

*FEAR AND TREMBLING* BY AMÉLIE NOTHOMB:  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A DIALOGUE BETWEEN IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the process undergone by the protagonist of *Stupeur et Tremblement* (*Fear and trembling*) by Amélie Nothomb. As this process is believed to be a dialogue between cultures, a Bakhtinian approach has been taken to illuminate its development towards a final understanding. In addition, the multiple sites of conflict and identity negotiation in the data are analyzed following Pavlenko's main aspects of identity negotiation (2001b). One of the peculiarities about Amélie Nothomb is that she considers Japanese and French as two 'varieties' of her mother tongue, although all her novels are written in French.

Keywords: dialogism, imagined communities, identity negotiation, bilingual writers

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## 1. Introduction

What does it mean not to be answered? What is the price of silencing a person's second language? Could an individual become part of a community if their voice is not responded? To what extent does a person own a language without the consent of the given linguistic community? In the present article I explore all these questions in regard to the unique autobiographic work *Stupeur et Tremblements* (1999) by Amèlie Nothomb.

Bilingual users and speakers and their cultural and linguistic identity have become the topic of debate in the last decade (e. g.: Kanno and Norton, 2003; Marchenkova, 2005 Pavlenko, 2007, 2001a, 2001b; Ros i Solé, 2004; Vitanova, 2005, Xuemei 2007; Hanauer 2010). Due to globalization notions as national and linguistic identity have been relativized partly because the concept of nation-state has disappeared (Bloemmaerts, 2006: 239). At the same time, language has become an important tool for identity construction and terms as *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991) have changed our notion of cultural and linguistic identity (Ros i Solé, 2004:229). As a result, autobiographies of bilingual writers have become an interdisciplinary focus of attention (Pavlenko, 2007: 164).

Amèlie Nothomb, of Belgian origin, was born in Kobe (Japan) in 1967. She was a diplomat's daughter and she lived in Japan, China, Unites States, Laos, Burma and Bangladesh during her childhood. She was seventeen when she visited Europe for the first time (Baingrigge and den Toonder, 2003, 1). Amèlie Nothomb has written so far three autobiographic books that recreate her childhood, and one book about her adult life. The books describing her childhood are: *Le Sabotage amoureux* (1993), *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000); and *Biographie de la faim* (2004). In her adult

autobiographic book *Stupeur et Tremblements (Fear and Trembling)* (1999), she describes her return to Japan after finishing her studies in Belgium. In this book she narrates her adventures in a Japanese company, and more interestingly, her struggles with the Japanese language and her efforts to become part of the Japanese society. Ironically she is forced to give up her Japanese language skills although she was working as an interpreter. After leaving Japan, Nothomb became a novelist in Belgium.

One of the peculiarities about Amèlie Nothomb is that she considers Japanese and French as two ‘varieties’ of her mother tongue, although all her novels are written in French (Jacomard, 2004: 15). At the same time her novels are considered as a site of identity negotiation, where ‘conflicts of all kinds’ can be traced (Bainbrigge and den Toonder, 2004: 2).

The aim of this article is to explore the process undergone by the protagonist of *Stupeur et Tremblement*. As this process is believed to be a dialogue between cultures, a Bakhtinian approach has been taken to illuminate the development of the process towards a final understanding. Also, the concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991) is defined because the conflicts narrated in the autobiography could be regarded as confrontations between imagined and real communities. Finally, the multiple sites of conflict and identity negotiation in the data are analyzed following Pavlenko’s main aspects of identity negotiation (2001b: 326).

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Autobiography as a site of identity negotiation

Autobiographies are no more regarded simply as a genre. Following Pavlenko, in the late 1960s and 1970s, autobiographies became the focus of study of interdisciplinary fields and with time, they are considered not only as an object of study but also a means of research of disciplines such as history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and education (Pavlenko, 2007, 164).

According to Pavlenko, autobiographic narratives offer three major contributions to the study of bilingualism and SLA. Firstly, autobiographies describe the inner world of the authors, their private domains. Secondly, they pinpoint new connections between learning processes and phenomena. Finally, autobiographic narratives are seen as a source of information for historic and diachronic sociolinguistic research (Pavlenko, 2007:164-165).

Commonly, three types of autobiographies are explored in sociolinguistics: diaries and journals, linguistic biographies, and language memoirs (Pavlenko, 2007: 165). Diaries and journals are normally written either spontaneously or as a result of a request from a teacher or researcher. Linguistic biographies and autobiographies have a common focus on the language acquisition process. Language memoirs are published linguistic autobiographies.

In addition to that, Pavlenko (2007:171) examines three different theoretical approaches to the study of autobiographies. The first is the cognitive approach which considers autobiographies as ‘meaning-making systems’ and therefore as evidence of how authors understand the world. The second is the discursive approach that considers

autobiographies as ‘interaction-oriented’. The third is the textual approach, based on the works of Bakhtin (1981) and which regards narratives as a ‘creative interplay of a variety of voices and discourses’ (Pavlenko 2007:171).

In this article, I explore the published autobiography of Amèlie Nothomb *Stupeur et Tremblements* (1999). This work could be categorized as a language memoir because the author aims at imposing ‘order on experience that was both disruptive and confusing’ (Holte 1988:28, cited in Pavlenko, 2001a: 224) through what Pavlenko calls a ‘narrative act of identity’ (2001a: 224).

In the next section, I will present the approach taken for this article, corresponding with the so-called textual approach and based on Bakhtin’s theories.

## 2.2. Bakhtin and Anderson’s imagined communities

According to Pavlenko, Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic nature of language has offered several tools for analysis of L2 users (Pavlenko, 2007: 179). In her article she cites six notions or terms that are commonly used for analysis: *voice*, *voicing*, *double-voicing*, *speaking on behalf of another*, *intertextuality/ interdiscursivity* and *answerability/responsibility*. In this article I focus on the notions of *dialogism*, *intersubjectivity* and *understanding*.

The main philosophical Bakhtinian theme is the dialogic relationship between cultures, persons or a person and a culture (Marchenkova, 2005: 174). For Bakhtin, “to be means to communicate dialogically. When the dialogue is finished, all is finished... One voice alone concludes nothing and decides nothing, two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence” (Bakhtin, 1984: 213, cited in Platt, 2005: 120). Marchenkova builds on Bakhtin’s notions and argues that Bakhtin saw dialogue as a

means of creating language, and in turn ‘language emerges from dialogue and is its consequence’ (Marchenkova, 2005: 175). Language is regarded as the mediator of dialogue and self-formation (Marchenkova, 2005: 175). Moreover, according to Vitanova building on Bakhtin, dialogue is more than a verbal exchange between individuals; it is a representation of the interconnectedness of ‘symbolic and physical boundaries’ (Vitanova, 2005: 154).

For Bakhtin, intersubjectivity is the major component of dialogism (Platt, 2005: 121). Intersubjectivity is a notion used by Kant in an attempt ‘to capture the relationship between the individual and his or her social world’ (Platt, 2005: 122). According to Platt (2005: 122), the relationship ‘I-thou’ (Self-Other) is vital to understand the notion of dialogism because intersubjectivity is established only when interlocutors enter ‘temporarily shared social world’ (Rommetviet, 1974: 29; cited in Platt, 2005: 122). It is through communication that the self dialogically checks the knowledge of other (Manjali, 1999: 127). Moreover, in a dialogue, in order to be understood, participants must be able of positioning themselves in the part of the other interactant (Voloshinow 1973: 257; cited in Platt, 2005: 122) and at the same time, dialogue is possible as far as the participants remain different from each other. (Marchenkova, 2005: 177).

Understanding is the final goal of every utterance and it is conformed by a background composed of ‘specific objects and emotional expressions’ (Bakhtin, 1987: 281). This specific background is made up of ‘contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments’ (Bakhtin, 1987: 281). Intercultural understanding means to simultaneously enter another culture while remaining outside it (Marchenkova, 2005: 178). Moreover, Outsiderness is not regarded as a restriction, but as a motive that can broaden one’s perspective (Marchenkova, 2005: 178). As a result, the different cultural

identities are not threatened in an intercultural dialogue. Moreover, for understanding to take place, there must be a response (Bakhtin, 1981: 282). Marchenkova (2005: 184) argues that when understanding is achieved, it becomes a tool of self-transformation.

It is through creativity and imagination that individuals enter into other people's positions or other cultures. Imagination is following Wenger 'a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves' (Wenger, 1998: 176; cited in Kanno and Norton, 2003: 241). The next section deals with the concept *imagined communities* coined by Anderson (1991).

### 2.3. Imagined communities

*Imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991) refer to groups of people with whom other individuals connect through imaginary bounds.

As Kanno and Norton (2003: 241) argue, we interact in our daily life with different communities such as our workplaces, our educational institutions or our religious groups. However, we are involved with more communities than those, such as our nation.

Following Wenger (Wenger, 1998: 176; cited in Kanno and Norton, 2003: 241) there are two ways by which we engage with a community of practice. The first way is by what he calls *engagement*, which consists of tangible and concrete relationships, and the second way is through *imagination*. As already mentioned, it is through imagination that we expand ourselves. These imaginary bounds can be stretched both through space and time. Anderson (1991) argues that nations are imagined communities. When defining the term he added that 'it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear

of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991: 6)

Kanno and Norton (2003: 242) suggest that imagined communities include future relationships that only exist in an individual's mind. They add that imagined communities are no less real than concrete communities with which a person is engaged in a daily basis (Kanno and Norton, 2003: 242). To illustrate their vision they offer the story of Rui, a Japanese student who spent almost his entire life in English-speaking countries but who believed he was Japanese. When he finally travels to Japan, he realized that the Japan he has imagined had very little in common with the real Japan. As a result, he felt so disappointed that he declared he didn't want to be Japanese any more (Kanno and Norton, 203: 243).

The concept of imagined communities is elaborated and applied in many fields. As an example, the article by Busby and Martin (2006: 238) regarding biobanks or national and regional genetic blood banks in which they argue that the concept of imagined communities is appealed in order 'to gain the allegiance of target populations'. In this case the authors stress the role of imagination and emotion as connected with nationhood and nationalism.

According to Pavlenko the role of imagination is crucial in immigrants' narratives (Pavlenko, 2001b: 320; Ros i Solé, 2004: 230) and these narratives are seen in turn as acts of identity (Pavlenko, 2001b: 324). In the present article I aim at presenting identity negotiation in a linguistic autobiography. Amèlie's identity is thus understood not only in terms of investment in concrete relationship or 'real world', but also in terms of investments in 'possible worlds' (Kanno and Norton 2003: 248).

#### 2.4. Writing and aspects of identity negotiation

According to Pavlenko (2001b: 325-326), writing enacts four important roles in the negotiation of identities. First of all, writing is a way of regaining control over ‘the self and the world’ (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; cited in Pavlenko, 2001b: 324) as it offers the authors the opportunity to control their own narrative story. Secondly, narratives offer a safe space for the authors where they can try out new voices and experiences. Thirdly, linguistic memoirs help the authors to achieve linguistic transitions. Finally, autobiographies are considered as sites where discourses of resistance can take place.

Pavlenko (2001b:326) after examining several autobiographies of bilingual writers, concluded that there are five aspects of identity negotiation subjected to change: linguistic identities, national, racial and ethnic identities, cultural identities, gender identities and social and class identities.

#### 3. Methodology and data

The aim of this article is to explore the different sites of identity negotiation in the novel *Stupeur et Tremblement* (1999) by Amèlie Nothomb. I argue that in this book, identity is negotiated in an attempt to enter another culture, or in other words, the author tries to establish a dialogue, in search of acceptance and understanding. However, dialogue is negated to her. In the book, Amèlie Nothomb narrates her struggles in a community that bears no resemblance with the community she remembers from her childhood.

Amèlie Nothom’s novel was chosen for three reasons. First, because the author is multilingual and Marchenkova, building on Bakhtin, argues that a person who speaks

two or more languages is the carrier of the respective cultures and can compare them having at the same time a deeper insight into each of them (2005: 180). Secondly because Amèlie Nothomb has always publicly recognized her preference for the Japanese world and the highly aesthetic values attached to its culture, but at the same time she has always acknowledged her Belgian identity (Bainbrigge and den Toonder, 2003: 205). The third reason for choosing this book is because all the struggles are narrated with humour, and laughter can be seen as an ‘act of resistance’ toward ‘oppressive utterances’ (Vitanova, 2005: 165).

To carry out this analysis I draw on Pavlenko’s analysis of cross-cultural autobiographies written in the USA (2001a: 223), adapting her design to my own purposes. First, I have identified all the discussions or references to the narrator’s different aspects of identity in an explicit way (for example, ‘I see myself as Japanese’). Second, I have looked for expectations, comments, or the like (for example, ‘Traditionally, Japanese women are expected to be very quiet’). As in Pavlenko’s analysis, the length of the references is very variable, from one sentence to a whole episode.

In this article, I will present an analysis of qualitative data and not quantitative as I am interested in showing the process of entering a culture and how aspects of identity are negotiated. In addition, I would like to stress that all the different aspects of identity negotiation analysed in this article tend to overlap even in a single reference. According to Pavlenko (2001b: 326), linguistic identities are ‘intrinsically tied to ethnicity and race, while ethnicity may be tied to social status, social status to gender, and gender, once again, to one’s linguistic identity’.

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

The present analysis was carried out with two purposes in mind. First, I wanted to explore the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogue between cultures, intersubjectivity and understanding in an autobiographic text where understanding is finally achieved after many conflicts. The second objective is to discover how through these conflicts identity is negotiated. In addition, I argue that especially in this book the role of imagination is very important in identity negotiation, and I connect it with the concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991).

This section is divided into two interconnected subsections. In the first, I show the analysis of identity negotiation and in the second I link them to the Bakhtinian concepts mentioned above.

##### 4.1. Analysis of identity negotiation

In this section I follow Pavlenko's (2001b: 326) five aspect that can be subjected to transformation, to explore the book *Stupeur et Tremblement* (1999) by Amélie Nothomb. This section, thus, will be divided into five subsections: linguistic identity, national, racial and ethnic identity, cultural identity, gender identity and social and class identity. I illustrate each section with an excerpt from the data. All the excerpts are translated into English in the Appendix.

##### 4.1.1. Linguistic identity

Linguistic identity refers to language ownership and subsequently ownership of meaning (Pavlenko, 2001b: 326). According to Pavlenko (2001b: 326), language

ownership is the crucial area where identities are negotiated in cross-cultural autobiographies.

(Excerpt 1: see Appendix for an English translation)

*Un matin, monsieur Saito me signala que le vice-président recevait dans son bureau une importante délégation d'une firme amie :*

*-Café pour vingt personnes.*

*J'entrai chez monsieur Omochi avec mon grand plateau et je fus plus que parfaite : je servis chaque tasse avec une humilité appuyée, psalmodiant les plus raffinées des formules d'usage, baissant les yeux et m'inclinant. S'il existait un ordre du mérite de l'ôchakumi, il eût dû m'être décerné.*

*[...]*

*-Vous avez profondément indisposé la délégation de la firme amie ! Vous avez servi le café avec des formules qui suggéraient que vous parliez le japonais à la perfection !*

*[...] Comment nos partenaires auraient-ils pu se sentir en confiance, avec une Blanche qui comprenait leur langue ? A partir de maintenant, vous ne parlez plus japonais.*

*[...]*

*Je m'étais quand même donné du mal pour entrer dans cette compagnie: j'avais étudié la langue tokyoite des affaires, j'avais passé des tests[...] j'avais toujours éprouvé le désir de vivre dans ce pays auquel je vouais un culte depuis les premiers souvenirs idylliques que j'avais gardés de ma petite enfance.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 18)*

Traditionally, Japan has been considered as a monolingual country where the majority of the population (approximately the 98%) has Japanese as main language (Tukahara, 2002: 1). In this excerpt, Amèlie imagined herself as a traditional Japanese woman in a tea ceremony (ôchakumi). However, her boss is disappointed because a 'White woman' should not speak Japanese, and finally Amèlie is banned from speaking it. Her mastery of the language is what has allowed Amèlie to imagine herself as Japanese, and at the same time, it is what has triggered the conflict. As she is not

Japanese, she is not considered as a legitimate speaker, and therefore, she is not imagined. As Pavlenko argues, in countries where a monoglot ideology dominates, bilinguals remain unimaginable (Pavlenko, 2001b: 330).

#### 4.1.2. National, racial and ethnic identity

Pavlenko (2001b: 330) argues that language context in the USA is often related to race, and therefore, Standard English is related to whiteness. Similarly, she demonstrates that in Japan, the ideology of nihonjinron, which ‘emphasizes Japan’s racial, linguistic, and cultural homogeneity’ supposes that foreigners cannot learn to ‘speak Japanese in a native-like fashion’ (Pavlenko, 2001b: 332). As mentioned, the different aspects of identity analyzed in this data, are intertwined. For example, in excerpt 1, race or whiteness is also mentioned as a prerequisite of language ownership. In addition, a new perspective of national, racial and ethnic identity is found in the data:

(Excerpt 2)

*-Vous ne connaissez plus le japonais. C’est clair? [...]*

*-C’est impossible. Personne ne peut obéir à un ordre pareil.*

*-Il y a toujours moyen d’obéir. C’est ce que les cerveaux occidentaux devraient comprendre. [...]*

*-Le cerveau nippon est probablement capable de se forcer à oublier une langue. Le cerveau occidental n’en a pas les moyens.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 157)*

In this excerpt, the difference is posited in terms of Western and Oriental ways of learning a language, although the author reverses the situation and speaks of forgetting a language instead. Her answer is connected with her ideas about how a Japanese person would have responded. According to Hashimoto (2000: 40) there is a sense of

uniqueness in Japanese culture, which is tied to the concept of Japaneseness as opposed to Western cultures. Hashimoto argues that for a Japanese person, mastering a language ‘requires the courage to make a total commitment of mind and body to the task’ (Hashimoto, 2000: 40).

#### 4.1.3. Cultural identity

Following Pavlenko (2001b: 333) in addition to racial and ethnic ideologies, language and identity are linked to ‘cultural allegiances’. Pavlenko deals with the meaning of being bi- or multicultural in a country with an official monoglot ideology, and she concludes by claiming the ‘impossibility of unproblematic biculturalism’ (Pavlenko, 2001b: 333). Nothomb presents in her book cultural affiliation not to Belgium in particular, but to Western culture in general. She feels as if she was the bearer of Western culture in the eyes of the Japanese society, but at the same time, one part of her is Japanese:

(Excerpt 3)

*Présenter ma démission eût été le plus logique. Pourtant, je ne pouvais me résoudre à cette idée. Aux yeux d’un Occidental, ce n’eût rien eu d’infamant ; aux yeux d’un Japonais, c’eût été perdre la face. J’étais dans la compagnie depuis un mois à peine. Or, j’avais signé un contrat d’un an. Partir après si peu de temps m’eût couverte d’opprobre, à leurs yeux comme aux miens.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 21)*

In this excerpt the protagonist is dealing with her two cultures, and she shares with the readers her two views or the views she imagines of both cultures. Again, the author emphasizes the differences between Western and Oriental cultures, this time in terms of leaving a job and the confronted thoughts attached to it: leaving a job is not

uncommon in Western society, but it is regarded as a shame in Japan. According to Hashimoto (2000: 41), the Western concept of 'individualism' is interpreted negatively as 'self-centredness' or 'egoistic' in Japan, but in contrast, the concept 'individuality' is treated as a positive element in establishing Japanese identity. As Tsui and Tollefson argue, the Japanese self emphasizes individualism as opposed to the group, and individuality as in relation to the group (Tsui and Tollefson, 2007: 10).

#### 4.1.4. Gender identities

Pavlenko stresses the difficulties experienced by many authors when negotiating new gendered identities (Pavlenko, 2001b: 335). She argues that societies impose new models of femininity and immigrant authors feel that they are incapable of fitting in.

(Excerpt 4)

*Mais le Nippon, lui n'est pas un asphyxié. On n'a pas détruit en lui, dès son plus jeune âge, toute trace d'idéal. Il possède l'un des droits humains les plus fondamentaux : celui de rêver, d'espérer. [...]*

*La Japonaise n'a pas ce recours, si elle est bien éduquée-et c'est le cas de la majorité d'entre elles. On l'a ainsi dire amputée de cette faculté essentielle. C'est pourquoi je proclame ma profonde admiration pour toute Nippone qui ne s'est pas suicidée. [...]*

*Ainsi pensais-je en contemplant Fubuki.*

*-Peut-on savoir ce que vous faites ? Me demanda-t-elle d'une voix acerbe.*

*-Je rêve. Ça ne vous arrive jamais ?*

*-Jamais.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 95-96)*

Amélie deals with her inability of being as Japanese women are supposed to be, and instead, she thinks that she behaves as a man because she dreams. Yoshihara (2004: 992) argues that in Japan, discourses about gender are dominated by Japanese male

projections of an ideal Japanese femininity. Although Amèlie thinks that she has failed to behave as a Japanese woman, it is remarkable how she can enact and transform her identities:

(Excerpt 5)

*Désormais, je servais les diverses tasses de thé et de café sans l'ombre d'une formule de politesse et sans répondre aux remerciements des cadres. Ceux-ci n'étaient pas au courant de mes nouvelles instructions et s'étonnaient que l'aimable geisha blanche se soit transformée en une carpe grossière comme une Yankee.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 26)*

#### 4.1.5. Social and class identity

Pavlenko points out that social and class identities are 'inextricable from the issue of language ownership as race, ethnicity, culture, and gender' (Pavlenko, 2001b: 336). She provides examples of dominant discourses linking foreigners with humility and illegitimacy. However, in the data analyzed, social identity is linked with assumptions on the part of the author towards the group that considers her as a foreigner. Amèlie makes every effort to enter that society, but she is systematically rejected:

(Excerpt 6)

*En cela, je n'échappais pas à la règle : tout étranger désirant s'intégrer au Japon met son point d'honneur à respecter les usages de l'Empire. Il est remarquable que l'inverse soit absolument faux : les Nippons qui s'offusquent des manquements d'autrui à leur code ne se scandalisent jamais de leurs propres dérogations aux convenances autres.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 124-125)*

#### 4.2. Autobiography as dialogue

According to Vitanova (2005: 155) building on Bakhtin, narratives are ‘zones of dialogic constructions’ and can be considered as an important form of authorship. Bakhtin considers authorship not as monologic, but as polyphonic. When an individual speaks they are not simply describing or recounting experiences, but they are entering into a dialogue with these others they speak of. Moreover, Bakhtin emphasizes how ‘every word is directed toward an answer’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 280). In the book *Stupeur et Tremblement*, Amèlie tries to enter into a dialogue with Japanese society and to position herself in the other. She attempts to do so in different ways: she imagines herself as a traditional geisha (excerpts 1, 5); she adopts a Japanese personality (Excerpt 3, 6). Every word she utters is an effort to achieve the desired dialogue. However, she is rejected, and moreover, she is not allowed to speak in Japanese, which was her link with society (excerpt 1, 2).

Marchenkova (2005: 175) argues that the Bakhtinian dialogue consists of ‘relations’ between culture and human consciousness. These relations are based on the concepts of identity and difference, of the self and the other. Amèlie Nothomb is considered by Japanese as the representative of Western culture, although she is the bearer of two cultures. In fact it is through imagination that she has stretched her ties with Japan before her arrival, relying on her knowledge of Japanese and her first memories, built on an imagined community. When she is banned from speaking Japanese, one of her cultures/identities is banned, but it is still alive in her imagination. Her autobiography is a way of regaining control over that part of her identity that was banned. In addition, the humour displayed throughout the book could be regarded as an

act of resistance toward an oppressive society and a way of liberating her self (Vitanova, 2005: 165).

According to Marchenkova building on Bakhtin, the final goal of dialogue is *understanding* and *intercultural understanding* which means entering another culture and at the same time remaining outside it (Marchenkova, 2005: 178). Amèlie has two vital experiences. On the one hand she knows how Japanese people feel and think, and therefore, she has the experience of an insider. On the other hand, as Belgian she also has the knowledge of an outsider. However, Amèlie is not able to enter into dialogue with the Japanese culture during her stay in Japan, and understanding is not realized. Nevertheless, once in Belgium, after achieving success with her first novel, she receives a letter from Fubuki, her Japanese colleague:

(Excerpt 7)

*En 1993, je reçus une lettre de Tokyo. Le texte en était ainsi libellé :*

*"Amélie-san,*

*Félicitations.*

*Mori Fubuki "*

*Ce mot avait de quoi me faire plaisir. Mais il comportait un détail qui me ravit au plus haut point : il était écrit en japonais."*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 175)*

With this letter, understanding is finally achieved: her Japanese skills are recognized and her Japanese identity is restored.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the process narrated in the autobiography *Stupeur et Tremblement* (1999) can be regarded as a dialogue between cultures. As we have seen Amèlie attempts to enter into a dialogue with Japanese society and she is rejected. Therefore, in a Bakhtinian sense, neither dialogue nor understanding can be achieved. These attempts become sites of identity negotiation that are further reflected in her autobiography. Thus, the book could be seen as a safe place where the author discusses her conflicts and regains control over her life (Pavlenko, 2001b: 325).

In addition, the conflicts presented in the data demonstrate how aspects of identity such as linguistic, national, racial and ethnic, cultural, gender, and social and class are intertwined and the examples provided could be seen as sites of multiple clashes. These can also be expressions of a conflict between what was imagined by the author and real life, as identity could be understood as taking place in real as well as in future or imagined 'worlds' (Kanno and Norton 2003: 248).

Finally, this autobiography can be seen as the reflection of how cultures imagine each other and do not understand until dialogue is established, as understanding and response are inseparable (Bakhtin, 1981: 282). Fubuki's answer recognizes Amèlie as legitimate user of Japanese, and this leads to understanding and self-transformation.

## Appendix: English translations

### Excerpt 1

*One morning, Mister Saito told me that the vice-president was going to received in his office an important delegation of a friend firm.*

*-Coffee for twenty people.*

*I went to Mister Omochi's office with a big tray and I was more than perfect: I served every cup humbly, accompanying them with the finest compliments, looking down and bowing. If there was an order of merit of ôchadumi, I should have been awarded with it.*

*[...]*

*- You have profoundly upset the delegation of the friend firm. You have served the coffee and have used some sentences insinuating that you speak perfect Japanese [...] how our colleagues could feel free with a White woman who understands their language? From now on, you don't speak Japanese any more.*

*[...]*

*I have made every effort to enter this company: I have studied the business language of Tokyo, I have passed the tests [...] I have always proved the desire to live in a country I adored since the first memories of my childhood.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 18)*

### Excerpt 2

*-You don't speak any more Japanese. Is that clear? [...]*

*-That's impossible. Nobody can obey such an order.*

*-There is always a way to obey. This is something Western minds should understand. [...]*

*-Japanese minds are probably capable of pushing themselves to forget a language. Western minds do not have that resource.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 157)*

### Excerpt 3

*Presenting my resignation would have been the most logical thing to do. However, I could not come into terms with the idea. In the eyes of an Occidental, there was nothing humiliating, in the eyes of a Japanese, that was losing the face. I entered this company barely a month ago. Or, I have signed a year contract. If I went now, it would be humiliating, in their eyes and in mine.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 21)*

#### Excerpt 4

*However, the Nippon male is not stifled. Idealism has not been taken away from them in their childhood. He has one of the most fundamental human rights, the right to dream, to hope [...]*

*The Japanese woman does not have that right, if she is well brought up-this is the case of the majority of them. It could be said that this right has been amputated. That is why I claim my deepest admiration for all the Japanese women who have not committed suicide [...]*

*I was thinking about all this while looking at Fubuki.*

*-Could I know what you are doing? She asked me angrily.*

*-I'm dreaming. Don't you dream now and then?*

*-Never.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 95-96)*

#### Excerpt 5

*From that moment on, I served coffee and tea without a trace of politeness and without answering my colleagues. They did not know anything about my new instructions and they found strange that the kind white geisha has become a carp, disgusting as a Yankee.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 26)*

#### Excerpt 6

*And, I could not escape the law; every foreigner who wants to be integrated in Japan has to become familiar with the laws of the Empire. It is remarkable that the opposite is not true: the Japanese find offensive that others broke their code, although they do not feel the same way about their own derogations of others' code.*

*Stupeur et Temblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 124-125)*

## Excerpt 7

*In 1993, I received a letter from Tokyo. The text was the following:*

*“Amelie-san*

*Congratulation,*

*Mori Fubuki”.*

*This word had something pleasant to me. However, it comported a further detail that made me feel delighted: it was written in Japanese.*

*Stupeur et Tremblements (A. Nothomb, 1999 : 175)*

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