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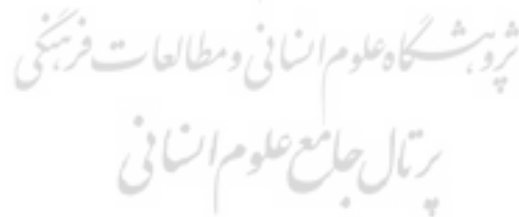
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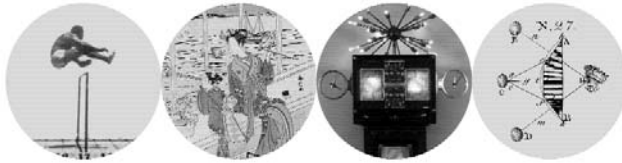
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# journal of visual culture



## Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation

Joanne Morra

### Abstract

Translation is, for Gayatri Spivak, the most intimate act of reading. Working from accented and autoethnographic film, video and installation work, I examine what is at stake in the intimate act of a daughter translating her mother's tongue. I am specifically concerned with representations of psychical, geographic and linguistic displacements within these artistic practices as a means of understanding subject formation, gendered agency, and the politics and poetics of race and ethnicity. By focusing on Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) and Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988), I suggest that the translation of one's mother's tongue can be thought of as a palimpsestic mode of fragmented layering, and as a detour through which a 'minor literature' is visualized.

### Keywords

accented cinema • Chantal Akerman • autoethnography • Mona Hatoum • intimacy • minor literature • palimpsest • translation

In her 'Translator's Preface' to a collection of 18th-century Bengali poetry, Gayatri Spivak (1993) writes,

Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate. These songs, sung day after day in family chorus before clear memory began, have a peculiar intimacy for me. Reading and surrendering take on new meanings in such a case. The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self. (p. 180)

For Spivak, at its most fundamental, translating one's mother tongue is an act of intimacy. Here she conjoins the figures of autobiography, the familial,

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memory and voice so as to form the basis for an understanding of the 'intimate act' of translation. This intimacy as an act of proximity and necessary distance is both a matter of love – 'the task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow' – and an act of gendered 'agency' (pp. 180–1). For Spivak, translation is motivated also by racial, historical, linguistic and economic factors so that it functions within an 'ethicopolitical arena' (p. 179). Although Spivak touches on the ways in which translation is connected to personal history and memory, love, voice and intimacy, she mentions these intimate aspects of translation only in passing because her interests in this text lie elsewhere. It is precisely these intimate matters that involve me here.

In this article, I am interested in thinking through what contemporary art, film and installation work that are concerned with daughters translating their mother's tongue tell us about subject formation in terms of gendered agency, language, and the politics and poetics of race and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> My use of the somewhat awkward formulation 'mother's tongue' is an attempt to highlight the dual way in which I understand this term. Mother's tongue refers to both a shared language and its community of users; it is also a synecdoche for the daughter's mother, personally and psychically.

The practices that concern me here are works within the realm of the moving image in which daughters in exile have translated their mother's tongue. Hamid Naficy (2001) has used the term 'accented cinema' to define works that are made by 'exilic or diasporic subjects' (p. 4). More precisely, I am focusing on feminist films, videos and installations that can be subsumed under the auspices of accented practices, but that are more accurately identified as autoethnographic. With the rise of the contemporary feminist movement in the 1970s, women filmmakers provided us with a series of works that interrogated various aspects of their relationship to their mothers. Soon after, these films were accompanied by work made by women of colour and ethnic minorities who had alternative stories to tell. It is these later, accented, autobiographical and documentary films and videos, also considered 'autoethnographic' by Catherine Russell (1999), that are of particular interest to me here.

Coined by Françoise Lionnet (1989), and elaborated on by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), autoethnography is thought of in relation to ethnography. Pratt writes, 'if ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations' (p. 7). Russell takes up the term autoethnography to isolate certain contemporary films and videos that unite an interest in the 'new autobiography' (Renov, 1989) and ethnography. That is, these works use the essay form as a means of interrogating the documentary, as well as the representation of the 'I', so that the subject position is constituted as divided, displaced and uncertain. Autoethnographic practices also implicate the filmmaker's or video-maker's personal history as a means of placing themselves within a larger social, cultural and political context. The auto-

ethnographic work of Chantal Akerman, Mona Hatoum, Ann Hui, Ngozi Onwurah, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vasda, Zineb Sedira and Rea Tajiri offers us instances of critical examinations of a daughter translating her mother's tongue. The film, video and installation work of these artists and filmmakers often analyses the visual, linguistic, vocal, spatial, subjective (autobiographical, psychic, racial), cultural and historical issues at stake in this intimate act of translation. For the purposes of this article I will focus my attention on two works: Chantal Akerman's film *News from Home* (1976, see Figure 1) and Mona Hatoum's video *Measures of Distance* (1988, see Figures 2 to 4).



Figure 1 Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976). © Paradise Films.



Figure 2 Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* 1988. Colour video, sound, 15 minutes. A Western Front Video Production, Vancouver. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London).

*News from Home* (90 mins) documents the young Akerman's memories of her stay in New York City between 1971 and 1972. The film is constituted by a series of insular shots of the city's subway and its street life, which in the final sequence, opens up to an expansive shot of the city's harbour and skyline filmed on a boat as it slowly recedes from the urban environment. The former images of the city's interior are accompanied by a voiceover of Akerman reading and translating letters from her mother living in Belgium, while in the harbour scene the sound of water as it laps up against the boat, and seagulls in the distance are heard. The film wends its way around an urban centre and its environs as a means of representing a daughter's ability to negotiate her autonomy in the face of her mother's constant love.

Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (15 mins, 25 sec) is a video made up of images of her naked mother taken in the family shower and bathroom in the artist's childhood home in Beirut. These are overlaid with Arabic letters received from her mother, as well as a voiceover of Hatoum reading English translations of her mother's letters. A soundtrack of an Arabic conversation between the two women, taped during Hatoum's visit to Lebanon in 1981, is also heard. Overall, the video examines notions of memory, intergenerational love and intimacy through the prism of exile, war and linguistic boundaries.

In both these works, and in many of the accented films, videos and installations that deal with a daughter's translation of her mother's tongue, the context for them begins with the elder woman's exile or displacement. The result of this maternal uprooting forms the daughter's traumatic inheritance, leaving the younger woman with psychic scars, which often propel her to forge a new life in a different geographic location and within an alternative linguistic community. As such, the daughter is often triply displaced from her mother: psychically, geographically and linguistically. In this article, I am attuned to the various ways in which this triple displacement is represented within the works as moments of translation. The matter of the visual image and language, the use of sound and voice, the intimacy and distance evoked in the works are for me representative of both the bridging of the borders and boundaries between daughter and mother, and the recognition of the necessity of a gap between them in order to sustain each woman's survival.

### The Intimacy of the Letter: Writing in Exile

My mother wrote me love letters, and that was marvellous.  
With her own words . . .

Chantal Akerman on *News from Home*, in Akerman  
and Creveling (1977: 137)

*Measures of Distance* was really the only work where I  
consciously used autobiography as the text of the work.

Mona Hatoum on *Measures of Distance*, in Archer (1997: 100)

Much has been written on the letter. And much of it concerns the paradox of the epistolary form. Letters, seemingly the most private of writing practices, perhaps containing a secret, are never private, and they can never be secrets in themselves as they are written to be read, to expose the secret that they may contain. Letters are always a public exchange between at least two people. 'My dearest little girl [Akerman informs us of her mother's thoughts in *News from Home*] I think of you all the time, . . . I even dream about you.' 'My dear Mona, [speaks Hatoum of her mother's longing in *Measures of Distance*] the apple of my eye, how I miss you and long to feast my eyes on your beautiful face that brightens up my days.' In reading their mothers' letters out loud and to the viewer, both Akerman and Hatoum make explicit the fact that letters are directed at more than one person, that they are always triangulated by a third party who may just fall upon (or even have purloined) the letter. Generally implied or elided, both *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* make explicit the triangulation of the epistolary form. The third party is decidedly addressed. By addressing us so clearly, when the daughters read the translations of their mothers' words, words which obviously address the younger women, they make apparent the letter as 'witness', and our role in this witnessing as other, foreigner and invited guest (Bower, 1997; Derrida, 1987[1980]; Kauffman, 1986, 1992).

Letters are concerned with space and place: the letter must travel across a space in order to get from one place to another. Letters also await a reply. As Franz Kafka notes, writing letters is a means of witnessing 'the terrible dislocation of souls in the world'; it is a form of writing that disseminates the subject by making apparent the 'phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing' (Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, quoted in Altman, 1982: n.p.). Epistolarity forms an ongoing 'haunted' dialogue within the subject, as well as witnessing the gaps between the most recent letter, the one that came before it, and the one still to come (Derrida, 1987[1980]; Kauffman, 1986, 1992). In both *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* we witness this extension of time, its duration, its formation as a series of moments constituted by the relationships between the two daughters and their respective mothers, moments which refer to their ongoing dialogue with the present and the future, and in Hatoum's mother's case, the past.<sup>2</sup>

In the wider context of accented cinema, Naficy argues that there is an 'inexorable link' between letters and the question of exile because they both involve 'distance, separation, absence, loss, and the desire, however unfulfilled, to bridge the multiple gaps' (1995: 55), even as the 'repetitive act of reading letters reiterates the gap of exile . . . turning epistolarity into, if not communication, at least a ritual of communication' (2001: 114). As such, accented films often employ the letter as a strategy for representing and narrativizing the self, and they do so in such a way that personal identity becomes intertwined with the more general concerns of 'group affiliation and disaffiliation' (1995: 55). Letters thus inscribe the intimate distance between correspondents and their communities.

In both *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* the translation of the letters highlights the epistolary and translative dislocations found in many autoethnographic films, videos and installations. Akerman, born in Brussels in 1950 to Jewish immigrant parents from Poland, was raised a polyglot: Polish, French, Hebrew and Yiddish were the languages that enveloped her as a child. The letters that Akerman reads and translates into English in *News from Home* were written in French by her mother, but of course are not in her mother's mother tongue. Hatoum was born a British subject to Palestinian-Christian parents in Beirut in 1952. Her parents, born and raised in Haifa, found themselves exiled to Lebanon in 1948 with the proclamation of the state of Israel. Unable to obtain Lebanese identity cards, Hatoum's father, who worked for the British embassy in Beirut, applied for and received British passports for the family. Hatoum recalls her 'extreme sense of dislocation'; she considers herself 'emotionally Palestinian, officially British and brought up in a predominantly French culture' (Hatoum in Deblonde, 1998: 17). Hatoum spoke French at school, Palestinian-Arabic at home while other children spoke in a Lebanese-Arabic dialect, and she became fluent in English in her 20s.<sup>3</sup>

In both *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* we are provided with only one half of the correspondence between daughter and mother thereby ensuring that the mother's longing is not shown to be reciprocated by way of the daughter's articulation of her own desires through letter writing, since our knowledge of the daughter is via the mother. Of course, in making a work of art or film, the daughters are clearly articulating and representing their own desires, and their autonomy. In *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* it is not the mother that speaks her own desire but the daughter; and the daughter does so through translation. By translating their mothers' words, reading and speaking them in a language which is neither theirs nor their mothers' tongue, the daughters highlight the necessity of translation in autoethnographic and accented visual practices as a means of momentarily bridging and representing distance, separation, absence and the gaps of exile, polylingualism, longing and desire.

For instance, in *News from Home*, Akerman reads and translates the imploring and existential words that constitute her mother's 'love letters': 'Write to me immediately, you know I am waiting patiently, I live for the rhythm of your letters. Don't leave me without news.' And we hear Hatoum in *Measures of Distance* speaking the translated words of her mother's resolve to be with her daughter, to continue to share the new-found aspects of an intimate relationship with her:

I enjoyed very much all those intimate conversations we had about women's things and all that. You and I have never talked in this way before. Why don't you come back and live here and we can make all the photographs and tapes you want.

In both of these translative articulations, the translated words of the mother fuse with the voice of the daughter, and the mother's desire to come 'face to



Figure 3 Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* 1988. Colour video, sound, 15 minutes. A Western Front Video Production, Vancouver. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London).

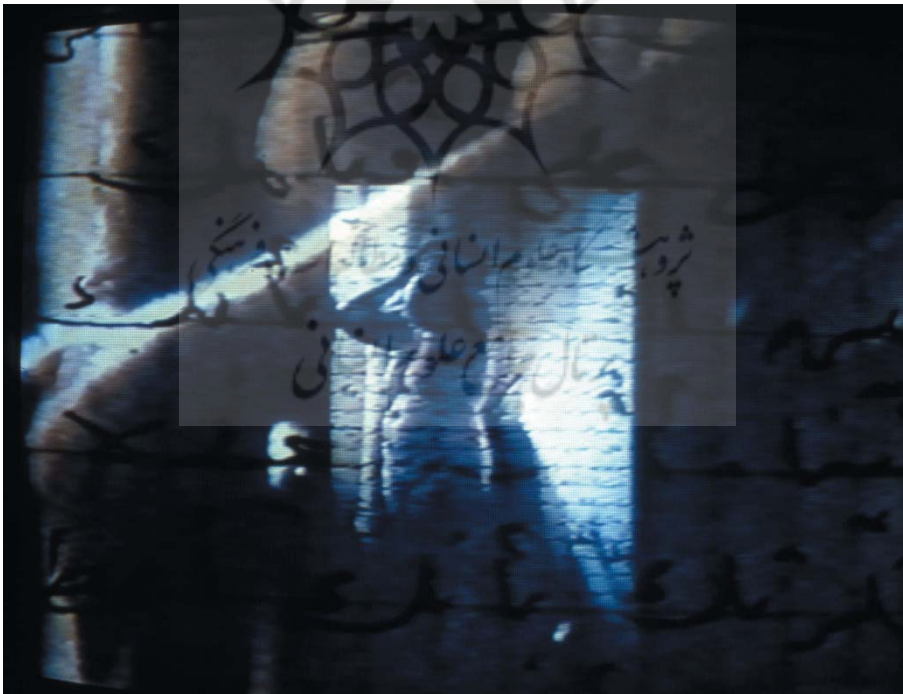


Figure 4 Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance* (1988). Colour video, sound, 15 minutes. A Western Front Video Production, Vancouver. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube (London).



face' with her daughter, to merge with her, is articulated (Jensen, 2004: 110). In these instances of momentary fusion, the viewer is enveloped by the loving words and gestures of these mothers but also by the heaviness of this burden in the repetition of their longing.

It is necessary that the intimacy of translation also ensures that the fusion between daughter and mother is *incomplete*, and that the daughter represents her own independent and autonomous subjectivity. In *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* the inevitable gaps of linguistic, psychic and geographic displacements are represented in the repetition of these gaps through the letters; and because the intimacy shared is ruptured, the 'I' and 'you' are separated.<sup>4</sup> One of the ways in which this parting is accomplished is because the 'I' of the letter is being read by the 'you', and the 'you' is both the addressee of the letter – the daughter – and the viewer of the work. We become the 'you' in the letter, and the intimacy between daughter and mother is shattered as we are invited into the aural, visual and linguistic frame. We are made privy to the representation of what Spivak (1993) calls the intimate 'surrendering' within translation.

In both *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance*, the daughter translates her mother's tongue – the language in which she, like Spivak, sang childhood songs – both literally and metaphorically. The daughter reads the letters in a different language to the one in which they were written. She translates them and brings to the foreground the intimacy of translation, the intimacy of surrendering to the translation of one's mother's tongue and text, and one's own mother tongue, and then speaking it in translation. This, to my mind, is what Spivak is referring to as the surrendering of the 'self' to the place of the 'other' within translation; it is a measure of time, history, memory and experience. The proximity and distance of translation is the site within which the self and other meet personally, psychically and communally.

### Palimpsestic Translation: Layering, Fragmentation and Contradiction

One of the virtues of being a Palestinian is that it teaches you to feel your particularity in a new way, not only as a problem but as a kind of gift.

Edward Said, 'On Palestinian Identity', in conversation with Salman Rushdie (1991: 183)

The palimpsestic mode of translating one's mother's tongue is widely used in autoethnographic works of art and film.<sup>5</sup> It offers the daughters a means of representing the complex and overdetermined intertwining of the personal and communal aspects of translation as well as the geographic and linguistic displacements of this relationship through visual and aural multiplication and fragmentation. These tactics ensure that an intimate distance is constructed between the daughter and mother because the representations are partial and therefore not total and totalizing. The visual

and aural representations of the mother often function as supplements to an ongoing dialogue between the two women such that they represent both the bond and necessary gap between them. In *Measures of Distance* the artist uses a palimpsestic structure to great effect in representing displacement and the complexity of subject formation, history and memory.<sup>6</sup>

The palimpsestic mode is made manifest in the video by the daughter's visual and aural translation of her mother's body, her writing, her voice, her words, her thoughts, her concerns, so that each fragment aids in the mapping of their relationship. For example, the penultimate sequence of *Measures of Distance* is made up of still images of Hatoum's mother's naked body – both full body shots and fragments of these same images (Figures 3 and 4). The images fade in and out so that the full body is shown with a large black border around it; it is then overlaid with a fragment of the same image; the full body shot disappears leaving a fragment which is in turn overlaid with a new full body image. Neither presides over the other, they supplement one another. The Arabic letters are overlaid and inscribed upon the body, thereby bringing the surface of the body to bear upon the viewer, while also distancing the body from the spectator's gaze. The conversation between daughter and mother is heard in the background, while the voiceover of Hatoum reading her mother's letters is at the fore. Hatoum informs us that her mother does not understand why her daughter talks about a 'gap' between them. [Her mother continues] '[y]ou say you can't remember that I was around when you were a child.' The elder woman attempts to understand and articulate her daughter's concerns by thinking back and reflecting upon their exile to Lebanon: the family being 'scattered'; how the elder woman was left 'feeling stripped naked of my very soul'. Hatoum translates her mother's words as the latter continues to articulate her family's exile:

And I am not just talking about the land and property we left behind, but with that our identity and our sense of pride in who we are went out the window . . . Yes of course this must have affected you as well, because being born in exile in a country which does not want you is not fun at all.

And now, her mother continues, with all of her daughters having moved away from Lebanon, they too are 'living in another kind of exile in a culture that is totally different to [. . .their] own'. Because of these various alliances and differences, Hatoum's mother concludes this letter by saying that she certainly does understand her daughter's 'sense of fragmentation', of not belonging, because as she says, this is the 'painful reality of all our people'. In this penultimate series of images in the video, the discussion of the past and present, the intimation of a future return, the images fading in and out create a movement and rhythm, a depth of image that is echoed by an aural change created by the sounds of the voices, the rhythmic melancholy of Hatoum reading in translation her mother's letters, the hushed tones of the conversation between daughter and mother, and the laughter which

punctuates the enveloping sound. The fragmented layering of the contradictory visual, aural and textual representations work together to create a cartography of the personal, familial, psychic and geopolitical relationships between daughter and mother.

At the end of *Measures of Distance*, we are left with a blank screen and the daughter's voice informing us of her mother's approaching absence: another bombing in Beirut, this time the post office is rubble, the elder woman is unable to send any letters to her daughter; in fact, movement – even nearby – is difficult. The war that keeps the family apart was momentarily overcome by the epistolary bridge, while at the same time, the letters witnessed the repetition of that same distance and dislocation. The letters will now end.

Through its images, sounds, voice, and rhythm, *Measures of Distance* offers us a translation of the double displacement of exilic existence. As Edward Said (1995[1984]) explains in his essay 'Reflections on Exile':

The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons . . . Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience . . . Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions. (p. 28)

It is the simultaneity that Said articulates that is part and parcel of much autoethnographic work. These artists and filmmakers represent and insist upon the duality of which Said speaks. For Hatoum, being stranded in London during the war in Lebanon in 1975 was 'another kind of dislocation' which 'manifests itself in [her] work [as] a sense of disjunction' (Hatoum in Antoni, 1998: 20). This dislocation involves her attempts to locate the parameters of social, political, visual and aural relationships; points of reference that the subject in exile is 'constantly assessing and reassessing, working out how things function physically and emotionally'; so that for her, 'it feels as though you're inside and outside at the same time. Yes, you always have more perspectives on things that way, which can be creative' (Hatoum in Roberts, 2000: 116).

The paradox of translating one's mother's tongue is that it is always both intimate and distant. Many autoethnographic works represent the translator's 'surrendering' palimpsestically as a fragmentary, layered and contradictory encounter staged between daughter and mother; between various languages, gestures, voices; between the personal and communal; between time, space and places. Autoethnographic films, videos and installations often represent the personal, historical and communal as fractured so as to ensure that the translation of memories, identities, geographies, languages, histories and politics abides by what I would call a fragmented and contradictory palimpsest of the intimate distance of translation.

## Translation as Detour, Or Visualizing a Minor Literature

This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language. (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', 1990[1986]: 61–2)

The translation of one's mother's tongue as an act of intimate distance takes a different form in a work such as *News from Home*. This film represents Akerman's translation of her mother's tongue through the detour, so that translation is understood as a mode within a mode, or a language within a language. What many accented and autoethnographic films, videos and installations offer us is a means of considering the translation of one's mother's tongue through the prism of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1990[1986]) have called a 'minor literature'. In this final section, I am interested in thinking through these visual practices as temporal and spatial representations of a minor literature. In other words, what is the result of considering the personal and communal detours precipitated by the traumatic displacements of an exilic existence, what Deleuze and Guattari call in the epigraph just cited 'the problem of immigrants, especially their children, the problem of minorities', in terms of the various linguistic, geographic and psychic propositions offered to us by these visual practices?

Akerman has noted that the English version of *News from Home* 'is not the real version' (see Indiana, 1983: 58) and of course this claim of authenticity for the French version intrigues me. In the French version Akerman reads her mother's letters in French, the language in which they were written, but *not* her mother's mother tongue. Thus, even in the French version, the film already highlights the act of translation and its relationship to questions of not belonging, exile and displacement. Importantly, the English version of *News from Home* reiterates and strengthens these same concerns rather than inauthenticating them, as Akerman implies. The affect of distance through intimate desire is highlighted and sustained by Akerman speaking her mother's words in English.<sup>7</sup>

The not belonging that haunts *News from Home* is doubly represented through the daughter's translation and articulation of her mother's tongue. The French which is her mother's adopted communal tongue is somehow understood by Akerman as 'real' and yet, as we know, it is not her mother's mother tongue. The interrogation of this linguistic and subjective situation in which many diasporic and exilic peoples find ourselves is vital and basic to much autoethnographic visual practice. For example, in the English version of *News from Home* two of the more general concerns of these visual practices are highlighted: the necessary interrogation of one's communal tongue while living in exile; and the personal politics at stake in this same displacement when the language one speaks is no longer the language into which one was born.

In remarking on the letters in *News from Home*, Akerman (1977) states:

My mother wrote me love letters, and that was marvellous. With her own words . . . She hasn't had a lot of schooling but she's far from being an uncultured person. On the contrary . . . my parents carry in them a whole history: Poland where they were born, the concentration camps, Belgium . . . My mother didn't learn to write, she quit school at 11, and then there was the war. She writes as she can, she formulates her feelings in an unsophisticated way, they really reflect her. If she were more sophisticated, she wouldn't have dared to ask me all the time 'When are you coming back? You know very well that we love you, you know that we miss you.' She wouldn't have dared, she would've said it by way of a thousand 'detours'. But she's not sophisticated, she used the words that she had, so she had a more direct relationship. (p. 137)

The detours that are not taken by Akerman's mother are countered by the geographic, psychic and linguistic detours that she did take: from Poland, to Belgium, to Auschwitz, to Brussels. In *News from Home*, Akerman's mother's letters witness these traumatic movements. The specificity of Akerman's mother's detours as witnessed in the letters is the general condition of subjects in exile. The physical movements endured, or chosen, by diasporic, exilic and immigrant peoples, result in the need for translation. Linguistic translation becomes symptomatic of the subjective, phenomenological as well as political, cultural and social transformations necessary in these geographic displacements. Language, and the language of images, bear the scars of these translations.

In *News from Home*, the issues of a minor literature are visually and aurally translated. Akerman is very clear about this convolution of subjectivity and speech within her own visual and spoken language, and by extension she offers us also an insight into that which she inherited from her mother:

my language is very poor; I have a very restricted vocabulary. Deleuze explains this very well when he speaks of Kafka's language and minor literature. There are no big car accidents, no big effects, everything is very, very, very, very, tight. (Akerman in Rosen, 2004: 126)

Akerman says she 'feels very close' to Kafka because 'he's not using his own language, but another language that isn't his mother tongue. I feel the same way when I speak French, it's not exactly my language' (Akerman in Indiana, 1983: 61).

For Deleuze and Guattari (1990[1986]), a minor literature is quite simply that 'which a minority constructs within a major language' (p. 59). By looking mainly at Kafka's work, Deleuze and Guattari are able to distinguish three characteristics of a minor literature: the deterritorialization of language; the relationship or connection between an individual and politics; and the collective act of enunciation. Deterritorialization is a result of the impossibilities of being and speaking within a language that one is not most able or

comfortable in. The act of writing in this language means that everything in it is political: the 'cramped space [of a minor literature] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it' (p. 59). Because of this, everything takes on a collective value. A minor literature rearticulates language's relationship to sense, it brings out the 'internal tensions of a language'; it brings to the fore the gap between the place of the enunciation and that which is enunciated; it makes explicit and at the same time foreign the ways in which language sounds (and the places within which linguistic sounds are formed – the mouth, tongue and teeth); it dislocates sense to form a type of linguistic music (p. 64).

In *News from Home*, Akerman visualizes, or translates into a visual medium a minor literature. For instance, the film has a series of interior night shots of cafes and shops seen from outside of the windows looking in. This means that the viewer is able to see inside the shops, look at what is going on, while also being able to see reflections on the windowpanes of that which is outside of the shot, as it moves in and out of the frame. The result is a doubling of activity, of knowledge, of viewing, of relating. This visual within a visual produces our sense of a partial knowledge. In addition, the camera's stillness frames the image like a painting, the colour is sensual, and the viewer sees representations of alienated city life as a still life, a genre painting, as abstractions. The image is static, and yet there is movement within it. The double image provides the viewer with still portraits of the city, and of its ongoing life. At the same time as we enter and become involved in this doubled visual space, we hear Akerman read to us in English her mother's translated French letters.

These types of dissonances are, for Janet Bergstrom (1999), what constitute Akerman's deterritorialized cinema. She discusses how the seeming split within Akerman's use of 'voice' and position of enunciation, and the filmmaker's focus (both consciously and unconsciously) on personal experience are a part of this cinematic practice. As Bergstrom explains:

these two aspects are related, for personal experience is presented through Akerman's mode of enunciation as if an invisible wedge had been forced between the represented experience and the audience: we look onto a stylised world that would not be called autobiographical in the usual sense. (p. 15)

*News from Home* attests to these characterizations, and how the film references the multiple languages that surrounded Akerman as a child. In two interviews dated over 20 years apart, one in 1983 with Gary Indiana, and the second in 2004 with Miriam Rosen, Akerman discusses the issue of language. In these conversations Akerman notes the polylingual surrounding of her early years; the French they learnt and spoke in Brussels; the 'musicality' of Polish that resonates in her mother's syntax and speech, and is echoed by Akerman as she speaks and reads to us in translation in *News*

*from Home* (Akerman in Rosen, 2004: 126); her grandfather's Hebrew and Yiddish, and the echo of these grandpaternal languages in her mother's writing: 'The way she writes, the way she puts one sentence after another, I'm sure it's the exact translation of Yiddish. It's not really French – it's French but the rhythms are Yiddish. I tried to keep that rhythm in my speech' in *News from Home* (Akerman in Indiana, 1983: 58). These rhythms remind us that the elder woman is a Polish Jew and of the consequences of being Jewish, consequences that she decided to never speak of until 60 years had passed, and a language she has abandoned.

In *News from Home*, Akerman begins by reading the English translations of her mother's loving and imploring letters very quickly in a breathlessly rhythmic voice. It is as though the daughter cannot keep up with her mother's desire and demands, and her memory of her mother's tongue. Akerman seems to be reading in an attempt to grasp the ungraspable. To close the subjective, geographic and psychic gaps to which the film attests. As Akerman becomes exhausted from reading and speaking, her mother's longing and insistence become more melancholic and demanding. Akerman recalls how

the letters were moving. They were like a lover's lament, repetitive, which used to accompany me . . . It's like a love song which one hears or doesn't and at the same time, it's like a hold that is loosening. [And yet] *it's a relationship – she expresses herself with words, her words, and I don't hear them because I make the sound disappear.* (Akerman in Godard, 1980: 35, trans. Marie Fitzsimmons, emphasis added)

Akerman speaks her mother's words, quickly, without breaths, tumbling one on top of another; the words seem to almost lose their meaning, 'like a hold loosening' thereby enveloping the space of the film as sound. This envelopment holds us and supports us, and yet also debilitates us. We are comforted, and yet alienated by it.<sup>8</sup> At times, the longing, control, persistence, love and desire of Akerman's mother's words are ruptured by the soundtrack, which swells up to drown them out. Aurally and visually, the film makes apparent the intimate distance of translation as a longing and a rupture, as tension and release, as a mode within a mode, as a detour.

Here we are very close to a different understanding of translation's impact upon the gesture, texture and rhythm of speech; upon the phenomenology of the subject, and the subject's unconscious formation. In *News from Home*, we hear what Akerman (1977) refers to as its 'musicality', we are attuned to the repetition, the rhythms, the tone (p. 138). And we recognize that they are not the speaker's mother tongue nor that of the addressor. The dissonance inflects within it the fact that we are over-hearing and witnessing something distant and yet intimate; a convolution of subjectivity and speech; a language within another language; the letter as witness to another letter; the subject's relationship to what Spivak (1993) calls the translative 'space of the other within the self'. The film thus manifests the ways in which translation is constituted as a means of representing one image within another; the individual

and collective politics of representation; the dislocation of representation; the dissonant musicality of the textures and sounds of language and representation; the gap of exile. In *News from Home* these complex representations are connected to the visualization of a minor literature, and its manifestation through translation.

*Measures of Distance* and *News from Home* represent and convey two modes through which accented and autoethnographic films, videos and installations translate the intimate distance between daughter and mother. On the one hand, we are confronted by the paradox of the palimpsest, its fragmentation, its overdetermined representation of the necessary gaps of autoethnographic translation. On the other hand, we are offered an understanding of the process of translating one's mother's tongue as a mode of situating the detour, of visualizing a minor literature, of representing one encounter within another. In both instances, the relationship between daughter and mother is represented through the intimacy and distance between the personal and the communal, the subject and other, between two languages, between two generations, and between two locations.

Spivak (1993) offers us a glimpse of translation as a phenomenological, temporal and spatial experience by connecting the time and space of memory, the familial, the historical and the political aspects of gendered agency to the practice of translation. What these visual practices offer us, in addition, is an embodied materialization of these times and spaces of translation through their use of images, voices, sounds, words, desires, memories, identities and geographies. Through them, translation becomes a primary mode within which we can come to consider the formation of subjectivity, gendered agency, language, and the politics and poetics of race and ethnicity as a means of understanding the intimate distance of translation.

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### Notes

1. Much interesting and important work has been written about the mother–daughter relationship, particularly within literary, psychoanalytic and feminist theory. Although the relationship between these two women – the mother and the daughter – is always understood as complex, overdetermined and intertwined, my concern in this article is on the *daughter*–mother relationship. Quite simply, I flip the perspective from the mother's to the daughter's so that the point of departure is the daughter's relationship to her mother's tongue.



2. The lack of reference to the past in *News from Home* is intimately connected to Akerman's mother's inability to articulate the horror and trauma of Auschwitz. She has been able to do so only in Akerman's most recent work *Marcher a cote de ses lancets dans un Frigidaire vide (titre provisoire) (To Walk Next to One's Sboelaces in an Empty Fridge, 2004)*. As Akerman states in an interview with Jean-Luc Godard in 1980: 'My mother was in a concentration camp: she never talks about it', a refrain that Akerman has been compelled to repeat often (trans. Marie Fitzsimmons, p. 12).
3. In *Measures of Distance*, Hatoum brings her mother closer, by translating and pronouncing the Arabic words of her letters in English, the language in which the daughter now communicates, articulates herself and her practice. Hatoum relates in an interview with the journalist Rachel Halliburton how the artist was once asked to discuss her work on an Arabic radio station and declined because, at that moment, she realized that she could only discuss her practice in English, the language in which it is constituted (Hatoum in Halliburton, 2000: 11). Thus, although Hatoum's emotional and primary familial life is intimately connected to her mother tongue – Palestinian-Arabic – her work is born out of her articulation of herself and it in the English language, thereby making apparent once more the gap of translation.
4. Within epistolary theory, the ambiguity between the 'I' and the 'you' – between the addressor and addressee – is essential to the form of the letter (Altman, 1982). Derrida (1987[1980]) notes the undecidability of the letter's addressor, addressee and third party. This ambiguity and undecidability in *News from Home* and *Measures of Distance* revolves around what Spivak (1993) calls the intimate 'transgress[ion] from the trace of the other . . . in the closest places of the self' (p. 180). In psychoanalytic terms, both the film and video represent and articulate the internalized m/other by externalizing her, by vocalizing and making her manifest through the articulation of her letters. When the daughter speaks the pronoun 'I', – the 'I' of the addressor, which is in fact the mother's subject position – the daughter takes on the role of the addressor, the mother. The mother's 'I' becomes intertwined with the daughter's subjectivity to form an 'intrapsychic' relationship wherein the 'I' of the m/other is a part of one's (the daughter's) self. But, at the same time as the daughter reads her mother's tongue – the words of her mother in her own voice – the daughter represents the necessary distance between the two women. As Akerman and Hatoum name themselves – the 'little girl' of the letters – they are marking their 'intersubjective' difference from their mothers. The separation between the daughter's subjectivity and the internalized and externalized m/other through visual, linguistic and oral representations embodies the intimate distance of translation. (I have borrowed the terms 'intrapsychic' and 'intersubjective' from the work of the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, 1995, 1998).
5. On translation as a mode, see Benjamin (1992[1955]). See also Derrida (1985a[1982], 1985b) and De Man (1986).
6. Akerman also uses the palimpsest for these purposes in *D'Est* (1995). For an analysis of this work see for instance Halbreich et al. (1995) and Lebow (2003).
7. Interestingly, this is also the affect of listening to Akerman reading from her autobiographical novel *Une Famille à Bruxelles* (1998), a story that narrates the death of Akerman's father from her mother's point of view. The intimate distance is particularly noticeable when the pronoun which allocates the mother's point of view – the 'I' – slips and becomes the daughter's, and she takes on her mother's role and voice. For an alternative reading of the 'I' see Margulies (1996); and for the letter see Longfellow (1989).
8. On the female voice and the cinema, see Silverman (1988).

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