

Translingual Public Pedagogy, Precarity and Inquiry:

*Learned Limits and
Limitlessness Through
Memoir*

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Precarity & Translingual Pedagogy

"Translingual," "translation," "translanguage," and "transgender" are all terms that embrace the Latin root "trans," a prefix drawing attention to fluidity and things that "cross" boundaries, disrupting dualistic, binary norms. The term "translingualism" has replaced previous terms such as bilingualism or multilingualism to draw attention to new repertoires of exposure, integration, and fusion among diverse languages and cultures rather than separation and distinction. This paper discusses our engagement in translingual public pedagogies as related to *critical pedagogies of precarity* (Zembylas, 2019), drawing attention to arts-based practices of reflection on one's complicity and/or disruption to monolingual-monocultural norms. To critically think through precarity we drew upon artistic practices of noticing (Tsing, 2015), specifically memoir as method in educational inquiry.

Translingualism and the Arts

Canagarajah (2013) describes translingualism as taking place on translocal scales where multiple language norms intelligibly co-exist. Moving from the language of literature, he applies translingualism to communities of practice in many settings that constitute "an openness to diversity, collaboration with others, and a willingness to accommodate norm differences" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 56) including workplaces, leisure spaces, and many other contexts of formal and

informal practice. Razumova (2015) prefers "transculturality" over translingualism to address the interdependence of most people's economic realities as almost universally affected by migration and new communication technologies, a term that may be perceived as "synonymous with Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic" (p. 135). Translingualism, transculturality, and other closely related terms such as Garcia's (2009) translanguaging scholarship joins poststructuralist analysis that is critical of knowledge claims that privilege monolingual norms and bring them into being. While the term *multilingualism* perceives "additive" relationships between separate languages, Canagarajah (2013) notes that *translingualism* "addresses the synergy, treating languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars" (p. 41).

Art-making processes provide critical tools for confronting precarity rooted in translingualism, challenging, as Berlant (2011) argues, normative notions of materials, objects, boundaries, languages, identities, and stories. Like languages and translingual practices, the art-making process carries stories and histories of movement (Hegeman, 2019), and becomes "unhinged from routinized forms of expression and released to the potential of pedagogical (and theoretical and methodological) uncertainty" (Rhoades & Daiello, 2019, p. 72). Theoretical moves toward overlapping and precarious identities are more difficult to realize pedagogically, in so far as translingual

pedagogy requires participants “to confront their complicity in others’ suffering and injury, without sentimentalizing the terms and conditions of doing so” (Zembylas, 2019, p. 106). Moving away from a focus on educative narratives of grand transformations, our focus has been on misunderstandings, mistakes, and considerations of failure as critical to meaningful translingual engagement.

The NEA “Big Read” Context

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read offers up to \$15,000 to 75 communities across the U.S. to promote community reading of a single book of “literary merit.” 2017 marked the first year that a book in translation appeared on the approved list: Yu Hua’s (2003) *To Live*, translated from Mandarin Chinese into English by Michael Berry. This paper’s author, Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor, received this award and worked with co-authors, Sharon Nuruddin and Tairan Qiu,¹ planning a six-week series of art and literature events in our college town during the 2018 Lunar New Year [see figure 1]. Events featured the Chinese zodiac animal, the dog, and included Grace Lin’s (2006) novel *The Year of the Dog*, aligning events with our university “Dawg” mascot. Through zither music, mahjong, papier-mâché parade dragons, dumpling preparations, tai chi, calligraphy, fashion design, tea customs, and other modalities experienced by those who have moved between geographic borders, we attracted well over 2000 participants to book-related events [see figures 2, 3, and 4]. Our goal was to capitalize on existing “food & festival” interests among the

1 Authors thank numerous UGA students and faculty and Athens community members and artists for their volunteer assistance with 2018 programming.



Figure 1. Year of the Dawg Calendar (2018).

members of our community (see Cutshall, 2012), but also to deepen, through a wide variety of arts engagement, access to precarious knowing, documenting what Berlant (2011) refers to as “what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift.” Tsing (2015) says of precarity that it is no longer “the fat of the less fortunate,” but a “requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times” (p. 2). We documented what it meant to be vulnerable co-learners on pathways of translingual participation through and beyond arts and literature programming.

Our data included interviews, field notes, and surveys as well as more innovative *trans** approaches such as *memoir method*.



Figure 2. UGA students present as guzheng musician Rosalie Zhao performs during the Year of The Dawg (2018). Photo credit: Shannon Montgomery.



Figure 3. UGA students, volunteers, and local community members attend the Lunar New Year Celebration at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia (2018). Photo credit: Shannon Montgomery.



Figure 4. Parade with handmade dragons (2018). Photo credit: Emily Haney.

Our team studied fiction and creative nonfiction literature to inform the ways we interpreted data and personalized analysis. We discuss the various limits we encountered as translingual scholars, memoirists, and public pedagogues, and expansive moments of *limitlessness* where fractured differences between identities gave way to new pathways for translingual participation.

Translingual Memoir Data Collection and Analysis

Our study included autoethnographic strategies inspired by Farrell's (2011) description of "immersion memoir" where we created a "framework to actively engage in experience and memory" in our efforts to "solve a personal mystery" (n.p.) of living and teaching in translingual spaces. We collected ethnographic data including participant-observation, interviews with 24 participants, 182 survey responses from high school youth and event attendees, as well as field notes in the form of our own translingual memoirs. Our methodologies included "stories built through layered and disparate practices of knowing and being" (Tsing, 2015, p. 159). Studying NEA focal books as well as published memoirs and memoir craft essays, we sought methods for "getting curious" and "responding to, rather than resolving, complexity" (Staley, 2018, p. 290). Our inquiry aimed to blur relationships between the researcher and researched. We invited artful, co-construction of narratives to attend to and challenge issues of representation.

What's in a Name? Findings & Lost Things

As educational researchers, we are accustomed to representations of empiricism that contain "findings" often in terms of happy endings to successful

educative practices. Through memoir inquiry, we learned more from what was lost, rather than what was found. We found (or lost) "naming" as a many-prismed theme. Here, we share excerpts from researcher memoirs that draw together the naming of our (mis)understanding. After sharing these translingual moments as empirical and pedagogical meaning-making, we draw implications for translingual educational practice.

Stretching Output: Mispronunciation as Opportunity (Cahnmann-Taylor)

I was the 2018 Big Read project director and am faculty in a Teacher Education Program. My identities have been fluid and changed over time to queer- and cis-gender, Jewish and secular, semitic "white," English and Spanish bilingual (Spain, Mexico, and pan-Latin), social scientist and artist identities, among other identities such as parent, spouse, professor, applied theatre artist, and poet. As increasing numbers of Chinese graduate students join our university program, I have become increasingly interested in acquiring and understanding Mandarin-English translingualism. At the beginning of the project I convened several Chinese graduate students in my program with several school district teachers.

"I see you've just joined us, how do you pronounce your name?"

I was among five white, U.S.-born educators and Kuo (name used with permission), my (then) doctoral advisee and assistant when we met in January 2018 to plan the high school curriculum celebrating Chinese literature. Our meeting on Google Hangouts was mediated by dysfunctional technology. Kuo's microphone wasn't working, so I answered

(uncomfortably) on her behalf.

"Kuo," I said, as I have said her name so many times before.

"Like cool?" the district consultant asked.

"Yes," I said, "but without the 'L'."

Kuo nodded to the screen. We could see her but the sound never came on so only one of the district educators called her by cell phone (no speaker) and still struggled to pronounce her name. "Ko," "Ko-ul," each tried, spoke to the video camera, apologized, and then we moved on to discuss the high school Lunar New Year curriculum and flipgrid greetings Kuo, Tairan, and other students would create (<<https://flipgrid.com/7d296b>>).

In my January 2018 memoir notes I wrote: *What's a name if you can't say it? How can one confidently teach through such foreignness to translingual becoming? When each phoneme seems like an explosive in a multicultural landmine, the mouth can be a dangerous place of ignorance, naiveté, or chauvinism.*

As I read Hua's (2003) novel and prepared public pedagogies, I was haunted by how much I didn't know as I revisited each of the novel characters' names, worried about saying them out loud [see figure 5]. In the translation, character names are capitalized and not spelled with tonal markers. In contrast, a Mandarin speaker wrote this name list with tone markers to help me with pronunciation:

jiā zhēn

fèng xiá

yǒu qìng

fú guì

lóng èr

chūn shēng



Figure 5. Copies of 2018 and 2019 NEA Big read selections and a children's companion book for UGA's 2018 Year of the Dog celebration. Photo credit: Shannon Montgomery.

I lived comfortably with these (unmarked) characters' names while engrossed privately in the novel but when planning to publicly discuss the book, my (dis) comfort changed. Swain (2000) refers to this kind of output as "stretched language," requiring second language learners to go beyond what is comfortable and familiar in mediated dialogue. Despite numerous opportunities to linguistically stretch, Mandarin input remained aurally insufficient for my independently confident output, thus requiring my interdependence on translingual others.

As I promoted the first public celebration of Lunar New Year in February, I revisited my own experiences of hyper-invisibility every fall during Jewish holy day celebrations, when those of Jewish faith must make difficult yet invisible choices concerning high stakes participation

between their religious or “secular” lives in our Southeastern town. As I expanded my transpedagogies to the East, I recognized the precarity of my own family’s belief in melting pot assimilation giving way to what Tsing (2015) refers to as “a wild new cosmopolitanism” living in what she calls the ruins of “unrecognizable others” (p. 98) Longing for repair, I initiated requests for religious diversity awareness in our local district. My wish for greater religious awareness and mindful action became a signed district policy in December 2018 due in large part to the agentive writing and reflections during this project (Jaben-Eilon, 2018). It deepened my questioning of the misleading view of Chinese national movement to the U.S. as “unprecedented” rather than a natural, ongoing outcome of human movement toward resources as a response to a myriad of stresses including economic, environmental, religious, and academic. Meaningful investment in translingual pedagogies “allows us to explore the ruin that has become our collective home” (Tsing, 2015, 3-4). In deepening recognition of growing Chinese national populations and Asian Americanness, I was able to recontextualize my own non-dominant identity as what Manning (2016) refers to as an “enabling constraint” (p. 197). What may have begun as a reflection on aural limitation to names expanded from phonemic awareness to social action.

Relating the musical concepts of form, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, melody, and polyphony to the art of doing qualitative research, Bresler (2005) discussed how “aural attention provides a back-bone to perception, documentation, and data analysis. It is equally present in the communication stage, following different conventions for aural presentations, versus written ones; for popular ethnographies

versus more formal papers” (p. 174). Ultimately, translingual memoir combined with ethnographic field notes helped stretch and tune aural, physical, and visual attention in the process of naming as social action.

Dis/Connections: Finding Ourselves in the Contact Zone (Nuruiddin)

I am an African-American bilingual education scholar who works in the space of Spanish-language instruction and Spanish-English translation. My mainstream, suburban upbringing led me on a quest of self-discovery, both as a Black girl and as an emerging bilingual. My world was small, and I often felt trapped between it and the world I knew existed outside. Coming into the project, I felt disconnected from Hua’s (2003) historical fiction and Lin’s (2006) creative memoir. However, as translingual scholars and educators, introducing a wide range of voices into our classrooms not only encourages us to “celebrate both our differences and our similarities (Bishop, 1990, p. xi),” but a shared vulnerability where dis/connections, mis/performances, and our consistent moments of failures and triumph can be the impetus for expanding our limited worldviews. We see ourselves, reflect, and walk through doors, in and out of translingual and transcultural spaces, embracing the human experience in all its forms. Despite years of language study and living in Spanish-speaking countries, I found—through analyzing my own project participation—that I had much to learn about the universality of the human experience, but I feel more comfortable now with stepping outside of my comfort zone and finding myself in the messy limitations of what Pratt (1991) calls the *contact zone*. In my memoir notes on *To*

Live, for example, I share the tragic death of a friend's son, and reflect on the pain of survival:

January 2018:

There was a lot to process while reading. I felt myself relating my experiences with birth and death, wealth and poverty, marriage, parenting, friendships, gender roles, and so many other aspects of life. I thought of my friend whose 10-year-old son—an otherworldly athlete, poet, dancer, and student—died after being hit by a car. He was a beam of light: the one who would win the sport scholarship, play pro basketball, win gold at the Olympics for his amazing acrobatics, and publish literary masterpieces. He reminded me of Fugui's grandson Youqing, a skilled student and athlete, who also died young. I recalled the heartbreak after receiving the phone call, and cried for my daughter—then an adoring toddler—who delighted in his dance moves. I also reflected on how human beings become victims of both choice and fate. I often labor over the choices I've made that caused the greatest pain to those around me, and wonder if time and relationships can ever be mended. When Fugui gambles away his family's wealth, I felt for them, especially Fugui's father, only to realize that a loss can save a life. If it weren't for the family's bad luck, Fugui would have been executed instead of Long Er, ill-fated heir to the family fortune. In exchange, Fugui lives to be an old man, watching everyone around him perish. I wonder, is life his punishment? The fact that he could still tell his story with humor and hopefulness reflects the fact that his family, even in death, forgave him, and I understand that in life the most important thing we can do is to live.

Ellis's (1993) account of living after the death of her brother in a plane crash

encourages readers to "experience an experience" (p. 711), noting that true accounts fit within ethnographic, social science, and literary fiction in what we learn from them. She states that "[a]s social scientists, we will not know if others' intimate experiences are similar or different until we offer our own stories and pay attention to how others respond, just as we do in everyday life" (p. 725).

The Year of the Dog served as a valuable contact zone in my understanding of the Taiwanese American experience and its dis/connections to my experience. There were beautiful, sometimes sad moments throughout both books, and as I read, I translated the characters' experiences into my own. Through my reading, I engaged in translanguaging practices, not only with unfamiliar words and histories, but within my world, perpendicular and parallel to those of Asians and Asian American immigrants. Here is one of those crossings:

February 2018:

Finding yourself in a world that seeks to underrepresent or misrepresent you is daunting, whether you are a 14-year-old Taiwanese-American girl in 1980s New Jersey, or a 14-year-old Black girl in 1980s Maryland. I identify with many of her experiences, in part, because we came of age during the same era. It was an era devoid of positivistic, standardized testing, but also when teachers were the sole purveyors of culture and knowledge. If a student's name and culture carried deep meaning for her and her family, teachers, administrators, and fellow students were not required to respond with understanding, knowledge, and care. In finding herself, I feel that Grace was much better prepared for that task than I. She had a history that could be mapped to a home language (Taiwanese) and to her parents' home

country. Not me. There were no celebrations of African American (AA) heritage in my home. No “AA” camp like the Taiwanese American, “TAC” camp that Grace and her friends attended during the summer. In fact, an elder in my family has said on many occasions that when she was growing up, “we thought white people knew everything.”

Throughout my engagement with the Big Read events—my children also participated in some of them—I noted various connections between Taiwanese and Chinese cultures and my own, but also found that much, and perhaps more, can be learned when there is nothing tethering our experiences to others. When there is willingness to grow from ignorance and an acknowledgement that we must engage in socially situated activities (Lave, 1993) that force us to address our own biases and misunderstandings, educators can provide enriching community learning opportunities between our students and local residents.

The art of translingual memoir writing as inquiry helped me to articulate dis/connections during engagement in this project, embrace paradox, and settle into uncertainty. Participation in community pedagogy paired with this reflective process allowed me to name understandings of multiculturalism where African Americans stand outside of and are often alienated from U.S. immigrant stories and to pose critical questions about African Americans' place in the joint enterprise of translingualism.

“Yes, I am from China.”: Being and Becoming an In/Outsider (Qiu)

As a Chinese, cisgender female, born and (mostly) raised in China for eighteen years, I see myself as a knower of Chinese

culture, societal norms, and language. However, as an international student in the U.S., I was also an outsider of some societal norms in the locations where our work took place. As an outsider to the lives and perceptions of our public pedagogy participants, I prepared for my own and others' perceptions of “foreignness” as we traversed translingual spaces.

Sharing memoir notes with the co-authors and reading about others' disconnections with Chinese and Taiwanese culture in Hua's (2003) and Lin's (2006) books transported me back to my elementary years in Canada, when people struggled with my “foreign” sounding name. In my memoir I wrote:

Just as Lin's character “Pacy” struggled upon being renamed “Grace” when entering public school, I remembered being a new immigrant in Vancouver when I was in 3rd grade. My mom had given me the temporary name, “Terry,” and told me that I was Terry instead of Tairan when I was in school. She was fearful of me being made fun of because my Chinese name would not be “normal” to Canadians. Back then, I never questioned my mom's decision to help me fit in a society that required me to assimilate to their norms to thrive in school.



Figure 6. Vegetables on display during the 2018 Lunar New Year Celebration at the State Botanical Garden of Georgia. Photo credit: Shannon Montgomery.

Alongside writing and sharing memoir notes, we reviewed data collected for this project, including surveys with those in attendance at our events who had also received free book copies. In her responses in our post-event survey, U.S. born "Sam" (all names are pseudonyms) surprised me that her connection to *The Year of the Dog* (Lin, 2006) was also the narrator's story about her name. The participant explained that in second grade there were two "Sams" in her class, both female. Her teacher appointed her the cisgender female name "Samantha" to differentiate the two "Sams." She wrote: "I had never been called Samantha, so it was quite an adjustment for me." I contrasted this to a high school participant responding to why they felt it was important to study Asian literature and culture traditions in our town where the Asian population is relatively small, to which they answered:

I am an Asian-American and I feel like my culture (although I am not Chinese) is under-represented in general. Growing up, in many ways, I felt out of the norm due to some cultural practices I follow. I think if we all have a deeper understanding of other cultures, people won't feel as out of the norm and we can understand each other better. [see figure 7]

Previously, I had understood that only "foreigners" would be renamed in U.S. public schools and express feeling "not normal." The data were more complicated. U.S.-born teens and adults could also experience uncertainty and insecurity that social and cultural precarity causes to surface. In losing one perception I gained another: names and practices could be conceived of as foreign or familiar depending on a wide variety of variables such as language, race, nationality, and

culture, as well as gender, possible sexual orientation, and even in terms of cultural values for individualization (as evidenced by not allowing for two "Sams" even if of the same gender identity).

When I interviewed attendees at our events and reviewed the survey data, many made positive remarks about my beloved homeland. I enjoyed witnessing people celebrate the cultural practices that are important to me. "I think China is becoming more and more powerful in a lot of ways and I would like to visit China one day. It is already one of the greatest world powers," said Johnny, a middle-aged Hispanic male.



Figure 7. High school youth and educators look at their Chinese New Year art (2018). Photo courtesy of Lindy Weaver.

When interviewed about what she thought when hearing the word "China," a young white female, Lisa, said: *"I think about the long history and culture of China, and how it is doing better than the U.S. in economics now... My son has a Chinese friend in school and I am glad my son is making friends with kids from other cultures and languages."*

Jiexi, a Chinese man who came to our event with his wife and daughter said: *"China is becoming stronger and stronger, we are proud of being Chinese."*

Despite these many positive encounters, a less positive (to me) moment felt more impactful. This is an excerpt from my February 2018 memoir notes:

"Are you of an Eastern descendant?" An elderly white lady who was holding her granddaughter's hand asked as she tapped me on the shoulder during the Lunar New Year festivities at the botanical garden.

"Yes, I am! I'm from China!" I turned around, beaming with a big smile. I was excited cause someone was asking about China.

The lady turned to her granddaughter who was staring at me in the eyes, "See, this is what a Chinese person looks like." The little girl started glancing at me up and down.

"Look at her brown almond eyes and straight long black hair...this is what your Chinese classmates are going to look like when they grow up. Just take a long and hard look at her," she continued slowly.

I don't even have almond eyes...wait...what is happening right now?

In that moment, I had wanted to say that Asians, or people from "an Eastern descendant" (as she put it), entail great diversity. Each dynamic Asian population

has historical, cultural, economic, linguistic, and political experiences of their own (Chang, 2017); not all Asians look alike, and the little girl's friend is not going to look like me when they grow up. I wanted to tell her, "I don't have almond eyes" and "generalization can be dangerous." I wanted to ask where she was coming from.

Instead, I stood there, smiling awkwardly, as the little girl stared.

I could have had a deeper conversation with the "old lady" and asked why she wanted to show a Chinese person to her granddaughter; I could have communicated my discomfort and vulnerability with her and told her about different kinds of "Eastern people;" I could have held her hands and brought her into "transformative mutualism" (Tsing, 2015, p. 40), or asked her about her identities, preparing to offend her by confronting the racialized lens with which she viewed the world. I could have done any of these things, but I did not. I was "stuck" as Staley (2018) and Ellsworth (1997) might say, within binary us/them limitations. I was stuck because I was scared. I was stuck because I was not taught to be confrontational. I was stuck because I could not think of how to confront in that moment.

While I had experienced great pride and positive visibility for the naming of things Chinese, including connections between my own experiences and those of U.S.-born individuals of my new hometown, I also experienced negative hyper-visibility, poked like a caged zoo animal and categorized like an item on a grocery store shelf. Translingual spaces of public learning can be hurtful. As immersion memoirists and researchers, we went into the Big Read event series like

documentary filmmakers who move into scene with a camera, uncertain of what will be captured (Smith, 2011). In these contact zones, I was powerful and vulnerable as an insider and outsider.

Discussion

Writing memoir as translingual pedagogy and inquiry allowed new individual and educational possibilities to arise, walking new and alternative directions through precarity (Powell, 2019). Producing new sound systems; connecting to new literatures, cultures, and nonhuman materials, and recontextualizing old and new labels of differences—translingual memoir scholarship helped us articulate moments when we felt stuck, uncertain, angry, or embarrassed by limitation, our own and those of others. New inquiry practices with new publics and new literatures expanded opportunities for endless grappling with the edges of our own certainties. When participants in our study connected Hua's and Lin's books to universal limitations shared by "Samanthas" and "Sams," we noticed other connections made to African American, Jewish, and other U.S. experiences of daily complicity in the oppression of differences in language, religion, race, language, and culture.

In a climate that often insists on duality, on viewing languages, cultures, religions, races, and sexual orientations in terms of binary divisions and separateness, engagement in the arts—literary and/or visual—facilitates what Tsing (2015) describes as "transformative mutualism" (p. 40) where each worldly encounter is filled with both destruction and possibility. Seeking the "potential of failure" is a vital 'edge' (Lucero, 2015) in (1) educating the artist's deep appreciation of precarity

in one's cultural, social, linguistic, and economic worlds, and (2) fostering the embracement of the vulnerability, indiscernibility, and relationality that precarity brings.

We conclude our study with the implication for all engaged in literary and visual arts education to let go of prescriptive "what to do next" solutions (Lather, 1998, p. 488) to nurture precarity and failure in a variety of school and non-school settings with researchers and participants of all ages, languages, ethnicities, nationalities, races, and religions. We understand failure broadly, as Hamid (2019) described it: the universal failure of all humans to be "native of the place we call home." Beautifully rendered narratives such as Hua's and Lin's help readers acknowledge connections between losses that may appear local to "loss that is the other thread uniting and binding our species" (ibid, p. 18).

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