Bilingual Being: My Life as a Hyphen by Kathleen Saint Onge (review)

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Kathleen Saint Onge. (2013). *Bilingual Being: My Life as a Hyphen.* Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press. Pp. 328, CAD $34.95 (Cloth).

In her debut memoir, Kathleen Saint Onge, a linguist, language teacher, and Ph.D. candidate, takes us on a complex, intricate psycho-analytical voyage of identity construction, survival, and introspection by unveiling her experiences and memories of growing up bilingual and the insurmountable attachment one can have to language (1) as a means of living through "unspeakable" trauma, and (2) as a means to transform or reinvent oneself. Though not a book of theories or conceptual methodological approaches, I believe this book has something important to offer us all.

Many of the applied linguistic books that we come across today reflect different contemporary facets of language, particularly the ideological and political economic dimensions, such as language as a commodity in a neo-liberal era (e.g., Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012); language as an economic, symbolic, material resource which individuals invest solely for profit or gain (Duchêne & Heller, 2012). However, However, Saint Onge describes another intriguing association of language as a refuge for healing, for overcoming trauma.

Having grown up in the 1950s and 1960s in Québec City with a francophone mother and bilingual father and attending English schools, Saint Onge leads us through a multi-layered, psycho-analytic, stream of consciousness memoir as she weaves across different moments of her life, at times blurring present and past memories of her own ambiguities about having to live life on a "linguistic seesaw" between two languages, of which as she says, "there is no complete *balance*." Among these weavings, Saint Onge intertwines poetry and prose that appear to represent the emotional as well as symbolic expressions of someone trying to find her voice while at the same time seeking refuge in language to overcome something lost, which, in this case, represents the innocence of a childhood taken away from her. There is an underlying sadness that emanates from this prose, as

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through the author's depiction, we are presented with the impositions of family and religion (in this case, the Catholic Church) on gender, on francité (what it means to be French in Québec), on sexuality, on language, and on ethnicity.

Recounting memories of growing up in a bilingual French household and revisiting the social expectations placed upon her as a daughter and female, then shifting to present moments of her life as an adult, Saint Onge gets at the very powerful attachments one associates both with language and through language. This becomes particularly evident with her regard for English, as we learn that she is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. In all of her recollections, the abusers were francophone. Much like "Alice" in Celeste Kinginger's (2004) essay, "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore," Saint Onge's narrative will resonate with many of us who have looked to language as a passageway into an imagined world—one in which we can take refuge or find some kind of solace by constructing a new identity and/or escaping a difficult childhood.

However, the consequences of abuse are very real. I must admit that my first impressions of the book left me frustrated, as I felt that Saint Onge distracts us, writing in a first-person psychoanalytic stream-of-consciousness style (which may not appeal to everyone) and keeping the focus of attention on her contradictory linguistic and social dualities, but all the while there is a dark indifference looming in the background of the text. The depiction of abuse is delivered sporadically in a series of flashbacks of settings, odours, emotions, and so forth. Saint Onge describes the abuse in a somewhat dream-like state, yet there appears to be a nonchalant suggestion of routinized everyday or ritualistic behaviour inherent in her descriptions at the same time. But such depiction is common, as most abusers are people we know and with whom we interact in our everyday lives. The emotion that one would expect instead comes off as a deep, multi-layered wound, masked with indifference, and an uncomfortable numbness toward her mother, toward her father, and even toward the Elder who abused her. She doesn't discuss this emotional aspect at all, though she does talk directly about the implications (e.g. her refusal to speak French with her children). Her writing seems a bit disjointed at times, and this could frustrate the reader, leaving the reader to wonder if something really happened or if it was illusion. Consequently, to write openly about, revisit, and depict one's past, let alone abuse, can also be tremendously painful for anyone, so while there seems to be some distance or missing pieces, this does not take away from the courage it takes to write about one's bilingual being. Clearly, the book

demonstrates that there is so much more than the *bilingualness* of being.

Throughout the memoir, Saint Onge questions and reflects on whether bilingualism changes the relationship between thinking and being, going back and forth or up and down (like a seesaw) from different flashbacks and experiences. In this way, readers will most definitely get a feel for what it was like to grow up bilingual as a female amid the experiences, impositions, and projections from Saint Onge and her family as related to constructions of gender, language, ethnicity, sexuality; and to understand as well the impact of Québec's politics, history, and social practices during the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. As such, the multi-voicedness, identity constructions, and sheer writing of this book have perhaps offered Saint Onge a means to pave the way for all of us to engage more deeply with the dimension of language that can represent a means to heal, cleanse, carve out a different space, and even possibly transcend our experiences.

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