
had I felt myself so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the flowers began.

from "White flowers" (Oliver 2004)

Far from being bounded entities our minds and bodies become sensitised, become porous, precisely at these places where we are at our nerve endings and wits ends. This is experience of porosity is, mythically, one ascribed to women.

In myth, woman's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concerns for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. (Carson 2000, 154)

And:

[Air] To love together with her, porous to a multiple familiarity. Is it a self-gathering more profound than the one which takes place in the silence of life and in the presence of so many guests? (Irigaray 2001, 114)

I shelter under their words here, Mary Oliver, Elaine Scarry, Anne Carson, Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolf and (still to give shade) Barbara Kingsolver, as they speak of what is still heavy on my tongue. It connects the mother tongues and



makes the normal rule of language law: monolingual here: multilingual there—of mother tongues firmly locatable and biological—cede to the rule of the daughter tongue and of language's porosity, as I experience others practising the principle stated earlier of *Manaaki kit e tangata* (share and host people, be generous).

And so it is with languages—opening out to all kinds of risk, vulnerability, new subjectivities, symbolic forms, crossing backwards and forwards between multilingualism from below to multilingualism from above, messing with it all. This is not so much a place where we are learning to be multilingual subjects as a sensory experience where we are unmoored enough to be enlanguaged:

We would be wrong to assume that sensory experience is embodied, or that through it people are tied to place. We may in practice be anchored to the ground, but it is not light, sound or feeling that holds us down. On the contrary, they contrive to sweep us off our feet. Light floods, sounds

drown out and feeling carries us away. Light, sound and feeling tear at our moorings, just like wind tears at the roots of trees rooted to the earth. [...] Thus, as it is immersed in the fluxes of the medium [for me, languages], the body is enlightened, ensounded and enraptured. (Ingold 2011, 134).



This move to sharing the world does indeed require us to be enlanguaged, opening us out to all kinds of different and even contradictory subjectivities, and symbolic forms. I am, at different times engermaned, enfrenched, enportuguesed even, but also now entigrinya-ed, even, slowly enarabiced; The senses awake, memories, tastes, the feel of hot Sudanese sunshine, or the saltiness of Gazan hope: *Insh'allah* they say as we part and

the bombs drop around us. Multilingual worlds are "striated," tough, resistant, changing, full of roots, at times friable, porous. To know them we must live in, with and through them, we must become habituated to their edges and surfaces.

Poisonwood

So where might I go, with my knowledge of pain and my porosity, from occupying multilingualism, from knowing multilingualism from below, to make sense of the decreation and unmooring of an ontological remaking of life. How might we live multilingually with integrity, and unmoored, what forms might give us more than a transitory glimpse into worlds as they pass by rather than as anchored? "A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel." (Sontag 2004, 110). This challenges language scholarship too, codified transcripts, corpus linguistics, machine translation, crowd sourcing, foreign language pedagogy, communicative competence—none seem to help with the unmoored conditions, and their human consequences are questions of multilingual ethics, which are raised and hang in the air mocking attempts to control them.



I propose we row back to the humanities and see how a literature responds to this challenge. In literature “an entity or idea unthinkable with existing frameworks of understanding and feeling come[s] into being as part of our understood and felt world” (Attridge 2004, 2-3). This is the “singularity” of literature, experienced as an event, and

enabling, through its play on the porous film of imagination such a changed quality of awareness as to allow alterity to meet, unmoor and merge into our beings. “All creative shapings of language make demands which can [...] be understood as ethical” (Attridge 2004, 130). By this Attridge points to the event of creative reading as inducing a sense of responsibility to the works unfolding temporally through the sensuous experience of reading, and re-reading. The imaginary events of literature prompt responsiveness to the other, which—like the encounter with a language that is wholly other—cannot come into existence unless, “affirmed, welcomed, trusted, nurtured” (125). Otherwise the events remain concealed as non-events, unexperienced, and the languages remain opaque, unloved and untried, and a little frightening.

The ethical act of languaging, of moving into this opacity to experience the otherness and make it familiar and care for its rhythm and pace, brings a sense of wonder and surprise at new possibilities.

“I have found a language even more cynical than my own: in kilanga the word *nzolo* is used in 3 different ways, at least,” says Adah Price, daughter of Nathan price, the zealous Baptist missionary from Georgia, working in the Congo and disintegrating before our eyes as his daughters make their own sense of their lives in Africa, through languages.

It means “most dearly beloved.” Or it is a thick yellow grub highly prized for fish bait. Or it is a type of tiny potato that turns up in the market now and then, always sold in bunches that clump along the roots like knots on a string. And so we sing at the top of our lungs in church: ‘Tata Nzolo!’ To whom are we calling? I think it must be the god of small potatoes. That other Dearly Beloved who resides in north Georgia does not seem to

be paying much attention to the babies here in Kilanga. They are all dying. Dying from Kakakakaka, the disease that turns the body to a small black pitcher, pitches it over, and pours out all its liquid insides. (Kingsolver 1998, 172)



The Poisonwood Bible is an event which unmoors at one and the same time as a postcolonial novel of unmoorings, with languages at its heart. The fixed language of the controlling, ideological father; the fluid, porous, resistant, angry, pained enlanguaging of his four daughters, the mute, resistant weariness in speech of the over-languaged mother. It is full of

literary inventiveness with the languages in play. This inventiveness is an experience of finding new ways to understand and live through the world. This is experienced by the reader who has to read back and fro, under and over, through plosive and vowel and all the patterns that unmoor, toss and then anchor the reader in a new place, to see the world differently, now.

Walk to learn. I and path. Long one is Congo. Congo is one long path and I learn to walk. Manene I the word for path: manaene enenam, amen. (Kingsolver 1998, 154)

The novel also uses the metaphor of the poisonwood tree, a tree which produces some beautiful wood used for decorative carvings, wood turning and furniture, but which also has a highly irritating sap which, when it gets on your skin, begins with a redness, an itchy sensation and then burning blisters: pain and porosity.

The tree leaks and sticks to the skin, which leaks in turn and makes us vulnerable and endangered. For me this is a metaphor for the enlanguaged condition:



Tata Jesus is BÄNGALA! Declares the Reverend every Sunday at the end of his sermon. More and more, mistrusting his interpreters, he tries to speak in Kikongo. He throws back his head and speaks these words to the sky, whilst his lambs sit scratching themselves in wonder. Bangala means something precious and dear. But the way he pronounces it, it means the poisonwood tree. Praise the lord, hallelujah, my friends! For Jesus will make you itch like nobody's business. (Kingsolver 1998, 276)

Conclusions

Literature as a moving performance or event; multilingualism from below, involve us in the linguistic activity of changed perception, of newly elaborated subjectivities. It is here that new currents of multilingualism can emerge and be felt through the temporalities and experiences of unmooring.

The forms humans build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the currents of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings. (Ingold 2011, 10) Meanings are produced, rather than being based on equivalences. This involves working with the materials of languages rather than working on them, through which changed subjectivities occur. Crossing the membrane, between language-work and being enlanguaged is an absorbing activity. It is the known and lived way of the majority of the world's speakers. Through it I find myself shifting my own conceptualisation of multilingualism from the forms, formats, templates,



transcripts, pedagogies, grand politics—away from a fixation with objects and images, and towards a better appreciation of the material flows and currents of sensory awareness [- the pain, porosity and the itch of poisonwood -] within which both ideas and things reciprocally take shape. (Ingold 2011, 10)

It struck me [says Leah Price] what a wide world of difference there was between our sort of games “Mother May I,” “Hide and seek”—and his “Find Food,” “Recognize Poisonwood,” “Build a House.” And here was a boy no older than eight or nine. He had a younger sister who carried the family’s baby everywhere she went and hacked weeds with her mother in the manioc field. I could see that the whole idea and business of childhood was nothing guaranteed. It seemed to me, in fact, like something more or less invented by white people and stuck onto the front end of grown-up life like a frill on a dress. For the first time ever I felt a stirring of anger against my father for making me a white preacher’s child from Georgia. This wasn’t my fault. (Kingsolver 1998, 114)



Absorption, involvement in life and its activities, takes time. In situations of unmooring, for the danger to pass, for the vulnerability to feel less acute, there is a need to slow things down, to be less competent, less professional, to practice new patterns of speech or words, to make the unfamiliar familiar, to be enlanguaged, and to care. “Space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in the modern society, whose chief model of a public space is the mega-store (which may also be an airport or a museum)” (Sontag 2004, 107).

The argument I am making here is quite simple; something different is required, occurring on a different plane. I am arguing for an engaged and deliberate unmooring of our given languages and given methodologies and given ways of ordering which are bound up with the privileges of multilingualism from above and its attendant colonial traumas and wounds.

So, I have set out, as a linguist and anthropologist and poet and perhaps also as a rather incurable hopper for the best, in the search for new moorings, which requires living within multilingual occupations, in both senses of this phrase. Such time and imaginative space is given however, through the temporalities of the event of reading, of participation in life events, which a renewed ethnography in a contrite, postcolonial anthropology can offer. A new berth; lowered anchors.



Such a radical multilingualism involves pain but also pleasure, shaped and changed by languages from unexpected places. It requires the kinds of anger which is present in the Occupy movement, together with hard graft. Graft, too, suggesting in its multiple meanings that life does not end at the skin, but is porous, renewable at its wounds and nerve ends. It also requires

space and time to be able to make sense of and move from the traumatic experience of disintegrated language and decreation to a place where I can occupy and be occupied anew by multilingualism. Which is why painful, porous multilingualism is studied in so many different contexts as it breaks out – like a flower in bloom, or like a poisonwood rash. It is why I find myself asking now,

again, not as a question of pragmatics, though it is this too, but as a question of justice: what is the multilingual life we should live?



This may indeed mean the struggle to maintain the traditions of translation and study, the universities and cultural institutes of modernity and of the humanities, but it also needs the domestic spaces where parenting takes new shapes and forms and

where we are first enlanguaged. It needs a lived, involved understanding of multilingualism from below. And why, finally, it will always need the space of poetry; where we do something tender, something precious, something kind with our many words.

Violets

In a different tongue
the educator renders your
velvet zygomorphic,
times
actinomorphic
times
cleistogamous.

He differentiates your perianth
into five imbricated sepals.
The lower most which
is commonly
spurred.

And there are
nectariferous appendages
that project backward into the spur
of the petal

[...] that one
yes....

the one that is
lowermost.

There.

Oh spare me the
lecture and show me
where they grow when
the april's in her eye.

"Most violet seeds
need a cooling
period to trigger
growth" he says.

I need not draw
the analogy. I don't
believe in the growth
trigger.

They grow well
if you grind the bones
of dead words to dust
and sprinkle the earth
with their morbid power.

This is not a metaphor.
Culture comes
from cutting back,
rotting matter, from
matted matter.

Culture comes from raking
over the living

with the dead.

Lay her in the earth,
And from her fair and
unpolluted flesh
May violets spring.
There, look,
a clump, under the oak,
against the fading winter of
the
grassy bank.
Purpling into the darks
of blue, paling as
soft as apricot.
Like Patience
on a monument.
Smiling
at grief.

(Phipps 2009)

Editor's Note: A link to the talk upon which this essay is based, from April 14, 2012, is available [here](#).

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