Translingual Practices and Alternatives: Literary Studies in the Age of Global Mobility

Arianna Dagnino
University of British Columbia

The anthology *Comparative Literature for the New Century*, edited by Joseph Pivato and Giulia De Gasperi, takes the baton where the three previous reports of the American Comparative Literature Association (Bernheimer; Heise; Saussy) left it. The volume is a critical response to these American reports and also acts as a "self-interrogation" of the discipline in light of the radical changes that have deeply affected academic departments in North America (Hutcheon vii). The last two decades have been characterized by a dramatic increase in the global mobility of material and immaterial goods and resources, and of humans, with their related dialects, languages, and highly localized cultures (see Simon). The growing number of people experiencing the effects of migration, dislocation, transnational practices, neonomadic impulses, and processes of transculturation has led to the emergence of individuals who are culturally versatile and highly proficient in different languages, and whose identities, ethnic loyalties, and senses of national belonging have become more complex and less definable (see Ong; Zembylas et al.). These individuals tend to produce literary and artistic texts that reflect the kaleidoscopic nature of their transcultural makeup (see Ascari; Dagnino, *Transcultural Writers*; Walkowitz). Such circumstances call for new vocabularies, theories, and ways of interpreting our multilayered "global modernity" in its various social, anthropological, political, and cultural aspects. As Arif Dirlik maintains, "Modernity may no longer be approached as a dialogue internal to Europe or EuroAmerica, but is a global discourse in which many participate, producing different formulations of the modern as lived and envisaged within their local social environments" ("Modernity as History" 17; see also Dirlik, *Global Modernity*). In this context, Pivato argues for the use of different languages in Comparative Literature, rather than English translations in English programs (41-63).

Within a more specific literary context, this contemporary scenario has spawned a

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renewed interest in translation studies and comparative methodologies in the way we approach texts (see Bassnett; Ingram and Sywenky). Most importantly, the growing relevance of "questions of agency" (Bassnett 239) in the wider field of "world literatures" (see Dagnino, "Transcultural Literature"; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee) has led to the rediscovery, or the resurrection, of the author (the artist, the creator at large) with her peculiar sensibility and life experience. Despite Barthes's postulations on the "death of the author," writers are alive and kicking and, as Pivato contends, inalienable from their writings. More or less subconsciously, they inscribe themselves, as they have always done, in their fictions, like characters inside and outside their work, in that Bakhtinian dialogic perspective that postulates a fusion between author and character, real life and imagined life. For this very reason, authors are, and should be studied as, living knots, dynamic hotspots in the ever-growing web of cultural, cross-cultural, and intertextual references.

Caught at the crossroads of my personal experiences as an academic researcher, published author of fiction, and self-translator, in Italy, South Africa, and Australia, I almost perforce vouch for the reinstatement of the author and her life experience in the literary discourse. Obviously, I am not advocating for the trend toward *author as celebrity*, nor supporting the author's narcissism and her apotheosis. Rather, I challenge the disposal of the author's subjectivity and situatedness invoked by an early Barthes and so often enthusiastically accepted in scholarly quarters ready to overlook the ironic subtleties and "clever word-play" (Pivato 48) inherent in Barthes's original French text. In their contributions to the anthology, both Pivato and E.D. Blodgett call for a reinterpretation and reassessment of Barthes's work in the light of changed cultural landscapes and, most importantly, through a more nuanced understanding of his writing that takes stock of the unreliability of translation and its subsequent proposed interpretations (Pivato 48).

Barthes's equivocal stance on the "removal" of the author from the text (255) becomes apparent in his later work—in particular, *Le Plaisir du texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975) and *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (*A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 1977). In those instances, Barthes himself seems to recant the alluring idea of handling literature as if it were an exact and impersonal science. "Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity. Better the Imaginary of the Subject than its censorship," Barthes combatively states in the collection of Lecture Courses and Seminars suggestively titled *In Preparation of the Novel* (3). The novel in question is the one that Barthes himself had been willfully preparing to write, although he never succeeded in doing so. Most ironically, he was among the first in reclaiming "the intimate which seeks utterance in me," eventually recognizing the presence of the author and "fragments" of (auto-)biography in the literary work.[1] In this regard, Sylvère Lotringer's recapitulation of Barthes's attempts and failure at fiction writing is most enlightening: "What he [Barthes] wanted was to locate himself at the point where biography [or "fragments of life"] and writing met." So much for the death of the author.

As a matter of fact, authors do not live in a vacuum, nor in some sort of postmodern afterlife: they are men and women situated in this world of ours as much as their texts. As Edward Said reminds us, "the true intellectual [whether he/she is an author or a literary critic] is a secular being" (120), and as such is situated in society, in which his/her "morality" is influenced by "where it takes place, whose interests it serves, how it jibes with a consistent and universalist ethic, how it discriminates between power and justice, what it reveals of one's choices and priorities" (120). Needless to say, in this globalized context of pre- and postcolonial reframings, multicultural encounters, transnational experiences, and neonomadic impulses, authors are as much psychologically, socially, linguistically, and culturally fragmented and dislocated—but also as much resituated and relocalized—as their characters. More importantly, whether they have relocated themselves (or have been forced to do so) or not, they carry within themselves the cultural traits of their communities of reference and/or origin. As Pivato argues:

> The markers of ethnic identity are the author's name, family ties, links to a different history, culture, and language. He or she gives voice to a whole community. The removal of the author diminishes this ethnic identity and history. The removal of the author silences a whole community. Far beyond appropriation of voice, theory can obliterate a whole human existence. This approach is not compatible with comparative studies designed to consider all the elements dismissed by Barthes. (55)

Already in 1977, Raymond Williams highlighted the fact that "in denying the active relationship and interrelationship between literature and other social experiences and practices, we are cut off from considering what in fact are real relations, the primary relations, between literary practice and other kinds of individual and social experiences and practices" ("Literature" 25). This suggests that, while aspects such as sensitivities, imaginaries, or outlooks are impossible to measure and thus quantify, they can nevertheless be made manifest, and thus detectable, in a literary work. Indeed, it is also through the selection of specific themes, characters, voices, language(s), settings, and/or narrative devices that authors express and perform their subjectivity. Thus, by analyzing stylistic, linguistic, or content choices we can try to detect the underlying *Leitmotiv*—the totemic essence—of an author's life and body of work and then spin it into a web of correspondences, significant connections, and symbolic meanings. In this form of reading, the work, and a person's life, reveals the significance of a spiritual, ethical, and/or aesthetic quest into our unknown where nothing is set in stone and where everything is allowed to grow organically. No longer omniscient, even the narrator, like the reader or the literary scholar, does not know where this will lead, since, as David Attwell notes in his discussion of the notion of "narrative authority" in J.M. Coetzee's writing, "the endless story of the self will be brought to finality only at the point where it is most unaware" (11). Indeed, the multifarious complexity of the human condition makes any attempt at capturing and conveying any absolute truth of another person—or even of ourselves, for that matter—ultimately futile. As Milan Kundera points out, "What do we know of

one another? […] All anyone can do is give a report on oneself […] Anything else is a lie" (*Book of Laughter* 124). Nonetheless, we can at least infer and discuss the psychological and imaginary processes in which we all indulge when we are caught in the process of creating and interpreting our or other people's lives/identities/works.

Approaching the anthology from a transcultural perspective (see Epstein; Ortiz; Pratt; Welsch), two chapters in particular have drawn my attention. The first, by Deborah Saidero, deals with the importance of language use beyond English as a means to "bring […] to the fore individuals and groups that would otherwise be left voiceless" (De Gasperi 10-11). The second, by Sneja Gunew, discusses the need for "a different vision of what English Studies/literatures in English might mean today" (37).

The reflections I offer on these texts are meant to feed into the thought-provoking debate initiated by Pivato, De Gasperi, and the other contributors to the anthology. When my comments take the form of a critique, their aim is to widen the conceptual territory within which such a debate can unfold and develop for the benefit of the stakeholders in the discipline of Comparative Literature and beyond. I also see the arguments in this volume as part of an ongoing discourse that includes my own book *Transcultural Writers and Novels in the Age of Global Mobility* (2015).

In her chapter "A Many-Tongued Babel: Translingualism in Canadian Multicultural Writing," Saidero first explores, through a postcolonial lens, the possibility of using heritage languages, creole, or regional dialects to "destabilize" the centrality of a dominant colonial language (207). For this purpose, she provides examples of code-mixing and code-switching in the novels of the African-Asian-Canadian writer Moyez Vassanji and the Trinidadian writer Dionne Brand. No matter how interesting it might prove in terms of experimentation, the act of introducing words and expressions from minority idioms in texts still written in a dominant (post)colonial language such as English fails to deliver a radical critique of linguistic primacy or take a confrontational stance against linguistic subjugation, or even annihilation, by a (neo)colonial power. In fact, while certainly welcome, these translingual practices (see Kellmann, *Switching Languages*; *Translingual Imagination*) hardly manage to go beyond the stage of what many consider a colourful addition, a touch of exoticism, a linguistic invention, or an effort to provide a richer account of complex sociocultural contexts; at best, they express the authors' more or less subconscious attempts at reclaiming their primal language and ethnic identity or at "relocating their ethnicity outside the motherland's borders" (Saidero 208).

Ngũgi wa Thiong'o proposes and enacts an alternative, more plausible pathway toward linguistic *rebellion*, a term retaining a symbolic power in contrast to the hackneyed and highly academicized *resistance*, and still firmly rooted in a postcolonial framing. After writing several successful novels in English, Ngũgi decided to return to his native Gikuyu (see Baker). He self-translates his works into English, with the publication note "Translated from Gikuyu by the Author." In this act of creative and translational defiance, Ngũgi not only honours and ennobles the linguistic tradition

in which he is active but also tries to reduce the power differential between Gikuyu and English.[2]

Indeed, trying to destabilize, decentralize, or "minorize," a majority language working within its same language system may prove unrealistic. This realization has led Emily Apter to call for comparative approaches to the study of World Literature(s) that acknowledge the asymmetrical power relations at work across the "World Republic of Letters" (Casanova) and the "global galaxy" of languages (see Calvet; De Swaan, *Words of the World*). In particular, Apter is keen to "recognize […] the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability" (347). However, it is worth considering that in an increasingly pluricentric linguistic world, even the prestige, qualitative prominence, and weight of national languages tend to vary dramatically depending on the context and literary stature of writers and (self-)translators. As Eva Hoffman remarks: "there is no one geographic center pulling the world together and glowing with the allure of the real thing […] in a decentered world we are always simultaneously in the center and on the periphery […] every competing center makes us marginal" (274-75).[3] Thus, more pragmatically, translingual writers may instead attempt to "majorize" a minority language by using their bilingualism and self-translational practices to expose the power dynamics at work within specific national contexts and linguistic communities. In this regard, Saidero brings forward the case of Quebecois writers Antonio d'Alfonso and Filippo Salvatore who, by self-translating some of their works from French into English, lay bare "structures of inequality" between anglophone and francophone Canada (207). Moreover, as Saidero contends, by doing so d'Alfonso and Salvatore "draw […] the reader into an encounter with the other, which obliges them to become aware of a different reality" (208).

We are well aware that the global power dynamics and inequalities at work in the sociopolitical and economic dimensions also affect the linguistic and literary arena (De Swaan, "The Evolving European Language System", *Words of the World*; Calvet, *Pour une écologie*, *Towards an Ecology*; Casanova). In addition to this, however, the author's situatedness plays a significant role in determining which language has a dominant or subaltern role in her creative process. Italian, for example, can be experienced as a dominant language by the new waves of migrants to Italy as much as by regional writers who grew up with a rural mother tongue. Saidero demonstrates this in her discussion of the lives and works of Dôre Michelut and Marisa De Franceschi, two Italian-Canadian migrant writers from the Friuli region in Italy. Conversely, that same language—Italian—might find itself downgraded to a minority language in a country such as Canada, in which English and French are the dominant and official languages. Building upon these observations, I have been arguing for a more contextualized definition of minority language applied to the realm of literary writing and (self-)translation: "A minority language is any language which a bi/plurilingual writer perceives as not being the dominant one in the socio-cultural and linguistic context in which he/she is creatively active (either by choice, life's circumstances or

outer forces) as an author and/or as a (self-)translator" (Dagnino, "Breaking").

Performing in a global dominant language via translingualism or self-translation can thus be interpreted in two different and contrasting ways, depending on whether we adopt a postcolonial or transcultural lens. In other words, this phenomenon can be understood as an act of subjugation towards a dominant (often globalized) culture, or as an effort towards, and a means of, transnational communication, "literary transaction" (Bassnett 239), "identity re-envisioning" (Saidero 210), and intercultural mediation.

Indeed, bilingual writers who practice translingualism and (self-)translation often see these practices as ways to acknowledge and honour the complexity of their cultural makeup, with both the dominant and the minor languages playing their roles in the identity building process. While exploring the translingual work of the Italian-Canadian poet Gianna Patriarca, Saidero notes that this experience allows her "to accept both her cultures and languages as part of a transcultural identity that is necessarily mercurial, an ongoing invention and reinvention of past and present selves" (207). I interpret this position as that of the outlier: an individual who is simultaneously an insider and an outsider with regard to the languages and cultures in and with which that individual works. While not being, or willing to be, out of the group but having nonetheless transcended various cultural, ethnic, religious, or territorial lines of demarcation, outliers end up feeling a sense of "unbelonging" or of "belonging among the unbelonging," wherever they happen to be.[4]

The other contribution I wish to discuss here is Sneja Gunew's "Anonymous: Animating Ecologies of Belonging." Gunew inscribes her discussion on the study of Comparative Literature within "the framework of a cosmopolitanism that sets itself against globalization," a statement consistent with her longstanding view of the literary scholar as an activist within a postcolonial paradigm. We are here at the antipodes of the approach to literary criticism espoused by scholars and writers who are cautious about evaluating literary aesthetic efforts from the perspective of political activism, and worried, among other things, by the essentializing and/or moralistic stances that such a viewpoint might entail. Indeed, one does not need to fully agree with Kundera's assertive position on this issue to be cognizant of the dangers behind the practice of interpreting a text from an inevitably restrictive political, ideological, or moral standpoint.[5]

We are all well aware that each artistic product, each act of literary writing, each aesthetic effort is also a political act situated in a political dimension. F. Elizabeth Dahab's close reading of Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* in the anthology demonstrates this. Thus, it may be worth keeping in mind, as Maurizio Ascari invites us to do, that "it is thanks to their ability to trigger the imagination, opening us to alternative worldviews, that narratives exert an action on reality and translate into political acts" (13). Preemptively imposing a specific political viewpoint ineluctably shuts down all those "alternative worldviews" and related political acts.

Consistently with her introductory statements, Gunew's chapter does not skimp

on references to concepts of subalternity, abjection, servitude, master tongue(s), inferiority, hegemony, subversion, and deconstruction. The subtle implication inherent in this theoretical/ideological framework is that writers categorized as belonging to a conveniently identified minority (tribal, Aboriginal, First Nation, ethnic, diasporic, colonized, postcolonized, multicultural, bilingual, religious) or social status (exile, refugee, economic migrant, underprivileged) cannot be studied and comparatively analyzed with the usual toolbox (critical reasoning, aesthetic sensibility, interdisciplinarity) of the literary critic as with any writer belonging to the mainstream or majority culture. By virtue of their subjugation and minority status, these writers need to be sheltered from such practices and handled instead with supporting care by the paladins of literary activism. However, notwithstanding the good intentions of the operation, sooner or later a doubt is bound to emerge: what if these minority writers did not want to be corralled and protected? What if they did not want to be inscribed in the category of the "abjected" (Gunew 29-30)? "I am not an ethnic writer. I am a cosmopolitan writer," Rawi Hage has defiantly declared in a CBC interview with Jian Ghomeshi.[6] Like other minor or minority writers considered "non-canonical" (Gunew 25), Hage openly returns the minority label to the sender. In fact, this kind of ghettoization tends to hamper these writers' understandable wish to become part of the mainstream literary world, the world of hegemonic majorities, major canons, and "normatively situated narrator[s]" (Gunew 30) to which, it is subtly implied, they do not belong and should not belong, unless they were ready to let themselves be caught up within the "hyper-individualism of the first world" (Gunew 21).

The point of my argument is that, if we look past the debate about the legitimacy of a more or less political approach to literary criticism, the real issue is summarized by rather simple questions: Who decides to what and which group or category a writer belongs: the writer or the academic who studies her? Why should an author be preemptively inscribed into a category, even one of which she might even agree to be part? Why can a writer not be allowed to be perceived in a wider, less segregating way? Unfortunately, few have the grit and status of Salman Rushdie, the historical initiator of a rebellion from below against the shackles of overly restrictive labels —and, incidentally, the most celebrated and studied among the postcolonial writers; the star, together with Amitav Ghosh, in the postcolonial firmament. In 1991 Rushdie had already refused to be categorized under the postimperial umbrella of "Commonwealth literature," a term that in his view "is not used simply to describe […] but also to divide": at best, he wrote, "what is called 'Commonwealth literature' is positioned below English literature 'proper' […] it places Engl. Lit. at the center and the rest of the world at the periphery" (66). In the same tone, Pascale Casanova deplores those British critics who, ignoring the ambiguity implicit in the notion of Commonwealth literature—or, for that matter, postcolonial literature—do not take into consideration, or merely overlook, Rushdie's refusal "to be treated as a postimperial product" (120) and are instead ready to annex him under the British aegis in an act of literary misappropriation driven by the new postcolonial "vogue for exoti-

cism" (121). Commenting on the literary success of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) to illustrate this phenomenon, Casanova reminds us that critics were ready to describe the book as "the 'revenge' of the old colonies against the British Empire'" (121).

Thus, to answer the requests of those "abjected" writers who reject the narrowness of postcolonial forms of identitarian labeling, we are now being offered the category of the "neo-cosmopolitan" and its related terminology. Instead of *cultural difference*, we now have "ecologies of belonging"; instead of *postcolonialism*, we now have "armoured cosmopolitanism" (Gunew 21). Yet, behind the muscular prose and appealing turns of the phrase, nothing has really changed under the sun. Postcoloniality, with its *us vs. them* mantra in contrast to concepts of critical interdependence and relationality, as Dominique Hétu discusses in the anthology, is being camouflaged under a whole set of new catchwords, while the literary activist-cum-academic is being morphed into a "radical cosmopolitan." The new abjected to be rescued are no longer the colonized but those "left out of triumphalist globalization" (Gunew 21).

And yet, bearing in mind Gunew's ambitious goal of identifying "a different vision of what English Studies/literatures in English might mean today" (37), a major question arises: could an "armoured" form of "neo-cosmopolitanism" conveniently cloaked in a "post-humanist conception" (Gunew 23) actually lead us towards new paths and alternative literary perspectives for world literatures? Or are we being offered instead, once again, conventional (post-)patterns of thought under a slick veneer of academic parlance uttered within the neoliberal walls of North American universities? In other words, are we being asked to return to the future anterior of a minorizing postmodern narrative of *petits récits* and *pétites différences*? Should we still revere theoretical paradigms that oppose everything indiscriminately—globalization *tout court*, the State, the nation, the nation-state, Europe (including the Enlightenment and the historical birth of human rights for minorities), the West, English (unless it is a "rotten," post-English),[7] English literature and its canon, the local (with its local affiliations and allegiances), the male element (unless it is judged in stark contrast against its female counterpart), the human (unless it is a migrant being or a sentient machine), the humanist (unless we are dealing with an intelligent colony of bees), the body (unless it is a posthuman entity), and the subject/self (unless it is a fractured, abjected, and diasporic one)—in its maddening race into the abyss of post- and neo-de-con-struction? Or are we ready for something truly different, radically creative, and powerfully generative, something that still has/asks to be invented by a new breed of liberated writers and freethinkers, inside and outside of the ivory towers of unquestioned and unquestionable knowledge?

On a lighter note, I was interested in reading the final chapter by Mark McCutcheon as a crypto-Festchrift or anti-Festchrift of this old academic tradition.

Notes

1. Incidentally, is there anything more narcissistic than Barthes's wish for academic fame and recognition through a piece of literary creation? Let us not forget that Barthes had planned to title his 1977 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France "*Proust et moi*" ("Proust and I"), although in the end he opted for a more sober "*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure*," which is the incipit of the first tome of Proust's 1913 masterwork *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*).

2. See also Ndeye Fatou Ba's essay in the anthology.

3. Casanova similarly acknowledges that in recent times, literary production and marketplaces are increasingly becoming pluricentral, thus overcoming the traditional dichotomies between centre and periphery and between developed and underdeveloped literary systems.

4. The term "unbelonging" can take various nuances. Dubravka Ugresic uses it in her book *Europe in Sepia* to refer to "the intoxication of belonging (to a home, a homeland, a country, a faith) and the trauma of unbelonging" (204). In a personal email exchange, Inez Baranay uses this word-concept within a transcultural framework better aligned with my way of understanding it: "the transcultural is a theoretical arena, in which the company is fine with a sense of belonging among the unbelonging" (Dagnino and Baranay). This framing of the concept of unbelonging also resonates with Robert Bromley's "post-national model of belonging" (Saidero 210).

5. In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera states, "I have always, deeply, violently detested those who look for a position (political, philosophical, religious, whatever) in a work of art rather than searching it for an effort to know, to understand, to grasp this or that aspect of reality" (91).

6. In this regard, see F. Elizabeth Dahab's chapter in the anthology.

7. For the purposes of this project, these terms circle around the qualifier "English," but in order to extend the potential contained in the terms *English studies* or *English literature*, it is important to subtend it with literatures in English, including weird English and rotten English, so that global legibility includes a robust understanding of literatures of the world (Gunew 35).

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