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Perspectives on Eco-Translation in Diane Ackerman (The Zookeeper’s Wife) and Kapka Kassabova (Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe)

Abstract: The present article takes into account a current trend in the translation studies that reconsiders anthropocentric thinking about translation – as Michael Cronin, one of the leading theoreticians of this movement believes, communication systems have to be made effective against the threatening prospects of an imminent ecological crisis. Central to this expanded vision of translation is the idea that communication is not the exclusive “property” of humanity, but a natural means of interaction that characterizes the lives and being of all planetary forms of existence (including landscapes and geological sites). In other words, the Earth itself is held together by impulses of verbal and non-verbal communication, and human beings are just members of this infinitely extended, but effectively operating communicative space that Cronin refers to as “tradosphere”. While this is just the beginning of a challenging, exciting and meaningful re-routing of the conventional modes of thinking about translation, I aim to explore how this planetary consciousness can be employed as a critical instrument in reading narratives of suffering and survival. It is in such survival stories that human integrity is tested both psychologically and physically as physical menace strips human characters of their cultural identities and relocates them in the immense network of cross-species communication.

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“Translation studies are undergoing a dramatic turn” is a statement that makes the titles and haunts the introductory pages of quite a few critical writings on the evolution of translation. Significantly, this transformation announces a decadent stage in the anthropocentric thinking about translation – as Michael Cronin, one of the leading theoreticians of this movement believes, communication systems have to be made effective against the threatening prospects of an imminent ecological crisis.¹

Cronin, along with other pioneers in this field, takes efforts to navigate translation studies as quickly as possible “towards a post-anthropocentric relationship to the world, vital for any notion of ecological survival” (16), i.e. he and fellow scholars see the future of the discipline – its methodology, mentality, tools and practice – not only bound to the noble purposes of intercultural communication, but urgently needed to possibly prevent and cope with the vital purpose of physical survival. Switched to this expedient “SOS” mode, the theory and practice of translation are expected to operate as adequately and efficiently as they do to cope with communicative predicaments due to cultural difference and conflict resolution. More than that, however, the new turn in translation studies (which has been in circulation for the recent decades) and which has apparently borrowed much from the postcolonial terminology, seeks to navigate the human-centred vision of translatability to a planet-centred agency where communication is not the exclusive “property” of humanity, but a natural means of interaction that characterizes the lives and being of all planetary forms of existence (including landscapes and geological sites). In other words, the Earth itself is held together by impulses of verbal and non-verbal communication, and human beings are just members of this infinitely extended, but effectively operating communicative space that Cronin refers to as “tradosphere”. While this is just the beginning of a challenging, exciting and meaningful re-routing of the conventional and recently revised modes of thinking about translation, I will attempt to explore how this planetary consciousness can be employed as a critical instrument in reading narratives of suffering and survival. It is in such survival stories that

human integrity is tested both psychologically and physically as physical menace strips human characters of their cultural identities and relocates them in the immense network of cross-species communication. Such patterns of survival also presuppose partial rehabilitation of the natural instincts in humans which further undermine the anthropocentric focus of the narration in search of a more effective inter-species communication.

I will attempt to illustrate how this revised form of nature-bound humanity survives in narratives of excessive violence and suffering inflicted on humans due to their ethnic/cultural difference. My point is that while most critical readings of such works approach human suffering as the focaliser of a grossly offensive political situation, the new turn in translation studies makes it possible to translate human suffering into the entire network of elements that are integrated in the suffering – it spreads across genetic borders and spills over all forms of humanity and all living forms across the planet. Furthermore, its repercussions go forth in the future in the form of traumatic memories for the future generations, spilled blood soaks into the earth and continues to speak (as we will see in Kapka Kassabova’s insightful dissection of the buried border in Strandja mountain).

Another benefit of adopting eco-criticism and the concept of the *tradosphere* in narratives of suffering is that this expanded critical awareness can further illuminate and cooperate with the theories of victimhood and victimization to explore the psychological potential of cross-species communication. To make this point clearer, I will refer to Anja Müller’s inspiring talk at a conference on Eastern Europe. In it, she reflects on the work of two migrant Anglophone writers – Rana Dasgupta and Miroslav Penkov (of Bulgarian origin) – whose fictional characters experience severe loss but are capable of coping with it by refusing to stay trapped in the quicksand of memory and nostalgia. Instead of embracing the nostalgic remembrance of the past as a form of stability against the ruinous present, they experience it, but only briefly, sufficiently enough to mobilise their energies and wish for a forward-looking mode of survival. This is how Müller describes this controversial experience:

With their diametrically opposed temporal orientation, nostalgia and survival can have reciprocal effects on each other. As long as the focus is placed on nostalgia, the past dominates both the present and the future; survival may become legitimate only for the sake of remembrance. This retrospective form of nostalgia is the form that is generally
characterised as an inconsequential, idealising social or cultural “disease” of sorts. If the focus is placed on survival, however, the time trajectory is reversed and the present and future are foregrounded. This directional shift does not automatically eclipse the past, suppress memory and nostalgia or obliterate loss [...] while retaining a connection to the past; yet this connection to the past is transformed into a productive impulse whereas the paralysing effects nostalgia are gradually overcome.²

I suggest that Diane Ackerman (with a Polish trace in her ancestry)³ and Bulgarian-born Anglophone Kapka Kassabova present cross-species communication as a mighty impulse for moving forward beyond the excessively problematic temporality of a traumatic past. In Ackerman’s novel the zoo operates as symbolic, but also tangible Noah’s ark that transports animals and humans alike through the Holocaust disaster; and in Kassabova’s travelogue Nature that invites ancient rituals of cleansing is part of the self-healing potential of the place where the easternmost borderline of the Iron Curtain used to lie.

Ackerman’s writing – poetry, prose and non-fiction – in all its variety and forms, is held together by a truly interdisciplinary impulse to claim human space from a much wider, cosmic-driven eco-system of relationships. The ending of her “anthropocentric story” in *Dawn Light*, for example, renders the cycle of human life as only an element of a larger circular movement: “Nature surrounds, permeates, effervesces in, and includes us. At the end of our days it deranges and disassembles us like old toys banished to the basement. There, once living beings, we return to our nonliving elements, but we still and forever remain a part of nature” (3). This organically defined natural human identity is affirmed against adversity by its interconnection to the larger network of protection. At the same time, animal instincts can be unlocked in times of crises and may take the form of violent, predatory pursuit. Whatever the case, the complex aspects of interspecies relationships are an example of Cronin’s “tradosphere” where species are translated into other species and this translation acquires the communicative value of survival.

² Cited from Anja Müller’s presentation ‘I would be nothing without you’: Survival and Failure in Rana Dasgupta’s Solo and Miroslav Penkov’s East of the West at the 7th Euroacademia International Conference “Re-inventing Eastern Europe”, 2019.

³ It is in our friendly academic conversations with Prof. Dr. habil Margreta Grigorova that I found encouragement and inspiration to embark on my reading of Ackerman’s novel. I am particularly indebted to her profound discernment of the cultural landscape of war narratives in/about Poland, which is her current academic interest.
The Zookeeper’s Wife, itself a translated story (Ackerman, whose maternal descent is Polish, rummaged through Polish diaries, newspapers and other recordings in her research of the zoo in Warsaw to write her English story), tells about the war time Jan Zabinski, the director of the zoo, and his wife Antonina spent helping over 300 Jews to escape Nazi persecution by keeping them as transit guests in the animal cages of the zoo. Ackerman takes us into the Warsaw ghetto and the 1943 Jewish uprising, and also describes the Polish revolt against the Nazi occupiers in 1944. She introduces us to a variety of characters such as Lutz Heck, the treacherous head of the Berlin zoo; Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, spiritual head of the ghetto; and the leaders of Zegota, the Polish organization that rescued Jews. But most of all, the novel explores the potential of human-animal interaction in times of danger and suffering, and how this interaction engenders modes of survival that rely on the ability to identify danger and handle it. This ability develops more or less successfully with the intensity of the human-animal symbiosis, taking its utmost form in hybrid, interspecies identities.

On many occasions in the novel, for instance, Antonina Zabinska (the zookeeper’s wife) is portrayed as a skilful mediator between humans and animals. A lot of problematic and delicate animals in the zoo are consigned to her care and nursing, as she can “speak”, “understand” and translate animal language. Significantly, her “translation” skills are not fully disconnected from the anthropocentric paradigm (her exceptional sensitivity is a key to human survival in the expanded human-animal space of the zoo), but they do subvert the binary human-animal relationship into a multitude of hybrid, inter-species forms of communication. As Jan, her husband and one of the leaders of the underground resistance, observes, “She’s so sensitive, she’s almost able to read their minds... She becomes them... She has a precise and very special gift, a way of observing and understanding animals that’s rare, a sixth sense” (26). In another eloquent observation of Antonina's flexibility with both animals and humans, she is compared to the warrior mermaid, the emblematic guardian of Warsaw, “Not an outlandish image in a city whose age-old symbol was half woman, half animal: a mermaid brandishing a sword. As she said, the zoo quickly became her „green kingdom of animals on the right side of the Vistula River“ (28). A lot of other cross-species identities develop in Ackerman’s narrative and almost all human characters in the novel have their animal “selves” – thus Ryszard, Antonina’s son, is named after a Catholic saint, but his nickname, Ryś, is the Polish word...
Petya Tsoneva, *Perspectives on Eco-Translation in Diane Ackerman (“The Zookeeper’s Wife”)...*

for a lynx; and as the zoo, half-destroyed, adapts to war life, for safety reasons, a whole camouflage system develops of naming the human guests of the zoo with animal names,

[...:] the Żabińskis devised two schemes that worked throughout the war—hiding Guests either in the hollows of the villa or in the old animal cages, sheds, and enclosures. (143)

Ryś sneaked plates and bowls upstairs and downstairs, one after the other. Sometimes Jan or Antonina would tell him: “The lions need to be fed,” or the “pheasants,” “peacocks,” and so on, and Ryś would carry food to the caged Guests (217) [... “And it’s so funny having a lynx guard the pheasants. It would make a good fairy tale, wouldn’t it?” (254)

This process of naming can be seen as a form of subversive translation in which the anthropocentric model of the Biblical genesis – “the language of [human] dominion over the other animals and Adam’s explicit charge to name the animals” (39), as Phillip Sherman insightfully observes – is appropriated to name humans by the names bestowed upon animals. Thus, Ackerman’s study of human nature in times of crisis departs from the anthropocentric perspective, in variable degrees, and adopts, instead, interdisciplinary methods and tools to explore and rehabilitate animal instincts in a culturally detached form of humanity. She formulates her task clearly at the beginning of the novel: “Antonina felt convinced that people needed to connect more with their animal nature, but also that animals «long for human company, reach out for human attention», with a yearning that’s somehow reciprocal” (34). This expanded vision of humanity as a participant in a larger network of communication is vital in the survival stories of the characters.

The symbiotic survival of animals and humans against the atrocity of war, and their collective suffering produce a number of hybrid, but particularly vigorous life forms that stand against the violently imposed models of ethnic supremacy, and the more general models of species hierarchy. Thus, due to their prolonged clandestine coexistence on the zoo premises, humans develop or, rather, recover a lot of survival instincts of wild animals, while animals acquire some strange human habits. On one such occasion, the arctic hare Wicek whose natural diet is exclusively vegetarian, becomes carnivorous and particularly fond of human food, “Naturally vegetarian ... Wicek preferred stealing a horse cutlet or slice of beef, and bouncing away to devour it in a shadowy corner” (164).
In a reciprocal manner, the human inhabitants of the zoo reinvent the extraordinary potential of this uncommon living space to hide from stringent military surveillance outside. As a result, they elaborate a whole system of camouflage techniques including renaming, the earlier-mentioned use of animal code-names, the ability to sniff danger from afar, to be quiet and vigilant, to keep composure in critical situations, to remain invisible by mimicking the surroundings. On one occasion Jan rescues a friend from the Ghetto only because he manages to mask his anxiety by exceptional self-control. On another occasion, Antonina has a similar experience with inquisitive German soldiers. “The animal world thrives on ploy and counterploy” (147), Ackerman observes at the beginning of chapter 16, and the “roomy”, “bucolic” and even “zany” (115) life in the zookeepers’ villa translates this vital principle into its “hodgepodge of eccentric people and animals” (119) protected from suspicious gaze by the best camouflage possible – the sincerity of its glass walls. In all cases, the transformation of the zoo into a carefully navigated “Noah’s ark” is made possible by the numerous instances of cross-species translation in which humans are able to feel, understand, and reclaim their natural identities from within their culturally inscribed selves. In this process, human camouflage techniques that are “switched on” in the survival mode turn out to be the tactical translation of olfactory signals, smells, cries, colours or silence – communicative elements so common for the repertoire of animals.

Bulgarian-born Anglophone writer Kapka Kassabova is another contemporary writer who turns to nature in an attempt to transform and possibly alleviate politically inflicted and collectively experienced trauma. As Tsoneva observes in her comparative analysis of Nicholson and Kassabova,

Though the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria did not end in such outbursts of violence, politically designed and state-imposed nationalism expanded to threatening ends in numerous zones of invisibility such as the peripheral borderlands. The border area between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey was a corridor to freedom and death for those who would opt to pass through the Iron Curtain. Making it the focal point of her journey and the ensuing travelogue, titled Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe, Kassabova attempts to observe, from within the invisibility of buried trauma, the workings of a regime whose façade identified with a slogan reading “Socialism with a human face”, obtaining much insight from local stories and from her own crossing of the now “sleepy” border in many directions. The local stories she weaves into her narrative belong to witnesses, sufferers, survivors,
family members of victims, most of whom themselves migrants, more or less comfortably settled on one or the other side of the border after ethnic persecution, ungrounded police arrests, false incrimination on accusations of spying, or as a sequence of the sorrowful expulsion of ethnic minorities (like Turks or Pomaks) during the notorious Great Excursion of 1989. Collecting local stories at a time when the rigid border has started to fray, overgrown by a primordial forest or dissolved in mythic, ritual space (ember-dancing rites of purification in Strandja mountain, healing springs, the flight of doves over the Valley of Roses), perforates the space and time of a contemporary sovereign state attempting to reconcile it to its aching anachronistic fringes. (81)

In this process, Kassabova is not only concerned with the capacity of human language to speak out the traumatic memories of the past in a therapeutic anamnesis which she encourages in her interviewees. Along with the verbal rituals of “cleansing” she performs with the very effort of telling the silenced stories of local people, Kassabova translates other, non-verbal messages in her text. Entire chapters deal with culturally enshrined natural sites, like Strandja Mountain, for example, or the stories a cheshma (stone fountain) can tell in human words. The interaction of nature and culture is not uncommon in literature, but here it takes the form of a healing mediation between unspeakable human suffering and its possible translation into non-verbal modes of confession. If people are unwilling to tell their stories, because of the burden they carry along, they can confer them to stones, water wells, and to the earth itself.

But the constant interaction between nature and the remains of what used to be an area of violent border control serves other purposes in Kassabova’s narrative as well, one of which is closely linked with the attempts to release violently established human impositions from their political, ideological and ethnic confines. Such a rehabilitation of border areas forms part of a recent academic attempt to provide an interdisciplinary platform for theorizing border space that integrates border theory, border studies, translation studies and ecocritical theories. This approach has already been successfully adopted by scholars like Julia Ditter in her article “Reading Scotland’s Borders through the Environment”, where she argues that

Ecocritical approaches take into account the multiple interdependencies between bordering processes and environmental concerns, outlining the affordances of literature in
the negotiation of this connection. Examining the correlation between borders and the environment through literature may provide an alternative pathway to approach these questions through narratives that prompt a questioning of the basic premises and paradigms underlying our current understanding of borders and “nature”.  

Another recently published critical investigation, Jopi Nyman’s comparative reading of Kapka Kassabova and Ben Judah, likewise suggests that our understanding and conceptual models of border areas will only be partially complete, if we fail to consider the ongoing processes of *debordering*, or, the processes of “negotiating and reassessing” (2) the potential of the border to operate as a site of dynamic encounters, i.e. to be flexible, porous and permeable; to enable connectivity through translation. Contrary to some obsolete, conservative models of bordered enclosures that rest on hopes of a fixed, sheltered existence; “debordering” embraces the idea that border areas are sites where cultures and identities are “in the making,” and difference is a vital survival principle for the communities that inhabit them.

I suggest that this dynamic principle is instrumental in Kassabova’s semi-fictional return to her origins. While it works against the political and ideological effects of violent bordering as part of the populist propaganda of the communist past, it also operates as an active, invigorating means of reclaiming the once traumatic border zone as a site of new beginnings. In this process, the vocabulary of political, ideological and ethnic division becomes inadequate to the larger translation processes that take place in the border zone and its tradosphere – the deliberate terms of “othering” ethnic and national difference in the past times of severe nationalism become a “minor language” compared to the more potent and prolific languages of myth, ritual and earth-bound self-awareness.

In *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* Kassabova underscores the ephemerality of the politically and ideologically instituted “last post” of the Communist bloc and translates it into the language of a non-verbal, transcendental, primordial expanse. This liminal space that goes beyond political authorisation encompasses an old pagan ritual of fire-walking/dancing, shared between Southeast Bulgaria and Northern Greece (*nestinarstvo/anestenaria*), and its symbolic performance of death and resurrection; the mysterious presence of dragon-like fiery

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4 See her article published in ResearchGate at tinyurl.com/bp62-tso-1. Pageless edition.
flying objects whose supernatural appearance is part of the magical repertoire of Stranja mountain; and some stories that cut across the more plausible but less optimistic political narratives. One of them testifies to the vain efforts of a team of scientists led by Ludmilla Zhivkova, a major proponent of intercultural contacts in communist times, to uncover the relics of an Egyptian princess. In Kassabova’s memoir this borderscape is anything but a fixed location. It constantly shifts its form and meaning, meandering in-between myth and reality, political ideology and popular legends, culture and nature. She observes how the border takes a different turn with every new story or remembrance she records from the local people’s accounts that constitute the bulk of her writing. To feed them into a consistent narrative, she also refers to her own, personal story of displacement across national borders. The most viable effect of these constant transformations is the persistent process of debordering that takes place with the attempt to rephrase fleeting political definitions by referring them to the permanence of earth and nature. This move illustrates the dissolution of politically imposed and ideologically justified models of borderline identities which give way to visions of the superiority of nature.

In the very first lines of her Preface to the book, Kassabova makes it clear that the border opens an elusive space of confluence and simultaneity, and is an excellent example of heterotopia, the term that Michel Foucault refers to places that are “here and now” but point to elsewhere. In Kassabova’s words,

This book tells the human story of the last border of Europe. It is where Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey converge and diverge, borders being what they are. It is also where something like Europe begins and something else ends which isn’t quite Asia. This is roughly the geography of it, but the map will only take you so far before you find yourself in the ancestral forest that teems with shadows and lives out of time. That is where I ended up going anyway. (xv)

Even at this early stage of the narration, it becomes evident that the narrator’s journey will not lead her to a definite location, at least not only to the decaying border post that used to be one of the most vigilant checkpoints of severe control across Europe. In its contemporary state, however, the place turns out to be

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5 See Foucault’s seminal research Of Other Spaces. Utopias and Heterotopias (1986).
multiply displaced by memories (outspoken and silenced), depopulation and
the omnipotent return of wild nature. It is, however, significant, that even in
political terms, the exact location of this marginal land patch remains uncertain,
occupying the in-between of where “something like Europe” is supposed to begin
and “something else which isn’t quite Asia” is expected to end. Of course, this
geographical instability is partially a matter of perspective, but it also reflects
the fact that what renders even the most severe and rigid borderline flexible is
a quality of the imagination – its capacity to enshrine or shun factual reality due
to the intensity of the experienced time and place. The “ancestral forest” that re-
claims the vestiges of human-imposed division, and human mind that is willing
to remember or to forget the atrocities of the past, join efforts in the production of
a border space that borders on the infinitude. It teems with “shadows”, burgeons
and expands in Kassabova’s own narrative effort and in all the local stories of
witnesses or their descendants that recollect only glimpses of the experienced
trauma, blurring or magnifying them by the twists and turns of family/genera-
tional memory.

This is how border space expands into a mental space, modified by a plethora
of other complications due to controversial historical accounts and the general
entanglement of fact and fiction, reality and myth in the melting pot of Balkan
history, and this mentally produced border zone relates to an equally expanded
vision of Nature and the universe. As I observed earlier in this paper, in my crit-
ical reading of Ackerman’s novel, times of crisis tend to produce hybrid forms of
identity not only through cross-species encounters, but mostly through awakening
of an expanded planetary consciousness in which humans perceive their instru-
mental, but not overarching role in drawing lines of power across the surface of
the earth. Tim (Timothy) Ingold who studies borderlines from the perspectives
of anthropology, insightfully remarks that human lines (traces or trails) are not
solitary imprints in a sterile space.6 They intersect with other lines left by
animals, plants, water wells, and all other innumerable inhabitants of a particular
living space. These intersections form the structure of Kassabova’s narrative and
produce the vantage points from where she addresses her message to the readers.

One of the crossways where limited human existence meets the natural/
supernatural expanse in her travelogue is the above-mentioned ritual of barefoot

Petya Tsoneva, *Perspectives on Eco-Translation in Diane Ackerman (“The Zookeeper’s Wife”)*...

dancing on burning embers. Kassabova employs it as a mighty vehicle of releasing accumulated suffering. She provides a detailed, vivid description of the mysterious ritual (still practiced in a few villages in Strandja mountain), which follows a special preparation calendar, instruments and places of consecration – the “opening” of *agiazmi* (sacred water wells) in May, places where the icons are sanctified and left to rest (*konaks*), the obligatory *kurban* (sacrificial offering of an animal as a substitute for human sacrifice to plead for the mercy of the gods); and a *drum* or/and a *bagpipe* to charge the rhythm of the dance and facilitate the dancers’ *seizure* (fall into trance). Only some of the *nestinari* are “called” to enter the fire as fire-walkers and dancers, but all who belong to this unorthodox religious community undergo the preparation process according to the ritual calendar. It culminates on St. Constantine and St. Elena’s Day (celebrated by the Orthodox church on 21st May) when the fire-dancers perform their dance and make prophecies about the future. While the ritual claims the patronage of Orthodox Christian saints, it definitely maintains and resurrects earlier pagan practices linked with solar worship and the seasonal cycle of life. Kassabova dwells on some hypotheses about its origins:

“It’s obvious,” Marina said. “Today is the fire festival of Saints Constantine and Elena. They are just a variation of the double cult of the Earth Goddess and her son and lover the Sun God. Representations of the Dionysian–Apollonian duality at the heart of fire worship. The solar and the chthonic come together. Briefly. They can only come together briefly.” (35)

While this hypothesis relates *anastenaria* to ancient Greek cults, another, local theory suggests that

the Hesychast monks of Paroria could have been the original anastenarides. After all, there are similarities: the intense meditation, the change in body temperature, the dissolving of the ego and the communion with a divine energy. There are also the gestures: just as the Hesychast monks practised a rocking meditation, so there was a custom here (lost in the demographic chaos of the Balkan Wars) where the anastenarides rocked and banged their heads with icons of the Virgin Mary. Finally, the material symbols: in old nestinar icons, Saint Marina walks on a fire-red ground as snakes come out of her skirts, and the Virgin Mary is dressed in red. Red like the ‘dress’ of the icons today, red like the
mantles of Saints Constantine and Elena. The monks of Paroria were scattered by the soldiers of Islam in the 1350s, but could they have left this secret legacy to the civilian population? (40)

In this way, the ritual can possibly stand for a deeper, individual and collective spiritual experience that amounts to being “inside the collective unconscious” (40). Among its many cultural and ethnographic meanings, anastenaria represents a form of interaction which involves human dissolution and rebirth from the fiery depths of a living universe. It follows the steps of ritual cleansing that can be observed in the practices of most “primitive” cultures, like the Hebrew Day of Atonement with its sacrificial animal offering as a collective atonement for human sin. After all, the result of these culturally diverse patterns of worship, is the same – god and the worshipper must become one (at-one-ment) to ensure the continuation of life. The same principle regulates the fiery “death” (seizure) and resurrection (awakening to new life) performed by the nestinari. Significantly, while they are in a trance-like state, they are often heard hissing like snakes (in a metamorphic animal-human state) and making prophecies about the future as they, being united to divine or possibly chthonic deities, are able to benefit from far-reaching vision. Thus, as is common among renovation rituals, such practices serve to guarantee that the past will not be disconnected from the future, that the present moment of suffering is needed to ensure that the end will engender a new beginning.

When applied to alleviate collectively experienced trauma, this mechanism of individual and collective purification may operate as a major instrument of translation of human suffering into non-verbal languages that transmit it to a “listening”, understanding and healing Nature. As Kassabova points out, taking record of the words of a local nestinar woman-ethnographer

“Fire and water,” Marina said. “It’s collective therapy. Without it, people would go mad.”
She went on: “Fire and water. Purifying but destructive. Which is why those who go into the fire have to channel something.” “Channel what?” “Suffering,” Marina said and stubbed out her cigarette on a tree root. “We all know suffering. But to come through it,

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As we observed in Ackerman’s novel, interspecies hybridity is a sign of enhanced vigour and a vital survival principle.
come through fire and water and allow the rest of us to do it too – that’s why the passion for fire isn’t passed down in the family. Because it’s knowledge from elsewhere.” (36)

In the contemporary world, to admit that there is knowledge “from elsewhere” means to recognize human dependence on a higher authority that takes shape in the meaningful interaction of culture and nature. After all, Kassabova’s “border” in her eponymous work is such a place, but it likewise stands for the capacity of nature to subsume the ephemeral workings of human violence and to translate them into healed, new beginnings.

In conclusion, what binds Kassabova’s travelogue to Ackerman’s memoir is that both narratives are concerned with strategies of survival that are borrowed and reworked from beyond human political, cultural and historical “aching” space. In both cases, the ability of stepping forward into a meaningful present and future is reclaimed from a larger, more stable and potent communicative system of relationships where the will for life activates the primary impulses for survival. In this process, the permanence of earth, water, the heavenly globe constitutes a forgotten narrative of life’s essentials that translates and is translated by human traumatic experience into an expanded system of cross-species interaction. Going back to Michael Cronin’s Introduction to eco-translation, he refers to this system as “tradosphere”, and I will end with his illuminating explanation of the term,

The notion of “tradosphere” is advanced to capture the different forms of translation implied by the multiple connections between the organic and the inorganic. In order to develop any sense of solidarity with other species in a period of unprecedented mass extinction of other species by humans, inter-species relatedness demands reflection on translation, how to communicate across difference. (5)

These relationships are best revealed in times of disaster or crisis when human belonging to a larger, suprasystem of communication, becomes a vital survival must.

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