Translations and Transformations of Snow Women as Exiles: Lafcadio Hearn’s “Yuki—Onna” and Anne Sexton’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”

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Lafcadio Hearn and Anne Sexton—a fin-de-siècle international prose writer who is also known with his Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo, and a mid-twentieth century American poet who is prominently known for her confessional style of poetry—seem, on first looking, to have little in common, except one thing: their respective canonical work includes a translated tale that features a “snow woman” as its central character: “Yuki-Onna” in Kwaidan for Hearn and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” in Transformations for Sexton. In their transpositions of the “snow women” into their own contemporary contexts—Hearn’s from an old Japanese folklore into a folktale intended for the turn-of-the-century American audience, and Sexton’s from a nineteenth century German fairytale to that of the twentieth century America—both writers adumbrate complexities in the theme of “exile,” as their snow-women characters, O-Yuki and Snow White, mold their identities in their displaced environment and seek a place that gives them a sense of belonging. A reading of these two texts as stories of exile and questions of identities would delineate the nature of these two stories as allegories that both embody and expose the exclusion-assimilation dynamics under which the displaced characters are placed. This condition of displacement we call “exile” leaves the
subject in between two choices: a melancholic return to the place of her origin, or a foolhardy search for fulfillment in a place outside of her origin. Choosing one, however, essentially makes the other a taboo, and the two stories portray how bindingly and persistently this exclusion-assimilation binary influences the two characters’ denouements. “Yuki-Onna” and “Snow White,” then, become allegories of this problematic dichotomy, and this imbroglio is further complicated by the act of translation itself as a type of displacement—one that tasks the translator with the same categorical proposition between assimilation and alienation, between domestication and foreignization.

The story of “Yuki-Onna” Hearn translates is a tale of the fantastic. Hearn portrays the snow-woman as a supernatural being who is simultaneously frightening and beautiful—someone who both terrifies and fascinates. The original legend, according to Hearn’s preface, is an oral folklore he once heard from a peasant in the district of Musashino. Several different versions of snow-woman folktales were already existent at the time, and apparently the exact source has not been located. In this regard, one may argue that Hearn’s “Yuki-Onna” is more a transcription than a translation, in that the spoken material is turned into a written document. But a typical transcription occurs within the same language, without any alteration of the content; in that sense, Hearn’s adaptive, cross-lingual intervention in “Yuki-Onna” is more apt to be called a translation.

The overall arc of the story is comprised of three main scenes: the day of the snowstorm when the supernatural snow-woman kills
Mosaku but lets Minokichi live; an encounter between Minokichi and O-Yuki a year later; and the final scene in which O-Yuki reveals her identity and then disappears. The story begins with two woodcutters, Mosaku and Minokichi on their way home from the forest on a day of blizzard. On a cold winter day, Mosaku, an old man, and Minokichi, an 18-year-old apprentice, are walking back to their village from the forest. Then a snowstorm hits the area, and they end up having to spend a night in a small hut on the opposite side of the river from the village, since the boatman, who is supposed to ferry them to the village, has already left. That night, a woman, dressed in all white, appears. She blows her breath on Mosaku and freezes him to death, but she lets Minokichi live; she warns him that she would return and kill him if he ever tells anyone about her, and then disappears. Minokichi wonders if he was just having a dream, and then, the following morning, the boatman returns, finds Minokichi and takes him back to the village. A year later, Minokichi meets a beautiful girl named O-Yuki, and he marries her. They have a happy family life with ten children, but one night Minokichi tells O-Yuki that she looks like the woman dressed in all white he met some time ago on the day of snowstorm. O-Yuki reveals that she is the snow-woman he met that day, but instead of killing him, she vanishes, leaving Minokichi and their children behind.

The nature of the snow woman as an exilic character becomes evident in Hearn’s depiction of her; in the second scene, in which the snow-woman appears for the first time as O-Yuki—whose name literally means “snow”—Hearn unequivocally characterizes her as a foreign, displaced character: a “strange girl” (62). And
this “strange girl” is, evidently, rootless. Having lost both of her parents recently, she is on her way to Edo, even though Edo itself offers her little sense of belonging; she is heading there, since she just happens to “have some poor relations, who might help her to find a situation as servant” (62). The use of the subjunctive creates a sense of opacity: it is uncertain if there was any prior communication or arrangement between O-Yuki and those relatives about her move to Edo or her need for their help, or if they would even actually help her. Furthermore, these relatives, if they actually do exist at all—which is itself a question—are not particularly close to O-Yuki. Edo is the capital of Japan at the time in which the story takes place, and like any metropolis, it attracted people without ties to any community to which they could claim their membership, since the feudalistic local communities would leave little room for those seen as outsiders. And O-Yuki seems “by nature different from” other country-folk (63). She is a “foreign” element—an exile.

Following the portrayal of O-Yuki as a displaced, rootless character, Hearn then provides a narrative of her transition into Minokichi’s household and his village, which further underscores her estrangement:

By the time they reached the village, they had become very much pleased with each other; and then Minokichi asked O-Yuki to rest awhile at his house. After some hesitation, she went there with him; and his mother made her welcome, and prepared a warm meal for her. O-Yuki behaved so nicely that Minokichi’s mother took a sudden
fancy to her, and persuaded her that Yuki never went to Yedo at all. She remained in the house, as an “honorable daughter-in-law.”

O-Yuki proved a very good daughter-in-law. When Minokichi’s mother came to die—some five years later—her last words were words of affection and praise for the wife of her son. And O-Yuki bore Minokichi ten children, boys and girls—handsome children all of them, and very fair of skin. (62-63)

O-Yuki is generally welcomed, but this initial hospitality is that which is given toward her as a guest, an outsider. Sometime ago, there was an occasion when the present author’s colleague, who works for International Organization of Migration, shared a joke about Danish immigration policy: “the Danes were exceptionally tolerant of foreigners, until all the foreigners came to Denmark.” The phenomenon is hardly restricted to the Danes; that is, people are often tolerant or even welcoming of foreigners as temporary visitors—until the foreigner begins to settle in their community. For, at first,

⋯one is struck by [the foreigner’s] peculiarity—those eyes, those lips, those cheekbones, that skin unlike others, all that distinguishes him and reminds one that there is someone there. The difference in that face reveals in paroxystic fashion what any face should reveal to a careful glance: the nonexistence of banality in human beings. ⋯[T] his grasping of the foreigner’s features, one that captivates
us, beckons and rejects at the same time.²

Just as Kristeva suggests, it is precisely this peculiarity, this strangeness in O-Yuki that first fascinates Minokichi: her “charm” is attributed to her “strangeness” (62). The true litmus test, then, is how the villagers would react when the foreigner decides to settle.

By and large, O-Yuki succeeds in assimilating her into the community; the villagers think, after all, that she is a “wonderful person” despite her strangeness (63). O-Yuki finds herself accepted by this community in large part because of the way in which Minokichi’s mother approves of and welcomes her: the way in which O-Yuki carves her identity as a “very good daughter-in-law.” Julia Kristeva characterizes a foreigner as one who “has lost his mother”—an “orphan” of sort.³ The word “mother,” in the English language at least, has come to symbolize a sense of belonging; we call our native language “mother tongue,” and we call our nation, “motherland.” If a foreigner is someone who “has lost his mother,” then the one who gains a mother can potentially efface her foreignness; she can plausibly obtain her citizenship in that community. Possibly because of it, Hearn seems rather scrupulous in describing Minokichi’s mother’s acceptance of O-Yuki. In fact, even though Minokichi is the one who actually marries O-Yuki, Hearn’s passage makes it sound almost as though it is Minokichi’s mother who is adopting O-Yuki. After Minokichi takes O-Yuki to his house, Hearn hardly mentions Minokichi again until the final scene; Minokichi’s mother takes the initiative in welcoming O-Yuki. Moreover, it is the mother who persuades O-Yuki to “delay her
journey to Yedo” (62). In addition, O-Yuki is continuously referred to as the “honorable daughter-in-law,” a phrase that Hearn repeats several times—in quotations, no less. Judging from the fact that Minokichi’s mother’s last words were those “of affection and praise for the wife of her son” (63) and not for Minokichi himself, it is hardly hyperbolic to suggest that the mother may have liked O-Yuki more than Minokichi, her own son.

In addition to the mother’s acceptance of O-Yuki, there is one more component that allows O-Yuki to “assimilate” into the village: namely, her contribution to the new household and the community. After O-Yuki marries Minokichi, Hearn’s first description of O-Yuki is that she “proved a very good daughter-in-law” (63). In the context of the era in which this story is presumably situated—that is, somewhere in the eighteenth or nineteenth century—there is a certain cultural overtone in the consideration of someone as a “very good daughter-in-law”: someone who is capable of fulfilling her obligations as a daughter-in-law, mainly, though not limited to, household chores. First, this characterization of “O-Yuki” evidently comes from the point of view of the mother, not Minokichi’s. If Hearn had written that O-Yuki was “a very good wife,” it might have left more room for different interpretations, but Hearn chooses to repeat the phrase, “daughter-in-law,” along with its connotation of the fulfillment of obligations. Simone Weil claims that the sense of obligations—or the sense of being useful—is a crucial need for the soul, which engenders a feeling of belonging to a community; for Weil, a sense of responsibility comes before rights in the formation of a community.⁴ The mother’s acknowledgement of O-Yuki as a “good daughter-in-law” suggests
her capacity and competence in fulfilling those obligations. After all, a mother and a daughter-in-law are not blood-related; in a community of strangers, one’s worth is often determined by one’s usefulness in the context of that community—that is, one’s ability to satisfy responsibilities—and in this instance, O-Yuki proves her worth to the mother in a manner that exceeds the mother’s expectations.

O-Yuki, then, finds herself accepted in this community because of Minokichi’s mother’s acceptance of her as a part of their family, which owes at least in part to her ability to fulfill her obligations in their household. What was gained in the mother’s presence, however, is bound to be lost in the mother’s absence. Following the paragraph that notes Minokichi’s mother’s death, Hearn once again reestablishes O-Yuki’s alienation by enunciating how different she is from the other villagers:

The country-folk thought O-Yuki a wonderful person, by nature different from themselves. Most of the peasant-women age early; but O-Yuki, even having become the mother of ten children, looked as young and fresh as on the day when she had first come to the village. (63)

Kristeva asserts in reference to Albert Camus’s *Strangers* that one’s “Stranger reveals himself at the time of his mother’s death.” As much as Hearn depicts O-Yuki as a “strange girl” in previous passages, this passage marks the first time Hearn emphasizes how innately and intrinsically different O-Yuki is from the rest of the villagers. In the previous scenes, O-Yuki’s strangeness hardly has
the air of otherworldliness. In the above paragraph, however, she is portrayed as un-humanlike: she does not age, even after having ten children like other peasant women. Like Meursault, O-Yuki’s strangeness unveils itself upon the death of the mother figure, who had, up to that point, contained her strangeness and disguised her to be the “same” as others.

The unveiling of O-Yuki’s strangeness is directly related to the unveiling of her past—the question of her origin. On the matter of origin, Kristeva states the following:

“And what about your origins? Tell us about them, it must be fascinating!” Blundering fools never fail to ask the question. Their surface kindness hides the sticky clumsiness that so exasperates the foreigner. The foreigner, precisely—like a philosopher at work—does not give the same weight to “origins” as common sense does. He has fled from that origin—family, blood, soil—and, even though it keeps pestered, enriching, hindering, exciting him, or giving him pain, and often all of it at once, the foreigner is its courageous and melancholy betrayer. His origin certainly haunts him, for better and for worse, but it is indeed elsewhere that he has set his hopes, that his struggles take place, that his life holds together today. Elsewhere versus the origin, and even elsewhere versus the roots: the motto for daredevils breeds sterile repressions as well as bold undertakings… He is a foreigner: he is from nowhere, from everywhere, citizen of the world, cosmopolitan. Do not send him back to his origins. If
you are dying to ask the question, go put it to your own mother...\textsuperscript{6}

The fact that “origin” is a loaded word for the foreigner is at the heart of this assimilation-exclusion binary: the foreigner generally is forced to make the choice between the two. For the “daredevil” like the one Kristeva alludes to, the question of origin becomes a taboo, since he is the “courageous and melancholy betrayer” of his origin. With Kristeva, “melancholy” is a laden word that is not just about one’s mood; in Black Sun, she defines the term as a failure of perception, loss of meaning.\textsuperscript{7} The implication is that in being displaced—in being a “betrayer” type of a foreigner—there arises a need to abandon the old system of signification and to construct a new system of signification because the change of environment does not only mean a change of locale but also that of language, culture, and the entire system of perceiving the universe, of making sense of the world: the process of assimilation is not complete without this overhaul in one’s way of seeing. For those who choose assimilation, the origin becomes a “sterile repression,” the place they’re not meant to go back to, for they have their hopes set “elsewhere.”

For those who remain at the other end of the spectrum—exclusion, alienation, and a return to the origin—their denouement matches the portrayal by Joseph Brodsky: exiles become “retrospective” beings who cling to the past, with excessive retrospection overshadowing their present reality.\textsuperscript{8} As their retrospective capacity hypertrophies, repetitive nostalgia triggers one’s failure to face the uncertainties of present and future. By
and large, human cognition is comparative in its nature; that is, we understand new phenomena by comparing them to other phenomena that we are already familiar with. As Georg Simmel theorizes, human cognition works by detecting differences; hence, one could say that human beings in general are largely retrospective beings. But in exiles, retrospection becomes more critical in that the present reality continuously prompts a trip back to the past, while for most others, the past is a comparative means to comprehend the present. The hypertrophied retrospection means an emotional stasis in the present—and in the future—which is itself another definition of melancholia, albeit more a Baudelairean version of it than a Kristevean one; in the word of one critic, Baudelaire’s is defined by “a maximum of consciousness which has as both its cause and its effect a minimum of action.” Therefore, regardless of whether one chooses assimilation or exclusion, the question of the past, of the origin, becomes a thorn in that, for the former, it exposes the fact of repression in the foreigner and, for the latter, it leads the foreigner into an emotional paralysis, inability to move forward.

Seen in this context, the snow-woman’s warning in the first scene—“if you ever tell anybody—even your own mother—about what you have seen this night, I shall know it; and then I will kill you...,” she says (61)—can be interpreted as an act of making the past a taboo. Like Kristeva’s daredevil, O-Yuki is the form of the snow-woman who has decided to lead a human life as she has set her hopes “elsewhere,” outside of her origin. The admonition reads as follows: “Do not send [her] back to [her] origins.” And that is precisely the taboo that Minokichi breaks when he tells O-Yuki
about the snow-woman, especially the way “the light on” her face reminds him of the snow-woman. The light on the snow-woman’s face is the haunting return to the first scene of the story—a return to the origin. In that first scene, too, Minokichi sees the woman’s face by the “snow-light” (61). The subconscious connection he makes between O-Yuki and the snow-woman unveils her origin, and exposes the critical strangeness in O-Yuki, rupturing any hopes of her assimilation, the semblance of which had started to crumble after the mother’s death.

In other words, breaking of the taboo exposes O-Yuki’s past, her origin as that of a foreigner. In addition to her outward strangeness and the circumstances of her encounter with Minokichi in the second scene, Hearn meticulously situates the first scene so as to stress that O-Yuki is a native of another world. The hut where the snow-woman, later found to be O-Yuki, first meets Minokichi is on the other side of the river from the village. A river is often a metaphorical boundary in folktales and myths, not to mention that, in political geography, national borders are frequently delineated along such natural borders as mountain ranges, rivers, ocean, and the like. For O-Yuki, the act of crossing the river to come to Minokichi’s village is both literally and figuratively an act of crossing the border, of leaving behind her origin as a strange creature from another world.

When her otherworldliness is exposed, O-Yuki has no choice but to vanish completely, never to be seen again, for an unconditional disappearance is the only path left for the alien who loses or abandons her place of origin but fails to find a domicile in the new community: the price of such failure in border-crossing is
that the exile is left with no place to be—like a refugee whom no
country wants to accept and who is left abandoned in the refugee
camp with no citizenship, as though she does not exist at all.

The theme of border-crossing, in fact, abounds in “Yuki-
Onna”; her crossing of the border between humans and ghosts
isn’t the only “border-crossing” she does. For instance, O-Yuki
presents herself as both a power-wielding femme fatale figure
and a domestic, well-behaved woman—a characteristic that goes
against the Victorian patriarchal bias of the male-oriented social
view, which, in the word of one critic, is defined as a typological
characterization of ambitious, power-wielding women as ugly,
scheming witches, contrasted to the portrayal of “good” women as
quiet, domestic, and submissive, taking care of children and home
dutifully and selflessly. In fact, Hearn’s “Yuki-Onna” generally
appears to ascribe more agency to the female characters than it
does to the male character; O-Yuki essentially holds Minokichi’s
fate in her hands, and Minokichi’s mother seems as though she’s
adopting O-Yuki as her daughter, rather than Minokichi marrying
her as his wife. Compared to the helplessness of Minokichi at
critical junctures, O-Yuki and Minokichi’s mother are portrayed
with more vitality and resolve. While O-Yuki is not entirely
liberated from feminine household chores—Hearn is himself hardly
free of patriarchal biases—she is also unchained to the role of a
submissive domestic wife. O-Yuki’s in-between characteristics—
domestic but flamboyant, selfless but assertive—add another layer
to her border-crossing status.

Perhaps the overarching theme of border-crossing is embodied
within the very language in which this story is narrated. That
Hearn’s stories were intended for the American audience is well-known, and it earned him the indisputable view of him as a premier Japanologist who depicted Japan favorably to the rest of the world, even as the issue of accuracy in Hearn’s depiction of Japan is widely debated; Hearn is, after all, much more of a literary prose writer than an ethnographer or journalist. Because of his limited proficiency in the Japanese language, Hearn relied, in the process of translation, on his wife, relatives, and servants, with whom he conversed in so-called “Mr. Hearn’s dialect”—supposedly an elementary sort of Japanese, a “pigeon” of sort, a private dialect resembling a no-man’s language.12 His source language, itself, then is an act of border-crossing and a trace of exilic existence.

Furthermore, in translation, Hearn takes many licenses, which engender more exilic products of border-crossing. His views of translation appear to be in line with those of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who asserts that a translation should “have a foreign flavor to it, but only to a certain degree” in that it should feel foreign without the feeling of foreignness,13 or of Friedrich Schleiermacher whose belief is that “just as our soil itself has... become richer and more fertile, and our climate more lovely and mild after much transplanting of foreign plants, so do we feel that our language... can only flourish and its own perfect power through the most varied contacts with what is foreign.”14 One may query whether or not Hearn could be construed as a Western Orientalist who sees the East as the essential Other—after all, Hearn himself is a border-crosser who adopts a Japanese name—but judging from this translational strategy, which we call “foreignization,” one may argue that his work is still tailored toward what Edward Said
describes as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’”\(^\text{15}\) The outcome of this translational practice is that there is a tendency, in Hearn’s recreation of the Japanese tales, to leave the original Japanese language in his text, ostensibly in an effort to preserve that “foreign” flavor that his American audience likely sought at the time.

To rephrase, Hearn’s language is not a complete domestication of the tale into the American context, in that even something as innocuous a phrase as “snow-light” is accompanied by its original phrase, “yuki-akari.” And in a place where he could just say “lantern” if he were to make his translation sound more naturalized, Hearn uses the word “paper lamp” (63). The examples abound, even in a short three-page story like “Yuki-Onna”—such as his parallel translation of a proverb, “\(\text{Ki ga areba, me mo kuchi hodo ni monowo iu}\)” or “When the wish is there, the eyes can say as much as the mouth” (62), in a place where he might simply say, “the eyes speak louder than the mouth,” or the like. The surfeit of foreignizations is itself a statement: a shattering of the domestication fantasy. Foreign is bound to remain foreign.

In other words, there is a distinct element of foreignization that occurs in Hearn’s translation, and with that, his translation itself becomes a type of displacement, a border-crossing—a distinctly “strange” tale transplanted into a language that cannot always find an apt correspondence for it. Hearn’s style of translation signals the failure of dynamic equivalence—“quality of a translation in which the message of the original text has been so transported into the receptor language that the response of the
receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors."\textsuperscript{16} In his essay, "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin remarks, "No translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original,"\textsuperscript{17} since, in his idea, a translation becomes a kind of an outward journey, prompted by the "translatability" of a literary work, which is "the work of art's search for a fulfillment in something other than the original itself."\textsuperscript{18} It goes without saying that Hearn was not familiar with Benjamin's work, but it seems as though Hearn was aware of the inherent failure in the act of translation, which Benjamin suggests with his famously ironic use of the word, "Aufgabe," to describe the "task" of the translator, which becomes, in a subordinate clause form, a word for "giving up"—"Aufgaben."

The most critical failure of translation, however, occurs when a translator encounters a proper name, which, as Jacques Derrida points out in "Des Tours de Babel," "is untranslatable."\textsuperscript{19} Proper names exhibit the same characteristics as the tower of Babel itself: it not only expresses the "irreducible multiplicity of tongues" but also a sense of "incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing":\textsuperscript{20} even as foreign names get flipped, mispronounced, mis-stressed, misspelled or otherwise misrepresented in the process of cross-lingual transfer, they remain adrift in the high seas. The name, "O-Yuki," means "snow," but such nuance eludes the readers of the translation; the same goes for the very title of the tale, "Yuki-Onna," which means "snow-woman." The closest Hearn comes to translating the proper name, "O-Yuki," is to use the untranslated name as the translation of itself, and supplement it by adding a footnote, saying "This
name, signifying ‘Snow,’ is not uncommon” (62). Even in the best of translations, proper names stand in the way as an obstacle, signifying incompleteness, failure, or in-between-ness of the translated language.

Translation, in other words, has the inherent potential to create a border-crossing language, a language that is simultaneously neither-nor and both. The enrichment of language through the act of “transplanting” that Schleiermacher speaks of is an illusion triggered in the reader who sees the language that looks familiar and yet different, and finds in it a sense of novelty; what seems “enriching” or novel is, in fact, a byproduct of the inherent failure of translation—an entity that has “failed” to be either one or the other. Therein lies the problem of the assimilation-exclusion dichotomy: an act of border-crossing rarely results in unadulterated assimilation or transformation—one is circumscribed to reside within the in-between territory of neither-nor and both—but such purity, which is a near-impossibility, is viewed as the only acceptable outcome by those minds chained to the rhetoric of classification. For that reason, literary translations, as crucial as they are in our reading experience, still continue to be seen as an “inferior” mimetic debasement of the original, and translators in general, aside from those that have already become famous in literary genres other than translation, tend to go unrecognized outside of a small circle, or even made invisible for the most part.\textsuperscript{21} Like O-Yuki, a failure to be on one side or the other necessitates an act of disappearance—or at the very least, consigns one to a status of second-class citizenry.
Similar to O-Yuki in Hearn's "Yuki-Onna" who disappears as she loses herself in the in-between territory, Anne Sexton's Snow White in "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," one of the adaptations collected in *Transformations*, is also paradigmatic of an exile who loses a sense of her selfhood through misdirected assimilative efforts. Estranged at home and elsewhere, Snow White's usurpation of the adopted home comes only as a result of her self-erasure, as she turns into someone she originally wasn't. Sexton's Snow White is a tale of an exile's repeated failed assimilations—failures that recur until the exilic subject becomes entirely another creature.

Wherever she is—whether in or outside of her home—Snow White is portrayed as an exotic object. Estrangement begins with the arrival of the stepmother—an antagonistic "mother" figure that hardly affords her a sense of belonging—as what was once her home transforms into a site of alienation. From the start of the poem, Sexton describes Snow White's exoticism as follows:

No matter what life you lead the virgin is a lovely number: cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper, arms and legs made of Limoges, lips like Vin Du Rhône, rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut. (1-7)

Snow White's "arms and legs" are made of the "Limoges" porcelain, lips are like "Vin Du Rhône," and her doll eyes are of the "china-blue" color (4-6); she is likened to a collection of foreign valuables. Outside of the castle, too, Snow White continues to be fetishized, whether by the dwarfs, who ends up encasing her in
a glass coffin, or by the prince, who finds himself enthralled by her show-windowed beauty. Until Snow White evolves into her stepmother—an aging domesticated woman who keeps watching the mirror in order to confirm her beauty—and effaces her original identity, she remains a synonym of exile, an exotic in the wildwoods and a stranger in the adopted homes.

Snow White’s eternal exile becomes evident even in a rough sketch of the storyline. Although Sexton takes as many licenses in transforming this Grimm tale, the basic plot remains intact: Snow White, driven out of the household by her stepmother, wanders the wildwood “for weeks and weeks” (150) till she eventually finds a shelter in a dwarf house. She then suffers near-death experiences as a result of her stepmother’s schemes to murder her, but she is eventually rescued by a prince, who resuscitates her—albeit in a very clumsy and unheroic manner. Snow White marries the prince, and returns to the domesticity of the household. The poem ends as Snow White returns from her exile to the predetermined role of a domesticated woman admiring herself in the mirror, as her stepmother used to do. That is to say, Snow White crosses the familial boundary—from a child to an adult—and takes over her stepmother’s place, but that place turns out to be the domestic prison that effaces her original self before the exile into the wildwood.

As the above plot indicates, Snow White crosses many boundaries: the linguistic boundary between German and English through an adaptive translation; the border between the human world symbolized by the castle and the nonhuman world symbolized by the wildwood; the boundary between life and death,
as she repeatedly returns to life after presumably being killed by the poison lace and a poison apple; the line between a child and an adult; to name a few principal examples. Furthermore, one of Sexton’s interventions is that Snow White is a thirteen year-old, rather than a seven year-old as in the case of the original story.

As one critic points out, her age would place Snow White right on the border between childhood and adulthood. In this manner, Snow White lives on the border in more ways than one.

If there is one way Sexton’s Snow White does not cross the border, it is that Snow White largely remains in the role of an oppressed woman with little agency of her own. She does little on her own, and most of the actions in the poem are things that are done to her; “doll” is one of the words used to describe her features several times in the poem, and her fate becomes an object that other characters—the stepmother, the dwarfs—toy with. While Hearn’s O-Yuki moves between the roles of a \textit{femme fatale} and a housewife, Sexton’s reworking of Grimm’s tale appears intentionally more concerned with an analysis and dissection of Snow White’s predetermined role in the patriarchal social construct than with a proposal of alternatives; that assessment is consistent with general characterization of Sexton as more of a “feminine” poet than a “feminist” poet, whose task is to present a “\textit{product} of a society that oppresses women, not a \textit{critique} of it.” Both O-Yuki and Snow White, then, are incisive portrayals of the different consequences that a condition of displacement can incur: if Hearn’s O-Yuki depicts the pathos of someone who fails in her attempt to cross the border and is left with no place to be, Sexton’s Snow White epitomizes the tragedy of someone who is imprisoned in her
imposed-upon role that makes her a quintessence of exile, forever “other,” wherever she is, whether abroad or in her adopted homes.

Among many indications of her exilic character, Snow White's alienation in both the human world and in the wilderness illustrates a typical case of her failed assimilation. In the context of this tale, the castle—the domicile of the stepmother and the prince—represents the woman's role as a commodity in the patriarchal society, and the wilderness—a habitat of the dwarfs—symbolizes masculine freedom and an escape from commodification. Driven out of the feminine household by the stepmother, Snow White initially finds a shelter in the dwarf's mountain, but she shows an utter inability to assimilate into the masculine world of wildwoods. Sexton wittily shows how Snow White, given even an iota of temptation, reverts back to her domestic role: the trinkets that the stepmother gives Snow White—a suffocating corset, a poisoned comb—are women's toiletries. And despite the dwarfs' repeated admonition to be careful of the stepmother's treacheries, Snow White dutifully falls for the stepmother's trap time after time, prompting the speaker to call her a “dumb bunny” for her incorrigibility (152). While the “dumb bunny” moniker is certainly catchy, the issue is less her obtuseness than the failed assimilation. Her actions typify that of someone who clings to her past—domesticity—even as she finds herself in a different environment—wildwoods. To recall Brodsky’s observation, an exile is a distilled form of a retrospective being.

In the aftermath of her adamant incapacity to assimilate, Snow White gets her wish and successfully returns to her original placement, the feminine domesticity, where she perpetuates the role
of a commodified female in the patriarchal social construct as her stepmother used to do—as “women do” (153). What enables her to end her exile, however, is not so much the return to feminine domesticity but rather her self-erasure:

And thus Snow White became the prince’s bride. The wicked queen was invited to the wedding feast and when she arrived there were red-hot iron shoes, in the manner of red-hot roller skates, clamped upon her feet. First your toes will smoke and then your heels will turn black and you will fry upward like a frog, she was told. And so she danced until she was dead, a subterranean figure, her tongue flicking in and out like a gas jet. Meanwhile Snow White held court, rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut and sometimes referring to her mirror as women do.

(147-164)

What stands out in this final stanza, where Snow White ends her exile, is her acceptance of the same cruelty that her stepmother used to treat her with; while Snow White is not the one who is exacting this revenge on her stepmother—Snow White hardly does anything herself—the invitation to the wedding feast that leads to this cruelty suggests her tacit acquiescence to this barbarity. In patriarchal societies, women are often as victimized by women as by men—and in some cases, more so by women themselves—since patriarchal figures tend to value women, even if only as mere objects, and shepherd other women into serving as surrogate oppressors to obfuscate the real oppressor. In this stanza, Snow
White is transformed from a purely passive “lovely virgin” (14) to a burgeoning of a domesticated woman who, as a cog of the patriarchal order, victimizes other women. In the process of finding her home, Snow White becomes what her stepmother was: Snow White’s exile ends only when her previous self gets replaced by another identity deemed acceptable in the given locale. One is right to ask: is this sadistic, mirror-admiring Snow White the same person as she was before? For Snow White, the result of this assimilative end to her exilic state is the loss of her own identity.

Just like the domestication of Snow White, the strategy Sexton adopts to translate the Grimm tale is itself named such: domestication. In domesticating translation, the text closely conforms to the culture of the target language. While Hearn retains the feeling of exoticism in “Yuki-Onna” by inserting many of the words and phrases from the original language, Sexton does precisely the reverse, using American-English colloquialisms and modern references, such as “an Ace bandage,” “roller skates,” “a gas jet,” and the like. In fact, the poem is so squarely composed within the twentieth-century American conventions that few readers would even think of Sexton’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” as an actual translation of the Grimm’s tale. In this sense, Sexton’s “Snow White” is a different entity than the original Grimm tale, just as Snow White’s post-wedding self is a different creature than her virgin self at the start of the poem. There would be no more border-crossing to be done, if there were no remnant of foreign identities—even as the question of identity could still continue to haunt.
When read in the context of displacement and assimilation-exclusion binary, Hearn’s “Yuki-Onna” and Sexton’s “Snow White” become emblematic of the choices that this categorical proposition imposes on the subject and the problems it entails. In Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves*, the key to border-crossing is the acceptance by the figurative mother, but Hearn’s and Sexton’s stories insinuate that no biological mother exists at the other side of the border, and that one’s survival in the foreign land hinges squarely on the possibility of adopting, or being adopted by, a non-relation mother. This proposition is tenuous: Hearn’s O-Yuki becomes “strange” again once the adoptive mother departs; and while Sexton’s Snow White preserves her place by becoming her adoptive mother, the act effectively annihilates any semblance of her original self in the process. And the implication is inauspicious: whether one embraces or rejects changes, chooses amorphous flexibility like O-Yuki’s shifty metamorphosis or adamant fixity like Snow White’s effigial femininity, one remains mired in the question of identity—self-disappearance, self-erasure, or some other form of self-estrangement.

In this regard, assimilation is rife with possibilities of failures, which lead to a loss of one’s place to be or one’s own identity, while, on the other hand, exclusion or return to one’s origin perpetuates the oppressive stringency of the original social construct that prompts one’s exile in the first place. Despite the fact that this bipolarity forces the subject to make a choice one way or the other, both options ultimately remain undesirable: the present separation of the thesis and antithesis that does not progress toward a benevolent dialectic is at the heart of the
problem of this cultural forgery of the assimilation-exclusion framework, through which many nations and groups even today continue to be unkind to those who possess an attitudinal proclivity akin to that of the people mockingly referred to as “the citizens of the world.” And Hearn and Sexton expose this problem in their translations and transformations of fairytales, as though to adumbrate an image of repressive aporia as the only halfway house for the exiles.

3 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, 5.
5 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, 5.
6 Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, 29-30.

11 Caroline King Barnard Hall, Anne Sexton (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 93.


20 Derrida, 166.

21 “Invisibility” is the term Lawrence Venuti uses to describe “the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture”: namely, the translator’s crucial interventions in the foreign text are concealed, whereby “the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator” becomes (Lawrence Venuti, The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation [New York: Routledge, 2008], 1-2).

22 Philip McGowan, Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: the Geography of Grief (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 76.


25 The largely held assumption is that this forced dance of death is “presumably ordered by Snow White and her prince” (Gail Weiss, Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality [New York: Routledge, 1999], 185).


References


