Polyphony: Reader and Explorations for First-Year Writing

POLYPHONY: READER AND EXPLORATIONS FOR FIRST-YEAR WRITING

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ROTEL (Remixing Open Textbooks with an Equity Lens) Project
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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Polyphony gathers texts and activities for the first-year writing classroom to facilitate critical conversations about multilingualism, the politics of language, and linguistic justice. When we began this book project, we knew we wanted to write something that went beyond a traditional textbook; we wanted to write something that reflects the creativity in our classrooms and teaching approaches while also offering concrete ways of putting principles into practice. As polyphony became a keystone to our work together, we decided to create a resource that embodies and enacts this idea. Rather than present a comprehensive reader or full study of these issues, this book is designed to offer different modes of engagement and offer various access points. We make suggestions for connections, combinations, and transitions in a way that retains a sense of multiplicity and variability that will resonate differently across readers, courses, and classroom communities. We envision the resources within can be used in a variety of combinations, read by both teachers and students, and engaged in and beyond the classroom.

The book follows a basic two-part structure, **Reader** and **Explorations**, to address both course content and class practices.

In the **Reader** section, we have gathered texts (written, audio, and video) that reflect diverse perspectives on themes like silencing/voicing, language extinction and reclamation, (in)visibility, translation, agency, and validation, among others. When available, we have included the full text, and in other cases, we have included key excerpts with links to access the full text online outside of the OER. At times, the excerpts stand alone, and for others, the excerpts can be a useful starting point to enter a text since they reveal core topics and themes without giving away the force of the full piece. For instance, Elise has taken to starting a reading together with a class with these excerpts. Having a shared reading experience that gets students thinking about their questions and thoughts has helped increase reading engagement as they go on to explore and annotate the entire reading as homework. Rather than organize by topic or chronology or geography, etc. as they may be in a traditional textbook or anthology, the chapters are simply presented in alphabetical order with a range of suggested connections. In general, the following notations accompany each reader chapter to facilitate your exploration:

Hashtags – At the top of each reader chapter is a list of hashtags that go some distance to describe key topics, themes, frameworks, or approaches that are relevant for reading and discussion. These tags are by no means exhaustive, but we have put together a set that may also help to track clusters of texts (and activities) that one could engage in together. For this function, we recommend using the search box at the top of the Pressbooks page. You can also see the full set of tags under the List of Hashtags page. And of course, as an open resource, suggestions for other hashtags are always welcome!

Introductory Comment – Each reader chapter includes a brief note from the author who was primarily

responsible for the write-up. These comments vary in style and approach but usually provide an overview of the text, a bit of background on our process, and some explanation of how we chose to present it in the book given its unique features, challenges, and affordances.

Wide, Close, and Mid Shots – In the spirit of presenting multiple ways of engaging with a text in ways that are generative, creative, and ideally a bit surprising compared to the usual textbook fare, we developed a way of talking about our discussion questions and extended activities that borrow from film terminology.

- **Wide shots** refer to big-picture questions that are more conceptual or reflective, offering a zoomed-out overview of important ideas. These questions don't require references to the text and may work well before, during, or after reading.
- **Close shots** refer to discussion questions that zoom in on the text, focusing on certain passages, conceptual inflections, or formal features that deepen the meaning of the text. Many times our initial annotations became close shots, and often more involved close shots became mid shots.
- **Mid shots** refer to more extended discussion and writing activities that take more time and encourage different kinds of thinking, sometimes with linked texts or contextual research. As in film, a mid shot includes a lot of details and movement in the same field of vision, sometimes referring back to wide and close shots for information that helps with interpretation.

As much as possible, we collaborated when devising the "shots" for a given text, aiming to suggest different camera angles that might reveal different aspects through a shift in perspective. Early in our ideation process, we noticed that while focal distance offered different views on the same reading, each of us as readers were drawn to different focal points and thus placed our cameras at diverse angles from one another. We also endeavored to present the wide and close shots in a way that was nonlinear and nonhierarchical. The questions might be approached in any number of ways, taken alone or moved through in various combinations before, during, or after reading.

Annotations – A handful of readings also include in-text annotations that express our own reading processes and how we think on the page. Insofar as first-year writing is also about reading skills, we agreed it would be important to show how we tackle complex texts through our own reading processes. In general, we offer comments that react, connect, and question, but they are mostly written in a free form that represents intuitions, inquiries, and first takes. In our conversations, it was extremely illuminating (and enjoyable) to discover how differently we responded to the same text, so we attempted to represent that range by including two commenters with each annotated text.

By contrast, some readings are intentionally free of annotations. Jennie has experimented with "cold readings" in class in which a new text is introduced simply by reading it out loud with the group. These cold readings invite a closer attention to language and detail that initiates a different kind of relationship to the text. (This has worked really well with Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Asters and Goldenrod," perhaps

in part because she identifies as a poet and brings that care to her prose.) Other texts are audio or visual, and the close shots work as annotations insofar as they correspond to pause points in the clip. In a similar way to cold reading, Jennie has also incorporated these texts in group-listening activities in which the questions generate discussion as we listen together for the first time. Often, it is worth listening again on your own and these questions can again serve as annotations to key moments for consideration.

Possible Transitions – Each reader chapter ends with a couple of suggestions from the co-authors about connections with other texts and the themes, topics, or frameworks. These suggestions include direct links to the corresponding pages, encouraging open exploration of the book rather than a linear progression.

The **Explorations** section features at least one activity (sometimes two or three) designed around each text in the Reader. With the first-year writing classroom in mind, these activities foreground reading, writing, and, at times, research. They range from shorter in-class activities for a single period to longer plans that could span a week or two of class meetings, depending on how they are assigned. As with the Reader, we include a few notations with each chapter as a guide:

Hashtags – As with the reader chapters, the hashtags provide an overview of key features and topics of the activity. In this case, the tags also refer to estimated length of time on the activity and core skills that are engaged, which may be helpful for planning. These ideas are elaborated in a brief description below.

Introduction – This section is written with the instructor in mind, providing some background on the design, learning goals, and rationale. Very often, we have shared some of our experiences teaching these activities, connecting to responses from our students and/or our own reflections as teachers.

Guide – This section is written to be used by students and teachers alike. We have written out directions for various activities, including discussion progressions and steps for research and writing assignments. Very often in these mid shots, we have included links to connected texts that provide additional context, extend the conversation, or deepen engagement with the original text. As an OER with a Creative Commons license, we encourage you to use this assignment directly as written, or modify as you like!

An Invitation

As an OER project, we leaned into the possibilities of open pedagogy and collaboration to design something for the first-year writing classroom that is functional, creative, and radical. We move away from conventional textbooks and composition handbooks by actively engaging students (and instructors) in critical conversations about language, education, and the institutionalization of both.

While there are certainly many ways to go about this collaborative thinking around developing chapters, in our own practice, we each nominated potential readings that were open access or available through an external

link. We then read independently and meet to discuss the reading and the kinds of questions we would be interested in exploring with students, loosely drafting wide and close shot questions. We also brainstormed extended activities that provided for good mid-shot questions. At the end of these meetings, we each adopted mid-shots or readers that we took the lead on writing up and then met in a couple weeks to discuss, expand upon, and edit.

That regular rhythm of reading and thinking together throughout the semester fed so much creative thinking and self-reflection on how we teach. Working together with colleagues on shared readings and discussing and then concretizing how we teach and use texts in our own classrooms became opportunities to expand our individual practice as educators and make course prep a socially engaged activity that builds community around teaching.

This is an ongoing project that we will continue to develop, and all readers are invited to contribute to this collection as well. To amplify the polyphony, we are eager to expand the Reader and Explorations sections with new chapters from new contributors and to see what other directions this book may go.

Active feedback is also very much welcome. For example, Diego opens up about some of his experiences teaching Ada Limón's, "The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to Be Bilingual" and asks other instructors to share their successes and failures with teaching this text. In early iterations of the "Parsing Themes" activity for Yiyun Li's "To Speak is to Blunder," Elise explored and then included other thematic observations students had beyond those she opened the class with. We want to keep the spirit of this reader as "live" as possible, and we look forward to hearing about any classroom experiences with these readings.

We hope that both teachers and students will approach this book as open and evolving and in that spirit use this Google Form to share feedback, experiences, and new chapters.

More Context, Further Reading

Below is a reading list we have found helpful in thinking through the politics of language in first-year writing and finding more creative, radical, polyphonic, and justice-oriented approaches to our teaching.

Armen Avanessian, *Overwrite: Ethics of Knowledge – Poetics of Existence*, Sternber Pr, 2017.

April Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, Routledge, 2020.

Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, Routledge, 2013.

Suresh Canagarajah, "Translingual Writing and Teacher Development in Composition," *College English*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2016, pp. 265–273.

Jhonni Carr and Román Luján, "Language Solidarity: How to Create a Force Field with Words," *Let's Talk About Your Wall: Mexican Writers Respond to the Immigration Crisis*, edited by Carmen Boullosa and Alberto Quintero, The New Press, 2020.

Conference on College Composition and Communication, "Statement on Second Language Writing and Multilingual Writers," Revised 2020.

Ruth Crossman, "Problem Posing in the ESL Classroom," *Teaching Resistance: Radicals, Revolutionaries, and Cultural Subversives in the Classroom*, edited by John Mink, PM Press, 2019.

Erin Dyke, Eli Meyerhoff, and Keno Evol, "Radical Imagination as Pedagogy: Cultivating Collective Study from Within, on the Edge, and Beyond Education," *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2018, pp. 160-80.

Bruce Horner, et al., "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach," *College English*, vol. 73, no. 3, 2011, pp. 303–321.

Bruce Horner and Elliot Tetreault, eds., *Crossing Divides : Exploring Translingual Writing Pedagogies and Programs*, Utah State University Press, 2017.

Asao B. Inoue, "How Do We Language So People Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do about White Language Supremacy?," *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2019.

Natasha Lennard, *Being Numerous: Essays on Non-Fascist Life*, Verso, 2021.

Kyna Leski, *The Storm of Creativity*, The MIT Press, 2020.

Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read*, Vintage, 2014.

Urayoán Noel. *Invisible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*, University of Iowa Press, 2014.

Krista Ratcliffe, "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretative Invention and a "Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct," *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1999.

Nora Samaran, *Turn This World Inside Out: The Emergence of Nurturance Culture*, AK Press, 2019.

Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*, The MIT Press, 2017.

Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, Verso, 2020.

POLYPHONY: A MEDITATION

What follows as an introduction to *Polyphony: Reader and Explorations for First-Year Writing* is a series of snapshots or collages by each contributor. We elaborate on our academic convictions, personal backgrounds, teaching experiences, pedagogical approaches, and motivations for participating in this project through the ROTEL initiative in Massachusetts. We each come from very different backgrounds, shaped by different experiences that brought us to think and teach and write and inhabit the world as we do.

Our own crossings to write the book together were occasionally harmonious, sometimes cacophonous, but always polyphonous. We wanted to honor that multivocality here where we each intercut one another to coexist in our individual way.

Elise Takehana: In the Fall of 2021 I taught a section of Writing I that focused on the politics of language. We read about language reclamation, the social role of satire, using metaphor to explain scientific concepts, prescriptive grammar in schools, and the power of naming. In the end, I felt like I failed those students and botched the harder conversations on the stakes of their writing and the meaning and value of intentionality in their language choices because they were largely willing and even motivated to continue venerating standard English and even global English. Writing this book with my colleagues was a way to improve my practice by learning from their expertise and experiences. Maybe they knew better ways to reframe the standardization of language and its discriminatory effects, reframe the tragedy of language death?

Diego Ubiera: I recently taught *The Farming of Bones* (1999), a historical novel about the "Parsley Massacre" of 1937 enacted by the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. In an attempt to deliver Edwige Danticat's work, I shared a personal history with my students. My grandfather lived in the borderlands of Haiti/DR during the massacre and had many stories to tell. I discovered this only recently. There's a tremendous collective amnesia and silence around this massacre both on the island and elsewhere.

I have to admit to myself that my own silence on writing about this is influenced by a typical academic conceit around identity politics. I am often encouraged to focus more on universal topics, that focusing on the Dominican Republic is too specific – implying that I should avoid "navel-gazing" and performativity. I feel this tension in the first-year writing classroom. In my view, students are sometimes incentivized to go universal, assimilate and avoid the specificity of their lived experiences as a legitimate realm of academic reflection.

My grandfather was a schoolteacher for many years in the border village of Dajabon/Ounaminthe. When asked about 1937 – in his 90s and suffering from dementia – he would rise out of his muted, depressive silences, and repeat obsessively, "the kids, the kids, only because of their skin color, color, color. The kids were good students, even though they talked with the 'i'. They would say, '*comei, andai, jugai*' and I would correct them."[1] In some regions of DR/Haiti, all verbs ending in an "r" are replaced with an "i." In his testimony he mentions that he would shield his students in his house from the soldiers.

Much of Danticat's work is about voicing/silencing and communicating *lòt bò dlo*, a complex Haitian Kreyol saying that means life "across the waters" or "beyond death." I was stunned to read that he, perhaps already far gone, or *lòt bò dlo,* would obsessively repeat images and memories of language. Linguistic violence was a key element of the massacre. Between October 2nd and October 8th of 1937, Trujillo armed soldiers with machetes to "secure the border." He ordered the army to ask people to pronounce "parsley" correctly in Spanish to test people's supposed dominicanness (*"perejil"*). If the word was pronounced with a francophone inflection, the soldiers would kill them. Between 17,000 and 35,000 died.

When I was asked to contribute ideas for this reader, my mind always went to these sorts of stories about language, memory, the body and linguistic violence – the relationship between language and power is one of my main concerns, especially in the first-year writing context. Ideally, students feel a sense of openness in my writing courses so that they feel free to experiment and develop their voices. I avoid dictatorial command in order for students to have a sense of agency over the registers and sounds they carry in their lives.

Jennie Snow: While working on this project, I was struck to hear some of my students in an upper level seminar ask if it would be okay to use "I" in their papers. We paused and discussed this notion—my response to them being "of course I want to hear your *I*...in our discussions every day you speak freely and self-reflexively and that kind of analysis is exactly what I am interested in 'on the page.'" They expressed their reservations since they "were always taught not to." I was used to having this conversation in my first-year writing courses as students transition from high school and standardized testing and are eager to relinquish the handcuffs of arbitrary rules that are passed down as "proper usage" or "standard English." But I wasn't expecting to have this conversation with students close to graduation, no doubt my own hopeful shortsightedness (or idealism) about what happens in college: that the emphasis on critical thinking means confronting your "I" and observing the changes over time, that a first-year writing course is an exploratory space for developing a writing voice, that other teachers and mentors encourage experimentation, and that experimental failures aren't punished but understood as process.

As I thought about it more, I recalled how I hid from my *I* for a long time—and still do. I've never known what my writing voice should be, and wasn't sure I wanted one. I do remember in college trying all kinds of passive constructions and neutral structures to sound like I was speaking from an objective position—this was after all how many of my teachers themselves spoke and modeled interpretation. At the same time I was learning that this objective perspective is exactly what I was expected to inhabit as an educated white person, and this training was something I wanted to un-learn. (The high school lesson on Emerson's "transparent eyeball" took on added layers.) Key mentors along the way encouraged me, coaxed me, not to bury my argument, or concede too much space in my analysis—go ahead, try an "I argue" statement. It's only been recently, on the other side of a dissertation, that I am somewhat comfortable reaching for this sentence. I know it takes time, necessarily. But I also think that one of the functions of first-year writing is to create an environment for students to experiment with how they show up in writing and find expression in language (something I think this book encourages). This is more than just the prerogative to "break the rules" once you know them, it's about getting to know, again and again, the *I*.

ET: The last film I made included found footage my mother sent me. One clip included an impromptu interview between my aunt and me when I was six years old in my grandmother's backyard in Kópavogur, Iceland. At one point, I said "Heyrðu, á ég að fara í kastalann minn?" but I didn't understand myself. I needed my mother to translate so I could understand something that once flew out of my mouth without thought or pause.

Jhonni Carr and Román Luján in "Language Solidarity: How to Create a Force Field with Words": "We propose to use Spanish as a force field of words. Whenever we speak a minority language in public to defend others from language discrimination, we engage in linguistic solidarity, or the practice of protecting others by speaking in a given language. We are currently in a moment when English is a hegemonic power attempting to suppress linguistic and cultural diversity under a fictitious guise of assimilation—that in order to become part of a new culture, it is not enough to gain a new language and customs; you must also sever your cultural and linguistic backgrounds...We conceive of language solidarity as a grassroots endeavor that works toward achieving social justice and, in particular, language justice..." (53-54).

ET: I'm starting to learn Spanish because I'll be moving to El Paso shortly. I cannot imagine not learning Spanish when so much of the community around me is Spanish-speaking and so many of my students will be too. But I'm daunted by the thought. I remember naively starting to learn French, of dedicating an hour or two a day to it, thinking in six months or so, I'll speak fairly well and be able to read at a decent level. But a language is so much more than translating one word for another. Language carries so many cultural references and understandings, so many allusions to history and literature and politics, so many idioms that only work in a certain context. In practice, my French is pretty good now, but it took me a couple of years of speaking the language regularly to dream in French and my internal monologue has still always been in English. Then I thought, perhaps if I lived in a French-speaking country I would have taken to thinking in French, but after nearly 50 years in the US, my mother still tells me she thinks mostly in Icelandic and that it was maybe a decade after moving here that she started thinking in English. It feels daunting now to learn Spanish because I know it will be a long time until I feel like I live in that language and words flow like water downstream.

DU: Tradition feels forceful to me in New England academic circles as well as in my perception of the field of Composition Studies. I was tempted to follow this academic culture by centering testing, disciplinary propriety, merit, rigor, and my authority as an expert. Indeed, negotiating my authority and belonging in this space brought about challenges when I transitioned early in my career from a Modern Languages department to an English department. Questions of language and power again resurfaced. I was granted easy authority from both students and faculty as "The Spanish Professor" but as the face of "English," challenges emerged.

The OED says polyphony means (among other things):

> *Music*. Harmony; esp. the simultaneous and harmonious combination of a number of individual melodic lines; the style of composition in which melodic lines are combined in this way; polyphonic composition, counterpoint.
>
> *Literary Criticism*. A multiplicity of independent and often antithetic narrative voices, none of which is given predominance; the use of this narrative technique.

> *Phonetics*. The symbolization of different vocal sounds by the same letter or character; the quality or condition of being polyphonic.

ET: Audre Lorde writes: "we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition." Taking fear out of the classroom feels like the bigger part of the work in building writing agency. It breaks my heart when students ask me "Is this what you want?" or "Do you have a model of a good one?" That is not the kind of impression I want to leave on others. Being a teacher requires one to contend with the shadow of authority that lingers in that role. It's something you have to untangle if you want students to see you as a collaborator, as someone who is open to their thinking. If form follows function, students have to know what they want to say before they can know what shape that thinking should take. If I give them a model of a shape, their first thought should be to interrogate the impact of that form: Why? When no one asks why, I know I still haven't assuaged the fear schooling instills.

A meeting with the professor of my first doctoral seminar course to discuss the B+ on my first paper: "It is just evident in how you write that you went to a state university." While that was certainly true, I didn't know at the time that the way I wrote already marked a deficiency. He had no comments on the substance of my paper, only that it didn't read like an A paper.

JS: In many ways, "polyphony" is another iteration of a pedagogical practice that is inclusive, collaborative, equitable, and open, all approaches that I have layered in my practice over the years. But it's also more than that, invoking both a jazz orientation that resists standardization and a commitment to multilingualism that remains marginalized in first-year writing and composition studies (and U.S. higher education more broadly). I come to this as an over-educated, monolingual, white woman who is keenly aware of how my own presence is over-represented in these classrooms, which often over-determines the dynamics between me and students and between students. I walk into the role of "teacher" remembering that I am embodying a discipline and an institution, and my students are likely seeing echoes of other teachers, other classrooms, other rules and judgments. (As Elise says, there is a "shadow of authority.") In this sense, polyphony, for me, has also meant an active commitment to creating a different kind of space that critically engages with the norms and expectations (from all sides) of what happens with English, writing instruction, and "school" in general. Whether or not they've been asked before, first-year students are shrewd observers of their learning and the ways that "school" facilitates or disappoints; bringing these insights into the classroom is a tremendous foundation for critical thinking. This means inviting students' prior experiences, valuing their linguistic resources as strengths beyond my own, and actively communicating a different model of learning that is invested, first and foremost, in the student, their goals, creativity, and agency. It is an ongoing experiment, with a lot of improvisation, to gradually transform these spaces by inhabiting them differently together. It doesn't always work, and with the *habitus* of our schools so deeply ingrained, I certainly don't always have the trust of my students—but this dissonance within multiplicity is also part of the polyphony, inviting a deeper curiosity, patience, and humility. As a teacher, as a person, it's powerful to experience polyphony not as the realization of harmony across differences (something like multicultural unity), but as the meeting of multiple voices that can create discord and syncopation.

ET: Glenn Gould – So You Want to Write a Fugue but also why not The Fugue

Asao Inoue in "How Do We Language to Stop Killing Each Other, or What Do We Do About White Language Supremacy?": "I'm trying to set up the problem of the conditions of White language supremacy, not just in our society and schools, but in our own minds, in our habits of mind, in our dispositions, our bodies, our habitus, in the discursive, bodily, and performative ways we use and judge language. This means, many of us can acknowledge White language supremacy as the status quo in our classrooms and society, but not see all of it, and so perpetuate it. I'm trying to explain the conditions in our classrooms that cause your judgements to be weaponized as a White teacher, or even a teacher of color who must take on a White racial habitus to have the job you have. It takes conditions of White language supremacy to make our judgements about logic, clarity, organization, and conventions a hand grenade, with the pin pulled. All we have to do is give them to another and let go of the hammer" (357-8).

DU: I was repeatedly asked to define what I meant by being "concrete" in our discussions for this project. I think this means to approach assignments or keep the classroom in general feeling as organic as possible to allow students to explore from within their own material and discursive realities. The most successful semesters I have had have relied on a grounded approach to the local circumstances of any institution or any one class. This means having the ability to intuitively read the affective, intellectual and material dimensions of a classroom and then design lessons from there. Having taught at a large, research institution in Southern California, then at a small liberal arts college in rural Colorado and then finally at a public liberal arts college in New England showed me the importance of always attending to context and place. Each of these spaces carries different ideas around academic legitimacy and value. As an example, teaching in the borderlands of Southern California required much less of the performative/rhetorical move of teacher-as-authority figure compared to a college in north-central Massachusetts. I bring in texts that allow students to think about these kinds of questions to reconsider the complexities of subject and space and how these dynamics might inform their writing.

We underestimate the question of fear in first-year writing. This project was a reminder that I still carry those concerns over fear in learning, voicing and sharing that perhaps was cemented during my formative years of rigid, discipline-focused education in the Dominican Republic as well as those years in the public education system in North Carolina as a new immigrant. Emphasis was placed on the right look, the right sounds, the right calligraphy and flourish and the right mannerisms to properly assimilate. These kinds of questions around language, power, fear, and authenticity came up for me time and again when proposing ideas for this project.[1]

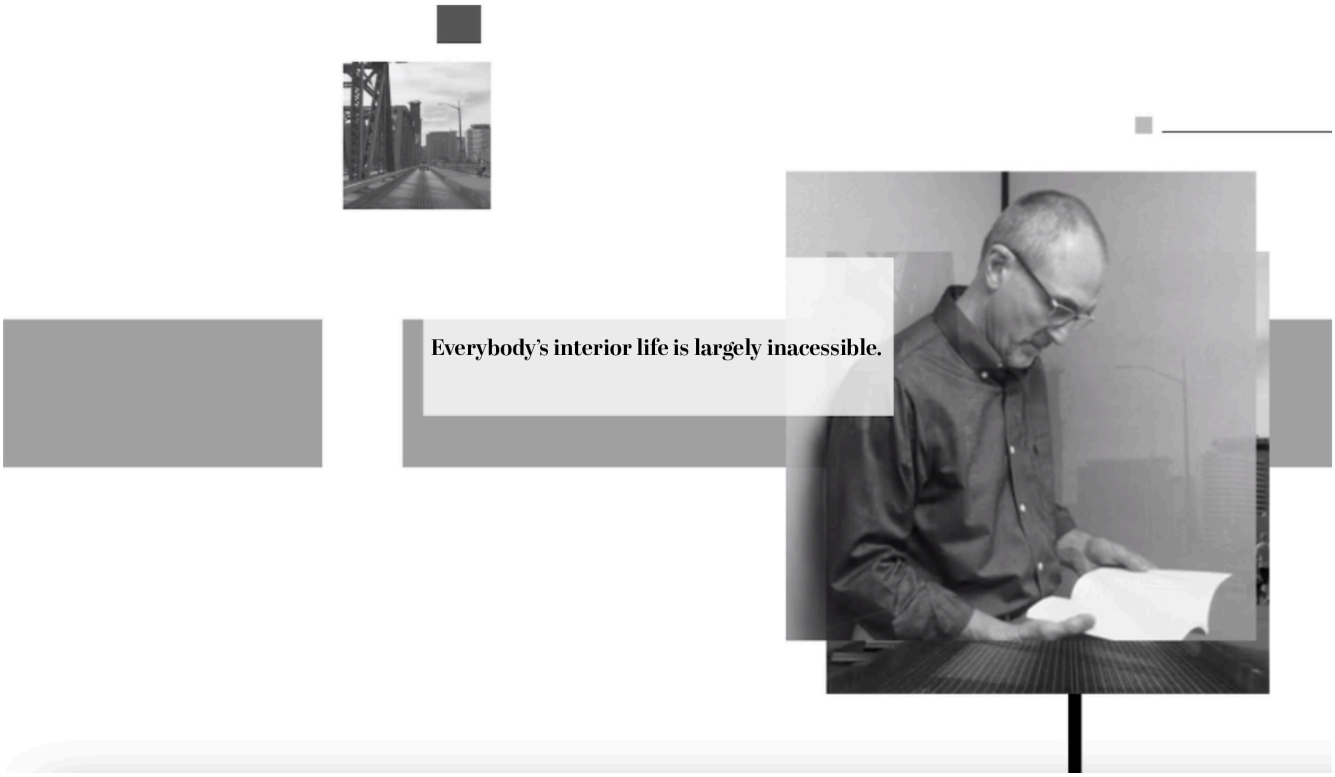
ET: Why this book? Because I needed a community of educators after those dark COVID days. I needed to make something with others that meant something – to make first year writing feel like an experience with real stakes after a year of little initials on screens. I needed an educational space to honor human experience and

1. Lora, Ana and Pablo Mella. *Memoria del Siglo*. Santo Domingo, Editorial Universitaria Bono, 2018.

expression again. My new normal had to be generative, affirming, polyvocal, unresolved, but most definitely present with the thinking of others.

Katy Siegel, in "A Space for Reassessing the Present" from the Institute of Contemporary Art's exhibition catalog of Firelei Báez's work writes: "*Man Without a Country* includes torn pages from *Statesmen* (1893), and the faces of some of these 'great men of achievement' – presidents, captains of industry – are obliterated with circles in a range of colors and sizes. These dots refer to the Ishihara test, which assesses the ability to perceive color by hiding a figure in one color amid a field of dots in a contrasting color. Here Báez turns her scrutiny away from the colonized object to the colonizer as subject, testing the perception of the men who were, she says, 'actively filtering what's being seen, what's being mined both materially and ethically within a society." (19)

ET: How do you see X? What do you notice about X? Sharing your perception of a person, a poem, an event, anything... is an intimate moment. If someone shares with you what they perceive, they are also revealing something of themselves. Shinobu Ishihara developed his plates of red and green dots in 1917 to discern if a soldier could perceive those colors as different. What I see confirms that I am not colorblind. I can see the 16 in the red dots surrounded by a background of green dots. When I read Yiyun Li's "To Speak Is to Blunder" and what I notice first is the nonchalance around suicide, it is colored by how I have been and seen the world. And if I share with you that this is my strongest first impression of this essay, it says something about what I noticed, provokes further questions of why that's what I noticed, and if I were comfortable with you, I just might tell you why.



Screenshot of novelling, Will Luer, Hazel Smith, and Roger Dean's digital novel.

JS: Coming in as a new colleague on this project, I was particularly aware of how these discussions were also about getting to know one another: how we think, create, and teach, what we believe, how we persist in the institution. Often enough, I felt what Yiyun Li captures in the line "to speak is to blunder"—any extension of myself in communication is not *quite* what I mean, always a compromise, but one that is valuable all the same. We gathered together for a project we were all invested in, but from different places, different experiences, styles, and approaches. Discussion necessarily risked vulnerability as I tried to make my thinking, and my commitments, a bit clearer to others. As I wanted to participate in creating material that is rich, complex, and perhaps even unconventional, I had to extend myself in creativity—offer routes that would propel our discussion and remain open to rerouting, doubling back, and starting somewhere else. I realized that as much as I had believed I had honed my teaching over the years to be student-centered, responsive, and adaptable, this experience of discussion and co-creating actually put me in the position of *doing* what I ask my students to do in almost every class meeting. It's a humbling reminder to recall, acutely, what it means to be in a position of learning with strangers, and to take the risk of being understood among friends.

Toni Morrison in her 1993 Nobel Prize Speech: "The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; it does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered and exposed..."

DU: As we conclude this project, my approach has been to assemble the ways in which I've thought about pedagogy since I began teaching in 2006. For the first six years of my PhD program at the University of California, San Diego my funding package granted me with at least six Intermediate Spanish Language & Literature courses per year. Some of these were more technical intermediate grammar courses and others were focused on Latin American & Spanish literature or film, the detective genre in Latin America, or special topics such as the question of memory/history/forgetting during the various *"guerras sucias"* of the Cold War in the 20th-century hemispheric Americas.

Trained in a department that is neither a traditional English department nor a department of Comparative Literature, my mentors organized the program as a polyvocal, decentered department of world literatures and cultures within a single unit committed "to the multilingual historical study of the connections and conflicts between cultures and societies." It was never surprising or an event to find a literature or first-year writing course that in traditional academic circles would be seen as "minor" or too specific. Allowing for courses like these without making it an overly visible, performative event seemed like an attempt to decenter tradition and normalize more voices in the curriculum.

My training encouraged me to question which traditions and subjects are prioritized or centered in academic spaces. I think readers will get a sense of this when they see some of the texts I recommended for this project – particularly Kei Miller, Michel DeGraff, Audre Lorde, and Pedro Pietri. For me, considering power and place

is relevant in first-year writing – it is just as important to share with students the historical context in which texts are produced as literary/rhetorical form. In my previous role teaching in a Spanish department, I learned that highlighting questions in the classroom that some might see as "charged" – focusing on fascist repression alongside the proper construction of the subjunctive – required a space that centered nonhierarchical structures of feeling, the student's own perspectives and voices, and the elimination of fear.

ET: When I was seven years old, sitting at my kitchen table, I watched my father come home from the store and correct my mother's spelling of broccoli on her grocery list. She moved to this country at 16 and went to community college the year after and failed anatomy and physiology because spelling counted on the tests. She didn't go back to school until she was in her forties. She ensured I practiced my spelling every day in first and second grade. She bought me a Speak and Spell toy, and I even pestered her for help spelling "computer" while she was in labor. I got 99th percentile on my state standardized test on spelling. Now I teach writing and never correct my students' spelling. Instead, I remind them that standard spelling came along with the spread of the printing press: an "improved efficiency" for laying out print at a time of great variety in pronunciation.

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LIST OF HASHTAGS

These hashtags indicate features and topics in the readings as well as the nature of student work undertaken in individual activities. Beyond describing an individual reading or activity, these hashtags also connect readings (and activities) to suggest interesting text sets that teachers and students may want to explore.

Writing Traits/Genre

#conditional
- **#experimental**
- **#journalistic**
- **#personal narrative**
- **#poetry**
- **#storytelling**
- **#audio**

Topics/Themes

The thematics highlighted here reflect different dimensions of the conversations on multilingualism, the politics of language, and linguistic justice that we have found important; these ideas resonate across texts, authors, communities, and histories and are best understood within these contexts rather than being individually defined.

#assimilation
- **#belonging**
- **#body**
- **#colonialism**
- **#community**
- **#complicity**
- **#conditional**
- **#death**
- **#difference**
- **#education**

#exclusion
#family
#fear
#feminism

#grammar
#identity
#immigration
#indigeneity
#language discrimination
#lost in translation
#memory
#mental health
#multilingual
#music
#otherness
#outsider
#personal is political

#perspective
#protest
#self-censorship
#self-hatred
#settler-colonialism
#silence
#stereotype
#tokenism
#translation
#trauma
#ways of knowing

Activities

#30 minutes
#45 minutes
#60 minutes
#120 minutes

#annotation
#argument
#close reading
#comparison
#context
#critique

#discussion
#group
#perspective
#reflection
#research
#rewriting
#structure
#writing project

PART I
READER

"As a Child in Haiti, I Was Taught to Despise My Language and Myself"

Michel DeGraff, 2022

Originally published in *The New York Times*
Editor's Note: The excerpt in this chapter is included on the basis of fair use.

Hashtags

#exclusion, **#education**, **#colonialism**, **#multilingual**, **#language discrimination**, **#trauma**, **#self-hatred**, **#protest**, **#assimilation**, **#journalistic**

Frame

ET: *As my co-authors and I considered late editions to the reader, we wanted to include other genres and styles of writing that also speak to themes established elsewhere in the book. As an op-ed, this piece offers a more direct and cutting critique of the effects of colonialism and the resulting self-hatred of one's language and identity as it plays out in the classroom and national curriculum.*

Excerpts

In 1982, a decree known as the Joseph Bernard Reform promised change. It required that Kreyòl be the language of instruction for the first 10 years of schooling and sought to make French a second language of instruction in the sixth year. That would have given Haitian students a chance to function in both languages

while prizing their national identity. But for the past 40 years, this decree has largely been either ignored or misinterpreted. Haitian education has suffered across every academic subject — even French, in which the adults at the front of the classroom may be only marginally more proficient than the students in the seats. Many teachers use their native Kreyòl to approximate a narrow range of French sentences that they have simply memorized.

In October 2014, Michel Martelly, the Haitian president at the time, asked his French counterpart, François Hollande, to send retired French teachers to Haiti to help rebuild "the Haitian mentality and the Haitian man." The next year, Mr. Hollande pledged to repay France's so-called moral debt to Haiti, in part by investing in its educational system and more fully honoring its place as a Francophone nation. As recently as last year, experts at the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training, with help from the French Development Agency, produced a curriculum guidance framework for the Haitian education system that would make French the sole language of instruction from the fifth year onward.

I consider the description of Haiti as the poorest nation of the Western Hemisphere to be a gross misrepresentation; Haiti is, rather, the nation most impoverished by the effects of white supremacy. The emissary of Charles X imposed an insurmountable financial ransom, but the French educational model, a supposed war bounty, was every bit as brutal: a linguistic ransom, a powerful tool for mental colonization. Haiti's French-speaking elites, who have enforced that mandate, have always lived as far away as possible — geographically, socially, culturally, religiously and linguistically — from the majority Kreyòl-speaking population. They have never created a system to adequately teach French to those who did not grow up speaking it. Instead these Haitian elites favor teaching *in* French — an option that's guaranteed to multiply the privilege they already enjoy and to ensure that most of their fellow citizens cannot share it.

You may access the full text here on *The New York Times* website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=5#h5p-11

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- How is school designed to exclude? How does it value exclusiveness, and why? Consider the benefits of thinking of schools as instruments of inclusion and exclusion.
- Think about what you would like the purpose of school to be. What markers do we use to judge if a school is a "good" school? How do those markers compare to how Great Schools ranks schools in Vox's video "How online ratings make good schools look bad"?
- What is self-hatred? Where and how do we learn to hate ourselves? What outside narratives produce self-hatred?

Close Shots:

- Look at the sentences below and examine how they each approach expressing opinion differently:
    - "Even UNESCO, which declares its commitment to local cultures and languages, favors French on its website and social media in Haiti"
    - "I was also made to write hundreds of lines saying 'I will never speak Kreyòl again.' Some parents and teachers even make children scrub their tongues with soap, lemon and vinegar to metaphorically wash away Kreyòl."
    - "Unshackling Haitian minds and society from centuries of linguistic discrimination is the first step to help Haiti overcome the disastrous consequences of its colonial and neocolonial history."
- Perspective-taking and contextualizing that perspective is important to opinion writing. How does DeGraff turn the narrative around by changing the perspective on Haitian poverty in the last paragraph of the excerpt above?
- Consider the phrases "moral debt" and "financial ransom" in the above excerpt. How does that economic inequality provoke an internalized colonialism amongst some Haitians? What does DeGraff seem to think of that?

Mid Shots

- See "Historical Contexts" for an activity on rebuilding the historical context that is hinted at, elided, or implied throughout the article.
- See "Building an Opinion" for an extended writing prompt that invites students to practice developing arguments through the form of an op-ed on related issues as they appear in their local contexts.

Possible Transitions

JS: For a wide-ranging discussion of different histories of colonialism, I would pair this essay with the podcast episode by NPR Codeswitch, "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" as well as Robin Wall Kimmerer's, "Asters and Goldenrod."

DU: I'd consider teaching this text alongside Audre Lorde's, "The Transformation of Silence into Action." Both of these authors clearly lay out their own processes around identifying particularly oppressive discursive and material forces and then offering concrete acts for transgressing those forces.

"Asters and Goldenrod"

Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2013

Originally published in *Braiding Sweetgrass*
plus: "The Intelligence of Plants," *On Being* with Krista Tippett, 2016
Editor's Note: The excerpt in this chapter is included on the basis of fair use.

Hashtags

#ways of knowing, **#personal narrative**, **#identity**, **#indigeneity**, **#education**, **#audio**, **#community**, **#settler-colonialism**, **#storytelling**, **#grammar**

Frame

JS: The following excerpt is from a chapter in Robin Wall Kimmerer's Braiding Sweetgrass, *which we've paired with a podcast episode in which she retells the story and dives deeper into the Potawatomi worldview she brings to her work as a botanist. The text excerpt highlights something of a "core memory," and Kimmerer retells it in poetic prose (admitting at one point she considered being a poet), which invites close reading and reflection. The podcast episode expands on this story and may open up wider discussions of epistemologies or ways of knowing.*

Excerpts

The girl in the picture holds a slate with her name and "class of '75" chalked in, a girl the color of deerskin with long dark hair and inky unreadable eyes that meet yours and won't look away. I remember that day. I was

wearing the new plaid shirt that my parents had given me, an outfit I thought to be the hallmark of all foresters. When I looked back at the photo later in life, it was a puzzle to me. I recall being elated to be going to college, but there is no trace of that in the girl's face.

Even before I arrived at school, I had all of my answers prepared for the freshman intake interview. I wanted to make a good first impression. There were hardly any women at the forestry school in those days, and certainly none who looked like me. The adviser peered at me over his glasses and said, "So, why do you want to major in botany?" His pencil was poised over the registrar's form. How could I answer, how could I tell him that I was born a botanist, that I had shoeboxes of seeds and piles of pressed leaves under my bed, that I'd stop my bike along the road to identify a new species, that plants colored my dreams, that the plants had chosen me? So I told him the truth. I was proud of my well-planned answer, its freshman sophistication apparent to anyone, the way it showed that I already knew some plants and their habitats, that I had thought deeply about their nature, and was clearly well prepared for college work. I told him that I chose botany because I wanted to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. I'm sure I was smiling then, in my red plaid shirt.

But he was not. He laid down his pencil as if there was no need to record what I had said. "Miss Wall," he said, fixing me with a disappointed smile, "I must tell you that that is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves." But he promised to put me right. "I'll enroll you in General Botany so you can learn what it is." And so it began.

I like to imagine that they were the first flowers I saw over my mother's shoulder as the pink blanket slipped away from my face and their colors flooded my consciousness. I've heard that early experience can attune the brain to certain stimuli so that they are processed with greater speed and certainty so that they can be used again and again so that we remember. Love at first sight. Through cloudy newborn eyes, their radiance formed the first botanical synapses in my wide-awake, newborn brain, which until then had encountered only the blurry gentleness of pink faces. I'm guessing all eyes were on me, a little round baby all swaddled in bunting, but mine were on Goldenrod and Asters. I was born to these flowers, and they came back for my birthday every year, weaving me into our mutual celebration.

People flock to our hills for the fiery suite of October, but they often miss the sublime prelude of September fields. As if harvest time were not enough—peaches, grapes, sweet corn, squash—the fields are also embroidered with drifts of golden yellow and pools of deepest purple, a masterpiece. If a fountain could jet bouquets of chrome yellow in dazzling arches of chrysanthemum fireworks, that would be Canada Goldenrod. Each three-foot stem is a geyser of tiny gold daisies, ladylike in miniature, exuberant en masse. Where the soil is damp enough, they stand side by side with their perfect counterpart, New England Asters. Not the pale domesticates of the perennial border, the weak sauce of lavender or sky blue, but full-on royal purple that would make a violet shrink. The daisylike fringe of purple petals surrounds a disc as bright as the sun at high noon, a golden-orange pool, just a tantalizing shade darker than the surrounding goldenrod. Alone, each is a botanical superlative. Together, the visual effect is stunning. Purple and gold, the heraldic colors of the king and queen of the meadow, a regal procession in complementary colors. I just wanted to know why.

Why do they stand beside each other when they could grow alone? Why this particular pair? There are plenty of pinks and whites and blues dotting the fields, so is it only happenstance that the magnificence of purple and gold end up side by side? Einstein himself said, "God doesn't play dice with the universe." What is the source of this pattern? Why is the world so beautiful? It could so easily be otherwise: flowers could be ugly to us and still fulfill their own purpose. But they're not. It seemed like a good question to me.

But my adviser said, "It's not science," not what botany was about. I wanted to know why certain stems bent easily for baskets and some would break, why the biggest berries grew in the shade and why they made us medicines, which plants are edible, why those little pink orchids only grow under pines. "Not science," he said, and he ought to know, sitting in his laboratory, a learned professor of botany. "And if you want to study beauty, you should go to art school." He reminded me of my deliberations over choosing a college, when I had vacillated between training as a botanist or as a poet. Since everyone told me I couldn't do both, I'd chosen plants. He told me that science was not about beauty, not about the embrace between plants and humans.

I had no rejoinder; I had made a mistake. There was no fight in me, only embarrassment at my error. I did not have the words for resistance. He signed me up for my classes and I was dismissed to go get my photo taken for registration. I didn't think about it at the time, but it was happening all over again, an echo of my grandfather's first day at school, when he was ordered to leave everything—language, culture, family—behind. The professor made me doubt where I came from, what I knew, and claimed that his was the *right* way to think. Only he didn't cut my hair off.

In moving from a childhood in the woods to the university I had unknowingly shifted between worldviews, from a natural history of experience, in which I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not "Who are you?" but "What is it?" No one asked plants,"What can you tell us?" The primary question was "How does it work?" The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The way botany was conceived and taught didn't seem to leave much room for a person who thought the way I did. The only way I could make sense of it was to conclude that the things I had always believed about plants must not be true after all.

Keep listening to Kimmerer discuss this experience in her interview with Krista Tippett:
Listen: "The Intelligence of Plants"

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=36#audio-36-1

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=36#h5p-2

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- What ways of knowing are privileged in "school"? How would you describe the kind of learning or education that happens here?
- What are the different gateways or gatekeepers that one has to navigate when entering college? As far as you know, what is the purpose and effect of these "checkpoints"?
- Looking back on your childhood or adolescence, what was a strong experience, memory, object, tradition, or feature of your environment that shaped how you perceive the world today? Take some time to describe it and try to explain how that perception impacts you.

Close Shots:

- How does the story explain the photo that Kimmerer describes in the opening paragraph? Start by taking stock of the details in the photo and Kimmerer's recollection of it, then make connections to details from the story.
- Without knowing more of the story yet, what does Kimmerer mean with the last line of the first section, "and so it began"?
- What does it mean to be "born to these flowers" (first paragraph of second section)? Try to work with both the literal and figurative meanings as you make connections to the surrounding context.
- Focus on the "echo of my grandfather's first day of school" (second to last paragraph of second section). What do these details tell you about the author? How does this historical experience relate to the story she shares of her own life and educational experiences?

Mid Shots

- See "Critical Learning Reflection" for a writing prompt that is reflective, analytical and creative.
- See "Indigenous Perspectives of Western Science" for a brief exploration of Robin Wall Kimmerer's podcast interview responses on differing educational practices.
- See "Poetry and Science: Epistemology through Language" for a sister text from Andrea Chapela on disciplinary dispositions.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would connect Kimmerer's chapter with NPR's "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" to draw out the power of centering indigenous languages as ways of knowing as well as Michel DeGraff's "As a Child I Was Taught to Despise My Language" to underscore the long tail colonialism plays in dividing a people from their language.

DU: Miller's "Place Name: Oracabessa" may be a productive pairing to expose students to studies on comparative indigeneities.

"Connecting the Dots"

Bassey Ikpi, 2016

Originally published in *Catapult*
Editor's Note: The excerpt in this chapter is included on the basis of fair use.

Hashtags

#body, **#otherness**, **#difference**, **#identity**, **#family**, **#personal narrative**, **#translation**, **#memory**, **#perspective**, **#colonialism**

Frame

ET: I first came to this piece through another of Ikpi's essays – one on how one can lie to oneself and be unsure of their own truths. This essay, however, has a stronger focus on seeing the outside of oneself and of what is written on the face, on the skin. As my co-authors and I spoke more about this essay, we increasingly saw it as a personal relationship to our own bodies, in contrast to Sofia Samatar's more strongly socially and politically focused view of the body. This time our annotations provide a simple word that could both define and recast a phrase in Ikpi's essay.

Excerpts

I stayed away from the rest of the party, choosing to hide behind the compound on a makeshift bench hidden by trees. I'd hear my names being called and draw my hard twelve-year-old knees closer to my face,

resting my soft cheek upon them, willing myself to disappear or transport across the ocean back to what was familiar—back to the language I didn't need to force myself to remember.

It wasn't long before someone found me beneath the tree. I felt the bench sink under the new body. I braced myself, waiting for the next, new way I could disappoint.

In soft, hesitant English, he said, "I'm your father's third brother's eldest son. I am your brother Otu."

Third brother could mean uncle, and there was no word for cousin in Yakuur. No term for "distant relative." It was only colonization that introduced the English words to separate these relationships. I noted that he pronounced "brother" as "brodda," so in my head, he became Uncle Brodda.

***

I returned to the village years later, on the verge of starting college. This time, the anxiety I carried came also with threat of depression I couldn't name. I looked for Uncle Brodda. I had more questions about the way we change, but he wasn't around. He had left the village for some place that knew him as he is, and not a reminder of how he'd changed. I think of how we both hid beneath the trees, that night, and how he spoke the language of acceptance.

You may access the full text here on *Catapult*'s website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=38#h5p-12

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- Brainstorm several phrases you've heard that include the word "face": "tell it to my face," "put a face to the name," etc. What gets associated with the face? What's the power of the face?
- Reimagine your childhood or adolescence and reinhabit that perspective. How did you see your circumstances and exchanges with others?
- Think of a time when you had to perform a version of self. Who was served by that performance?

- In many ways we cannot control our appearance. Some things are simple physical realities of our being. What provokes people to hide parts of what they look like?

Close Shots:

- Reading the full text in the link above, track Ikpi's use of "faces." What do we see on Ikpi's faces? What do they do? For example:
    - "Their disgusted faces looked like crumpled origami"
    - "My favorite auntie saw the shame shadowing my face and pulled me away from the angry, disappointed looks"
    - "Would I tell people that I watched the brown slide off my face and crawl away?"
- Beyond the face, Ikpi examines many body parts and specific parts of the face, often fragmented from the rest of the person. She also isolates individual senses. What is the function of isolating the parts? Does she reconcile them?
- Ikpi mentions that there is no term for "distant relative" in Yakuur. Read the below excerpt from "The Magic of Untranslatable Words" and discuss connections between this analysis and the poem.

    > As such, even if languages seem to have roughly equivalent words – amour as the French counterpart to love, for instance – translators have long argued that something precious is always lost in the act of translation. Conversely though, some people submit that nothing is ever genuinely untranslatable. Even if a word lacks an exact equivalent in English, its meaning can usually be conveyed in a few words, or at least a couple of sentences. However, it's the fact that a word doesn't appear to have an 'exact match' in English that makes it so potentially intriguing (and, in common parlance, renders it 'untranslatable'). Such words pique our interest, and for good reason. Above all, they appear to indicate the existence of phenomena that have been overlooked or undervalued by English-speaking cultures.

    - Follow up: Select a word in your language that you think would be difficult to translate to another language. How does that word impose a certain worldview?

Mid Shots

- See "Body as Metaphoric Space" for a comparative reading of Ikpi on the body and belonging and Samatar on skin as a political surface in spaces of not belonging.

Possible Transitions

JS: I would teach this with Sofia Samatar's "Skin Feeling" for further discussion on embodiment and with Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" to explore the way identities are made and unmade through visibility.

DU: I would teach this with Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" in order to have students think about collective versus individual identities.

"The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to be Bilingual"

Ada Limón, 2018

Originally published in *The Carrying*

Editor's Note: The poem in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#exclusion, **#tokenism**, **#stereotype**, **#perspective**, **#protest**, **#poetry**, **#assimilation**, **#personal is political**

Frame

ET & DU: Discussing this piece with my co-authors was particularly entertaining because the person initially most annoyed by the poem came to the most transgressive reading of the poem. We spent a good amount of time talking about the lines that irritated us—like, "Don't mention your father was a teacher, spoke English, loved making beer, loved baseball." We asked ourselves, is the poem critiquing casual, violent acts of "otherness" by reifying a stereotypical image of Americanness as some kind of false transgression? Our conversations got us wondering more and more about how the kitschy and cringy parts could have more power than we first gave them once we thought more on who is talking to whom in this twist on the lyric poem.

The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to be Bilingual

When you come, bring your brown-
ness[1] so we can be sure to please
the funders. Will you check this
box; we're applying for a grant.[2]
Do you have any poems that speak
to troubled teens? Bilingual is best.
Would you like to come to dinner
with the patrons and sip Patrón?
Will you tell us the stories that make
us uncomfortable, but not complicit?[3]
Don't read the one where you
are just like us. Born to a green house,
garden,[4] don't tell us how you picked
tomatoes and ate them in the dirt
watching vultures pick apart another
bird's bones in the road.[5] Tell us the one
about your father stealing hubcaps
after a colleague said that's what his
kind did. Tell us how he came
to the meeting wearing a poncho
and tried to sell the man his hubcaps
back. Don't mention your father
was a teacher, spoke English, loved
making beer, loved baseball[6], tell us

---

1. JS: a great phrase for thinking about identity — what does this really mean? what is "brown-ness"?

2. ET: What happened to the question mark? Is there a choice to make?

3. ET: How does this mimic the closing line of the previous couplet?

4. JS: how does this image help to establish who the "we" or "us" is? what division is being established in this line that separates while also admitting commonality (you are just like us).

5. ET: What other "watchings" are happening in this poem?

6. ET: How do you understand the limits of these lines? It seems like an affirmation of an assimilated "American" identity.

again about the poncho, the hubcaps,
how he stole them, how he did the thing
he was trying to prove he didn't do.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=40#h5p-13

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- What social contracts bind your behavior and identity? What are the costs and benefits of keeping those contracts?
- Have you ever felt like a ventriloquist's dummy? When do the things you tell yourself come from something outside of yourself? What social or cultural messages have you internalized?
- Audre Lorde wrote, "We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition." Reflect on this idea.
- When and how does a request become a demand? If you reflect on this question before reading, revisit your thinking after considering the transition between the fifth and sixth couplets.

Close Shots:

- Identify the speakers in the poem. Who is the "you"? Who is speaking to the "you"?
- Circle all the nouns and take note of their concreteness. How are they placed? What do they do in terms of situating the speaker, the requests of the speaker, and the speaker's reality?
- Compare Limón's vulture in the eighth couplet to Lorde's dragon reproduced below. What do these animals symbolize? How do they interact with the people in the pieces?

Within this country where racial difference creates constant, if unspoken,

> distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings and neither were most of you here today, black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak.

Mid Shots

- See "Reading the 'Fine Print'" for an extended discussion of the poem that leverages the concepts of social and racial contracts in the U.S.

Possible Transitions

JS: For a fuller discussion of the burden of cultural representation on writers (and how requests for language become demands on identity), pair this text with Yiyun Li's "To Speak is to Blunder" and Sofia Samatar's "Skin Feeling." This poem also works well with Jamila Lyiscott's "Three Ways to Speak English" which also delves into the character stereotypes against racialized groups.

DU: Instructors may productively pair this text with Miller's "Oracabessa" to complicate notions of universality. In my view, the most challenging part of teaching Limón is getting students to complicate the oppositions of the poem – particularly the poet's opposition between the "universal" everyday, "don't tell us how you picked tomatoes," and her images around performing otherness, "bilingual is best." In my experience, students seize on "universality" as the central idea of the poem and leave the class thinking, "see, we're all the same, let's stop talking about difference so much..." which is not what I'm hoping to do with the poem. If any instructors ever teach this, I'd love to know how it goes because I rarely get to the depths of where I want to go.

"Grammar, Identity, and the Dark Side of the Subjunctive"

Phuc Tran, 2012

Originally published on *TEDx Talks*

Hashtags

#ways of knowing, **#personal narrative**, **#identity**, **#audio**, **#family**, **#conditional**, **#immigration**, **#assimilation**, **#mental health**, **#community**, **#storytelling**, **#grammar**

Frame:

JS: This TedTalk is both an example of good storytelling and a faulty argument that is worth engaging with. Recounting both imagination and revision of his thinking, this short story is rich with moments for reflection and discussion. Yet when the speaker zooms out to make a broader argument about culture, it is worth taking some time to deconstruct the claims he makes

This interactive video features several pause points with close-shot questions for discussion. They may be helpful to review before listening and can be found in the guide below.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it

online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=42#h5p-16

Text Version

Close Shots: Listen and pause to respond to key moments in the TedTalk:

Time (mm:ss)	Questions
1:43	• Based on what you know so far and this mini dialogue, what is the subjunctive? • Why would you want to talk about something that didn't happen? • And why wouldn't you?
5:01	• What is important about the subjunctive in telling this story of their experiences as refugees? • What does it mean that Tran's father didn't have the "luxury" of an alternate reality? • Is this really about language? • What else could it be about?
6:20	• In what ways is the indicative mood linked to resiliency and strength? • Do you agree with this? • What does it mean that Tran describes English as "subjunctive rich"? • Can you think of an example that shows this?
9:20	• How does the "quagmire of the subjunctive" express Tran's experience as an Asian teenager in the U.S.? • What deeper issues are circling around his encounters with the image of a "typical American teenager"?
10:49	• What is the power of the indicative in this dialogue? • How does the advice from Tran's father presents a different version of his character? • How does it add to the first story told?
14: 45	• In this closing segment, Tran says he wants to show us a "grammatical lens." How would you put his argument in your own words? • What do you think of this argument?

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=42#h5p-3

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- "If I were...I would..." – Fill in the blanks and repeat as many times as you like!
- Where do "shoulds" come from?
- What has grammar meant to you? Tell a story about how you've learned it, how you know it, and/or how you use it.
- How does it affect you to think about what is possible?

Mid Shots

- See "Against the Grain" for a discussion activity that critically engages the arguments that emerge from the personal narrative.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would pair Phuc Tran's TED Talk with Marget Thors's "Gun Bubbles" to build on the concept of how language creates space for possibilities. Another interesting pairing would include Yiyun Li's "To Speak Is to Blunder" to discuss how migration and new language acquisition impact family and belonging.

DU: "Puerto Rican Obituary" and "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" could also be productive comparisons to raise questions about representation, language, and identity.

"Gun Bubbles"

Margrét Ann Thors, 2022

Originally published in *Creative Nonfiction*
Editor's Note: The excerpt in this chapter is included on the basis of fair use.

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#family**, **#personal narrative**, **#trauma**, **#conditional**, **#body**, **#death**, **#immigration**, **#lost in translation**

Frame

ET: Unlike Yiyun Li's "To Speak Is to Blunder," Margrét Thors's "Gun Bubbles" takes a direct and raw approach to the first-person personal essay. Even the translations of Icelandic to English are unapologetically literal. Despite that directness, what comes through as compelling is its use of repetition—relived trauma, collage-like echoes of themes, and compounded language sounds—and immersion, so that language evokes a closeness and distance from the violence and uncertainty in the narrator's life.

Excerpts

The Icelandic word for dinosaur is *risaeðla*, which means giant lizard. *Bergmál*, the word for echo, means language of mountains. To say wedding, you use *brúðkaup*, which means to buy a bride. Quotation marks are

goose feet, bras are breast-holders, and planets are wandering stars. If I tell you I'm in love with a guy with gray-blue eyes and an accent, I'm really saying I am imprisoned by affection.

Many summer nights, this guy—my husband—and I sit on a patch of damp grass in a suburb of Reykjavík, watching the midnight sun smolder and bouncing between languages. Half-Icelandic and raised in the United States, I have forgotten many of the words I knew as a child, and I laugh as if hearing them for the first time. Sometimes I get carried away, taking some poetic license. A penguin is a blubber-goose. An idea is a picture in the mind. A cello, a knee-violin. "Do you remember what a sloth is?" he'll ask, and although I have an inkling—a sniff of sight—I don't risk the guess. "Remind me." He smirks. "*Letidýr*." Lazy animal.

Icelandic is like this: blunt, beautiful. The land itself is striking and extreme, marked by glaciers, rumbling volcanoes, black-sand beaches made of cooled lava. Winters are practically without daylight; summers, nightless. Hot water shoots up from the earth, warm tap water smells like rotten eggs, and in winter, snow swirls so fiercely that the whole island is chalked white. There are elves here, known as hidden people, *huldufólk*, who live behind brightly painted doors in the mountains and, if you believe the stories my parents tell me, routinely swap well-behaved children for evil imposters. "The elves stole my good son and daughter," my mother would say when my brother and I fought. "I don't know who you two are."

A marshmallow is a sugar-pillow. A rocket, flying fire. A hangover is a man made of wood.

Placenta is a womb-cake. To breastfeed is to give the gift of your boobs.

Translated literally, abortion is fetus-deletion. Bullets are gun bubbles.

* * *

What if he had shot me, and I had been pregnant?

You wouldn't have been. The doctor told you.

But what if, if I were pregnant, I wouldn't have deleted a fetus or put my pregnancy on hiatus?

It's not about you. It's the principle.

Then why risk shooting at someone like me, what principle did that prove?

It was for the babies.

If I wanted a baby and couldn't have one. Isn't that the opposite, the antithesis of what you're killing people for.

It's not about you. It's the principle.

You may access the full text here on *Creative Nonfiction*'s website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=44#h5p-8

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- How do you make repetition interesting? When have you found it appealing? Haunting? Boring?
- Arguably we all need approval or validation. In what ways is this encouraging or empowering? And how does this become a power dynamic that may even "imprison" us?
- After reading this piece, what is an image you viscerally remember feeling? On the other hand, where did this essay provoke you to think more deliberatively or intently?

Close Shots:

- Read the tenth section of the article that starts "We call her spud, our little sweet potato." It's largely about etymology and word association through shared roots for the word "earth," "native soil," or "fósturjörð." Find a sentence in another section of the essay that echoes an idea or feeling from this section. How do they resonate with one another?
- In the paragraph that begins "Icelandic is like this: blunt, beautiful" consider how that paragraph attempts to describe an entire country and its langauge. What seems definitive of Iceland and Icelandic? What more might be there that Thors doesn't speak to?
- Gather the direct translations Thors provides from Icelandic to English. What point does she try to make in about Icelandic, English, and translation in general in her direct and literal approach to translation?

Mid Shots

- See "Emotion in Language" for a close-reading prompt about how language can evoke distance.

Possible Transitions

JS: To further explore ways of finding language for and around moments of violation, especially when gendered and racialized, I would pair this with Sofia Samatar, "Skin Feeling." To further explore the connections of language and place, this piece can be put in conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue."

DU: I'd pair this Bassey Ikip's "Connecting the Dots" and highlight the effective use of first person in each essay. Then, I'd transition towards a personal essay writing assignment to guide students around point of view.

"How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987

Originally published in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*
Editor's Note: The excerpt in this chapter is included on the basis of fair use.

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#immigration**, **#personal narrative**, **#music**, **#experimental**, **#personal is political**, **#identity**, **#feminism**, **#protest**, **#language discrimination**, **#family**, **#silence**, **#self-hatred**, **#community**, **#complicity**, **#assimilation**

Frame

JS: This canonical essay embodies the concept of "polyphony" in a number of ways as Anzaldúa blends modes and styles of writing, braids together diverse sources and influences, and of course, presents a multilingual voice in writing. As we include it in this book, we want to emphasize both the content and form of this essay which is one of the most anthologized pieces of 20th century Chicanx, Latinx, and feminist writing.

Excerpt

Linguistic Terrorism

Deslenguades. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic *mestizaje*, the subject of your *burla*. Because we speak with tongues of fire,

we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically, *somos huérfanos* – we speak an orphan tongue.

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other.

Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time, I couldn't figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicano is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood, we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper.

If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with *mexicanas y latinas* we'll speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanas, we tend to speak English at parties or conferences. Yet, at the same time, we're afraid of the other, vying to be the "real" Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language, just as there is no one Chicano experience. A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan, Chicago, or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S., a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more "cultured." But for a language to remain alive, it must be used. By the end of this century, English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity–I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue–my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code ....

–Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

How to Tame a Wild Tongue (With Translations)

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=46#oembed-1

The full text is also included in a number of anthologies.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=46#h5p-4

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- How does Spanish appear in your local community? Zoom out a bit and consider how Spanish appears in your region, the nation, and the world. At each level, can you describe what the "dominant view" of this language is?
- How do you experience the relationship between language and culture? How is your own cultural identity expressed? What do your languages express about you and your identities?
- What does it mean to "accommodate" a difference? What are the various layers to this idea that you can think of? What alternatives exist? A word cloud or spider web brainstorm might be helpful here.

Close Shots:

- This section of Anzaldúa's essay is titled "Linguistic Terrorism," yet this term does not appear in the body, and she does not offer a direct definition. Re-read the excerpt for details that help you work out a definition of this term. Then consider: Why call this form of violence "terrorism"? Why emphasize "linguistic" violence rather than "cultural" violence more broadly?
- Near the end of this passage, Anzaldúa claims that language is "alive" (and must be kept alive). What kind of life story does Anzaldúa describe for Chicano Spanish? Re-read the excerpt for key moments and details and try to draw or outline the life story of this language.
- In the last two paragraphs, Anzaldúa offers a kind of testimony about the impact of linguistic terrorism. Close read the paragraph sentence by sentence to answer the question: What legitimizes a language?
- Based on this excerpt, and/or the full chapter if you have access, how do you understand "the tradition of silence" that Anzaldúa refers to?

Mid Shots

- See "Tracing Citations" for two short writing assignments that engage the research behind this essay either through a poetic reading of Anzaldúa's footnotes or a student-contributed footnote.
- See "Music Trails" for an exploration activity inspired by music traditions that cross borders.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would teach Anzaldúa alongside Jamila Lyiscott's "Three Ways to Speak English" to expand on the plurality of any one language and the dynamics of language discrimination. Another compelling pairing would be with Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence to Language and Action" to draw on the women's relationship with silence in particular.

DU: This would go well with DeGraff's essay on Haitian Creole to discuss questions around linguistic violence.

"Place Name: Oracabessa"

Kei Miller, 2014

Originally published in *In Nearby Bushes*

Editor's Note: The poem in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtag

#multilingual, **#ways of knowing**, **#otherness**, **#poetry**, **#death**, **#audio**, **#experimental**, **#personal is political**, **#memory**, **#colonialism**, **#protest**

Frame

DU: Jamaican writer Kei Miller (b. 1978) has received international recognition for his poetry, essay collections, short stories and his recent novel, Augustown (2016). This poem – and his work generally – may serve well for any lessons on postcolonial studies, multilingualism or the "politics of knowing." Instructors will find generative points of comparison with other entries in this reader. His works explore the relationship between sound, power, otherness, and alternative epistemologies.

"Oracabessa" is part of a sequence of poems called "Place Names" from Miller's The Cartographer Tries To Map a Way to Zion (2014). Generally, this collection narrates what happens when one system of knowledge or one way of seeing confronts another. The main sequence in this collection is a dialogue between a Western "cartographer" and a Jamaican rastaman. The cartographer purports to measure, map, categorize – and by implication, control

and violate – places in the Caribbean while the rastaman counters by arguing for a different way of seeing and experiencing place or space. In a sort of symbolic reversal of the colonial experience, the cartographer eventually concedes to the rastaman's arguments to experience place "from within," without importing epistemological frameworks that are out of tune with the concreteness and particularities of any place that is newly encountered. The cartographer eventually learns that every place name is full of histories that require a more careful kind of listening for benign access and that "not every place that can be named can be found." Miller asks the reader to pay attention to what stories are hidden in the naming of one place.

The "Place Name" poems like "Oracabessa" are interspersed throughout the dialogue of the rastaman and the cartographer. As Miller explains in the accompanying video, "good poetry always exposes the world as insufficiently defined ... good poetry expands our way of knowing the world." Each of these place name poems attempts to attune the reader to acknowledging that the "half has never been told" – a biblical phrase often invoked within rastafarian cultural production and popularized by Bob Marley – and that any one place is full of stories that would otherwise be lost if we insist on monoculturalism, monolingualism, and epistemological paradigms that pretend to be "universal."

In an essay on power, sound, and publishing as a black Caribbean writer in the UK, Miller writes, "I live ... in a deeply conflicted state, recognising that I have been able to flourish artistically within a system that was constructed to exclude me, and my body, and the sounds that come out of black mouths .... I try to write poems that gradually turn up the volume. I want to adjust my readers' ears, slowly, slowly, to a world of sound and beauty that they had not been capable of hearing before."[1] Writing political/protest poetry masked as lyricism (such as Miller's poem "The Law Concerning Mermaids"), and raising questions about cultural conflict, naming, history, and the complexities of language and sound, Miller is a new, compelling voice in the long tradition of anti-colonial Caribbean literature.

Excerpts

See the International Writing Program's video with Kei Miller contextualizing how he sees the relationship between poetry and politics. He then performs the poem. Instructors can show 7-10 minutes of it effectively,

1. Miller, Kei. "the Fat Black Woman." PN Review, vol. 44, no. 5, June 2018, https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10209

starting at the second part of the video. Miller reads or "remembers" the poem and performs the song towards the end of the video.

Miller's poem "The Law Concerning Mermaids"

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=48#oembed-1

Oracabessa – origins disputed but most likely leave over[2]
from the Spanish. *Oracabeza*, *Golden Head*, though
what gold was here other than light shining off the bay,
other than bananas bursting out from red flowers[3]? But
this too is disputed – not the flowers – rather, the origin
of bananas; they may have come here with Columbus on
a ship that in 1502 slipped into Oracabessa the way grief
sometimes slips into a room[4]. In those days the sailor
tried to name the island *Santa Maria*, as if not knowing
we already had a name, in another language, a language
whose speakers would soon die – though this too is
disputed[5] – not the deaths, but the completeness of
genocide. Consider, if you will, such leave-over words as
barbecue; consider *hurricane*[6]; consider the word *Jamaica,*
land of wood and water – but not of gold. Could someone
please go back in time[7] and tell Columbus, in Taino there

2. DU: Instructors may find it productive to share with students some of the history of "Jamaican Patois" in the context of British colonialism.

3. DU: What critique is here regarding nature and colonial violence?

4. DU: How do you make sense of the confluence of the personal and political here?

5. JS: what is the dispute here? the line says the deaths are incontrovertible, so what is debated in the phrase "completeness of genocide"?

6. DU: Why do you think the poet reminds the reader of the etymology of words like barbecue and hurricane?

7. DU: Note how temporality is an issue throughout the poem.

is no word for gold. Christopher Columbus, in Italiano
Cristoforo Colombo, en español *Cristóbal Colón*. A teacher
once told me '*Colón*' is root word for colonist, and though
I know that was false etymology[8], there is some truth to it.
Oracabessa – place where you might find such tranquil
villas as *Golden Cove*, *Golden Clouds* or *Goldeneye* –
longtime home of Ian Fleming[9] who sat there on cliff's
edge, the morning's breakfast brought to him by a woman
named Doris, the scent of ackee and crisp-fried
breadfruit wafting up to his nostrils while between his
teeth he bit a number 2 pencil, all the time looking out to
sea as if fishing for a story[10] – maybe a man – an incredible
man – let's call him Bond. James Bond. Who knew 007
wasn't Scottish, but a barefoot bwoy from St Mary, Jamaica.[11]
Like so many others, he too would migrate – the brutish
winter cooling his complexion down to white. Such stories!
Goldfinger, *GoldenEye*, *The Man with the Golden Gun*.
Did you never stop to wonder where all this gold came
from?[12] Did you never stop to ask, what was found in El
Dorado? Well, let me tell you: not a nugget, not an ounce
of ore – but light gilding the bay, and perhaps bananas, and
perhaps ackee, and such language[13] as could summon
wind to capsize Columbus's ships[14] – and if that's not gold,
then what is?

You may access the full text here on *The Poetry Society*.

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8. DU: What truths are buried in this false etymology?

9. DU: Why do you think Ian Flemming makes an appearance here?

10. JS: in what ways is this the action of "fishing for a story" the crux of the poem? does the poem participate in this activity? what's different about Fleming's fishing and the poem's?

11. DU: Ask students how they make sense of this line.

12. DU: How would you reformulate the buried truths behind this question? What would be a literal translation of this line?

13. DU: What is this "language"?

14. DU: How can this language "capsize Columbus' ships"?

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=48#h5p-9

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- Observe an object that's currently around you. What larger or wider histories may this object contain?
- What are your first thoughts about the Caribbean? Of Jamaica? Can you complicate these stories you've inherited about the Caribbean? Where do you think you inherited them from?
- What do you know about the history of indigenous groups in the Caribbean? Miller mentions in the poem words that were inherited from the Arawak like "barbecue" and "hurricane." What do you know of the "completeness of genocide" of Caribbean indigeneity?

Close Shots:

- What's the relationship between "gold" and "language" in this poem? The poem ends with, "if that's not gold, then what is"? How can language be material?
- How would you describe the tone of the poem? How is Miller using the lyric as a mask for protest?
- On two occasions, Miller interrupts the sentence with a supposition of what the reader is thinking: in lines 4-8 and again in lines 8-13. What does he assume the reader was thinking? What were you thinking before the "not" clause"? What idea does he plant in your mind with that "not" clause?

Mid Shots

- See "Insufficient Definitions" for a comparative reading of Robert Pinksy's "The Shirt."

Possible Transitions

ET: I would teach this poem alongside Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Action" to build on the politics of naming and whose voices speak. Another interesting connection would be with Madhu Kaza's "Vão/Vòng A Conversation with Katrina Dodson" to underscore the fluidity of meaning as translated between languages.

JS: This poem dialogues with Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Asters and Goldenrod" in compelling ways, both authors complicating colonial narratives and epistemologies to uncover other ways of knowing.

DU: A possible pairing would be this text with Li's "To Speak is to Blunder." Instructors may find it interesting to pair these two to deepen student's appreciation of the (im)possibilities of representation.

"Puerto Rican Obituary"

Pedro Pietri, 1973

Originally published in *Puerto Rican Obituary*

Editor's Note: The excerpt(s) in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#immigration**, **#poetry**, **#death**, **#protest**, **#assimilation**, **#experimental**, **#personal is political**, **#music**, **#exclusion**, **#self-hatred**, **#audio**, **#complicity**, **#identity**

Frame

DU: Pedro Pietri (1944-2004) was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico and moved to Manhattan when he was three-years-old. A few years after graduating from high school, he was drafted into the Army and served in the Vietnam War. ***The discrimination he and his community faced in the Army and in NYC in the '60s and '70s influenced his poetry and politics****. Upon his return to New York from war, Pietri joined the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican Civil rights activist group. In the early 1970s, he co-founded the Nuyorican Poets Café with Miguel Piñero, Miguel Algarín, and others. Pietri was a pioneer of one of the most important literary and spoken word movements in US Latinx Culture and is perhaps the most notable "Nuyorican" writer of the twentieth century. Pietri's legacy lives on in many ways in Latinx literature. Notable contemporary Latinx author Xochitl Gonzalez, for example, echoes his work in the title of her celebrated novel, Olga Dies Dreaming* (2022).

I would suggest speaking at length with students about the historical and literary context before teaching the poem. It may be more challenging for the instructor if this text is taught without considering the historical context in which this poem was produced.

To make sense of the orality of this spoken word poem, read the text as you listen to a performance.

"PEDRO PIETRI" — Video by Jose Rivera 1986

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=50#oembed-1

Excerpts

Juan
Miguel
Milagros
Olga
Manuel
All[1] died yesterday today[2]
and will die again tomorrow
Hating fighting and stealing
broken windows from each other[3]

1. JS: Reading this poem in our current moment I'm thinking about the way the BLM movement has amplified the call to "say their names" as a collective act of mourning in defiance of the normalized killings of black people. What is the effect of beginning with individual names like this, especially when we know little else about them?

2. DU: Take note of how temporality works throughout the poem.

3. DU: What are some other ways of describing the relationships between these five departed, fictional Puerto Ricans? How do we unpack the concept of "self-hatred" in minoritized communities in the US?

Practicing a religion[4] without a roof
The old testament
The new testament
according to the gospel
of the internal revenue
the judge and jury and executioner
protector and eternal bill collector
Secondhand shit for sale
learn[5] how to say Como Esta Usted
and you will make a fortune
They are dead
They are dead
and will not return from the dead[6]
until they stop neglecting
the art of their dialogue —
for broken english lessons
to impress the mister goldsteins—
who keep them employed
as lavaplatos
porters messenger boys[7]
factory workers maids stock clerks
shipping clerks assistant mailroom
assistant, assistant assistant
to the assistant's assistant
assistant lavaplatos and automatic
artificial smiling doormen
for the lowest wages of the ages
and rages when you demand a raise

4. DU: Is Pietri talking strictly about "religion" or is this image more expansive? What does the image of "practicing religion without a roof" evoke? Describe the kind of "religion" that is being represented here.

5. DU: Who is the poetic "I" referring to with command tense of "to learn" here? Who will make this fortune and why? Listen to Pietri's performance of Spanglish in this passage and try to take note of the nuances in his voice.

6. JS: What could this "return from the dead" mean? How does this transform the earlier line that asserts they "will die again tomorrow"?

7. DU: What are the complexities here around language, labor and "assimilation"?

because *is* against the company policy
to promote SPICS[8] SPICS SPICS
Juan
died hating[9] Miguel because Miguel's
used car was in better running condition
than his used car
Miguel
died hating Milagros because Milagros
had a color television set
and he could not afford one yet
Milagros
died hating Olga because Olga
made five dollars more on the same job
Olga
died hating Manuel because Manuel
had hit the numbers more times
than she had hit the numbers
Manuel
died hating all of them
Juan
Miguel
Milagros
and Olga
because they all spoke broken english
more fluently than he did
And now they are together
in the main lobby of the void
Addicted to silence[10]
Off limits to the wind

8. DU: Research the etymology of this slur. This article is a good place to start: https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/03/388705810/spic-o-rama-where-spic-comes-from-and-where-its-going

9. DU: How do we make sense of the self-hatred of these individuals? What concrete socio-historic and cultural factors produce this self-hatred in some immigrant communities in the US?

10. JS: how does this silence underpin the poem's message? why is it "addicted" to silence in this line?

Confine to worm supremacy
in long island cemetery
This is the groovy hereafter
the protestant collection box
was talking so loud and proud about
Here lies Juan[11]
Here lies Miguel
Here lies Milagros
Here lies Olga
Here lies Manuel
who died yesterday today
and will die again tomorrow
Always broke
Always owing
Never knowing
that they are beautiful people
Never knowing
the geography of their complexion

You may access the full text here on the *Poetry Foundation* website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=50#h5p-10

Text Version

Wide Shots:

11. DU: How does the poem take a dramatic turn at this point – and through the end – regarding questions of self-hatred and authenticity?

- Have you read an obituary? What did you notice about how it was written? How did it capture a person, their life, and character? If you haven't read an obituary, think of someone you admire and how you could distill what you see in them.
- Write an obituary documenting how you would want to be remembered.
- How do you think about your responsibility as a worker? What does having a work ethic mean to you? How does it help and hurt you?
- Why would one write political poetry or poetry of social protest?
- How do you see the relationship between language and politics?

Close Shots:

- As you read the poem, pay attention to verb tense and representations of time. For example, in the first stanza, Pietri writes: "They worked / ten days a week / and were only paid for five." He repeats the lines "All died yesterday today / and will die again tomorrow" four times. His last stanza is in shockingly present present tense.
- Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga, Manuel. How is each defined by their descriptions when you gather up all their epithets throughout the poem? Whom are they defined against?

Mid Shots

- See "Dialogues Over Time" to read "How Beautiful They Really Are" as a contemporary response to Pietri's poem.
- See "Work Culture Reexamined" to explore the disconnects between how talk versus action about valuing self-care differ in institutional spaces.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would connect Pietri's poem with Bassey Ikpi's "Connecting the Dots" to draw out a range of feelings around assimilation and isolation. Another compelling connection would be pairing this poem with Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Action" to think about death and voicelessness together.

JS: To elaborate a discussion of the politics of "broken English," I would pair this poem with Jamila Lyiscott's "Three Ways to Speak English," which also leans into poetry as performance.

"Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak"

Shereen Marisol Meraji, et al., 2021

Originally published on *NPR's Codeswitch*

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#personal narrative**, **#identity**, **#indigeneity**, **#audio**, **#settler-colonialism**, **#education**, **#family**, **#language discrimination**, **#journalistic**, **#community**, **#personal is political**, **#storytelling**

Frame

JS: This is a bit of a unique text in the reader, not only because it is a radio show (and functions somewhat as an audio essay) but because its approach shifts halfway through the segment. With this in mind, we wanted to highlight the first part of the episode as more suitable for close "reading" while the second part may inspire reflection and analysis through juxtaposition with other texts included in the reader.

Saving A Language You're Learning to Speak Podcast

This podcast has close-shot questions at various pause points. They may be helpful to review before listening and can be found in the guide below.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=52#h5p-19

Text Version

Close Shots:

Time (mm:ss)	Questions
1:45	• After listening to this introductory snippet, what do you think Kimura means when he says he felt that "Hawaii wasn't really Hawaiian"?
4:28	• Kimura recounts knowing as a young person that he wasn't really getting the full education he wanted, only Hawaiian "light," even while admitting he didn't really know how to teach the language better. Based on what you've heard so far, how do you think this language should have been taught?
7:37	• Focusing on the radio show and interviews with first language speakers, or Kimura's memories with his mom, how would you describe what keeps language alive and what harms it?
10:56	• In this segment we learn more about the history of colonialism in Hawaii and how that has shaped generations. How does language hold this history and how could it be a form of resistance?
13:35	• This segment begins by marking the legislative victory in 1978 when Hawaiian was once again established as the official language of the state – but this was not enough. Revisiting an earlier question, what goes into reviving or re-vivifying a language?
15:42	• How does this last part of the story draw out the dynamics between home, community, and school? • When are these spaces congruent and when are they more incongruent?

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=52#h5p-5

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- What does the idea "nest of language" mean to you? Try drawing this image to uncover different layers of meaning in the phrase.
- Following up, brainstorm idioms you have heard in English or look at the lists below. Examine what the language is doing literally and how this does or does not convey the message implied.
    - "7 Everyday English Idioms and Where They Come From"
    - "20 English Idioms with Their Meanings and Origins"
    - "23 Common Idioms and Their Origins"
    - "How to Speak Bad English"
- What is an example of a choice made in a previous generation in your family that has shaped who you are, how you understand yourself and the world?
- What are some examples of language loss due to "English only" rules or other forced changes? What do you know about the loss of indigenous languages here in the U.S.? Elsewhere? If this is a new topic, what questions do you have?

Mid Shots

- See "Language Life Story" for a short research assignment that dives into endangered languages and reclamation movements.

Possible Transitions

ET: NPR's "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" pairs well with Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Aster and Goldenrods" to broaden the picture of what is lost when indigenous languages are lost. Another fruitful pairing is with Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" to broaden the conversation on the challenges of maintaining your languages despite social pressures.

DU: I would suggest Miller's work as a complement to this in order to craft a class around comparative American indigeneities.

"Skin Feeling"

Sofi Samatar, 2015

Originally published in *The New Inquiry*

Hashtags

#education, **#experimental**, **#personal narrative**, **#outsider**, **#experimental**, **#trauma**, **#tokenism**, **#memory**, **#body**, **#personal is political**, **#community**, **#mental health**, **#music**

Frame

JS: The following text is one of the few in the reader that already participates in open publication, which is perhaps reflective of the spirit of the piece as well. In presenting it below, my co-authors and I wanted to retain the full text and relied on annotations to identify moments that felt like "echoes" or "speed bumps" to slow down the reading process.

You may access the full text here on *The New Inquiry* website, or read below.

"Skin Feeling" Text

What it is to be encountered as a surface, to be constantly exposed as something you are not.

1. POOR ROBIN

In a moment of crisis, Charlie "Bird"[1] Parker stripped off all his clothes. The episode followed a disastrous 1946 recording session for Dial Records: Parker was suffering from heroin withdrawal, his muscle spasms so severe he could hardly keep up with the band. That night he left a cigarette butt smoldering on his mattress and wandered nude into the lobby of his Los Angeles hotel. He was arrested, clubbed, handcuffed to a cot at the county jail, and charged with suspected arson, resisting arrest, and indecent exposure.

It was a spectacular crash, the kind we want from artists. The owner of Dial Records arranged for Parker to be transferred to Camarillo State Mental Hospital, where he would spend the next six months. The experience produced the song "Relaxin' at Camarillo," although that wasn't Parker's original title[2].

Camarillo State Hospital closed in 1997. In 2002, it became California State University Channel Islands, where I now work.

As a black academic, part of a tiny minority, I often feel hypervisible, exposed[3]. Crossing a courtyard among the white walls, perhaps passing the window of Bird's old room, I ask myself: Why did he take his clothes off?

Ralph Ellison reads Bird's story as that of an artist-addict hounded by the public, by the hunger of his fans for some new drama: "In the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human significance." Wondering what kind of bird Bird was, Ellison settles on the robin, because of Walter Page's lyrics to a tune Charlie Parker would have heard in Kansas City:

> *Oh, they picked poor robin clean*
> *Oh, they picked poor robin clean*
> *They tied poor robin to a stump*
> *Lord, they picked all the feathers*
> *Round from robin's rump*
> *Oh, they picked poor Robin clean.*

Ellison's subject here is the unbearable visibility of the performer, but it's not so far from the invisibility of his Invisible Man, who appears to others as "only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything except me." The invisibility of a person is also the visibility of race.

I'm interested in visibility as it relates to the lives and working conditions of academics of color, at a time when visibility has come to dominate discussions of race in U.S. universities to such an extent that it has made other frameworks for approaching difference virtually impossible. We speak of diversity, of representation. Diversity, unlike the work of anti-racism, can be represented visually through statistics. How many of X do you

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1. ET: Why is that his nickname? Why POOR ROBIN for the section title?

2. ET: We get that title later, but why not yet?

3. ET: This is the first of twelve uses of this word. How is each use a little different?

have? What percent? There is an obsession with seeing bodies that raises the ghosts of racial memory[4]. These ghosts haunt black performance: Charlie Parker, for example, grew up with and rejected the comedy of the minstrel show, which plays with and replays the violence of plantation spectatorship. The same ghosts haunt the academy, and we can sense them if we understand that the issue is not so much how blackness is made visible, whether the purpose is to defame or to defend, but the fact that in either case, visibility is the end point. The visual marker of blackness stands in for the person, and once it has taken the person's place, it becomes amenable to a variety of uses. In Ellison's words, it's "drained of human significance." I think of the abolitionist emblem *Am I Not a Man and a Brother*?, which was reproduced on brooches and hairpins.

2. SKIN FEELING

Academics of color experience an enervating visibility, but it's not simply that we're part of a very small minority. We are also a desired minority, at least for appearance's sake. University life demands that academics of color commodify themselves as symbols of diversity—in fact, as diversity itself, since diversity, in this context, is located entirely in the realm of the symbolic. There's a wound in the rupture between the diversity manifested in the body of the professor of color and the realities affecting that person's community or communities. I, for example, am a black professor in the era of mass incarceration of black people through the War on Drugs; I am a Somali American professor in the era of surveillance and drone strikes perpetuated through the War on Terror.

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander taps into that wound: "Highly visible examples of black success are critical to the maintenance of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness." It's not that we're too few, nor is it that we suffer survivor guilt for having escaped the fate of so many in our communities. It's that our visibility is consumed in a way that legitimizes the structures of exclusion.[5][6]

Skin feeling: to be encountered as a surface.

This has everything to do with reading. As a graduate student in a seminar on world literature, I remember arguing that no one who took representation as a goal could ever come up with an adequate model for creating anthologies. The classics of Western literature are admitted to these anthologies based on their perceived artistic or philosophical merit; meanwhile works from Kenya, from India, from Jordan, from Vietnam, will be admitted to make the anthology "representative." David Damrosch discusses these different logics: works of

4. ET: W.E.B. DuBois's infographics could have an interesting conversation with this idea: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/first-time-together-and-color-book-displays-web-du-bois-visionary-infographics-180970826/

5. DU: The truth of this hit me hard as a reader of this essay and instructor of color.

6. ET: This sentence is worth a long pause and reflection.

world literature may be chosen for stature and influence, he writes, or as "windows on the world." I hate this. Homer is our epic artist, Dickens our realist artist, Ngũgĩ our Kenyan—or worse, our African—artist.[7]

The other students and the professor argue that we ought to concentrate on representation "for now," as anthologies of world literature are still so often skewed toward white male authors. I refuse to be satisfied with this. Although I can't articulate it at the time, I'm beginning to sense the mechanics of visibility. The one who makes it into the anthology stands for all the others, rendering them unnecessary, redundant. The chosen work is a "window on the world," transparent, impermeable, a barrier masquerading as a door.[8]

CAN YOU SEE ME?

Some weeks after the representation debate, one of the other students in the seminar clears her throat. She glances at me across the table, shrinks back slightly, hands raised as if to protect herself. "I want to talk about representation. Don't pounce on me!"

Startled, I laugh. "I don't pounce!"

Everyone chuckles, uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Pounce—it sounds so aggressive."

I'm suddenly aware that I'm the only black person in the room. Stunned, I feel the hot cloak of "angry black woman" descending. But I don't pounce, I keep thinking, I'm not aggressive, I'm not. I hate confrontation. I'm often frustrated with myself for being too nice. The air gets smaller, I'm angry and black, black angry and black black black. A moment I'll later describe as a "double-consciousness brainfreeze."

Skin feeling: to be constantly exposed as something you are not.

There is almost no way, in places where black people are few, to talk about the complexities of blackness, to go beneath the surface of a predictable form and refuse to be an institutional ornament. I reject much of the thinking I see in mixed race studies[9] and the energy invested in claiming an "other" box on the U.S. census; at the same time, as a mixed person, I am aware of the privileges afforded by a light complexion and the flat, news-radio accent of the white Midwest. I am aware of being African American in the manner of our most illustrious exception, Barack Obama: born to a white American mother and an East African father. African and Caribbean immigrants and their children make up a disproportionately large slice of the black middle class, but at my university, where black members of the teaching faculty can be counted on one hand, I am diversity. There is pressure to stand in for a largely absent community, to speak on its behalf.

The reign of predictable forms. I want to fight this, to acknowledge that I am not a descendant of slaves and

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7. ET: Hmm, so a held trauma of past representational issues? An inherent or internalized desire for status in the "big" anthologies?

8. ET: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

9. DU: I wish the author would elaborate more on "...the thinking I see in mixed race studies." Not sure what she's writing against here. Is she critique categories like hybridity/transculturation/creolization?

that it matters, and to do this without belittling my scholarship on black cultural production or distancing myself from black identity.

I want to expose myself.[10]

3. POWER POINT

Doris Parker, Bird's third wife, who visited him at Camarillo before they were married, describes the scene that led Bird to beg for release from the hospital—a spectacle of imprisonment whose eerie power comes not just from visibility, but from its reproduction, from the tyranny of form:

"He told me one time that this man used to get up every morning and eat breakfast and go stand—look out on a hill. And so, for about three mornings, Charlie had gone out and watched him. And all of a sudden, he had a mental vision of, like, ten years from now there would be this man, and him and whoever was behind him, watching them to see what they were looking at. He said that was when he panicked, and he felt he had to get out of there."

A nightmare of visibility and repetition. Pointless gazing. One man after another. A looking that produces nothing but looks. I think of the boxlike figures reproduced in university Power Point presentations to illustrate the numbers on diversity. The figures are differentiated by color: soothing shades without too much contrast, beige to brown, like the color scheme in the lobby of a bank. There aren't very many brown ones. Still, there are more than we had last year. I'm scribbling numbers, trying to figure out what percent of one figure is me.

I cling to Bird. Not just because he was black or because he found himself in an institution sharing much of its architecture with mine, but because he was a jazz artist and jazz feels like the antidote to this Power Point, a source of what diversity programs promise and fail to deliver. Unexpectedness. Dazzling unpredictability[11]. The thrill as the artist steps out, as the script becomes a pair of wings. "You wanted to be known by your name, not 'that nigger over there,'" said Bird's friend Bob Redcross. "To be an individual was the most important thing in the world."

4. THE FALL OF DR. W

Summer 2012. I'm working hard on my dissertation. One afternoon, on campus, I run into Dr. W. Dr. W is on my dissertation committee; we joined the university at the same time; I took a class with him our first semester, and the paper I wrote for him won a prize and became my first publication. I doubt I'd have submitted it to a journal without his encouragement. We stand in the sun, laughing and talking about work. Dr. W is Kenyan and writes about Kenyan prison literature; he's driving himself hard to meet the deadline for his first book. I think of us as teammates, our successes intertwined, but this is the last time I will ever see him. In a few weeks, he'll be arrested for exposing himself to a student, just off campus, close to where we're standing now.

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10. DU: Not sure if she elaborates on this in her other works. Does she want to expose her complicated "belonging" within blackness?

11. ET: What makes jazz improvisation possible and what role does structure play in that?

Skin feeling.

The students in my graduate program are in shock. We've all read about Dr. W in the local paper. I'm sitting with my best friend in the department. We're lifting our hands and dropping them, gasping, drowning, we don't know what to think. My friend has worked as Dr. W's teaching assistant. She's never sensed anything inappropriate. Neither have I. She wonders if there's "something wrong," if he's been framed by the police—a black professor, after all, it's possible—but no, he admitted to the act. What we'll keep asking ourselves, what everyone in the department will keep asking, is this: why did he flash someone he knew? One of his undergraduate students. Of course it's wrong to flash anyone, but why this? It's like he wanted to get caught.

Flashback[12]: Brownsville, Texas, 1990. I'm visiting a friend. We're both nineteen. We're crossing a giant street, in my memory it feels as if we're crossing a highway, and there underneath a bridge stands an older man in a baseball cap, and when we look at him he drops his pants. His balls are huge. We run. We can't stop laughing. A memory of near-hysterical silliness, which I now recognize as a mild form of terror, in the way that an itch is a mild form of pain. It's the first time I've been flashed (though it will not be the last). I wonder if the terror is what makes everything seem huge: the street, the balls. This is the context I have for the act of indecent exposure. It takes place in a zone of squalor, a decayed industrial wasteland. There's no one around. It's not my teacher. It's not my friend.

I am furious with Dr. W. He had a chance at a brilliant career at a research university. His book was almost done. He might have gone up for early tenure. In the weeks following his arrest, I argue against everyone who regards him with compassion. "He has a problem," say some people in the department, "he needs help." Fine, I tell them, but he can get help far away from a university classroom! Are you going to privilege this one person over the hundreds of women who will take his classes, visit his office? (Like me, like me.) Today, at a couple of years' remove, I'm still angry, and also my heart hurts. In the fall of Dr. W I see a reaction to extreme pressure, a reaction that is no less real for being unjustifiable, like the fall of Charlie Parker, the heroin addict. Why did he take his clothes off? LOOK AT ME[13]. Is it possible, without attempting to absolve Dr. W, to recognize[14] the inflexibility of the structures within which he labored, the tenure track stretching out before him? To recognize the forms in which he was required to produce knowledge of the interior of a prison under Daniel arap Moi. How do you get off a moving train? You jump. I remember a conference the year before his fall, how Dr. W gave a talk on the subject of his research, concluding with a poem by Alamin Mazrui, who was detained under Moi: "Niguse"—"Touch Me."

When I'm released
I will ask anyone

---

12. ET: Pause to think about the "flash" in these two cases as a knowing.

13. ET: Who is yelling for acknowledgement here?

14. ET: How do you think differently about being recognized versus being exposed?

to touch me
delicately
sensitively
but
truly!

When I'm released. I'll ask anyone. Niguse. Touch me. The idea that anyone, anyone at all outside this prison, would be able to touch me truly. Inside the prison, all forms of touching are false. Dr. W at the microphone in his handsome suit, surrounded by an audience of academics.[15]

Can a sense of constant exposure lead one to a compulsion toward that very thing? Robert George Reisner describes a fancy dress party in Harlem, and how Charlie Parker "suddenly emerged from a room with his horn and played a long solo of extraordinary beauty." Bird and his horn. The guests looking up, arrested by the sound. Such a gift, the solo, the individual voice. A voice that could belong to no one else. "His attire was conspicuous," Reisner informs us. "He was completely naked."

And yet flashing isn't a solo. It's a routine, a repetition. Dr. W admitted to the police that he'd flashed several women before. Five times, he said. Is there anything more banal than this kind of abuse? I feel like I'm picking up feathers here, trying to put them back where they belong. Poor cock robin! And yet he won't be covered. He's forever visible to me, exposed. What is it that drives me to attempt this rescue, to make something out of this abject episode? Don't I have better models?

Nobody wants to emulate a bad model. Maybe there's something important about role models that are completely hopeless and trashed. I won't copy Dr. W. I can't march behind him across a Power Point slide. He makes the easy questions grotesque. *Am I not a man and a brother*?[16]

5. PAST DUE

I listen to "Relaxin' at Camarillo" over and over. I don't think I've ever heard anything so cheerful. I think about how Bird wrote it down in a taxi. A scrawl nobody else could read. His original title was "Past Due."

What was past due? What kind of debt? In the meeting, pale figures line the Power Point slide like underdone gingerbread cookies. Our mission is to add more brown ones, to even it up a bit, to pay the debt so that everybody can relax. I'm here because I care, because I don't know what else to do, and because I was asked. By the end of my second year, I'm on three different diversity committees. Center, commission, task force. I'm leading two of them. I am, at one time, worker, expert, and evidence of success.

In the logic of diversity work, bodies of color form a material that must accumulate until it reaches a certain mass. Once that's done, everyone can stop talking about it. For now, we minimize talk by representing our work with charts that can be taken in instantly, at a glance. In her book *On Being Included: Racism and*

15. ET: Another prison, school, art trifecta.

16. ET: If Dr. W. is a bad model, what kind of model is Charlie Parker? Sofia Samatar?

Diversity in Institutional Life, Sara Ahmed writes of diversity workers of color: "We are ticks in the boxes; we tick their boxes." The box is the predictable form, the tick the sign of how quickly you can get past it[17]. Get past us.

Well, you ask, should we dissolve all the committees, then? Keep faculty of color off them? What's your solution? Try to read the demand for solutions and your frustration for what they are: products of the logic of diversity work, which wants to get the debt paid, over with, done. Diversity work is slow and yet it's always in a rush. It can't relax. It can't afford the informal gesture, the improvised note, the tangential question that moves off script, away from representation into some weird territory of you and me talking in this room right now. Diversity work can't afford to entertain the thought that some debts can't be paid, that they might just be past due. With agonizing slowness, this work grinds on toward payment—that is, toward the point where it will no longer exist. It's a suicidal project.

6. HOTEL CALIFORNIA

J, who now teaches in the Psychology Program, used to be a researcher at Camarillo State Hospital. One day he takes me to the hill behind the former chapel where, he tells me, a patient at Camarillo State once built himself a house. Tugging aside the vines, we find steps carved into the hill. Higher up, there's a flat space where the patient laid concrete foundations. Concrete! Where did he get it? J doesn't know. We stand looking down at the campus. Somebody's put a plastic chair up here. It's a haunted spot, full of presences that criss-cross one another among the ruins of a secret and dogged labor. A labor whose meaning remains obscure, the little house mostly gone now, the remaining stones without character, withdrawn. I can't know why the patient built the house, and I'm wary of investing the project with too much romance, when it may have been more of a survival strategy, a way of emerging on the other side of something unbearable. Still, the campus looks different from up here. The figure of Bird's lone man looks different, too—the man who so terrified him, looking out on a hill. Maybe the man was looking at this hill, imagining how he could improvise, rig something up within the institution.

There's a rumor, almost certainly false, that the Eagles song "Hotel California" was written about Camarillo State Hospital. A paranoid version of a pretty jail with a beast that won't die at its heart. Well yes, I know, I'm in it up to my ears. I'm in it and trying to figure out how to be in it, improvising with a heroin addict and a flasher. These are not ideal conditions. But after all, we're all working with what we've got in the university, weirdly homeless together, camping out[18]. I'm not talking about hospitality, inclusion, or a "welcoming environment"—all ways of saying the guest had better behave. I don't buy the institution's attempts to appropriate notions of "family" or "home life." I'm talking about a hotel. I'm saying I don't belong here and neither do you. So let's meet in this space where we don't belong. Like hospitals, hotels are haunted places,

17. ET: What are the connotations, feelings, and attitudes around this idea of "ticking boxes"?

18. ET: This is how she describes her workplace. Let's pause to think about that.

teeming with the ghosts of those who were not at home there, who slept there, ate there, played the sax for the dances on Saturday nights. Ghosts of the itinerant ones who passed through having found, temporarily and among strangers, a way to relax. One of the websites I sift through in my obsession with Bird points out that his time at Camarillo may have been "the only true holiday" of his short life.

The most beautiful story I know about Bird was told by August Blume:

"There was this musician's girl who had a bad case for Bird's music. She left her fiancé to follow Charlie... The musician went out looking for the girl and found her registered in the same hotel as Parker. She had asked for and managed to get a room right next door to Bird. She had put a chair against the wall, and she would sit there, her ear glued to the plaster, listening to Bird's incessant practicing. Her boyfriend took another chair and joined her, the both of them holding hands and listening through the wall."

These days, I'm turning around the idea of jazz study—wondering if there's a way that study can borrow from jazz, which is not just about individualism, but is rather, as Ellison writes, "a marvel of social organization." As I write, a marvel of social organization takes place in San Francisco: black women activists block an intersection in the financial district, several of them with their torsos bare, protesting police brutality against their sisters in response to a report called Say Her Name. Say her name. "To be an individual was the most important thing in the world." These women improvise a space both public and private, an occupied space. They set up altars. They form a wall. The decision some make to go bare-chested, the organizers explain, draws on African traditions. It's a riff, a variation on the practice of women exposing themselves as a protest or in war. I think of Dr. W's Kenya where, Wambui Mwangi writes, "A group of women stripping naked in public is one of our most potent political practices."

There are different kinds of exposure, of organization, of study, of strategy, of being together in public, of being skin.[19]

"I put quite a bit of study into the horn," said Bird. How do you study that way? I keep coming back to the hotel, to the couple beside the wall, how Bird was invisible to them but not inaudible, how closely they listened to him, studying through the wall. The barrier seems so important to me, the fact that it was a wall and not a window. There could be no pretense of accessibility. And yet. Something was happening there, in the fraught intimacy of the listeners, at that moment in their charged and unhappy history. This is another inadequate model—after all, it was a kind of invasion, Bird unaware of what was going on—but its elements haunt me, demanding a remix: sound, touch, a broken history, a rapt attentiveness, an uncertain future.

I think of Bird's innovation, the sublime difficulty of his music. "Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary," Ellison writes, "its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos." That frozen face is a wall: a conscious rejection of the grins of the minstrel show. The sound of bop, too, is deliberately inaccessible, its complexity springing partly from the desire to be known by name, to receive credit for one's art, "to create a jazz that could not be so easily imitated and exploited by white musicians." This is a dream

19. ET: And how can we think of Dr. W.'s flashing in comparison to this?

of something so raw it can't be bottled and sold, an exposure so intimate and unstable it acts as a barrier to appropriation.

I'm looking for that kind of wall. A sound. Somebody to hold my hand.[20]

I'm right here in front of you

Touch me again please!

Touch me!

Touch me!

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=54#h5p-6

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- How would you define this neologism "skin feeling"? Try to generate different definitions of the term, anticipating what this text could be about.
- Following up, what does it mean to define or name something?
- What are the differences between nakedness, nudity, and exposure?

Close Shots:

- In section 3: Power Point, Samatar suggests that jazz is an "antidote" to the university's power point presentation on diversity, offering a different kind of "source." Go back and close-read this section to bring out the meaning of this contrast. What does the power

20. ET: What is it to think of your individuality as a wall?

point do? In what ways is it like the scene of Charlie Parker "looking" out from prison? How is this related to the idea of skin feeling (defined in the previous section) and what is different about jazz?

- Part of this essay is Samatar's pastiche of several voices that speak directly on Charlie Parker or around his circumstances. Look at the quotations from Walter Page, Ralph Ellison, Alamin Mazrui, and August Blume. How is Charlie Parker being seen or not?
    - Page: Oh, they picked poor robin clean
      Oh, they picked poor robin clean
      They tied poor robin to a stump
      Lord, they picked all the feathers
      Round from robin's rump
      Oh, they picked poor Robin clean.
    - Ellison: "In the end he had no private life and his most tragic moments were drained of human significance."
      "only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything except me."
      "Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary [...] its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos [...] to create a jazz that could not be so easily imitated and exploited by white musicians."
    - Mazrui: When I'm released
      I will ask anyone
      to touch me
      delicately
      sensitively
      but
      truly!
    - Blume: "There was this musician's girl who had a bad case for Bird's music. She left her fiancé to follow Charlie... The musician went out looking for the girl and found her registered in the same hotel as Parker. She had asked for and managed to get a room right next door to Bird. She had put a chair against the wall, and she would sit there, her ear glued to the plaster, listening to Bird's incessant practicing. Her boyfriend took another chair and joined her, the both of them holding hands and listening through the wall."

- In section 6: Hotel California, Samatar turns to the idea of the hotel as a way to talk about institutional spaces where no one belongs, asserting, "so let's meet in this space where we don't belong." What does it mean to do this? How do we make sense of these spaces as "haunted," as she describes it? Going back over the essay, how does the hotel echo the hospital and the university, and how are these spaces different?

Mid Shots

- See "Collage: Found, Donated, Repeated with a Difference" for a creative writing assignment inspired by jazz as form.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would teach Samatar alongside Bassey Ikpi's "Connecting the Dots" to consider an alternative image of nakedness and the body. Another interesting pairing would be with Ada Límon's "The Contract Says: We Want This to Be Bilingual" to consider the relationship between the social whole and the individual experience.

DU: I was always struck by Samatar's ideas on space and belonging. In teaching this piece, I'd center her idea about, "meeting in a space where we don't belong" and what that would mean within the various institutional spaces of academe. Pietri (and Perdomo) imagine alternative spaces around

constructing emancipated collective identities. Space, collective identities and alternative futurities around what's possible could be directions to take in teaching these texts.

"Three Ways to Speak English"

Jamila Lyiscott, 2014

Originally published as TED Talk

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#education**, **#personal is political**, **#poetry**, **#protest**, **#trauma**, **#stereotype**, **#language discrimination**, **#grammar**, **#colonialism**, **#audio**

Frame

JS & ET: We often kick off the semester with this poem and students respond enthusiastically to a message that is intent on disrupting the norms of academic spaces and how we regulate each other. In this poem, Lyiscott connects language to her own body and to the social contexts in which she moves. This recording is also a great way to introduce students to the idea of "performing" a language, raising questions about who we perform for and why.

This interactive video features several pause points with close-shot questions for discussion. They may be helpful to review before listening and can be found in the guide below.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it

online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=56#h5p-17

Text Version

Close Shots: Since this text is a poem, we recommend listening to (or watching) the whole piece in its entirety before breaking it down.

Time (mm:ss)	Questions
1:20	In this first part, Lyiscott performs her three Englishes by retelling three moments of exchange – listening closely you see that she meets one English with another version each time, as if to break the rules of exchange. • What is exchanged in each moment and with whom? • If we think of this as a kind of translation, how does that enact equality as she claims
2:50	Lyiscott digs into the "rules" of language as she recounts correcting her professor, correcting her mother, and her internal process of finding language when at home, school, or with friends. In this part of the poem try to pull out lessons from these examples about the "rules" of language. • What makes up a language? How is it supposed to be used? • How does understanding these rules change the value statement of "good"? • Rules could simply be descriptive but when does it become prescriptive? Do Lyiscott's corrections describe, prescribe, critique?
3:45	Lyiscott asserts: "How can you expect me to treat their imprint on your language as anything less than equal?" What does she mean here? • Focus on the "equal." Newton's third law of motion is "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." What is she implying about the assumption of one-way impact and the appropriateness of reciprocity? • Think about the possessiveness of those italicized pronouns; who owns the English language? • Then, how is "imprint" used differently as resistance? How does it convey the "linguistic celebration" she desires?
End	The latter part of the poem describes the history of Lyiscott's three Englishes and the politics of identity and communication that come from this. • What is the connotative meaning of "borrowed," "broken," "stolen," and "composite"? • How does this draw on other images in her poem like "profusing gashes"? • How is this invoked against the expectation to "speak your history wholly"?

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=56#h5p-7

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- What is grammar? How does it work?
- What does it mean to be articulate?
- When have you received a back-handed compliment? How would you describe what happened? What was exchanged? How did you know it had ulterior meaning?

Mid Shots

- See "The Point of Education" for an exploration of Lyiscott's liberation literacies principles she developed as guidelines for teaching.

Possible Transitions

DU: Since performativity seems to be a central concept in Lyiscott, I could pair this with Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" to go over all of the different polyphonic registers that both authors use to deliver their performances.

ET: Given that Lyiscott talks about how she purposefully speaks, and she has a moment of "correcting" her mother's grammar, I would pair this with Michel DeGraff's "As a Child in Haiti, I

Was Taught to Despise My Language and Myself" to discuss the purpose and motives behind how we teach language. Putting this alongside NPR's "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" and Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" would add even more dimensions to this topic.

"To Speak is to Blunder"

Yiyun Li, 2016

Originally published in *The New Yorker*

Editor's Note: The excerpt(s) in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#immigration**, **#lost in translation**, **#personal narrative**, **#experimental**, **#personal is political**, **#memory**, **#mental health**, **#tokenism**, **#family**, **#silence**, **#self-censorship**

Frame

JS: In talking with my co-authors about this piece – how to teach it and how to include it in this book – we kept returning to the idea that it functions by keeping open many directions and layers and refusing closure or finality. Likewise, we wanted to present this text in a way that suggested this multiplicity and opted for a few excerpts with annotations that reflect different ways into the text.

Excerpts

WHEN WE ENTER a world[1]—a new country, a new school, a party, a family or a class reunion, an army camp, a hospital—we speak the language it requires[2]. The wisdom to adapt is the wisdom to have two languages: the one spoken to others and the one spoken to oneself. One learns to master the public language not much differently from the way that one acquires a second language: assess the situations, construct sentences with the right words and the correct syntax, catch a mistake if one can avoid it, or else apologize and learn the lesson after a blunder[3]. Fluency in the public language, like fluency in a second language, can be achieved with enough practice.

Perhaps the line between the two is, and should be, fluid; it is never so for me. I often forget, when I write, that English is also used by others. English is my private language.[4] Every word has to be pondered before it becomes a word[5]. I have no doubt—can this be an illusion?—that the conversation I have with myself, however linguistically flawed, is the conversation that I have always wanted in the exact way I want it to be. In my relationship with English, in this relationship with the intrinsic distance between a non-native speaker and an adopted language that makes people look askance, I feel invisible but not estranged. It is the position I believe I always want in life. But with every pursuit there is the danger of crossing a line, from invisibility to erasure.

There was a time when I could write well in Chinese. In school, my essays were used as models; in the Army, where I spent a year of involuntary service between the ages of eighteen and nineteen, our squad leader gave me the choice between drafting a speech for her and cleaning the toilets or the pigsties—I always chose to write. Once, in high school, I entered an oratory contest. Onstage, I saw that many of the listeners were moved to tears by the poetic and insincere lies I had made up; I moved myself to tears, too. It crossed my mind that I could become a successful propaganda writer. I was disturbed by this. A young person wants to be true to herself

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1. JS: So what makes up a world? How does Li's list following the em dash suggest a definition? It's social, the space is identifiable, and there seems to be some reason or purpose. Yet these spaces might also generate a range of feelings when we enter them. It seems odd to me that those feelings are neutralized in Li's description here.

2. ET: I breeze by this, but when I slow down, she speaks of people as collectively pressured (the we ... me and you) by a group that's collectively imagined (the it ... a country, a school). She doesn't single herself or anyone else out in imagining the pressure we feel to speak a certain way.

3. JS: So much is happening here beginning with "assess the situation" — this almost makes language first about listening and observation, rather than speaking or expressing something.

4. JS: I can relate to this experience of writing as creating a private space for thinking and language. But it's also unusual since we use language to communicate with an audience, even if it's only implied. Writing IS about reaching out another. There's another layer as well since Li is talking about English specifically which is, in my experience, almost overwhelmingly pushed as the main, or dominant language, for communication. And we know this is often used against people (thinking here of Anzaldúa's How to Tame a Wild Tongue and her argument against "linguistic terrorism").

5. JS: Is this a definition of the concept "private language"? If so, what does that suggest?

and to the world. But it did not occur to me to ask: Can one's intelligence rely entirely on the public language; can one form a precise thought, recall an accurate memory, or even feel a genuine feeling, with only the public language?[6]

***

When Katherine Mansfield was still a teen-ager, she wrote in her journal about a man next door playing "Swanee River" on a cornet, for what seemed like weeks. "I wake up with the 'Swannee River,' eat it with every meal I take, and go to bed eventually with 'all de world am sad and weary' as a lullaby." I read Mansfield's notebooks and Marianne Moore's letters around the same time, when I returned home from New York. In a letter, Moore described a night of fund-raising at Bryn Mawr. Maidens in bathing suits and green bathing tails on a raft: "It was Really most realistic . . . way down upon the Swanee River."

I marked the entries because they reminded me of a moment I had forgotten. I was nine, and my sister thirteen. On a Saturday afternoon, I was in our apartment and she was on the balcony. My sister had joined the middle-school choir that year, and in the autumn sunshine she sang in a voice that was beginning to leave girlhood. "Way down upon the Swanee River. Far, far away. That's where my heart is turning ever; That's where the old folks stay."

The lyrics were translated into Chinese. The memory, too, should be in Chinese. But I cannot see our tiny garden with the grapevine, which our father cultivated and which was later uprooted by our wrathful mother, or the bamboo fence dotted with morning glories, or the junk that occupied half the balcony—years of accumulations piled high by our hoarder father—if I do not name these things to myself in English. I cannot see my sister, but I can hear her sing the lyrics in English. I can seek to understand my mother's vulnerability and cruelty, but language is the barrier I have chosen. "Do you know, the moment I die your father will marry someone else?" my mother used to whisper to me when I was little. "Do you know that I cannot die, because I don't want you to live under a stepmother?" Or else, taken over by inexplicable rage, she would say that I, the only person she had loved, deserved the ugliest death because I did not display enough gratitude. But I have given these moments—what's possible to be put into English—to my characters. Memories, left untranslated, can be disowned; memories untranslatable can become someone else's story.

You may access the full text here on The New Yorker website.

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6. JS: This reminds me of reading Umberto Eco's novel The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana. The narrator loses his long-term memory and tries to figure out who he is by reading what he's written in the past. He finds a school essay he wrote as a child that praised Benito Mussolini. He wonders if he actually believed what he wrote or if he wrote what was expected of him at the time. The idea of not knowing if you believe what you wrote also reminds me of Pablo Neruda's phrase from his Book of Questions: "Might I ask my book if I'm the one who really wrote it?"

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=238#h5p-1

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- This essay is self-destructive – focused on erasure, suicide, the blunders in speaking and of speech. When does making or saying something simultaneously destroy it?
- What do you think is meant by the term "private language"? How could you relate this concept to the title?
- How do you describe the experience of eavesdropping? What does it tell us about "public" and "private"?
- What does it mean to be made a symbol? Why does this happen? What might be some of the pitfalls?

Close Shots:

- Look to paragraph 20 (starts "The lyrics were translated into Chinese") or 28 (starts "Mansfield spoke of her habit of keeping a journal") and circle all the instances of "not," "cannot," "n't," "dis-," "un-," and "in-." Then underline other words in that paragraph that connote similar feelings of "not." How is Li filling the void of all this negation? What is there and what isn't in those words on the page?
- At the end of the essay, Li writes, "I dread the moment when a thought trails off and a feeling starts, when one faces the eternal challenge of eluding the void for which one does not have words." Underline all of the words in the essay that are tied to affect ("Loneliness," "emptiness", "invisible", "estranged", for example). Contextualize these words in the larger context of each section of the essay. How is affect part of the larger ideas of the essay?

Mid Shots

- See "Aphoristic Translation" for an extended writing prompt based on the poetic, aphoristic phrases throughout Li's essay.
- See "Parsing Themes" for a close reading activity focused on the structure of Li's essay.

Possible Transitions

ET: I would teach Yiyun Li's essay with Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" as texts that take the silencing of the self very differently from one another. I would also pair Li with Phuc Tran's "Grammar, Identity, and the Dark Side of the Subjunctive" to consider what carries over in translation or across generations.

DU: Yiyun Li may go well with Miller's "Oracabessa" as a way to complicate student's understanding of the complexities of representation. Stuart Hall's theories on culture and representation would be one suggested avenue for instructors.

"The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"

Audre Lorde, 1978

Originally published in *Sinister Wisdom*

Editor's Note: The excerpt(s) in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#silence, **#fear**, **#death**, **#difference**, **#protest**, **#personal is political**, **#feminism**, **#self-censorship**, **#complicity**, **#identity**, **#mental health**, **#trauma**

Frame

ET: A canonical text from the black feminist movement of the 1970s, Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" is almost the antithesis of Yiyun Li's "To Speak Is to Blunder." There is no safety or reprieve to be gained by silence in Lorde despite silence being a haven, or at least the zugzwang, in life. Both are a direct response to death as well – a sort of survivor's testimony. Thinking of these two together had us all wondering about the life and death (benefit and cost) of speaking, of silence.

Excerpts

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly edged in a merciless light, and what I most regretted with my silences. Of what I had ever been afraid? To question or to speak[1] as I believed could've meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death on the other hand is the final silence and that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words.[2] And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge[3] that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear[4] into perspective gave me great strength.

* * *

And of course I am afraid because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent[5][6], because there's always one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside."

In the cause of silence each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgement or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live.[7] Within this country where racial difference creates constant, if unspoken,

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1. JS: I love that already speaking is layered with an inquisitive disposition. How does the extension of oneself in speaking reflect inquiry, curiosity, perhaps even critique?

2. ET: If you only had 200 words left to say in life, what would you say?

3. JS: Although we don't have concrete details yet about the kinds of power that can persuade someone not to speak, I can anticipate this is social and political, referring to hierarchies and inequalities, whether through gender, race, class, sexuality, or other kinds of differences. What I notice here is how Lorde identifies power within oneself through knowledge, feeling, and reflection that helps to "put into perspective." This kind of power flips the script on structures of oppression that seek to marginalize and silence.

4. ET: This feeling can help you survive but it can also deny you a life.

5. ET: This feeling can help you survive but it can also deny you a life.

6. JS: And even is the feeling of wholeness? Have you ever felt it? One thing I'm appreciating about Lorde is the emphasis on transformation...might we always be changing?

7. JS: Close reading the details here, the fear arises from a social exchange, or putting the self in relation with others...

distortion of vision, black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable[8], our blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson that we were never meant to survive.[9] Not as human beings and neither were most of you here today, black or not.[10] And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our Earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles and we will still be no less afraid.

You may access the full text here on the *Deep Green Resistance News Service* website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=60#h5p-14

Text Version

Wide Shots:

- What do you think of the adage "actions speak louder than words"? Where does this leave the power of language and voice?
- Have you ever felt at risk after speaking or sharing parts of yourself with others? Have

8. ET: But "without which we cannot truly live"? Are we never safe as long as we live?
9. JS: This line says so much, revealing a truth that is still difficult (or impossible) for many Americans to admit because it is denied in the mythology of the U.S. How does this truth sit in your understanding of American society now? How does the idea of "survival" resonate in the power of Lorde's speaking?
10. JS: Subtle detail but what does this tell you about Lorde's speech, her audience, and message? Who all is included in her remarks about who isn't mean to survive "as human beings"?

you felt in danger when you reveal yourself?
- When you push yourself out of your comfort zone, what did you gain from that experience? How did you push past your fear?

Close Shots:

- Circle all the references to death, pain, fear, and danger. Underline other related terms. What is the collective impact of these words on how Lorde presents both silence and speaking?
- In concrete terms, what do you see as the "dragon we call america" and "the machine"?
- This essay largely deals with the question of identity, from external identity markers like race and gender to internal identity marked by personality, psychology, and feeling. Where do you see the internal and external colliding in this excerpt?
- Beyond external and internal identities, Lorde alludes to the intersectionality of identity toward the end of her chapter when she speaks on reading, studying, and teaching different voices. The passage below points to the history of occupying the position of others with a call to continue doing this — how do you reconcile these ideas with the first paragraph of the excerpt above, which celebrates the power we find within ourselves?

> And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing – their experience is so different from mine." Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, "she is a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or, "she's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?" Or again, "this woman writes of her sons and I have no children."

Mid Shots

- See "Self Reflection, Collective Change" for a reflective writing activity that builds into a creative writing assignment to compose a manifesto on communication inspired by Lorde's call to action.
- See "Juxtapositions of Silence" to consider side-by-side passages from Li, Samatar, Thors, Anzaldúa, and Lorde that present silent women.

Possible Transitions

JS: For a strong introduction to core thinkers on intersectional feminism, this selection works well alongside another canonical piece, Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." This text also serves as a kind of political provocation to frame the journalistic podcast episode by NPR Codeswitch, "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak."

DU: I'd pair this text with Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" to craft a lesson plan on the relationship between activism and literature. Historicizing Lorde's influence on feminist movements along with Pietri's place within the Latinx Civil Rights movements of the 60s and 70s may also be another direction I'd take.

"Vão/Vòng A Conversation with Katrina Dodson"

Madhu Kaza, 2017

Originally published in *Asterix Journal*

Editor's Note: The excerpt(s) in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#translation, **#identity**, **#ways of knowing**, **#journalistic**, **#belonging**, **#family**, **#outsider**, **#multilingual**

Frame

ET: I was adamant about wanting to include one entry in the reader that very directly addressed translation and Diego Ubiera delivered with this interview of Katrina Dodson from a favorite journal. What is fascinating about this interview is that Madhu Kaza deliberately chooses to make the translator, Katrina Dodson, a real person. Dodson has a past and an identity and presents translation as a familiar part of life. Translation isn't effectively done by machines and this interview reminds you why that is the case.

Excerpts

KD: I've thought a lot about how the Brazil-Vietnam connection is somewhat random[1], and yet I'm always noticing similarities in my experiences with both places. Both are tropical countries, much poorer than the U.S.[2], where a lot of life happens on the streets, in an informal economy. Both nations have a history of hardship and violence that somehow combines with an ability to maintain a certain lightheartedness through suffering and to enjoy just sitting on a stool and watching the world go by[3], something that Americans don't seem to know how to do very well[4]. I suppose that could be said of a lot of tropical countries.

One convergence that I find more striking is an echo between the languages. Having studied Vietnamese unexpectedly gave me an instinctive understanding of Portuguese spelling and pronunciation, elements that often perplex foreigners. Both Portuguese and Vietnamese have a lot of nasal sounds, and both languages strongly favor open syllables[5]—you never end a word on a closed syllable in either language, even if you see a consonant. For example, "vão," which can mean "they go" or "empty space" in Portuguese, sounds just like "vòng," which means "round" or "circle" in Vietnamese. The phrase "đi vòng vòng," means to go walking or cruising around, so I like to think of "vão/ vòng" as a place where the two languages I'm closest to intersect[6].

Imperialism makes for strange bedfellows[7], and it turns out that the romanized Vietnamese alphabet is derived from the Portuguese because the Portuguese missionaries who came to Vietnam from Macau and Goa in the early 1600s were the first to convert the language from Chinese script into Roman characters[8]. The French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes is credited with romanizing Vietnamese, but his 1651 dictionary drew

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1. JS: what do you think about Katrina's use of "random"? what does this adjective mean, particularly in the context of a connection like this?

2. ET: Why evoke the US here?

3. JS: Interesting to hear a kind of passive construction in referring to histories of hardship and violence. We have seen other examples in this reader of explicit accounts of colonialism, war, and displacement, so this stands out a bit. Is this what happens when trying to make comparisons across singular histories? Is this helpful to you as a reader? What questions does it raise?

4. ET: Is there truth to this? Is this too essentializing...too much of a generalization?

5. ET: Madhu Kaza had asked Katrina Dodson "have you found any resonances between your experiences of Brazilian Portuguese and Vietnamese?" Sound is resonant, but does resonance imply similarity?

6. JS: I find this delightful not only because there's ingenuity in this convergence but it introduces a bit more dynamism to the usual venn diagram visual we might think of when encountering these words and indeed when comparing two things. Vòng reminds us that it's about "cruising around" rather than static differences. What else can you think of through this unique conjunction?

7. JS: how does this phrase add on to the "random" in the first paragraph and/or the passive construction of histories of hardship and violence?

8. ET: Translating or transcribing isn't a transparent process as each language is a lens. What might be some of the unintended consequences of translating a language into the script of another?

heavily on work done by the Portuguese. So even though there are virtually no Vietnamese in Brazil, there is this unexpected linguistic connection.

In translating Clarice Lispector, I thought about her relationship to Portuguese as the child of immigrants who spoke with an accent and who brought other languages into the home—Yiddish and Hebrew. Lispector clearly dominates the Portuguese language in her writing yet makes these deliberate distortions that I feel must have started from having that window onto other languages that comes with being part of a diasporic community. Having to speak some Vietnamese with my relatives and listening to my mother talk on the phone in Vietnamese for hours definitely gave me a more imaginative relationship to English and to the givens of language in general than I otherwise would have had[9].

MHK: I think that's something that's not acknowledged widely enough: how access to multiple languages can enhance your imaginative capacities in your primary language.

Lastly, on a slightly different note, what are some works that you love that have come to you through translation?

KD: I can say with conviction that Ferrante Fever is forever for me, and I'll say it five times fast. Elena Ferrante is responsible for making me want to learn Italian next, but I'm also a huge fan of her translator Ann Goldstein, who is now a friend. I discovered the creepy magic of Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz through Danuta Borchardt's intoxicating translations, especially Cosmos and Ferdydurke. The Senegalese-French writer Marie NDiaye is a more recent revelation. I was completely absorbed by her Self-Portrait in Green. I sometimes read books in French, when I'm not feeling lazy, but her translator Jordan Stump does a beautiful job, and it's just a lot easier to get your hands on the translations in the U.S. Yoko Tawada is another writer I'm glad to be able to access through translation. Her The Bridegroom Was a Dog was translated from Japanese, and I'm about to start Memoirs of a Polar Bear, which she wrote in German and is translated by the highly respected Susan Bernofsky.

You may access the full text here on the *Asterix Journal* website.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=62#h5p-15

Text Version

9. ET: Here Dodson projects onto Lispector a similar "imaginative relationship" with language that comes from multilingualism. How does multilingualism provoke such playfulness? Do you think of translation as playful?

Wide Shots:

- Take an inventory of the books and stories you recall reading. Were they translations and if so from what language? How did that influence or enhance your reading experience or your memory of it now?
- What is a translator's job? How is this different from interpretation? What values should guide how they translate? What do the values you identified say about what you think about language?
- How have meaningless, chance, seemingly inconsequential decisions, or accidents affected you despite their objective unimportance?
- Consider different languages you speak (and define this in whatever way fits your experience), what is possible in that language that isn't in another? What are "specific resonances" or "particular feelings" you associate with speaking one language over another, especially when you move between languages?

Close Shots:

- Look to the first paragraph of the above excerpt. What cultural nuances does Dodson overlook in making essentialist statements about what the U.S. is like? What tropical places are like?
- The third paragraph states that "imperialism makes for strange bedfellows." Where does the phrase "strange bedfellows" come from? How does that phrase cast imperialism (as accidental)?
- In some ways, Dodson's response to the last question in this interview is in conversation with an excerpt from Sofia Samatar's "Skin Feeling" on world literature anthologies. Read the passage below and revisit the second excerpt above from Dodson. What are the tensions between accessing culture through translation and accessing culture through literary texts meant to be representative of a nation, people, history, etc.?

> SAMATAR: As a graduate student in a seminar on world literature, I remember arguing that no one who took representation as a goal could ever come up with an adequate model for creating anthologies. The classics of Western literature are admitted to these anthologies based on their perceived artistic or philosophical merit; meanwhile, works from Kenya, from India, from Jordan, from Vietnam, will be admitted to make the anthology "representative." David Damrosch discusses these different logics: works of world literature may be chosen for stature and

influence, he writes, or as "windows on the world." I hate this. Homer is our epic artist, Dickens our realist artist, Ngũgĩ our Kenyan—or worse, our African—artist.

The other students and the professor argue that we ought to concentrate on representation "for now," as anthologies of world literature are still so often skewed toward white male authors. I refuse to be satisfied with this. Although I can't articulate it at the time, I'm beginning to sense the mechanics of visibility. The one who makes it into the anthology stands for all the others, rendering them unnecessary, redundant. The chosen work is a "window on the world," transparent, impermeable, a barrier masquerading as a door.

Mid Shots

- See "Translation Across and Within Languages" to explore and reflect on the choices translators make that one can bring to their own playfulness and flexibility with writing across and within languages.
- See "Transculturation, Language and South-South Migration" to build knowledge on an understudied issue. This activity will help students understand some of the larger contexts around Dodson and Kaza's interview on translation/interpretation as well as dive into a major question of the times. The activity ends with a writing reflection.

Possible Transitions

JS: Paired with Phuc Tran's "Grammar and the Dark Side of the Subjunctive," these texts give two different perspectives from Vietnamese Americans on both Vietnamese and English, and other languages. This also works well with Yiyun Li's "To Speak is to Blunder" since both pieces explore what it means to inhabit—think and feel and dream within—languages.

DU: I would pair this text with Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" to have students reflect on Kaza's insight that having access to multiple languages can "enhance imaginative capacities" in a primary language. Anzaldua unapologetically writes through various registers to deliver what is now a classic text taught in all sorts of academic settings. An interesting assignment would be to ask students to utilize all of the various registers they may command to write energetically and forcefully. Jamila Lyiscott's work could also be used in a similar way.

PART II

EXPLORATIONS

AGAINST THE GRAIN: LISTENING FOR CONTROVERSY

paired with "Grammar, Identity, and the Dark Side of the Subjunctive"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#discussion**, **#argument**, **#ways of knowing**, **#critique**, **#context**, **#comparison**, **#multilingual**, **#60 minutes**

This discussion is designed to deepen interaction with the primary text by connecting to paratext in the form of YouTube comments, which critique the main arguments emerging from personal narrative. It may be most useful as a follow-up discussion and can link to other discussions or assignments about forms of writing.

Introduction

JS: Phuc Tran's TedTalk offers a compelling personal story, in part because he weaves his humor and self-confident geekiness with powerful memories of his family's refugee experiences and resettlement in the U.S. Like other Vietnamese American, refugee, and immigrant authors, Tran turns to his personal story to tell his family's story in order to speak of history that is not well understood or appreciated in mainstream American culture. Indeed, his narrative not only exposes the bullying pressures to assimilate that he and his family faced but also becomes an expression of how he has command over this culture to spin his own story and to emerge as the person he really wants to be.

Yet, if we listen closely to his presentation, at times, he relies on his own experiences to make broader claims about language, expression, relationships, and identity, which don't always hold up. Many of the YouTube comments below his video offer rebuttals and complications in what he says about the Vietnamese language in particular. The exchange that occurs between the main text and this paratext flesh out some of the underlying arguments about language and outlook, which one might not interrogate by listening to Tran's narrative alone.

The following discussion activity is designed to dive deeper into the core issues raised in Tran's talk and may

also generate productive conversations about the extent to which we can rely on our personal experience to develop arguments and the value of incorporating multiple perspectives for deeper understanding.

Guide

Close Read: Audience Reactions

One of the affordances of engaging with a YouTube video as text is that there is so much information *around* the main content which can provide some clues on how to complicate the ideas presented. In the case of Phuc Tran's talk, he presents a personal narrative that becomes the basis of an argument about language as a lens, which means it can shape our personal, cultural, and even national outlook. Take a look at some of the YouTube comments that begin to push back on the ideas he presents.

Use the ones below or go back to the YouTube page to find your own leads:

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=261#oembed-1

@ngocbui7435 9 years ago

I am Vietnamese and I find of most of his claims are absurd. Vietnamese has way to express condition, to think of what could happen if they had did something. About another claim that Vietnamese does not have "might, could, would", I think it's wrong too. While it's true that Vietnamese does not have "would", "could" could be expressed as "có thể", "might" could be expressed as "cũng có thể".

For example:
If he told me that, I would have lend him some money: Nếu nó nói với tôi, tôi đã cho nó mượn tiền.
If he told me that, I could have lend him some money: Nếu nó nói với tôi, tôi có thể đã cho nó mượn tiền.
If he told me that, I might have lend him some money: Nếu nó nói với tôi, tôi cũng có thể đã cho nó mượn tiền.

Show less

50 **Reply**

@fdt31415926535 8 years ago

Vietnamese has subjunctive... However, Phuc's dad's English isn't sufficient enough to comprehend what he said. His father probably didn't "catch" the phrase "would have", or he was unable to comprehense it in English since it's not his mother tongue... Also, Phuc's Vietnamese is quite incomplete since he's left Vietnam at a young age...
Vietnamese subjunctive form:
Nếu <Subj> đã <action/condition>, thì (có lẽ/perhaps) <alt consequence>
Just like a normal condition form, but Vietnamese language speaker could assume it to be in subjunctive form for an alternative result/future. Note that beside perfect tense, tenses are often optional in Vietnamese, speakers could assume what tense it belong to...

Show less

40 **Reply**

@leevanbinh 8 years ago

I find that the presentation was very well delivered with a nice cadence of calmness and factually convincing. However, had I not been born in Vietnam and grown up in America, I would have sided with him on all points. Oops! Was that a subjunctive? My point is, there are subjunctive moods in the Vietnamese language. In Mr. Tran's case, his father probably did not use it much because of a cultural preference for not using the subjunctive, not the lack of it. I know Vietnamese has the subjunctive mood because I have used it myself.

Show less

Reply

@mrnaruwan 9 years ago

Phuc keeps talking about "the subjunctive" when he actually means the conditional: "If it hadn't rained, we would have gone to the beach."
I couldn't help thinking that Phuc's parents were probably quite capable of pondering and expressing the notion of "what might have been" but they just chose not to.

23 **Reply**

Questions:

- What are the most important critiques you notice in the comments?
- How do the comments reframe some of the key moments in Tran's talk?
- What questions do you have based on the debate we see across the main talk and the comments?

Discuss: Grammar and Identity

In many ways the title of Tran's talk, "Grammar, Identity, and the Dark Side of the Subjunctive" tells us about the key concepts that link his personal narrative and his argument about language. Yet, the YouTube comments above complicate his story. Beyond strict grammatical "rules" dictating what's possible in language—for example, whether the subjunctive mood exists—the audience's comments suggest that one's *use* of language reflects both cultural preference and individual choice and that there are many ways of expressing concepts beyond a simple grammatical structure.

- In what ways do Tran's stories really seem to reflect language, and when do you see other dynamics? Focus on one of the key moments in the video and discuss again how Tran describes language working. Then, discuss how you see other forces like culture or experience shape this moment. How are these two interpretations related? What's more convincing to you and why?
- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis contends that the structure of a language determines how native speakers perceive the world and categorize experience. This is also known as linguistic relativity, an approach in linguistics that has been debated, criticized, and largely discredited. What are the implications of this hypothesis for understanding culture, communication, and even identity? To what extent do linguistic differences reveal a different outlook and at what point does this lead to stereotypes? Revisit some of the key moments of miscommunication and misunderstanding that Tran recounts. You may also want to revisit the validity of his claim that "different nations' feelings of optimism" reflect their languages.

To understand more about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and linguistic relativity, check out this short video:

Linguistic Relativity: Does Your Language Change How You See The World?

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=261#oembed-2

To dive deeper into linguistic diversity in a way that builds on this hypothesis, watch another TedTalk titled "How Language Shapes the Way We Think":

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=261#oembed-3

- Connecting the ideas from Tran's TedTalk, the youtube comments, and insights from your discussions, what do you think is the relationship between language, culture, and identity? How do you experience this? How might you "re-understand" your own languages (as Tran suggests) as a result of these discussions? You may even start by reflecting on how you inhabit the subjunctive and indicative moods.

Media Attributions

APHORISTIC TRANSLATION

paired with "To Speak is to Blunder"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#discussion**, **#60 minutes**, **#translation**

Inviting students to move from close reading to guiding ideas in the essay as a whole, this activity could be used as either an in-class discussion or as an extended writing prompt.

Introduction

ET & JS: Given the complexity and elusiveness of "To Speak is to Blunder" – an essay that refuses to give you all the details you might seek and reinforces contradictions by withholding resolution – much of our discussions about how to teach this essay returned to the question of different points of access. Where do we find openings to leverage for understanding? Many of the openings emerge from the conceptual oppositions that run throughout her piece.

One of the main tensions in the essay is that between public and private languages. While Li explicitly maps this onto the dynamics of native and adopted languages, we also traced this tension in her own writing as she introduces different registers, blending personal narrative (even confessional) with a more philosophical meditation. Often, Li tapers her insight toward a more categorical statement, as if making an offering at the end of her paragraphs or sections. It might be helpful to think of these more impersonal statements as "aphorisms." These declarative statements suggest something like a general truth while emerging from the intimacy of her memories, dreams, revelations, and disclosures. Just as Li demonstrates a habit of borrowing the received wisdom of other writers, this turn to "aphorism" suggests language that circulates in a more public register than the privacy of her experiences. In this sense, we could say the aphoristic statements translate across the threshold of private and public.

When working with students on this essay, these aphorisms are one way to encounter this translation in the experience of reading and they also become points of departure for analyzing some of the overarching questions raised in Li's essay.

Guide

Warm Up: What is an Aphorism?

Since this might be the first time students think about "aphorisms," ask students to come up with some either in groups or in private. These do not have to be related to Li's text or the framework of the class. Write on the board a simple definition of aphorisms like: "An aphorism is a short memorable statement used to impart wisdom or give a lesson." Some ideas could be: 1) Ask them to give each other aphorisms on how to succeed in life or in college, 2) Ask them to share aphorisms on how best to communicate with others, 3) Ask them to share aphorisms about how to excel at their favorite hobby. This "Warm-Up" could take many forms. We just suggest that you take time to introduce the concept a bit more before diving into a close reading.

Close Read: Parallel and Opposing

Li has a tendency to close some paragraphs with parallel sentences that hold onto opposing ideas that make a broader claim to how she sees language. Take one of the sentences below which appear at the ends of Li's paragraphs. Start by discussing what it might say to you on its own (annotate, free-write, or discuss with a peer).

Where and how does the sentence show a parallel structure?

What are the oppositions revealed and what do they mean to you?

Then, return to the paragraph from which the sentence is drawn (and perhaps the one before and/or after it) and now work up what you think Li might mean with this sentence based on the surrounding context. Notice how this adds on to your own sense of the line, building or departing from the understanding you had on your own.

- An artist is not of much importance to any nation's interest (paragraph 4)
- One's grief belongs to oneself; one's tragedy, to others (para 6)
- What one goes toward is less definitive than that from which one turns away (para 12)
- No one thinks of suicide as a courageous endeavor to kill time (para 14)
- We can kill time, but language kills us (para 16)
- One does not always want to be subject to self-interrogation imposed by a cliché (para 17)
- Memories, left untranslated, can be disowned; memories untranslatable can become someone else's story (para 20)
- Fluency in the public language, like fluency in a second language, can be achieved with enough practice (para 22)
- A private language, however, defies any confinement. Death alone can take it away (para 28)
- To speak when one cannot is to blunder (para 39)

- The solace is with the language I chose. The grief, to have spoken at all (para 44)

Write: Translating Aphorisms

Working with the aphoristic sentence you selected, how do you connect it to some of the larger questions of the essay?

What is lost when adopting a new language?

How can one reasonably resist being appropriated by social expectations? Is something like "authenticity" possible?

What is a "private language"? How does this disrupt the assumptions around native and adopted languages?

In addition to considering the ideas Li is trying to convey as you connect your focus sentence with the broader issues of the essay, what do you think about how she accomplishes this? Why does this pivot to this aphoristic moment? What is the effect? How is this more public language working to express her more private ideas?

In this sense, you are trying to answer the question of how Li's essay performs the tension between public and private, a core idea introduced even in the title of her piece, when "to speak is to blunder."

BODY AS METAPHORIC SPACE

paired with "Connecting the Dots"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#comparison**, **#perspective**, **#30 minutes**, **#body**, **#personal is political**, **#annotation**, **#discussion**

Inviting students to move from close reading to guiding ideas in the essay as a whole, this activity could be used as either an in-class discussion or as an extended writing prompt.

Introduction

ET: Both Sofia Samatar and Bassey Ikpi center the body – the black, female body in particular – in their essays, but in seemingly different ways. In broad strokes, Samatar seems to read the body as a political surface of *not* belonging while Ikpi potentially presents the body as an intimate space of self-discovery and belonging. Samatar tends to look outward to how others see her body, how it's counted, commodified, and surveilled. Ikpi looks at her own body and negotiates its differences with her mother and her father's brother.

What struck us about this difference is how readers might be more comfortable with one approach over the other or see one approach as more important than the other. But we think it valuable for students to challenge their own notions of value in the role of the body by seeing how those two approaches – one seemingly more political and the other personal – could be two sides of the same coin. Like an optical illusion, it could be that, as readers, we see one approach before we notice the other. Asking students to see the political in the personal and the personal in the political not only helps them see how entangled those two seemingly separate realms are, but also might make them more sensitive to their own assumptions and blindspots about approaches they undervalue. What are they avoiding by discounting the political? The personal?

Guide

Close Read: Similar but Different.

Read these two sections from Ikpi and Samatar's essays where they directly address their own bodies in the first person. Annotate them with some attention to the purpose and impact of this self-examination of the body. How do they see their bodies in similar and dissimilar ways from one another?

Bassey Ikpi's "Connecting the Dots"

> That evening, after everyone had gone, I sat on the bed in my auntie's hotel in the village with a torch and examined my body. I searched for any hint of discoloration, anything that would grow into a patchwork on my skin. What story would I make up to explain my own? Would I tell people that I watched the brown slide off my face and crawl away? Would it just disappear one day? Would it be easier, then, to explain the kind of different I'd become?
>
> After about an hour of searching with the torch, I found the dot on the back of my leg. This one is light, a reversal of all the other dots speckled on my body like black paint. I thought of Uncle Brodda and how this white spot could grow or show up on other places on my body. I told my mother the next morning. She said, "Don't worry. That one is your father's side." She said it as if I had somehow sprung whole from her. I have her mother's face, the one she gave us all, so it could have been the truth. I left it alone, checking every few years to see if the white spot had grown. It has been the same size since then. It hasn't moved.
>
> When I think about these stars that litter my skin, when I think about the dot that defies all of those black marks, I recognize one thing—that even my body defies itself. My skin is a star-filled night of moles and marks, and there is one that chose to lighten. These collections of dots and marks tell a story of who I am. How I became. On the days when it feels like my skin is a prison filled with flaws and insecurities, I think of Uncle Brodda.

Sofia Samatar's "Skin Feeling"

> I'm interested in visibility as it relates to the lives and working conditions of academics of color, at a time when visibility has come to dominate discussions of race in U.S. universities to such an extent that it has made other frameworks for approaching difference virtually impossible. We speak of diversity, of representation. Diversity, unlike the work of anti-racism, can be represented visually through statistics. How many of X do you have? What percent? There is an obsession with seeing bodies that raises the ghosts of racial memory. These ghosts haunt black performance: Charlie Parker, for example, grew up with and rejected the comedy of the minstrel show, which plays with and replays the violence of plantation spectatorship. The same ghosts haunt the academy, and we can sense them if we understand that the issue is not so much how blackness is made visible, whether the purpose is to defame or to defend, but the fact that in either case, visibility is the end point. The visual marker of blackness stands in for the person, and once it has taken the person's place, it becomes amenable to a variety of uses. In Ellison's words, it's "drained of human significance." I think of the abolitionist emblem *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, which was reproduced on brooches and hairpins.
>
> Academics of color experience an enervating visibility, but it's not simply that we're part of a very small minority. We are also a desired minority, at least for appearance's sake. University life demands that academics of

color commodify themselves as symbols of diversity—in fact, as diversity itself, since diversity, in this context, is located entirely in the realm of the symbolic. There's a wound in the rupture between the diversity manifested in the body of the professor of color and the realities affecting that person's community or communities. I, for example, am a black professor in the era of mass incarceration of black people through the War on Drugs; I am a Somali American professor in the era of surveillance and drone strikes perpetuated through the War on Terror.

In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander taps into that wound: "Highly visible examples of black success are critical to the maintenance of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness." It's not that we're too few, nor is it that we suffer survivor guilt for having escaped the fate of so many in our communities. It's that our visibility is consumed in a way that legitimizes the structures of exclusion.

Skin feeling: to be encountered as a surface.

Write: Defamiliarizing the Personal and Political

Take a resonant word from Ikpi's excerpt that doesn't appear in the Samatar excerpt and use that word as a framework to reinvision what Samatar is doing in her passage. How is the political personal?

OR

Take a resonant word from Samatar's excerpt that doesn't appear in the Ikpi excerpt and use that word as a framework to reinvision what Ikpi is doing in her passage. How is the personal political?

BUILDING AN OPINION

paired with "As a Child in Haiti, I Was Taught to Despise My Language and Myself"

Hashtags

#research, **#120 minutes**, **#argument**, **#discussion**, **#writing project**, **#reflection**, **#group**, **#community**

Inviting students to critically respond to an opinion piece by developing their own op-eds on related topics, this discussion and writing assignment presents an opportunity to practice making claims with supporting evidence and reasoning.

Introduction

JS: In many of my first-year writing courses, I've struggled to finesse the transition between personal narrative and analytical argument-based writing. One of my goals in teaching is that students develop a confident sense of their own thinking, which I believe is predicated on them knowing they have a place in the classroom community to draw on the full range of their experiences and resources. Personal narratives are an excellent way for students to bring in their expertise and introduce themselves on their own terms. Cultivating an awareness of perspective like this is crucial to developing arguments later on. Yet, when we do focus on the analysis of evidence, I also want students to think beyond their own experience; reasoning means asking questions, making connections, and recognizing the limits of a single perspective. This approach to argumentation doesn't deny personal experience but does suggest this experience be integrated into a critical awareness of perspective—as reader, thinker, and writer.

To underscore the value of perspective and to bridge toward more conventional academic writing, I have found that the op-ed genre is particularly helpful and fun. This kind of writing intentionally blends personal narrative with research and advocacy. An op-ed also highlights how to assert a position that is supported by evidence and to communicate this argument effectively for a chosen audience. As my co-author Elise Takehana helpfully reminded me, the op-ed is also valuable for engaging students to think about a shared "now-ness" as

they work to develop a focus issue and perspective that communicates something meaningful to an audience they are connected to.

The activity below includes a discussion of an example argument before scaffolding the steps of developing and writing an op-ed. In its most condensed form, this activity could take place over a long class meeting with research and writing outside of class, or it could be expanded over a couple weeks of class.

After close-reading the conclusion of Michel DeGraff's essay for a sharper view of his argument, the discussion works backwards to identify core issues. This step itself is illustrative of how arguments address debates and big, open-ended questions. From here, students can brainstorm their own connections to these core issues through their experiences and observations in their own local contexts and communities (whether that's a shared context of the college/university or beyond). Emphasizing the importance of considering an audience around an issue, students are encouraged to join a conversation that is already taking place and to develop their thinking in response. With research and then writing, students are asked to practice engaging with claims, evidence, and reasoning as core skills for academic writing that prioritizes analysis. In the past, I have expanded this lesson further and provided time in class to have informal practice debates which presents another opportunity for students to experiment with how their thinking is structured and how they would like to communicate to an audience.

Guide

Close Read: Closing Statements

At the end of his opinion piece, "As a Child in Haiti, I Was Taught to Despise My Language and Myself," Michael DeGraff carves out a clear debate and takes a position based on current events in Haiti (dated October 2022). In these final paragraphs, he writes:

> Financial remedies for these overwhelming historic injustices still seem like a distant prospect, but in terms of cultural remedies, Haitians at last have some hope. Haiti's minister of education, Nesmy Manigat, recently announced that Kreyòl should serve as a language of instruction throughout primary and secondary education. French would be taught as a second language in the early grades, then used as an additional language of instruction soon after. Mr. Manigat is also advocating the teaching of English and Spanish starting in middle school. The new direction is meant to valorize students' language and identity, healing them from the colonial wounds of the past and equipping them for academic success and further education.
>
> These curricular changes are necessary, though not sufficient. Haitian officials also need to ensure that teaching and course materials at all levels include student-centered, active-learning pedagogy, to nurture generations of Haitian children and instill solidarity and pride through a language that honors their history, their identity and their prospect as a nation.
>
> Unshackling Haitian minds and society from centuries of linguistic discrimination is the first step to help Haiti overcome the disastrous consequences of its colonial and neocolonial history.

Take time to close-read these final paragraphs and identify the sentences that make claims. As a reminder, a claim is an assertion, offering more than a description of fact to take a position.

- Within the sentences you've identified, zoom in closer on the parts of the sentences that show you the writer is making an assertion. How do you know it's a claim and not a description?
- Looking now for meaning, what is the sequence of claims DeGraff is making? Make a list using the terms he uses that are most important to unlocking his argument.

Now that you have an outline of DeGraff's argument, what can you distill as the core issue(s) or debate? In some sense, you are looking at DeGraff's "closing statements" in a debate in which the speaker/writer sums up his position and makes a pointed response to the core issue. If you come up with a few core issues, how do they relate to each other? Can you map their connections to uncover further layers of his argument?

Pre-Write: Researching for Debate

Using the brainstorm of DeGraff's core issues, take some time as a group to brainstorm how these issues relate to your local contexts and communities, and/or lead to related issues that you see around you now. A branching spider web or bubble diagram works great for this kind of thinking.

To prepare your own op-ed, start by finding your core issue and thinking about the context and audience that are important to you:

- What experience(s) do you bring to this debate?
- From what other vantage points are you approaching this issue?
- Which community do you want to write within? Who needs to know about this issue?
- Have there been any current events or illustrative examples that amplify the issue? Typically op-eds address something that feels very "now," so what comes to mind for you and your immediate contexts?
- What research do you need to do to dig deeper?

At this point, use your library resources and/or general web browsing to find at least 3 reliable, substantive sources to incorporate into your essay. Take some time to read and understand the facts and perspectives presented. What information is presented and whose voices are you able to hear? Depending on your focus, these sources may need to reflect your local context or they may provide some connections or frameworks that help you develop and support a position.

After some initial planning and research, have a conversation with classmates to share what you've learned from your research. Take turns asking questions to develop a sharp focus for your essay, pathways for further research, as well as your overall position based on what you've gathered for evidence.

Write: Op-Ed Arguments

For an op-ed, your evidence may be a combination of your own experiences and observations and research, particularly as you work to make your argument resonate with your audience—that said, make sure your position is based on evidence that you will present in writing and explain with reasoning.

As you compose your essay, aim to include the following:

- A focused topic and clear, well-defined point of view or position.
- A strong voice that speaks directly to an intended audience.
- Clear organization that demonstrates the steps of your thinking and shapes your essay—*like DeGraff, consider how to craft a compelling opening and closing to emphasize your argument*.
- Direct engagement with a perspective that is not your own.
- Evidence from different sources to support your position.

COLLAGE: FOUND, DONATED, REPEATED WITH DIFFERENCE

paired with "Skin Feeling"

Hashtags

#structure, **#60 minutes**, **#comparison**, **#reflection**, **#storytelling**, **#rewriting**

This pre-writing activity is designed to be used as in-class writing to gather and create pieces that can be combined into and/or inspire a collage-based essay.

Introduction

ET: Sofia Samatar's "Skin Feeling" pieces together overlapping moments, histories, people, and texts that converge at her place of employment – California State University Channel Islands – and the associations she makes with that place and places like it. Some of those associations are musical, historical, personal memory, or literary. Collecting these stories through a collage-like association creates a richness in the combination and juxtaposition that each individual story couldn't bring on its own.

Students habituated to thesis-driven writing that disciplines paragraphs to an overarching point often have little experience playing with building an essay without such a strong, unifying point. Building through association and collage can let an implied point develop over time. This makes for a playful process of creating depth through resonances where one might revisit a topic like Charlie Parker's incarceration through a range of retellings: Ralph Ellison's writing on jazz, Walter Page's lyrics, his wife Doris Parker's testimony, Dr. W.'s story, Sofia Samatar's own work and educational experience, and Alamin Mazrui's poetry.

Because this associative structure of writing is often rather new to students, having a discrete set of writing activities that lay the groundwork for unexpected connections helps jump-start writing an essay that meanders through unique, can we say improvised, writing performances?

Guide

Collect: Found Stories

1. Go to Atlas of Transformation and Humans of New York and print or copy and paste four entries. You can choose them at random or choose those that resonate with you either from the image of the person or the content of the writing.
2. For each of those four entries, read them, marking interesting words or phrases. After reading each entry, set a timer for two minutes and write what comes to mind on an index card, one for each entry.
3. Take those four short reflections on your associations with the entries and circle words that resonate with you or that seem like points of convergence.

Write: Collage Pieces

1. Choose one of the words you circled that you feel most drawn to now. Write on five separate index cards paragraph-long scenes, moments, memories, or events that feel somewhat related to that word. Write out those paragraphs with all the details and feelings you can recall. Paint a fleshed-out picture.
2. On another index card, describe one object that came up in one of those five paragraphs.
3. On another index card, describe a place that came up in one of those five paragraphs.
4. On another index card, rewrite one of those five paragraphs from another perspective.
5. Choose one interesting noun from your five paragraphs and on three separate index cards, write out an associated thought or reflection you have of that new term.
6. Choose a different interesting noun from your five paragraphs and on three separate index cards, write out three different facts about that noun. Do some research to find facts you didn't already know about.
7. On three separate index cards, write a declarative sentence you feel is true.
8. On three separate index cards, write out a question you don't know the answer to, but you're curious enough to eventually research.

At this point, you should have 21 index cards and the four original entries from Atlas of Transformation and Humans of New York. Arrange them (all or just a selection) in a way that interests you and spend some time thinking about what it collectively implies about the topic that seems to emerge.

CRITICAL LEARNING REFLECTION

paired with "Asters and Goldenrod"

Hashtags

#reflection, **#writing project**, **#60 minutes**, **#ways of knowing**, **#education**, **#discussion**, **#critique**

Emphasizing critical reflection to appreciate the dynamics within educational spaces and how different people navigate them, this activity is designed to support the writing of an extended piece that is both analytical and creative. This could be completed in-class or extended as a homework assignment.

Introduction

JS: This assignment is most directly linked to Robin Wall Kimmerer's short essay, "Asters and Goldenrod," which she also discusses in an interview with Krista Tippet titled "The Intelligence of Plants," diving into the historical violence against indigenous practices and ways of knowing that she has managed to marry with her scientific training as a botanist. Yet the intention of this assignment emerges from the heart of this whole book: co-writers and colleagues, we wanted to create a resource for teaching and learning that prioritizes critical reflection—on all sides— about the consequences of standardization in educational spaces and practices. Recalling the genocidal history of residential schools for indigenous children, Kimmerer's piece is just one reminder of the explicit violence inflicted through the disciplinary power of schools. We see this refracted in many communities and histories reflected in the texts gathered (see "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" and "Three Ways to Speak English," for instance), and one of the goals of this project is to also bring this awareness to our regular teaching practices in first-year writing. In these courses especially, the politics of language are negotiated in an intensified way: not only are we explicitly teaching language and writing, we are also facilitating the transition to university as another educational institution.

The longer I teach, the more I have come to feel that the way we show up in these spaces, interact with one another, and try to teach and learn, is overdetermined by a tacit agreement to be in "school" and to follow this training. So, even as we pursue more inclusive, responsive, and culturally sustaining practices for language

and writing instruction, it is crucial to call attention to the fact that this teaching and learning still takes place within the broader structures of our educational systems. One way to begin a conversation about what happens in education is to invite individual and collective reflection on educational experiences, the messages we've received about it, and our ongoing investments in it. Not only does this actively invite diverse perspectives to be shared, but in sharing, can introduce other ways of relating to each other while learning together.

After discussing Kimmerer's experiences on the first day of school (and perhaps beyond), many students express empathy for both the harm Kimmerer experiences as well as her strength and resilience. Many identify the racial tensions in her interactions with her advisor as well as the gender exclusions in the science field she is entering; they also appreciate the honesty in her passion for asters and goldenrod and how their beauty motivates her. While a critical reflection on learning could be a generative assignment at any point, it is especially powerful after a discussion of this material early in the semester as everyone is getting to know one another. At this point, the dynamics in the class are also still being created, and this can provide a significant opportunity for students to assert their experiences, preferences, desires, and goals. Another approach is to use this essay at the end of the semester to help students reflect on how they think about their thinking and writing, who that work serves, and what discourse practices students privilege and why.

Guide

Write: Critical Reflection

This critical reflection draws inspiration from the insights of Kimmerer's "Asters and Goldenrod" and uses some of her ideas to prompt your own reflections on important influences on your identity as a student, your own educational path(s), and your transition to university.

For this assignment, there are no expectations about form, and you are invited to write in a format that makes sense to you and your way of thinking. The sole expectation is that you address the questions below thoughtfully to share what's important to you.

Ways of Knowing

- What are some things – ideas, interests, activities, habits, routines – you know you already know about? How did you gain this knowledge?
- Just as Kimmerer was motivated by a good question about the beauty of asters and goldenrod together, what are some of the curiosities, deep questions, or early experiences that have motivated you forward in life?
- What experiences, knowledges, expertise, or parts of your identity have you been asked to leave behind when you've entered or participated in education? This demand may have been explicit or implicit.

School, Education, Learning

- How did you decide to go to college? What was your path to get here?
- What do you desire most for your college/university experience?
- Many talk about the "path" to college or that education is its own path. Did you have to step off any other paths to be on this one? How did that feel for you? Do you see a way to bridge them in "reciprocity" as a "cross-pollination" (to use Kimmerer's terms)?
- What, to you, is the difference between "school," "education," and "learning"?
- What has supported your learning the most? What has made it more difficult or challenging?

Discuss: Creating Community

After reflecting on your own experiences, take some time to exchange perspectives with your peers. The "ways of knowing" questions especially highlight who you are and what's important to you outside of education, so use this discussion to see how you can braid that into a school context. The last set of questions may also connect to a broader discussion about shaping routines, "ground rules," and agreements as a class community.

Extension: Reframing the Course

After reflecting on your ways of knowing in and out of school as well as your experiences with education, take some time to revisit the official learning outcomes of the course. These goals are typically set by the university and are standardized across sections. Interact with these goals and set your own.

- In your view, what is the purpose of this writing course?
- What do you most want to learn?
- When you look at the official outcomes, what do they convey about the purpose of this course?
- What are 2-3 that you would like to work on? Why these ones? What are your prior experiences with them?
- What additional outcomes could you suggest adding?

DIALOGUE OVER TIME: A NEW BOOGALOO: "HOW BEAUTIFUL WE REALLY ARE"

Paired with "Puerto Rican Obituary"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#audio**, **#30 minutes**, **#community**, **#colonialism**, **#context**, **#protest**, **#critique**

Inviting students to move from close reading to guiding ideas in the essay as a whole, this activity could be used as either an in-class discussion or as an extended writing prompt.

Introduction

DU: The Nuyorican Poets movement had a lasting impact on Latinx Literature. Willie Perdomo (b. 1967) continues the legacy of Pietri and other Nuyorican poets by writing back to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe more than forty years later. Read and listen to Perdomo's "How Beautiful We Really Are" and explore with students the specific ways in which Perdomo is in dialogue with Pietri. I would suggest researching more about the Nuyorican Poets movement to properly contextualize these two readings for students.

Guide

Listen:

Watch Willie Perdomo perform his poem "How Beautiful We Really Are"

Questions

- How does this poem build off of Petri but also depart from it?
- What are the names of the five fictional characters in Perdomo's poem and why is this important?
- What kind of "inclusive" 21st-century community is Perdomo representing through these five lives?
- What kinds of "ways of knowing" have these five characters developed that signal that they're "going to die knowing how beautiful [they] really are?"
- How does Perdomo incorporate Spanglish in similar and different ways to Pietri? The first line of this poem announces a "new kind of bugalú (boogaloo)" in reference to a genre of Latin music and dance popular in the United States in the 1960s.
- What does this new bugalú look like? How are grief and mourning rituals different in each poem?
- How is Perdomo's musicality and rhythm different from Pietri's elegy?

Write: Latinx Literature and Protest, 1960s- present

- Latinx protest literature has changed from the '60s and '70s to now. Read Dalleo and Saez's analysis of Pedro Pietri's poetry in *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (2008). As these authors suggest, Latinx literature from the 1960s is regarded as politically committed and resistant to the commodifying forces of the market. Literature of the post-1990s, Dalleo and Saez suggest, is often read as apolitical, assimilationist, and personalist. Do you think Pietri's aesthetic of protest is still viable now? Why or why not?
- Following Pietri as a model, write an elegy of five people who have become disconnected or disillusioned from their lives. You could also write yourself into the five if you wish. Students could choose historical figures or fictional characters. The former would be more of a research project and the latter would be a creative writing exercise.

EMOTION IN LANGUAGE

paired with "Gun Bubbles"

Hashtags

#rewriting, **#conditional**, **#perspective**, **#45 minutes**, **#personal is political**

Inviting students to explore the effects of different language choices in writing, this activity could be used as an extended writing prompt in or out of the classroom.

Introduction

ET: In our discussions on "Gun Bubbles," we first wondered how to get past the prominent role of several controversial topics: mass shootings, domestic terrorism, reproductive rights, and motherhood. These topics feature so prominently in the piece that seeing other dynamics in the essay meant finding subtleties in what seems, at first glance, an unambiguous essay.

Because this essay is organized as a collage of eleven sections that revolve around a shooting near a Planned Parenthood and the author's contemplation of her potential motherhood, it's understandable that thematic resonances across sections hold the essay together. Since these topics cross over her body and the language for such impactful life events, the essay waffles back and forth between being more immersive in a bodily way and being more distantly contemplative. Sometimes Thors hypothetically talks to the shooter, trying to reason with traumatic experience. Other times she provides hyper-focused sensory details on a shooting or an intimate but also clinical reflection on her medical conditions. For readers, this means we get several different emotional registers displayed in different styles of writing despite a persistent use of past tense and first-person narration. Sometimes it makes you feel, and other times it makes you think. Sometimes readers feel far from the action, and other times very close. Sometimes it supposes or hypothesizes, while other times, it recounts explicit events.

Looking at these stylistic choices across different emotional registers can help students see how much flexibility there is in the affective impact of their writing depending on *how* they decide to approach writing the same scene.

Guide

Close Read: Immersion and Distance

- Compare the writing style in these paragraphs, the first from the second section of the essay and the second from the fourth section of the essay. How does Thors make you feel emotionally connected to the story in each moment? What makes it feel far or close to you? Some things to consider are point of view, tense, passive voice, dialogue, the length and rhythm of sentences, connotation, or the subject of the sentence.

1. Rounding a pillar, I saw the silver hood of my parents' sedan and sprinted. Bullets kept popping, sounding fake, childlike–gun bubbles. I veered toward the car and lunged to get inside. But this wasn't our rental; it was one just like it. My parents were a few spaces down. "*Get on the fucking ground.*" This time I listened. I splayed myself flat on the frozen asphalt, bubbles all around. "Stay down!" the voice ordered, as if it could sense me scheming. I had made up my mind. I could see the bent license plate on the front of my parents' car. I bolted.
2. The shoot-out lasted five hours. As my parents and I walked through airport security for our flight home, customers in the grocery store were just being released from lockdown. Details about the incident were still coming together. In the end, three people died, and nine were severely injured. As it turned out, the store was very close to a Planned Parenthood clinic. On this particular day, Black Friday, a middle-aged man had woken up and decided to take a stand against fetus deletion by gunning adults down.

Write: Generating Various Emotive Registers

With your notes and reflections on these two passages (and those two sections more generally), let's try out several versions of one story to try out the effects of some differing language choices. We'll start with a base version and then vary the passage from there. Give yourself 4-5 minutes to write each version.

1. Describe a discrete moment where you came to an important realization. Write it in the past tense.
2. Now rewrite that moment as an immersive scene. Use the present tense this time and focus on sensory details and use connotative language.
3. Rewrite that moment again, but this time be brief, general, and neutral as though you only need to report the facts. Imagine you're farther away from the action.
4. Create another version of the moment where now you're inside of your head recounting your thinking in that moment. Try using some subjective and conditional moods.

5. You've probably been writing in the first person so far. Try writing out that moment again using the second or third person instead. If you've tried out a few points of view already, try recounting that moment from a different person's perspective from your own.
6. Rewrite that moment using only dialogue.

Now reread and think about these six versions of a moment and consider which emotive register best works for your purposes in recounting this moment.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

paired with "As a Child in Haiti, I Was Taught to Despise My Language and Myself"

Hashtags

#multilingual, **#memory**, **#context**, **#reflection**, **#audio**, **#60 minutes**, **#self-hatred**, **#colonialism**, **#personal is political**

Inviting students to explore some historical events and circumstances of Haitian history as it overlaps with the United States and France, this activity would be used as an out-of-class activity to prepare for a class discussion or follow-up on one.

Introduction

The Importance of Historical Context

DU: DeGraff's essay is about residual colonial practices on the body – socially produced self-hatred of Haitian Creole – and about silencing the autochthonous sounds of "haitianness." Indeed, voicing/silencing and hyper-visibility/invisibility are key questions that run through much of Haitian Studies and this reader. Encouraging students to learn more about Haitian history may be a productive activity with this essay. More historical context presents another layer of complexity to DeGraff's positions. Instructors may generate a rich classroom discussion if this Op-Ed is discussed alongside little-known (or disavowed) historical events like the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) or the US occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934. Since the Op-Ed assumes familiarity with Haitian history, it may be productive for instructors to pair the activities below with DeGraff's essay.

As we discussed this activity together, we shared some of our experiences teaching texts that are outside of our realms of expertise. We imagine that many who may teach this text are not experts on Caribbean history. Following one of the overall projects of this reader – centering polyphony and transparency in practice, course design, and course delivery in the first-year writing classroom – it may be productive for instructors to consider teaching this text as "co-learners" with students. When instructors open up about what they don't know, students sometimes respond positively and are more engaged. "Normalizing not-knowing" may

be a productive rhetorical or horizontal pedagogical move to produce more authentic curiosity around the historical periods that DeGraff mentions throughout the Op-Ed.

This exercise may also allow for a deeper exploration with students around the complexities of historiography. We have to be mindful of not using *The Office of the Historian's* representation of the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) as the only source for making sense of this period. Elise Takehana shared how, in one semester, she had students read different historical accounts of the same event: the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Side-by-side comparisons of varying documents – a widely assigned U.S. high school textbook, a documentary film of survivors of the bombing, and a section of George Weller's *First Into Nagasaki* – made it abundantly clear to students that historical retellings are diverse and layered.

It is that multiplicity that makes building historical context challenging but rewarding. There are great stakes in how a history is told, and in that spirit, this activity invites students to explore historical context while encouraging them to embrace questions. In addition to sharing with students questions around historiography and the politics of Haitian Creole, another aim of teaching DeGraff could also be to deepen student's understanding of the US in a hemispheric and Atlantic context (USA-Haiti-France).

Guide

Read: Lesser Known Historical Context

Choose one of the following little-known periods of Haitian history and read the linked text. As you are reading, pose several questions where further research could fill in a blank for you.

- The Haitian Revolution – OER Project's video "The Haitian Revolution and Its Causes," where Dr. Marlene Daut describes the life of enslaved Haitians, the beginning of the Haitian Revolution by slave revolts disrupting the economy, and its global significance.

> *One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=422#oembed-1*

- Haiti's Debt Repayment to France – NPR's Planet Money article, "'The Greatest Heist in History': How Haiti Was Forced to Pay Reparations for Freedom" on Haitians paying for their freedom by compensating their former slaveholders for their "property loss" retold in 2021 in the context of the Biden administration's deportation of Haitians.

- The US Occupation – "U.S. Invasion and Occupation of Haiti, 1915-34" from the Department of State's Office of the Historian on the US's rationales for invading and leaving Haiti.

Revisit DeGraff Through His TedTalk

After reading the Op-Ed, watch DeGraff's TED Talk "Language Has Super Powers: Can Destroy Souls or Build Nations" on his experiences with Haitian Creole. What does he add that is not in the essay? What is left out? Use the TED Talk to delve deeper into the questions raised by DeGraff's work.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=422#oembed-2

Reflection: The Blind Spot

Considering the questions you developed from the histories and the additional dimensions DeGraff's TedTalk offers, write a paragraph reflecting on how much remains unknown to you on Haitian educational policy, its history, and even your own country's history and educational policy. How does that sense of incompleteness impact you?

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES OF WESTERN SCIENCE

paired with "Asters and Goldenrod"

Hashtags

#audio, **#comparison**, **#ways of knowing**, **#30 minutes**, **#annotation**, **#otherness**, **#perspective**, **#indigeneity**

This activity invites students to expand on Kimmerer's chapter with a podcast interview which could be used as either in-class or at-home reading and writing.

Introduction

ET: Kimmerer's work comments directly on *how* a disciplinary field and Western-centric educational practices observe and validate the world around us. While her comments are pointed, they open toward alternative ways of knowing that augment and decenter assumed truths about knowledge baked into academia, such as objectivity and the primacy of measurement and observation. In some ways, scholars and students choose a discipline for its own way of seeing even if that choice is not interrogated. That is why I've had many students say such things as "I'm more a one-right answer math person" when they feel overwhelmed by the openness of many of my assignments.

But, when I get such a student in my office, I implore them to talk to their math professors about the "one right idea" mentality, warning them that mathematics is also creative and interpretative. On the other hand, I also remind them that English (or writing) has its rules too. Sentences have certain syntactical patterns that aren't flexible, for instance. Helping students see that each disciplinary field is a very specific way of seeing, but despite that there are interesting overlaps between all fields even within the Western tradition that open opportunities for them to access ways of knowing that they've often written themselves out of before they arrived at the university.

Listening to Kimmerer expand on her thinking about science and beauty alongside Western and indigenous

ways of knowing and how those perspectives play into linguistic features shows us that there is more we do not pay attention to than that we do.

Guide

Listen: Ways of Seeing through Epistemologies and Language

Start listening to the *On Being* podcast episode "Robin Wall Kimmerer: The Intelligence of Plants" at the below timestamps. Write openly in response to a question for each segment for a couple of minutes or assign questions to groups of students to discuss. Once you've completed all three segments, sum up your thoughts in a one-sentence statement about ways of knowing.

5:38 to 9:36 – What does being objective mean, and why is that seen in generally positive ways? How does Kimmerer challenge the neutrality of scientific objectivity? How does objectivity help science? How does it hurt science or the broader society? How do you feel differently about a scientific explanation of the beauty of asters and goldenrod and a more poetic or aesthetic explanation?

20:13 to 22:18 – Why does science focus so much on the visual? More broadly, how does science pay attention to our senses? Why does science exclude the intuitive, emotional, and spiritual ways of knowing? How does science help us transcend the limits of the human? How does it instrumentalize humans and other living things?

27:05 to 31:02 – He and she are gendered pronouns. Many languages have noun cases like the masculine (*le libro*) and feminine (*la canción*) that sort nouns into categories. Some languages have dozens of categories. What would it mean to have a category and so a pronoun that differentiates living from non-living beings as Kimmerer proposes? How does our language instrumentalize and care for life?

INSUFFICIENT DEFINITIONS

paired with "Place Name: Oracabessa"

Editor's Note: The poem in this chapter is considered a transformative fair use. Please see the annotations section in How to Use this Book for an explanation of the author's pedagogy on creating conversation within a text.

Hashtags

#close reading, **#comparison**, **#poetry**, **#discussion**, **#30 minutes**, **#ways of knowing**, **#colonialism**

Inviting students to move from close reading to guiding ideas in the essay as a whole, this activity could be used as either an in-class discussion or as an extended writing prompt.

Introduction

DU: Like Robert Pinsky's "Shirt," Miller's poems explore the larger worlds and histories of any one object or name. Miller's poems explore the breadth of unusual names of places in Jamaica like the town of "Me-no-sen-you-no-come."

As we saw above, Miller's project is to attune the reader to a wider world of sound and perspective – sounds, ways of seeing, and languages buried by coloniality and dominant, singular soundscapes. When teaching poetry, Miller instructs his students to attend to how names, objects, or categories are always already insufficiently defined and thus require sharper, embodied, on-the-ground, and contextual ways of listening. Much is buried in the town name of "Oracabessa" just as there is a long tale behind the construction of the shirt in Pinsky's poem.

Read Robert Pinsky's "Shirt" with your students as a way to deepen your understanding of "Oracabessa."

Guide

Read: Companion Poem

"Shirt"
by Robert Pinsky

The back, the yoke, the yardage. Lapped seams,
The nearly invisible stitches along the collar
Turned in a sweatshop by Koreans or Malaysians[1]
Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break
Or talking money or politics while one fitted[2]
This armpiece with its overseam to the band
Of cuff I button at my wrist. The presser, the cutter,
The wringer, the mangle. The needle, the union,
The treadle, the bobbin. The code. The infamous blaze
At the Triangle Factory in nineteen-eleven.[3]
One hundred and forty-six died in the flames[4]
On the ninth floor, no hydrants, no fire escapes—[5]
The witness in a building across the street
Who watched how a young man helped a girl to step
Up to the windowsill, then held her out
Away from the masonry wall and let her drop.
And then another. As if he were helping them up
To enter a streetcar, and not eternity.[6]
A third before he dropped her put her arms

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1. DU: How are the major ideas of the poem introduced in these first few lines?

2. DU: Why do you think the poetic "I" details the everyday happenings of this imagined sweatshop?

3. DU: What do you make of this startling transition from someone putting on the shirt and then this reference to the famous "Triangle Shirtwaist Fire" of 1911 in Washington, DC?

4. DU: https://www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=35627 Share with students this historical reference.

5. DU: What's interesting about the line that there were no hydrants, or fire escapes on the night floor?

6. DU: How are these lines consistent with the main ideas of the poem? Be specific.

Around his neck and kissed him. Then he held
Her into space, and dropped her. Almost at once
He stepped to the sill himself, his jacket flared
And fluttered up from his shirt as he came down,
Air filling up the legs of his gray trousers[7]—
Like Hart Crane's Bedlamite, "shrill shirt ballooning."
Wonderful how the pattern matches perfectly
Across the placket and over the twin bar-tacked
Corners of both pockets, like a strict rhyme
Or a major chord. Prints, plaids, checks,
Houndstooth, Tattersall, Madras. The clan tartans
Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian,
To control their savage Scottish workers, tamed
By a fabricated heraldry: MacGregor,
Bailey, MacMartin. The kilt, devised for workers
To wear among the dusty clattering looms.
Weavers, carders, spinners. The loader,
The docker, the navvy. The planter, the picker, the sorter
Sweating at her machine in a litter of cotton
As slaves in calico headrags sweated in fields:
George Herbert, your descendant is a Black
Lady in South Carolina[8], her name is Irma
And she inspected my shirt. Its color and fit
And feel and its clean smell have satisfied
Both her and me. We have culled its cost and quality
Down to the buttons of simulated bone,
The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters
Printed in black on neckband and tail. The shape,
The label, the labor, the color, the shade. The shirt.

7. DU: What's the effect of this detail?

8. DU: What's the effect of telling these stories in Scotland and then in the American South?

Write: Translating Poetry

1. Take 10-15 minutes to "translate" both "Oracabessa" and "Shirt" into a narrative (With character, plot, and setting). What points of comparison did you find in each telling? Share your narrative with your partners, taking note of how each person sees the poems and what themes emerge.
2. As you were narrativizing the poem, some portions were hard to move into prose. Choose a tercet and consider how elements of that tercet are insufficiently defined in the narrative translation you wrote in step 1. What can be said best in poetry compared to narrative? What can poetry do that a narrative cannot?

JUXTAPOSITIONS OF SILENCE

paired with "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#comparison**, **#silence**, **#30 minutes**, **#personal is political**

Weaving together five different women's approaches to silence, this activity could be used as a primer to an in-class discussion or as an extended writing prompt.

Introduction

ET: Audre Lorde's "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" directly names silence in the title and addresses the pain it manifests but doesn't necessarily assuage either. Her activist stance on the power of speaking and the need to speak brought me to consider all the many mentions of silence in other pieces in this reader, where silence appears at various volumes. This comes at the heels of being especially frustrated at how few students wanted to engage with Anzaldúa's section on the silence of women in particular. Gathering what the many women have to say about silence then is a personal moment of reckoning, but otherwise, leaving students to consider these passages without context will hopefully leave them space to consider the many meanings, motives, and positions they might take on the value and the pain of silence.

Guide

Close Read: Collection of Silences

Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.

***

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

And it is never without fear – of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.

***

We can learn to speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learnt to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words in an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference that which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

Yiyun Li's "To Speak is to Blunder"

During my second hospital stay, in New York, a group of nursing students came to play bingo one Friday night. A young woman, another patient, asked if I would join her. Bingo, I said, I've never in my life played that. She pondered for a moment, and said that she had played bingo only in the hospital. It was her eighth hospitalization when I met her; she had taken middle-school courses for a while in the hospital, when she was younger, and, once, she pointed out a small patch of fenced-in green where she and other children had been let out for exercise. Her father often visited her in the afternoon, and I would watch them sitting together playing a game, not attempting a conversation. By then, all words must have been inadequate, language doing little to help a mind survive time.

Yet language is capable of sinking a mind. One's thoughts are slavishly bound to language. I used to think that an abyss is a moment of despair becoming interminable; but any moment, even the direst, is bound to end. What's abysmal is that one's erratic language closes in on one like quicksand: "You are nothing. You must do anything you can to get rid of this nothingness." We can kill time, but language kills us.

In my relationship with English, in this relationship with the intrinsic distance between a nonnative speaker and an adopted language that makes people look askance, I feel invisible but not estranged. It is the position I believe I always want in life. But with every pursuit there is the danger of crossing a line, from invisibility to erasure.

***

I often sat next to this lonesome Dorothy. Was I eavesdropping? Perhaps, but her conversation was beyond encroachment. That one could reach a point where the border between public and private language no longer matters is frightening. Much of what one does—to avoid suffering, to seek happiness, to stay healthy—is to keep a safe space for one's private language. Those who have lost that space have only one language left. My grandmother, according to my mother and her siblings, had become a woman who talked to the unseen before she was sent to the asylum to die. There's so much to give up: hope, freedom, dignity. A private language, however, defies any confinement. Death alone can take it away.

***

In an ideal world, I would prefer to have my mind reserved for thinking, and thinking alone. I dread the moment when a thought trails off and a feeling starts, when one faces the eternal challenge of eluding the void for which one does not have words. To speak when one cannot is

to blunder. I have spoken by having written—this piece or any piece—for myself and against myself. The solace is with the language I chose. The grief, to have spoken at all.

Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

OVERCOMING THE TRADITION OF SILENCE

Ahogadas, escupimos el oscuro.

Peleando con nuestra propia sombra

el silencio nos sepulta.

En boca cerrada no entran moscas. "Flies don't enter a closed mouth" is a saying I kept hearing when I was a child. *Ser habladora* was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. *Muchachitas bien criadas*, well-bred girls don't answer back. *Es una falta de respeto* to talk back to one's mother or father. I remember one of the sins I'd recite to the priest in the confession box the few times I went to confession: talking back to my mother, *hablar pa' 'tras, repelar. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women – I've never heard them applied to men.

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word "*nosotras*," I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use *nosotros* whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse.

***

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white.

I will have my serpent's tongue – my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code....
– MELANIE KAVE/KANTROWITZ

Ada Limón "The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to be Bilingual

Don't read the one where you
are just like us. Born to a green house,

garden, don't tell us how you picked
tomatoes and ate them in the dirt

watching vultures pick apart another
bird's bones in the road. Tell us the one

Robin Wall Kimmerer "Asters and Goldenrod"

But my advisor said, "It's not science," not what botany was about. I wanted to know why certain stems bent easily for baskets and some would break, why the biggest berries grew in the shade and why they made us medicines, which plants are edible, why those little pink orchids only grow under pines. "Not science," he said, and he ought to know, sitting in his laboratory, a learned professor of botany. "And if you want to study beauty, you should go to

art school." He reminded me of my deliberations over choosing a college, when I had vacillated between training as a botanist or as a poet. Since everyone told me I couldn't do both, I'd chosen plants. He told me that science was not about beauty, not about the embrace between plants and humans.

I had no rejoinder; I had made a mistake. There was no fight in me, only embarrassment at my error. I did not have the words for resistance. He signed me up for my classes and I was dismissed to go get my photo taken for registration. I didn't think about it at the time, but it was happening all over again, an echo of my grandfather's first day at school, when he was ordered to leave everything–language, culture, family–behind. The professor made me doubt where I came from, what I knew, and claimed that his was the *right* way to think. Only he didn't cut my hair off.

Write: Complicating Silences

Take any two of the five passages above and put their versions of silence in conversation with one another. Where do they accentuate one another's points? Where do they conflict with one another? How do those different voices complicate your view of the silence's impact?

From there, bring in a third passage or a moment of silence you've experienced or heard of. How does that addition bring more complexity or urgency to the subject of silence?

LANGUAGE LIFE STORY

paired with "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak"

Hashtags

#research, **#annotation**, **#writing project**, **#context**, **#120 minutes**

Inviting students to examine the more general topic of language reclamation brought up through a specific case study in the podcast, this activity could be used as either an in-class research activity or as a research writing prompt.

Introduction

ET: Unlike other pieces in this reader, "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" is perhaps more interesting for the topic it discusses than the language of the podcast itself. It provides a specific example of one indigenous language, the historical context for how it became endangered, and the contemporary efforts to reclaim that language.

In the course of the episode, Keiki Kawaiʻaeʻa, Director of the College of Hawaiian Language, says, "If we don't really pay attention, we will have nothing in our language to pass to our children, and with that is a tumbling domino effect of our songs, our way, our practices, our arts, and our culture because a language holds all of that intact." (9:58-10:16). This quote alone spurred many lines of thought for us as teachers of writing. How much more does your language carry than you think at face value? What loss would you feel most heavily if no one else spoke your language?

Language loss happens around the world for many reasons even though colonialism, globalization, and migration are often sizable factors. Language reclamation projects around the world exist to save or preserve languages that are losing speakers with each generation and thus a community or culture around that language. A language has a life not just in that it evolves with its speakers as they add and change the meaning of words through usage but also in how power dynamics are exacted over time in specific places to privilege or disprivilege languages and thus communities. Knowing the stories of the languages of our own geographic

location or cultural heritage and reflecting on our connection or estrangement from that process would be its own compelling research process.

Guide

Read to Connect: Language Preservation and Reclamation

"Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak" gives an example of one endangered language that a community is working to reclaim, but there are thousands of such languages with The Guardian saying another language dies every 40 days, with global warming aggravating the language extinction problem. The resurrection of Hawaiian is a hesitant success story, but other languages have different stories.

Read the selections below and annotate them with connections to your own thoughts on language loss and to ideas in "Saving a Language You're Learning to Speak." Include questions in your annotations too that would require more thought and research to answer.

from "Vanishing Voice" by Russ Rymer

National Geographic, July 2012

When I ask university students in Kyzyl what Tuvan words are untranslatable into English or Russian, they suggest khöömei, because the singing is so connected with the Tuvan environment that only a native can understand it, and also khoj özeeri, the Tuvan method of killing a sheep. If slaughtering livestock can be seen as part of humans' closeness to animals, khoj özeeri represents an unusually intimate version. Reaching through an incision in the sheep's hide, the slaughterer severs a vital artery with his fingers, allowing the animal to quickly slip away without alarm, so peacefully that one must check its eyes to see if it is dead. In the language of the Tuvan people, khoj özeeri means not only slaughter but also kindness, humaneness, a ceremony by which a family can kill, skin, and butcher a sheep, salting its hide and preparing its meat and making sausage with the saved blood and cleansed entrails so neatly that the whole thing can be accomplished in two hours (as the Mongushes did this morning) in one's good clothes without spilling a drop of blood. Khoj özeeri implies a relationship to animals that is also a measure of a people's character. As one of the students explained, "If a Tuvan killed an animal the way they do in other places" — by means of a gun or knife –"they'd be arrested for brutality."

Tuvan is one of the many small languages of the world. The Earth's population of eight billion people speak roughly 7,000 languages, a statistic that would seem to offer each living language a healthy one million speakers if things were equitable. In language, as in life, things aren't. Seventy-eight percent of the world's population speaks the 85 largest languages, while the 3,500 smallest languages share a mere 8.25 million speakers. Thus, while English has 328 million first-language speakers, and Mandarin 845 million, *Tuvan speakers in Russia number just 235,000. Within the next century, linguists think, nearly half of the world's current stock of languages may disappear. More than a thousand are listed as critically or severely endangered–teetering on the edge of oblivion.*

* * *

The cataloging of vocabulary and pronunciation and syntax that field linguists do in remote outposts helps keep a language alive. But saving a language is not something linguists can accomplish because salvation must come from within. The answer may lie in something Harrison and Anderson witnessed in Palizi one day, when a villager in his early 20s came with a friend to perform a song for them. Palizi is far removed from pervasive U.S. culture, so it was something of a surprise to the two linguists when the teenagers launched into a full-bore, L.A.-style rap song complete with gang hand gestures and head bobbing and attitude, a pitch-perfect rendition of an American street art, with one refinement: They were rapping in Aka.

Were the linguists dismayed? I asked. To the contrary, Harrison said. "These kids were fluent in Hindi and English, but they chose to rap in a language they share with only a couple thousand people." Linguistic co-optation and absorption can work both ways, with the small language sometimes acting as the imperialist. "The one thing that's necessary for the revival of a language," Father D'Souza told me one day, "is pride."

Against the erosion of language stands an ineffable quality that can't be instilled from without: someone's insistence on rapping in Aka, on singing in Tuvan, on writing in the recently orthographized Cmiique Itom.

Research and Write: Tracing the Life Story of a Language

Choose one of the research and writing prompts below

1. Go to NEXT's "Disappearing Languages," a visualization of UNESCO's World Atlas of Languages data and scroll down to the interactive map to locate an endangered language in an area of interest to you.

You might also look at "The Endangered Languages of New York City" and/or "Marie's Dictionary." Spend 30 minutes researching that language and its community, taking note of interesting features of the language, reasons for its decline, and any reclamation projects that exist. Write a biography of that language: its ancestors, its development, its decline, and, if applicable, its resurrection.

2. Talk to people from at least two different generations in your family about the languages they spoke or heard spoken in their family and community. Focus on the motives, feelings, gains, and losses that family members had about their language history. Write a two-page essay that enfolds your thoughts on your family's heritage languages and blends in the thoughts and voices of your family members in that essay.

MUSIC TRAILS

paired with "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

Hashtags

#music, **#research**, **#audio**, **#context**, **#60 minutes**

While much of what Anzaldúa writes about is place-specific, the specificity of that place is also the result of collisions and affinities. These activities invite students to explore the layers of context that complicate the definitiveness of borders.

Introduction

ET: As we talked about "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," two thoughts came up repeatedly: (1) with such a canonical piece, what can we do with it that is new? and (2) given that we are in Central Massachusetts, so far from the US-Mexico border and the communities and cultures of that area, how can this mean something deep to outsiders?

In Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," she recounts the "travelways" of language, music, and food in the borderlands between Texas and Mexico as different people moved through the landscape and time passed. Identities form, blend, and are challenged in these spaces as they flow, solidify, dissolve, and haunt. She speaks specifically of norteño, which blends musical traditions from around the world, and corridos music, which often documents the stories of the Mexican revolution. The music encodes waves of immigration, conquest, ranchero life, civil unrest, and iconic figures of that place and time. It is its own oral and sonic tradition that documents cultural and social realities that inform the lives of the musicians and their audience.

Guide

Close Listen: Drawing a Thought Map

Listen to RadioLab's episode "Songs that Cross Borders" or Alt.Latino's episode "Cumbia, the musical backbone of Latin America" and draw a map of the journey the conversation takes. Mark places, people, events, and ideas that come up in the conversation. Once you're done listening to the episode, look at your map and see how ideas in the episode connect and diverge from one another. Write another layer of ideas, preferably in a different color or in CAPS with connections, associations, or thoughts you have.

It is worth gathering a list of thoughts on the traits of the music discussed in the podcast and other music like or near it, the culture around that music, and the social impacts and influence in and of the music.

Listen: "Songs that Cross Borders"

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=265#h5p-22

Listen: "Cumbia: The Musical Backbone Of Latin America"

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=265#h5p-23

Research and Reflect: Tracing a Song

Pick a song that means something to someone in your community or a community that interests you. Avoid songs to which you feel personally attached. Do some research to find answers to some basic questions:

1. When and where did the song first come out? Who wrote it or performed it? How have specific live performances or music videos represented it?
2. How many covers can you find of it? Is the version you're listening to a cover?
3. Find the lyrics and mark any references, terms, etc. that seem to mean more than they appear.

4. What terms or genre labels get pinned to this song? Find some canonical examples of that genre.
5. How popular was it and with what groups when?

Now that you have a few brief answers with factual information, dig into a second round of research that finds deeper origins for those facts.

1. What was happening in and around the community when this song came out? What might the song be responding to?
2. What makes this version of the song different from and similar to other versions of the song?
3. Research the mysteries of the lyrics and find other songs that participate in similar traditions.

    - For instance, you might check out "The Story Behind the Song" podcast (https://redcircle.com/shows/1ea26847-b933-4033-9711-f7e1b6aa0988) to hear origin stories from creators, read reviews of the album it appeared on, and in general find language around the genres, traditions, and musical choices the music makes.
    - Then, you could also research some of the terms you found in Grove Music Online (https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic).

4. Find out where those terms or genre labels come from. What is the history of those genres and what traditions or genres did they build from, respond to, or resist?
5. Why might this song have resonated so much with the group it did? What about that community's experience feels represented in that song?

Now you have a lot of material to think about this song culturally, socially, and musically. Surely you could write a paper on this song, but you could also write your own song that participates in these traditions now that you have more context.

PARSING THEMES

paired with "To Speak is to Blunder"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#structure**, **#discussion**, **#30 minutes**, **#group**, **#memory**, **#family**, **#multilingual**

Li's essay braids several threads that resurface at different points in the essay. This structure is rather similar to magazine features and can often feel unusual to students. Grouping together paragraphs of similar threads can help students see the collective impact of a thread.

Introduction

ET: Since "To Speak Is to Blunder" presents many contradictions and resists offering readers a sense of mastery over the message of the essay, it can be challenging to isolate the impact of some of her compositional choices at a "mid-shot" level. Isolating six threads in her essay lets readers grapple with the development and impact of a theme in the essay.

While the New Yorker's framing of the essay is simply "choosing to renounce a mother tongue," Li ultimately circles around several themes to flesh out an impression of why she abandons Chinese without making direct statements as to her motives for such a drastic divide in her own personal timeline from her thoughts and memories. To give some dimension to this indirectness, she brings her thinking to several major themes: (1) Phone calls, dreams, and memories; (2) Sister, mother, and singing; (3) Hospitals, patients, and suicide; (4) Reflections on her own writing; (5) Reflections on the writings of others; and (6) Manifestoesque statements about language itself. These threads are widely dispersed throughout the essay, making a sort of mosaic of impressions that bleed into one another to create a hallucinatory overall effect, one we even called "lilting" in our early readings of the essay. Isolating the threads might help steady the boat for a moment and help students before a reread.

Guide

Set-Up

After students had an introduction to the essay in a previous class and were assigned to read it for homework, we started discussion activities with an exploration of themes. I read out the selection below (paragraph numbers from the original essay) to introduce students to the six main threads of the essay. I then asked for volunteers to "adopt" a thread to look at closely. I also emphasized that these are threads I noticed and that there are surely other ways to slice up the essay.

> 7) In the summer and autumn of 2012, I was hospitalized in California and in New York for suicide attempts, the first time for a few days, and the second time for three weeks.[1] During those months, my dreams often took me back to Beijing. I would be standing on top of a building—one of those gray, Soviet-style apartment complexes —or I would be lost on a bus travelling through an unfamiliar neighborhood.[2] Waking up, I would list in my journal images that did not appear in my dreams: a swallow's nest underneath a balcony, the barbed wires at the rooftop, the garden where old people sat and exchanged gossip, the mailboxes at street corners—round, green, covered by dust, with handwritten collection times behind a square window of half-opaque plastic.[3]
>
> 18) WHEN KATHERINE MANSFIELD was still a teen-ager, she wrote in her journal about a man next door playing "Swanee River" on a cornet, for what seemed like weeks. "I wake up with the 'Swannee River,' eat it with every meal I take, and go to bed eventually with 'all de world am sad and weary' as a lullaby." I read Mansfield's notebooks and Marianne Moore's letters around the same time, when I returned home from New York. In a letter, Moore described a night of fund-raising at Bryn Mawr. Maidens in bathing suits and green bathing tails on a raft: "It was Really most realistic ... way down upon the Swanee River."[4]
>
> 19) I marked the entries because they reminded me of a moment I had forgotten. I was nine, and my sister thirteen. On a Saturday afternoon, I was in our apartment and she was on the balcony. My sister had joined the middle-school choir that year, and in the autumn sunshine she sang in a voice that was beginning to leave girlhood. "Way down upon the Swanee River. Far, far away. That's where my heart is turning ever; That's where the old folks stay."[5]
>
> 31) When one remembers in an adopted language, there is a dividing line in that remembrance. What came before could be someone else's life; it might as well be fiction.[6]

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1. ET: Thread on "Hospitals, patients, and suicide"

2. ET: Thread on "Phone calls, dreams, and memories"

3. ET: Thread on "Reflections on her own writing"

4. ET: Thread on "Reflections on the writings of others"

5. ET: Thread on "Sister, mother, and singing"

6. ET: Thread on "Manifestoesque statements about language"

I then handed out pages by thread. I assigned the first five threads to groups, reserving the last one on manifesto-esque statements on language for the longer writing activity. Email etakehana@gmail.com with "Li by themes" in the subject line and I'm happy to send you the handouts by compiled threads. Otherwise, I divided the essay thusly:

1. Phone calls, dreams, and memories – paragraphs 1, 2, 8, 21, 36, 37
2. Sister, mother, and singing – paragraphs 19, 20, 26, 38
3. Hospitals, patients, and suicide – paragraphs 14, 15, 16, 17, 27, 28
4. Reflections on her own writing – paragraphs 3, 4, 12, 13, 23, 25
5. Reflections on the writings of others – paragraphs – 5, 10, 11, 18, 29
6. Manifestoesque statements about language – 6, 9, 22, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 39 (32-34 can go with thread 3 as well)

Close Read

Read the paragraphs on the theme your group chose. Mark connections and conflicts you see across those paragraphs. Look for repeated words and phrases. Seek out contradictions Li introduces in the different ways she addresses the theme. Underline phrases that you think resonate with some of the other themes other groups are focusing on or that connect with your broader understanding of the essay. Discuss your findings with your groupmates and prepare a 1-2 minute oral report to share with the whole class that answers the question: What is the collective impact of this theme on how Li sees language?

Write

From the paragraphs on the sixth theme on manifesto-esque statements about language, select one paragraph or phrase from a paragraph to put in conversation with your observations about the team your group was assigned. What does your theme illuminate about Li's statement on language that you chose?

POETRY AND SCIENCE: EPISTEMOLOGY THROUGH LANGUAGE

paired with "Asters and Goldenrod"

Hashtags

#reflection, **#comparison**, **#ways of knowing**, **#60 minutes**, **#close reading**, **#annotation**, **#experimental**, **#personal narrative**

This activity invites students to expand on Kimmerer's chapter by putting it in conversation with selections from Andrea Chapela's "The Act of Seeing Through," which could be used as either in-class or at-home reading and writing.

Introduction

ET: Kimmerer is far from alone in wanting to put different ways of knowing in conversation. Bringing Chapela into the conversation, with her essay on glass and its in-between state – not quite solid or liquid – gives students another vantage point into how ways of knowing across chemistry and poetry and the language each field uses affects one's perception of what understanding means.

While discussing how we might teach Kimmerer's chapter, we talked about how different experiences, expressive media, and disciplines function as lenses showing *how* one might see the world. I shared with my co-authors an instance of a student who was struggling with revising her paper. Since I knew that student was a photographer, I asked her to think about her writing as she would a photographic composition: What is centered? What details are in focus? What is outside of the frame? By calling on that framework, the student could more readily think of how she could reconsider balance and focus in her essay. Even in my late return to studying mathematics, integral calculus made more sense to me through metaphor: that I should always be on the lookout for the "caterpillar" version of the butterfly function in front of me.

"The Act of Seeing Through" is one of three essays in Chapela's collection *The Visible Unseen*, which

explores scientific and literary conventions while working out understanding herself. Nine of the numbered 61 sections appear here and were selected because they speak more directly to the language of science and poetry.

Guide

Read and Write: The Scientist Turned Poet

Read and take notes in the margins of how Chapela's language changes and of what she sees as the limits and possibilities of scientific writing versus poetic writing. How does the borderline state of glass concretize the challenges of understanding through only one way of seeing: chemistry OR poetry?

> 5 I'd be lying if I said that my mother, the Mathematician, and my father, the Physicist, tried to stop me from quitting chemistry. They knew that after four years of the study of matter, and twenty-five years of scientific cohabitation, I'd digested scientific thought and language. I was the only one who ignored this fact when I left Mexico for the United States to write. But there's no escape if what you find when you look inside is always science. Little by little its language seeped into my poems, and I started writing about bonds, synthesis, reactions, and decay. Hybrid words trapped between two worlds.
>
> 11 What is glass? (Consult entries 4, 26, and 57.) Even the most basic sources disagree. The Royal Spanish Academy (RAE): glass is a hard, fragile, and transparent or translucent solid without a crystalline structure. A delicate and breakable thing or a person of delicate temperament, easily irritated or angered. Colloquial Spanish expression meaning to take the blame: "to pay for broken glass." When I google "glass is a liquid": glass is a supercooled liquid, a viscous material that flows very slowly, so slowly that it would take hundreds of years to flow at room temperature. Wikipedia: common glass. Composition: silica, lime, and soda melted together at 1800°C (3272°F) and cooled until they form a disordered structure. A material that doesn't behave like either a solid or a liquid.
>
> 19 Main characteristics of a solid: resists changes in form or volume, has a defined shape, particles are closely packed and ordered. Main characteristics of a liquid: has a defined volume regardless of pressure, but takes the form of its container. A cubic milliliter of water is the same in a cup, a bowl, a vase, the palm of my hand, a bathtub. And all those milliliters share the most important characteristic of a liquid: the ability to flow.
>
> 26 Supercooled liquids are partway between a solid and a liquid. Near the melting point, the molecules are moving, but run the risk of spontaneous crystallization. A glass is cooled beyond cold, beyond its freezing point, beyond solid, until the molecules have lost all possibility of movement: they're stuck between order and disorder in a metastable state (consult entry 56). Christian Bök said it best in his poem "Glass":
>
> *Glass represents*
> *a poetic element*
> *exiled*
> *to a borderline*
> *between*
> *states of matter:*
> *breakable water*
> *not yet frozen,*

yet unpourable.

49 Knowing I'll be traveling soon makes me take up writing again. I read *Glass (Object Lessons)* by John Garrison. I admire his attempt to track glass through the depictions of the past and the imaginations of the future. I write down a quote: "Even when it's transparent and trying its best to be invisible, it's still affecting how we experience what is beyond it." He's talking about glass, but this idea could apply to all of language–scientific language, to be precise. How can I write about science from outside it? How can I stop seeing *through* language, using it as a tool, pretending exactitude is possible in words? What happens to scientific words when they're observed? If we extend the metaphor, we'd say they become unstable and change aggregation states.

58 To pursue science is to assume that each repeatable experiment and proven hypothesis brings us closer to some absolute truth. At its core is the conviction that one day we'll be able to understand everything around us. When I studied chemistry, I developed the bad habit of searching for precision in words, but my mistake was in forgetting that language is an approximation. Like believing that when I can see my breath in winter, I'm observing an ideal gas. I thought words were solid, reliable, but the exercise of writing has taught me that they mold to whatever container I put them in. They *flow*.

59 Glass, because of its metastability, is an orphaned material. This is due to the limitations of our language, the strictness of its taxonomy. Definitions in scientific language can't be fluid, yet faced with the mystery of glass, we have to accept the fragility of words, their lack of precision. Accepting this opens the door to searching for a way of talking about the most elusive experiences–the sensations and feelings that can only be grasped through metaphor, though we often fail in our attempt to capture them in language. In failing to define glass, in having to make comparisons and create new categories, I discover that the orphanhood of glass is also, in its turn, the fundamental failure and the very orphanhood of writing.

60 I'm told that the day I arrived in Madrid was the first cold day since summer ended. In the morning, as I cross El Retiro, the chilly air feels crystalline, and under my feet the leaves crunch. I no longer need a map to find the Palacio de Cristal. I amble through it, more occupied with searching for my own reflection in the windows than studying the names on the floor. Unlike my house, the Palacia was built for gazing out: the pond, the blue sky, the trees in the park. The glass magnifies the birdsong. In Mexico, I always looked outward. But now, in Madrid, I'm looking inward. I pause before one of the walls, consider my reflection, and think about how I always have to go against the flow. So I focus on the glass and on the idea that one day everything around me will crystallize, will shatter, and in doing so will find equilibrium. Will I find it too? It's hard to determine the final state of the system when you're halfway through the process. Between two states is a transition, which sometimes reaches equilibrium and sometimes stays metastable–it always depends on the circumstances. Only with the passage of time, by looking back, can you tell which was the path.

Reflect: How Your Training Guides Your Vision

Focus on passage number 58. Consider how language is an approximation and how it is precise. Consider why Chapela might think of chemistry as more precise. Take this sentence: "In failing to define glass, in having to make comparisons and create new categories, I discover that the orphanhood of glass is also, in its turn, the fundamental failure and the very orphanhood of writing." What about her training as a chemist might provoke such a strong desire for a precise definition that leaves no gray space between solid and liquid? Is that writing a "failure" to the chemist or the poet? To both?

Now that you have thought about those questions, return to a piece of your own writing and focus on a

paragraph or two. Write a one-page reflection that discusses *how* your writing reveals something about *how* you see the topic at hand. Pull out 2-3 sentences from your own writing and break down what assumptions, perspectives, and disciplinary ways of knowing might be playing into *how* you understand the meaning of your topic.

THE POINT OF EDUCATION?

paired with "Three Ways to Speak English"

Hashtag

#ways of knowing, **#belonging**, **#language discrimination**, **#reflection**, **#30 minutes**, **#education**, **#discussion**

Looking to the poet's work as a social scientist, this activity is designed as an in-class exploration of the idea underlying "Three Ways to Speak English" that can supplement a discussion of the poem itself.

Introduction

ET: Jamila Lyiscott's poem "Three Ways to Speak English" is a powerful spoken-word poem, rich in its own right. Beyond being a poet, Lyiscott is a social scientist and professor of Social Justice Education at UMass Amherst. Her research concerns the intersections of language, race, and power, which can certainly be expressed through poetry. Poetry's attention to language, image, and performance makes for an emotional and forceful message. Looking at those same ideas in her other TEDTalk, where she explains her liberation literacies principles that lead her guidelines for educators, lets students consider the practicalities and particularities of how education functions to empower and disempower specific groups.

While "Three Ways to Speak English" is full of powerful images of colonialism's effects on a people that remain to this day in normalized language discrimination, it can be easy for students to identify and commiserate with the sentiment without acknowledging its specific place in their daily lives. Lyiscott's "Why English Class Is Silencing Students of Color" can help students determine how the education system they are a product of enacts that violence on them in how it approaches teaching English and normalizing language practices.

Guide

Listen: The Theories Behind the Poem

Lyiscott also created another TEDTalk "Why English Class Is Silencing Students of Color". Listen to the sections, pausing at the designated marks below, and either write silently or discuss as a class initial responses to the questions for that section.

- Introduction (0-3:10): language, race, and power and their intersections are what Lyiscott studies as a social scientist. After she describes why she performed "Three Ways to Speak English," she shares a story about animals debating who is dominant, which closes with a human claiming their global strength with an image of a human defeating a lion. The lion then asks the question, "But who drew that picture?" How do you relate that question to the privileging of standard English?
- Language, Race, and Power AND Modern Family (3:11-6:47): Why is the power of multilingualism stripped away by institutions that claim to value diversity? Why use phrases like McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" and *Modern Family*'s "She Crazy" but still correct those "grammar mistakes" in the classroom?
- Language of Subjugation (6:48-9:24): Lyiscott recounts the words of writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the use of the classroom to continue the work of the military in colonizing a country such that "language was the means of spiritual subjugation." Why should a school accept the legitimacy of a non-standard language? Why doesn't it? What does this imply about who can safely speak? Who has a legitimate voice?
- Language of Power (9:25-12:36): Paradigms are maps that we use to reconstruct reality. We've kept at the center of many institutions, including educational ones, the white-centric paradigms that existed during slavery. Think of how your English classes up to this point have gone. What seems the paradigm around which language is taught and valued?

In the second half of the TEDTalk, Lyiscott recounts five principles of liberation literacies: awareness, agency and access, actualization, achievement, alternation and action. Listen to each section marked below with a timestamp and standout quotation. Define each principle in a sentence in your own words. Do you think your educational experience has helped you in realizing any of these principles? Blocked you from realizing these principles? How?

- Critical Awareness (12:37-13:54): "It's not just a random awareness, but an awareness of the social identities that we each navigate"
- Agency and Access (13:55-15:04): "Once you become aware [that your language has power] then you say 'what kind of agency or access exists for me in the world?'"

- Actualization (15:05-16:29): "This disrupts the traditional notions of what it means to read and write in this world. What it means to inscribe yourself in the narrative of history beyond the five-paragraph essay, is to go up and speak from the power of my voice"
- Achievement (16:30-19:14): "It takes a lot more work to be fully invested in who you are, what you have to say than to perform school for somebody who is imposing a structure on you"
- Alternation (19:15-22:05): "If we do not have socially just practices in ourselves, here in the silence, then it is impossible to have social justice in our world"

Reflect: Institutional Accommodation

Lyiscott accentuates how educational institutions have to change and adapt to affirm the students in the room. In a page, how would your school need to change to accommodate you so you felt legitimate and safe to speak on your terms?

READING THE "FINE PRINT"

paired with "The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to be Bilingual"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#comparison**, **#discussion**, **#context**, **#audio**, **#60 minutes**, **#language discrimination**, **#stereotype**

Connecting with the broader concepts of the social contract and racial contract, this extended discussion deepens engagement with close reading a poem.

Introduction

JS: Admittedly, when we considered this poem for our project, I hadn't read any of Ada Limón's work, though I was aware of her position as the U.S. Poet Laureate and was hearing more and more chatter about her writing. At first glance, this poem may seem simple enough with direct questions and imperatives, and indeed it seemed great to teach because it could introduce students to form and a number of poetic devices. Yet, the longer our group was discussing the poem and wondering where to emphasize the meaning—the part about not wanting to be complicit? the part about stereotypes about the father? what about the way beer and baseball cut through?—the more complex this poem became. In fact, I'd go so far as to say this is an example of what poetry is meant to do: by interacting with the poem through recursive readings, the meaning continues to evolve, even beyond what we can trace to the speaker or poet.

This discussion activity deepens a discussion of the poem by exploring the concept of the "contract" in the title. Designed to follow an initial close-reading of the poem, this discussion moves beyond the literal sense of a contract for a speaking engagement to confront implied meaning around deeper social and racial contracts in U.S. society. I think of this as reading the "fine print" of our social, political, and cultural relationships, which implicate us as readers and writers.

After an introduction to the meaning of the "social contract," there is a short podcast episode from May 2020 featuring Adam Serwer discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted social contracts as the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and developing movement for racial justice illustrated the concept of a racial

contract underpinning U.S. society. Insofar as the U.S. racial contract is typically understood along a black/white axis, it is particularly generative to return to Limón's poem and discuss what kinds of contracts are animated in this scene around a bilingual, implied Mexican speaker. In this sense, the poem is a reminder of how literary and cultural texts are often bound by explicit and implicit contracts, but may also experiment past them. At the very least, the poem may generate a critical consciousness of the social, racial, cultural, and linguistic contracts we participate in.

Guide

Concept Analysis: Social Contract(s)

Watch the following video and take notes on how "social contract" is broadly defined. What is a "social contract"? How do we have them and why?

Watch: Social Contract Theory | Ethics Defined

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=448#oembed-1

Building on the examples in the video, brainstorm examples of how you know you participate in social contract(s). What explicit and implicit agreements are you aware of?

Now listen to this podcast from May 2020 which takes us back to the early days of the covid-19 pandemic and how this brought new pressures on the social contract. The guest speaker, Adam Serwer, also centers how racial violence during this time reveals a "racial contract" that has long structured U.S. society (which we know prompted the racial justice movement that same year).

Listen: The Racial Contract

The Racial Contract (The Atlantic Link)

The Racial Contract (Podcast Spotify Link)

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=448#h5p-21

How do you see the racial contracts play out? Think about historical and current examples, in your own experiences or in society more broadly. How does Serwer's analogy of the train change your understanding of how social contracts work? How does the racial contract complicate the previous definition of the social contract?

Close Read: Noticing the "Fine Print" in "The Contract Says…"

Working from your understanding of social and racial contracts, return to Limón's poem, which leads with the title "The Contract Says: We'd Like the Conversation to be Bilingual." For this discussion, the task is to re-read the poem to figure out the explicit and implicit rules of the contract, or the "fine print," and to see how the contract is upheld or broken.

- Working with the title alone: What contract(s) seem relevant to this poem? What is the scene of the poem suggesting? What other layers can you add based on the previous discussion of social and racial contracts?
- Working in chunks (lines 1-6, lines 7-10, lines 7-27), what is the explicit or implicit stipulation or request being made? Do you see any "fine print" between the lines?
- Now, evaluating these lines as reflecting some of the contracts you brainstormed, is the contract being upheld or being broken? Who is breaking the contract?
- Focusing on the final section (lines 7-27), how do stereotypes reflect social and racial contracts? How do you interpret the burden of needing to prove or disprove the stereotype?
- Putting this all together, go back to the title that claims "we'd like the conversation to be bilingual" and lines 6-7 that ask for bilingual poems to reach "troubled teens." Why isn't the poem bilingual? What contract(s) are being upheld, and which are broken? By whom and why?

SELF REFLECTION, COLLECTIVE CHANGE

paired with "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#writing project**, **#group**, **#reflection**, **#60 minutes**, **#community**, **#personal is political**

This reflective writing activity builds toward a creative assignment to write a manifesto about using language more truthfully inspired by Lorde's call to transform silence.

Introduction

JS: I see a reflection of the first-year writing classroom in the ending of Lorde's essay that recenters the collective audience gathered for her talk as she calls on everyone to critically examine how they use language. The following activity invites students to engage with the process Lorde outlines, working from personal reflection to collective activity to consider the deeper meaning of transforming one's own use of language. Beginning with self-reflection guided by Lorde's core questions, this writing builds into an exploration of Lorde's description of the process of transformation in which she highlights three primary roles or functions: the one who writes, the one who shares, and the one who teaches by living their values (the last role, she clarifies, is for everyone). These roles become another prompt for exploration of one's strengths, tendencies, values, and goals, which in turn becomes the basis for a creative writing activity in which groups write manifestos based on their chosen role.

In the spirit of Lorde's observations that all too often, "we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition," this kind of writing assignment that blends reflective and creative writing in an academic setting is one way in which we as instructors can empower our students to critically examine their relationship to language in the hopes of collective transformation.

Guide

Write: Attuning to Self

As Lorde pivots from feeling "casualty" to being "warrior," she offers some direct questions to her audience to ponder the transformation from silence to language. Use these prompts as a reflective writing task with yourself. Write in a flow or simply make lists; be curious about where you go when you really tune into your realest responses:

- What are the words you do not yet have?
- What do you need to say?
- What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

These questions have been used by many as a journaling technique or creative writing tool (for example, see Divya Victor's questionnaire). In the context of this discussion, this list will be a way of examining your own relationship to language and writing, by yourself and with others.

Close Read: Self Examination

Toward the end of the essay, Lorde accentuates the collective responsibility and ongoing process of reclaiming language, which means also taking stock of one's role as an individual. Rather than offering something prescriptive, Lorde once again prompts a reflective process. Close-read the passage below, and as you go along, circle/underline/highlight only 1 or 2 words that anchor the meaning of the sentence for you. For example, *"role" in the first sentence.*

> In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation. For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us but primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths by which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

Looking at each of the words you emphasized, write down some notes about what you think this means in the context of the paragraph, and then Lorde's essay overall. What does this tell you about the dynamic between the individual and the collective?

Write: Responding through Reflection

Midway through the paragraph, Lorde begins to outline different roles or functions: those who write (writer), those who share and spread words (connector), and those who teach by living out their truths (teacher).

First, brainstorm what you associate with each role: writer, connector, and teacher.

- What are some examples of each? Hint: think outside the box and people who *do* these things even if it's not an official or professional position (for example, a neighbor may teach you a valuable lesson even though it's not in a classroom).
- What qualities do you associate with each role?

Now, take some time to respond to the ideas in the passage above through your own reflection:

- As a writer, how truthful are you? When you write (speak, express yourself) do you feel you are truthful? Does your language feel truthful? How do you know?
- As a connector, how do you spread words (ideas, insights) that are meaningful to you? Who do you share with? What role do you play in sharing?
- Finally, in what ways do you "teach by living and speaking" the truths that are meaningful to you? What is the difference between not just writing or sharing but *living* these ideas? What does it mean to you to think about yourself as a teacher?

Write Together: Manifesto for Transformation

Compare your reflections with others and form groups based on which dimension you identify with most: writer, connector, teacher. Work together to write a manifesto about your insights on this particular role inspired by Lorde's call to transform silence into language and action.

If it's helpful: a manifesto is a public statement that offers a set of principles and usually includes a call to action. In keeping with Lorde, this kind of writing is pretty charged with vitality and is oriented toward change!

TRACING CITATIONS

paired with "How to Tame a Wild Tongue"

Hashtags

#close reading, **#annotation**, **#30 minutes**, **#120 minutes**, **#poetry**, **#research**, **#writing project**

This activity works best as a short writing assignment done outside of class, though doing some initial research together can be helpful.

Introduction

ET & JS: Gloria Anzaldúa uses a number of footnotes to trace parts of her thought journey. Some of these are a bit surprising since you don't anticipate the connection between the Ray Gwyn Smith quote Anzaldúa includes – "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?" – and *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*. My co-authors and I saw a few ways we could take this idea of branching and associating ideas to our writing that might surprise our readers.

While footnotes indexically trace punctuated moments in the body of the main text, we could also view this list as a text in and of itself, revealing layers that resonate in different ways when read apart from the body. These citations do, after all, reflect a reading and thinking journey taken by the writer and suggest other pathways that grow and splinter through writing. As much as a text reflects its author, it also carries innumerable influences and connections that we glimpse in different ways, often depending on our mode of attention. The footnotes and references are one way of marking these resonances.

Beyond coming to see Anzaldúa's poetry through what she reads and connects, we as readers can also document the path of our own thinking by contributing footnotes that show a bit about where Anzaldúa's writing brought our minds. This offers a great introduction to exploratory research that privileges curiosity and invites students to travel down side roads or take detours from "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" while also being grounded in that text. Perhaps they want to dig into depth about one term, person, or place that intrigues them. Maybe the reading provoked an associated thought that a student might want to connect to Anzaldúa's

thinking. Students might have another perspective or point of reference that they want to bring to exploring an idea Anzaldúa sees differently. In the end, the idea of multiplying pathways of connected thinking will help students see the richness of complicating rather than essentializing a place and its people.

Guide

Close Read: Attunement

Read the list of footnotes and references from "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" — you may want to read to yourself and annotate as you go, or have someone read aloud, or even take turns reading aloud. As you go through, listen for words or phrases that catch your attention. Don't worry too much about why at this point, but just listen to this list as if it were a poem. If annotating by yourself, circle the words and phrases all the way through. If working in a group or as a whole class, focus your individual attention on one moment.

How to Tame a Wild Tongue References

Ray Gwyn Smith, Moorland is Cold Country, unpublished book.

Irena Klepfisz, "*Dirayze abeym*/The Journey Home," in The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, eds. (Montpelier, VT: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1986), 49.

R.C. Ortega, Dialectología Del Barrio, trans. Hortencia S. Alwan (Los Angeles, CA: R.C. Ortega Publisher & Bookseller, 1977), 132.

Eduardo Hernandéz-Chávez, Andrew D. Cohen, and Anthony F. Bel-tramo, *El Lenguaje de los Chicanos:* Regional and Social Characteristics of Language Used By Mexican Americans (Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975), 39.

Hernandéz-Chavez, xvil.

Irena Klepfisz, "Secular Jewish Identity: Yidishkayt in America," in The Tribe of Dina, Kaye/Kantrowitz and Klepfisz, eds., 43.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Sign," in We Speak In Code: Poems and Other Writings (Pittsburgh, PA: Motheroot Publications, Inc., 1980), 85.

Rodolfo Gonzales, I Am Joaquin/Yo Soy Joaquin (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1972). It was first published in 1967.

Kaufman, 68.

Chávez, 88-90.

> "Hispanic" is derived from *Hispanis* (*España*, a name given to the Iberian Peninsula in ancient times when ic was a part of the Roman Empire) and is a term designated by the U.S. government to make it easier to handle us on paper.

Then, look back at all the moments you've isolated. If working in a group, take turns reading just the words/phrases and listen as they are re-assembled in a "found poem."

- What do you hear when you reassemble these words and phrases?
- What ideas emerge across the repetitions you hear?
- Can you tune in to deeper themes or issues listening just to these threads?

Research and Write: Adding My Own Footnote

Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" has many potentially interesting paths to follow. This assignment asks you to choose one tidbit from Anzaldúa's passage that sparked your interest and provoked a genuine question which you can answer in a researched footnote.

You can frame your question any way you like, but it has to be an honest question that you actually care about. If a question doesn't immediately come to you, it might help to think about a few common categories of questions to jog the brain:

- Origin questions: Sometimes people are curious about when and where something started.
- Motivation questions: Sometimes people want to know the context around why someone did what they did.
- Background information: Sometimes people want to understand what else is going on around an event that might help explain it.
- Reaction questions: Sometimes people are curious about what people think about an idea or event to see how it landed with an audience or community.
- Informational questions: Sometimes we are just unfamiliar with something and we're worried that other readers are too and would benefit from a good explanation of a complicated or niche idea.
- Rebuttal questions: Sometimes we are skeptical of what we've read or think otherwise, so we question an author's thinking and share another position.
- Connection questions: Sometimes we notice a relationship between what we read and other things we've read or noticed in our life experiences, and we wonder how those ideas might link to one another.

At the end of your footnote, include the MLA references for all the sources you used to answer your questions. Put any sources that you summarized, paraphrased, or quoted in a "Works Cited" list and any you read but didn't directly use in a "Works Consulted" page. Aim for at least five in each.

- References from library database materials are available by clicking the "Cite" button.
- For sources you found on the broader internet, I suggest using Scribbr https://www.scribbr.com/citation/generator/mla/.

TRANSCULTURATION, LANGUAGE AND SOUTH-SOUTH MIGRATION

paired with "Vão/Vòng A Conversation with Katrina Dodson"

Hashtags

#reflection, **#translation**, **#writing project**, **#personal is political**, **#45 minutes**

This introduction to "South-South" migration could be used as an assignment for writing during or outside of class. Instructors could use portions of this activity to supplement in-class discussions of the text or for free-writing activities in class.

Introduction

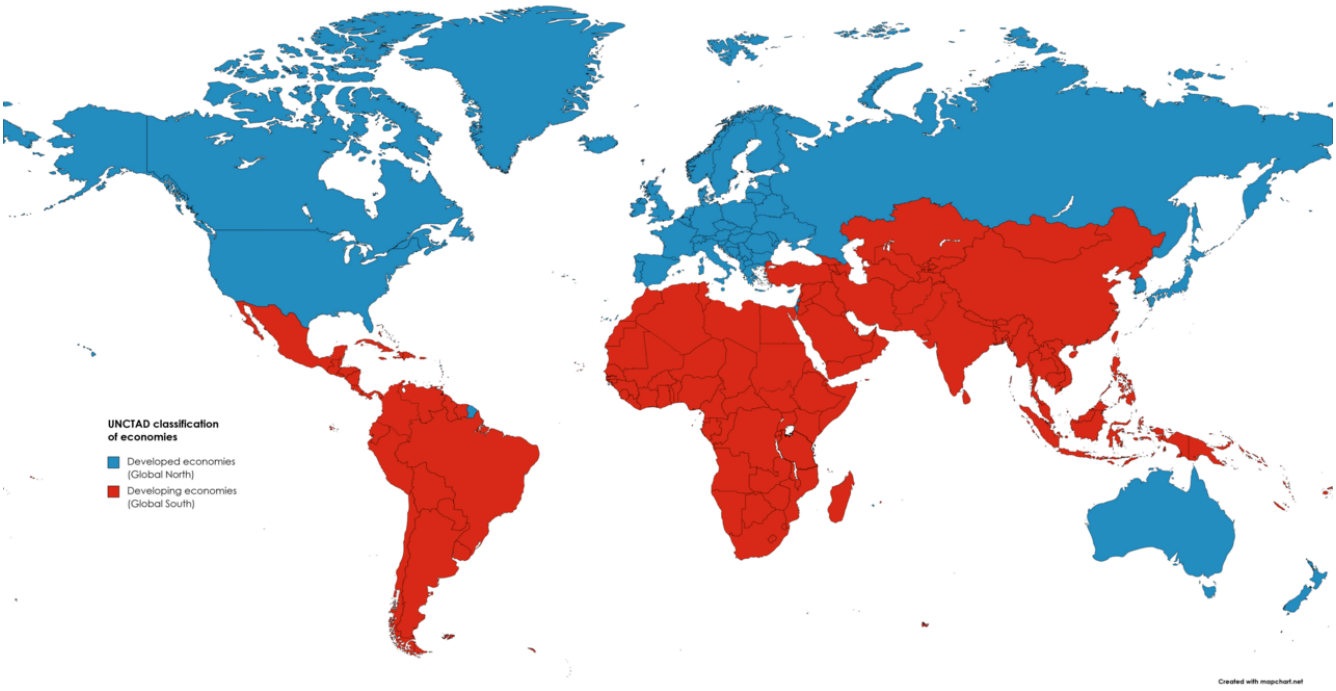
DU: The interview between Katrina Dodson and Madhu Kaza explores connections between Brazilian Portuguese and Vietnamese. To deepen our understanding of the larger questions in this text – particularly the ways in which the authors discuss translation, interpretation, and transculturation – consider the issue of "South-South" migration, a term that may be new for you. The issue of "South-South" migration is an interesting parallel to the major ideas in "Vao / Vong."

As Dodson points out in the interview, "imperialism makes for strange bedfellows, and it turns out that the romanized Vietnamese alphabet is derived from the Portuguese because the Portuguese missionaries who came to Vietnam from Macau and Goa in the early 1600s were the first to convert the language from Chinese script into Roman characters." This Portuguese/Chinese/Vietnamese connection is a little-known fact. Attending to these particular histories deepens our appreciation and understanding of how cultures and languages intersect during particularly intense historical moments of transculturation as in the period of early imperialism in the 1600s.

While there are many terms to discuss cultural contact, we use the term "transculturation" purposefully. The concept was first theorized by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s. As described in the

interview in *The New Humanitarian* that we ask that you read below, one of the key reasons for studying "South-South" migration is to understand the importance of making visible knowledge production in places outside of the "Global North." If we don't, we have a limited understanding of the world.

Since migration is one of the most contested questions in our current historical moment, students will find it interesting to deepen their understanding of global movement. While defining these terms is difficult, the "Global South" generally refers to regions in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and parts of Asia and the "Global North" is roughly defined as Europe, United States, and Canada. Complex and fraught, the Global South/Global North framework is nevertheless helpful when making a richer, fuller sense of both individual and collective migrant stories.



This map reflects how the UN Conference for Trade and Development classified countries in 2022 and offers one perspective on how to think of these terms along economic lines.

Guide

Reflect

Take some time to reflect on your reading of the Dodson and Kaza interview and make connections to your own experiences and contexts.

- Do any of the issues in the Dodson and Kaza interview resonate with you?
- What kinds of stories do you know that showcase surprising linguistic connections? For example, the

everyday verb for "I wish" in Spanish is "*ojala*,"
which comes from the Arabic (this originates from the long moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula from 711 through 1492).

- Think of some of these everyday intersections between languages, culture and history that you or your peers may be familiar with. What do we learn about language and culture when we attend to these intersections?

Extend

Most representations of migration in the media focus on movement from the "Global South" to the "Global North" even though at least a third or more of all movement is "South-South." Scholars have pointed out that ignoring "South-South" migratory flows can lead to misunderstandings both on a policy level and on how we tell stories about immigration generally.

As a brief glimpse into this complex question, read "South-South Migration Has Long Been Overlooked–Why?," an interview with Joseph Teye, the director of the Centre for Migration Studies at the University of Ghana.

Then, respond to the following questions in writing or discussion:

- Why do you think "South-North" stories are more visible than "South-South" migratory flows? What is the importance of shifting focus to "South-South"?
- Do you have any newer understandings of migration after this activity?
- Can you collect any personal histories in your community of "South-South" migration?

This short video, "The Story of Migration" elaborates on many of these points and may deepen your thinking on why we should know more about "South-South" flows.

The Story of Migration – English

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/polyphonyoerreader/?p=502#oembed-1

Write

After exploring these texts, write freely on your choice of prompts below.

1. Dodson mentions that "having to speak some Vietnamese with my relatives and listening to my mother talk on the phone in Vietnamese for hours definitely gave me a more imaginative relationship to English and to the givens of language in general than I otherwise would have had." Has the interview in *The New Humanitarian* or the accompanying video challenged any of the givens you have concerning migration? What is gained when we complicate our "imaginative relationship" to the movement of people?
2. Research a little-known story of "South-South" migration. Elaborate on how your research helps us capture a deeper understanding of global migration.

    - To get started, you might look at some migration data for a country in the Global South from MIDEQ, the Migration Policy Institute, or the UN Migration Report. Identify a pattern of migration to that country from another country in the Global South and do some research to determine why, for instance, Bangladeshis are migrating to India.

Media Attributions

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TRANSLATIONS ACROSS AND WITHIN LANGUAGES

paired with "Vão/Vòng A Conversation with Katrina Dodson"

Hashtags

#reflection, **#rewriting**, **#translation**, **#45 minutes**, **#poetry**, **#context**, **#multilingual**

Inviting students to play with language as they consider the stakes of translation, the "pre-write" and "read and take note" portions of this activity could be used as an in-class workshop and reflection, while the "write and rewrite" portion could extend to writing outside of class.

Introduction

ET: Translation can feel like a foreign concept for monolingual people, while people who use and identify with many languages might not have thought with much intent about the role translation plays in meaning-making. Katrina Dodson and Madhu Kaza's conversation revolves around individual identity, familial translation, and resonances across Portuguese and Vietnamese, but they speak less about the act of translating. The activities and readings gathered here work to provide that perspective so that you and your students might easily make the leap from the personal experience and the process of moving your ideas from one language to another (or even within one language, expressed otherwise). Perhaps it is a bit indulgent, but I find it hard to resist revisiting the tensions around translation I've experienced over the years. While translation is a linguistic process, it's also an impactful experience of self and group.

1. I was raised bilingually in the US. My mother spoke only Icelandic to me until I was six years old. My father only speaks English. She would often call me "dugleg," but that doesn't translate directly to English. Google Translate calls in "hard-working," but it means something like being very ambitious but also very contentious of the group. A part of my character doesn't exist in English.
2. I visited my grandmother in Iceland in 2015, but my Icelandic was rather poor by that point. I

understand a decent amount but struggle to speak much. My grandmother only speaks Icelandic, so the two of us sat in my uncle's house and I'd type what I wanted to say to her in Google Translate and she would read it. She laughed and laughed and was a bit surprised to discover that I am funny. I wondered if Google Translate made me more or less funny.

3. I started learning French at 16 and got to be rather fluent by 19, but during my first trip to France when I was 17 I went to a comedy show by then incredibly famous Jamal Debbouze. The thing about comedy is you have to understand so much more than what the words mean. You have to have so much cultural knowledge and understand inflection. I didn't yet, so I sat in the front row stone-faced for almost the entire show. I understood one joke and laughed as hard as I could, thinking it would likely be the only one I understood. Jamal pointed me out and said something about me, but I'll never know what it was, but everyone laughed, so it must have been funny.
4. While in my MA program, I took a course on Francophone literature of West Africa where everything was in French: our discussions, the readings, the essays we had to write. I had taught myself French by reading novels one page at a time with a dictionary and grammar book, but in this context, I was frustrated by how even though my language level was solid at that point, the thinking felt anything but fluid. It took me three times longer to write in French and I struggled to know how someone would perceive what I wrote. I would ask native speakers about my tone since I felt tone-deaf in my own writing. I couldn't understand myself.
5. While working on a film for a graduate course, I was gathering from found footage and discovered a video of myself in Iceland when I was six years old. My aunt was following me around my grandmother's yard while asking me questions. I understood all but one line, but that one line bothered me. I had to call my mother to have her translate what six-year-old me was saying since I couldn't understand myself.
6. One night I managed to dream in French. I felt victorious...that the language infiltrated my subconscious. Then I remembered how my mother, who has been in the US for over 40 years and speaks English fluently, still counts in Icelandic. Still writes her grocery lists in Icelandic lest my father correct her spelling. It made me wonder if one can ever fully habitate a language.

When you negotiate language, you're also negotiating self, culture, power, meaning. There is no neutral use of language even if there is plenty of unintentional or thoughtless uses of language. With translation, you cannot avoid the balancing act all language expression is because you have to try to maintain meaning across languages. Then you see how delicate and multifaceted meaning is and how much and how little it has to do with the words we use to contain it. In that spirit, the activities that follow ask students to explore the concept of translation and how that reveals nuance even for monolingual speakers.

Guide

Pre Write: Versioning

Take the couplet below from Pablo Neruda's poem "Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines" that W.S. Merwin translated in 1969 as

> This is all. In the distance, someone is singing. In the distance.
> My soul is not satisfied that it has lost her.[1]

Rewrite the sentiment of these lines in at least five different ways. Share those rewrites with a classmate and discuss the impact of the different choices in those versions.

Read and Take Note: Contextualizing Translation

Moving from one language to another is no easy feat. Consider the two opening paragraphs of Paul Hund's "The Peculiar Perils of Literary Translation" that appeared in *Columbia Magazine*. Pay attention to the challenges, risks, and rewards translators encounter. Think about the political, social, and cultural weight of their work.

> In 1978, Gregory Rabassa '54GSAS, famed translator of Gabriel García Márquez '71HON, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa, was asked about a review in the *Washington Post* of a novel by the Guatemalan writer and Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias. Rabassa had translated the book from Spanish into English, and though the reviewer praised the richness of Asturias's language, he never once mentioned Rabassa. It was as if the reader had absorbed the author's words directly, without any mediator. Rabassa, who taught Spanish and Portuguese at Columbia from 1948 to 1969, wryly wondered aloud whether the reviewer even knew the book had been translated. "This would seem to be an additional argument," Rabassa quipped, "for the placing of the translator's name on the dust jacket of the book."
>
> At least since *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was translated from Sumerian into Akkadian four thousand years ago, translators have been unsung conduits of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual exchange. The verb "translate" is rooted in the Latin translatus, meaning "to bear across," and indeed translators, living on the edges of two languages, must ferry meaning across a churning sea of possibilities. In doing this they have faced skepticism

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1. These lines were first published in Spanish in 1924 under the title "Puedo escribir los versos más tristes ..."

> Eso es todo. A lo lejos alguien canta. A lo lejos.
> Mi alma no se contenta con haberla perdido.

If you speak Spanish, what do you think of Merwin's translation? How would you have translated it otherwise and for this time?

> and worse. An early martyr of translation, the English scholar William Tyndale, was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536 for violating a papal decree against translating the Latin Bible into local languages, and in the sixteenth century, Italians angered by French translations of Dante, which they felt betrayed the poetry, hurled the phrase *traduttore*, *traditore*, or "translator, traitor" (a sentiment shared by many authors whose work has been shabbily translated — allusions disfigured, humor gone flat). Given the nuances and resonances of any two languages and the unachievable ideal of perfect lexical equivalence, writers from Voltaire to Virginia Woolf have decried the futility of translation, and the philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt declared it "impossible." Science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin '52GSAS, herself an amateur translator, called the act "entirely mysterious."

Translation itself is first an interpretative process that must negotiate the limits and affordances of each language at play. If you are monolingual, that dynamic might feel unknown (though you certainly know how retellings within a language shift meaning as well, whether you've played that classic game of telephone or not). Regardless, translator Sophie Hughes's short interactive essay "The Art of Translation" in the *New York Times* showcases her thinking around translating two sentences from Spanish to English in Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* and Alia Trabucco Zerán's novel *Clean* in a sort of speak aloud. Take note of the many considerations she offers as she adjusts her translation. Alternatively, or in addition, take a look at Caroline Bergvall's *VIA*, a collection of 48 translations of the opening tercet of Dante's *Inferno.*

Reflect and Rewrite: Meaning Changing Over Versions

With your notes on Hund and Hughes (or Bergvall), outline several ways that translators make their work evident through their choices. How do the considerations translators have to make weigh in how you might now consider how you write even in your primary language? Dodson said, "access to multiple languages can enhance your imaginative capacities in your primary language." What might you imagine otherwise in your primary language after considering the translation process? Take a paragraph or two to reflect on these questions. If you are feeling extra inspired, pull a paragraph from the last essay you wrote and reimagine HOW it conveys what it is saying by exercising your "imaginative capacities."

WORK CULTURE REEXAMINED

paired with "Puerto Rican Obituary"

Hashtags

#critique, **#context**, **#reflection**, **#writing project**, **#45 minutes**, **#complicity**

Inviting students to question the largely positive perception of productivity, the "pre-write" and "gather ideas" portions of this activity could be used as an in-class exploration and discussion, while the "write" portion could extend to writing outside of class.

Introduction

ET: Work constitutes a significant portion of most adults' daily lives, but our relationship with work is one we're socialized and encultured into. And so, like other beliefs and ideologies defined by the collective and internalized by the individual, it can be very difficult to question or undermine ideas with which we pin some sense of value. Faculty on our campus teach a full load of 4 courses per semester and most of our students work at least one job to pay for their tuition and fees as full-time students. Venerating hustle culture can feel like the positive spin on an overwhelming workload even if it makes us complicit to a work culture that benefits from each of us tying our self-worth to our work performance.

One of the challenges of teaching Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary" is that students often overlook its role as a poem of protest against a toxic work culture that aims to ask you about the agency you have in your own work, of who defines your worth to society, of who benefits from your work and why that may not be you. We hope that these texts and activities will help you and your students question and critique work culture by redefining "good work" as what empowers and supports the well-being of workers. Efficiency and productivity aren't necessarily bad, but who benefits from and who pays for those efficiencies and productivity?

Guide

Pre-write: Going Against the Productivity Maxim

Pick one of the below quotes and spend a couple of minutes writing on why this productivity maxim could be misguided, toxic, or lack nuance. What are the ideological assumptions that underlie the quote you chose? What do those beliefs teach you to be ashamed of?

- "Sometimes, things may not go your way, but the effort should be there every single night." – Michael Jordan
- "Reflect on what you do in a day. You may have never realized how some simple, harmless activities rob you of precious time." – Vivek Naik
- "Stressing output is the key to improving productivity, while looking to increase activity can result in just the opposite." – Paul Gauguin
- "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." – Sir Edmund Hillary

If you are already enamored by productivity and see no issue with these quotes, try skimming Nancy Driver's "Let's Talk About Toxic Productivity."

Gather Ideas: The Dark Side of Work

In many ways, the myth of one's productivity being proof of one's goodness infiltrates American work culture. It can be an especially pernicious and stubborn myth to unseat. While there is value in a job well done, one's agency over one's time and the goals one's work serves define that more than productivity at large.

Read or watch one of the following sources and take note of the three most compelling ideas that challenge or deepen your thinking on your relationship to work.

- BBC Radio's "Max Weber and the Protestant Work Ethic," published on their *YouTube* channel in 2016, provides a brief overview of Weber's premise of his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which tied salvation with one's work ethic.
- George Woodcock's "The Tyranny of the Clock," an anarchist essay published in 1944, charts how the development of the mechanical clock changed humans' relationship to time and work.
- Elle Hunt's "Japan's karoshi culture was a warning. We didn't listen," published in *Wired UK* in February of 2021, discusses how working to death, once a seeming oddity of Japanese work culture, has spread globally and employer and government practices are not doing enough to curtail the health risks the World Health Organization identifies as directly connected to overwork.

- Maya Vinokour's "Work won't set you free," published in the *Boston Globe* in August 2023, draws parallels between American conservatives' take on the "work ethic" lessons slaves learned on the plantation and the narratives of productivity Jews fell victim to heading up to and during the Holocaust. You might also want to read about the "Arbeit macht frei" from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum.
- Matthew Desmond's "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation," published in the *New York Times* in August of 2019, connects the surveillance and productivity models modern corporations use to the accounting and "labor management" practices developed on slave plantations. This article is long, so if you're short on time, read the section that begins "Perhaps you're reading this at work" or the following section that begins with "Today modern technology has facilitated unremitting workplace supervision."

Write: Critique Labor Practices

Through the "Pre-Write" and "Gather Ideas" activities, you've spent time considering other ways to look at the value and meaning of work that doesn't venerate productivity for its own sake or the sake of your own self-worth. Now it is time to consider how you judge the work culture around you. A few approaches you might consider for a short cultural critique on work culture include:

- Notice how your co-workers and boss talk about and create a culture around what work should be. Consider how those cultural choices, rule or incentive systems, or attitudes affirm and hurt your well being. Use one of five elements of the Framework on Workplace Well-Being Developed by the U.S. Surgeon General to help ground your critique.
- Read the syllabi you received from professors this semester and mark elements that humanize and dehumanize your work as a student. Read the feedback your professors give you on your work and note how they talk to and about students. How do they cast your role and theirs in the learning process? How does it encourage and discourage you?
- Consider the back-handed compliment that ultimately demeans and shames its recipient. For instance, you could watch the music video to Stromae's "Santé." Is it a celebration of the worker? Does it mock and belittle the worker? Put that video in conversation with another pop culture representation of work life to identify ways we perpetuate an empty rhetoric around caring for the humanity of others.

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