



Biljana D. Obradović

As if I Were Floating above the Ocean¹

Interview conducted by Biljana Dojčinović

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Biljana D. Obradović is a Serbian-American poet, critic and translator. Before she moved to the United States of America in 1988, she has lived in Yugoslavia, Greece and India. She obtained her B.A. from the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, and her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. She received her PhD in English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. Czech Republic's Masarik Academy of Arts awarded her a medal for her artistic achievements. In 2015, Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, where she teaches Creative Writing and other classes at the Department of English, presented her with the *Norman C. Francis* award for excellence achieved throughout her research. She received the *Rastko Petrović* award for her second book of poetry, *Frozen embraces*. Along with Dubravka Đurić, Biljana D. Obradović received the *Miša Dorđević* award for the anthology of contemporary Serbian poetry – *Cat Painters*. The formal occasion behind this conversation was the 2024 publication of selected poems written by Dubravka Đurić and translated by Biljana D. Obradović into English within the collection titled *The Politics of Hope (After the War): Selected and New Poems*.

You received your B.A. in English language and literature at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, yet you have lived in various places in Yugoslavia and worldwide – from Greece, to India and the USA. You teach creative writing and other classes at the Department of English language, at the Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. As a poet, translator and professor, you live in different languages. Do you see yourself as a sort of a language nomad, someone whose mind constantly translates (to paraphrase Rosi Braidotti)? Is that strenuous for you?

I was born in Bitola (of Serbian parents), surrounded by the Macedonian language, because my father was a customs officer at Yugoslavia's border with Greece. Later on, we moved to Negotin, where most of the children were of Vlach minority, so, once again, I wasn't familiar with the language.

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As my father got a new position within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia, we left Belgrade and moved to Greece in 1969. I couldn't speak a word of Greek or English as I was in fifth grade of an American elementary school. I think the foreign language in Yugoslavia at the time was only taught from the fifth grade. So, that fall I had to start attending the fifth grade of the American school, in English which I couldn't speak at all. That summer I began to study English with Mrs. Rossi, a Greek woman married to an Italian. She was, also, a French teacher in my new school. She couldn't utter a word of Serbian. So, I was "immersed" right away. She would pick up a glass and say "glass." As I didn't have the word "glass" on my mind, I would learn the term directly in English. And that's how I learned the language. We started with a picture-book, *Dick and Jane*, which had one to two sentences per page, along with pictures which were odd for me at the time as I was already nine years old then. I also found some cultural aspects of America odd in those pictures, such as the grill on which they roasted corn. Later I saw that they actually do that every weekend.

When I started school, the teacher, Mrs. Gregoriadis, taught me English while all the other students studied French. The children teased me, but that was just an incentive for me to learn the language as soon as possible and to speak it well. I started speaking it within one year. I finished the eighth grade of elementary school in Greece. Then I went to first grade of high school in Belgrade, after which I moved to India. I spent four years in Bombay, finished high school there and came back to Belgrade. In 1980, I enrolled at the Faculty of Philology for a double major – English and French. French was my third language. I also learned Greek pretty well while living there, although I, also, learned it, later on, through courses and I used it when visiting my parents who moved back there. I can read and communicate in Greek. I didn't learn Hindi in India, nor any of their other languages. Thus, once again, there I was a stranger, because all other children knew one more local language. So, I don't translate into English, I think in it. When I'm here I think in Serbian. There are some words I know in English, but cannot remember in Serbian and vice versa.

You have published four poetry books until now – three of them bilingual, Frozen Embraces; Le Riche Monde; Little Disruptions; and the fourth one in English Incognito. What does it look like to translate your own poetry, as opposed to writing it down directly to Serbian?

I started writing poems when I was eight years old, first in Serbian and right after that in English. I might have written two-three poems in Serbian. All my

poems in Serbian are translations, but not necessarily done by me. Some of them were translated by other people, but I was the one who adjusted them for the Serbian culture, for this context.

Why did I even write? I wrote because I constantly moved around. So, I wrote letters to my friends, I had regular correspondence with friends I met abroad who are all over the world as well. To this day, I do the same, I correspond with many people, which is a dying habit, I think. In today's world, we exchange text messages through our phones. One of the letters I sent to my friend was sixty pages long. She must have thrown it away, however, for me, it was important to put myself on the paper, to write about myself, and at one point it transformed from prose to poetry.

Who were some of the poets who impacted you at different stages?

When I started thinking about poetry as a child, Desanka Maksimović was my role-model. I had that honor to meet her and talk to her, and I was even a guest in her home twice. I translated a whole book of her selected poems and published eleven of them. That book of poetry still hasn't been published, although some of those poems were a part of my M.F.A. thesis which mostly contained my poems. I don't know if children are familiar with "A Bloody Fairytale" today, but Desanka was truly a great role-model for me. After that I started reading English and American poetry and it was rather difficult because I read older poets like Keats and Shelley and I didn't see myself in it. It was not interesting to me. Not until I went to America. My professors there were poets who influenced me to a large extent: Margaret Gibson, Dave Smith, Greg Donovan. Dave Smith was my mentor for the M.F.A. thesis and, to this day, we collaborate regularly. What did they choose for us to read? Every year in our Creative writing classes we read at least five newest books of contemporary American poets. In the summer of 1988, before I departed for my graduate studies in the US, in August, I met two American poets who were in Belgrade on a Fulbright, Phillip Dacey and Larry Levis. I stayed in touch with Dacey. He was a formal poet, i.e., he wrote in certain forms, which was not popular at that time in America. My professors did not teach that, but Dave Smith insisted we write a sonnet and not only the dominant free verse. I am deeply grateful for that. I write many formal poems besides free verse and I teach that to my students. They should learn how these are written as well, because it is not simple at all. I was interested in poets like Anne Sexton and Caroline Kizer. They were writing from the 1960s as confessional poets. Robert Lowell (one of the leaders of the Confessional movement) was, by

the way, Hilda Raz's professor, who was my professor in Nebraska. So, in a way, I am the "descendant" of Lowell's. Sylvia Plath is interesting, although I prefer Anne Sexton. "Daddy" is Plath's only poem my students must read. Anne Sexton wrote poems women hadn't written until then, for example "In Celebration of My Uterus." That's the kind of poem a man cannot write. Or, "Menstruation at Forty." I knew Caroline Kizerin person, as well. (She wrote the famous poem "ProFemina" after which the Serbian magazine was named after).

You studied Creative Writing when that was an unfamiliar field here. How did it come to that?

Professor Tihomir Vučković from Faculty of Philology told me about creative writing because he knew I wrote poetry in English. I wanted to publish my poems in *Znak*, the undergraduate student magazine, but I was told to translate them into Serbian. "Why?" I asked, "This is the Faculty of Philology?" I was told the same thing in *Književne Novine* – this can't be done; it can only be published in Serbian. It was in 1986 or 1987. Professor Vučković suggested I go to America to study creative writing. He told me, go to the American library in Knez Mihailova street. So, I did just that – there were three pages of small print about the creative writing programs, so I applied to those I was familiar with. My father paid the application fees which were very expensive at the time – I applied to seven or eight of them, to Harvard, Yale, the universities I had heard of. None of them admitted me. Next year, my father told me to try one more time, so I applied to the University of Iowa, which was the first and most famous university for creative writing. I wasn't accepted there, but I did get acceptance letters to the other two I applied for. In March 1988 I went to the US for a month, for the first time, in order to get acquainted with the country and to visit the universities I had applied for. After I got admitted to Virginia Commonwealth University, I enrolled, and moved to Richmond, VA in August 1988. They had just rolled out this program four or five years before. So, I was the first foreign student in it.

How long does your course of creative writing last? What do the students take from it? To what extent is it linked to what you teach in your English language and literature course?

I teach several courses of creative writing that last one semester. Introduction to Creative Writing is taught to freshmen. In the second year we have a poetry

workshop. In the third year they read contemporary poets and we work on something more specialized, such as the influence painting, or music, has on poetry. And in their senior year, students write a thesis about poetry – a book which should be maximum 40 pages long.

In the first year I teach four different subjects. I teach *creative nonfiction*, writing essays about oneself, a specific genre which doesn't have an adequate translation here. I teach poetry, established forms at first and then free verse in the end. Then I teach short stories where they need to write a story from one passage. For example, I ask them to write a story which contains the assigned elements: a man and a woman are waiting for a cab. Or, the alphabet. Each sentence must begin with a letter from the alphabet. The final form they need to master is a brief play. In the middle and the end of the course, students gather all the work they created during the semester into a portfolio which resembles a book manuscript. Many of them have never been to a play, although they are eighteen years old, and they think theatre is the same as film. In Poetry Workshop, I assign five books. We don't use a textbook, but rather five recent collections of poetry I choose from the conferences I go to. We talk about those poems and then I ask them to write a sonnet, for example, or a recipe in the form of a poem, or a poem about some artwork.

The largest number of students are at freshman year – fourteen. I have twelve at the poetry workshop. And I, also, teach Women's Literature of the 20th century – from Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, we go through all the genres. I have created most of those subjects myself, and now others teach them, as well. I, also, teach World Literature from 1650 to modern times, along with other subjects all the professors teach, such as English Rhetoric and Composition or English Composition and Literature. Some of my students have been exceptional; many have received their M.A. degrees and some have received their PhDs, have their books published, some even two-three of them. Some are, even, awarded. And one of them worked on the film *12 Years a Slave*, which won an Oscar.

How long have you been at the Xavier University of Louisiana? How did you end up in New Orleans?

I have been teaching at Xavier for 28 years. I was hired by Michele Levy, the head of the department at the time. What's interesting is that three African American poets who are now extremely famous were at Xavier University at that particular moment: Toi Derricotte, Major Jackson, who visited Belgrade recently and Terrence Hayes. Those are now well-known

names of contemporary American poetry. They were there with me for two years and they left, leaving me behind. A year before coming to Xavier, Toi Derricotte created a great summer program called Cave Canem, inspired by the inscription from Pompeii. She told me she gave that title to the summer workshop because she envisioned it for herself and other African Americans, as a retreat from Whites and a place where they don't have to think about them. I told her I would love to have such a retreat for myself, where I can go and be with people who are like me, but that I don't have a place in the world. I don't feel like an American White person. I am a foreigner wherever I go. I feel as if I were floating above the ocean, and that I can fall and drown at any given moment.

This year The Politics of Hope (After the War): Selected and New Poems was published by Roof Books from New York. This is your selection of poems Dubravka Đurić wrote. You have, also, translated and annotated them with the aim of giving the context and motive behind certain poems. How would you describe the work on this book?

Dubravka and I not only translated together, but we also created new poems in English. Dubravka is a language poet and she plays with words. Besides that, she rarely uses punctuation, so we had to work together. We worked on the book for a year and a half. There were a few things Dubravka, who knows English (although not like me), insisted on, but which could not be preserved in English. For me it's, of course, more difficult to translate into Serbian, so I have to work with the poet and someone who is a Serbian poet and who can go through my translation. I cannot do this on my own. However, when I translate into English, I don't have the same issue.

In her poems, Dubravka talked about the origin of those poems, which we described in the footnotes. We contemplated where to put them. Then we decided, along with the publishers, James Sherry, and Charles Bernstein who wrote the preface, to leave those notes below the poems instead of moving them to the end of the book, because this is, ultimately, a translation. At the end of the book, there is a comprehensive interview with Dubravka which I led.

You and Dubravka differ a lot as far as your poetic sensibilities are concerned. The anthology you two worked on a few years ago, Cat Painters, contained a large number of poets, with a variety of sensibilities. What did that transition from one poetic "skin" to the other look like?

It is true that Dubravka and I completely differ when it comes to our attitude towards poetry. She writes language poetry while I write narrative, formal and free verse poetry. It was very important for me to differ like that. We worked on the anthology for four and a half years. I don't think it would have turned out as well as it did, if we had been on the same side. We agreed that it should contain as many women as possible, that was very important. Dubravka is known as a feminist, while I am not a critic like her, although I am a feminist. The anthology comprises of poems written by more than seventy poets, half of them women. Another thing we agreed upon was that we didn't want it to have many poems reverting to Serbian history, although such poets were present. We included poets of various religions, atheists, gay poets, a female Roma poet who has been included in the anthology for the very first time and a woman who lives in Serbia, but was born abroad. I have been living in America for thirty-six years, while she has been living here. I am a Serbian-American poet, she is a Japanese-Serbian poet. She lives here, has dual citizenship, yet she writes in Serbian, in Cyrillic. She is a Serbian poet and, of course, a Japanese one. I insisted on having different types of poetry presented. I only may have preferred having more formal poetry. However, it is very difficult translating poetry that rhymes into a target language. I, also, insisted on having haiku poetry which was not included in anthologies before. Why not? The form of haiku is truly important for American poetry. The same can, obviously, be said for Serbian poetry, as well. Dubravka agreed with these points.

Then we wrote the introduction together. Charles Bernstein wrote the preface. Then came the biobibliographies, as well. We invested a lot of time in gathering and making them, but everyone who has seen the anthology agrees that this was an important step – if anyone wanted to translate anyone from the anthology, they would have all the necessary information available in one place. I, also, recorded 25 poets from the anthology and I've uploaded those recordings to the internet so that anyone who's interested can hear what their poems sound like in Serbian.

Besides this, I've been publishing book reviews of Serbian poetry and, sometimes, prose (*World Literature Today*; *Serbian Studies*) for years now, and I attend conferences all over the world and I use every chance to write conference papers on Serbian poetry.

You translated quite a number of American poets from English to Serbian. Your husband, John Gery, is among one of those poets, with American Ghosts: Selected Poems. What did that process of translating from English to Serbian look like?

The first book of poetry I translated into Serbian was John's. His poetry is difficult to translate. He has an incredible vocabulary. I hear new words from him every single day. That is what makes it rather difficult to translate. When I finished, I worked with Ivana Milankov and Bratislav Milanović on fixing the poems, which was a pleasant process. Ivana knows English well, Bata does not. The process itself was fun. There weren't many corrections, but I think I tend to make mistakes when using cases. I don't know, I haven't lived here for thirty-six years, I think it's good I still speak Serbian at all. I know people who've left their country and then forgotten the language overall after five or ten years living abroad.

Would it be easier for you to conduct this interview in English?

No, of course not. I'm here now and I love speaking Serbian.

You and John have a son, Peter, who's in college now. Does Peter speak Serbian? Was it important for you to teach him your mother tongue? Why?

His name is Petar. Over there he is Petaar, with the elongated a, while here he's Peter. They never get his name right. He's, just like me, floating somewhere in between.

What kind of attitude do you think your son has towards Serbian language? What did you do regarding that?

Petar was born in 2003. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina occurred. That completely uprooted our lives. For a year we couldn't live in our own house. We lost 2500 books, Petar's toys. We were homeless for a while. Michele Levy helped us once again. She provided accommodation for us in an apartment in Asheville, North Carolina for four months. Then we went to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and we came back to New Orleans to teach in fall 2006, only to go to Belgrade in January of 2007, because John got the Fulbright stipend he couldn't defer. That's when Petar attended kindergarten and started speaking Serbian fluently. There were other children from abroad there as well. After moving back to America, we came back here every summer. When he was seven-eight years old, I realized I cannot use only Serbian with him. That's when someone informed me that a graduate student from Niš held online

lessons, through Skype, for children from the Diaspora. She was Petar's professor of Serbian language for seven years. Whenever we were here over the summer, he would have in person lessons in Niš. She was amazing. They watched cartoons together, read poems in Serbian, she taught him about the culture. Petar can write Serbian, both in Cyrillic and Latin letters. He did struggle a bit with starting to speak it anew, because here he doesn't have friends with whom he can speak Serbian with. However, he said he would like to do his M.A. studies here for a year, as that is the only way to regain his language skills which "entered his ear" when he was a kid.

You've been in the US for a long time and you've been surrounded by the English language. Do you still react in your mother tongue in unexpected situations? Does it break out unexpectedly in some situations where you wouldn't expect it to do so?

I have some friends in America with whom I talk in Serbian and in English, but words mix in our conversions. When I talk to Americans, I never mix languages.

There are some cultural aspects I find interesting, for example, "you didn't look after the sheep with him," which I use sometimes with my students when they talk about, let's say, Charles Simic as "Charles." That's when I alert them that they should use his last name, Simic, as he changed it.

And you? What's your last name?

I'm Biljana D. Obradovic, because, of course, "ć" is not a part of their alphabet.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am waiting for my Serbian publisher to accept and publish the translation of my book *Incognito* in Serbian. Apart from that, I have been working on my memoirs for years. My new book, *Called by Distances*, the fifth book of poetry, will come out in spring 2026. It will be published by a university LSU Press, one of the best for poetry. After that I will put the focus back on my memoirs. I plan on writing at least two books of poetry and one collection of conference papers. And a cookbook!

Translated by Marija Bosančić