Viajes y escrituras: migraciones y cartografías de la violencia

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ISSN : 2605-8723
ISBN : en cours

Índice

Preface 7
Nicoletta Pesaro

De abismos y fronteras 13
Alice Favaro

Migration to the United States and Challenges of Diversity 19
Werner Sollors

Violenza simbolica e immigrazione nel discorso pubblico e nel paesaggio urbano 33
Nicola Montagna

Donne, violenza e diritto internazionale delle migrazioni 51
Sara De Vido

Accettare la violenza per integrarsi: dilemmi dell'immigrazione in Italia 73
Luis Fernando Beneduzi

"Cosa succede ai corpi quando la storia li investe?" Alcuni esempi nella letteratura italiana contemporanea sulle migrazioni 91
Silvia Camilotti

The Death of the Mother Tongue: the Inadequacy of Language and Body Representation in Chinese-American Writer Yiyun Li 107
Nicoletta Pesaro

Escaping Bodies on the Dark Roads of China: Space and Displacement in Ma Jian's *Yin zhi dao* 125
Martina Codeluppi

Fragile and Powerful: Chinese Migrant Women, Body and Violence in Sheng Keyi's *Bei mei* 145
Federico Picerni

Ficción como refugio de la realidad violenta - *Aquella noche la vi* de Drago Jančar 165
Branka Kalenić Ramšak

"Es dulce el amor de la patria": la escritura del viaje y la identidad nacional en el lance de Ricote (*Quijote*, II, 54, 63 y 65) 181
Adrián J. Sáez

Las "tecunas" en *Hombres de maíz* 195
Dante José Liano

Metáforas del poder: censura y violencia en *Ganarse la muerte* de Griselda Gambaro 209
Adriana Mancini

Migración de los símbolos y de los imaginarios: el viaje detrás de una quimera en la trilogía de William Ospina 219
Diana Paola Pulido Gómez

Cartografía de la violencia. Algunos cuentos de Princesa Aquino Augsten 231
Ana Cecilia Prenz Kopušar

Ulises en París: la vida ante Santiago Gamboa 247
Francisco de Borja Gómez Iglesias

Migrantes, desplazados, fantasmas: la circulación de los cuerpos en Samanta Schweblin 261
Gabriele Bizzarri

De breves resonancias 273
Eduardo Ramos-Izquierdo

Bibliografía 275

The Death of the Mother Tongue: the Inadequacy of Language and Body Representation in Chinese-American Writer Yiyun Li

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Résumé : L'article aborde la violence exercée sur l'individu à travers l'expérience de la migration et inclut un type de violence auto-infligée, due à des causes externes ou à un besoin tragique. En prenant les études les plus récentes sur le lien entre traduction et migration, j'analyse le travail de l'auteure sino-américaine Yiyun Li comme un exemple d'auto-déterritorialisation.
Mots-clés : migration, langue maternelle, corps littéraires

Resumen: El artículo reflexiona sobre la violencia ejercida sobre el individuo a través de la experiencia de la migración y comprende un tipo de violencia autoinfligida, debido a causas externas o a una trágica necesidad. Tomando los estudios más recientes sobre la conexión entre traducción y migración, analizo la obra de la autora chino-americana Yiyun Li como ejemplo de auto-deterritorialización.
Palabras clave: migración, lengua materna, cuerpos literarios

Abstract: This article reflects on violence exerted upon the individual during the migration experience. It deals with a sort of self-violence that occurs due to external causes or to tragic necessity. Using recent studies on the connection between translation and migration, this study analyses the work of Chinese-American writer Yiyn Li as an example of self-uprooting.
Keywords: Migration, native tongue, literary bodies

> *If you can be articulate about your thoughts, why can't you articulate your feelings? asked the doctor. It took me a year to figure out the answer. It is hard to feel in an adopted language, yet it is impossible to do that in my native language.*
> (Li, *Dear Friend* 151)

"Translated beings": a "crisis of alterity"

The history of human migration shows that people can be both "agents" and "objects of translation". The British Indian writer Salman Rushdie coined the expression "translated men" to describe the process of physical and psychological dislocation undergone by migrants:

> The word "translation" comes, etymologically, from the Latin for "bearing across." Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (*Imaginary Homelands* 16)

In his article Rushdie meditates upon important identity issues connected with writers (such as himself) whose culture and language imply multiple, composite or shifting identities, rejecting any essentialistic and nationalistic interpretation. He describes what it is like to be a 'translated man'. This means that human acts and behaviours, as much as texts, can also be translated. Literature as a form of cultural production is bound to be a useful tool for expressing and analysing migrants' multiple, shifting or fragmented identities. Indeed, we can draw upon a vast repertoire of diasporic literature and experiences in order to assess the role which translation (or the rejection of translation) plays in creating, disrupting, and changing identity. A lexicon of violence and trauma is typical of the relevant literature: "Translation is the traumatic loss of native language" (Apter, *Against World Literature* xi). Some scholars suggest a third space, hybridity and in-

betweeness (Bhabha), as a fruitful means of restoring a 'local' self in a global context (Abdullah, "Paradoxes of the 'Glocal' Self").

By analysing this 'third space' that always emerges in migrant literature, we can observe that the 'translation of the self' by a writer can represent both the positive, cognitive side of translation and its resilient, obscure, and even violent side. While the Latin word 'trans-ducere', as explained by Rushdie, means to 'take across', 'to move from one place to another', the Greek verb for 'translating' μεταφράζω (*metafrazo*) means 'to show, to point at', emphasising the cognitive role played by translation as argued by Georges Steiner: "Translation is, and always will be, the mode of thought and understanding" (*Aprѐs Babel* 264). On the contrary, Spivak – as a feminist and post-colonial scholar – sees a violent element in this, a forced shift of meanings, which is comparable to the forced movement of human beings in migration. Another Greek word close to the meaning of translation, μεταφέρω (*metafero*), 'to transform', literally meaning 'to transfer,' is clearly the root of the word 'metaphor': to translate could be therefore understood as a way to replace words and concepts by means of others, thereby transforming both, so that the first term (suppressed by the metaphorical act) is reduced to the second one (the one that survives in the metaphor). Cronin has elaborated on Rushdie's concept as follows:

> The condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a source language and culture to a target language and culture so that translation takes place both in the physical sense of movement or displacement and in the symbolic sense of the shift from one way of speaking, writing about and interpreting the world to another. (*Translation and Identity* 45)

The 'destructive' effect of this spatial and linguistic/cultural shift goes hand in hand with the sense of 'gain' underlined by Rushdie: translation as both a spatial and linguistic shift produces

at the same time losses and gains in the translated being. The gain aspect has been described by Budick[1], Bandia ("Translocation: Translation, Migration") and Polezzi ("Translation and Migration") as a form of double identity or double perspective embedded in the migrant (writer). This 'crisis of alterity' (as Budick calls it) endows the 'translated being' with a kind of augmented albeit fragmented vision, as he/she is "an insider and an outsider in both worlds" (Bandia, "Translocation: Translation, Migration" 276)[2]. Seeing things 'from new angles', though, can also imply that a complicated subject-object relation takes place which even carries political implications, "because it goes to the heart of the relationship between individuals, groups and the power exercised over our lives" (Polezzi, "Translation and Migration" 346). However, in some cases, such as the one I am presenting in this paper, the double perspective – according to which the migrant writer is simultaneously part of two cultures – is not accomplished, as though one of the two perspectives, after the sometimes painful process of negotiation, were ultimately missing, defective or even ignored.

Migrants' translational strategies

Being agents or objects of "translation", migrants of course display different strategies in order to accommodate themselves into the host language/culture and society. According to Cronin

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[1] Budick believes that: "Whenever we attempt to translate we are pitched in a crisis of alterity" ("Introduction" 22).

[2] "At a deeper level, translation can account for how immigrants form new identities in the public sphere as well as in the private or domestic sphere, as they seek to cope with the pressures of occupying a foreign space and dealing with the gaze of the host society. Immigrants have a unique 'double vision,' owing to their ability to communicate experiences from disparate worlds, from the position of being simultaneously an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in both worlds. This 'double vision' also speaks to the plurality and instability of origin, as well as to the partial sense of belonging. Their experience as migrants allows them the flexibility to shift perspectives freely, and to see the world from new angles" (Bandia, "Translocation: Translation, Migration" 275-6).

there are essentially two kinds of strategies in migrants' reaction to the new linguistic and cultural context:

> • translational assimilation: [when immigrants] seek to translate themselves into the dominant language of the community […];
> • translational accommodation: [when] translation is used [by migrants] as a means of maintaining their languages of origin though this does not rule out limited or indeed extensive acquisition of the host-country language (Cronin, *Translation and Identity* 52)

Polezzi analyses some ethical implications involving both the language and the person of the migrant:

> If we take into account people rather than, or at least as well as, texts, then the implications of 'translating' them necessarily foreground ethical questions: there is, after all, a crucial difference between 'manipulating', 'domesticating' or even 'betraying' a literary work and doing the same with a human being. ("Translation and Migration" 347)

Bandia ("Translocation: Translation, Migration"), in turn, questions the actual 'power' conferred by translation to migrant writers (or 'dominated' writers, insofar as they belong to a 'minority language') in order to avoid complete assimilation. As Polezzi shows, migrants can even adopt micro-strategies aimed at untranslatability as a form of self-defence or a means to build a new identity:

> [...] migrant writers can also adopt strategies which play on the inclusion and exclusion of specific sectors of both national and transnational audiences. [...] micro-strategies such as mistranslation, partial translation or even non-translation can constitute active ways of engaging in

> complex games with existing and potential readers. (Polezzi, "Translation and Migration" 352)

Beyond assimilation and accommodation, in some of these writers we also find forms of 'resistance' or a 'refusal' to be translated or to self-translate themselves, as an effort to either preserve their original culture (first category) or, on the contrary, to completely deny it (second category).

My study-case is the Chinese-American female writer Li Yiyun 李翊云 (b. 1973), whom I will be referring to as Yiyun Li, by placing her first name before the surname, according to the Western custom, and as she herself has chosen to do since emigrating to the US in 1996. Her choice in terms of language and identity practices belongs to the latter category. After arriving in the US as a student of medicine to pursue her studies, Yiyun Li eventually chose to become a writer, participating in the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop. Since then, she has "turned away from"[3] her roots by adopting English as her only writing language from the beginning, even preventing her works from being translated into Chinese. For this reason I would define her choice as a sort of 'language deterritorialisation', which denies both time and space as a rejection of her own past and homeland. According to the Oxford Dictionary, deterritorialisation is "the severance of social, political, or cultural practices from their native places and populations", and this is exactly what Li's literary and linguistic practice of rejecting her mother tongue as a migrant writer means.

Although Li's migration to the USA is not a political exile, from her literary works, the many interviews she released and her recent autobiographical essay, *Dear Friend from My life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017), we can clearly deduce her negative evaluation of Chinese cultural traditions and of the Chinese social context: this radical criticism of her country is reflected in her

[3] The writer herself uses this expression in her latest book (Li, *Dear Friend* 50).

choice of English – her acquired language – as her exclusive creative instrument. We can reasonably infer that Li could be included in the category of migrant writers who adopt the direct use of the host language, fully denying her own mother tongue, more for personal than political reasons. In her case, assimilation in the host culture/language is a deliberate strategy. The main reason for such a radical choice is the search for freedom, not political freedom – as it is the case with many Chinese writers of the diaspora (such as Ma Jian and Gao Xingjian) – but rather personal freedom, a desire for a completely different linguistic intimacy. "If you grew up in a language that you never used to express your feelings, it would be easier to take up another language and talk more in the new language. It makes you a new person" (Li, "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" 199), says a character of one of her short stories. And, in an interview in 2006, the writer herself confesses: "I can't write in Chinese at all. I think it's more like self-censoring, than other people censoring me. I don't know - I just feel so much more comfortable writing in English. I think I need a distance with language just to write" (Edemariam, "Found in Translation").
As Polezzi points out,

> [t]he choice of a language other than one's mother tongue also brings with it an additional degree of, if not an insistent requirement for, creative freedom: being oneself in the language of the other can be the ultimate act of self-fashioning. (Polezzi, "Translation and Migration" 351)

On several occasions Yiyun Li has underlined her uncertainty and difficulty in accommodating herself within a specific national identity as a writer:

> […] I don't feel like I can call myself an American writer. I mean, I'm American-trained, I would say. Definitely, I'm not a Chinese writer. One thing, I don't live in China, and second, I don't write in Chinese. I would love to be called

> an international writer, because that's the only thing I can fit myself in. I feel like my writing is very removed from your everyday American life, the life I have not lived in this country. On the other hand, really anybody could be an American writer. So if I write about America, I think I could [whispers] pass as an American writer. (Watrous, "Talking with the Dead")

Several years after she released this interview, having survived two suicide attempts, which obliged her to spend a long period of psychological rehabilitation in hospital, Li returned to this issue: "my abandonment of my first language is personal, so deeply personal that I resist any interpretation—political or historical or ethnographical" (Li, *Dear Friend* 141).

In her latest book, where she explores the reasons behind her literary creativeness, Li often uses terms such as 'abandonment', 'betrayal', 'orphan', and 'linguistic suicide'. Language, in particular the author's mother tongue, is tightly associated with memories:

> When one thinks in an adopted language, one arranges and rearranges words that are neutral, indifferent even, to arrive at a thought that one does not know to be there. When one remembers in an adopted language, there is a dividing line in that remembrance. What came before could be someone else's life; it might as well be fiction. Sometimes I think it is this distancing that marks me as coldhearted and selfish. To forget the past is a betrayal, we were taught in school when young; to disown memories is a sin. (Li, *Dear Friend* 150)

Although her early works – the collection of stories *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005) and the novel *The Vagrants* (2009) – are almost entirely set in China and delve deeply into Chinese culture and society, when it comes to language, Yiyun Li's choice constitutes a sort of linguistic de-territorialisation, which also becomes a question of identity.

> The paths I walked by myself in Beijing are gone. Even if the city had remained unchanged, I have turned away from the people and the language and the landscape. Homecoming, in my case, would only be meaningful followed by leave-taking. A permanent homecoming would be a resignation. To be among people—does that require one to be at home with others, to be at peace with oneself? But an agitated mind does not know any road to peace except the one away from home, which time and again exposes one to that lifelong phobia of attachment, just as to write betrays one's instinct to curl up and hide. (Li, *Dear Friend* 50)

The inadequacy of language: a problem of the "I" and of linguistic motherhood

This sense of solitude within her own language and her deep spiritual restlessness, which push Li to erase her own linguistic identity for the reasons revealed in the above-mentioned interview, are at the root of her double suicide attempt. Indeed, the 'crisis of alterity' which she underwent in the midst of a successful career as a writer and a satisfactorily integrated existence in the US as a mother and wife, is actually a crisis in her relationship with her personal identity. In the autobiographical essay she wrote in 2017, after the traumatic experience, Li confesses thet her troubled relation with her own mother tongue is connected to a troubled relation with her past. In the famous sentence by Derrida (*Le monolinguisme* 13), "Je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne" [I have only one language, it's not my own], we probably find a truthful statement which applies to Li herself, albeit for opposite reasons: she is escaping from her own mother tongue, while Derrida must accept the "colonising" French as his mother tongue; Li also adopts the 'monolingualism of the other', and this choice is as problematic for her as it is for Derrida. Li's tragic *othering* of her own mother tongue leads her to *other* her own identity:

> one's relationship with a native language is similar to that with the past. […] Over the years my brain has banished Chinese. I dream in English. I talk to myself in English. And memories—not only those about America but also those about China; not only those carried on but also those archived with the wish to forget—are sorted in English. *To be orphaned from my native language* felt, and still feels, a crucial decision. (Li, *Dear Friend* 145. The italics are mine)

In the next passage, the writer remarks on the inadequacy of language – both Chinese and English – for her, as she feels that neither language, not even the one she grew up with, is the language of intimacy, of private conversation:

> Q. Has your native language impacted your use of the English language and your style of English prose?
> A. When you did not grow up with a language, for me I feel I never will have the intimacy with English as you would have, because you grew up with it. *There's always this distance between me and the language.* To me, that's a good thing, because you'll always be pushing to get closer. You know you'll never get there, you'll never get a perfect story, but you're trying. I would not want to do a lot of tricks with English. *On a language level, I'm just interested in telling stories with clarity, and some decent rhythm.* (Watrous, "Talking with the Dead". The Italics are mine)

By reading her works one is gradually exposed to the deep and disquieting psychic unease underpinning the author's rejection of her own mother tongue. We learn from her recent book that the thought of suicide might derive from a complicated relationship with her parents, specifically her mother:

> Writing is the only part of my life I have taken *beyond my mother's storytelling.* I have avoided writing in an autobiographical voice because *I cannot bear that it could be overwritten by my mother's omniscience.* I can easily see all other

> parts of my life in her narrative: my marriage, my children, my past. Just as she demands to come into my narrative, I demand to be left out of hers. There is no way to change that; not a happy ending, not even an ending is possible. (Li, *Dear Friend* 167-168. The italics are mine)

In this way, Li establishes a painful metonymical chain of denial: motherhood, motherland, mother tongue:

> Not writing, like writing, can be disloyalty, too. *If one turns away from the storytelling of one's mother, is it worse than turning away from one's motherland and mother tongue?* (Li, *Dear Friend* 158. The italics are mine).
>
> Would you ever consider writing in Chinese? an editor from China asked, as many had asked before. I said I doubted it. But don't you want to be part of contemporary Chinese literature? he asked. I have declined to have my books translated into Chinese, which is understood by some as odiously pretentious. Once in a while my mother will comment, hinting at my selfishness, that I have deprived her of the pleasure of reading my books. *But Chinese was never my private language.* And it will never be. That I write in English—does it make me part of something else? The verdict of my professor in graduate school was that *I was writing in a language that did not belong to me*, hence I would not, and should not, belong. But his protest was irrelevant. I have not been using the language to be part of something. (Li, *Dear Friend* 146. The italics are mine)

Already in her fiction, but even more clearly in her autobiographical essay, Yiyun Li lucidly represents her traumatic relationship with her family, country and native language as a physical disease:

> My intention is not to defend suicide. I might have done so at other times in my life, but I have arrived at a point

> where defending and disputing my actions are the same argument. Everything I say is scrutinized by myself, not only the words and their logic but also my motives. *As a body suffers from an autoimmune disease, my mind targets every feeling and thought it creates; a self dissecting itself finds little repose.* (Li, *Dear Friend* 52. The italics are mine)

In a recent interview for an Italian newspaper (Rotelli, "Cambio lingua"), Li draws a parallel between the rejection of her mother tongue and the refusal to live – hence the suicide. In her 2017 book she reveals the psychological process which lies at the origin of her act of physical violence. The shift from language to the body seems automatic and natural:

> People who have not experienced a suicidal urge miss a crucial point. It is not that one wants to end one's life, but that the only way to end the pain—that eternal fight against one's melodrama so that it does not transgress—is to *wipe out the body.* (Li, *Dear Friend* 72. The italics are mine)

The words "to wipe out the body" clearly arise from a radical repudiation of the most intimate part of herself: language.

In the second part of my article, I will analyse some aspects of Li's fiction that reveal the apparent biopolitical tie between her status as a migrant writer and her rejection of her mother-tongue and motherland. While denying any autobiographical element in her earlier works, Li actually stages there her personal (melo)drama, by rehearsing violence and death through her characters:

> at the time, the only real people were my characters. When a book is finished, to mitigate the emptiness of their leave-taking, one kills them in a gentle manner—if there is any violence in imagining the action it is as secretive as a suicidal thought lodged in the corner of one's mind. Is

> writing not my way of rehearsing death? (Li, *Dear Friend* 113-114).

"Talking bodies, delicate vessels"[4]

The identity crisis provoked by this self-deterritorialisation is mirrored in Li's works by the way in which the female body is described and treated. The violence of the self-eradicating act Li performs on herself is actually a long and painful process of de-familiarisation from her own language and feelings. This process unfolds in her works through the unbearable violence perpetrated on the body of her characters – especially female ones – which betrays its undeniable psychoanalytic nature. Indeed, the strong connection between memories, language, and the body established by Yiyun Li herself allows us to read this physical violence as a reflection of her inner torment. In his seminal essay on the female body and modern narratives, Peter Brook draws upon Freud's theories to underline the semiotic value of the body in literature. We can borrow his statement "[m]emories are unavailable to the counsciousness. They are rather written on the body" (*Body Work* 226) as a possible interpretation of the physical destruction which is inflicted on some of Li's female characters. According to David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, "the body in literature is the locus of socio-political resistance" (*Introduction* 6). In my opinion, in Yiyun Li's writing, the body is rather a space for the expression of the author's own tormented psyche, and, more specifically, of her linguistic disruption. In particular, I will focus on two characters from her novels: the first is the protagonist of *The Vagrants*, Shan, a young woman who is executed for her counter-revolutionary activities one year after Mao Zedong's death. Significantly enough, right before the public ceremony preceeding the execution, the police cut her vocal cords in order to prevent her from speaking. After her death, her mutilated corpse is desecrated by two thugs. The other character

[4] The expression is drawn from Peter Brooks's book *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (221).

is Shaoai, one of the female protagonists of *Kinder than Solitude* (2014), a student in Beijing during the Tian'an men protests, who ends up in a vegetative state after having been poisoned as the result of a botched plan hatched by some tragic teen-agers.

With reference to the first novel, the word "vagrants" in the title may be seen to refer to a group of ordinary Chinese people, whose eradication is not so much territorial – they all live in a small town in the countryside – as moral and psychological. After years of communist rule and family disruption due to political pressure, the small town community feels degraded and humiliated; the locals are accustomed to violence, both suffered and inflicted. The ideological coercion exerted on the people is reflected in their somewhat tainted language, but also in their body: the lack of stability which the word 'vagrants' conveys is actually a complete lack of mutual communication and failure to share emotions; and this estrangement takes place first of all within their families, as in the case of the protagonist, Gu Shan, and of her parents. The novel opens with the announcement that Shan will be executed as a counter-revolutionary, and the whole story is devoted to the description of the big public event and of a few characters, who revolve around it as both actors and spectators. Indeed, the violence does not occur only in the huge city stadium, where Shan is abducted, visibly upset and silenced by the injures inflicted upon her to prevent her from making one last transgressive appeal to the audience; rather, violence dominates all areas of the story revolving around female characters: Nini, the disabled girl despised and mistreated by her own family, Gu Shan, the condemned woman, and Kai, a young and only apparently happy radio-speaker, a 'model' mother and wife who eventually comes to question her 'perfect' world. Surprisingly, the political violence exercised on Shan's body is counterbalanced, or even surpassed, by the interpersonal domestic violence staged by Li in her stories. As I have tried to show by quoting the aforementioned interviews, this use of the female space reflects the writer's thoughts on the shift from social

violence to the private, domestic violence. Language and the body are but the chosen avenues for this violence. I will report below some passages from the novel which meaningfully exemplify this technique of representation. In the following scene, the body of the condemned prisoner is secretely carried to the stadium:

> For a brief moment, Nini thought she saw the black hair of a woman, but before she could take another look, several men lifted the person onto the gurney, which was at once covered by a piece of white cloth. The body struggled under the sheet, but a few more hands pinned it down. "What is it?" Little Fourth asked. Nini did not answer, her heartbeat quickening when she saw a red spot on the white sheet covering the body, at first about the size of a plate, then spreading into an irregular shape. A few minutes later, the body was lifted up off the gurney, its legs kicking; yet strangely, *no noise came from the struggling body*. […] the policeman shuffled in the body inside the police car (Li, *The Vagrants* 104. The italics are mine)

Neither the crucial scene inside the stadium nor that of the execution are directly represented, Shan's lifeless body is transported out of the stadium, and we can only hear the comments of some onlookers:

> "The woman did not say a word througout the meeting," a man said. "I wonder if they drugged her." Another men swore that he had seen the woman open her mouth during the meeeting. How could she speak? They must have cut her trachea," another men said. "Didn't you see her neck was covered by a bandage. Trachea? You fool. How could she if her trachea was cut? It was her vocal cords that they cut." The first men shrugged: "She couldn't speak, for sure." (Li, *The Vagrants* 93)

It is equally meaningful and terrible that the woman is represented only by a speechless body at the mercy of others. Another terrible scene is the one where Shan's body is handed over to two thugs, who are exptected to bury it. They coldly observe the butchered corpse:

> The woman's body was lying face down on the crystallized snow, her arms wrenched and bound behind her back in an intricate way. […] The blood stain on her back was about the size of the bowl, and it amazed Bashi that such a little wound could finish a life. The woman's face was half-hidden in the snow, impossible for one to make out her features. Bashi touched her scalp; it was cold, but the hair, soft and thin, felt strangely alive. […] When Kwen ripped the clothes off the body, they both looked at the exposed middle part of the woman, the bloody and gaping flesh opening like a mouth with an eerie smile (Li, *The Vagrants* 104-5)

But the description of their savage devastation of the dead body is even more unbearable.

The novel *Kinder than Solitude* opens with the three main Chinese characters, two women and a man, getting back in touch with each other after the death of their former friend Shaoai, who had lived most of her life secluded in a room in a vegetative state. The two women have long emigrated to the US, while the man is still living in Beijing. During the twenty years which separate the three characters from their youth at the time of the Tian'an men massacre, they shared no contact or relationship except for a dark and guilty secret: the poisoning of Shaohai, which had reduced her to an unsensing, deformed body. Here again, a lifeless female body stands at the very centre of the plot: Shaoai's body, the victim of a cynical juvenile game, but also of a complicated web of unexpressed feelings, an enduring repression of the language of intimacy. Through her physical descriptions of this body, the writer portrays the deep psychological unease of a prisoner:

> The body, in the absence, took up more space than it had when alive (Li, *Kinder* 8)

> The last time Moran had seen Shaoai it was before her departure for America, by then, Shaoai had already lost much of her sight and her hair, her sinewy body taking on a dangerous plumpness, her mind no longer lucid behind her clouded eyes. What would twentyone more years have done do that prisoner in her own body, Moran wondered, but did not force herself to answer. (Li, *Kinder* 61)

The figure of the prisoner is concretely represented by the condemned counter-revolutionary Gu Shan, in *The Vagrants*, as well by the comatose Shaoai in *Kinder than Solitude*. But it is also metaphorically embodied by the writer Yiyun Li herself, secluded in a form of emotional and linguistic isolation that drives her to attempt suicide in an effort to escape from such a prison.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from Peter Brooks's book on the body and literature, more precisely the chapter titled *Talking Bodies, Delicate Vessels*: arguing that we need to "listen" to – not to look at – the bodies, he calls for

> a partial subversion of the nineteenth-century model of the body as an object of scrutiny in a detached and objective scientific gaze. Bodies do not yield their secrets in this manner. They must be listened to for their betrayasls, read in their complex rhetoric, by a listener-reader whose position of mastery and authority is at issue. The content of the delicate vessels cannot fully be specified, only their narrative trajectory. (Brooks, *Body Work* 256)

The crisis of alterity that overwhelmed Yiyun Li in the troubled process of translating herself into her adopted language – English – by "killing" her mother tongue, takes the shape of and talks through, the battered bodies of her female characters.

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