

SPECIAL ISSUE

POLYGLOT ART PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Doris Hambuch

United Arab Emirates University

The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translingualism (2022), edited by Steven G. Kellman and Natasha Lvovich, is the latest among many recent testimonies to the fact that the study of creative multilingualism has been expanding rapidly in the new millennium.¹ Much of the resulting research, in particular in English, challenges language hierarchies and the concept of a national language. As Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz emphasize in their introduction to *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation and Culture* (2018), “monolingual paradigms are inadequate in a world dominated by globalization and migration” (1). Jane Hiddleston and Wen-Chin Ouyang, likewise, state that their *Multilingual Literature as World Literature* (2021) “argues not only, with Spivak and Mufti, against the dominance of English, but also against a dominant concept of monolingualism² that has further served to limit and skew the scope of world literature” (3). This special issue on polyglot art practices positions itself within the same movement as it investigates the use of plurilingual creative expression across different genres and media in order to contest the status of a global language and its implications for authors, audiences, publishers, and editors. Despite several genuine efforts, it was not possible to divert the issue’s focus on European languages, although the discourse in most of the contributions is not limited to them. A distinct Canadian perspective is offered throughout the majority of included articles.

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Plusieurs des personnes ayant contribué à ce numéro ont participé au groupe de recherche sur l’art multi/trans/plurilingue et s’inspirent du manifeste « Pour des savoirs en commun ». Basé sur une table ronde ayant eu lieu au colloque annuel de l’Association canadienne de littérature comparée en 2019, ce manifeste vit dans plusieurs espaces. La table ronde était bilingue, et réunissait des membres de la communauté comparatiste et de la communauté des humanités numériques (Monjour

et Mathieu-Lessard 601-602). « Orienté autour de trois thématiques principales : celles des *temporalités*, des *espaces*, et des *formats* de publication, » (603) le manifeste souligne le pouvoir des langues, notamment dans les propositions « pour un multilinguisme actif and fluid » (607) et « Let's think beyond words » (608). Notre groupe a rassemblé des versions différentes de ces propositions à travers diverses traductions, par exemple « For en aktiv flersproglighed med flydende grænser! », « Ας σκεφτούμε χωρίς λόγια! », « 活発で円滑な多言語を目指して », « نحو تعدد لغوي نشط وسهل », ou « He mana tō te kupu » (complit.ca/i-research-group-multi-trans-lingual-art-groupe-de-recherche-sur-lart-multi-trans-plurilingue/). Un grand merci aux membres du groupe et à leurs ami·e·s pour avoir maintenu le projet vivant.

240 A key study in the field of creative translanguaging is Yasemin Yildiz's *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2013). With a focus on authors whose common language is German, Yildiz traces the development of a monolingual paradigm back to the late eighteenth century and encourages continuous resistance against this paradigm's proliferation. "The postmonolingual condition [...]," Yildiz warns, as quoted in the opening essay of this issue, "is not resolved by a one-time move beyond the mother tongue, but requires constant reinvention and questioning of the underlying concepts of language and identity. It requires constant exit strategies" (142). Much of the discussion throughout *Polyglot Art Practices* points towards respective exit strategies, and in the process, a number of examples move beyond the obvious components of language, letters and words, to focus on sound (Roussel; Morris), performance (Ingram; Innes), music (Ingram), and image (Siemens). The issue thus takes its cue from Hiddleston and Ouyang's instruction, "to explore the phonetic sign in [this] context and its combination with other nonverbal forms of language" (7). Some genres are more conducive to this kind of exploration than others. Two of the seven contributions revolve around lyric poetry, while a third reserves it for a large part of its interdisciplinary inquiry, and the opening essay is itself an experimental prose poem. Other genres addressed include film, theatre, and photography, besides prose.

In *Translingual Poetics: Writing Personhood Under Settler Colonialism* (2018), Sarah Dowling reminds us that poetry has a "very long history of being written across and between languages" (5). Kellman and Lvovich, in their preface to the *Routledge Handbook*, look as far back as Mesopotamia where "the first poet history knows by name, Enheduanna [...] composed her poetry in Sumerian, though her first language was probably Akkadian" (20). The inclusion of "Shakespearean Polyglot Performance" in this issue serves as a reminder of the field's long legacy, even if the content of the remaining contributions testifies to its recent growth due to accelerated mobility combined with the push for a global language on the one hand, and the contesting thereof on the other. Alice Loda and Antonio Viselli identify various motivations for translanguaging in poetry in their contribution to Kellman and Lvovich's *Handbook*, "from ludic, humorous, and witty objectives, to more socio-politically complex deviations from tradition, to the desire to open novel hybrid

creative spaces” (62). Contributions to this issue show that these driving forces also apply to prose, and that they may even apply to criticism, as seen in the first essay, itself poetic and polyglot.

Flora Rousset’s “Comparative Literature: Comparative Language? Vocalisations poétique” displays commendable courage in its disregard for the distinction between academic and creative writing. It employs the conceit of vowel shapes and sounds to reflect on the discipline of comparative literature and its dealings with language, and does so in a daring polyglot fashion. Inspired by translingual writers such as Yoko Tawada and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Rousset interrogates theories of world literature, translation studies, and translingualism to remind comparatists that their practice needs to remain open in the broadest sense. As the essay is crafted in a dialogue between the two official languages of Canada, it highlights the polyphonic nature of thought in general.

The two Canadian founding languages are also at the centre of Paul Morris’s “Poetic Solicitude: Two Languages and the Lyric Voice of *Ex Nihilo*.” Morris considers *Ex Nihilo* as a testimony to the mutual attentiveness between E.D. Blodgett and J.R. Léveillé, and argues that it “transcends the language-based sectarianism latent in bilingualism” due to the use of a modified *renga* structure, the complimentary poetics of the two writers, and their willingness to subordinate their individual poetics in favor of the collaboration. Intended as a game in the Japanese tradition, the *renga* allowed the two poets to create meaning beyond the addition of their two different tongues. Morris scrutinizes the result alongside philosophies of language and creative inspiration of each of the two poets and outlines crucial parallels between their poetics. The most striking parallels relate to the common focus on “unique and provisional” forms of expression, to the fondness of visual imagery, and to the highlighting of language’s plasticity. The two collaborators further share an extraordinary involvement with intertextual references, which gives their endeavour a cosmic character with enigmatic effects. Morris concludes by envisioning the combined creative efforts as an equation in which the sum is greater than the individual added elements.

Unlike the two authors of *Ex Nihilo*, the two poets studied by Doris Hambuch, Dominican-American Julia Alvarez and Lebanese Zeina Hashem Beck, are not in dialogue with each other, though some of the analyzed texts would suggest that different selves of a single person can create in a similar way. In particular, Beck’s “Duet” form of poetry resembles a *renga* involving two personalities of a single poet. A more compelling connection between the analysis of *Ex Nihilo* and the comparative study of Alvarez’s and Beck’s poetry, however, lies in the poets’ views on creative expression and its relation to language choices. The views expressed by Alvarez and Beck are more explicit in their concern with sociopolitical aspects than those of Blodgett and Léveillé. Hambuch invokes the concept of comfort to tackle the ways in which Alvarez relies on Spanish and Beck on Arabic in their respective anglophone texts. If this discourse revolves slightly more around public politics than the analysis of *Ex Nihilo*, it builds up, in this regard, to the following essay, the contribution that

reminds us, if ever so subtly, of the Indigenous languages of Canada.

In “Listening for Reconciliation: Gendered Truths about Death and *Mädchen* from Dorfman and Polanski to Kathia Rock,” Susan Ingram departs from a gendered representation of death in European art history to demand a coming to terms with trauma that originates in “violence towards those identifying as female.” Examinations of Ariel Dorfman’s play *La muerte y la doncella* (1990) and Roman Polanski’s film adaptation *Death and the Maiden* (1994) against a close analysis of “Terre de nos aieux,” a 2022 music video by Innu singer Kathia Rock, lead Ingram to identify a substantive shift in creative representations of death. Via the study of translingual artists across different media, this essay further suggests that reconciliation depends on a post-monolingual paradigm.

Like Canada, Switzerland has more than a single official language, though Jerry White reminds us that “policy and practice regarding language in Switzerland differs significantly from models in bi- and multilingual countries such as Canada.”

242 Organized in a decentralized confederation, only one of the twenty-six Swiss cantons is officially trilingual. Fleur Jaeggy grew up in the officially monolingual-German canton of Zürich, but she nevertheless grew up trilingual, speaking Swiss-German, Italian, and French. Her publications are in Italian, the language of her mother and her late husband, but White argues that the Italian of Jaeggy’s novels carries nuances of the childhood German, partly due to the fictional settings. In a “translation-inflected comparison,” he therefore likens Jaeggy to Nancy Huston and Milan Kundera, two other writers who elected a new language, incidentally French in both cases, for their novels set in places of the writers’ respective origin, where French is not common. Citing Joe Pivato’s discussion of Italian-Canadian authors, White concludes that Jaeggy, like Huston and Kundera, is “always translating.”

In “Shakespearean Polyglot Performance,” Paul Innes links the process of staging to translation. As mentioned in the context of the long history of translingual literature, this contribution is the only one in the present issue whose object of study is older than a century and a half. It takes us back to a time when English was far from a global language, to a time when Latin possessed a similar hegemonic status, although only in Western Europe. Innes opens his essay with a reference to Ben Jonson’s disregard for Shakespeare’s command of classical languages. With a focus on the Roman plays, he argues, however, that Shakespeare’s “play texts may have incorporated his old Latin lessons and ongoing engagement with the classics for the purposes of staged performance.” Following the work of Robert Weimann, Innes foregrounds the significance of audiences in the context of a “theatrical transaction.” With a case study of the Tribunes in selected plays, he ends up revealing a “polyglot web of associations” ingrained in the practice of Renaissance drama.

The last contribution to this special issue teleports readers from the context of Renaissance drama several centuries forward into current times of accelerated travel. In an Eisenstein-style collision montage, Elena Siemens scrutinizes creative expressions of mobility. With an emphasis on fast pace, “Ole Nopea,” she comments on

polyglot characteristics of impulse-driven urban explorations through visual impressions from a visit to *The Polaroid Project* (2019) exhibition in Montréal. Technological innovations such as Polaroid photography and electronic translation are highlighted as facilitators of rushed, immediate creativity, which invites community participation. Visual reflections on travel alternate with studies of poetry by Joseph Brodsky, Vera Polozkova, and Ayumu Takahashi. Shortcuts prompted by a need for speed, Siemens concludes, may lead to rewarding revelations, though it requires more than a single language to appreciate them.

Polyglot art practices are as old as storytelling. In the words of Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman, “every century and every genre has seen its share of language-related experiments” (11). The essay by Innes in the present issue reminds us not only of this long history of translingual creative expression, but also of the fact that a co-existence of the different languages inherent in a given text is not always easy to detect. White, likewise, investigates authors who conceive of their writing in one language while another is hidden in the process and, by implication, in the result. Both these essays, in comparison with those that discuss more obvious degrees of interacting languages, indeed point towards the argument made by Till Dembeck, that the concept of multilingualism should not presuppose a concept of monolingualism (24).³ In contrast to Jaeggy, the poets studied by Hambuch make their reliance on different paroles, and in one case different scripts, explicit in their poetry. Morris analyzes a collaboration between two poets whose translingual adoption of the Japanese *renga* style depends on their proficiency in both languages given room in *Ex Nihilo*, English and French, the two official languages of Canada. A distinctly Canadian perspective on polyglot art practices looms large over this issue, be it in the form of references to critics such as Catherine Leclerc or Joe Pivato, or in the form of analyzed primary texts by E.D. Blodgett, J.R. Léveillé, Kathia Rock, and Nancy Huston.

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Mein ganz herzlicher Dank für die Fertigstellung dieser Auswahl gebührt, allen voran, sowohl unserer Herausgeberin, Irene Sywenky, als auch der Redakteurin Cindy Chopoidaló und dem Redakteur Chris Reyns-Chikuma. Ihrer Souveränität ist das Gesamtbild der Ausgabe zuzuschreiben. Desweiteren möchte ich den beitragenden Autor*innen danken für die Kreativität, das zugrunde liegende Sachverständnis und die unendliche Geduld, die meine Arbeit außerordentlich erleichterten. Auch möchte ich jene nicht vergessen, deren Namen unerwähnt bleiben müssen. Es ist zu hoffen, dass die Sammlung ein symbolischer Dank ist an die sehr geschätzten anonymen Kommentator*innen. Auch hoffe ich dass weitere Ausgaben über polyglotte Kunst hier folgen werden, in denen fehlende Kontexte, wie zum Beispiel ein afrikanischer oder ein südpazifischer, zur Sprache kommen, oder ihnen gar gewidmet sind.

NOTES

1. See also the *Journal of Literary Multilingualism*, at brill.com/view/journals/jlm/jlm-overview.xml?contents=editorialcontent-57548.
2. For careful examinations of the concepts of *monolingualism* as well as *multilingualism*, see David Gramling's *The Invention of Monolingualism* (2016) and *The Invention of Multilingualism* (2021).
3. Die eigentliche Herausforderung für eine Philologie der Mehrsprachigkeit besteht daher darin, Differenzen im Sprachgebrauch zu beschreiben, ohne davon auszugehen, dass diese Differenzen auf unterschiedliche, je in sich systemisch abgeschlossene Spracheinheiten zurückzuführen sind.

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