LIMBA MATERNĂ: A CREATIVE INQUIRY INTO MOTHER LANGUAGE SHIFT AND LOSS

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ABSTRACT

This creative arts-based inquiry explores an individual case of Mother Language shift and loss through poems and paintings. Language shift is often defined in the Canadian context as the process whereby “individuals abandon their native language as the principal language spoken at home and adopt another” (Sabourin & Bélanger, 2015, p. 727). But is abandon the right verb? And what about adopt? A abandona înseamnă că ai avut o alegere de făcut. A adopta also means you had a choice and you consciously made it. What if your limba maternă hid in your body, s-a ascuns, out of fear? And what if it still lives inside of you at the cellular level, in your body’s home, adânc, așteptând momentul potrivit to resurface? These poems and paintings explore the feelings of home as mother tongue, and the effects on identity of gradually losing a first language.

KEYWORDS

poetry, mother tongue, language loss, language shift, arts-based inquiry

A NOTE ON LANGUAGES

My poems and captions weave together different languages. I code-switch frequently, but do not provide translations or a glossary in an Anzaldúan attempt to “keep my tongue wild” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 40), and to “unsettle” and question the deeply entrenched (yet largely unacknowledged) Anglocentrism in academia and publishing worlds that often erases or suppresses multilingual voices. Linguistically diverse authors who think, write, and work in non-official languages must often accommodate for mono- or bilingual spaces of publication. In this inquiry, I invite you to embrace the ambiguity and discomfort that often accompanies being a language learner.

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I should have begun by saying that I lost my mother tongue.

I know what you are thinking. How can you lose something that lives inside of you, unless you chose to live languageless?

Forgive me, loss never occurs on purpose. Think of the way you lose a loved one, or a faith.

I did not deem Romanian inconvenient, crumple it up by a trash bin, hoping someone will stumble by, find it useful.

Nor did I sweat it away in the labour of learning another language.

S-a ascuns. It disappeared inside corpul meu, my body’s weight and I know it’s still there.

Memoria mea, burnt sienna, a clot of regret, limba maternă.

Its letters still line my throat, its old curses live in my fingertips.
SEVEN SELF PORTRAITS

I
Clenched jaw like an old cathedral.
Slant light. Stacks of books
on your side of the bed.

II
Suitcase. Scrawled poems
in a language care nu înțelegi.

III
Cupped hands. Under the walnut tree
la Biserica pe Mierlari. Frowning.
Ai uitat cum să zici nuc.

IV
Cu ligheanul albastru
Cu gastele. în Jilava cea de toate zilele.

Is it even a self-portrait
if I can’t say this
în limba română?

V
Is it even a poem
if I don’t say Jilava?

Three wet syllables.
Self-portrait as my village
in eternal grief.

VI
O lalea. Slabă și subțire.
Ca o amintire.

Will you look that up?

VII
Mother tongue sprouting from throat.
O zmeură coaptă. Pe o foaie de viță.

Put yourself in this painting.

Painting by Adriana Onita,
Găște/Geese*[watercolour on paper], 2018
APARTMENT

Losing your mother tongue is like misplacing your keys in fiecare zi of your life yet you still allow yourself to leave with your home unlocked

and go about your business from desk to dusk only to return to your apartment to find one object missing every day.

Azi, it’s the ceramic cup from Horezu Ieri, it was the green rug from Sinaia Mâine, it will be the hand-painted icon or crocheted ilic de la Mamaie.

One by one, your apartment is emptied. Și tu te dezbraci de cuvinte, de amintiri.

Years later, you return to your homeland and replace each object.

Dar nu e la fel.

The cup, de la Piața Progresul, is violet. The rug is smaller, its pattern different. The icon is not hand-painted. Ilicul cumpărat de la magazin.

But you think: it’s better than nothing. Măcar am găsit o cheie nouă.
WHAT DO WE LOSE WHEN WE LOSE A LANGUAGE?

pe scurt: entire ways of being
and knowing and feeling
ways to pray, ways to curse
ways to cure, praise, grieve
scold, love, remember

people think it’s just words
vocabulariu și gramatică
sintaxis y morfologia

they say languages live  limbie dispar
survival of the fittest  una competencia

dar o limbă trăiește, zâmbește, gândește
È una cosa viva, that lives and blooms

we must protect a language
come se fosse una foresta

a botanical belonging
AUTHOR BIO

Adriana Oniță lives at the intersection between poetry, art, and languages. Născută în București but currently living in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, AB), she writes poetry in Romanian, English, Spanish, French, and Italian. Her chapbook, Conjugated Light, was published by Glass Buffalo (March, 2019) and she is the 2019 winner of the Canadian Literature Centre poetry contest. She is the founding editor of The Polyglot, a magazine that has published over 100 multilingual poets and artists in Canada (www.thepolyglotmagazine.com), and one of the organizers of the Edmonton Poetry Festival. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Second Language Education at the University of Alberta, where she also teaches.

REFERENCES