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Exophonic Ecopoetics as a Transformative Force: Concepts and Illustrations

In the world of transnational literature that increasingly accommodates contemporary East European poetry of displacement, composing literary texts in English as a second, foreign, or an additional language has become a multifaceted strategy of personal survival, economic prosperity, cultural and academic exchange, political witnessing, and social critique. Writing beyond their mother tongues, voicing themselves from the outside, from a distance, or serving as foreign insiders and domestic outsiders, exophonic or non-native writers of literature in English seem to be extending the global poetic field in ways that involve various social and environmental concerns. Illustrating my claims with some of the ecologically-aware poems or lines authored by Bulgarian-born Kapka Kassabova and Yugoslav-born Charles Simic, I attempt to demonstrate how contemporary poetry of displacement, due to its attention to place and global mobility, emerges as equally preoccupied with environmental and social transformations on local and global levels. I also explore the potential of such poetry to create a dynamic platform at which ecopoetics and exophonic writing converge in producing poetry that simultaneously contains traditional elements of nature poetry, acknowledges contemporary concepts of natureculture and unnatural ecopoetics, and estranges itself through claiming familiarity with another language. Drawing upon Sarah Nolan's definition of "unnatural ecopoetics" and its experimental potential, I propose considering the concept of "exophonic ecopoetics" when referring to contemporary poetry of displacement, its translingual features, and ecological concerns.

Key words: exophonic ecopoetics, poetry of displacement, East European poetry in English, Kapka Kassabova, Charles Simic

In most of her early poems from the collections *All Roads Lead to the Sea* (1997) and *Dismemberment* (1998), published in New Zealand and republished in the UK, along with her most recent work, Bulgarian-born Kapka Kassabova in *Someone else's life* (2003) tackles variously intertwined contemporary issues of identity, place, displacement, and environmental estrangement. A polyglot writer who emigrated from Bulgaria at the age of 17, only to find her temporary or more permanent homes in New Zealand, France, Germany, Argentina, India, and the UK, she speaks Bulgarian, Russian, French, and English. As a poet, she claims that reading and composing poems is the easiest way into a new language because it is in poetry that she finds her voice ("Kapka", 01:28-01:30). Referring to her displaced family as "economic migrants" and "accept[ing] the label of migrant for herself," Kassabova claims that being displaced serves as a "motivating factor in her creativity" ("Interview" 135).

Unlike political migrants, exiles and refugees, who have often preferred to articulate displacement in their mother tongues since "the very attempt at verbalizing [their] memory in a foreign language not only extends [their] melancholy phase but defers a resolution" (Aleksić 171), English-writing Kassabova can be partly observed through the lens of Julia Kristeva's "happy foreigner" (3–4) who, like a Braidottian nomadic globetrotter, appears to be rootless and self-sufficient. However, while Kassabova's displacement is voluntary and economically based, it can be argued that her early poems reflect the speaker's intention to self-translate the "immigrant pain" (Hron 39–40) attached to most newcomers' perceptions of social and environmental changes. While Kristeva vividly depicts one's mother tongue as "the language of the past that withers without ever leaving you" (15), which obviously complicates and challenges the position of non-native-speaker writers in relation to the mental blueprints of their mother tongues, she also defines the new, additional language as just another instrument or a device providing polyglots with a new body, however artificial and sublimated it may be. Kristeva calls the new language "a resurrection" during which one gets a "new skin," "new

sex," and a realm of (productive) silence that bridges the two languages (15–16). While the new-skin identity achieved through displacement and writing in a foreign language often signifies entrance into a realm of possibilities that promises reinvention and empowerment, it also enables the verbalization of cultural differences and social actualities within broader civilizational contexts. Thus the enthusiastic thinking foreigner, striving for more authenticity, usually merges their personal (un)happiness with collective positions of mostly underprivileged individuals, voicing an array of global concerns in a new language acquired through geographical displacement.

The new language as a reluctantly discussed creative writing tool has undergone many namings, passing through diverse phases of otherness, anotherness, secondness, foreignness, non-nativeness, and externality. Inspired by the Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada while addressing the importance of naming the new language in a more inclusive and general way, Chantal Wright (38) observes that creative experiments with additional languages have not been adequately defined. Acknowledging that authors who write beyond their mother tongues need a comprehensive term of their own due to the generally innovative stylistic features of their work or unique experiences of other languages and cultures, she finds the term *exophonic writers* and *exophony* as more appropriate than *non-native-speaker writers* and *hyphenated writers*. According to Wright, exophonic authors' "childhoods were spent in other languages, [which] makes itself felt in their [target language] writing" (38). Although the writers' exophony may not imply anything about their background, exophonic writing, according to Stephen Slemon, "allows for comparative study of the phenomenon of exophony across linguistic boundaries, while always bearing in mind 'the local'" (qtd. in Wright 40).

Reading Kassabova's poems of immigration at the intersections between environmentally and textually defined concepts of place and space, land and memory, experience and language, emplacement and displacement, and illustrating my discussion with references to other poets who originate

from Eastern Europe, I will argue that contemporary poetry of displacement has its roots and prospects in simultaneous focusing on nature and social transformations, which suggests its possible contextualization within the fields of ecopoetics and exophonic writing. I will also explore the potential of transnational poetry of displacement to create a dynamic platform at which ecopoetics and exophonics converge in producing poetry that at the same time contains traditional elements of nature poetry, acknowledges concepts of natureculture and unnatural ecopoetics, and estranges itself through claiming familiarity with another language.

According to Lynn Keller, traditional nature writing tended to "position nature as something apart from the human," which was usually achieved by insisting on "elegiac or nostalgic" poetic texts that were not fully aware of the importance of "renovat[ing] language to foster more sustainable relations to the planet and its inhabitants" (581). The need to "renovate" language was also felt almost a decade earlier, with Lawrence Buell noticing that "environmental criticism's working conception of 'environment' has broadened in recent years from 'natural' to include also the urban, the interweave of 'built' and 'natural' dimensions in every locale, and the interpenetration of the local and global" (12). Paying particular attention to whether "local toponymy, vernacularization, and indigenous names for uniquely native species" are foregrounded in nature writing, Buell also reveals that "language never replicates extratextual landscapes, but it can be bent toward or away from them" (33). Based on this, along with Sarah Nolan's more recent ideas of "unnatural ecopoetics" that incorporate a necessity for language experimentation because "contemporary poets do not live in a world where nature is distinguishable from culture" (28), it may be timely to speak about exophonic ecopoetics as something that increasingly resonates with worldwide migrations in a transnational world, where poets seem to globalize or glocalize themselves by being displaced, newly local and renovating English as a global language.

As part of her poetry cycle "Place," Kapka Kassabova's two-stanza poem "My life in two parts" is clearly illustrative of the potential of displacement texts to incorporate voicing from outside with environmental observations and concerns. The poet juxtaposes two lands and cultures, identifying the Balkans as her place of origin while the other geographical destination remains unnamed:

1
Outside my window is a row of poplars
growing from the turf of childhood.
Poplars grow in rows, never on their own.
It is Christmas. The sky is full of stars,
the branches are bare,
the wolves distant and menacing.
Now is the only time for oranges.
Their brisk fragrance fills the nails
as we lie in cold rooms high in the Balkans
dreaming of palm trees and the world.

2
Outside my window is a palm tree.
It is winter. The sky is enormous
and the ocean follows the moon.
Oranges are on the window-sill with other
tropical fruit no longer of interest.
Bright-plumed parakeets sway in the palm tree
and that's the only time I look up.
I lie in the low, stuffy rooms of adulthood
dreaming of poplars and the world.
Always, they come in rows.

(*Someone else's life* 12)

To make sense of relocation desire expressed through yearning for differently unattainable landscapes, the poem relies on a dual nature of

things, but its two mirroring parts, strictly divided by being numbered, seem to project uneven reflections and non-binary specificities of place. The neatly separated windows, however distant, conjoin to accommodate a single poetic voice that feeds on the tropes of memory and outsideness. Oranges are both a festive luxury and a daily treat. Poplars are at the same time tangible and out of reach. Continents apart, similarly connoted feelings of highness and lowness are simultaneously inside and outside, and the speaker capitalizes on the cultural duplicities of home and abroad that are, according to the poet herself, best expressed in a language not one's own. While perceptions of nature and environment evidently depend on geopolitical differences between the two places, the "cold" Balkans and an "enormous" sky / ocean, the former named and the latter nameless but marked as "tropical" and therefore both foreign and familiar, Kassabova does not get a clearer vision of her native poplars only because she reimagines them from spatial, temporal, and situational distances, or because she simply juxtaposes them with palm trees. She is primarily creating a new literary value by choosing to self-translate her former surroundings within expanding spaces of another language, which resonates with Buell's claim that language cannot replicate extratextual landscapes (33), but that it can possibly modify and recreate our perceptions of them, particularly through exophonic expression.

Anglo-American ecocritical interventions in the concepts of place and space as both poetic and physical texts have become more prominent in the last two or three decades. In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between language and the physical environment" that "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii), with "one foot in literature and the other on land" (xix). In a similar vein, W. H. New observes land as a conglomeration of place and text in which "people read place in words" or "as words," while words themselves can be read "as place" because of their physical dimensions and an ability to occupy space and transform through relocation (165). Acknowledging the significance of "the place-space framework in interacting

with ecological texts" in general, and ecopoetry in particular, Scott J. Bryson suggests that ecopoetic texts challenge prevalent humanocentric attitudes towards the rest of nature by *creat[ing] place* and *valu[ing] space* in recognition of environmental vastness and diversity (5, 8). Claiming that ecopoems represent "a new movement in poetry" (3) that simultaneously converses with traditional nature poetry and goes beyond it by problematizing contemporary world issues, Bryson emphasizes the relevance of "place-making" and "space-consciousness" for creating a balanced and harmonized ecotext (18). While ecopoetics can thus stretch from "topophiliac devotion to the places we inhabit" (12) to a sense of placelessness that favors space over place (21), it can also be approached from additional perspectives, two of them being "topological" and "ethnological" (Skinner 128, 129). According to Skinner, ethnological ecopoetics transcends boundaries by looking beyond Western languages and cultures in order to bring fresh insights and attitudes through "an act of translation" (129). The ethnological approach combined with Gillen Wood's remark that literary texts in their complexity are comparable to the biosciences by being "multiscalar" in their treatment of variously connoted objects, while "draw[ing] their character from the expressive diversity of language" and its "allusive webs" to create "a powerful estranging effect" (10), can as well contribute to a better understanding of exophonic ecopoetics. Wood's statement that "social history . . . is ecological in character rather than simply dramatic or ideological" considers equalities of social and natural factors in shaping a large yet underestimated "socio-environmental nexus" (6) that embraces human and nonhuman communities, globality and alterity.

In her article on the international turn in ecocriticism that greatly expanded the scope of environmental literary criticism after 2000 by focusing on world literature along with traditionally more explored British and American literary works, Ursula K. Heise stresses the importance of "the interface of human and nonhuman systems," stating that cultural communities, social practices, and ecological conditions shape one another to an almost equal measure (8). Heise's perception of the global dynamics of cultural and en-

vironmental resources builds upon what Adamson and Slovic term as a new third wave of ecocriticism, "which recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries" (6). Observing that "multi-ethnic groups from around the world are increasingly entering the conversation about ecocriticism on their own terms by producing artistic expressions of their responses to the natural world" (10), Adamson and Slovic also draw attention to "American ethnic writers, who are often voluntarily or involuntarily placed and displaced" (11). They also highlight Lawrence Buell's call on ecocritics to embark on explaining "the ways in which migration and diaspora complicate traditional understandings of the sense of place" (16). From this perspective, the inclusion of emigrant writing in ecocritical preoccupations can help extend the notion of traditional place-centeredness to encompass global migrations and mobility within transnational frameworks.

Exophonic and ecologically aware, the poetic subject throughout Kassabova's *Someone else's life* is visibly decentered due to her diverse experiences of movement and displacement. As a "citizen of the unknown," she is a stranger who, while seeking protection from natural forces, both "lament[s]" the impossibility of creating a home place and "leave[s] footprints in the air" (14) in recognition of the globality of space. Depicting a day in New Zealand's transnational community, in which "nothing is ever the same" (19), she senses personal and collective estrangement from the land where belonging is out of question and changes are situational and constant. Her memories of a "childhood in an East European city / of shadows and fogs" (47), both oppressive and dear, seem to be washed away by "frivolous tide[s]" (67) of the hostland's "metallic and cruel" ocean that makes her "sick" and inadequate (85). While she remembers the exhilaration of coming to the promised sunlit paradise with exotic parakeets, her reminiscences of both places are evasive and partly preserved not only in her head depicted as a "cracked cup of memory" (15), but also in some unevenly distributed "clusters of moments touching each other / with phantom limbs" (73). The unreliability of

memory that is protracted by fragmented images of extratextual landscapes is further explored within a spatial consciousness of a newly acquired language. Reminiscing on the foreignness and incompleteness of her initial experiences of life in displacement, the speaker resorts to a collective we in an attempt to voice her close migrant community, their hopes and expectations, adding that "[i]t's a sign of fluency to dream in a language / but we dream wide-awake" (78) "in yet another / native tongue" (72). While alluding to a possibility of estrangement from the mother tongue and culture or origin, the alertness with which the speaker's we reacts to new landscapes and sounds signals an exophonic's need to fit into a novel environment by responding to its nature and social realities with a sense of expressive responsibility characteristic of socially-conscious and ecologically-aware individuals. As a result of merging new landscapes and languages, "dreaming wide-awake" often becomes engaged with wider world problems of human and nonhuman exploitation based on identity differences and (post)colonial heritage. Kassabova's poem "Balinese," situated at "the Indian ocean" and divided into two parts, 'Taking a photograph' and 'Made,' exposes many faces of exploitation that overlap with land pollution and deterioration of tourist-defined exoticism:

(. . .)
Out in the empty field
behind luxury hotels
garbage flutters,
white blossoms fall from trees
with nobody to stand beneath,
smiling photogenically
so the filth, the heat
and the absence of hope
become exotic backdrop.
Tonight, I am the backdrop.
I am the blurry stranger in the photograph,
with her mouth open almost in laughter,
saying: This is not my ocean.
This is not my pain. (*Someone else's life* 24)

Forming her own picture of exoticism seen through the eyes of a sensible tourist who perceives the environment before she steps in to make a change, the speaker stresses the contrast between luxuriously constructed hotels and man-made garbage that devastates nature and conquers the surroundings. Whilst noticing basic society-nature disconnections caused by human negligence and capitalistic tendencies that obstruct spontaneous human interactions within nature, the concerned tourist continues playing her traditionally designated role as a happy foreigner, yet she resolutely detaches from the place, sensing its bleakness and desolation but refusing to be overwhelmed by it.

The second part of the "Balinese" double-poem, which is addressed to Made, an underprivileged young woman who works at "the café of Bali Sun," juxtaposes preconceived identities of locals and foreigners. Aware of Made's unenviable life full of hardships, in which the woman is denied education but expected to provide for her family, the speaker who stays at her "false" luxury hotel reveals what is really authentic beyond the local woman's friendly and seemingly carefree disposition:

(. . .)
For us you smiled and spoke
your self-taught English.
For us you were the friendly local.

You have taken off your apron,
wiped off your smile
and walked to your room.
You have washed your clothes
ready for tomorrow,
lit a cigarette and lain
in the humid night.
You listen to the ocean

break over the reef.
You think of me and my white tribes,
how your life is our holiday.
We're out of here tomorrow but you,
you're only twenty four
and you don't dare dream
before you go to sleep. (*Someone else's life* 25)

The speaker's empathy for the Balinese woman, who is taken for granted by most tourists and perceived merely as a functional part of the exotic setting, enables valuable insights into a "self-taught" exophony that sustains local life. Spoken by Made, English as a foreign language is both a burden and a strategy of survival. It disguises the local into a presentable mediator who facilitates basic understanding between cultures in a globalizing world that, paradoxically, encourages traditional views of exoticism and thus perpetuates class differences and racial inequality. Evidently exploited and unable to visualize a more fulfilling future, Made is nevertheless aware of the power dynamics operating in her surroundings and discriminating people based on their land of origin, financial standing, and skin color. Empathizing with the socially underprivileged woman on the margins, the speaker discloses the inverted exoticism of her "white tribes," whose otherness, however, remains more privileged because they can afford entertaining themselves as tourists by tailoring the image of the local woman to fit their temporary needs.

Whether the poet foregrounds migrant, tourist, or local issues, the background usually contains sights of nature in all its variety, from the indifferent or soothing lushness of palm trees to polluted cities and disastrous storms. While the vastness of ocean-space tends to evoke homesickness and hopelessness in immigrants, it often arouses tourists' admiration. But, for locals like Made, it is mostly present in the form of a constant background sound. Poeticizing nature along with displaced human lives, experiences of travel, local transformations and global preoccupations, Kassabova seems to

create a flexible cosmopolitan poetic subject, whose worldliness is also pronounced in her prose works.

In her article on *Street Without a Name*, Kassabova's 2008 memoir and travelogue depicting life under communism in the late 1970s and 1980s, Ludmilla Kostova problematizes the author's cosmopolitanism, arguing that the displacement of Bulgarian and other former Eastern Bloc professionals who fled politically repressive one-party systems "has led to the emergence of a distinctive *postnational* migrant middle-class identity" (166) which is, unlike transnational identities, closely linked to the migrants' cultures of birth. While Kostova accuses Kassabova of "rejecting cultural rootedness" (173) and flirting with elitist transnationalism, another scholar, Ioana Luca, acknowledges the complexity of the writer's subject positions. According to Luca, Kassabova is not simply national or foreign, but she evidently "takes turns in being a native, a tourist, a foreigner, a foreign journalist, the returned exile, just to discover the pitfalls and impossibility of any such identity" (74). Addressing Kassabova's poetry collection *Geography for the Lost* (2007), Kostova detects "the absence of an identifiable home," blaming it on the poet's resistance to being pigeonholed and thus re-installed within the boundaries of her native culture (173). That a single identification is certainly reductive, if not implausible, has already been discerned in *Someone else's life*, which is, according to Mark Strand, "the book of perpetual exile, of endless comings and goings, in a world that offers neither stability, nor salvation" (qtd. in Kassabova, *Someone* 90). Poems such as "My life in two parts," "Balinese," and "Berlin-Mitte" portray precarious positions of natives, migrants, tourists, foreigners, and ghosts of the past, signaling that there is no reconciliation, "but a continuous exploration of belonging" (Luca 74). Impersonating all available identities through her "willed uprootedness" and "unwilling defamiliarization," Kassabova creates, as Luca rightly observes, "a language of communist and post-communist alienation, geographical and ontological displacement" that is "emblematic for the new global, transnational Eastern European generations" (75–76) whose crossing multiple borders modifies their identities,

creative expressions, and perceptions of place.

Addressing divergent aspects of border culture that include not only the Iron Curtain as both "an actual place" and "a metaphor," but also the borders that stop "[t]he Middle Eastern refugees of today," Kassabova states that "[b]order zones are extreme peripheries, [or] margins where the fabric is thin," which enables archetypal presences of border defenders, trespassers, natives, smugglers, and all others who either cross the border illegally or are in some ways affected by the border culture (*There*). Judging from the poems entitled "In Transit" (*Someone* 33) and "Refugees" (34), the poet serves as an empathetic outsider who witnesses and conveys the pain of those stuck around the border, which instead of being a safe place "creates a culture of paranoia and insecurity" (ibid.). The multiple representations of human migrations on global and local levels are also tightly connected to ecological awareness and environmental issues. In just a few clear-cut lines, Kassabova offers brief snapshots of a barren field, a dispossessed and powerless human, and a divided and polluted landscape wrapped in a debilitating atmosphere of social animosities, which altogether points to a civilizational failure to provide safe and sustainable environment for human and nonhuman species:

There is a field of frozen mud
and in the middle – a border.
On this side of the border
a pear tree that doesn't bear fruit.
Under the tree an old man
in a borrowed jacket
with a plastic bag,
sitting or kneeling
against the trunk.
The mud has embraced his movements.
(. . .) (*Someone* 33)

Bearing in mind that Kassabova's writings accommodate diverse subject positions, ranging from forcefully displaced persons to cosmopolitan travelers, it is unsurprising that her poems contain the overlapping themes of love, war, migration, voluntary displacement, hypocrisies of tourism, foreign identities and other languages, and nature and society. Her poetry is both exophonic and ecocritical, with pronounced references to multiple cultures and their contemporary realities. It finds emplacement in language, compares war with pollution that "falls like smog / over the cherished ecology" (32), and exposes human indifference and sensationalism, concluding that "[w]e eat our plastic breakfast and read / in yesterday's paper how / a visual artist awaits / the next man-made disaster" (35). The overlaying of representations of culture and nature can thus be contextualized and interpreted within what Nolan recognizes as *culturenature* and introduces as *unnatural ecopoetics*, claiming that "unnatural ecopoetics offers a critical lens that focuses on the methods by which poets express nonmaterial cultural, historical, political, and personal elements of environmental experience along with material objects and spaces through self-reflexive language and experimental forms" (29). Unnatural ecopoetics certainly resonates with exophonic ecopoetics in terms of "culturenature" and language experimentation. Apart from tackling broad civilizational issues, it acknowledges exophony in all its aspects as a means of transcending language boundaries.

In his 2006 article "A Transnational Poetics," Jahan Ramazani claims that poetry in English from the modernist era to the present has been "styled and shaped" by various "globe-traversing influences, energies, and resistances" (332). A good number of canonical modernist cross-cultural poets such as Yeats, Stein, Pound, and H.D. "translated their frequent geographic displacement and transcultural alienation into a poetics of bricolage and translocation, dissonance and defamiliarization," visibly defying national literary genealogies (333). The modernists' polyglossia and syncretic allusiveness seen as additional "practices of displacement" have likewise helped "define an alternative to nationalist and even to civilizational ideologies" (336). Due

to their translational and citational strategies, modernists represent the forerunners of contemporary multilingual poetry, and their syncretic expression is sometimes equated with exophonic practices.

For Marjorie Perloff, who attaches her primary definition of exophony to the modernist works of Eliot and Pound that are replete with allusions and intertextual references, contemporary exophonic poems contain more than one language in order to respond to "a world of relentless global communication" by "processing and absorbing the 'foreign' itself" (*Unoriginal* 129). While Perloff and Wright agree that exophonic writing today is a phenomenon of the digital age and global mobility, they seem to focus on different groups of writers: Perloff bases her research on canonical twentieth-century English-speaking poets as predecessors of all our (multilingual) contemporaries, regardless of their culture of origin, whereas Wright pays closer attention to particular cultures, describing the term *exophonic* as "an important shift in how we approach writing by non-native speakers" (40). Perloff's take on exophonic poetics is at the same time rooted in the past and present states of multilingualism, yet she seems to depoliticize current contexts in poetry by "[r]ooting exophonic poetics in the textual rootlessness of the internet" (Dowling 9). While Perloff's increasing preoccupation with eclectic online journals, blogs, and poetry domains is certainly useful for brainstorming new interpretative frameworks in the realm of poetry and poetics (*A Critic* 48), she appears to avoid deeper engagement with multifarious economic, social, geopolitical, and environmental contexts of a rising number of contemporary writers whose exophony is not necessarily citational, intertextual, and collagic, but primarily exophonic and performed by those who are voicing themselves from outside their first languages. Born in Austria and exophonic herself, Marjorie Perloff is one of the many highly influential literary figures who have successfully expressed themselves in additional languages. Conrad's, Nabokov's, Murakami's, and Hemon's Englishes, Beckett's French and Lahiri's Italian, to name but a few, are far from being their mother tongues. Yet the works written in them are widely acclaimed for introducing novel-

ties on thematic, linguistic, and stylistic levels. While prose is generally more popular than poetry, it is now refreshing to witness an increasing number of exophonic poets of displacement and alterity whose experiments with culture-translation and self-reinvention, rhythms and wordplay reflect various environmental and geopolitical changes in today's world of transnational mobility.

Asserting that "transnational human and cultural flows" have presented a continual and "strong stimulus to contemporary US poetry" in terms of introducing European surrealism, Asian fixed poetic forms, poetry in translation, and various poetic borrowings and exchanges, Ramazani points at the emergence of poets like Charles Simic (b. 1938), who were "born and reared elsewhere" (346), but who evidently enriched both the United States and transnational poetry arena by voicing themselves from an exophonic and environmentally aware position. Emigrating from Yugoslavia to the United States in the 1940s as a child survivor of World War II, Charles Simic, the 2007–2008 U.S. Poet Laureate, has contributed to modern and contemporary poetry in English by creating a unique poetics of displacement that places him among the most original voices in Anglo-American poetry. Introducing surreal yet familiar and homely images of estrangement that defy easy classification and belonging to any particular poetry school or style, "Simic's poetry is not read with specific critical vocabularies in mind" (Hart 200). Critics have generally attempted to read his poems within the contexts of both Yugoslav and American poetry, paying particular attention to the influences created by the poet's translations of East European authors, such as Vasko Popa and Ivan Lalić. Simic's exclusive position within American poetry canon is usually compared to that of Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, and W. C. Williams (Hart 201) and, more recently, to many other well-known English-speaking poets including Louise Glück, Tony Hoagland, Sharon Olds, Adam Zagajewski, Sherman Alexie, and Terrance Hayes. Depicting these contemporaries as "three-dimensional poets," David Kirby claims that the plasticity of their oeuvre stems from their balanced focus on wisdom, intellectual challenge,

and humor, while emotion expressed in the adaptability of poetic voices permeates all of them (435). Simic's poetry is thus often read as "a discursive space where Eastern European folk poetry, French Surrealism, and American Transcendentalism converge" (Hart 202). What is particularly interesting is that more recent criticism tends to emphasize Simic's English with a Slavic accent, which is "coherent and smooth" yet "delivered as a second language speaker" (Hawkins).

Acknowledging the complexity of conveying life experiences in two mutually complementary languages, Diana Engelmann rightly observes that "the voices of the foreign and of the mother tongue memory still echo in many [of Simic's] poems" (44), enabling a "binary vision" (45) that embodies a duality of exile in which the poems are at the same time "authentic statements of the contemporary American sensibility and vessels of internal translation, offering a passage to what is silent and foreign" (47). By claiming that "[i]n any Simic landscape — big city, New Hampshire countryside, or the memories of Serbian villages and the war-torn streets of Belgrade — the unexpected patterns of imagery turn back to a place or origin" (45), Engelmann points at transnational and transhistorical intersections between language and environment, society and nature. That such duplicities of homeland / hostland imagery expressed in exophonic texts accommodating bicultural and multicultural traditions have a solid ecocritical potential is particularly discernible in Simic's eco-conscious poems in which the speaker's self is at once individual and collective as well as introspective, critical, and urgent. It is interesting to notice that, while most of his miniaturist conceptual poems are often viewed as "defining momentary stays against confusion" (Stitt 490–91), their plasticity allows for inscriptions of universal messages that incorporate spatial and ecocritical dimensions of displacement and non-belonging. Striking in their simplicity, Simic's poems offer a complex and unresolved position of the speaker who voices layered interactions within culturenature spaces:

Every morning I forget how it is.
I watch the smoke mount
In great strides above the city.
I belong to no one.

Then, I remember my shoes,
How I have to put them on,
How bending over to tie them up
I will look into the earth.

(*Looking*, "Poem" 3)

The poem's most ordinary title generalizes personal and particular details, juxtaposing the elusiveness of memory with a constancy of life purpose. Seemingly uprooted and residing in a polluted city, the speaker has to detect his roots in nature every day anew in order to feel alive and connected. As with this one, Simic's nature poems possess the imagist intensity of Dickinson's spiritual culturenature fragments that register environmental changes in an unimposing way. Sensing familiarity with the pre-modernist poet, Simic often converses with her philosophical concepts of place and abroadness (Bijelić 54–59), and even addresses her directly when concerned with changes in nature and ecological issues. Thus, while in the poem "Emily's Theme" the speaker complains that he "no longer recognize[s]" his "dear trees" because of a new "wintry light" and its transformative power (*Looking for Trouble*, 83), the more recent poem "Star Atlas" offers urgent commentaries on the media report of "the bleak and desolate northern regions / [o]f our planet" and on "the line of the unemployed / [w]inding around the globe," (*Scribbled in the Dark*, 69-70), anticipating natural calamities and social unrest. The speaker's inability to trace some "old gods" with soothing power who would be capable of maintaining equilibrium on earth is theatrically summarized in "The madness of it, Miss Dickinson!" which is the very first line of the poem. The absence of the "old gods," who have ostensibly kept humans and their playgrounds safe, is what disturbs the speaker whose surrealist images have tended to project amusement and tragedy at the same time. But besides

introducing the overtly sinister tones that capture the ongoing realities of human alienation and environmental disasters, Simic's ecopoetic and exophonic strength lies exactly in his casual surrealism that playfully tackles large and serious issues in domestic and everyday settings, as in the poem "Mother Tongue":

That's the one the butcher
Wraps in a newspaper
And throws on the rusty scale
Before you take it home

Where a black cat will leap
Off the cold stove
Licking its whiskers
At the sound of her name

(*Jackstraws* 13)

Keeping in mind that writing outside of the mother tongue is closely linked to linguistic experimentation with authors' mental blueprints, cultural origins, and spaces of displacement, it can be argued that surrealist images go hand in hand with exophonic writing, allowing for non-standard interpretations and new critical vocabularies. The presence of neosurrealism as one of the many directions of contemporary exophony is also palpable in Kapka Kassabova's early poems, especially in "Lemon Tree Witnessing Man Being Built In" (*Someone* 40) and "Embracing the umbrella" (44), in which elements of nature, culture, and exophonic writing strangely combine to contribute to eco-awareness and displacement matters. Apart from its surrealist tendencies, exophonic poetry authored by displaced East European poets can be seen as translingual exploration of local and foreign landscapes and their verbal interactions as well as the "expression of hybrid, multi-layered, transformative literary spaces" (Sofronieva 35). This resonates with what Stephanie Sandler considers to be the most radical streak in a poetry canon formation: "the production of [national] literature in another language

entirely" (359), through which writers draw on other cultures' nature and heritage in the process of reconstructing their own.

Along with Simic and Kassabova, whose poems and single lines illustrate their engagement with exophonic ecopoetics, there is an increasing number of English-writing poets of displacement who also originate from Eastern Europe and Eurasia and whose works can be read from diverse exophonic and ecocritical perspectives. Among them are Nina Živančević (b. 1957), Katia Kapovich (b. 1960), Biljana D. Obradović (b. 1961), Ilya Kaminsky (b. 1977), Ana Božičević (b. 1977), and a good number of others. Having migrated for political, economic, or any other reasons, and often identifying as transcultural authors and cosmopolitan travelers, they have already made remarkable contributions to both Anglo-American and transnational poetry. While some of their works are highly praised and some critically underdiscussed, they demonstrate different levels of (trans)nationalism, ranging from national nostalgia to becoming a world citizen. Describing exophonic practices as "those little thefts between languages, those strange angles of looking at another literature, 'slant' moments in speech, oddities and their music" (Greenwell 2019), Ilya Kaminsky, for example, "fiercely resist[s] being pigeonholed as a 'Russian poet' or an 'immigrant poet' or even an 'American poet'," asserting that he is "a human being," which is "a marvelous thing to be" (ibid.)

Drawing on Ramazani's remark that transnationalism as a term should be used with caution, acknowledging that "the cultures, locations, and identities connected or juxtaposed are themselves agglomerations of exceedingly complex origin" (353), I see the space of exophonic ecopoetics, its broad inclusiveness and fresh juxtapositions of various local, translocal, and global values and issues as a potent platform for transcultural expression. Informed by the concept of natureculture and by "unnatural ecopoetics" that "provides a bridge between ecocriticism's focus on physical environments and a broader interest in how the material and nonmaterial elements of en-

vironmental experiences come together on the page" (Nolan 356), I suggest that much of contemporary writing of displacement can be read through the prism of ecocriticism that recognizes Kaminsky's "strange angles of looking" and Wood's "powerful estranging effect" (10) produced by exophonic representations of mutually related social and environmental issues.

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