

## GUEST COLUMN

## Introduction to “Monolingualism and Its Discontents”

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This cluster of essays takes a counterintuitive object as a starting point for reflection on our disciplinary commitments, orientations, and productions. Curiously resistant to scrutiny as an object in itself, monolingualism often appears as an indispensable antagonist or an unmarked marker, a category assumed more than it is named and named more than it is examined. It is, on the one hand, a simple term, a way of designating a “one” among many, seemingly simple because it has a single referent. On the other hand, it encompasses a heterogeneity: a linguistic field whose boundaries may be (or perhaps always are) contested and rife with internal oppositions and contradictions. A founding example here might be the case of an oath sworn in 842 CE in what the chronicler who recorded it, Nithard, called the “lingua romana.” This oath is often described as “the earliest document in any Romance language” because it uses forms that point forward to what came to be called “French” (Bloch 6), but, from that perspective, it also contains “archaisms” that point backward to the Latin from which French is usually said to derive (7; see 6–9). The standardization of Latin under the Carolingians in the eighth century and the vernacularization that was its consequence, detailed in all its complexity and implication by Nicholas Watson in this cluster, are both on view in this unusual document. *Mutatis mutandis*, shifted by twelve hundred years and roughly as many miles southward to Gibraltar, there is now another instance of the multilingual as the monolingual in the admixture of Spanish and Arabic that Eric Calderwood calls “Strait flow” in his essay here. The oath of 842 exemplifies exactly this sort of flow: at once, a transcription of how “Latin” was spoken and a vivacious rendering of the very splintering that produced the whole variety of self-identifying monolingualisms

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771

we now call (just to name a few) "French," "Italian," "Spanish," "Portuguese," "Romanian," and "Catalan." This example is notable because it is so early, but, like so many texts before and since, it is written in a language that, whatever one name we choose to give it, contains multitudes.

In a world in which monolingualism is culturally and historically so varied, we need accounts of its circumstances in Europe, but, given the occlusions of past scholarship, we need more and still richer accounts of this phenomenon in the Global South and in North American and other settler-colonial societies, among many other regions and areas. Vital to this reconceptualization is a deeper reckoning with the concept's entanglement in European colonial modernity, of which Achille Joseph Mbembe wryly remarks, "Colonialism rhymes with monolingualism" (36). Illustrating and deepening Mbembe's maxim, Taoufik Ben Amor's essay reflects on the "unique and extreme" case of French colonial language policies in Algeria and their afterlife in the early postcolonial period through the seemingly divergent linguistic choices of the francophone writers Malek Haddad and Kateb Yacine. Haddad committed "literary suicide" by refusing to write in French after Algerian independence, while Yacine continued to write in French before turning to producing plays in *dārija*. Ben Amor shows how the French ban on Arabic in educational institutions drove the mother tongue into exile in its own country (as Haddad puts it), thereby usurping its authority as the language of emancipation and modernity. Inverting the question postcolonial studies usually poses, Ben Amor asks not why "some Algerian authors chose or choose to write in French" but, rather, "why Haddad and later Yacine . . . opted not to write in French when it was their only means of literary expression."

Since every language has such histories—or, perhaps better, embeds a variety of histories within its forms—any examination of monolingualism is also inevitably historiographical: a narrative or genealogy of paradigms, conventions, idioms, styles, practices, and uses. Moreover, because historiography is often imbricated in imperial, regional, national, or anticolonial projects, we must be alert

to the implications of the conflicting and divergent ways that such histories envision the oneness of a language and its relation to others. To take an example, whereas Oriental philology divided the past through taxonomies of language families, races, and nations, Chinese "contact philology," a minor tradition that flourished in the wake of the 1955 Bandung Conference, reread the past through Afro-Asian histories of two-way cultural exchange figured in the Silk Road. In contrast to the Europe-Asia axis of earlier Western visions of this trade route, the Bandung-inspired version centered Afro-Asian networks. By tracking loanwords and translations instead of grammar, scholars "reoriented the Indo-European study of genetic word roots . . . to focus on historical word routes across language families" (Chin 21). Plotting loanwords for satin, sugar, rosewater, tamarind, and henna across Arabic, Sanskrit, and Chinese, they created "a multivector map of linguistic exchange" (20).

Like minor traditions of philology, postcolonial historical fiction and criticism have also rethought mono- and multilingualisms at the confluence of empires and in border zones. The English of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, for example, commingles with Bengali, Laskari, Persian, Cantonese, Arabic, and Bhojpuri along commercial land and sea routes carrying indentured workers, traders, and opium between India, Mauritius, and China. "The *Ibis* Chrestomathy," a glossary appended to Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, slyly jabs at the omissions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* by including words absent from its pages, thereby retroactively staking their "claim to naturalization in the English language" (501). The Chrestomathy entries provide "a chart of the fortunes of a shipload of girmitiyas," words that "sailed from eastern waters to the chilly shores of the English language," some gaining entry, others not, but all giving the lie to monolingualism's claim of oneness. Similarly, B. Venkat Mani's essay in this cluster refuses the conflation of the *mono-*, or singular, of monolingualism with *homo-*, or the similar, by examining the uses and practices of "languages of refuge" in the area around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Languages of refuge, Mani argues, are forged through acts of translation in conflict and border zones, adopted in sites of detention and displacement, and shaped by the legal apparatus of enforcement and redress. Always more than one and in tension with state-sponsored monolingualism, these languages exist within and across much of everyday speech: “the entire linguistic universe of refuge resounds with forbearance, endurance, and hope for tolerance.” In postcolonial projects, that is, languages are seen not as closed and complete but as porous, interactive, always becoming. They live beyond any present and traverse borders, continents, and oceans and are capable of being excavated, adapted, travestied, translated, and reinvented. Necessarily unfinished and open to the future, they evoke the potentiality of “a language to summon the heterological opening that permits it to speak of something else and to address itself to the other” (Derrida 69).

The fundamental estrangement between any speaker and that speaker’s first language has its histories too (Ben Amor, Calderwood, Choi, Dowling, Fleming). Work on monolingualism now must remember the extent to which the German and European nationalism that propagated the monolingual paradigm from which classifications such as “French,” “Italian” and “German” derive engendered a “key structuring principle [organizing] the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as imagined collectives such as cultures and nations” (Yildiz 2). Thinking in these terms, Sarah Dowling asks in her essay in this cluster, “Is it possible to theorize monolingualisms without positioning the state as sole or primary actor and agent?” We must remember, too, that the very division of the words we speak into “languages” has a pernicious history, not least as the family imaginary was projected onto philological “facts” such that the hypothesis of a common source language linking Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit (the “Indo-Aryan” or “Indo-European”) became the founding myth of an Aryan race in the work of eighteenth-century Indologists such as William Jones. Within this

model “individuals and social formations [were] imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation” (Yildiz 2). One consequence of such philology, armored with claims of property in languages, is a monolingualism of dispossession. As Dowling shows, the careful transcription and homogenization of Indigenous languages were often instruments of dispossession, at once a possessive assertion of settler expertise and authority over Native languages and a mode of Indigenous removal and erasure. The growing use of language in citizenship tests in Europe is a related but distinct legacy of this instrumentalization of a supposed linguistic unity in order to manage racialized populations and enforce an imagined national unity. However, when national languages such as “Welsh” (or Cymraeg) and “Irish” (or Gaeilge) have been revived in schools in the name of cultural nationalism the result can itself be alienating (as, for example, when a child taught such a revived language in school knows a “mother tongue” that the child’s mother does not). In “The Dead,” James Joyce (no fan of such nationalism) has Miss Ivors ask Gabriel, “Haven’t you your own language to keep in touch with—Irish?,” to which Gabriel replies, “[I]f it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language” (242).

An examination of monolingualism is therefore also a method for rethinking how we inherit, inhabit, and transmit language; how we count, classify, and hierarchize languages; and, most pressingly, how we understand the internal and external others our own linguistic commitments produce. In the simplest terms, as Edgar Garcia shows in this cluster through the complicating example of Mesoamerican pictographic writing, there is no real possibility for thinking of and about monolingualism without the circumstance or idea of multilingualism. In an early moment of linguistic self-consciousness, Geoffrey Chaucer registered “the greet diversitee / In English” (1793–94), and it is an easy step from noticing such internal difference to seeing it as a form of division, a social cleaving by means of language. *The Myroure of Oure*

*Ladye* described this circumstance shortly after Chaucer wrote about the diversity in English, thus: "the comen maner of spekyng. . . of some contre. . . can skante be understoded in some other contre of the same londe" (8). But *diversity* was a term that already had a positive valence for Chaucer, and it is equally possible to see, as he clearly did, that linguistic variety is a way of marking and embracing the many in the one at the level of culture. As Janet Sorensen notes in this cluster, even in the long moment when dictionaries and grammars worked hard at standardizing English, it was possible to register with real wonder the complex variety of tongues this process was trying to tame, celebrating idiosyncrasies and anachronisms, recognizing the various expressive communities into which an English monolingualism was, and doubtless always will be, divided.

On a global scale, and in the context of migration and displacement, categories such as "native speaker" have buttressed state-sponsored monolingualisms by demarcating and hierarchizing language communities. The concept privileges descent, kinship, and belonging, setting the terms for inclusion and exclusion, and feeding illusions of the mastery and possession of languages. Yet, as Jacques Derrida cautions, "contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master . . . does not have exclusive possession of anything," not even the language he claims as his own, which "he does not possess exclusively and *naturally*" (23). Juliet Fleming's essay on the Welsh psychoanalyst Ernest Jones teases out the crucial difference between having a language (as a colonial subject) and possessing it (as its natural, authorized speaker). Fleming argues that in provocatively suggesting that "the English spoken in England must have had its share in producing the violent perversities of British colonialism," Jones implied that "it is not enough to be English to know English. On the contrary, being English robs you of access to the resources of pleasure, knowledge, and healing that are available to others who speak the same language." Jones's "metrocolonial" jibes broadly align with renegade uses of English by minority and immigrant artists in the United States, who

openly defy nativist claims of possession and invent alternative genealogies (Valente, "Between Resistance" 327).<sup>1</sup> As the poet Cathy Park Hong declares:

It was once a source of shame, but now I say it proudly: bad English is my heritage. I share a literary lineage with writers who make the unmastering of English their rallying cry—who queer it, twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, *other* it by hijacking English and warping it to a fugitive tongue. To *other* English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out. (97)

The master, Hong jubilantly declares, can be bested. Her weapons of choice: the lyric as ruin, the modular essay.

If Hong describes the alienating inheritance of bad English, Susan Choi testifies to the estranging bequest of good English, a severance from her multilingual family history of Korean, Japanese, and English. Yet, despite her sense of deficiency as a monolingual English writer, reckoning with this multilingual inheritance becomes the crucible for her fiction starting from her first novel, *The Foreign Student*, based on her father's life. In her essay for this collection, she turns to her grandfather's fraught legacy as a leading Korean intellectual, condemned by contemporaries and posterity for his pro-Japanese writings—sifting for clues to his life, her past. She seeks out the scholar HeeJin Lee to retranslate her grandfather's Korean translations of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* back into English. The effort yields a more nuanced view of his politics and that of a generation of Korean intellectuals writing under Japanese occupation. It surfaces a lateral lineage, a made rather than given kinship, between Korean and Irish writers at that time. Yet her grandfather's inner life remains elusive, crystallizing her realization that language itself, not monolingualism, separates her from the past. For a fiction writer, the resources of imagination, memory, and translation remain, vessels that carry you not to a pure origin but to the prosthesis of origin. Against the claims of the native speaker,

Hong and Choi juxtapose heritages of bad English, accented English, and foreign-born(e) English. Their writings comprise an “emerging domain of languaging” that Rey Chow calls the “xenophone,” its sounds and signs disrupting the purported unity of dominant languages with linguistic multiplicities and “xenophonic memories” (59). The afterlives of colonialism in language complicate questions of possession, dispossession, and inheritance in unpredictable ways: “in postcolonial languaging, dispossession is the key that opens unexpected doors. Behind these doors lie the vast, wondrous troves of xenophonic énoncés” (60).

Monolingualism is also inseparable from gender as both concept and term, perhaps most obviously in the extent to which the troubling metaphor of the “mother tongue” is so often used to naturalize the connections between language, ethnicity, and nation. It is equally problematic that *gender* is “a foreign term in every language other than English” (Butler 2) and yet debates about gender and its philosophies “do not very often consider the presumption of monolingualism at work in such debates” (5–6). “Monolingual obstinacy” (as Derrida termed it [57]) has allowed us to see gender as both translanguaging and translatable, but attending to its roles requires that we consider linguistic and grammatical contingencies; as Butler notes, “the emergence of the singular ‘they’ is a case in point” (16). At the same time, to think about gender as both term and categorizing practice is to recognize that it often cleaves a single language in two (in, say, the Romance languages), or three (as in the Germanic languages—where classificatory systems have always seen “neuter” as a gender), or, as in Japanese, shapes linguistic self-reference, which depends not only on one’s gender but also on “social class, educational background, cultural conventions, and, importantly, the relation to the one who is addressed” (16). Alternatively, grammatical gender is absent or nearly so in languages such as Persian, Swahili, Armenian, and Bengali, while in the Algonquian Indigenous language, Ojibwe, nouns are categorized not by gender but by whether they are animate or inanimate. However etymological they may be in origin, or arbitrary in continued

description, such mobilizations of gender necessarily have “an unconsciously internalized referential effect” (Johnson 23). Sometimes it is only from a bilingual perspective, like that of the Japanese German immigrant writer Yoko Tawada, that one can defamiliarize these settlements: in her oeuvre in both languages Tawada exposes the gendered structure of the German language to its “native” speakers and uncovers the terms of gendered, racial, and sexual inclusion in both nations (Yildiz 109–42).

Because, as a rule, monolingualism as both concept and name traverses borders and exceeds the power of language to define it, it necessarily encompasses the regional, hemispheric, and transoceanic. *Monolingualism* can change meaning within a single nation (as, say, the monolingualism of a speaker of English differs radically in the United States from the monolingualism of a speaker of Spanish or Mandarin), and it is a unity that also often spans nations (the francophone, hispanophone, lusophone, sinophone), even as that very span dissolves such unities: as the forms of French differ markedly from Paris to Kigali, the forms of Spanish from Spain to Texas, the forms of Portuguese from Lisbon to Mozambique, the many forms the West calls Chinese from Beijing to Kuala Lumpur. Here a useful example might be Marco Polo, but not because he was an intrepid traveler, nor because he imported European languages to the court of Kublai Khan, or Persian and Mongol to Europe, but because of the curious and simultaneously multi- and monolingual account of his travels, *Le devisement du monde* (*The Division of the World*). The earliest version of this narrative that survives (written circa 1298) could be described as a hybrid of what we would designate now as different languages. But even calling that language a hybrid requires that we allow the borders of nation-states to make linguistic distinctions in ways that—even now, and in many territories—cut across a continuum of geographically distributed difference. The *Devisement* confounds even such difference since its unique forms exist “in between” the languages of other texts written in Tuscany in this period (languages we might—however inexactly—now call “French” and “Italian” [Gaunt 103]): its particular

"*monolangué*" can only be defined by means of its thoroughgoing "internal diversity" (111).<sup>2</sup>

This cluster also responds to a disciplinary pressure, wherein the urgency of exploring the many and embracing the diverse tends also to suggest that multilingualism trumps monolingualism or is antithetical to it. As Rey Chow notes in her contribution to this cluster, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives often regard monolingualism as a barrier to inclusion while celebrating multilingualism as inherently nonexclusionary. Yet, she argues, careful attention to monolingualizing phenomena like the global uptake of the jargon of liberal democracy, especially in an Internet age, shows that ideological conformity can coexist with the ability to speak multiple languages. In other words, acquiring proficiency in multiple languages cannot overcome submission to the preemptive sloganeering of a Western-dominated lexicon of human rights, free speech, and democracy. Similarly, a renewed embrace of comparative inquiry, urgent calls to describe and celebrate the plurilingual, and revanchist investigations of a lost or nearly lost linguistic richness may always (or, maybe, especially now) seem superior to investigations or narratives of a single language or its writings, making the study of one language or its literature equivalent to parochialism. But the complexity that studies like those in this cluster find in monolingualism as a designation, a linguistic condition, and a lived experience suggest that its study is anything but.

Monolingualism has its discontents, but it also has its claims. Single languages, so conceived, can form communities and foster social cohesion. As Sorensen has noticed elsewhere, "English dictionaries and realist novels"—even if only an imaginative resolution—formed both the language of this introduction and our discipline by bringing together the "Babel of regional, trade, and craft, foreign and 'cant' languages" with the fiction that they were all variants of the same language (58). As we've noted, such fictions can be pernicious, but they can also have very useful, classifying effects, naming peoples and places in ways that make languages and literatures more available to careful study, bringing together inquiries about the local while also

expanding them into the global. Speakers may find it valuable to claim their *monolangué* while still recognizing it as the instrument of their own oppression. As the writer Chantal Spitz has insisted, even if French is the language by which the Ma'ohi in Tahiti were conquered, and even if it suppressed a whole written, Indigenous literature, it is also *her* language: "non parce que je suis française mais parce que mes parents ont décidé de me la donner" ("not because I am French but because my parents decided to give it to me"). The francophone writers in Ben Amor's essay offer a poignant and powerful counterpoint to Spitz, highlighting the importance of reading literary strategies of resistance through distinctive colonial and linguistic histories.

This cluster grew out of two years of work on the *PMLA* Editorial Board where we had a unique opportunity to survey shifting currents in the larger field and across subfields, bringing into view scholarship divided by language, geography, and history in ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, gender and sexuality studies, comparative literature, and literatures of migration and diaspora. In this work we often saw a reassessment of the colonialism-is-monolingualism model that had shaped the first decades of postcolonial studies, a shift with multiple sources and sites, among them a turn to the movements and exchanges produced by globalization and growing connections with scholarship in ethnic and Indigenous studies. Such work described the demographic shifts that have placed more speakers of colonial languages outside the metropolis than within it, the dispersal of language communities across and within national boundaries through forced or voluntary migration, the rise of new media and the proliferation of transversal sites and forms of cultural production and exchange within and between spaces, new approaches to translation, and generational shifts in reckoning with the legacy of colonial languages in postcolonial nations. We also learned of language revitalization projects in Indigenous communities that have spurred the creation of new understandings of our relationship to languages and the sites and sources of their flourishing.

What follows brings together scholars, writers, and translators working in fields that are rarely in

conversation to see what new insights and frameworks these exchanges might generate. In that spirit of experimentation, it also brings together writers habituated to a variety of genres, both cultural critics and producers—to enrich our explorations of how we count languages and what counts as a language. In every sense, then, this cluster is conceived of as a space to propose new approaches, to pursue unexpected openings, to test hypotheses, and to revise assumptions. Some essays explore hip hop, jargon, and Mesoamerican pictorial writing as monolingual phenomena that challenge how we define language and the range of media we take into account (Calderwood, Chow, Garcia). Several examine the monolingualizing pressures of language policy implemented at the imperial, continental, national, settler-colonial, disciplinary, and familial level, documenting their dispossessive force but also their unforeseen and incalculable consequences (Ben Amor, Choi, Dowling, Fleming, Sorensen, Walkowitz, Watson). A number of essays examine the claims of monolingualism outside European models and histories (Ben Amor, Calderwood, Choi, Dowling, Garcia, Mani). All these essays dwell with acuity and subtlety on the generative and destructive power of monolingualism, asking us to reflect on how our disciplinary expertise and investments, our theories and methodologies, and our pedagogies and institutional practices can better account for the vitality, beauty, and world-building power of the languages that are our inheritance and that will shape our futures. What does our propensity to count languages in whole numbers miss? Rebecca Walkowitz's rousing call to rethink teaching and research in the discipline and more broadly the university through the lens of English as an "additional language" is inspired by a civic hospitality toward "the languages that operate both within and across literary histories" and the conclusion that we simply must "read literatures that begin in languages beyond English." Her essay, like all the others in this cluster, points the way to other monolingualisms, and to that which is other than monolingualism.

It was less happenstance, perhaps, than an illustration of Jacques Lacan's axiom that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (53) that auto-fill turned "Susan Koshy" into "Susan Choi" in the address

line of an e-mail and that the message arrived exactly where it belonged, in Susan Choi's inbox. The ensuing exchange led to an invitation and provocation that brought not just her brilliant contribution but also the haunted voice of the monolingual into the cluster.

Misfortune, however, meant that Simon Gaunt's illness and untimely death robbed the cluster of the essay he was planning to contribute. We would therefore like to dedicate this cluster to his memory and to his revelatory work on French as a transnational language.<sup>3</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Joseph Valente coins the term *metrocolonial* to identify the dynamics of assimilation and othering in British colonial relations to "the proximate areas of the Celtic fringe." Valente focuses on the Irish case but notes that even though "there is a different historical temporality at work in the Welsh incorporation within Great Britain," the term can be extended to British imperial relations with Wales and, for that matter, Scotland ("Between Resistance" 327). The concept effectively captures the "double loyalties" of a figure like Ernest Jones (Valente, E-mail).

2. Marco Polo seems to have been a historical person, although almost all that we know of him comes from the *Devisement*. Whether he wrote a text on which all subsequent redactions are based is, however, unclear: most redactions frequently refer to "Marco" in the third person but also consistently use first-person forms; a prologue in one version of the text says that Marco collaborated with a "Rustichello da Pisa" to produce it, but not in what way or to what extent (see Gaunt 5, 41–77).

3. We would also like to thank Wai Chee Dimock for inspiration and Faith Beasley for her support (the former was editor of *PMLA* and the latter was a fellow member of its editorial board when this cluster was conceived). We are grateful, too, to all our contributors for taking up this call, especially in the middle of a pandemic that stretches on and has taken a toll on all of us. We have taken inspiration from the support we received from both our institutions, the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Johns Hopkins University, to move this collaboration forward. We owe particular thanks to the Unit for Criticism graduate assistants, Hyeree Ellis and Ashli Anda, for guiding this cluster into print.

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