

## **'I am my Language': Mothering a Foreign Child**

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In her study "Narratives of Mothering" published in 2009 Gill Rye identifies a new phenomenon in contemporary French women's writing that she calls "mothers' own narratives of mothering" (Rye 2009:15), which is to say "literary texts where the mother is herself either the first person narrative subject or, in third-person narratives, the figure whose point of view is paramount" (*Ibid.* 17). As the reference to Virginia Woolf suggests, the study has a feminist agenda and explores "the overarching issue of what it means to mother" (*Ibid.* 21) in contemporary France.

My own research project "Mothering in a Foreign Environment" is both inspired by Rye's critical undertaking and is its extension of sorts, as it sets out to question what it means to mother in a linguistically and culturally foreign environment drawing on narratives of expatriate, voluntarily exiled, and/or migrant mothers in different languages – mostly British, American and Canadian English, French, but also some texts in translation, including one text in translation from my native Lithuanian.

Narratives of mothers who mother in a culturally and linguistically foreign environment are part of the tendency of proliferation of mothers' own narratives of mothering identified by Rye. They are relatively recent and can be seen as both a result of and a reflection on the reality of growing global mobility in the last two decades. Although these narratives are few, they are generically diverse featuring such literary genres as novels, plays, memoirs, and essays. They are mostly autobiographical and as such, they are an important contribution to the totality of contemporary women's efforts to think, imagine, represent, and thus shape the rapidly changing nature of motherhood in the Western world.

As the language of mothering plays a crucial role in those texts, the focus of my research is on how the language the mother speaks to her offspring – her native, that of the host country, sometimes, it turns out, neither of the two, and most often, probably, both – affects her maternal experience and who she is as a mother. How and why mothers favour one language to another in their mothering practices, how that affects their maternal subjectivities, their bond with their offspring, how it impacts their intimate experience of mothering, how much mothering experiences and maternal subjectivities are influenced by culturally determined roles assigned to mothers and motherhood discourses in the mothers' country of origin and their host country? Mothers in those narratives fall under three main categories: silent, translingual and multilingual. This paper will explore an example of a silent mother as portrayed in the play "The Mother Tongue" by the Canadian playwright of Chinese origin Betty Quan.

Rye observes that a strikingly large number of narratives of mothering in her corpus of texts "express loss of some kind or relate to trauma" (*Ibid.* 18) and suggests that loss or fear of loss "is at the heart of the mothering experience" (*Ibid.* 19). My own findings so far overwhelmingly reiterate this statement, not least, of course, because loss is an inherent part of any exile and migration experience. However, recreating, reproducing a sense of 'home' and renegotiating the sense of self are equally central to that experience. Thus, mothering in a foreign environment is always coincidental not only with loss, but also with the emergence of a new subjectivity, which in this case, is maternal subjectivity.

Narratives featuring mothers who have migrated from countries with somewhat oppressive regimes, narratives of migration as opposed to voluntary exile or expatriation, tend to be dominated by tropes of reproduction of home and self rather than productively embracing notions of hybridity and nomadism. The emphasis on reproduction rather than production of identity seems to jeopardise the development of the maternal self and be associated with some sort of trauma prior to the arrival in the host country. The language of the mother, which is an enormous part of the reproduction of the sense of self, home and community belonging seems to be intertwined with and almost coincide with the mother's sense of not only national, but also her self identity. "I am my language. I speak Chinese" – says the mother featured in the play "Mother Tongue" – reiterating the conflation of her national, community and self-identity. In my analysis of the play I will first look at the representation of the mother from her children's point of view in order to unpack some of the demands mothering foreign children exerts on the mother and will then focus on the development of the maternal subjectivity in the light of some feminist migration theory and a psychoanalytic interpretation of language and subjectivity. I will argue that by reproducing home through embodied practices, such as speaking Cantonese to the exclusion of English, the mother works against the dissolution of her identity, but due to the cultural and personal trauma, becomes fixated on that identity essentially belonging in the past and is only able to face the challenges of the present (such as acknowledging the needs of her growing children), when the set ways of family dynamics is disrupted.

The author of the "Mother Tongue", Betty Quan, is Canadian of Chinese origin and makes extensive use of Chinese folklore in her work. She writes for stage, radio and television. Her work explores issues related to identity, racism and the generation gap. The play "Mother Tongue" was first published in 1996 in Winnipeg Canada. It premiered at The Firehall Arts Centre in Vancouver in 1995 and was co-produced by Factory Theatre and Cahoots Theatre Projects in Toronto in 2001 at the Factory Theatre. As the back cover of the published version of the play proclaims "Mother Tongue" is "a poetic and often moving exploration of the aching desire to overcome separations", primarily the separation between a mother and her children who live in the same apartment, but speak different languages, belong to different cultures and fail to connect emotionally and function as a family. Different ways of speaking, saying, listening, hearing and deafness are used in the play to re-enact and performatively reproduce the struggle of their communication, which turns into drama as all members of the family long for each other's attention and love, each feels abandoned and failed by the other, unable to make their emotional and other essential needs heard, understood and even less so fulfilled.

"Mother Tongue" is written in English, but with indications that some characters speak other languages too. This is how the characters' linguistic identities are introduced at the beginning:

MOTHER: 53, widowed parent of STEVE and MIMI; has a Chinese accent (but not pidgin English); also speaks Chinese (Cantonese).

STEVE: 16, no Chinese accent (at age 11 lost his hearing so is fluent in American Sign Language)

MIMI: 21, STEVE's sister, no Chinese accent; speaks some Cantonese and when speaking with Steve, occasionally mixes in signed words.

FATHER: 30s, has a Chinese accent. (FATHER can be a physical presence on stage but always in shadow; alternatively, his dialogue may be done as voice/over.) (Quan 1995: 6)

All characters speak different languages or different forms of the same language, which effectively means that none of their linguistic identities are the same. The mother speaks Cantonese and English with a Chinese accent. Her son Steve speaks English with no foreign accent and the American Sign Language. His sister Mimi speaks English with no foreign accent, some Cantonese (probably with a foreign accent, although this is not indicated) and the American Sign Language. Their dead father's ghostly voice behind the scenes speaks English with the Chinese accent, which suggests that he was also Chinese and was the only person in the family the mother shared the same linguistic and cultural identity with as well as the identity of a migrant subject.

The plot of the play is simple. A widowed Chinese immigrant mother lives in Vancouver with her teenage hearing impaired son Steve and her elder daughter Mimi who has just graduated from the university and was offered a scholarship to continue her postgraduate studies in architecture in Ontario and which she is eager to accept. Mimi announces her imminent departure setting off a wave of anxiety, insecurity and anger in the family. Her bid to pursue her own ambition unsettles existing communication patterns, but pushes everyone, especially the mother, towards a new beginning, which potentially entails higher levels of mutual understanding between the mother and her children and leads to more personal maturity for the mother.

One of the most interesting features of the play is that the plot is intertwined with a popular Chinese mythological tale called "Jingwei Filling the Sea". It is a story about the daughter of the Sun God, called Nvwa, meaning a little girl. The Sun God goes to the East Sea to direct the rising of the sun early in the morning every day and returns home late. Nvwa longs for her father to take her with him, but he never does. Eventually, she sets sail on her own in a small rowing boat, but a deadly storm comes on and Nvwa drowns in the sea. After she dies, Nvwa turns into a bird with red claws and a white beak, vowing to fill up the sea, so that others would not have to perish as she did. She holds stones and tree branches with her beak and throws them into the sea, crying: "jingwei, jingwei...", as if encouraging herself. She keeps filling up the sea interminably, year after year, without ever stopping to catch her breath. The story has multiple functions in the play and deploys different symbolic meanings in relation to each character.

From the children's perspective, the mother is portrayed as an absent, missing or failing mother and the source of their distress. It is made clear in the text that Steve went deaf at the age of 11 because of an untreated ear infection, which can be seen as a sign of the mother's neglect. Since then Steve and his mother literally do not share a single language. Throughout the play he desperately calls for her attention. The first word he utters on stage is "Listen" and almost chants it during the course of the play: "Listen to my hands as I speak to you", "Listen to me, please", "look at me when you talk, (ASL) Look-at-me. Look-at-me" (*Ibid.* 19). The characters never actually touch, their constant discursive demands on one another expressed through verbs of perception is a poignant expression of the absence of and their hunger for intimacy. Steve wonders whether his inability to connect with his mother is due to his hearing impediment or whether there is something in her, in her personal history that is causing her emotional absence.

STEVE: Even before I was born. Floating – rotating around and around in my mother’s stomach like the earth around the sun. I could hear her voice too. I remember hearing my mother laughing and singing. But not anymore. Did she stop being happy? Or did I stop hearing her?” (*Ibid.* 29).

And later on:

STEVE: (*E then repeat in ASL*) Move your lips. Look at me. I can remember the sound. Say my name. I can hear the memory of how you used to say my name. Inside me. Look at me. Just because I can’t hear anymore doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten how to listen. If only you would just speak to me. The ghost of your voice is inside me. My mind hears you. It hears you, Mother (*Ibid.* 42)

Steve’s inner dialogue is infused with nostalgia for what may be read as the Kristevan notion of the “chora”, the pre-linguistic, pre-discursive maternal space, which every mother shares with her child and which constitutes the child as the speaking subject. In Kristeva’s conceptualisation of that space it is the child who tears away from it in order to become a separate and independent subject, but both, albeit especially the mother, have access to it for the rest of their lives for linguistic creativity and their eternal attachment (Kristeva, 1984; 1980). However, in this case, the mother seems to be strangely absent from it and out of Steve’s reach, which suggests that the former bond between the mother and her son has been disrupted and there is grounds to believe that it was the father’s sudden death of a heart attack that coincided with Steve’s hearing loss referred to in the text as “all the trouble” that is responsible for it.

From Mimi’s perspective, the mother also fails to play her role as a mother – if anything, it is Mimi who mothers her own mother. She is the language and culture broker for her mother.<sup>1</sup> Since the mother’s English is poor, Mimi handles all the administrative paper work of the family, of which claiming the Unemployment Insurance features on top of the list, and, more importantly, as she does not speak the American Sign Language, acts as a translator for both her mother and Steve when they wish to speak to one another. Take this scene:

(*Dinner; they eat in front of the TV*)

MOTHER: (C) Good?

MIMI: Yes.

MOTHER: (C) Some more?

MIMI: (*E then repeat in C*) I’m full

MOTHER: (C) Maybe Steve wants more. You ask him.

MIMI: He’s right there

MOTHER: (C) Ask him, Mimi. (Quan 1995: 18)

What’s interesting here is that the mother is trying to be attentive to Steve’s needs by offering him more food, but by doing so via Mimi, she falls short of her intention and instead of responding to his potential need, denies him his agency that is necessary for him to manifest his hunger in the first place. Mimi’s efforts to encourage their

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<sup>1</sup> “Language brokers are children of immigrant families who translate and interpret for their parents and other individuals. They possess unique characteristics that make them suitable for their role as the family’s translator and interpreter and parents select the child language broker based on those personal qualities. Language brokers translate and interpret a variety of documents in a variety of settings” (Morales, Hanson 2005).

communication come to nothing and the figure of *jingwei* appears to symbolise the Sisyphus like nature of Mimi's plight in her bid to fill up the gap that separates her mother from her son. This is Mimi's final dialogue:

MIMI: And the Sea God said, "Silly creature, you can never fill me up in a million years." "But I can," said the *jingwei*. Every day until one day there will be no more water between me and my family. It will be a bridge, a bridge that they can walk across. That my family can walk across." And the small bird flew back to the land, only to return with another pebble or twig to drop into the sea. (*Ibid.* 45)

The fact that Mimi is going to study architecture is an eloquent metaphor for the invaluable work she does for her mother and the whole family. It is a nod to the idea that emotional and cultural ties between estranged family members can and should be imagined, designed and built, but it takes a conscious and serious effort requiring a lot of imagination, perseverance and education. In order to become an architect, to grow up and become her own self, Mimi needs to leave home, but first she has to confront her mother's resistance. When Mimi tells her mother that she is going to take the scholarship and leave, the mother is initially very happy and proud, but when she understands that it entails Mimi's moving, she starts panicking and asking questions that reveal her infantilism and complete inability to manage her own life, including handling her relationship with her own son.

MOTHER: (C) What about Steve?

MIMI: He's deaf, not retarded. If you would only listen...

MOTHER: (C) No. You listen. I am the Mother!

MIMI: Then act like one!

(*MIMI is surprised by her words; MOTHER reacts as if she's been slapped in the face.*) (*Ibid.* 35)

Acting like a mother from Mimi's and Steve's point of view would involve listening to their needs, wishes, aspirations and responding to them – finding a way to interact with Steve, letting Mimi go and assuming the responsibility for the household. The idea of the children's need to be heard by their migrant mother is a recurrent one. It also features in the classic migration novel "Brick Lane" by Bangladeshi British author Monica Ali, in which the main character Nazneen, a positive example of an immigrant mother learns English because "the girls taught her. Without lessons, textbooks or Razia's 'key phrases'. Their method was simple: they demanded to be understood" (Ali 2003:159). Whether or not we find Nazneen's account convincing, the issue of the listening, hearing and understanding one's children who speak a different language in the context of migration is paramount.

Back to Mimi's conversation with her own mother in "Mother Tongue", it is significant that this scene comes half way through the play. It indicates the shift in perspective from the children to the mother and is suggestive of the shift in the development of her subjectivity as a mother. The first part of the play focuses on the children's perceptions of the mother and the complicated as well as inoperative communication patterns in the family. In the second part of the play the mother's own narrative starts to emerge and we learn her story. When Mimi accuses the mother of

not acting like a mother enough, she counters the accusation by pointing out that as far as she is concerned, she has done and is doing her best as a mother to provide for them all and create education and social mobility opportunities for her children that Mimi now enjoys.

MOTHER: (C) Who works hard, day and night? I put food on the table; you're going to an expensive university, and Steve needs special things. (E) Where do you think the money comes from? (C) Ever since your father died. (Quan 1995: 35)

Although this is quite a positive self-identification on the mother's part, signalling a strong sense of agency, a much bigger emphasis in the play is put on the darker side of her character.<sup>2</sup> Despite her commitment to ensure the family's economic wellbeing, the reader knows that she does not quite manage it and is dependent on social benefits claimed with the help of her daughter. At the centre of the play is the mother's alienated relationship with her children symbolised by the ocean. The distance between the mother and her children is a recurring motif in narratives of mothering abroad, sometimes represented as an abyss, sometimes, like in this text, as an ocean, but always carrying connotations of death and unrecoverable loss. The mother's signature monologue repeated twice – once at the beginning, once at the end of the play and framing the trajectory of her identity formation reads: "I am my language. I speak Chinese. Your voices. Your words. You drown me out" (Quan 14, 42). The monologue is part of the first scene set in the dark and performed as a "voice/over montage like a sea of voices ebbing and flowing, cutting and intercutting, reverberating" (*Ibid.* 13). The trope of the sea carries a reference to drowning here and connotes a threat to the mother's identity, a danger of losing the sense of self. Thus, from the outset of the play the mother is portrayed as alienated and vulnerable. In relation to the mother, the *jingwei* myth, images of crossing the water, the danger and anxiety it generates, drowning and identity transformation, parallel the mother's own destiny of an exile. I would like to suggest that her initial attachment to her native Cantonese, passing it on to her daughter and following Chinese traditions, such as celebrating Chinese festivals at home can be read as a reaction to the threat of losing her identity.<sup>3</sup> Irene Gedalof observes that the theory of migration considers repetition of embodied cultural practices as one of the migrant subjects' strategies of homing, of reproducing the sense of home and the sense of self as well as community belonging. Needless to say, those practices are usually attributed to women, especially mothers and defined as the "reproductive sphere" of exile existence described as "the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as the passing on the culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other interpersonal relations" (Gedalof, 2009). Feminist migration theorists, Gedalof for example, argue that such repetition of the same cultural rituals is not only a repetitive act of reproducing sameness devoid of any creativity, interpretation and difference. She believes that it can be and often is a dynamic process "that requires endless subtle

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<sup>2</sup> Betty Quan dedicates the play to her mother, which suggests that the play is written from a perspective of a daughter who has been mothered by a migrant mother. This might explain both why the children's perspective has been given so much room in the play and why it is so negative.

<sup>3</sup> Talking of the autobiographical work of the migrant writer Mohamed Bouchane who documents his arrival in Italy from Northern Africa, Jennifer Burns notes that "reproduction in his life in Italy of Islamic practices of worship and eating is a key element in combating a sense of loss of identity" (Burns 2013:23).

re-inventions and adaptations to a different range of possible private and public spaces, appropriate dress and adornment, food and drink, etc.” (Gedalof, 2009:96). Referring specifically to mothering, she notes that such practices create identities that are familiar, recognisable, but new and original. Thus, the embodied and repetitive homing practices the mother engages with in the “Mother Tongue” can be seen as producing identities – her own and her children’s – that are familiarly Chinese, but new and Canadian enough at the same time. For example, in several episodes in the play, the mother is portrayed as performing Chinese rituals at home. On the occasion of the traditional Chinese festival of *Chingming*, the tomb-sweeping day associated with Chinese ancestral veneration she performs the ritual of burning spirit money and makes offerings of oranges to the spirits, so that the dead do not bring evil onto the living. In one of those episodes the mother consciously attracts the daughter’s attention to her ritualistic activity to remind her of its significance and symbolism:

MOTHER: (C) The incense is very fragrant, isn’t it?

MIMI: Moon festival?

MOTHER: *Chingming*. (C) Have you forgotten already?

MIMI: No, I remember. I just get all of them confused, that’s all. (Quan 1995: 30)

The short exchange and the two different languages used in the dialogue - Cantonese by the mother and English by the daughter - demonstrate that Mimi is already initiated into Chinese culture enough to recognise what the mother is doing and suggests that the mother practices reproduction as a dynamic process involving the children as well. However, the fact that the older sister speaks Chinese and Steve does not and that it is only Mimi who is invited to partake in the Chinese traditions signals an interruption of that process. The mother manages to transmit her native Cantonese to one child, but not to the other effectively becoming a silent mother to him. This might be another indication that it was something in the past, something to do with ‘all that trouble’ that changed the nature of her embodied and productively repetitive practices into a routine of unproductive traumatic repetition. There is evidence in the text to suggest that both pre- and post- migration trauma is directly involved in this process. As the mother’s story starts to emerge in the second part of the play, we learn, among other things, about the circumstances of her departure from China as a victim of the violent repressions of the Cultural Revolution.

MOTHER: I arrived in Vancouver in 1959, without a word of English, wearing my hairspray and makeup and high heels, eager and excited. But I didn’t fool anyone. Only myself. [...] My husband dead and me alone. [...] No. There are my children. But I often feel as if I bore strangers who have my eyes, my skin, my hair, but whose souls have been stolen by invisible spirits (*Ibid.* 25).

This passage exposes the yawning gap between the mother’s Chinese past and her current Canadian identity the only markers of which are her children. That they should seem unrecognisable to her, reveals the vacuity of her Canadian, that is, her current identity, its quasi non-existence and suggests that her children are the force that can construct her as a Canadianised, creolised maternal subject. However, her negative attachment to her traumatic past seems to be obstructing this process.

I will thus try to consider the mother's trauma as an active component of her identity construction by considering it in relation to contemporary feminist socio-cultural theory. Cathy Caruth states that most descriptions generally agree that post-traumatic stress disorder "is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event" (Caruth 1999:4). As a traumatic experience that has not been fully assimilated, it is contained by the subject and keeps resurging in its full, raw, unchanged form making repetition the structural element most closely associated with trauma. Traumatic repetition is, of course, destructive and or at least non-productive. It seems that the mother's identarian repetition practices transform from productive into traumatically repetitive. Let us turn back to the conversation between the mother and Mimi when she announces her departure:

MOTHER: (C) Who works hard, day and night? I put food on the table; you're going to an expensive university, and Steve needs special things. (E) Where do you think the money comes from? (C) Ever since your father died.  
MIMI: I know, Mother! I know! But look at us. Look at you. When father died... And Steve... What are you afraid of?  
MOTHER: (*She mimes the action of her words, of her fear.* C) In China, every night we would turn out the lights, draw the curtains. We waited for the knock at the door. It could be a friend, a neighbour – wearing a Red Army badge, ready to take everything away from us. To take everything away from me.  
MIMI: You're not in China anymore. The Red Army won't be knocking at the door. I'm here, Steve's here –  
MOTHER: (C) Taking everything away from me. (E) And now they're taking you away from me too! (Quan 1995:35)

The conflation of several traumatic events in this passage – the mother's forced exile from China and the loss of her husband – testifies to the unassimilated nature of the mother's experience. Furthermore, this description fits neatly with Freud's comments on how traumatic memories are processed: "Hysterics and neurotics remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally, they cannot get free of the past and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate" (Freud 1910:16-17). The dynamics of the past traumatic event perceived as immediate present is also inscribed in that the mother experiences her husband's death, the loss of her son's hearing and her daughter's departure as inflicted by the perpetrators of violence in the name of the Cultural Revolution.

In this context, the figure of *jingwei* and her drowning carries connotations of death and negative transformation. Through migration and her husband's death the mother transforms into someone who morbidly clings to her past and is unable to relate to the present, to recognize the reality and urgency of her growing children's demands, to either teach them Cantonese or learn English. She transforms into someone who is deafened and blinded by her own traumatic past and cannot hear her own children in the present. This is what she says to Steve:

MOTHER: In this ocean I am swimming and I am underwater and I cannot speak. What? I can't hear you. I am my language; I speak Chinese. Your language is not Chinese. Your voices, your words. I cannot understand. You drown me out (Quan 1995:42).



In the absence of a common, familiar, recognisable identity between the mother and her children, she starts perceiving the children's linguistic difference as a threat to her own identity. She clings to the past, including and especially her mother tongue as a defence mechanism, which manifests itself in her refusal to learn English.

The idea of holding onto the mother tongue in a defensive, repetitive and self-destructive way as a mechanism of self preservation is a powerful one, because the mother tongue is often conceived of and theorised as, to quote Julia Borossa, "intimately bound up with a fundamental yet difficult to define central core of a subject's identity" (Borossa, 1998:398). Thus, keeping and reproducing the mother tongue, that is, passing it on to the offspring in a foreign country, is first associated with retaining a sense of self and identity in a new place and ensuring some sort of a shared, familiar identity with the children. However, mothering in a foreign environment, as we have seen before, requires listening and hearing the children who speak a different language and belong to a different culture.

In a psychoanalytic reading of the mother tongue as an inherent part of the self, Borossa argues that the mother tongue, just like the mother, is always already and forever lost to all humans, even those, who never left home and continue to speak it. The mother tongue is held within the subject "as memory-trace, as the scar which enables subjectification" (Borossa 1998:399). According to Borossa, then, becoming a fully formed subject involves accepting the loss of the childhood language or the mother tongue and learning to live with that loss, acquiescing to always speaking another language – be it a foreign language or the native tongue that has developed since childhood. Borossa writes: "We all mourn the mother we never possessed, yet who made us who we are. We all long for a mother tongue we can never speak" (*Ibid.* 400). If we apply this theory to a mother who mothers a foreign child, it would suggest that a fully developed mother should be able to accept that she as a mother and her language can never be the same, that she has to resign to speaking a foreign language to her children whilst keeping the memory of her native tongue with her as memory-trace. If we think of the mother in Betty Quan's play, we might say that her fear of annihilation by her children's voices in foreign English originates from her not having come to terms with the separation from her mother tongue, which is symbolically contained in her infantile fixation on and identification with the past together with the language of the past. However, the end of the play opens up a window of hope. In the very last and silent scene of the play, the mother responds to Steve's call in American Sign Language, looks at him and gives him an orange – a symbol of the Chinese tradition of ancestral and parental veneration as a sign of their possible cultural connection. She steps into his spotlight (throughout the play all characters are illuminated by a spotlight of a different colour), enters his world and, possibly, his language. Maybe, then, this finale suggests both the mother's and Steve's engagement into what Gedalof describes as "repetition that undoes, or that recollects forward in order to birth something that is both new and familiar" (Gedalof 2009:95-96). When the mother repeats her signature monologue – "I am my language. I speak Chinese. Your voices. Your words. You drown me out" – at the end of the play, the trope of the ocean comes to signify birth rather than death and carries connotations of initiation into independence as well as an altered state of awareness and agency.

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