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Special Issue

Literary Translingualism: Multilingual Identity and Creativity

Introduction

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For the last decade or so, multilingualism studies have recognized the growing need for what Alexander Luria called “romantic science,”¹ a view of the multilingual individual as a whole, complementing the traditional scrutiny of tiny particles in the cognitive mechanism. Multilingual identity and subjectivity, psyche and emotionality are now explored across disciplines using non-traditional research methods: via autobiography, literary text, narrative, and arts. On virtual pages of the special issue of *L2 Journal*, the emerging field of *translingual literature*—texts by authors using more than one language or a language other than their primary one—contributes to its sister discipline a unique lens of literary texts infused by multilingual creativity.

Though it might seem as modern as Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, and Vladimir Nabokov, translingual writing has an ancient pedigree. It may well have developed shortly after the invention of writing itself. It is quite possible that Etruscans, Anatolians, Carthaginians, and other peoples of the Mediterranean basin and Asia Minor appropriated the newly-devised alphabet brought by the seafaring Phoenicians not only by adapting it to their own unlettered tongues but also by writing in Phoenician. Within the far-flung empires of antiquity, citizens wrote in the imperial language — Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Sanskrit — regardless of what they spoke at home. And immigration has long been a powerful motive for switching languages. When the Biblical Ruth abandoned her Moab homeland to follow her mother-in-law — the Judean Naomi — back to Bethlehem, it is likely she took up Hebrew.

War, famine, disease, and oppression have combined with a revolution in transportation technology to create unprecedented mobility in the 21st century. Few migrants are writers, but many migratory writers are translingual, switching — like Julia Alvarez from Spanish to

English, Alberto Gerchunoff from Yiddish to Spanish, Hideo Levy from English to Japanese, or Aharon Appelfeld from German to Hebrew — to the ambient language of their new homelands. Yet *Kanshi*, the poetry written for centuries in Chinese by members of the Japanese aristocracy, demonstrates that it is not necessary to leave home to become translingual.

Translinguals are among the most prominent contemporary writers in the United States — an abbreviated list might include André Aciman, Rabih Alameddine, Daniel Alarcón, Julia Alvarez, Louis Begley, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Diaz, Ariel Dorfman, Cristina Garcia, Olga Grushin, Ursula Hegi, Aleksandar Hemon, Ha Jin, Andrew Lam, Li-Young Lee, Yiyun Li, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Dinaw Mengestu, Bharati Mukherjee, Luc Sante, Gary Shteyngart, Charles Simic, and Lara Vapnyar. Though the French are so proud of their language that they enforce its purity through diktats from the Académie Française, they have nevertheless bestowed glittering prizes on linguistic interlopers. Among feted authors whose mothers never sang them “*Au clair de la lune*” are Vassilis Alexakis, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Hector Biancotti, Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar, Romain Gary, Nancy Huston, Milan Kundera, Jonathan Littell, Amin Maalouf, Andreï Makine, Alain Mabanckou, Irène Némirovsky, Atiq Rahimi, André Schwarz-Bart, Jorge Semprún, Dai Sijie, Henri Troyat, and Elie Wiesel. Germany even created a special award, the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize (named for the 19th century German poet who was born in France), for translinguals — such as Zehra Çirak, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Yoko Tawada — who write in German.

Several of the most accomplished literary scholars of the twentieth century, including Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and René Wellek, employed a magisterial command of multiple languages and literatures. However, multilingualism was for them a tool rather than a subject for study. It was not until the late 20th century that authors who write in more than one language or merely in L2 came under sustained scholarly scrutiny. The language-switching of individual authors such as Beckett, Nabokov, and Isaak Dinesen had been analyzed, but an attempt at a comprehensive study of the phenomenon of translingualism had to await *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (Forster, 1970). However, the full wave of scholarship on the subject arrived with Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Writers of the "First" Emigration* (1989), Jacques Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre ou la prothèse d'origine* (1996), John Skinner's *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction* (1998), Steven G. Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination* (2000), Mary Besemeres's *Translating One's Self* (2002), and Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (2004). More recent contributions to the study of translingual literature include Brian Lennon's *In Babel's Shadow: Multilingual Literatures, Monolingual States* (2010) and Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), complemented by seminal scholarship on language and self in literary texts by multilingualism scholars Aneta Pavlenko (2006, 2014) and Claire Kramersch (2009). The bibliography included in this issue testifies to the vitality of the field. Since poetry and fiction by translinguals is proliferating, along with scholarship on their work, any such roster is of necessity provisional and incomplete.

Translingual writers and their works discussed in this issue offer a diverse picture of the “multilingual subject” (Kramersch, 2009) from a variety of perspectives, languages, and cultures, such as: Samuel Beckett's bilingual history, a neurolinguistic interpretation (Maria Kager); conflicting multilingual frames of reference in cross-cultural autobiographies (Mary Besemeres); the creation of a poetic multilingual “esperanto” by Eugene Jolas (Eugenia Kelbert); Japanese-French text art/concrete poetry (Elaine Wong); the psychological impact of immigration and national identity in Hebrew literature (Michal Tannenbaum); the

“newspeak” invented by a French writer from Hungary Katalin Molnar (Julia Oeri); and Nancy Huston’s multilingual texts and self-translations (Geneviève Waite). The latest trends in literary translanguaging are featured in review essays by Adrian Wanner and Ludmila Razumova, and an interview with a well-known translanguaging author, Ilan Stavans, adds genuine richness to the old debate on linguistic and cultural relativity.

Since no one scholar, not even René Wellek, is conversant enough in all of the permutations of languages from which and to which authors have switched, our project is of necessity collective. It has been advanced in recent years in sessions sponsored by the Modern Language Association, the American Comparative Literature Association, the International Comparative Literature Association, and the International Symposium on Bilingualism, among others. Our bibliography demonstrates that the study of translanguaging literature has increasingly attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, including comparative literature, linguistics, language pedagogy, psychology, and history. There is still much work to be done, not only on new contemporary authors and authors of the past whose translanguaging has been neglected, but also on authors who have switched into or out of non-European languages.

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ⁱ Russian neuroscientist Aleksandr Luria revolutionized the conventional biology-based study of the brain by complementing it with narratives about his patients as complete human beings, which eventually advanced a more nuanced understanding of neuro-psychology, now enriched by stories about learning, human behavior, and personality. He called this approach “romantic science.”