

Literacy Narrative: language as fluent must be free

written by Guest Contributor | June 10, 2021



My grandmother who, according to everyone in the family didn't understand nor speak English, would gingerly announce, "Olga is bad, very bad."

Years prior, when grandmother visited us in the United States, then, before her acquisition of adjectives towards me, she didn't have the necessary dictum, nor the ear to hear English as distinct, recognizable pieces of a whole. This, naturally, did not stop her from participating in her surroundings. I accompanied, or maybe chaperoned her to *Ross Dress For Less*, as she spent countless hours and well-earned dollars. At the checkout grandmother spewed out in Russian to the cashier. I was nine, glowing with wicked shame from this transgression. Unlike Ocean Vuong who promised himself to never be wordless when his mother needed him to speak, I promised myself to stay silent, to erase traces of otherness resembled in accents and gales of breath from the East of Europe. Grandmother wasn't wrong, I was bad. Am.

Tugging the sleeve of her sweater, scornfully I whispered, *the cashier doesn't understand a thing*. Grandmother, with a sway of her hand and a flippant intonation told me that the woman working behind the checkout lane, in fact, did understand everything without any issues. Looking at the clerk I had a sense grandmother wasn't a fool, and the woman did, indeed, understand. Or, in any case, *feel* whatever was regarded as language not incumbent on words within that moment.

Grandmother did not have a command of language, blundering her way through an interaction with a prewritten code she didn't follow.

What does it mean to have a command of a language, what does it imply? A command is only an utterance of force. To have a command of language, to force into complicity, into order of one's desires, adjuring the subject receiving the language into a state of alliance with the speaker. There is almost a lack of consent when speaking. Unless the consent is implicit, kind of like trust is within a public contract upon existing into the world from the confines of walls and borders of our privacy. Bodies following a similar trajectory as to not upset life's seamless progression, as though time is linear and so is language.

Barthes writes that language is inherently assertive.

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I am languageless. Without language. English feels lost and distant, as if I am always interrogating it, trying to penetrate form impervious to my feeble attempts at understanding. It is as though English becomes ephemeral; unfit for grasping, eternally fleeting, always in motion. Slipping through my fingers. Russian, on the other hand, is something lost, or dormant, deep within me. Only reachable in dreams, a thickness lurid, but uninhabitable. I live between these two languages. A liminal state. Crushed between them, or slowly and dutifully trying not to be crushed, between a rock and a mountain, when earthly delights shatter, compress. I wonder what would happen if I allowed for the languages to collapse atop one another, to meet me in the middle, to extinguish me into eternity, intermingling. But would the pressure create chaos, sending both languages into smithereens?

I have been told I am a carrier of language. Lightly and swiftly crossing borders. Undetected. An illegal transfer. I have assimilated into this territory, stolen and resigned. Walk through a door, no double takes. I don't resemble the old country. A trace of accentuation is my lifting the corner of my upper lip at certain intervals of pronunciation. This secret code is carried in a Russian deli in Vancouver, WA. Off some strip mall off I-5. I saw the upper lift, like a muscle twitch, from the cashier lacking an accent in her English.

To be a carrier is to be infectious.

A Russian's syntax disordering precept.

A carrier as fluency: fluency to be attained with enough study and exposition. *Are you fluent?* I am asked. Based on the time spent in a foreign country, or country of origin, *You are fluent*, they say. *Fluer* in Latin is to flow. Fluency derives from flow. Flow, as a verb for electricity, gas, liquid, to move steadily and continuously in a current or a stream, forging its own route. Flow descends from Germanic *flowan*, synonymous with flood. No, I am not fluid, I am not flow, I am not flood. I am not fluent. Neither am I contained. Language within me sparks fury. It stops at dead ends, it pauses at intersections. This language, it ebbs and flows with the Moon's movement past Mercury, God of thieves and communication. No, I am not fluent. I ask myself what silence means, I ask myself what syntax out of bounds of English disrupts in the common speaker. I don't ask. I hold off for the next possibility. The next time I open my mouth – three disparate, kinshipped languages fly out – like Russian fairy tales passed down orally, like the primordial communication through the earth. Then, I will ask myself: how I am fluent, in flow, when I am crushed between monoliths, with Spanish hovering above like an *angelito* ready to descend at any moment when all falters.

Maybe I am a fluke.

In Russian, *translation* is *perevod*. As in to re-conduct, as in a flow, as in water. To re-conduct into a divergent direction other than its intended place, its intended path.

Language as fluent must be free.

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To understand in Spanish is *comprender*, derivative of Latin's *comprehendere*, meaning to seize, formed from the roots, *con* (with) and *prendere* (to take). With taking. To take alongside, to take with. In French *comprendre* is to contain or grasp intellectually.

Grasp. To take; a basis for understanding. To understand is to swallow for oneself, to steal, to pillage with no permission, except for a common code prewritten, induced through a customary grace. Eduard Glissant asks for opacity, for the freedom to not be understood, nor illuminated, creating space for relation, the underlying connection humans possess, the unsaid in a form of a profound vessel of an intuitive past.

In the store with my grandmother I stood silent out of shame. My grandmother might as well have been silent with Russian as her gag. Yet, the cashier didn't ask to understand, she related in context, communicated in relation to another human being with words emergent as breaths.

The flow: language is not a possession, a transcendence of another real(m). This, for poets such as myself, regards a certain inspiration, a possession of *me*, bewitched into a trance. I am laughable at times, not able to confront minimum of words ascribed to the poet. Language eludes me, crumbled between loss and unattainability. The third entity wavers in the background, hankering for hope. Language must come from the heart, otherwise becoming brutal and frivolous. Our throats are the meeting point of heart and brain. Water and air meet, emotions church'd by thought, an alchemical instruction. Like place, we can't own language. We can't even understand it, for understanding bleeds into knowing. We must not know. We must relate, assigning ourselves into a fidelity to perplexion. How arrogant to think that fluency can be obtained, as if a final frontier. We attempt to separate all into fragments, containing and separating logistics, an ellipsis of spirit into materiality. Maybe that's the intention of language, to leave no fragments behind, but rather lead us into the passage of the unknown, to the point of reflection, as an immigrant does in a hall of mirrors, reflected back what is left unsaid, muttered.

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“what is homeland?”

To hold on to your memory – that is homeland.”

Mahmoud Darwish

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In the airport, when asked what all she was carrying aboard and into the U.S., grandmother said she was carrying drugs. An attribute of power in this situation, a characteristic of understanding was utilized, lacking any attempts to relate. A container put over the discourse. Barthes writes of duplicity in language, of words. Barthes describes this occurrence as amphibologies. Context defines the usage of the amphibological word. My grandmother, no doubt, endeavored to say what is most official: drugs=drugstore, doctor's orders. The agents at customs, at homeland protections, probably found the context to be baffling, yet used this lack of common language to check her bags, ask to pat down, look at lids, ingredients of *drugs*, to assert power, boundaries. Barthes calls these words “'preciously ambiguous'...because, by a kind of luck, a kind of favor not of language but discourse, I can *actualize* their amphibology, can say 'intelligence' and appear to be referring chiefly to the intellectual meaning, but letting the meaning of 'complicity' be *understood*.” I believe Barthes means exactly what he means using the word is *understand*; however, in my Glissantian terminology, this is a point of relation, an implicit governance of feeling. A new amphibology.

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Natalie Diaz, in conversation with Nathalie Hadal, professes, “The process of naming has always been an assertion of the Empire of the English language, and all empires.”

Erased by the names given to me, where it is easier to pronounce assimilated than wrongfully. Then, an attempt at a crossover. Becoming something unnatural, an appendage to the first. To be named, according to Hegel, is to

be in communion with the world, with other humans. Our humanity is available in relation to other humanity. To be named is to be seen, to partake. To name a thing is to transform it into a subject, to allow it to become a part of us, to allow it to become a part of the world. The subject partakes in a world allowed to them only when assimilated. I don't believe one willfully loses themselves. A tiny loss, like a chip off a shoulder, recruits a wounded body, encasing it within borders. A memory is language. Language, a memory of a world past, a world combined with the next worldliness. How cleverly I register obedience in assimilated states of being. Communication becomes memory, I bemoan what I know, anodyne servilities. I wish to be named, and with my name a pronunciation; one which springs as a clear day through an open window fluttering with a white curtain— *Olechaka, Olya -Olga* is only when spoken of professionally, addressed in a formality. My sobriquets erased through understanding. This formalist association was made as to not be misshapen, blundered. What if blunder is ok? What if to blunder is to return, to begin repair? My names, which have become aleatory defamations, allow others to never blunder, to never make mistakes, constricting the named into a bordered state of being. (*Bored*)ered. *To make a hole in something, to drill, pierce, penetrate.* A double sided penetration; my foreignness bearing into purity. In turn, I am pierced, wounded into newness with the tongue unable to pronounce, refusing. In a subterfuge fashion (fallibility, finality) my name is changed, and you, your foreignness unbroken. "This sense of linguistic and cultural superiority is arrogant. Languages are ruins. Purity is a myth," answers Nathalie Handal in the same conversation.

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Natalie Diaz does not trust empathy, definition of which is, to understand or share the feelings of another. Hunters study the other in order empathize with their prey, to become their prey, to easier hunt it down. Insistence on language obscures relatability in a new country. Its basis: pronunciation of language forced upon the new speaker in order to understand, for the sake of dominance of self through words, syntax, credence of such pronouncements. My grandmother, in her insistence upon Russian deliberation with the cashier, refused to become prey, putting herself on equal grounds. All was perfectly relayed. A transaction occurred, but not one of the self. A translation unneeded.

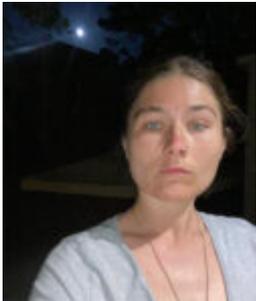
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Lineage is no possession. Lineage is language, our homeland. It is communication from within, from our core, from the heart. In French *coeur* translates to heart. Handal writes, "languages is destruction and divinity." What we utter we place into a frame.

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Sometimes I believe our most important feelings and thoughts are expressed in sentences of five words or less. Simple. Exact. Straight to the puncture.

Other times I tell myself I have gotten lazy with language; absoluting themes and subjects (themas). Not using the full capacity within myself, elongating situations into follies, incantations memorially inept. Maybe I have gotten lazy with language, but maybe I have only reduced a formality, built atop ruins. Built atop what has been reduced. Retracted. Fractaled out of fluency. Uncontained. Bad.



Olga Mikolaivna works within the mediums of photography, text, and installation. She is interested in memory, mysticism, inheritance, (dis)place, power and capitalism, and the construction of language. She is currently a graduate student at Rutgers Camden and lives in Philadelphia with an inherited porch cat. Her work can be found in *New Delta Review*, *Kaleidascope Mag*, *Desuetude Press*, and elsewhere.

If writing defies “common sense,” if it seems to go against traditional modes of thought, norms, and histories, the idea of that common sense no longer makes sense, or might make sense if we’re allowed to reinvent ourselves. That’s what I’m looking at with the literacy narrative. I want to hear yours: when you first “clicked” with a language, whatever it is; why you questioned the modes of your Englishes; how you wrote “poetry,” but looked at it again and called it “lyric essay.” I want to see your literacy narrative in its scholarly, creative, and hybrid forms. Send your literacy narratives to Sylvia Chan at sylvia@entropymag.org. Stay tuned for more [literacy narratives](#) from yours truly and others.