Translingual Events

World Literature and the Making of Language

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Abstract

This article outlines a theory of world literary reading that takes language and the making of boundaries between languages as its point of departure. A consequence of our discussion is that world literature can be explored as uneven translingual events that make linguistic tensions manifest either at the micro level of the individual text or at the macro level of publication and circulation—or both. Two case studies exemplify this. The first concerns an episode in the institutionalization of Shakespeare as a global canonical figure in 1916, with a specific focus on the South African writer Sol Plaatje's Setswana contribution to *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*. The second case discusses how Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998) evokes the bodily and affective charge of boundary-making by troubling the border between Haitian and Dominican speech.

Keywords

translingualism – World Literature – Edwidge Danticat – Solomon T. Plaatje – Shakespeare

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Plurality without a Number

Before languages are named and national boundaries drawn, there is the dialect continuum: fluid zones of variable speech and interacting speech communities which may subsequently be described in terms of gravitational constellations of languages (Beecroft 6; Calvet 58–80). Yet in the modern era the identification of languages as bounded entities within the institutional framework of nation-states constitutes—typically—the given condition under which language is used and literature is produced. The argument in this article concerns the implications of a double emphasis on the continuum and the hard boundary of language for world literary reading practices. A consequence of our discussion is that world literature can be explored not only as works that circulate (Damrosch), as canonical constellations (Thomsen), as a phenomenology of world-making (Cheah), as an international struggle for recognition (Casanova), as born-translated literature (Walkowitz), or as encodings of the capitalist world-system (WReC), but as uneven *translingual events* in which linguistic tensions are manifested either at the micro level of the individual text or at the macro level of publication and circulation—or both.

Translingualism, then, is a term we privilege in our attempt to articulate this contradictory quality of literary language. Our article builds in this way on a growing body of work that questions the relevance of the post-Romantic paradigm of language, nation, and people to literary studies. We do not, however, restrict translingualism to the bi- or multilingual capacity of individual writers, as did Steven G. Kellman in his seminal study. Nor are we focusing on the pedagogical challenges of teaching translingual composition (Lu and Horner). Rather, in this article translingualism refers more generally to the linguistic condition under which writers, publishers, and editors make use of language. In other words, we do not see translingualism as a quality that certain texts have and most do not but rather as a primary condition that literary texts can either work with or disavow and—by the same token—that reading practices can choose to highlight or ignore. The prefix “trans-” draws attention both to the boundary of named languages and to the constant crossing of the boundary. In this way, cultivating an attentiveness to translingualism can become both an aesthetic resource and a reading strategy.

More importantly, translingualism as a primary condition should be understood as distinct from, yet related to other terms such as heterolingualism, multilingualism, and monolingualism. Insofar as heterolingualism refers to “the foregrounding of foreign languages” (Grutman 19) and “the use of foreign languages or social, regional, and historical language varieties *in* literary texts” (Meylaerts 4), this indicates a particular translingual relation, whereby lan-

guage is defamiliarized and “othered” in relation to a perceived hegemonic norm. Translingualism, as an analytical concept, offers by contrast a broader canvas against which the literary uses of language can be assessed and actualized in reading. When a translingual event is produced by and in the encounter with a literary text, it is not immediately apparent what should count as foreign or familiar—this polarity may shift or even become irrelevant as one engages with the textual material (think here of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* as a limit case, written in all and no languages). In our choice to approach translingualism in literature as singular language events we do, however, wholeheartedly agree with Grutman (19) that such a reading practice should not assume a mimetic relationship between literary language and actual language use in society, but should rather consider the literary text as a separate staging of language.

As for multilingualism and monolingualism, both these terms can be understood to refer to institutional “settlements” of the translingual condition, whereby languages are identified and standardized. The multi- and the mono-follow—in fact the same logic of division, an insight that is implied yet not fully acknowledged in Yasemin Yildiz’s seminal study of the “monolingual paradigm” (see e. g. 21–25). Intent on foregrounding *multilingualism* and on disassociating subjective identity from the ties of the singular “mother tongue,” Yildiz diverts attention from how the mono- and multilingual fit together conceptually. By contrast, our emphasis lies in what we see as the primacy of the translingual and the instability of boundary making.

The implication of our two case studies is that the translingual making and unmaking of boundaries is a central feature of the formation of world literature. The first case concerns an episode in the institutionalization of Shakespeare as a global canonical figure in 1916. Here, the translingual condition is coded as multilingualism within the context of British imperialism; moreover, it is a multilingualism stratified according to a distinction between civilization and savagery. What *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916)—an exceptional collation of tributes in numerous languages issued on the tercentenary of the Bard’s death—demonstrates above all is how the institution of literature has the potential to reduce language to a marker of global and geopolitical differences. Yet a closer look will reveal the contradictory and unstable nature of the volume’s multilingual hierarchy. The second case, with its aesthetic rather than institutional focus, reverses the perspective. Here it becomes evident that Edwidge Danticat, in her novel *The Farming of Bones*, intervenes in the linguistic boundary-making of Haitian and Dominican speech. Crucially, it is a novel that by formal means evokes the bodily dimension and affective charge of such boundary-making between Creole and Spanish—and it does so in, or rather through, the hegemonic language of English. English is in fact what brings our

two cases together, but at different ends of its historical trajectory: in the first case, at its moment of imperial imposition on significant parts of the world (but prior to its global hegemony) and, in the second case, when it is entrenched as the vehicular language of the planet and the hyper-central source language of publishing (Calvet 60–61, Heilbron). In both cases, however, English turns out to be always more and less than just “English.” It is instead the multiple forms of translingual relationality and indecision in these two cases that capture our attention. Indeed, what our translingual approach demonstrates is that literary language may ultimately be read outside of identity and difference as a constantly adaptable assemblage of vernacular and cosmopolitan, private and public, conventional and transgressive vectors. Precisely because this assemblage functions in such diverse ways and at various levels we deliberately choose to develop two contrasting modes of analysis of texts from different periods. The first explores gaps between editorial organization and potential meaning in *A Book of Homage*; the second reads the translingual event of Danticat’s novel for the transgressive intensities it produces with deliberate force.

A further motivation for our selection of cases is that both are so deeply embedded in the Western imperial and postcolonial (b)ordering of the world. Within this conflictual macro-historical context, the stakes of linguistic difference are often dramatically high. Yet even here, such difference will never mean just one thing. Rather than belonging exclusively to the domain of the writer and/or the text, the full implications of literary translingualism come into view once the capacious repertoire of historical, social, and translational linguistic relations is considered. As already mentioned, literature can either work with or disavow the translingual condition. In the Shakespeare example, we encounter forms of disavowal, notably through the marking of languages as either cosmopolitan and civilized or (particularly in one case that we discuss) vernacular. In the second example, we find instead an author who works *with* the translingual condition. Through “trans-vernacular” moments in the narrative, intensities are produced that transgress and challenge the repressive boundary-making of postcolonial states.

Our theoretical point of departure, then, is to try to think of linguistic difference beyond the commonsensical agreements on what constitutes the unity of a given language, hence our attempt to think plurality without a number. This is an elusive undertaking, if only because one is obliged to recognize not only the tremendous institutional force of naming, counting, and standardizing languages, but more particularly the symbiotic relationship between literary writing and publishing, on the one hand, and standardization, on the other. Indeed, in a sly turn of phrase, Alexander Beecroft even claims that “a language is a dialect with a literature” (6). This seems pertinent not least in view of what

Pascale Casanova has dubbed the “Herder effect,” which dignified, a priori, vernacular languages as vehicles of literature and encouraged a proliferation of standardized languages (77–79). Yet we find support for our against-the-grain approach to linguistic identity in Naoki Sakai’s theorization of language “in terms of those grammars in which the distinction of the singular and the plural is irrelevant” (73). The crucial question, he argues, is what allows us to represent language as a unity. His response is historical and philosophical: it is only the regulative idea of a bounded language that affords us this capacity:

It is not possible to know whether a particular language as a unity exists or not. It is the other way around: by subscribing to the idea of the unity of language, it becomes possible for us to systematically organize knowledge about languages in a modern, scientific manner.

To the extent that the unity of national language ultimately serves as a *schema* for *nationality* and offers the sense of national integration, the idea of the unity of language opens up a discourse to discuss not only the naturalized origin of an ethnic community but also the entire imaginary associated with “national” language and culture. A language may be pure, authentic, hybridized, polluted or corrupt, yet regardless of a particular assessment about that language, the very possibility of praising, authenticating, complaining about or deploring it is offered by the unity of that language as a regulative idea.

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Such an emphasis on the regulative idea is what makes it possible to use the theoretical assumption of the translingual condition as a critical tool without ignoring the sharply significant effects of linguistic boundary-making at any given moment (see also Young for a discussion of this duality). This calls for a flexible methodological framework, for which Sakai’s conceptual pair of “monolingual” vs. “heterolingual” address may be of help, suggesting as it does two fundamentally different types of relations. In monolingual address, “the addresser adopts the position representative of a putatively homogeneous language community and relates to the general addressees who are also representative of an equally homogeneous language community” (85). Heterolingual address involves, however, addressing oneself “as a foreigner to another foreigner” (86). Hence our suggestion to approach literary language as an assemblage of relations that move between or combine the monolingual and heterolingual positions.

Shakespeare and the Languages of the World

A full century ago, in 1916, *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare*, edited by Israel Gollancz, appeared in the Oxford University Press. Lavishly produced and printed only in 1,250 copies, it sought to manifest, in the words of the editor, “the intellectual fraternity of mankind in the universal homage accorded to the genius of the greatest Englishman” (vii).

The volume is a baffling artifact. Although it participates in an ideological construction of Shakespeare as the figurehead of authochthonous Englishness, as discussed by Coppélia Kahn, it is also intended to demonstrate that Shakespeare “speaks to all people, of all times and nations” (Kahn 460). It is not just the case that the 166 contributors—among whom we note familiar names such as Rudyard Kipling, Henri Bergson, Georg Brandes, and Rabindranath Tagore—hail from such far-flung places as Persia, Japan, USA, Armenia, China, Russia, South Africa, France, Sweden, and Denmark. It is also that the actual texts are printed in 23 different languages and in at least eight different scripts. Translations or short summaries in English are provided for the most part, and English is the main language of the contributions, but Gollancz obviously made use of this celebration to cultivate a cosmopolitan ethos, fully in the idealistic spirit of Goethean *Weltliteratur* as a concert of humanity’s different voices.

In a sceptical reading, however, this idealism masks the accumulation of international symbolic capital on behalf of English literature, in implicit rivalry with the French (here, Frenchmen such as Bergson and Émile Boutroux valorize Shakespeare). And looked at from a postcolonial viewpoint, *A Book of Homage* apparently consolidates the imperial centrality of the English canon—in the midst of the First World War—as a standard of civilization (Kahn). Both of these claims are valid, although they are complicated not only by the idiosyncracies of the contributions themselves but in particular by the multilingualism (and multiscriptism) of the volume. What we find between the covers of the book is therefore a deeply contradictory vindication of linguistic plurality.

Taken as an integral whole, the book was and is unreadable to any single individual. Not even the most avid polyglot would have mastered the combination of—to mention a few—Burmese, Finnish, Arabic, Bengali, and Setswana. These texts are there to be seen, not read. Being externalized in this way, they arguably enact a monolingual address that produces the *single* effect of difference from an English vantage point. In this way, they perform the peculiar task of showcasing linguistic specificity as a locus of cultural authority in the production of Shakespeare as a global figure.

Considered in the light of certain macro-theories of vernacularization, such as those presented by Beecroft and Sheldon Pollock, *A Book of Homage* also confounds conventional wisdom. If, in Pollock's well-known account, vernacular literary cultures renounce "the larger world for the smaller place" (590), then this volume manifests instead the largeness of the world but on behalf of an exceedingly small community of readers—those who could access the 1,250 expensive copies. Or, reverting to the monolingual reading, one might say that the volume consolidates the provincial concerns of vernacular English literature with the *support* of the larger world. Or, as a third alternative which focuses more on the agency of the contributors, we find between these covers a range of writers who manifest the singularity of their language, but who do so in an international context and without much hope of being understood.

This last alternative comes close to the "Herder effect" whereby "the right and necessity of writing in one's native tongue" becomes a self-evident principle (Casanova 78). On closer inspection, however, there is an internal differentiation between writers and languages in the volume. Many of the languages—such as Farsi, Arabic, and Chinese—are classical. Others, such as Finnish or Polish, have a more recent history of being consolidated precisely as national vernaculars. By mapping these languages as either "cosmopolitan" or "vernacular" one could discern a subset of discrete literary spaces of production, circulation, and reception (with centers such as China, Persia, and France), upon which there is just an overlaid veneer of Shakespearean centrality.

What is presented as a unified field gathered around the pole of Shakespeare is in fact a motley congeries of literary languages. But this linguistic assemblage also presents a hierarchy, as demonstrated by a particularly jarring detail: of all the contributors, there is only one who remains unnamed. On page 336, there is a contribution called "A South African's Homage." This is the piece written in Setswana, and it conveys the anonymous author's appreciation of Shakespeare. What we see here is a manifestation of the imperial "standard of civilization," as Lydia Liu has called it (388), which on vague criteria distinguished between civilized and non-civilized peoples. The vagueness meant that designations could shift, but the decision to withhold the name of a black South African contributor (and only this contributor) placed him in the non-civilized quarter.

The irony and riddle is that the contributor was, in other contexts, a highly public figure. It is common knowledge that this piece was written by Solomon T. Plaatje (1876–1932), or Sol Plaatje for short—translator, editor, linguist, journalist, founding member of the SANNC (later the ANC), and the first black South African novelist in English (Willan 192). His claim to literary fame rests mainly on the novel *Mhudi* (1930), but to this must be added his translations of Shakespeare into Setswana, his gathering and translation of Setswana proverbs, and

his reportage *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), a powerful documentation of and protest against the consequences of the 1913 Natives' Land Act. One of his (failed) campaigns against the Land Act consisted in petitioning the Queen in London for the repeal of the law, and it was on this visit that he came into contact with Israel Gollancz, then professor of English at King's College (Willan 192–194).

As these biographical details indicate, Plaatje belongs to that early generation of African writers for whom the question of the vernacular was extremely urgent but also fraught and open. His vernacularism must, to begin with, always be considered in relation to his multilingualism. In everything that he did, Plaatje moved between and across languages, reaching out to a range of different audiences. The papers he edited, *Koranta ea Becoana* ("Bechuana's Gazette") and *Tsala ea Becoana* ("The Friend of the Bechuana," later *Tsala ea Batho*, "The Friend of the People"), were bilingual, with material in Setswana and English, but directed at a Tswana readership. *Native Life in South Africa* was, by contrast, targeted at readers in Britain, and he made many frustrated attempts to have *Mhudi* published in the United States before it was belatedly published in South Africa in 1930. Therefore, assessing Plaatje's own positioning of his vernacular in a fractured world literary space is highly dependent on what Karin Barber has theorized as addressivity (137–139), that is on how he "convenes" different audiences by switching between languages. His contribution to *A Book of Homage* is, however, a sheer paradox: being a masterful writer in English, he instead recounts his discovery of Shakespeare in Setswana. Kahn suggests that he chose to write in Setswana (472). If indeed that is the case (we will never know for certain), it is more than likely that this choice was encouraged by Gollancz, who clearly wished to extend the linguistic range of the volume as far as possible. The English readership could, at any rate, access it only thanks to a précis in English that must have been produced by Plaatje himself.

As Kahn and Deborah Seddon have previously shown, said précis is an astonishing piece of writing that apparently accepts, on a rhetorical level, the civilization/savagery binary yet subtly undermines it performatively as well as through its narrative content. With the Setswana and English texts running parallel on the page—English squeezed on the right margin next to the more spaciouly typeset Setswana—the reader of English is provided with not only an account of Plaatje's discovery of Shakespeare but also with a narrative of an African adoption of Shakespeare as a keystone of human dignity, cultural value, and transcultural understanding. Contrary to the racist coding of moral values Plaatje encounters in a cinematic rendition of the Passion (presumably in D.W. Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation*, Willan 194), "Shakespeare's dramas [...] show

that nobility and valour, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any colour" (Gollancz 339). In Plaatje's narrative, Shakespeare's works are not only recognized as African—and hence as human—but Shakespeare himself is also considered an enabler, under British imperial authority, of translingual communication. Identifying Shakespeare as the source of proverbs with which "educated natives [...] embellish their speeches," Plaatje recalls also how his courting of a Xhosa girl was made easier by having recourse to "the language Shakespeare wrote" (Gollancz 336–337).

His engagement with Shakespeare did not, however, move only along a translingual vector. It was also part of Plaatje's push to "literize" and "literate" Setswana—to adopt terms used by Pollock and Beecroft (Beecroft 12)—as a bounded language. Translating Shakespeare could, and did, assist in developing printed Tswana literature, in dynamic interaction with the oral heritage. Already in *A Book of Homage*, Plaatje vernacularized Shakespeare by renaming him "Tsikinya-Chaka," or "Shake-the-sword," in the spirit of Tswana praise-naming (Gollancz 336). His translation of *The Comedy of Errors*, *Diphosho-phosho*, likewise makes use—in an apparently domesticating translation—of Tswana proverbs and idioms (Seddon 85; Schalkwyk and Lapula). Not unlike other translation movements in history, Plaatje drew on Shakespeare, the cosmopolitan canon, to cultivate vernacular Setswana literature—or, to be precise, Setswana *print* literature in Latin script. According to Seddon, Plaatje's translations remained "the only secular literature available in Setswana" until the 1940s, which indicates the structural importance of Plaatje's intervention (Seddon 90).

With regard to *A Book of Homage*, the anonymous inclusion of Plaatje's essay can be read as a translingual event that produces an intensely contradictory set of meanings. The book's historical precondition is the imperial ordering of the world according to the standard of civilization, and its immediate effect is to establish a monolingual address (in Sakai's sense) which orders languages as neatly bounded entities with English in a position of centrality. At the same time, Plaatje's own text needs to be read as a vindication, within such a multi-/monolingual order, both of an ultimately counter-imperial heterolingual address and of his endeavor to consolidate Setswana as a language of literature within the modernity circumscribed by the Latin alphabet. Moreover, if we consider his essay in Setswana and its English summary as a complex unity, we see that this is a translingual event with multiple implied audiences and a range of possible meanings that are not reducible only to the Herder effect or to imperial coercion. To describe the full range of (potential) translingual events provided by *A Book of Homage* is, strictly speaking, impossible; in the case of Plaatje's contribution, it is the English-Setswana-Latin alpha-

bet assemblage—crucial to keep in mind—that in fact challenges the standard emphasis on Plaatje's language activism on behalf of Setswana (Kahn; Willan).¹ Rather than taking the boundaries between languages as given, such a description insists not only that the Setswana text is entangled (or folded) with English and the discourse network of Latin print but also that English and print are made to fold with Setswana, even within a context of domination and racialization.

Farming of Bones and Languages—Edwidge Danticat

It can be argued that the Haitian-born author Edwidge Danticat also radically questions the premises of the Herder effect by working through the translanguing condition. What, indeed, is the “native tongue” of a book evoking a Hispanic reality through the lens of a narrator speaking Creole, written in an English tainted with a variety of other idioms but most of all with the language of suffering bodies?

Danticat's first language is Haitian Creole, her second English, and French her third, learned in school after she immigrated to the United States. Considered from the point of view of literary heritage and thematic focus, Danticat clearly belongs to Caribbean and Haitian literatures, although she writes in English (Dash). However, it is difficult to place her among Haitian diasporic literature, since she came to the United States at the age of twelve to join her parents in Brooklyn and is not herself a political refugee (Munro 207). Nevertheless, she herself situates her writing within the floating space of the Haitian diaspora and engages in Haitian political issues. Having been consecrated both by media and academia, she holds a central place within the American literary field. She is also highly recognized in France, up to the point that she is almost seen as belonging to the Francophone heritage by virtue of her Haitian descent. This inclusion of a praised American author in the Francophone fold is rare, but not as far-fetched as it may seem. Especially during and after the American occupation of Haiti (1915–1934), many Haitian authors used the French language as a means of resistance to American imperialism, paradoxically making

1 Setswana had been “reduced” to writing by Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century. Unlike the comparable cases of isiZulu or isiXhosa, however, there had not yet emerged a consensus on orthography, which was a cause of great concern to Plaatje. Four different missionary orthographies competed against each other, and Plaatje fought for years—largely in vain—to have a fifth version accepted, based on the then current phonetic alphabet.

Haitian literature “more French” than literature from France’s overseas departments in the Caribbean, Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guyana. However, since she never spoke French in Haiti, Danticat’s relationship to this language is not tainted by the same colonial and postcolonial heritage as is the case for Francophone Haitian (exiled) authors. One could argue that the filtering of Danticat’s French Haitian literary heritage through the hyper-centrality of English makes her work particularly open to the effects of language relations on a global as well as on a regional level. While linguistic power relations are central to her work, she does not merely reproduce those relations. Nor does she write *between* languages. Instead, our analysis shows how her writing occurs at the point of encounter of languages that are not really foreign to each other within the space of the novel: Iberian and Dominican Spanish and Creole exist side by side in the plot and are folded into the narrative English.

The Farming of Bones is an attempt to personalize the traumatic history of what is known as the “Parsley massacre,” or in Spanish *El Corte* (“The Cutting”) and in Haitian Creole *Kout Kouto a* (“The Knife Cut”). This is an event that took place in the Dominican Republic in 1937 when President Rafael Trujillo ordered the killing of Haitian migrant workers living on the borderland between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Danticat gives language a crucial role in the plot (Munro 230) not only by retelling the horrifying linguistic aspects of the “Parsley massacre” but also by letting entanglements between languages operate in and through the protagonist’s intimacy. The first-person narrator, Amabelle Désir, is working as a maid for the wife of one of Trujillo’s generals when rumors reach her that Haitians are being sent to the border and killed. Fleeing for her life, Amabelle makes it across the river to Haiti, but her fiancé Sebastien is not as fortunate. When terror breaks out, a monolingual order replaces translingual exchange. Language is used to single out Haitians who were being killed “because they could not manage to trill their ‘r’ and utter a throaty ‘j’ to ask for parsley, to say perejil ...” (114). Separating Haitians from Dominicans, “perejil” functions like a shibboleth, as in the story from the Book of Judges (12:6), to which the author explicitly refer, quoting it as an epigraph to the novel. Here, the brutality of power is exercised through language identification by means of pronunciation, thereby exposing the underlying madness of counting languages. To speak two languages, not to mention mixing them, could lead to death: “In most of our mouths, their names would be tinged with or even translated into Creole, the way the name of Doloritas’ man slid towards the Spanish each time she evoked him. Perhaps if we addressed the sisters publicly in Dajabón, someone might hear and at that moment decide that we should die” (183). Here, languages are inextricably entangled with one another to the point that a name changes yet remains the same, depending on who

speaks. But as soon as terror steps in, languages are policed by phonetic means, disabling the characters to use the flow of languages that determines their existence.

The narrative challenges the fatal monolingual address enacted by the Generalissimo. It harbors all the languages that float around in the story—Haitian Creole, “border” Creole spoken in the area around the city of Dajabón, Dominican Spanish, Iberian Spanish, and Latin—within English. By building on the multiplicity of languages that are central to both the plot and the characters’ existence, Danticat creates a double, almost contradictory border space within the text where the strict political and geographical divide between the two nations of the island contrasts with the shifting boundaries between languages used. Here, the translingual condition, or what Édouard Glissant would have characterized as a Caribbean *langage* (42–43), is internalized to the point where it becomes a temporary mother tongue for the subalterns: “the tangled language of those who always stuttered as they spoke, caught as they were on the narrow ridge between two nearly native tongues” (Danticat 69). The characters lead precarious lives (many of them have no citizenship) on the border between two nations and two languages, and their reality is thus shaped by translingual events. Only by slipping from one language to another and by mixing them can they linguistically express their lived experience, thus turning translingualism into a temporary mother tongue, which is always just “nearly native.” The key is in the spatial adverb “nearly,” suggesting a linguistic situation governed by mobility, as it constantly moves toward or away from languages. The adverb gives a sense of non-presence, of always being on the verge of moving to something else, which affects the linguistic temporality: moving between languages makes for a transitional relationship to languages as if they were always *temporary*.

By taking its cue from the “tangled” and “nearly native” language of the novel’s characters, the narrative seems to disavow an imposed monolingual address—its language is a truly mutant *transvernacular* language, manifesting a mode of existing on the border. But it never fully provides a mimetic reproduction of such border-language. After all, the narrative is written in English and none of the languages present in the story is ever dissociated from the implicit power of oppression and exclusion that comes with the (post)colonial situation. In other words, no language rescues another, and there is no construction of utopian multilingualism that could overcome the physical and linguistic violence that takes place in the novel. Thus, Danticat’s form of exile literature questions the idea that a literature emerges out of a linguistic consolidation as in Beecroft’s model. Instead, she uses that moment of fixation as a motif, which she then challenges through crafting a text that precisely lacks

consolidation and, instead, seeks to construct itself by drawing from linguistic fluency allowing the use of many languages in one.

In fact, the most highly charged instances of translingual events in *The Farming of Bones* emerge in passages where languages cross, not necessarily to produce difference or even meaning. A case in point is the infusion of words in Spanish and in Creole, often in italics directly or indirectly translated in various ways. The insertion of foreign words can produce a kind of reality effect that also connects writing to context, and thus taking on a deictic function by signaling the “here” and the “now.” This is a relevant observation also about Danticat’s novel, but the process does not end there. Especially in passages accumulating words from different languages, the words cease to refer to the outside or to their own foreignness. Instead, they start to function together in an assemblage where the question of identifying languages is no longer relevant. In one passage, for example, Creole suddenly appears, not because there is no English equivalent, but in order to make the sentence work through languages: “He couldn’t remember how many he’d killed but felt like each one was walking kòt a kòt with him, crushing his happiness” (145). Interestingly, the character in question usually speaks Iberian Spanish. It is impossible to determine whether the linguistic shift suggests that the conversation was taking place in Creole, or whether it is a vocal marker, announcing the presence of Amabelle’s narrative voice, as if she had taken over the character’s words. In fact, in Danticat’s novel the linguistic shifts rarely appear in direct speech (see Sakai, Suchet). Typically, it is the narrator who makes the shift visible, as when the humanist, Doctor Javier says to Amabelle: “Have you given thought to what I asked?” and the narrator comments: “He spoke Kreyòl like a Haitian, with only a slight Dominican cadence” (79). Or when Kongo, a Haitian cane-cutter whose son was accidentally killed by the general’s car, addresses Valencia, the general’s wife: “My heart saddened for the death of your other child; Kongo said in his best Spanish” (116). The many languages at play are not *visible*; the narration does not necessarily change language and the address is, strictly speaking, monolingual.

It is the context that destabilizes the monolingual address. In many of the scenes of speech, translingualism seems to inform the direct speech, as in the case of Kongo’s utterance, where English is marked by Spanish and Creole, or when Amabelle encounters two Dominican sisters forced to flee because one was married to a Haitian: “How long has your journey been?” the older sister asked in Spanish. The two sisters didn’t seem to speak any Kreyòl” (176). Despite the direct discourse inserted into the narrative, this translingual event occurs where the narrative perspective and narrative voice overlap. Certainly, the intersection of two languages in this particular passage is signaled linguistically by the Creole spelling (*Kreyòl*), but the function of the linguistic tension

reaches beyond languages alone. The interaction between Amabelle and the people who cross her path as she flees the Dominican Republic envisions a moment of enhanced attention on the part of the homodiegetic narrator. Languages cross at an intense moment of encounter, of *seeing* the other. The linguistic comment becomes a perspectival marker, signaling that the narrator sees the character who is speaking, at the same time as it makes the speaker's address visible to the reader.

Pushing the complex production of translingual events even further, the novel also explores the operations of language *beyond* the question of address and more importantly, beyond the question of meaning or representation. It is near the end of the novel, after the characters have crossed the Massacre River (dead or alive) that the full range of translingual events produced in the novel comes together in one word: "parsley," the shibboleth, written and spoken in English, in Kreyòl, in Spanish. What mostly challenges the possibility of letting language mean just one thing is precisely this word that appears in many languages, cuts through the narrative, and condenses the translingual condition. At the end of the novel, when Amabelle and two other migrants, Yves and Odette, have finally made it across the Massacre River which divides the countries, the fluid process of translingualism is suddenly arrested as the referential function of language is suspended. Odette, more dead than alive, is reduced to being only the word *parsley/pési/perejil*, and this is when it transforms:

With her parting breath, she mouthed in Kreyòl "pési," not calmly and slowly as if she were asking for it at a roadside garden or open market, not questioning as if demanding of the face of Heaven the greater meaning of senseless acts, no effort to say "perejil" as if pleading for her life. [...] The Generalissimo's mind was surely as dark as death, but if he had heard Odette's "pési," it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare. To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more.

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The word leaves Odette's lips and is stripped of its anterior connotations to become pure intensity, as it ceases to represent or refer to the plant *per se*, or even to belong to one language. It is not communication or even address, since the word glides from one speaker to another. As the word comes out of Odette's mouth, Amabelle takes it over as if it required no particular speaking subject, but could be picked up by anyone in a moment of sheer translingualism. In this passage, the word no longer belongs to any language and certainly not to *one*

language, as it multiplies and changes. Put together in an assemblage, “pési,” “perejil,” “parsley” are *more* than the word itself—more than the plant, more than language. No language alone can harbor or express it, not even the native tongue. While *The Farming of Bones* indisputably is a translingual novel on several levels (with a bilingual author, the presence of several other languages than English, etc.), the full potential of translingualism actually occurs when the languages implied are no longer bounded.

Conclusion

The translingual events discussed above do not invite any neat and singular conclusion: that would be to traduce the complexity of the issue at hand. However, they do point us to some possibilities of a translingual mode of world literary reading. If Emily Apter’s well-known argument against world literature concerns the risks of effacing the linguistic specificity of the “untranslatable,” our discussion points towards a wider repertoire of linguistic relations in which the following are factored into the analysis: 1) the decoding of linguistic identities, literary meaning, and hence also the valence of untranslatability which varies with the linguistic competence and habitus of the reader, and 2) the institutional conditions of publishing, which heavily determine the range and acceptability of linguistic diversity. *A Book of Homage* projects, through its privileging of English and expensive design, an elite, imperial English-speaker as its ideal reader. However, because of its cosmopolitan ambitions, it does not and cannot sustain only this monolingual address. Instead, its multilingualism opens space for a wide array of potential readers. The case of Plaatje’s composite Setswana-English contribution is a particularly poignant example of a split address operating translingually, directed both at a (cosmopolitan) British and a (vernacular) Tswana readership. In the former instance, it serves to defend the human and civilizational dignity of Africans. In the second, it encourages the Tswana to appropriate the symbolic and literary value of Shakespeare for their own cultural purposes. The untranslatable is inevitably at work here and elsewhere in *A Book of Homage*, but it is Plaatje’s precarious faith in the constructive possibilities of translation that is all the more striking.

With Danticat, we enter a significantly different historical moment in which the institution of world literature has become a market-driven, English-dominated phenomenon (Helgesson and Vermeulen). Yet here too, the translingual events enabled by her novel are not reducible to a single function only (such as “authenticity,” “resistance,” or “identity”). Rather, the signification of the languages involved in the novel is mutable and changes as the plot unfolds. This is

precisely what our study shows: the different languages at play in politically charged colonial and postcolonial translingual contexts are certainly identifiable, but their meaning will vary depending on perspective, voice, mode, medium, and address. Considered as an assemblage of translingual relations, the language of literature means more than its conventional, standardized coding seems to allow, making other visions present, yet without disingenuously ignoring the monolingual effects of the powers that be. Such an approach to linguistic dynamism reinforces our initial observation about the symbiotic relation between language and literature. In this qualified sense, literature does in fact intervene in the shaping of language, if only by sharpening our awareness of what is at stake in the making, unmaking, and folding of borders in the dialect continuum.

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