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Literary Translingualism and Fiction

Abstract

This chapter treats literary translingualism in relation to its shaping presence in fiction. While acknowledging the longevity and ubiquity of translingualism in literature, the chapter concentrates on translingual writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, given the intensification of translingualism as a phenomenon in this period. It focusses on some of the stylistic traits and prevalent thematic concerns articulated in novels and short fiction by a sample of translingual writers from different parts of the globe. As well as taking account of translingual writing practices as they are realized in literature, it also considers what engagement with translingual fiction means for reading practices.

Introduction

This chapter considers literary translingualism in relation to the genre of fiction, addressing some of the distinctive stylistic and thematic features of translingual texts with a primary focus on the novel and short fiction. While translingualism in literature is an age-old phenomenon, with a long history and ancient pedigree (Kellman and Lvovich 403), it is one that has multiplied and intensified in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as a consequence of patterns of migration, changing demographics and, to an extent, the rise of English as a global language. Developments in fiction, in terms of form and substance, cannot be attributed solely to the effects of literary translingualism; however, it is certainly the case that translingual writers have shaped and continue to shape developments in fiction in significant ways, as discussed below. Given the varying contexts for, and motivations of, translingual writers and the specifics of their trajectories, generalizations must inevitably be made with a degree of caution. Nevertheless, there do appear to be some characteristics shared by translingual writers such as greater tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, and awareness of relativity (see Beaujour 1989). In addition, certain overarching features, both

stylistic and thematic, typical of the work of translingual writers, include but are not limited to, a focus on language and issues of translation (see Doloughan 2016), representation and/or enactment of linguistic, cultural, and often generic border-crossing, ludic and/or (self-)reflexive and critical commentary (see Sommer 2004). Indeed, we might even go so far as to suggest that “the impact of cultures in motion” (Wilson 218) is a determinant of or resource for translingual creativity and this is certainly reflected in much contemporary translingual fiction.

As a process of moving from one language to another, or working across languages (from the Latin prefix ‘trans’), using different tongues, literary translingualism refers to “the phenomenon of writers who create texts in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one” (Kellman 337). As Rita Wilson points out, literary translingualism can be seen today as “an overarching cultural phenomenon” (Wilson 217) which has arisen as a result of “the increased border-crossings occurring in contemporary superdiverse societies” (Wilson 215). Wilson is using the term ‘border-crossing’ in both a literal and a metaphoric sense to refer to those who move from one place to another, whether of necessity or by choice, as well as to other kinds of movement, across linguistic, cultural and technological borders, for example. In other words, she points to the prevalence of particular societal conditions that underpin contemporary translingual production. Of course, not all those who cross borders, literal and/or metaphoric, go on to become producers of translingual literature but it seems that mobility and/or cultural and linguistic exchange or interchange underwrite the kinds of literary creativity demonstrated by many translingual writers today.

We might think here by way of example of writers as diverse as Elif Shafak (primarily Turkish and English with some French), Xialou Guo (Mandarin, Zhejiang dialect, and English) and Jhumpa Lahiri (primarily English and Italian with some Bengali) to name but three, all from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as from different parts

of the world. Shafak, Guo, and Lahiri all produce work, including fiction, that treats cultural encounters in a broad sense, and demonstrates the power of narrative to transform ways of thinking and being by bringing into contact different linguistic and cultural traditions.

Shafak's 2019 novel, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, for example, produces a rich and layered account of the life of a sex worker in Istanbul, drawing on the memories that flit through her mind in the time it takes for consciousness to ebb. Guo's *A Lover's Discourse*, a work in dialogue with Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, relays in short, meditative chapters the struggles of a Chinese-born woman living in post-Brexit England, to communicate with her Australian-German lover. And Lahiri's work to date as a writer of short stories and novels in English as well as of a memoir in Italian, reflects an engagement with protagonists who must navigate cultural and linguistic difference. Lahiri is a writer who, having enjoyed early success as an English language writer of fiction, including short story collections (*Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* and novels, (*The Namesake* and *The Lowland*) chose to 'begin again' in a third language, Italian, to which she had no 'natural' or inherited connection other than a love of the language. In addition to a language memoir, *In Altre Parole* (2015), which contains her first short story, 'Lo scambio' ('The Exchange') in Italian, Lahiri's first novel, *Dove mi trovo*, written in her newly acquired language, was published in 2018. The novel, translated by Lahiri herself under the title *Wherabouts*, will appear in English translation in May 2021. Lahiri sees herself as "a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language" (Lahiri 21). Opting to write in Italian was, she claims, "a sort of literary act of survival" (57), an expression that requires some unpacking in relation to its possible meanings. To voluntarily set aside early literary success in one language (English) so as to begin the process of text creation in another, chosen language (Italian), might seem counter-intuitive in terms of literary survival. Yet, the process of moving across languages, while extremely painful for some (cf. Guo) can be not only

productive but also liberating for others, allowing them to realize different aspects or versions of self, as well as offering the possibility of ‘translating’ the lives of others into fictional form.

Translingualism and Genre/s

Writers who have not only switched languages but also worked in different genres are numerous but we might consider by way of example Vladimir Nabokov (Russian, English, and French), Samuel Beckett (English and French), and Kamala Das (Malayalam and English). Both Nabokov and Beckett published works in an array of genres – poetry, drama, short stories, novels and essays, and in Nabokov’s case, an autobiography – and for both writers, though to differing extents, translation, including self-translation, was an important part of their creative and revisional process. Kamala Das preferred to separate her languages according to genre, writing prose fiction in her native Malayalam and poetry in English (*The Translingual Imagination* 13). Her poetry is described as “pioneering” and is characterized as having “contributed immensely to the growth and development of modern Indian English poetry” (Patel 3). *The Looking Glass* is said to be a “revolutionary text, where the poet leads a crusade against all the ideological and cultural determinants of expression in which a male-dominated society believes” (Singha and Ghosh 193). This suggests that use of a particular language in relation to genre can be deployed strategically to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions as well as contributing to the development of a literary tradition.

A more recent example of a writer using language and genre/s both to unsettle, and to extend the possibilities of genre/s, is that of Ocean Vuong. Winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize 2017 for *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, Vuong is a Vietnamese-American translingual poet whose first novel, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), has also been received to critical acclaim. Vuong’s poetry, written in American English with some phrases and a proverb in Vietnamese, confronts and articulates his ‘difference’ in terms of his dual heritage (born in Saigon, brought up in the U.S. from the age of two) and his sexuality (as a queer writer) in a

language that mixes American vernacular and the musicality of oral Vietnamese in a collection that speaks to the writer's experience, while writing back to and remaking narratives of the past. For Vuong, language is like a person's DNA, unique, and idiosyncratic insofar as everyone has their own idiolect. His novel, ostensibly a letter in English to a mother who can barely speak the language, about the narrator's life, is underpinned by the influence of Vietnamese, both language and oral storytelling traditions. The Vietnamese language which he spoke at home has, he maintains, impacted on and improved his English; he has learned how to listen to the breath between syllables. In short, even as one language (English) is predominantly, but not exclusively, employed in Vuong's work, both poetry and prose, it is an English attentive to the sounds, rhythms and accents of other linguistic, cultural and storytelling traditions. While a focus on language, if not culture, and storytelling might be considered the prerogative of all writers, and not appear to be specific to translingual writers, it is nonetheless true that access to more than one language informs writing in sometimes materially significant ways. As a poet who also writes fiction, Vuong's attentiveness to language might be attributed not to his translingualism but to his initial choice of genre, and it is certainly true that his fiction is "poetic in the deepest sense" (Kirkus Review). Yet, as will be discussed in a later section, hybridity of form and border-crossing, including the creation of a hybrid voice through linguistic experiment (Guo 2020), is a characteristic of much contemporary translingual writing.

Language/s and Style

For translingual writers, who, by definition, have access to more than one language, there is likely to be evidence in their work, including fiction, of a high degree of linguistic and metalinguistic awareness. This is the case whether they be isolingual translinguals, who construct their literary work in an acquired language, such as English in Joseph Conrad's case, rather than his native Polish or his acquired French, of which he had a high degree of mastery,

or ambilingual translinguals, who like Samuel Beckett (French and English) or Vladimir Nabokov (primarily Russian, American English, French) create a highly valued body of work in more than one language (Kellman 338). Language can be said to be a resource for meaning-making with access to additional languages, whether actively employed or drawn on in less visible ways, impacting upon the construction, in both senses of the word, as process and as product, of their translingual writing. Conrad's famous novella, *Heart of Darkness*, for example, while clearly a text written in English, is also one that is permeated by a concern with meaning-making and with language, and the cultures to which they pertain. There is in *Heart of Darkness* representation of other (mostly European) languages (e.g. Latin and French) and mention of other systems of writing such as Cyrillic, originally thought by narrator Marlow to be cipher (Conrad 38; 54), while indigenous voices are often presented in relation to noise and babble (see, for example, Conrad 19; 35; 65), or "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language" (66). In addition, the looming presence at the heart of the novel, Kurtz, portrayed as a man of great eloquence, has a name which can be said to trigger a palimpsest of linguistic meanings, given the fact that 'kurz' is a German word meaning 'short' and Kurtz is described as a kind of linguistic and cultural amalgam: "His mother was half-English, his father was half French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (49).

So even as Conrad is an example of a writer whose literary reputation depends on his *oeuvre* in the English language – he is after all considered to be one of the U.K.'s most important literary modernists – he is at the same time a writer whose translingualism has had an important impact on his use of language. This goes beyond representation of other languages and what might be termed implicit translation in his work to recognition of the specificities and singularities of his style. Conrad was often seen by his contemporaries as producing a prose style in English, deemed at the time to be 'exotic' and seen to be

influenced in its syntax and rhythms by his knowledge of both Polish and French (Bär). For Conrad specialist Robert Hampson, “Conrad was accustomed to finding his identity in and between a range of languages” (Hampson 204-5). In relation to literary deployment of his linguistic competence in more than one language, Hampson sees evidence in Conrad’s work of the skilled representation of a plurilingual experience. However, he distinguishes Conrad’s early work, such as *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, from his later prose fiction such as *Heart of Darkness* or *Lord Jim*, where Marlow is introduced as narrator, arguing that Conrad uses his “awareness of others’ linguistic competencies” (205) in a reflexive way, allowing him to make clear the difference between his own and Marlow’s linguistic competencies, where Marlow’s apparent knowledge of English, French and school-boy Latin “have an impact on his narration” (205). In other words, representations of other languages in his fiction, and the ability of language to include or exclude, as illustrated above in relation to *Heart of Darkness*, become “a vital component of his self-conscious, modernist fiction” (205).

Another writer whose style is the product of literary translingualism is Milan Kundera, who moved to France in 1975 from his native Czechoslovakia. While he continued at first to write in Czech, he was aware that his books, many of which were banned in Czechoslovakia, would largely be available to his readership in translation and he eventually began writing in French. His last novel written in Czech was *Immortality* in 1988. For some critics, the move from Czech to French resulted in slimmer, novella-like works of economy and precision, though with a degree of simplification, from the Czech writings of his middle period; for others a stylistic unity could be traced between them, given Kundera’s long-lasting interest in classic French literature, which underpinned his writing in Czech and remained a feature of his later prose.

For critic and translation studies specialist Michelle Woods, Kundera's writing in French bears the stylistic and thematic hallmarks of his own personal style, but this is a Kundera whose material base is now French, rather than Czech, and who understands, like most other translinguals, that language is above all a tool employed to create stylistic and other effects. "Translingual writers", Woods indicates, "are particularly self-aware of how language works, what it *does* in their writing" (428; italics in original). She shows how Kundera's use of French serves to reflect aspects of his characters, undercutting their pretensions and ignorance. In relation to a scene in *La Lenteur/Slowness*, she speaks of a "Kunderization of language" (441), whereby Kundera takes "pleasure in playfulness" (440). In short, for Woods, Kundera becomes aware of the transgressive qualities of his writing and continues them in his writing in French. What may appear reductive or a simplification is, in fact, a way of focussing on the effects produced by language, through "repetition, unusual syntax, and euphony" (Woods 428). The fact that Kundera's work in both Czech and French has received literary acknowledgement at the highest levels, in France through publication of a two-volume *Pléiade* edition of his works (2017), and as a recipient in September 2020 of the Franz Kafka Prize for his extraordinary contribution to Czech culture, is evidence of his contribution to two linguistic and literary cultures.

The Role of Translation and the Figure of the Translator in Translingual Fiction

As with writing, so too with translation: it can relate to an aspect of process as well as the resultant text; translation in both its literal and metaphoric dimensions is a feature of the work of many translingual writers. This is true of ambilingual translingual writers such as Samuel Beckett who famously self-translated his works, often using the translational process as a vehicle for stimulating as well as revising his writing in one language or the other (French and English). As a writer who chose to spend most of his adult life in France, Beckett famously turned his back on English in favour of writing primarily in French; in truth,

however, his linguistic trajectory was more complicated, and is perhaps more accurately described as a “[s]huttling between and translating across languages” (Slote 116). In her article on Beckett’s bilingual writings, Maria Kager draws attention to the ways in which there was not only a constant back and forth but also a struggle for dominance between French and English on Beckett’s part. In looking at his work through a neurolinguistic lens, she concludes that the “tensions, interactions and cross-fertilizations between Beckett’s English and his French govern the very substance of his writing” (Kager 82).

In much contemporary translingual fiction, translation and the figure of the translator is integral to the thematic structure and fabric of the work, in addition to its methodological and/or stylistic employment. Discussion of the fiction of Xiaolu Guo – see below – is emblematic of this tendency but it is also reflected in neighbouring or attendant concerns in translingual fiction with cultural translation more generally in terms of the representation of linguistic and cultural others and with border-crossing. Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Lo scambio’ (‘The Exchange’), referred to above, penned in Italian and reproduced in her language memoir preceded by a brief authorial commentary in terms of its apparent meaning, illustrates this tendency in relation to the short story.

The story is narrated in the third person by a female translator who has moved to a different country in search of another version of herself. “Voleva generare un’alta versione di se stessa, nello stesso modo in cui poteva trasformare un testo da una lingua a un’altra”/”She wanted to produce another version of herself, in the same way that she could transform a text from one language into another” (*In Other Words* 66-67). Wandering through the city streets, she follows some “illegible signs” (71) into a building where a group of women are trying on clothes inside an apartment. Welcomed by the owner who speaks the language perfectly “but with a slight accent” (73), the translator tries on a range of black, well-designed clothes. It is only when she is ready to leave that she realizes that she has lost a black sweater. While a

black sweater is eventually found, the translator does not recognise it as her own but wears it nevertheless. Next day back in her room, she spies it sitting on the chair and “knew that it had always been hers”. “And yet”, she continues, “this sweater was no longer the same [...]. Now when she put it on, she, too, was another” (81). The comment from Lahiri introducing the story, which she wrote without realizing at first what it meant, indicates that she understands the sweater to be language: “il golfino è la lingua” (64). As Rita Wilson puts it:

“Transformation of the self, that shifting of identity, is of course what all this is about. Languages, as well as being tools, are the vehicle into a new culture: experiencing oneself in a language that is not native means (ideally) to know others and one’s self in a new way, conveyed here metaphorically by changing clothes” (Wilson 219).

Lahiri is conscious of having had to pare back her language in Italian but she finds this liberating, rather than restrictive, since she is free to experiment, having no hereditary or culturally accumulated ties to the language. Lahiri’s own biography would suggest that the woman translator who has left her previous life and connections behind to move to another city with few possessions and a foreign language is, in fact, a version of herself. It is at the level of language and the metaphors used that the ‘meaning’ of the story ‘translates itself’ and is conveyed. As Urmila Seshagiri (2016) puts it: “Metaphor, Lahiri’s signature literary device, has always connected the several narrative threads of her fiction”.

A very different writer in terms of cultural provenance and linguistic inheritance who nevertheless shares with Lahiri a focus on translation is Chinese-born writer, Xiaolu Guo, referred to in the Introduction. Without exception, her work treats translation in multiple senses, sometimes simultaneously. From her breakthrough 2007 novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers*, which mimics the language-learning process, and employs a dictionary form to ‘translate’ Chinese linguistic and cultural concepts for her mainly Anglophone audience, to her recently published *A Lover’s Discourse* (2020) via her 2014

novel, *I Am China*, Guo has incorporated translation into her fiction at the level of style, theme, and narrative strategy. *I Am China* is a story that literally, as well as metaphorically, unfolds through translation, as Scottish translator Iona Kirkpatrick, works on the translation of a disordered bundle of diary entries and correspondence between two young Chinese people, one a musician in exile, following the distribution of a political manifesto, the other a performance poet, who eventually makes it to London.

Just as Lahiri's short story in Italian operates at the level of linguistic, symbolic and metaphorical connections, with unnamed characters indexed by profession and status, Guo is a writer well aware of the resonances of language and culture, including naming practices. Her choice of names in *I Am China* was motivated by such linguistic and cultural choices and resonances (e.g. a translator named after a Scottish island), while her general preference for unnamed or minimally named characters (e.g. the unnamed male lover and the female protagonist mainly referred to as 'Z' in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*; no names in *A Lover's Discourse*) is something that she sees as having the potential to frustrate an easy adequation of character and culture or character and place. This is with a view to focussing on the dialogic interaction between characters whose positions are representative, rather than unique, and may reflect more generalizable philosophical and existential concerns. In other words, for Guo, the stripping out of culturally imbued naming practices that would locate characters in specific places can permit a more focussed enquiry on questions of more general import and relevance in her work, such as the architecture of memory, culture as a discursive practice, and literary style as a function of translation. Guo sees her literary style as a kind of translational composite, the outcome of reading and writing practices intersecting at different stages of her life. As a student in China she read French and American literature in translation, literature whose impact on her thinking she continues to acknowledge (e.g. the fiction of Marguerite Duras, the poetry of Allen Ginsberg); and as a young, somewhat

rootless but ambitious writer switching to English for a complex mix of reasons connected with mobility and residency/citizenship requirements, censorship issues and freedom from constraint, she found herself in a new environment with an expanding Anglophone audience interested in the migrant experience and translation of self across borders. Such issues were discussed online by Guo on January 12, 2021 in the context of “Exhibition (de)Tour: The Life of Memory: Xiaolu Guo on her writing and filmmaking” with curator, Ute Meta Bauer, of the Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore.

This interest in translation in multiple senses can also be seen in the work of translingual Lebanese-American writer Rabih Alameddine whose 2013 novel, *An Unnecessary Woman*, treats the solitary existence of a female translator into Arabic. Indeed, to apply a description of the protagonist of Lahiri’s *Whereabouts* to Alameddine’s novel, it might be said that *An Unnecessary Woman*, is “the story of a woman who turns her solitude into a profession” (*Teheran Times*), given the focus of protagonist Aaliya Saleh’s life, set against the backdrop of civil war in Lebanon, on the problematics of moving across languages and cultures. Holed up in her apartment in Beirut, Aaliya has spent her time over the years engaging in “a translation of a translation” (Alameddine 284), completing thirty-seven works from a range of source texts via their French and English translations. This double act of translation is her chosen system until the end of the novel when she reviews her “somewhat arbitrary decision” (62) to create an Arabic version of a non-French, non-English source text via their French and English translations, and decides to allow herself the luxury of choice, a choice that will finally depend not on a system but on chance (291). Alameddine is a writer whose work is considered to actively draw on multiple linguistic and cultural frames in his work, engaging with intertexts and allusions from Western literature and representing them in an Arabic context for his English-language audience. As Yousef Awad (Awad 88) puts it: “As an Arab author in diaspora, Alameddine draws on both canonical

Western texts and Arab cultural heritage to depict the experiences of his characters, who usually live between cultures.”

Migration, Exile, Return, Concepts of Home

In flagging up a cluster of themes in relation to translingual fiction, I do not wish to suggest that such themes cannot be found in other genres by translingual writers nor that other writers never engage with such themes. What I do wish to indicate is that particular thematic tendencies characterise translingual fiction and that their treatment in novel form clusters around issues of migration, whether voluntary or involuntary, exile, return, and concepts of home. Milan Kundera’s 2000 novel *Ignorance*, written in French, rather than Czech, and translated into English in 2002 by Linda Asher, treats the myth of the great return via the story of Irena and Josef, who knew each other in Prague, and who meet at the airport in Paris on their way to the city after twenty years living abroad in Paris (Irena) and Denmark (Josef). Their experience of return forces them to confront the incongruity between memories of the past and present realities, including disparities between the actual geography of the city and their memory of it. In addition, no one seems to be particularly interested in the lives they have lived in the interim; and Josef finds the sound of spoken Czech “flat and unpleasantly blasé” (Kundera 195), even though lovemaking with Irena was spurred by her use of obscenities—“dirty Czech words” (178)—which aroused him.

As a philosophical meditation on what it means to leave one’s homeland and live in exile, adopting a new language and ways of being in the world, *Ignorance* raises questions about identity in relation to both memory and experience, and interrogates the links between language, place and concepts of home. Interpolation of references to Odysseus and Penelope, and linguistic and essayistic digressions on language, home and exile, form a kind of interrogative counterpoint to the main narrative thread: section 2, for example, looks at the etymology and cross-linguistic resonances of words connected to nostalgia, both return after

absence and longing, bringing into historical and associative dialogue the roots of these terms and their semantic nuances in different languages (Kundera 5-7). It poses the question of whether it might not have been better for Odysseus to have remained with Calypso rather than return to Penelope and ends with the image of Josef returning to Denmark to the house he had shared with his wife, thereby providing a somewhat ambiguous answer to the question of departure, exile, and return. Ana Maria Alves (2017) reads the evocation of Odysseus in *Ignorance* as a means of asking whether it is time to rewrite the Homeric myth and replace it with the modern myth of the twenty-first century émigré: “En évoquant Ulysse, Kundera se demande si nous ne devrions pas réécrire le mythe homérique et le substituer par le mythe moderne de l’émigré européen du XXIe siècle” (Alves 6). (By referring to Odysseus, Kundera is asking whether the Homeric myth shouldn’t be rewritten and replaced by the modern myth of the 21st century European migrant).

While reflections on home and evocation of a place a given character has left behind is not the sole prerogative of migrant writers or translingual writers of fiction, it is certainly the case that constructions and memories of ‘home’ from the perspective of a character who has had to leave their homeland and journey elsewhere is typical of the thematic concerns of many translingual writers. A comparative perspective is necessarily embedded in their fiction, sometimes, as seen in the case of *Ignorance* above, because the characters effect a return, if only temporarily, to their homeland and comment on the differences, but this perspective may also be realized through acts of memory and comparisons between the place left behind and the place of arrival or where a new home has had to be established. For example, the title story, “In Cuba I Was A German Shepherd” (Menéndez 2001) from a volume of the same title, evokes memories of Cuba from the perspective of main protagonist Máximo, as he meets to play dominoes with fellow Cuban Raúl, and Antonio and Carlos from the Dominican Republic. Ana Menéndez, herself the daughter of Cuban exiles, who grew up in

Miami, creates a sense of ‘here’ (Domino Park, Little Havana, Miami) and ‘there’ (pre-revolutionary Cuba; and the early years of Cuba under Fidel Castro) through the dialogue and banter of the four domino players and via Máximo’s backstory and memories.

The English text is threaded through with words and expressions in Cuban Spanish, including slang, and references to Cuban literature and culture (e.g. writer and national hero José Martí; the Cuban *danzón*, a musical genre and dance; *guayabera*, a kind of loose-fitting shirt with pleats and large pockets worn untucked, and popular in Latin America; *el manicero*, the peanut vendor). There is, in equal measure, nostalgia and pain in the memories of Máximo. The joke he recounts to the other three players about the Cuban mutt and the American poodle, the punchline of which provides the story’s (and indeed the volume’s) title, is indicative of his own feelings of abandonment and displacement, as he navigates old age and a life of increasing isolation following his wife’s death. His connections to his roots, to Cuba, are bitter-sweet from the standpoint of a man who has had to start again in the U.S. where his “Spanish and his University of Havana credentials meant nothing” (Menéndez 6). The inclusion of a broken English ‘translation’ of part of the dialogue recounted between the two dogs, “You are one hot doggie, yes?” for “O Madre de Dios, si cocinas como caminas ...” (Menéndez 28) is indicative of what is lost in translation, as well as indexing the plight of newly arrived migrants.

Another example of the ways in which links are created in fiction by translingual writers between ‘here’ and ‘there’, comes from Sandra Cisneros’s now classic coming-of-age tale, *The House on Mango Street*, in which young protagonist, Esperanza, whose family has come to the U.S. from Mexico, refers to the Mexican records that her father listens to on a Sunday morning while shaving, as “songs like sobbing” (Cisneros 10), an indication of his continued investment in, and nostalgia for, the culture he has left behind. This is in the context of a section in which Esperanza reflects on the sound and signification of her name,

which includes both hope and waiting. From her child's perspective, there is already consciousness of the differences between its English and Spanish meanings and resonances. "In English, my name means hope. In Spanish, it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 10). Named after her great-grandmother, Esperanza hopes not to "inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Rather than being on the inside looking out, she wants to exercise some agency and make her own way in the world. In considering the kind of house she would like to have when she grows up, Esperanza makes clear that her idea of a house is different to the ones in which she has been living with her family to date: rented accommodation where space has been at a premium in sometimes noisy neighbourhoods. She wants a house of her own, "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros 108). The concept of home for Esperanza, then, is built not on differences between 'here' and 'there' in terms of a country and a culture left behind but rather on the need for self-determination and the literal and metaphoric space—"a space for myself to go"—in which to realize her future as a writer.

Border-crossing

While attention/attentiveness to language has already been flagged up as a characteristic of many translingual writers, there is another feature of translingual texts that depends on awareness of the affordances of more than one language. We can speak of linguistic and stylistic border-crossing in respect of the work of translingual writers who 'surface' in their fictional texts evidence of such border-crossing by drawing attention to linguistic difference and/or by combining the resources of more than one language to create something new. The previous examples from Ana Menéndez's short story have already highlighted how inclusion of both languages, sometimes with 'translation', sometimes without, where meaning is expected to be derived from context, can create, at different times in the story, a sense of parallel universes, yet also offer critique of exclusionary linguistic

practices, where there is an assumption of English only, rather than English plus. In the story it is the tourists who see the domino players as men from another culture and a bygone age, their ritual practice framed by a guide who positions them as “keeping alive the tradition of their homeland” (Menéndez 26), as if they were pieces in an open-air museum. Use of a sprinkling of Spanish cannot simply be considered a textual marker of authenticity but shows how the lived realities of the players are bound up with their linguistic and cultural origins. At the same time, non-Spanish speakers will need to work harder to understand or capture all the resonances that a bilingual reader will grasp more readily.

Another meaning of border-crossing relates to thematic and generic concerns whereby translingual writers of fiction draw on the embeddedness of language in culture to present characters who work across cultures and/or cross borders both literal and metaphoric. Many writers of Hispanic heritage bring to their use of American English consciousness of different linguistic and cultural systems. For example, Junot Díaz, winner of the Pulitzer prize in 2008 for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, inscribes in his work references to the troubled history of the Dominican Republic, from the perspective of those who have moved to the U.S.; Julia Alvarez is another example of a Dominican-American writer who, while writing in American English, seeds her texts with stories of cross-cultural interactions. In novels such as *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* Alvarez creates a sense of the complexities of moving between cultures and seeks to embed in the rhythms of her prose an echo of the oral culture first experienced by her characters.

Reading Translingual Literature

As mentioned above in relation to Menéndez’s short story, reading literature that depends on knowledge of more than one language, can create challenges for the reader who does not have access to all the languages on which the writer draws. Whether the writer includes or excludes the monolingual reader and/or nods to the bilingual or multilingual

reader may depend on what the writer is trying to achieve and on the politics of writing. There is a moment in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, for example, when the character-narrator, frustrated by her attempts to master English and understand British culture, writes in Chinese. For most British readers, this would not be comprehensible without what is presented as being the Editor's Translation on the following page: "I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it. I wish I could just forget about all this vocabulary, these verbs, these tenses, and I wish I could just go back to my own language now (Guo 180)". At one level, then, the text in Chinese is a mimetic device to flag up to the reader what it is like to encounter a different language and script without the benefit of scaffolding, explicit cultural mediation or translation. At the same time, the content and tenor of the supposed Editor's Translation of the narrator's text, which refers to the power of English to subject the narrator to symbolic violence by imposing on her a different language and culture, forcing her to translate herself, is such that it clearly functions as a critique of linguistic and cultural colonization. Moreover, reading this section of text will resonate differently for Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking readers. Inclusion of a source text (in Chinese) and its translation (in English), apparently by different hands, but most likely by the author herself, both enacts a moment of crisis and conflict for the protagonist within the novel's narrative arc, and signals the difference that it makes to read bilingually, rather than monolingually.

There are a number of points at issue here both in relation to the strategic deployment of language/s in text, and more generally to the politics of language. As increasing numbers of writers draw on the resources of more than one language, either in an effort to challenge the dominance of a single language and test the monolingual paradigm and/or to create a bi- or multilingual reading experience, the onus is being placed on readers to engage with text at

different levels according to their own linguistic and cultural histories and to acknowledge “the validity and value of cultural and linguistic exchange, even in the absence of perfect comprehension” (Williams 7). In the example discussed above, Guo was drawing attention to Anglophone linguistic bias, while at the same time foregrounding the advantages of bilingual privilege. Indeed, across the novel as a whole, despite moments of frustration such as that illustrated above, there is recognition of the benefits as well as burdens of bilingualism.

As Ilan Stavans’s work on Spanglish has shown, the dynamics of language acquisition are such that new forms of language can emerge from the interplay of other languages, such as Spanish and American English. Far from being simply intermediate forms on the way to full ‘mastery’ of a language, these new forms take on a life of their own, becoming embedded in culture and are seen to be reflective of new social and political concerns. Giannina Braschi’s novel in Spanglish, *Yo-Yo Boing!* is characterized as a “perfect example of translingual practice” (Moreno-Fernández n.d.) on the reviews page of Braschi’s website and demonstrates the extent to which code-switching as a linguistic and cultural practice has the potential to rewrite the rules of literary engagement. At the same time, however, it can be a demanding read for readers unused to such a linguistic rollercoaster.

Translingual Creativity and Generic Renewal

Clearly creativity, whether understood as process, product, or both, is not the prerogative of writers, let alone, translingual writers. Yet it might be said that translingual writers evidence a particular kind of creativity that derives, at least in part, from their very translingualism. This translingual creativity which stems from knowledge of or expertise in more than one language and/or culture, can result, as has been said, in greater cognitive flexibility, an enhanced sense of the relativity of phenomena, and greater tolerance of ambiguity (cf. Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour and Doris Sommer). Many contemporary translingual writers not only switch languages or employ more than one language in their

work but also cross genre/s. Such genre-crossing is not limited to working in more than one genre, but is, in effect, an unsettling of the assumed affordances and constraints of genre and a mode of generic renewal. Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, referred to above, is not just a reversioning of a poem from his earlier collection in a more elaborated novelistic form. Nor is it simply a reworking of an older form, as his reference in the Waterstone's interview (2019) to the impact of Melville's *Moby Dick* on his work might suggest. Rather, for Vuong, as for Guo, and many other translingual writers, genre is a cross-cultural resource for meaning-making that allows him to take some of the conventions of imagistic poetic modernism in the manner of a William Carlos Williams, and story-telling conventions from Japan, and the U.S. to create generic renewal in the production of a complex, multi-layered text. This "power of storytelling [...] [to] refuse the monolingual paradigm" (Sim 243), is enacted in Vuong's novel. Equally it might be said that it is the power of translingualism that generates new storytelling practices that emerge from translational writing and generic border-crossing to produce transformation and renewal.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has been concerned with the ways in which literary fiction has been impacted by a writer's translingualism and has discussed the stylistic and thematic concerns evidenced in the fiction of a number of translingual writers. While acknowledging that as a phenomenon, whereby writers adopt a language that they acquire rather than inherit, or compose works of literature in more than one language, translingualism has always existed, it has focussed on the period of its intensification in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and has examined the effects of translingualism on the shape and substance of the work of selected writers from different parts of the globe for whom English is an essential, but not exclusive, part of their repertoire. It has also gestured to the fact that literary translingualism necessarily intersects with research on and discussions of other phenomena such as

bilingualism and multilingualism, translation, ‘translational’ writing, and self-translation. It has also pointed to the impact of translingualism on readers of literary fiction, as well as considering the potentially different ways in which monolingual and multilingual readers may engage with translingual prose texts. From a post-monolingual perspective, switching languages, employing them for different purposes, mixing and blending them is at the heart of using language dynamically, flexibly and creatively. Yet, at the same time, “the immense distances between languages” (Lahiri 91) and the very real time it takes to learn a language to the point where one can “penetrate its heart” (Lahiri 91), is a slow and sometimes painful process that it is difficult to short-circuit. In this sense, then, there needs to be a strong connection between writer and the language or languages she employs. Connections are made, rather than given; writers shape whatever language/s they have at their disposal. As Lahiri puts it in interview at Princeton: “It’s only by stepping outside the language you take for granted—the language you can express yourself in without thinking—that you can really learn to work in any language” (Alio 2020).

The body of literature treating translingual writers and examining translingualism as a force in literature has increased rapidly since publication in 2000 of Kellman’s *The Translingual Imagination*. Indeed, the notion of a translingual turn (Dutton 2016) reflects increasing interest in the phenomenon and the fact that translingual writing has the capacity to unlock, if not dismantle, linguistic silos and unsettle binaries, such as ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ languages, by creating a third space (Bhabha) around writing that is more than the sum of its parts. While not all translingual writers consciously activate and display in their work material evidence of the competing influence of other linguistic and cultural systems, their writing is nevertheless the product of a degree of linguistic and/or cultural mediation. As illustrated in the body of this chapter, translingualism in literature affords writers access to a greater range of stylistic and narrative resources enabling them to produce works that

evidence enhanced creativity, and a high degree of self-reflexivity, thereby driving evolution in forms of fiction. It also demands of readers who may be unfamiliar with the differing languages and cultures at the writer's disposal a greater degree of care and attention in engaging with translingual fictional texts.

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