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FIVE

Memory, Language, and Healing

ISABEL VELÁZQUEZ

One morning on a spring day not unlike the one during which I write these lines, Dr. Marie Chantal Kalisa came into my office and gifted me with a word. It wasn't a strange occurrence, this. As office neighbors, friends, and fellow members of the order of the culturally dislocated, we were engaging in just an ordinary part of our ongoing conversation on language, memory, cultural (non)transmission, and the many intimate losses and transformations that come as a by-product of geographic displacement.

A lovely word it was, its Kirundi vowels bright, shiny, sweet to my ears. A tiny jewel wrapped in tissue paper and carried across oceans and years. She told me (reader: mistrust my paraphrasing mind), that it meant "I have traveled far, I have far to go," and then she told me that she liked it and that it would be the title of one of the stories that she would write one day. *One day*—academic-speak loosely translatable as "when the research is done, the articles are published, and the committee work completed." One day. And because I could not form a mental picture of my newly acquired gem, Chantal wrote it for me on a piece of paper that I kept in a book for a couple of years until I gave it back to her on some solemn occasion, now almost forgotten. Today, hard as I try, I cannot remember enough of that word to reconstruct it. It is only until very recently that I have stopped trying to guess enough of its structure or its sound to ask a speaker of Kirundi to bring it back to me—having made peace, perhaps, with the somewhat esoteric proposition that I was meant to lose it.

That conversation was interrupted in December 2015. This essay is my response. *This day*. It is an argument about language and memory, as well as about the cultural and emotional fallout that results from the loss of both. In this essay I revisit some of Julia Kristeva's ideas on language, as well as Joshua Fishman's thinking on intergenerational transmission and minority language maintenance, to claim that when women are displaced from their homelands by choice or historical circumstance, they carry with them specific linguistic practices that make possible the reproduction of language and culture, which is to say, memory. What is lost when a language is lost, if not memory? What is lost when memory is lost, if not the home? I further contend that there is healing to be found in the mechanisms of memory. That there is healing to be found through language. I write these words with the hope that someone may find in them a source of comfort in that brief moment before they too are submerged again in the never-ending waters of oblivion.

Of the many contributions made by Joshua Fishman to the fields of language planning, bilingualism, and the sociology of language, two stand out in that they've been so thoroughly naturalized as to have become commonplace in current discussions of how languages thrive and decay. The first is the sine qua non condition of household intergenerational transmission for minority language survival.¹ The second is the elaboration of the idea that, barring authoritarian violation of ethnolinguistic rights, a community will not abandon its language in favor of that of the majority because of any intrinsic quality of either language but because the group itself undergoes one or more of three distinct processes: *geographical displacement*, *social dislocation* (entailing the social, political, and economic marginalization of its members), and *cultural dislocation*, which Fishman describes as that state of affairs where "the endemic and omnipresent presence of majority culture" leaves the group with little legitimization in public and private spaces.²

What is lost when a language is lost? The answer to this question of course depends on who is asking it. According to the United

Nations Population Fund (UNPF), 3.3 percent of the entire population of the planet lived outside their country of origin in the year 2015.³ The refugee crisis that has unfolded in the twenty-first century, a crisis that the UN identifies as the worst since World War II, is only one of the most urgent and devastating faces of this massive process of geographical displacement. In the coming years millions of those who've left their homeland because of economic, political, or safety reasons will be unsuccessful in transmitting their family language to their children. Driven by economic need, ambition, determination, fear, a will to survive, a desire to provide a better life for their children, or by a combination of these and other factors, some will resist this loss, some will lament it, and others will barely register it in the midst of the struggles to adapt to a new environment.

Exocentric answers abound. Some are utilitarian: what is lost when a language is lost is tool, a resource, a skill, a bridge. Others are structuralist: an inventory of sounds, a lexicon, a morphosyntactic system, a grammar. Some are cognitive, heuristic even: a window into the human mind, a way to know something about human experience. Also common are answers of a political nature: a problem, a barrier, a threat, a right. But in order to understand the full weight of language loss, perhaps we need a better question: *What is lost when one loses one's language?* The former query is one degree removed from the object of our attention. It smacks of museums, ancient cities, and fallen empires. It concerns the realm of the purely intellectual, of documentation of examples and classification within categories. It is redolent of thought experiments conducted inside the protective cocoon of a wingback chair.

Answers to the latter question are untidy, unruly, and often come with a side dish of guilt and regret. They come with a longing for things that will not happen and people we will not be. They sting like skinned knees and smell like the burned flesh of all the things we allowed to perish so that we could save something else. For Fishman, maintenance is not the avoidance of shift; it is about language in culture. Only now do we arrive at

a better answer: at the individual level, language loss is fundamentally a loss of self. At the family level it is the dramatic alteration of kinship and community bonds that provide us with a sense of belonging. In stable, self-regulating ethnocultures, Fishman writes, children are insiders; transmission and continuity are assumed. In groups that have undergone these processes of dislocation, this transmission is interrupted.⁴ This is because language is not the sea we examine from the safety of double-pane shatterproof windows, not the specimen we pin under a microscope, not the sample we carefully transport to the lab. Language is the swell, and we are riding in it—undertow and riptides included. Language is the wave, and memory is the ocean. What is lost when one loses a language is memory.

What is lost when memory is lost? Should, in some distant and phantasmagorical future, Earth's population be extinguished, and should an alien traveler inquire about us, let this be known about the human race: that we were mammals with a penchant for stories. Because we understand ourselves and others through stories. Because we construct social realities through stories. Because we *are*, fundamentally, our stories. We are the narrated, and we are the narrators. Discussing Hannah Arendt's philosophical conception of what constitutes a fully human life, Julia Kristeva writes, "The possibility of representing birth and death, to conceive of them in time and to explain them to others—that is, *the possibility of narrating*, grounds human life in what is specific to it, in what is non-animal about it, non-physiological."⁵

For Kristeva the fundamental question in Arendt's political and philosophical work is "*Who* are we, as opposed to *what* are we?"⁶ Who we are is our memory. Narration is memory. Memory is language living through itself. "Language is at once the only manner of being of thought, its reality, and its accomplishment," writes Kristeva.⁷ Thus, Kristeva understands language as the container and the contained, not as an external tool: "In the same vein, we will be weary of affirming that language is the *instrument* of thought. Such a conception leads one to believe that language

expresses, as if it were a *tool*, something—an idea?—external to it. But what is this idea? Does it exist other than in the form of language?”⁸ What is lost when memory is lost is the home.

No way back. In the immigrant experience, language becomes our home, its walls only as solid as our memories. Which is to say, not very. And thus we learn to navigate the deixis of nostalgia: not fully here and not entirely there. A shifting center with movable margins. Not the object, but the story that travels with the object. Not the taste of the food, but the memory of the last time we shared it with someone we love. Not the prayer, not the remedy, not the curse, not the joke, not the song, not the ritual, not the sheen of the fabric or the pattern of the weave, but the signposts we leave in our wake so that our future and past others may find us and find each other.

In her *Language—the Unknowns*, Kristeva argues, “Whoever says language says *demarcation*, *signification*, and *communication*. In this sense, all human practices are kinds of language because they have as their function to *demarcate*, to *signify*, to *communicate*.”⁹

In diasporic communities, socialization to and through majority and minority language(s) is gendered. The demarcation of what makes “us,” as well as the deployment of all the signifiers of a shared ethnolinguistic experience, is gendered. In this sense, with the exception of immigrant households where children are being raised by male homosexual parents, minority language (non)transmission is predominantly, though not exclusively, a female undertaking, because it is a form of caretaking. It is a mechanism for the reproduction of emotional capital that, when successful, is advantageous and invisible to the institutions and the marketplace that benefit from it—and seen as a personal failure when it is not.

Inasmuch as language is a social product, it can serve both as a salve and as a poison. It can also be a scaffold that supports our present experience or a ballast that tethers us obsessively to the past. There is healing to be found in the mechanisms of memory. In making possible the reproduction of language and

culture, immigrant and refugee women carry the home on their tongues wherever they go.

It is thanks to the love of my family and my friends that I am fortunate enough to know that there are indeed things that elude language. The pressure of two bodies that come into contact. Sunlight reflected on a newborn's hand. The smell of a loved one who has just left a room. The taste of shared tears. The timbre of a laugh. But it is only through language that I am able to re-create them. Only through language that I can bring them back and give them meaning. Only through language that I carry them with me wherever I go.

Notes

1. Fishman, "Reversing Language Shift."
2. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 65.
3. United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), "Migration," accessed November 29, 2018, <http://www.unfpa.org/migration>.
4. Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 4.
5. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 8 (original emphasis).
6. Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 55 (original emphasis).
7. Kristeva, *Language—the Unknown*, 6.
8. Kristeva, *Language—the Unknown*, 7 (original emphasis).
9. Kristeva, *Language—the Unknown*, 4.

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