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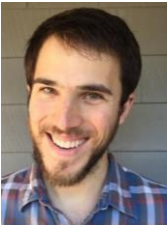
## JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

### What Can Translation Do? Language, Power, and Identity in an Elementary Classroom

Eric Fishman

**Abstract:** What purposes might literary translation serve in the K-12 classroom? In this article, I use practitioner research to explore a heritage language poetry translation project I taught with third and fourth grade multi- and monolingual students in a suburban independent school. Students interviewed family members about their heritage languages, worked with family and community members to choose and analyze a poem in their heritage language, and developed three interpretive translations of the poem in English. Drawing on classroom observations, student and family reflections, and a range of scholarly and critical perspectives, I describe three purposes for teaching literary translation. Translation can disrupt hegemonies of texts, languages, and identities; develop multilingual students' critical bilingualism; and work toward "critical monolingualism" for students who do not (yet) speak a language other than English.

**Keywords:** monolingualism, multilingualism, poetry, translation



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*[Even] with all its predicaments, all the violence it may carry on its back, translation is an act of hospitality.*

-Madhu Kaza

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>: One Curriculum, Multiple Translations**

Krish stands just outside the door of our third and fourth grade classroom. His mother is on one side of him, and on the other side is his mother's cousin, visiting from out of town. In front of them, Krish's translations of the Indian poet Maritha Gurjar, mounted on the wall. Krish reads the translations aloud in English, and the three of them converse quietly in Marathi. Krish turns toward me and smiles shyly across the room.

How to describe the understated power of this scene? "Translation is an act of hospitality," writes Kaza (2017). Who, or what, was being welcomed that afternoon? Krish was inviting his family into the classroom, certainly, as well as his language, the language of his mother's ancestors. He was also bringing in the words of a poet from thousands of miles away, channeled through himself and recreated in English. When he turned to look at me, I sensed he would remember this moment.

Should we teach literary translation in K-12 classrooms? How might we approach teaching it? And what purposes might it fulfill—and for whom? In this article, I examine these questions through a process of pedagogical sense-making, in which I use the story of one curriculum as a means to explore the possibilities and conundrums of teaching translation more broadly. The basis of this investigation is a

heritage language poetry translation project I taught with a group of 16 third and fourth grade students in a suburban independent school outside of Boston. Of these students, 12 were multilingual and four were monolingual. Heritage languages<sup>2</sup> spoken by students included Armenian, Dutch, German, Japanese, Italian, Mandarin, Marathi, and Mandarin. Two of these students were recent immigrants, seven were the children of immigrants, and three were the grandchildren of immigrants. Half the students identified as White and half as students of color, predominately of East and South Asian heritage.

The translation project was the conclusion of an interdisciplinary unit on language, assimilation, and resistance (Figure 1), during which we focused on the violent history of Native residential schools. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children throughout Turtle Island (North America) were removed from their communities by the American and Canadian governments and forced to attend White-run schools that aimed, in the infamous words of Richard Henry Pratt, to "kill the Indian, save the man" (Pratt, 1892). One of the most violent ways the schools attempted to destroy Indigenous culture was through the silencing of Indigenous languages. The poetry translation project evolved as a conclusion for this unit, and as a way for students to connect the ideas of language, identity, assimilation, and resistance to their own family histories. Over the course of the translation project, students interviewed family members about their heritage languages, worked with family and community members to choose and analyze a poem in their heritage language, identified essential features of the poem, and developed three different translations of the poem in English. Each of their translations focused on recreating a different

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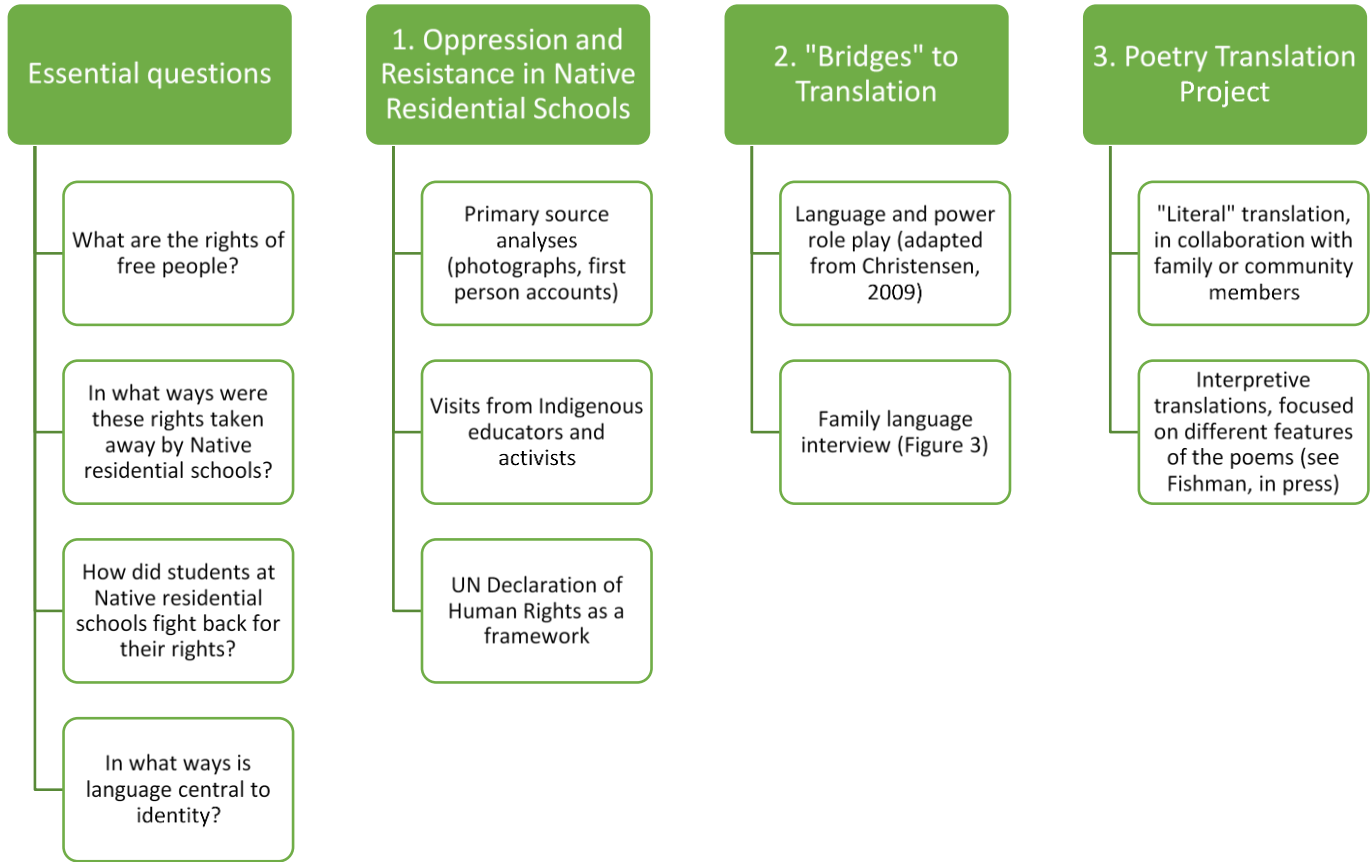
<sup>1</sup> All pronouns for individuals in this article correspond to the pronouns they use to refer to themselves.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, I use Wiley's (2005) definition of heritage language: "an immigrant,

indigenous, or ancestral language that a speaker has a personal relevance and desire to (re)connect with" (cited in Shin, 2018, p. 80).

**Figure 1**

**Unit map: “Language, assimilation, and resistance,” focused on the history of Native residential schools; the curriculum concluded with the poetry translation project.**



“feature” of the original poem, such as an emotion or a rhyme scheme.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I tell the story of the curriculum through a similar process of translation: each of the following three sections “translates” the curriculum story through a different lens. These lenses focus on developing multilingual students’ critical bilingualism and working towards “critical monolingualism”<sup>4</sup> for students who do not (yet) speak a language other than English.

Each of these three sections includes a description of the translation project and curricular context, analysis of how the project demonstrated the “functions of translation,” and reflections on what might be done differently in future iterations.

I employ a form of practitioner research that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have described as “inquiry as stance.” Within this framework, teacher research is not simply a technical protocol used to

their family histories and personal experiences of monolingualism. This term is discussed in more depth in the corresponding section.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the pedagogical scaffolding I used in the translation process, see Fishman, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Briefly, I use the term “critical monolingualism” to refer to students’ development of critical consciousness around

improve instruction, but rather a “a challenge to the current arrangements and outcomes of schools...as part of larger social and intellectual movements for social change and social justice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 2). I examine data drawn from classroom observations, student responses to open-ended reflection questions completed at the end of the project, analyses of students’ work gathered throughout the project, and informal interviews with several students’ family members. I situate these data within a range of scholarly and critical perspectives in order to explore the question: In an elementary classroom, what can literary translation do for students bringing both multi- and monolingual perspectives?

**Translation disrupts hegemonies of texts, languages, and identities.**

The Martinician poet Monchoachi, in an essay on power and language in the French Antilles, describes that “for us, the passage from Martinician Creole to French and vice versa as a subtle art, almost like footwork in a game of soccer” (Monchoachi, 2019). This is a joyous comparison, one that implies both skill and pleasure, aesthetics, and utility. There is still a “goal” to be scored (getting the meaning across), but there are a multitude of ways to get there. I am drawn to Monchoachi’s metaphor because it embodies the way that multilingual students pass between their different reservoirs of linguistic knowledge. They move between languages every day: among the language(s) they speak with family members, the language(s) they speak with friends, and the Standard English they are likely expected to speak in the classroom (Lima, 2012; Rodriguez, 2004; Zentella, 1997). Of course, this “translation” (in the etymological sense of “moving across”) is not always joyful: just as the movement between languages in Martinique is partially dictated by the oppressive colonial history of the island, American students are often forced to code switch by the rigid, and even

violent, monolingual language ideologies of American institutions (Soto & Kharem, 2006). Nonetheless, multilingual students skillfully pass between and among different language spaces on a daily basis.

Literary translation centers these multiple literacies and translanguaging practices. For example, one of the students in the class, Tommy, reflected on the knowledge he used to successfully navigate the translation process:

There were many difficulties when I was translating because of the Chinese grammar. The words are often located where in English it would be somewhere else. For example, in the poem the last line is “li li jian xin ku” and the literal translation would be “grain grain day hard work.” In English it should be “thanks to their toiling day.” Because a lot of Chinese words rely on the context of the word itself, if the grammar is wrong, then the word will change completely.

Tommy beautifully articulates an aspect of what Yosso terms “linguistic capital”: “the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (2005, p. 78). To Tommy, the translation process required him to have a sensitivity to the “context of the word itself” in Chinese. Tommy employed his sophisticated metalinguistic knowledge about differences between Chinese and English grammar to develop a convincing translation. He was also able to articulate the ways in which this linguistic capital was not just helpful, but *necessary* (“if the grammar is wrong than the word will change completely”).

In this way, translation put cracks in the hegemony of the English language in the elementary classroom: now monolingual students had to work additionally hard to understand the texts they were reading. This

re-centering of “capital” is itself an act of resistance in an American educational culture that discriminates, often violently, against minority languages. As Rumbaut, Massey, and Bean observe: “the United States has aptly been described as a graveyard for languages because of its historical ability to absorb immigrants by the millions and extinguish their mother tongues within a few generations” (2006, cited in Colla, 2018, p. 17). The monolingual American educational system has historically enacted—and continues to enact—a form of “linguistic terrorism ... [a] slaying of the soul” of multilingual children (Soto & Kharem, 2006, p. 25).

While the majority of the students in my class likely experienced a partial mediation of this violence through their privilege as part of the upper-middle and upper classes, as well as their position as native English speakers, it is notable that despite the prolific multilingualism of the school community, I almost never heard students or families converse in any language except for English during school hours. Therefore, I was careful to observe the ways in which the translation project established “new language norms” (Zapata & Laman, 2016, p. 377) in the classroom, moving toward multilingual community. When Brown was struggling to find a poem he liked in Japanese, Ken helped him read through some possibilities. Aya, whose language-based learning disability made writing a struggle, developed brilliant translations from Italian utilizing alliteration. She also spoke Italian with Krish for the first time in the classroom, both as they discussed her poem and later as they joked around. Two students had chosen poems by the same Chinese poet, and as they helped each other identify the features of the poems, they also swapped stories about their Chinese language school teachers. The “subtle art”

(Monchoachi, 2019) of translation provided a perfect opportunity for students to build the kinds of linguistic and cultural communities that support positive ethnic identity development. Lee and Suarez (2009), for example, assert that:

Identity is constructed and shaped through social interaction ... when there are negative associations with one’s culture and language, individuals tend to dissociate from the ethnic group, but in contexts where the heritage culture is viewed in a positive light, they desire close identification with the group. (cited in Shin, 2018, p. 114)

Family members also observed the ways the translation project supported students’ use of heritage languages at home. Krish’s mother, who is raising her kids to speak both Marathi (her heritage language) as well as Italian (her husband’s) explained why this project was so meaningful to her family:

**“Translation provided a perfect opportunity for students to build the kinds of linguistic and cultural communities that support positive ethnic identity development.”**

As a parent, staying committed to raising trilingual kids is hard. And it’s hard for the kids too. They spend most of their day speaking English, so when they come home, almost every other sentence comes out in English. To make sure that we keep our languages, we have to keep saying to them, “please say that again in Marathi” or “please say that again in Italian.” This exercise really renewed our energy in keeping up that effort. We were all reminded why it is so deeply important to us.

Aya’s mother reflected on how the project had affected Aya’s relationship to her Italian heritage: “Every summer, when we go to Italy, Aya struggles.



She doesn't feel fully part of Italian culture. But she also doesn't feel fully American. This translation project helped her connect these two parts of herself."

Aya's example is complicated by her other identities: as part of a biracial family (her father is Chinese-American), as a native English speaker and American citizen, and as part of an upper class family in which heritage languages could be used voluntarily as a social or economic resource. (For example, Aya and her family could move between the United States and Italy at will; the same could not be said of students whose families are undocumented.) Nonetheless, translation helped Aya bridge the distance between her identities.

Translation centers "in-betweenness," movement between languages, identities. As Kaza (2017) reminds us: "some of us experience translation all the time in our bodies, names, homes, movements and daily lives even if we are not translating from one text to another." Literary translation can offer students one way to make meaning of their intertwined identities. Carina del Valle Schorske, a writer of Puerto Rican heritage, describes how translating poems helped her to transform a complicated relationship with Spanish (2017):

I used to be ashamed of my hand-me-down, stitched-together Spanish, but I'm learning...to embrace [it]...Translation makes my struggle with Spanish seem natural, even tender. Even if your relationship with another language is strained, translation can transform your anxieties—doubt, dependence, hypervigilance—into the virtues of an artist.

Literary translation could allow those students with feelings of "anxiety...[or] doubt" towards their multiple languages an opportunity for healing, for an integration of their different language "selves."

Translation can therefore disrupt dominant language ideologies in the classroom at the same time as it rejoins fractured identities.

Translation also breaks down the idea that there is one authoritative interpretation of any given text. In a world of standardized reading instruction and multiple-choice assessment, translation demonstrates how subjective interpretation is. There is no one correct translation. Works of literature—and perhaps poems in particular—are filled with questions of syntax, shades of meaning, cultural and literary referents, rhyme, rhythmic meter, and more. It's impossible to recreate all of these facets from the original language in English: the translator must choose which feature(s) they feel are most important. At the beginning of our project, for example, I showed students two different translations of Clément Marot's poem "À Une Damoiselle Malade" (Hofstadter, 1997), and asked them to raise their hands if they thought these were translations of the same poem. Not a single student raised their hand.

Sad to hear	What's new?
You lie ill	Feel bad?
Weak and still	Egad!

Translation begins with an act of humility: listening as carefully as possible to the original text. Grossman observes that translation "is a kind of reading as deep as any encounter with a literary text can be" (2010, p. 10). In our classroom, students began by working with their family—or, in the case of monolingual students, with a "translator mentor" from the community—to create a "literal" translation of the poem in English. By "literal" I meant a translation that hews as closely as possible to the syntax and vocabulary of the original, without worrying about "making sense" (e.g., Figure 2). These interpretations stretch the limits of English. They are not easy reading—but that is exactly the point. Returning to Kaza (2017): "Translation can...perform subtle acts of critical

**Figure 2**

*“Literal” translation of झोपरे बाळा [“Sleep baby”], by Manisha Gurjar, translated from the Martahi by Krish and his mother*

Sleep baby, new cradle soft soft mattress  
Sweetie, sleep grandmother sing songs.  
Small small eyes close now,  
Swing to you give, small sister.  
Came came to you sleep,  
Don't don't cry, mother sing lullaby.  
Dad came now noise heard,  
In his hands swing dad did.  
Dad's hands are magic,  
Baby, deep sleeping now slowly in crib put.

resistance...through modes of translation that do not seek to erase the otherness of the text.” The mode in which we translate matters. By working against the notion of a “standard” English, by pushing readers of their translations to encounter the foreignness, the otherness of the text, students were resisting the hegemony of standard English. As poet and translator Don Mee Choi (2020) declares about her art of translating: “my tongue deforms, it disobeys” (p. 8).

**Translation can develop students' critical bilingualism.**

Translation can also help multilingual students connect their personal acts of language resistance to broader historical and contemporary movements for minority language rights. As Krish wrote after interviewing his mother about Marathi:

Since India was a British colony for a long time, people are starting to think that English is better than Marathi. Parents...send their kids to English schools, and they don't learn Marathi even though they live in Maharashtra. I already speak Marathi at home, but after I interviewed my mom...I

immediately wanted to learn to read and write in Marathi, too. My grandmother has promised to teach me next time she visits Boston.

In some ways, Krish was already deeply connected to his heritage languages (Marathi and Italian) as a trilingual speaker who spent significant time employing these languages with relatives from both sides of his family. But this was the first time I had heard him offer a critical analysis of this kind. Krish's reflection was a beautiful example of what Walsh (1991) termed “critical bilingualism”: “the ability to not just speak two languages, but to be conscious of the sociocultural, political, and ideological contexts in which the languages (and their speakers) are positioned and function” (p. 15). Krish's interview with his mother allowed him to situate his personal language use within the political and social context of post-colonial India. He was able to articulate a sophisticated analysis of internalized oppression (“people are starting to think that English is better than Marathi”). Understanding the ways in which his language had been repressed inspired him to resist; to learn more about Marathi from his grandmother, so he could fight back against its disappearance.

I don't believe that translation is necessarily an act of resistance in and of itself. Curricular context matters. Indeed, translation “has been used, is used and might still be used as a tool of conquest, assimilation, or domestication” (Antena Aire, 2013). How can translation be framed in such a way to develop multilingual students' critical bilingualism? In this case, the translation project followed, and was inspired by, a month-long study of identity, assimilation, and resistance in Native residential schools (Figure 1). There were both strengths and weaknesses of this curricular setting.

My students and I analyzed a wide variety of primary and secondary sources about Native residential

schools, including photographs, interviews of former students, picture books written by descendants of students, and letters written by teachers and administrators. Using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a framework, we asked:

- What are the rights of free people?
- In what ways were these rights taken away by Native residential schools?
- How did students at Native residential schools fight back for their rights?

Yet I struggled with the distance from which we were viewing this topic. I invited a Mashpee Wampanoag educator into the classroom to speak to the students about the continued ramifications of residential schools in Native communities. A board member from the Wampanoag Language Reclamation project also visited to share the ways in which her community was seeking to fight back against the loss of their language. But I still felt like we had *othered* this history of oppression—that my students were still viewing language loss and assimilation as something unfortunate that had happened to other people, but not to their own families.

Some students began to question what role their families had played in the history of violence towards Indigenous people. Ken remarked to me, “I think it’s our ancestors who were responsible for taking away Native languages.” This particular student is biracial, and he is the child of two immigrants: his father from the Netherlands, his mother from Japan. I was troubled that instead of making connections with the historical oppression of Japanese-Americans and feeling solidarity with Native communities—or processing his guilt around the particular forms of colonialism perpetuated by his Dutch ancestors—he would identify himself solely as a descendant of White, American oppressors. I wanted to give this student, and my entire class, perspectives that would nuance the history of cultural oppression while also

asking them to consider their personal stakes in the work of resistance.

Students’ responses to our unit made me ask: how can I help them connect the violence and resistance in Native residential schools to their own families’ histories? This was the moment the translation project began to emerge. I began to search for ways to move from what we had been learning about residential schools toward a translation project. I wanted students to build a foundation for understanding the sociocultural context of translation. Therefore, I developed two curricular “bridges” between our study of residential schools and the translation project.

The first bridge was a language and power role play (adapted from Christensen, 2009). Students took on roles ranging from Aileen Figueroa, creator of the Yurok Elder Wisdom Preservation Project in Northern California, to the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who writes in Kikuyu, to Damien O’Donovan, a member of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Irish League) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Once students had learned their roles, they engaged in an “oppression and resistance mixer,” which I designed to build explicitly off of the forms of oppression and resistance we had studied in the context of Native residential schools. Students had to find examples of people who had their language oppressed through various means, such as education, laws, and interpersonal shaming. Also, they had to identify activists who utilized different methods to fight back for their language rights, such as connecting with their community, protesting, and writing or publishing books.

The second bridge was the family language interview (Figure 3). Students interviewed their families about their heritage language(s)—whether their families were monolingual or multilingual. Students made remarkable connections during these interviews.



Ken, who had been concerned before about his culpability in erasing the linguistic heritage of Indigenous people, went through a profound shift in perspective. He articulated connections between his ancestors’ own Indigenous language, Ainu—which has been driven almost to the point of extinction through colonization by the central Japanese government over the past two centuries (Tahara, 2009)—and the languages of Native Americans: “People in Hokkaido were told to speak Japanese even though they had their own language just like Native Americans.”

In fact, these histories were even closer than Ken may have realized: throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Hokkaido Ainu were forced to attend schools specifically designed to replace their language with Japanese (Tahara, 2009). With further research, would Ken have decided to investigate poetry in Ainu, in addition to poetry in Japanese? How could he have explored the knowledge that his own heritage language—oppressed in the United

States—also existed as a colonial language that had nearly driven his ancestors’ language to extinction?

Tommy, whose examination of Chinese grammar I shared earlier in this article, offered the following reflection on the history of Chinese:

In mainland China, the government forces everyone to learn Simplified Chinese, which is destroying 5,000 years of written Chinese. Traditional Chinese is a beautiful, written language. Each character is packed with a lot of meaning and derives from “pictures.” The simplification of written Chinese destroyed a lot of the history and beautiful imageries of the original characters...Some of my ancestors way back were probably told to give up their dialects to learn Mandarin and other dialects.

What a beautiful exploration of the meaning and beauty lost through a process of linguistic “modernization.” Could Tommy have explored written Traditional Chinese through his translations?

**Figure 3**

***Family language interview questions***

1. Do you speak any languages other than English? If so, which one(s)?
2. Are any of these languages passed down from our ancestors (heritage languages)? If so, who in our family speaks/spoke them?
3. What language(s) would our ancestors have spoken? Who would have spoken them, and where?
4. What can you tell me about the history of this language/these languages?
5. What can you tell me about how these languages are connected to our culture, or were connected to our ancestors’ cultures?
6. Were people who spoke those languages ever told to stop speaking them in order to “blend in” with society or other people (assimilate)? If so, when and where?
7. Are people who speak those languages still told that they need to give up their language today? If so, in what ways are they being told this?
8. Are there any other stories or facts you’d like to tell me about our family’s heritage languages?

How might have working with these texts have affected the choices he made in his English translation? There are lost stories here: similar to Ken, Tommy’s ancestors likely experienced linguistic oppression by the dominant form of the language. But he can’t be sure (“probably”). How could he have explored these ancestors’ histories?

If I teach this unit again, I would want students to engage in further research about these connections. I could have curated sources for Krish, Ken, and Tommy, for example, to expand on what they had learned about language repression in India, Japan, and China. In what ways were the methods and consequences of repression similar or divergent? What roles did the intersectional histories of power play in each region – and with these same languages in the United States? What stories of resistance could they find and celebrate?

To return to Kaza (2017): “Translation can be a practice of hospitality that acknowledges that the host, too, will have to be changed by the encounter” (para. 14). If placed into a curricular context explicitly focused on the political, social, and personal dimensions of translation, teaching literary translation has the possibility of supporting multilingual students toward new forms of engagement with their heritage languages, and with new forms of linguistic resistance.

### **Can translation help students develop “critical monolingualism”?**

What about monolingual students—particularly White monolingual students? Did the translation project have any impact on them? In writing this article, I realized the extent to which my observations during the project had been focused on multilingual students, who in this case were mainly students of color and children of immigrants. Although I created structures to support monolingual students (who in

this class were all White) to complete the project, I had not attended to their unique experience of translation. What was it like for them to work in languages their ancestors had chosen to—or been forced to—give up? Their reflections are largely silent on the emotional aspects of this process, perhaps largely because my scaffolding questions did not help them attend to these aspects. One exception is Erin, who explained her frustration with not having anyone in her family who knew her heritage language, Greek. My delay in finding her a translation mentor had forced her to work with Google Translate during the first stages of translation:

A problem was that the words and sentences made no sense together and it was really hard to understand. Just when you thought something was going to make sense there would be a word that messed the whole translation up. This was very aggravating.

Was this aggravation at the “words and sentence [that] made no sense together” simply the result of her difficulty with the technical process of translation? Or was there a deeper disorientation underlying this frustration? I wonder what she experienced as she attempted to navigate through a poem written in a language she could only access through the cold machinations of a computer program. Erin’s mother also reflected on the sense of confusion she experienced during the family language interview: “I truly don’t know [what languages my ancestors would have spoken]. Chris’ family was Ukranian—mine were Northern European, but I don’t have a lot of knowledge about either side’s family history.”

In this final “translation” of the curriculum story, I move from the realm of observation to the realm of inference and conjecture. As I trace the threads of monolingual White students’ lost heritage languages, including my own heritage languages, I attempt to

articulate a tentative vision of how translation might move these students toward ethnic and racial identity development and solidarity with minority language communities.

There is a notable dearth of research into White Americans' experience of monolingualism. Moving one step backwards in the process of language loss, research into the experience of multilingual, White immigrants' families might give us some clues. Colla, in a 2018 study of language loss among White immigrant descendants in the San Francisco area, asserts that:

L1 survival becomes critical in preserving the ancestral cultural values of ethnic White immigrant descendants. For these immigrant descendants, assimilation and extinguishment of the heritage language is particularly problematic as they are adopted into the hegemonic White United States culture ... The lack of the heritage language, in conjunction with a privileged ability to blend into White society, results in significant cultural ambivalence for these individuals. (Colla, 2018, p. 9)

There are two particularly notable aspects to this excerpt. First, Colla draws an explicit connection between loss of heritage languages and loss of "ancestral cultural values." As one of her Italian-American participants asserts: "I think language is also kind of a little portal into another way of thinking about the world...Nothing really translates perfectly" (Colla, 2018, p. 61).

Heritage languages are one of the keys to accessing alternative worldviews. Descendants who cannot access their heritage language therefore become "literally outsiders to their ancestral heritage" (Nahirny & Fishman, 1965, cited in Portes &

Rumbaut, 2014, p. 218). Translation makes an appearance here as well; it cannot fully capture the context of this other "way of thinking about the world ... Nothing really translates perfectly." Perhaps this is how Erin felt in working with a Greek poem: like an outsider, fumbling around in a language and world she did not understand.

The second important aspect of the excerpt from Colla's study is that White immigrants' descendants have the ability to "blend into White society," and this proximity to the culture of power can accelerate the loss of their heritage languages. The ability to be "read" as White offers them a choice of whether or not to assimilate, a choice not offered to descendants of immigrants of color.

This story of assimilation and language loss reflects my own family's history. My dad remembers ascending "dark stairwells smelling of gefilte fish" in New York tenement buildings in order to visit his Lithuanian immigrant grandparents, as well as the snatches of Yiddish his parents peppered into their English (M. Fishman, personal communication, January 9, 2019). But as upwardly mobile White Jews, Yiddish was not passed on to their kids. I cannot ask these grandparents, who passed away years ago, but I imagine if I asked my dad's father why he had not taught my dad to speak Yiddish, he might have cited the times he was rejected from graduate schools who had already filled their "Jewish quotas." He was a doctor in predominately White Protestant institutions, a successful descendent of immigrants. Yiddish, and the "dark stairwells" that accompanied it, might have seemed a small price to pay for the class mobility that came with at least partial assimilation.

I've considered learning enough Yiddish to translate Yiddish texts. What gain would there be? I turn to Lina Morales, who identifies as a queer, biracial,

**"Heritage languages are one of the keys to accessing alternative worldviews."**

Latina Jew, for her reflection on learning Yiddish (2017):

From Yiddish communities, I've gained a bridge to *yidishkayt* [Jewishness] and to having a strong Jewish identity ... [and] I have access to a treasury of Jewish thought ... that deals with many of the same questions that American Jews deal with today, but with a much broader range of views, including a tradition of radical and anti-Zionist Jewish thought that makes it clear that my politics and values are the farthest thing from assimilation or self-hatred.

Similar to del Valle Schorske's (2017) reflection on how translation helped her transform a complicated relationship with Spanish, Morales describes the way learning Yiddish helped her find communities (of people and texts) who helped her integrate different facets of her identity, including her Jewishness, her anti-Zionist beliefs, her radical politics, and her queerness. All of these assets lead Morales to believe she would like to teach Yiddish to her future children. But Morales is also careful to qualify her assertions: "No language is inherently political ... Learning Yiddish can connect you to your heritage, but it doesn't dictate what you choose to do with that" (2017).

Again, context matters. Teaching translation is one way of connecting White monolingual students with their heritage languages though this is not any more "inherently political" than the languages themselves are. However, I propose that in the right curricular context, teaching translation is a tool that holds the possibility of developing students' *critical monolingualism*. Adapting Walsh's (1991) definition of critical bilingualism, I would define critical monolingualism as: students' consciousness of the sociocultural, political, and ideological contexts surrounding the ancestral loss of their heritage

languages, as well as the contexts in which their own monolingualism is positioned and functions. Whether or not translating leads students to re-learn their heritage languages, it does provide an opportunity to investigate the losses their ancestors experienced through assimilation.

When students experience the disorientation described by Erin, they present an opportunity for educators to support students toward this critical monolingualism. This was an opportunity I missed during my teaching of this project, but future iterations of the translation project might succeed in making these connections. Educators could help students to turn their gaze on their lack of multilingualism. Parents are unlikely to have knowledge of the stories of language loss in their families, but they could serve as partners to educators in curating and reading sources on histories of language loss among different immigrant groups in the United States. Students could reflect on questions such as:

- How did not speaking the language change your translation process?
- What do you miss out on by not speaking this language?
- What forces led people who spoke your heritage language to stop speaking it?
- Why do you think your ancestors might have given up their heritage languages?
- How do you feel about this loss?
- How does learning about this loss change your feelings about the movements for language justice that we've studied?

Critical monolingualism could also support White students' racial identity development. The racial identity models of both Helms (1993; see also Lawrence & Tatum, n.d.) and Hoffman and Hoffman (cited in Parker & Willsea, n.d.) posit that White children only can move through the stages of racial

identity through experiences with the guilt, anger, and sadness that comes from increasing awareness of racial oppression. In other words, these emotions—and structures to process them in community—are necessary for White self-actualization as well as for the development of White anti-racist allies. White activist Abraham Lateiner (2016), among others, has also reflected on the importance of *grief*, of having White people confront what they have lost:

Grief is usually thought of as a product of losing something or someone. But what happens if parts of myself were tied off at the stump with the fine threads of White culture, never allowed to develop in the first place? ... And what would it mean to fully grieve that absence?

One of the most concrete examples of this absence—what Lateiner calls the “White void” — is the loss of heritage languages. For many White people, myself included, this loss happened generations ago. To extend Lateiner’s questions: what would it look like to create classroom spaces for White students to learn about, and to grieve, what they have personally lost through their ancestors’ assimilation into White culture? I think of the words of the Aboriginal activists of Queensland, including Lilla Watson (cited in Leonen, 2004): “if you have come to help me, I don’t need your help. But if you have come because your liberation is tied to mine, come let us work together.” White monolingual students, though developing their embodied sense of what their ancestors lost through assimilation, can begin to develop their own stake in working as allies for

movements for minority languages as well as other movements for social justice.

Losing a language, even when this loss accompanies social mobility and the privileges of integrating into dominant society, can be heartbreaking. I end this section with the ruminations of a fictional character who gives us a visceral sense of the pain of this loss: Austerlitz, the protagonist of W.B. Sebald’s novel of the same name, is a man raised British who learns late in life that he was part of a Czech Jewish family who sent him away, at the age of four, to avoid the impending Nazi invasion. Upon returning to Prague

decades later, Austerlitz has a sudden intimation of the language he lost as a young child:

I could still apprehend the dying away of my native tongue, the faltering and fading sounds which I think lingered on in me at least for a while, like something shut up and scratching or knocking, something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it...buried in the depths of my mind. (Sebald, 2011, p. 136)

**“With a supportive community of educators, (monolingual students) can use this grief as fuel to interrogate what has been lost through their ancestors’ assimilation – and work in solidarity with those seeking to create alternatives to our current hegemonies.”**

Translation invites monolingual students to reach back toward the grief of this moment. And with a supportive community of educators, they can use this grief as fuel to interrogate what has been lost through their ancestors’ assimilation—and work in solidarity with those seeking to create alternatives to our current hegemonies.

### What can translation do?

Translation itself is an act of loss: “nothing really translates perfectly” (Colla, 2018). This includes translations of curriculum. I have suggested three



answers to the question, *What can translation do?*: 1) disrupt hegemonies of texts, languages, and identities; 2) develop multilingual students' critical bilingualism; and 3) perhaps help White monolingual students develop "critical monolingualism." These interpretations are only partial, informed by my glimpses of students' experiences of the translation process. I am sure there are more possible "translations," which I hope are explored by future educators.

Literary translation offers a powerful tool for the classroom. Rai (2001), writing about the history of Hindi language politics in India, asserts that "as desperate states have been forced to realize again and again, the struggle for language can be carried out in the depths of one's being, and can therefore never really be suppressed" (p. 103). To extend Rai's thought to include translation: I believe that translation is an

act of resistance precisely because of how intimate it is. When we translate, we shift "the subtle structures of the worlds in which [we live]" (Rai, 2001, p. 103). And this inner transformation offers a vision of societal transformation; as a polyphonic forest of voices, languages, and cultures spouts and climbs, the edifices of oppressive systems begin to crumble. And this transformation can begin in the classroom.

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