

5-14-2019

Introduction to the Special Issue: Multilingualism, Creativity, and the Arts

Natasha Lvovich
CUNY Kingsborough Community College

Steven G. Kellman
University of Texas San Antonio

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lvovich, Natasha and Kellman, Steven G., "Introduction to the Special Issue: Multilingualism, Creativity, and the Arts" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/177

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Kingsborough Community College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.



Natasha Lvovich

Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

Steven G. Kellman

University of Texas at San Antonio

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: MULTILINGUALISM, CREATIVITY, AND THE ARTS

In this issue of *Critical Multilingual Studies* we focus on the phenomenon of multilinguals with versatile creativity, translingual writers and poets who are simultaneously visual artists (or the other way around). The term ‘translingual,’ coined by Steven G. Kellman (2000), is now widely used to refer to authors who write in a non-native language or in a mix of languages. 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 Díaz, Ariel Dorfman, Olga Grushin, Ursula Hegi, Aleksandar Hemon, Ha Jin, Andrew Lam, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Dinaw Mengestu, Luc Sante, and Gary Shteyngart. Among celebrated French authors are Vassilis Alexakis, Hector Biancotti, Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar, Romain Gary, Nancy Huston, Milan Kundera, Jonathan Littell, Andreï Makine, Jorge Semprún, Henri Troyat, and Elie Wiesel. Originally from Turkey, Zehra Çirak and Emine Sevgi Özdamar write in German, and Yoko Tawada writes in German and in Japanese. Like the latter, some translinguals use their languages alternatively or for different purposes and some mix them up in one text; some other cases are complicated by the “change of instruments”—not only languages but art forms (on the case of Wassily Kandinsky, see Adrian WANNER’s essay in this issue).

As we set out to explore the relationship between multilingualism and creativity across languages, cultures, and art forms, we attempt to ask several questions: Is multilingualism itself a manifestation of creativity? Does multilingualism spur creativity or contribute to visual creativity in particular? Are there historical, social, or political conditions that predict this ‘extended’ or dual creativity? Are there patterns and / or individual circumstances that psychologically predispose

multilinguals for creative versatility? What is the genesis of translingual texts in relation to artworks? And what scholarship already exists in several adjacent disciplines that would help conceptualize this relationship? These questions cannot be answered yet in a linear or systematic way, but tentative patterns and analytic clues can emerge.

Wars and revolutions of the previous century, forming mass migrations and diasporas, bred a group of artists and writers who, tragically, had to flee persecution, seek asylum, hide, and often find cover under new linguistic and cultural masks, transforming themselves along with their creative instruments and adopting new languages, art forms and genres. Spinning and shapeshifting like mythological tricksters (consider, for example, the Coyote character in Native American mythology or the Greek-Roman god Hermes), these multilingual cross-dressers and boundary crossers often had to live in exile and express their complex fragmented world through a liminal identity, whose verbal and visual expression is a fluid flow, as opposed to the binary concept of native versus foreign. Thus, this special issue will be open for an examination of the creative translingual paradigm viewed through the shifting kaleidoscopic lens borrowed from mythology and cultural anthropology—the *trickster model*. It will offer critical glimpses into the world of several multilingual tricksters whose life and work, at different times and historical and cultural spaces, provide clues to the relationships among language, multilingualism, and art.

In his book, *Trickster Makes this World* (1998), Lewis Hyde, a prominent cultural critic, who is himself a versatile creative writer, examined mythological tricksters as transformers as well as culture (and anti-culture) heroes in mythology, fairy tales, and literary texts. He proposed that these “archetypal characters with disruptive imagination” had been planted in our cultures as precursors and creators of social and cultural change and examined cases of modern artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, and, not coincidentally, ‘translingual’ writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez, whom he called luminaries and *liminals*. The term *limen*, which means “threshold” in Latin, derived from structural cultural anthropology to designate the space in-between. ‘Margin-limen’ is a phase between separation and aggregation in the rite of passage in Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (1969). Turner examined examples of mythical figures stuck in liminal roles: court jesters, “third sons,” and traveling strangers—not surprisingly trickster characters.

Adopted and used in second language scholarship, *liminality* refers to the linguacultural threshold where multilinguals use subjective meaning, creativity, and tactics “used by tricksters in fairytales” (Kramsch 2009: 43). Similar to Hermes’s trick moving forward and backward covering his tracks and flying in between steps to hide his theft of Apollo’s cattle (called by Hyde “the confounded polarity”, 1998: 49), L2 students in Claire Kramsch’s survey described learning a language as escaping the limits of their skin and learning to fly (2009: 63). Along similar lines, switching

Russian and English and creating complex ‘cat’s cradles’ texts within texts, the trickster Nabokov played with translingual meanings and puns, and the trickster artist Marc Chagall painted levitating figures, hybrid animals, and fused- / fluid-gender characters (Lvovich 2015).

The twentieth century begot quite a few of those brilliant artists—multilingual “motleys-in-motion [...] tricksters being involved in the origins of linguistic multiplicity” (Hyde 1998: 299). Take for example the Surrealist artist and multilingual writer Leonora Carrington, who (literally) painted and wrote with both hands. This ambidextrous position is a metaphor for her gift of writing in English and French, painting and sculpting, making tapestry and murals. Born and raised in Great Britain, she had rebelled against her tyrant father and bourgeois life, moved to France, and became the companion of Max Ernst and the heroine of Surrealism. She painted and wrote fairy tales, stories and novels in French and in English, and then moved to Mexico, where she added Spanish to her linguistic repertoire, became active in the Feminist movement, and studied Maya and Aztec cultures, Zen Buddhism, and alchemy. See Carrington’s *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1937—1938) [here](#).

The above-mentioned world-renowned artist Marc Chagall had immigrated to France from post-revolutionary Russia and later became a French citizen. Bilingual since childhood in Russian and Yiddish, he wrote poetry in these languages and later published an illustrated autobiography, which sounds very much like his poetry, looks like his paintings, and is part of his “fictional universe” (Harshav 2006: 35) populated with hybrid animals, levitating human figures, and visual puns. In an interview Chagall said, “A painter’s drawing is really his writing” (1971: 145). He used his four languages—Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, and French—and all three alphabets to fuse his linguacultural worlds with his art. Like Hermes, the mercurial trickster, who stole and flew away in his winged sandals moving between gods and humans, Chagall’s biblical or mythical characters offered endlessly ambivalent visual interpretations—multilingual readings. See his *Homage to Apollinaire* (1911—1922) [here](#).

Many more celebrated artists of that tumultuous time joined the creative fellowship of multilingual tricksters: Pablo Picasso, who wrote poetry and plays in French and Spanish, the iconic Surrealist Salvador Dalí, who wrote essays and fiction in Spanish and French, the German artist Max Ernst who wrote in French, and the French-German sculptor, painter, poet, and abstract artist Hans / Jean Arp, to name only a few.

In today’s “post-monolingual” world of global economy, technology, communication, and migration (Yildiz 2012), immigrants, refugees, and transnationals continue to switch languages, magically turning their pens into brushes, challenging conventional norms, and reveling in bricolage: see for example the [Self-Portraits](#) of Rabih Alameddine, the Lebanese American writer and painter, [paintings](#) by Breyten Breytenbach, a South African writer, artist, and activist, and

those by Luc Sante, originally from Belgium, photographer and photography critic, author of several well-known nonfiction books in English, not his native French.

Our *CMS* Special Issue makes the case for several more.

Since the definitions of each vary, the relationship between multilingualism and creativity is under-researched and the scholarship stems from several disciplinary sources: creativity and exile (see for example *Exile and Creativity* edited by Susan Suleiman, 1998, and *Languages of Exile*, edited by Axel Englund and Anders Olsson, 2013); multilingualism and the arts (e.g. Penelope Gardner-Chloros’s insightful special issue of the *International Journal of Bilingualism on Multilingualism and the Arts*, 2014); and cognitive and applied linguistics perspectives to multilingualism and creativity (see Anatoliy Kharkhurin’s monograph *Multilingualism and Creativity*, 2012).

Several elements in multilingual theory are especially relevant to the articles featured in our special issue. Most L2 scholars endorse ideas about the so-called “bilingual advantage,” the notion that multi- or bilingual experience enhances cognition, and according to Kharkhurin’s research, the increased cognitive functioning may facilitate creative abilities, although there is no direct historiometric evidence to show that multilinguals have a creative advantage. However, the indirect evidence can be inferred. One line of such evidence (Kharkhurin 2012: 52) is the number of Nobel Prize Laureates per capita in multilingual nations (Switzerland tops the list) and in countries with high fluency of foreign languages (Sweden, Austria, Norway, Germany).

Another line of argument—and at the same time a caveat for its validity—is that “the impact on creativity [is] mediated by the effects of multicultural experience” (Kharkhurin 2012: 51), where the influence of ‘cultural heterogeneity’ is evident. Social scientists speculate that the exposure to several cultures or “being at the edge of cultures” (*ibid.*: 52) experienced by newcomers reveals high rates of creativity, also confirmed by the fact that most Nobel Prize Laureates worked or studied abroad (*ibid.*: 53), i.e. absorbed a foreign culture. According to an insightful 2017 *New York Times* op-ed by Frank Bruni “Want Geniuses? Welcome Immigrants”, of the 965 MacArthur ‘Genius’ fellows to date, 209 were born outside the United States.

Besides factoring in translingual writers’ and artists’ cultural heterogeneity, another pattern seems to be present, one of an early outsider position: even before their voluntary or involuntary exile, they have experienced the so-called “pre-existing condition of translingual creativity” (Lvovich 2015:118 and Lemos, this issue). This status of ‘internal immigrants’ is exemplified by European Jews living in the Diaspora, whose loyalties have been divided for centuries. Discussing “the confounding nature of the linguistic and cultural factors in creative development,” Kharkhurin specifically cites outstanding creative contributions of European Jews and their multilingual

practice in the Diaspora, although he acknowledges that the effect of multilingualism on creativity may be obscured and even reversed by the sociocultural factors (2012: 62).

Parallel to the historical effects of the Jewish diasporic situation, exiled writers and artists may be affected by their own geopolitical or personal circumstances, which would turn on their multilingual creativity. This insider-outsider position ingrained from early childhood may be hypothesized as a precursor of creative and multilingual versatility. Such a case of “pre-existing condition” of multilingual creativity is featured in Gabriela LEMOS’s essay on “The Internal Lineage of Exile,” which discusses the Chinese-British writer and cineaste Xiaolu Guo, director of the film *She, a Chinese* and author of the bestselling novel *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers*, as well as of the recent autobiography *Nine Continents*. Her unusual creative and personal life of a perpetual outsider began as a descendant of nomadic Muslim Hui ancestors and was exacerbated by the trauma of rejection, sexual abuse, and life in poverty during the Cultural Revolution in China. Her creative energy of “internal immigration” was eventually transformed into the external one in real immigration to the UK.

Along a similar ubiquitous dichotomy of East and West, artist-scholar Clark LUNBERRY (himself wearing multiple hats) problematizes in his contemplative essay translation of haiku into English, in this case one of the most famous Japanese haiku by Matsuo Bashō (松尾 芭蕉, 1644—1694). Lunberry’s essay digs deeply into the cultural history of haiku and the history of its translation, asking questions of the very possibility of verbal translation—and offering an alternative in the visual. His art installation presented to us via videos and photographs, alongside his verbal descriptions and analysis, may be one true ‘translation’ of the famous haiku.

The concept of translation into a different art form, called “intersemiotic translation” was pioneered by Roman Jakobson and is echoed in Adrian WANNER’s essay on Wassiliy Kandinsky’s multilingual poetry (in Russian, German, and French), which had been created at different stages of Kandinsky’s life and immigration periods (from Russia to Germany and then to France). His geographical moves and his desire to “change the instruments” (languages, art forms, and genres) underlay his Symbolist belief in “correspondences”—the harmony of colors, sounds, and geometric forms—that he described in his famous treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977). In his album *Klänge* the woodcuts, prose poems, and typography merge and complement one another in a symphonic synthesis.

In a similar key of “correspondences” or “translations,” yet of the insufficiency of Language too—the common thread of all articles in this issue—Marlene ESPLIN’s essay examines the crossings among visual art, multilingual play, and activism in the work of acclaimed Chicana artist Celia Alvarez Muñoz. In her compositions and installations Alvarez Muñoz pieces together fragments of English and Spanish, of history and autobiography, and of popular and material culture, with an

aesthetic of “Chicana rasquache” or “domesticana” as the praxis of translation (Esplin, this issue; Mesa-Bains 1999).

Finally, amplifying the paradigm of ‘multimodal expression’ and ‘intersemiotic translation’ and their attendant terminology of creative multiplicity used throughout this Special Issue, is a ‘conversation’ between Natasha LVOVICH and the interdisciplinary artist and musician Olga MEZHIBOVSKAYA, a graphic design educator at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Traveling from Russian to English words and back, from Tolstoy to Kundera, from Russian Jewish culture and literature to American culture, and shapeshifting from music to art, Mezhibovskaya makes a full circle, without leaving anything behind. Accordingly, terms like ‘wholeness,’ ‘interdisciplinarity,’ ‘music-art translation,’ and ‘polyphony’ sound vivid and meaningful in her bilingual realm amid the performative course projects she leads. Turning around the Jakobsonian notion of “intersemiotic translation” to signify the transmutations from music to art, dance, fashion, and primarily the graphic sign—the typography, perhaps the ‘super-signifier’ of language—Mezhibovskaya’s work is polyphony in action and in education.

A final word of celebration of all things ‘multi-’ at *Critical Multilingualism Studies* is due, in the spirit of an open inquiry into knowledge without walls, borders, disciplines, divisions, compartments, and departments. This Issue offers multiple disciplinary and discursive perspectives on a phenomenon with a multi-layered content at its core, using multimedia references in the text, transcending traditional scholarly limits. We encouraged the authors to include sources available online (URLs) and to directly reference illustrations—and, as a result, our readers can take in exactly what we are preaching on the virtual pages of this issue: a total simultaneous multimedia multimodal experience of reading, seeing, and in some cases listening.

References

- Bruni, Frank. 2017. “Want Geniuses? Welcome Immigrants.” *The New York Times*. 23 September. Accessed 22 February 2019 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/23/opinion/sunday/macarthur-grants-immigrants.html>
- Englund, Axel & Anders Olsson, eds. 2013. *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Gardner-Chloros, Penelope. 2014. *Multilingualism and the Arts*. A Special Issue of *The International Journal of Bilingualism* 18(4).
- Harshav, Benjamin. 2006. *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Hyde, Lewis. 1998. *Trickster Makes this World*. New York: North Point Press.

- Kandinsky Wassily. 1977. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated by Michael T. H. Sadler. New York: Dover Books.
- Kellman, Steven. G. 2000. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Kharkhurin, Anatoly. 2012. *Multilingualism and Creativity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Kramersch, Claire. 2009. *The Multilingual Subject: What Foreign Language Learners Say about their Experience and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lvovich, Natasha. 2015. "Translingual Identity and Art: Marc Chagall's Stride through the Gates of Janus." *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 3(1):112–134.
- Mesa-Bains, Amalia. 1999. "Domesticana: the Sensibility of Chicana rasquache." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 24(2): 157—167.
- Suleiman, Susan R., ed. 1998. *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Chicago: Aidine Publishing.
- Yildiz, Yasemin. 2012. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. New York: Fordham University Press.