



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 30 | Spring 2020

Title	Translingualism as Creative Revolt: Rewriting Dominant Narratives of Translingual Literature
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	30
Issue Date	Spring 2020
Publication Date	22/07/2020
Editor	Manon Berset

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Translingualism as Creative Revolt: Rewriting Dominant Narratives of Translingual Literature

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This essay traces the global development of translingual literature in order to confront the pervasive myth of the monolingual paradigm which insists that meaningful interaction can only occur in one language at a time in a given context. This paper shows that this Eurocentric mindset persists in translingual literature, negatively affecting critical accounts of translingual authors whose work falls outside of monolingual parameters. It offers a more appropriate account of a few of these authors, who use their writing to actively work against the monolingual paradigm and promote linguistic diversity. These authors employ translingualism as a necessary tool of identity expression, refusing to reshape themselves to the standards of a monolingual cultural purity. By prioritizing their own hybrid voices, translingual authors put the onus of comprehension on their readers, inverting the paradigm of monolingualism by denying easy access to the monolingual reader. It will focus especially on Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros, whose hybrid identity is a driving force in her work, and who uses translingualism especially in her poetry, to fully express her dual identity.

Introduction

For the better part of the last fifty years of literary criticism, postcolonial theory has made ever-stronger demands on the work of pre-existing theories, refining and interrogating them to reveal the myriad ways Eurocentrism and Colonialism permeate academic thought, like the pervasive paradigm of monolingualism. This paradigm claims that a certain orientation to language is the ‘proper’ approach: one that promotes “our assumption that a text should be constructed in only one language at a time and that its meaning should be transparent... We believe that for communication to be efficient and successful we should employ a common language with shared norms” (Canagarajah 1). Effectively, the paradigm of monolingualism insists that meaningful interaction can only occur in one language at a time in a given context. In recent decades, this paradigm has come under the critique of postcolonial critics for its Eurocentrism, and alternative orientations have gained popularity as viable contemporary replacements. One potential alternative is translingualism, which promotes movement between languages in literature.

Because of its ostensibly hybrid nature as a theory that inherently crosses the borders between languages, translingualism seems immune, even antithetical, to the paradigm of monolingualism. It has even been employed successfully many times as a tool and partner of

postcolonial criticism for its ability to engage with multiple languages at one time. In this essay, however, I want to explore the ways that translingual theory remains under threat of the paradigm of monolingualism, as well as the writers who use translingualism as a tool to reject monolingual colonialist pressures.

I will focus primarily on the burden of comprehensibility that the paradigm of monolingualism imposes on translingual authors. When we assume that language is monolithic, and that we ought to exist in one language at a time, a detrimental assumption that follows is that movement between languages involves increased intellectual labour. This mindset is, in fact, often exacerbated by postcolonial criticism, which attempts to structure literature according to presupposed power relationships. Translation theorist Rita Wilson explains that postcolonial translingual theory does not properly account for contemporary literature because it fails to recognize “the narratives of transnational/translingual writers [who] explore new identities by constructing new dialogic spaces in which language choice is located outside the oppositional model set up by the traditional binaries of postcolonial theorizing: centre/margin, self/other, coloniser/colonized” (237).

The postcolonial tendency to assume a centre-periphery relationship (Moretti 56), coupled with the romanticised prioritisation of the *muttersprache* that emerged from the eighteenth century onward (Yildiz 112), means that postcolonial translingual criticism easily becomes primarily a negotiation of an author’s relationship with a periphery mother-tongue and a central language that operates as a lingua franca. This presumed focus on power relationships leads to the assumption of a fabricated binary, in which authors supposedly move consciously and deliberately between languages. While this does relevantly describe many translingual authors, it falls short in describing the translingualism present in many examples of recent literature from immigrant, minority, and otherwise transcultural authors. For authors with hybrid linguistic identities, it actually takes increased effort to conform to the expectations of monolingualism, which demand that literature be wholly accessible to the speakers of one specific language.

The authors I address in this paper denounce this additional burden, favouring instead a more fluid linguistic and cultural identity. They refuse to conform their work to the paradigms, including monolingualism, that structure postcolonial theory. I will particularly focus on poet and author Sandra Cisneros, and will use this essay to show how her work expands translingualism into a hybridised approach, wherein linguistic effort is required from the reader as well as from the author. Revolting against the paradigm of monolingualism, Cisneros uses translingualism to invite her audiences into a space of fluidity and acceptance that rejects power binaries.

Monolingual Translingualism

Before turning to individual authors, I want to further examine the paradigm of monolingualism and its influence on critical practices in translanguaging, using Steven Kellman's 2000 book *The Translingual Imagination*. In an era of new and overwhelming demand for translanguaged content, Kellman's book is a valiant attempt to quantify the ever-growing, ever-diversifying category of translanguaging. Critic Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour writes that, while the book represents an impressive body of work, Kellman tends to "conflate heterogeneous linguistic practices emerging from very different situations" (173).

A consequence of this conflation, though Klosty Beaujour does not address it specifically, is Kellman's tendency to monolingualise translanguaging. Even when arguing for diversity in language, Kellman treats translanguaging as a group of distinct and monolithic individual entities. He also writes about translanguaging primarily as an effort on the part of the author, who uses translanguaging to actively construct an identity. These two aspects of Kellman's translanguaging are perhaps most apparent in the Introduction to *The Translingual Imagination*, where he writes about translanguaging and translanguaged authorship as a skill built over time (12–13). Describing translanguaged writing as a "transformation" (18) and an "arduous process" (18) in which authors work "with unfamiliar materials" (18), Kellman makes it clear that he sees translanguaging as a learned skill — a tool of metamorphosis for the highly-educated and skilled author. Though he briefly refers to those who are polyglot by birth, he continually writes about languages as wholly distinct from each other. Because of this, even though Kellman sees authors as capable of moving across languages to some extent, it seems improbable that an author's original oeuvre would exist in multiple languages at the same time. For him, the world exists in a series of monolingualisms, or a monolingual translanguaging.

While Kellman's monolingual translanguaging can account for a large amount of translanguaged work, it is less capable of engaging with "a body of narratives, lately appearing in great numbers on the European literary scene, written by authors who have been variously described as 'migrant,' 'diasporic' and, more recently, 'transnational' (Seyhan 2001) and who are also variously referred to as multi-, hetero-, poly-, or translanguaged writers" (Wilson 235–236). Kellman's translanguaging can move across languages, but it cannot exist between them, presenting a handicap when faced with a growing group of translanguaged texts that do exist between languages. The authors of these texts employ translanguaging in order to hybridise literature, moving it away from the influences of monolingualism and into a postmonolingual orientation.

Locating a Postmonolingual Translanguaging

Several key scholars have emerged in the last decade to give an academic voice to an increasingly relevant postmonolingual reality. In her seminal work on the subject, Yasemin Yildiz explains that

though postmonolingual scholarship is recent, the presence of multilingualism is ancient. “Indeed,” she writes in her Introduction, “it is monolingualism, not multilingualism, that is the result of a relatively recent, albeit highly successful, development” (2). She clarifies that though monolingualism is by no means the majority global reality, it has become the dominant global narrative by way of colonisation, consolidation of territories, mainstreamed education systems, and academic commentary. Her use of the term ‘postmonolingualism’ “underscores the radical difference between multilingualism before and after the monolingual paradigm” (4). Yildiz situates translanguaging as a flexible term, referring to “a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge” (5). This new terminology gives scholars in various contexts access to a vocabulary to talk about our peculiar temporal situation: one in which we are attempting a discourse about multi- and translanguaging in the midst of the dominance of monolingualism.

Designation of a postmonolingual framework also allows us to acknowledge the impact that dominant discourse has on all aspects of academic inquiry. This in turn provides space for us to interrogate how the monolingual paradigm maintains influence in areas like translanguaging, which often gets mislabelled as necessarily anti-monolingual. If we theorise translanguaging as a subject wholly distinct and separate from the monolingualism/ postmonolingualism debate, we fail to appreciate the impacts that academic narration has on the way border writing is dispersed and narrated. When we place translanguaging into this debate, we are able to appropriately negotiate the Eurocentric tendencies present in even postcolonial scholarship and move forward towards a postmonolingual translanguaging discourse.

As the paradigm of monolingualism breaks down, so does the belief that movement between languages is clean, precise, and intentional. For an example, we can turn to linguist A. Suresh Canagarajah, who writes in the Introduction to his book *Translingual Practices* about a student, Buthainah, who produces work in multiple languages in his class. Of her work, he writes: “Despite the power of the monolingual orientation in social and educational institutions today, we increasingly see texts such as Buthainah’s that emerge from language contact in everyday life, whether in writing, conversation, or multimedia” (1). He explains that while such communication is not new, globalisation has increased its visibility and amplified the effects of translanguaging in daily life. For Buthainah, the use of multiple linguistic codes in her work is not an effort to transcend her daily life, but rather to reflect it. This does not mean, however, that she has no concern for her anticipated audience; she rather chooses to invite them into the work of understanding her piece, and, by extension, her identity. Later in his consideration of Buthainah, Canagarajah writes that “the objective of her writing was not to merely convey some information about her multilingual literacy development, but to demonstrate or ‘perform’ it” (2). The task, as Canagarajah continues, then shifts to Buthainah’s classmates, who are asked to interact with her

translingual work. In writing and performing in this way, Buthainah shifts a responsibility to her classmates, asking that they, coming from various language backgrounds, contribute effort to understanding, reconstructing, and appreciating Buthainah's writing, despite the translingual challenges that it presents. Here Canagarajah is picking up on a key link in the chain of contemporary translingualism: the audience. This audience engagement is a critical part of the shift of burden spurred on by translingual writers who ask to be appreciated in their postmonolingual identities.

Mapping the Category

With a framework of postmonolingualism to guide our discussion, we can begin to reconstruct a category of translingual writers who cannot be accounted for in Kellman's monolingual translingualism. If we return to *Beyond the Mother Tongue*, Yildiz offers some clear examples of authors who fall into this category of postmonolingual translingualism. Her consideration of Yoko Tawada offers some particularly clear insights into a new kind of language negotiation. Yildiz positions Tawada as a participant in the "new 'linguascape,'" born in the era of globalisation and particularly suited to postmonolingual discourse (109).

Tawada's dual usage of Japanese and German in her significant literary oeuvre, Yildiz writes, "takes the firm inclusion into the monolingual paradigm as a problematic state" (111). Having been born in Japan and subsequently spent the majority of her career in Germany, Tawada denounces the monolingual paradigm as exclusivist to those who, like her, exist and work in multiple languages without the prioritisation of one over the other. Yildiz explains in her chapter on Tawada that "Tawada's writing actively participates in this politically charged, reemergent multilingualism..." (115).

Her activism is made more apparent in Yildiz's description of Tawada's interactions with her audience:

[Because] the number of speakers of both Japanese and German is small, and there is little overlap between the languages, or even their scripts ... [Tawada's] bilingual constellation ... does not emerge out of or refer back to any sociolinguistic community, and does not even assume readers who are familiar with both languages. It is thus a bilingualism addressing itself to 'monolinguals' — that is, an audience most likely only fluent in one of those languages — and confronting them with perspectives gained in an unfamiliar language. (116)

This insight about Tawada's interaction with her audience is key to exploring the burden of metamorphosis as expressed in her work. Rather than adapting her own writing to a particular

linguistic audience, her translingualism is an offer to her readers to explore an unfamiliar language. Where a monolingual translingualism demands Tawada's prioritisation of one language over the other, Tawada's postmonolingual translingualism consciously defies this assumption, not only by maintaining loyalty to multiple languages, but by inviting her audience to expand their own linguistic perspectives. By doing so, she transfers the burden of understanding to her readers. This burden is not without effort, as Tawada understands that portions of her work will be at least partially inaccessible to her audience. But her invitation affirms the validity and value of cultural and linguistic exchange, even in the absence of perfect comprehension. In shifting this effort to her reader, Tawada defies and expands the preconceived boundaries of translingual writing.

The Translingual Revolt of Sandra Cisneros

To look at the work of another author who interacts with her audience by offering them the same burden of metamorphosis, we turn now to Sandra Cisneros, a Mexican-American author who has spent her career navigating a hybrid linguistic identity. In an interview with Erik Gleibermann for *World Literature Today* in 2018, Cisneros explained that she plays with Spanish and English in her work because "I always feel like I'm on a borderland" (Gleibermann, "Inside the Bilingual Writer"). For her, writing translingually is a way to express and inhabit the 'borderland' of her identity. In a 1995 interview with Pilar Godayol Nogué, Cisneros more clearly expresses these sentiments. As she explains, "for those of us who are living in those borderlines it's just an incredible time in history because we are presenting mirrors to each country, to ourselves, and to all the citizens of the world, that have never been held up before. So we have a particular ear, and a particular vision" (Nogué 63). Cisneros sees this unique position as equipping her to educate her audience about the many various relationships that exist between Spanish and English. When asked whether she is conscious of her readers, she answers:

I am conscious that I'm writing to a girlfriend like myself. She is the main character. She's not in the margin. She's in the centre of the page, and there standing in the doorway are other people of other cultures who are eavesdropping; and in order that they continue to listen, I try to write it in such a way that I don't lose them and I try to structure the Spanish expressions in such a way that they learn Spanish. (Nogué 66)

In Cisneros' writing, we see a clear relationship between the author and the reader. Cisneros' shift of the burden of metamorphosis is perhaps not as complete as it is in the work of Canagarajah's student Buthainah, because she both accommodates a non-Spanish speaker and addresses a native speaker of both languages, but she asks for a similar investment from her audience. She constructs her Spanish/English identity so that it is at least partially legible, in the hope that her readers will make the effort to decipher, appreciate, and interact with it.

Cisneros' 1994 poetry collection *Loose Woman* gives readers a glimpse into how her efforts come to life in her writing. While most of the poems are written primarily in English, they include short colloquial phrases, thrown into the dialogue-esque language, to give the effect of a bilingual speaker. In "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me," for example, Cisneros closes with the stanza,

Quiero ser tuya. Only yours. Only you.

Quiero amarte. Atarte. Amarrarte.

Love the way a Mexican woman loves. Let

me show you. Love the only way I know how. (6)

Reading this stanza, we can see both where Cisneros has accommodated her reader and where she asks for effort. Her Spanish words, for example, are italicised, perhaps in recognition of their distinction from the English words that make up the majority of the text. A native speaker of both English and Spanish, we can assume that Cisneros italicises her Spanish for her audience rather than herself. Her Spanish phrases are also short and simple, built from language that would be at least partially accessible to a non-Spanish speaker. *Quiero* ['I want'] would not fall far below *hola* or *corazón* in a list of recognizable Spanish words, especially in the U.S. context in which Cisneros was writing. Speakers of romance languages would be able to easily connect *ser tuya* as 'to be yours,' helped additionally by the suggestions of the two following phrases. In a similar way, "*Quiero amarte. Atarte. Amarrarte.*" can be pieced together, or at least associated with the sounds of *amor* ['love'], or at the very least appreciated for their alliteration. When reading, even if they do not fully understand the words, Cisneros' audience can piece together enough from sounds, similar words and context clues to partially understand Cisneros' Spanish, and can appreciate the flow and sounds of the words. The Spanish throughout the poem increases both the audience's appreciation for an unfamiliar language and their awareness of Cisneros' hybrid identity, a central theme in all of her writing but particularly in this poem.

"Amorcito Corazón," a poem later in the same collection, is fascinating because it operates for the whole collection in much the same way as Cisneros' Spanish phrases operate in "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me." The poem is short, and describes the speaker's grief at the end of a relationship:

Ya no eres

mi amorcito

¿verdad?

Ya lo supe.

Ya lo sé.

Fuiste

y ya no eres.

Fuimos

y se acabó.

¿Comó les diría?

¿Comó se explica?

Te conocí

¿y ahora?

no. (52)

The entire poem is in Spanish, and the words are not italicised for the reader, as with the Spanish words in every other poem in the collection. It is placed almost exactly halfway through the collection, and functions as both an invitation and a challenge. Here, Cisneros highlights her increased expectations of her audience. After they have worked their way through the first half of the collection, presumably interacting with the Spanish words, phrases, and sounds that appear in poems before “Amorcito Corazón,” she presents an opportunity to interact with her hybrid identity. The words are still relatively simple and easy to look up, but the onus is on the reader to pursue understanding and appreciation. Whatever understanding is reached, it is a joint effort between Cisneros and an active reader, but the presence of the poem as a Spanish text demonstrates Cisneros’ refusal to adhere to a monolingual translanguaging – that is, a translanguaging that insists on the prioritisation of one language over all others.

Conclusion

In *Loose Woman*, Sandra Cisneros uses her knowledge of both English and Spanish not to cater to an audience of one language or the other, but to invite both sides to explore the space in between the languages. Through her work, Cisneros centres a voice that is inherently translingual, consequently decentring the paradigm of monolingualism as well. When she speaks as both a Spanish and English speaker, speakers of only one language suddenly become liminal, excluded from wholly understanding the poetry in front of them. Cisneros uses this translingualism to invert the expected systems of power and assert her own hybrid voice as a reasonable and insightful alternative to the flawed monolingual paradigm. She even presents an alternative to monolingual translingualism, which insists that languages, while they may be coexistent, must remain distinct and monolithic. Cisneros refuses to divide her identity, and invites her audience to educate themselves by taking on the burden of linguistic exclusion and the effort of understanding.

In Cisneros' work, as in Tawada's, as with Buthainah's, a postmonolingual translingualism allows an author to negotiate a complex hybrid identity. This push for increased fluidity in language is not present only in the work of these three authors, either. Cultural hybridity and globalisation demand from an engaged readership a space of linguistic fluidity, not as a break from the norm but as a freedom of expression for those who spend their lives catering to a colonising language. For so many transcultural authors, translingualism is an act of courageous expression. It is not a work of stepping outside themselves for a new creative challenge, but of being brave enough to *not* cater to a Eurocentric and/or anglophone norm. As literary critics and engaged readers, we cannot assert the postcolonial power of translingualism while still expecting it to play by Eurocentric rules. Instead, we ought to lean on the creative revolt of postmonolingual translingualism, accepting the invitation of authors like Cisneros to break down our own monolingual expectations. Investing in postmonolingual translingualism not only exposes us to an expanded linguistic reality, it normalises diversity of language and identity, and de-centres normative voices to make way for a multiplicity of perspectives.

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