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New Homes for Translinguals: Re-examining Cultural and Linguistic Belonging in Contemporary Literature

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The article discusses the most recent books on multilingualism and transculturalism. It focuses on two edited volumes: *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Englund and Olsson (2013) and *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Gilsenan Nordin, Hansen, and Zamorano Llena (2013).

INTRODUCTION

If until recently the term translingualism was reserved for a somewhat marginal practice that did not fit into a single discipline, it is now commonly used in Literary, Translation, and Cultural Studies as well as in Language Pedagogy to designate multilingual student writing. In 2013 alone, a few studies examining various facets of cultural and linguistic identity were published: *(M)Other Tongues: Literary Reflexions on a Difficult Distinction*, edited by Juliane Prade; *L'Autotraduction: Aux Frontières de la Langue et de la Culture*, edited by Christian Lagarde and Helena Tanquero; *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature*, edited by Axel Englund and Anders Olsson, and *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Irene Gilsenan Nordin, Julie Hansen, and Carmen Zamorano Llena. In addition to translingualism, many scholars incorporate the notion of transculturality, a concept originally developed within anthropological and philosophical discourses, into the analysis of literary works and consider it central to understanding fictional representations of multilingual identity in contemporary literature.

This article will focus on two of these recent collections: *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth-Century Literature* (2013) and *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature* (2013). Each collection consists of diverse articles that elaborate on various aspects of multilingualism and identity formation in different geographical, historical and linguistic contexts. While the collections address many similar topics—the relationship between migration, writing and identity; citizenship and belonging in multicultural societies; linguistic, cognitive and stylistic strategies adopted by multilinguals as well as demands imposed on the reader of multilingual texts—their starting points are different.

I will start by briefly outlining the structure and the main premises of the books, and then I will single out the recurrent themes and terms that address important research questions in the field of Translingual Studies. I will conclude by discussing a few articles from both volumes that specifically dwell on the issue of multilingual identity, exile, and creativity and that exemplify translingual writing and reading strategies.

LANGUAGES OF EXILE

Languages of Exile (LE) (2013) examines the relation between literature and exile in the 20th century and underscores the importance of modernist aesthetic practices that are inseparable from exile and expatriation. In their introduction, “Twentieth-Century Ruptures of Location and Locution,” Axel Englund and Anders Olsson refrain from limiting the notion of modernism to a certain epoch and use it instead as a concept central to defining the entire 20th century transnational literary space. The editors group 14 essays into four parts: I) Identity and Ethics: Three Anglo-Slavic Prose Virtuosi; II) Shifting Language, Shifting Thought: Philosophical and Stylistic Effects of Migration; III) Mediality and Multilingualism: Decentralizing Patterns of Western Thought and Aesthetics, and IV) Re-Appropriating Language and History from the Traumas of the Past.

The use of the plural (languages) in the title of the collection is judicious: the essays in Part II address the evolution of the writers’ and their characters’ languages not solely as a linguistic shift but as a complex poetics that involves switching languages of thought (e.g., Tobias Dahlkvist’s “Exile as a School of Scepticism: Emil Cioran”), changing narrative and stylistic conventions (e.g., “Language Shift and the Experience of Exile: Agota Kristof’s Prose in the Context of Migration”), or the presence of multiple voices in the French language of Maghrebi women writers (e.g., Gabriela Seccardini’s “Exile in the French Language: Assia Djebar and Malika Mokeddem”). The articles in Part III focus on the interaction of different media (music, sound-centered poetry, and theatre) in multilingual texts. As W.C. Bamberger shows in “Language and Alternate History in Mauricio Kagel’s *Mare Nostrum*,” introducing other media disrupts notions of linear narration, nationhood, and rootedness.

Part I addresses the issues of unstable and impure linguistic identity and its ethical implications in the work of such translingual classics as Joseph Conrad (Ulf Olsson’s “Evil Freedom: Linguistic Confusion and Convention in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*”), Vladimir Nabokov (Maria Kager’s “To ‘Fondle in Humbertish’: Vladimir Nabokov’s Linguistic Exile”), and the contemporary Bosnian-American novelist Aleksandar Hemon. For Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, there is still a clear meaning attached to the notion of native language, exile and home; for Hemon, whose situation reflects the predicaments of contemporary translingual writers, the terms “mother tongue,” “native language,” and “identity” are deeply suspect and shaped by competing discourses of unification or differentiation.¹ In “‘What’s Difference?’: On Language and Identity in the Writings of Aleksandar Hemon,” Ljubica Miočević posits that impurity in Hemon’s work is treated as an intrinsic part of linguistic identity. Italicized Bosnian words in his texts appear as witnesses to alterity and loss of belonging.

The categories of origin and becoming are questioned, while body in Hemon’s work becomes an important site of identity construction: the person’s body language can record all the layers of personal history where the inherited and the acquired always overlap (Miočević, 2013, p. 64). Miočević’s essay brings to light other contradictions of living outside one’s first language: the double perspective of a translingual writer or any immigrant possesses a creative potential and a critical awareness of fissures and displacements in any environment. Yet, the loss of belonging, country and ‘mother’ tongue, particularly in emotionally meaningful situations, is also real.

Much attention in *LE* is paid to historicizing modern exile that shuns nostalgia but that does not discard the past. While by the end of the 20th century, increased mobility, at least in European context, may render exile irrelevant, it was more than a trope for Nelly Sachs, Peter Weiss, and W.G. Sebald, the writers examined in Part IV. In his article “Aching Through: Nelly Sach’s Poetics of Exile,” Anders Olsson emphasizes the effects of persecution and exile on Sachs’s poetics and contrasts the mostly solitary speech of Sach’s pre-exilic writing with her exile poetry that imposes the demand for “infinitely dispersed truth” (p. 224). Even though each contributor was free to interpret exile, all the essays shared one common presupposition: that exile as used in the book always involved territorial and linguistic rupture rather than merely psychological or metaphorical meanings of ‘exile’ (Englund & Olsson, 2013, p.6).

TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITIES

By contrast, *Transcultural Identities (II)*, edited by Gilsenan Nordin, Hansen, and Zamorano-Llena (2013), parts with the idea of exile altogether and proceeds from the premise that all identities are formed in contact with others, hence, they are fluid and unstable. Most contributors share this definition of transculturality theorized by Wolfgang Welsch (1999, p. 198). This collection of essays treats political underpinnings of transcultural identities more explicitly and structures its essays around four topics that are essential for understanding transculturality: migration, cosmopolitanism, critiques of multiculturalism, and the interaction of languages in translingual texts.

Fictional narratives and language memories have always acknowledged foreignness and otherness from within at the individual level. However, as the editors note, increased migration, economic interdependencies and new communication technologies turn transcultural experiences into reality for most people, not just the elites. It is, therefore, vital to find an appropriate critical lens that will allow us to examine how these interdependencies affect both individual and collective imaginary. In the context of Literary Studies, transculturality, after all, is even a more capacious term than translingualism. Although all the articles make a compelling case for the use of the term, the reader may grow a little weary of the ubiquitous ‘trans^m’ and occasionally wonder if in purely literary contexts, transculturality—understood as a construction of identities that recognizes internal plurality and otherness—is not synonymous with Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic.

Mats Tegmark’s essay “Constructions of Transcultural Subjectivity: Going Beyond Nationalism and Ethnicity in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*” is particularly concerned with theorizing transcultural subjectivity. It draws on Levinas’s concept of the “other” and Critchley’s deconstructive subjectivity (as cited in Tegmark, 2013, p.95). Admittedly, transculturality becomes more operative for the subject matter that exceeds the disciplinary boundaries of Literary and Translation Studies and resorts to approaches from Anthropology, Sociology, and Migration Studies. For instance, Carly McLaughlin’s insightful essay “Childhood, Migration, and Identity in Chris Cleave’s *The Other Hand*” theorizes transcultural identity of children-migrants and argues that this approach represents childhood experiences of migration more accurately.

The essays in *TI* examine 21st century literary works and cover an impressive range of regions and languages (Algerian, American, Arabic, Asian-American, Berber, British, Canadian, Chinese, Dutch, French, Irish, Maghrebian, Nigerian, Russian). As an ensemble, they provide a coherent, nuanced view of the individual and collective responses to

transcultural experiences thanks to their strong theoretical grounding and the structure of the volume.

Most contributors apply what can be loosely defined as Cultural Studies methodology, which they successfully combine with close reading of fictional texts. Thus, transculturality is not viewed as a new paradigm nor is it unquestionably celebrated as a new existential and theoretical response to the contemporary situation; rather, it is treated as a way of interpreting fictional and real exchanges in the globalized world. In certain contexts (e.g., Christoph Houswitschka's "Cosmopolitanism and Citizenship: Identities and Affiliations in Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*," or Stefan Helgesson's "Literary Language and the Translated Self of Assia Djebar"), it is shown to be the only way of mental and physical survival since the alternative of adhering to racially-, ethnically-, or nationally-bound identity is no longer a viable option.

There is more thematic and less linguistic analysis compared to *Languages of Exile* with only one section ("The Interaction of Languages in Translingual Texts") devoted to cognitive and linguistic devices employed by translingual authors. Language plays an important role in the other three sections as well, but the emphasis is on formation and deconstruction of conflicting discourses on race, ethnicity, violence, and innocence (as in the entire section of "Critiques of Multiculturalism") or on multilingualism in the context of cosmopolitanization (Kristin Rebien's essay "Cosmopolitan Perspectives: Globalization and Transnationalization in Contemporary German Literature").

TRANSLINGUAL TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONAL POETICS

The last section of *Transcultural Identities* is of particular interest to scholars of translingual and multilingual literature. I will dwell on this part a little longer to exemplify the phenomena that strike me as characteristic of translingual writing in general even though the texts in question are discussed in entirely different contexts (Maghreb and Taiwan). Translingual poetry examined by Eric Sellin and J.B. Rollins not only defies the categories of genre, media (e.g. transparent plastic pages instead of traditional paper), writing, translation, authorship and readership, but it also draws attention to attempts of critics to follow the writers in their re-invention of language.

Eric Sellin's essay "Translingual and Transcultural Patterns in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb" zeroes in on pragmatics and cognition. Sellin provides a brief excursus into colonial and postcolonial use of language and demonstrates literary effects achieved by colliding syntactic and semantic conventions of two or more languages and cultures: gender reversal in the titles of poems (Yousef Sebti), linear interaction of languages along the surface of the text (Khatibi), vertical connections at the level of verbal deposits (Ben Jelloun), and a multidirectional switch of codes and layers of language. For instance, Bachir Hadj Alli's poems are printed in several languages and dialects—often paraphrasing one another—contain footnotes, and require an elaborate reading experience (the eye movement replicates a cursor moving sideways, then up and down the screen). The extreme playfulness of such writing does not deflect from its political significance. The call for Maghrebian poetry to turn into combat became history, but language still remains, in Sellin's words "not only the tool, but the very arena of decolonization" (p. 231).

Sellin stresses the active role of the reader of such texts and calls this experience of decoding *transcultural reading*. The indications of other languages can range from obvious code-mixing to hidden, subterranean pressures exerted by another language; Khatibi, for

instance, leaves very few clear indicators of ‘foreignness’ and lets the interior translation work from within). In Sellin’s critical language, musical and spatial metaphors abound (“transcultural and translingual vibrato,” “the simultaneous evolution involving two or more languages [...] provides a kind of tremolo in the discourse - two wavelengths, as it were, vibrating in harmony and dissonance” (p. 235). The translingual modes used by Khatibi and Ben Jelloun are described as surface tension, vertical introspection, and geological verbal exploration (p. 236). This idiosyncratic critical vocabulary may not be easily transferable, but it enables Sellin to show translational poetics at work.

Curiously, this article’s call for “new optics” (p. 242) and its preoccupation with the relation between poetics and politics resonates with two articles from *Languages of Exile*: Adam Wickberg Månsson’s analysis of Julio Cortazar’s *Rayuela* in “Exile Writing and the Medium of the Book” and Jesper Olsson’s “Speech Rumblings: Exile, Transnationalism and the Multilingual Space of Sound Poetry.” *Rayuela*, published in 1963, is a true precursor of electronic reading. It consists of three parts and contains a table of direction that enables the reader to jump between chapters in various ways. However, the connections in *Rayuela* are not random; on the contrary, they are quite structured.

In his discussion of *Rayuela*’s structure, Wickberg Månsson capitalises on Edouard Glissant’s concept of Relation (in itself a nod to Deleuze-Guattari’s rhizome, a network of relations) that goes against the Western traditional thinking that locates identity in the root (as cited in Wickberg Månsson, p. 170). Following Glissant, he posits that the urge to go “against the root” is much more common than the idea of the nation. The novel represents a multilingual space, including a made-up language, Gliglico, and suggests new writing and reading practices that undo expectations of linguistic and formal unity and the notion of center-periphery (p.168).

Another important study in *LE* that addresses the relation of poetics, transnationalism and technology is Jesper Olsson’s “Speech Rumblings: Exile, Transnationalism and the Multilingual Space of Sound Poetry.” Olsson traces some of the internationalist, multilingual effects found in translational poetry today back to the early avant-garde. He then dwells on neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960 with a particular emphasis on contributions from smaller countries like Sweden, where the desire to reach wider international audience was particularly strong.

The essay provides a fascinating account of several practices that strove to overcome the confines of a minor language: polyglot montage, abstraction towards pure music, and use of major languages such as English and French by Swedish poets and composers. For instance, in 1969, Sten Hanson’s composed and recorded poems ‘How Are You?’ and ‘Fruits de mer’ in English and French respectively, but the sound of his voice as well the distancing effect of recording situated the poems both inside and outside the Swedish context. Another Hanson’s poem, “Western Europe,” —meant as a critique of Western capitalism—was performed at the Fylkingen festival in 1969. It featured a mix of male and female voices in English and sounds of birds and/or laughter. Olsson rightly notes that despite the transnational thrust of such poems, they cannot be dissociated from the local or at least Eurocentric (p.195). He shares Leevi Lehto’s contention that this kind of English as an nth language is a viable tool today - “a globalized poetic language that both approaches a common code and plays with the impossibility of such attempts” (as cited in Olsson, J., p. 195).

In the era of digital media and Internet, Olsson projects, the translational poetics gain even more prominence. First, the Internet leads to creation of transnational poetic communities; secondly, in addition to multilingual mixes or poetry written in a different language (e.g., Yoko Tawada writing in German), poets turn to translating between media (word, image, sound) or even between species. I have to admit that I struggle to imagine the latter as a recurrent practice, but Eduardo Kac and Christian Bök have indeed created inter-species poetry by using bacteria as a host for poems encoded into the DNA sequence (p. 200). Olsson's argument culminates in the conclusion that "the word as such, as the anchoring point of literary practice [...] is about to be exiled in a space that, more and more, impinges upon the space of a generalized practice of art" (p. 200).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, I'll turn to the last essay in *TI* that also deals with inter-medial experimentation in a less Eurocentric context. In "Hsia Yü's Translingual Transculturalism from *Memoranda* to *Pink Noise*," J.B. Rollins provides a more optimistic account of human-machine translingual interaction and argues that Hsia Yü's translingual poetic experimentation rejuvenates the Chinese literary language and challenges the boundaries of languages and human authorship. Hsia Yü's frustration with limitations of received language results in a new imaginary language in poems such as "Missing Image" (1989) and "Séance III" (1990). She replaces conventional Chinese characters with her own character-like drawings (p. 253). Creation of one's own language poetry or imaginary is not new, especially for translinguals, but this attempt to change the very material of language in the process of the collision of languages is quite striking.

Hsia Yü's techniques in *Pink Noise*, the book made of transparent plastic pages, are the most radical so far. She collected English and French phrases from Internet sources, used translation software, and arrived at very novel syntactical and grammatical forms in Chinese. Rollins chooses Mikhail Bakhtin's and Mikhail Epstein's interpretation of culture to theorize the poet's desire to free herself from linguistic determinism and cultural essentialism. The collision of three major languages both semantically and graphically (the pink Chinese is seen through every page of English and French) resulted in a translingual reading experience, but, as Bradbury suggests, this kind of reading may not have been daunting for young media-savvy Taiwanese readers (2001, p. 3).

What I find symbolically important in this movement across major world languages is that in the new form of Chinese, "the two Western languages are reflected according to the dictates of artificial intelligence" (Rollins, p. 262). The resulting interaction precludes essentialist understanding of language and culture. In my view, it also seems to relativize human agency without entirely doing away with it. The authors and editors of both volumes took great care in contextualizing complex transcultural interactions without ever offering congratulatory or dystopian accounts of these experiences.

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ⁱ In her brief historical excursus, Miočević reminds us that Hemon's native Serbo-Croatian was split into four different languages (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian). In fact, proclaiming himself Bosnian is a defiant political stance since the author is of Serbian-Ukrainian descent (p. 57).

ⁱⁱ In his excellent article "Transcultural Translingualism," Rollins acknowledges the futility of pigeonholing a singular artist like Hsia Yü but finds that if her practices are to be categorized at all, Translingual Transculturalism describes them best.