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# In Others' Words: An Essay on Translating Myself

Michael Spooner



Michael Spooner is retired director of Utah State University Press and retired associate director of the University Press of Colorado. His scholarship appears in dozens of articles, book chapters, and conference papers, addressing subjects in writing studies, L2 learning, editorial practice, and scholarly publishing. In writing studies, his work is known for its eclecticism and its occasional innovations in form and voice.

I like being at the beginning again as a reader and as a writer. I like that I am limited. I like that I only have a certain vocabulary and certain tools, and that I can only go so far. That appeals to me. It's a sort of poverty, you know; it's a choice to make do with less.

—Jhumpa Lahiri

## MEXICO

I opened my email one winter day to find a Call for Proposals (CFP) from the *Congreso Internacional Red Latinoamericana de Programas y Centros de Escritura*<sup>1</sup> announcing a conference in Guadalajara. It would be a bilingual conference on current practice in writing programs and centers, and participants would attend from many countries in Latin America, plus the United States.<sup>2</sup> Keynote addresses would feature Latin American writing scholars, plus three U.S. scholars I knew from my years of directing the Utah State University Press. I was curious to learn what these three writers were doing now, but I wanted even more to learn what was going on in writing studies in Latin America. The discipline was growing there, and having lived for brief periods in several Latin American countries, I wanted to hear about it firsthand.

I asked myself, Why not propose a paper? I had already begun an essay based on a tutoring experience in a community ESL center nearby; maybe I could massage that into a presentable paper. Also: the CFP said *bilingual* conference. My Spanish was good enough for a gringo traveler, but I would present in English, so as not to embarrass anyone. In June, the conference planners accepted my proposal, and I began writing in earnest. By the end of summer, I had a full script, introduction,

### Abstract

Translating a paper for a conference in Mexico led me to explore translation theory and to search the ethical nuances of presenting in my L2. Moments of cognitive weirdness in the transit from one language to the other illuminated some troubling theoretical problems, such as the invisibility of the traditional translator, the cultural “smoothing” of texts, and the revisionist tendency of translation itself. These in turn led me to query my position as an L1 speaker of English addressing in Spanish an audience in Latin America, and to question even attempting it. Was I an imposter speaking in others' words, or was Spanish gradually becoming my language, too? Along the way, I found myself comparing notes on my emotional relation to Spanish with the writer Jhumpa Lahiri's description of her relation to Italian, her own L2.

### Keywords

L2 writing, translation, language teaching, ESL, EFL, translanguaging

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1 International Conference of the Latin American Network of Writing Programs and Centers

2 Or “including the United States.” The self-identified Latino population of the U.S. in 2020 was over 60 million, according to the official U.S. census.

images, slides, and bio. I was good to go. I even practiced aloud. But then, in September, the conference planners sent an email to say, by the way, bilingual conference, but most attendees would not be English speakers, and translators were hired only for the keynotes, so . . .

I had been worried about this. Both the CFP and the conference website were slick and bilingual, but evidently the universe was playing with me—and with my hopes to be part of an international conversation. Very funny. What was even more amusing: My topic was the value of translanguaging for tutors and clients who might be, yes, working in their second language. Sadly, my Spanish didn't feel ready for prime time, and anyway I had only a few weeks to make a translation. What to do? Maybe I should withdraw the proposal; I could just attend the conference without presenting.

My friend Maria-Luisa is a linguist and a Mexican national. She brushed off my panic. "Ha! Obviously, you do it in Spanish," she said. "So you are not perfect. So what? *Por respeto a mi tierra*,<sup>3</sup> you should be doing in Spanish already. I'm offended, hahaha." Fair, I thought. Why shouldn't I just embrace my fear and my linguistic poverty? Out of respect, I should leave travel Spanish behind and try building who I am in academic Spanish.

I took a breath and set out to translate myself.

## LAHIRI AND ME

It was during an interview about learning Italian as an adult that Jhumpa Lahiri made the remarks I quote in the epigraph above (Wallner, 2016). I was thinking about those comments one day in Ecuador while walking to a Spanish class. Dodging across the street, climbing the *escalinata*, I thought, Yes. *To make do with less—to make do without English—that's good for me. It complicates things, but it brings focus. It's hard and a little lonely. I like that.*

I feel in some sense linguistically an orphan. There is no language to me that isn't a foreign language in some way. So, I have a relationship now to three languages: the Bengali of my family, the English of my education, and Italian. And I think Italian is the only language I have really loved. (1:08ff)

I had just used this interview and Lahiri's book *In Other Words* (2016) with adult ESL/EFL students to get them talking about their own experience of language learning. Now, turning down the street toward my Spanish school in Ecuador, I thought about how nonplussed my students had been by Lahiri's sensibility. The Polish medical doctor spoke of her own very concrete reasons for learning English—her fourth or fifth language; the Pakistani barley researcher mentioned practical community-oriented needs. The

Japanese visiting scholars in atmospheric science, the Russian faculty spouse—all the students in that class—were pragmatic intellectuals. To them, Lahiri's stance seemed romantic and a bit frivolous. After all, she was born an international, was raised bilingual in an affluent home, was educated in the Ivy League. She has a Pulitzer Prize and a National Humanities Medal. In short, she is a wealthy, privileged American woman, choosing "a sort of poverty" from a chair at Princeton—when she isn't in Rome. More fundamentally, the students couldn't see why multilingualism would have become self-alienating for her. And finally, they asked, what does love have to do with it?

But Lahiri has been conjoining language and love for a long time. She did this, for example, in her prize-winning story "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999). Her title character is a translator—a medical translator—in India, who feels apathetic in his marriage. This man becomes infatuated with a tourist, and he reflects on how this new love gives him a joy very much like the elation he feels after successfully translating a passage from a French novel or an Italian sonnet. (An *Italian* sonnet.) Lahiri knows the thrill of connecting through language.

For my students, translating themselves into English was different. Sometimes exciting, sometimes funny, it was never angsty and never an infatuation or a self-assigned "poverty" challenge—like writing an essay without adverbs. Nor were they looking for linguistic monogamy. They were practical and focused adults, amused at themselves and serious, and they would leave *nothing* behind as they added another language. They were cheerfully multilingual.

My life has been different from Lahiri's, too. My childhood was grindingly rustic: woodsmoke, animal skins, snowshoes, axes, and guns. The Arctic Circle was just out the back of the house, and my young parents were poor and religious. I am old now, yet I am still quite marked by this background. My South American friends find me exotic because: Alaska. But in truth I am . . . what is the opposite of exotic? Provincial. I am indelicate and unpolished. I am not ignorant, but I am badly educated. Certainly, I am awake to the advantages I have now, especially in Ecuador as I walk to school in this "lower income" country. I am also awake to where I fall short. Falling short is why I am here, learning a language and a culture and building relationships. My path has made me, like my students, short on patience for mystical one-percenters with first-world problems.

At the same time, I do identify with Lahiri's affection for the language she has learned as an adult. To learn a new language is to choose and build a new identity, and this is a choice most people don't have in childhood—just as we don't choose our family or place. For that reason alone, it's no wonder that Lahiri loves Italian. And I love my L2 for the choice I've made, too. However, I feel

<sup>3</sup> "To show respect to my country."

challenged and invited, not impoverished, by the limitations I face. Monolingualism would be the poverty.

Under a narrow stone bridge in a sudden downpour, I share a smoke with a Venezuelan refugee, and we chat quietly about the disaster in his home country. I am a descendant of Puritans and Norwegians, so I am not used to being pleased, but it does please me to do the cognitive work that Spanish requires. I love how Spanish opens a window into this man's experience and how that opens me in turn. I feel enriched in some ways, to be sure, but this is not about gratification; I also feel a responsibility "to begin again" (in Lahiri's phrase), to lose the easy monolingualism of my class, country, history, and culture.

Toni Morrison famously said, "white people have a very, very serious problem, and they should start thinking about what they can do about it" (Rose, 1993; 40:33). I wish my people back in the backwoods felt the same. But in my home province, white people, even black sheep like me, sense that to begin again would require ongoing humble work for which we U.S. provincials are not well-equipped. We are isolationists—paranoid, stubborn, prickly, and prideful. "Fiercely independent" is how you will hear it said up north (and said without irony despite our state's utter dependency on industrial capitalism and federal support). While it is true we are prepared to survive some privation, our isolation has marked us, distorted us so that we somehow cannot handle the simple surrender of ego that might reduce our fear of Otherness. To connect with the Other even simply through learning a language would be to *become* an Other, and my provincial peeps are not sure they could survive the process. They can see that "to begin again" would challenge their myth of rugged independence and individual self-reliance.

Thus, paradoxically, it falls to individuals—to me and to other white black sheep of the provinces, to make the move. It is as Frankie Condon (2020) says in the context of antiracist activism: "[Y]ou can't snatch your people without snatching yourself" (p. 48).<sup>4</sup> Engaging with multilingualism is part of this; part of what I can do about it. Part of how I am snatching myself.

## SNATCHING ENGLISH

Published translation scholarship doesn't have much to say about translating one's own work. I was surprised at this as I began reflecting on the experience of rendering my Guadalajara paper from English into Spanish. Maybe the issues are too obvious—translating is translating. However, a few scholars from *outside* the field of translation studies have discussed the challenges in translating their field notes written with the aid of an interpreter. L.

G. Crane, M. B. Lombard and E. M. Tenz (2009), for example, offer an observation about the language of research and publication in social geography. As in many other fields, social geographers whose L1 is English very seldom submit work for publication in non-English journals, even when that research was done in non-English settings.

There is an implicit assumption about native English-speaking researchers' willingness to subject themselves to some of the uncomfortable situations described by non-Anglophone colleagues. (p. 40)

The authors are being oblique. As a group, native-English-speaking researchers are rather famously *not* willing to suffer the discomfort of L2-English colleagues who have to submit papers for monolingual English venues.

Just ask Laura Di Ferrante, Katie A. Bernstein, and Elisa Gironzetti (2019), co-editors of an applied linguistics journal. Despite the many recent developments in global communication, they write, most of the colonialist forces that set conditions in place for English language dominance remain today. These editors are concerned that distortions are accumulating in many fields as a consequence of the demographics in published work. "[T]he hegemony of English-language publications over any other language remains a strong influence in scholars' choice of publication venues, topics, and styles of scholarly debate" (p. 106). Which is to say that Anglophone culture in academe, as in economic and political and other realms, generally has not yet snatched itself from colonialist monolingualism, and the resulting losses even in "topics and styles of scholarly debate" are incalculable.

The issue is illustrated in a small set of case studies by my friend Maria-Luisa. Among her participants—bilingual secondary students in Albuquerque—she found 40 percent employing a major discursal feature associated with English in their narratives written in Spanish (Spicer-Escalante, 2015, p. 26).<sup>5</sup> A *laissez-faire* version of translingual theory might find this untroubling, even in the more global impact that Di Ferrante et al. describe. That is, translingual theory posits that language contact is constant, that variation is a given, and that the concept of named languages is suspect anyway. From these, one could argue further that there is no sense in lamenting the loss of language-specific rhetorics. In fact, logically, even in well-intentioned reforms in bilingual education lies the risk that programmatic translingualism may aid the erasure of the very wisdom of difference that Di Ferrante et al. want to protect for the sake of broader human knowledge. Jürgen Jaspers (2017) remarks,

<sup>4</sup> A friend used to warn her kids, "Child, I will snatch you baldheaded!" I loved it that Condon used this indelicate verb for social correction.

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, the focus of her research was not translingual boundary-crossing, but rather contrasting discursal features between student narratives in Spanish and narratives in English by the same students.

This is most visible in the way that concerns about minority language maintenance are approached [in bilingual education]. Many minority language activists are worried that the promotion of fluid language practices will threaten their own efforts. (p. 12)

I've seen some of that erasure in my home province, where more than a few Indigenous languages have vanished in my own lifetime from systemic coercion, simple displacement, and other influences, even without the help of translanguaging educational spaces and fluid language practices recently promoted in bilingual education.

In the context of writing studies—historically a U.S. dominated discipline—one wonders what wisdom in non-English styles of scholarly debate we might have already missed, due to that discipline's tardy movement toward multilingualism. That is why a bilingual conference like the one in Guadalajara is exciting. Especially when they are not-quite-bilingual, we can see better what writing studies globally might learn from the non-English world.

## RAREZA

Pilar Mestre de Caro, in a 2013 study, explores issues in L2 pragmatics, but she has her finger on something that is also a central problem for translators, as I would find out in translating my own *ponencia*<sup>6</sup> for Guadalajara. She makes the following comment on what can go wrong when a speaker tries to transfer a verbal formula naively from L1 to L2. The formulation of “certain everyday speech acts,” Mestre de Caro writes,

*no puede obedecer a una transposición de la lengua materna o L1 a la lengua extranjera (L2 o L3), pues en la mayoría de los casos habrá un efecto de “rareza” por parte del hablante nativo que constata dicho uso, afectando la comprensión entre interlocutores, el curso y el equilibrio de la comunicación.*

cannot obey a transposition from the mother tongue or L1 into the foreign tongue (L2 or L3), so, in the majority of cases, there will be an effect of “rareza” on the part of the native speaker who observes said usage, affecting the comprehension between interlocutors, the course and the equilibrium of the communication. (p. 409) [my translation]

In translating even these few lines by Mestre de Caro (which I did several years ago for other purposes), I found that a text could not “obey” a simple transposition from Spanish into English.

*Rareza* is a common noun derived from the root *rar-* (rare, peculiar, odd). One might translate it as “peculiarity” or “oddity”—though probably not “rarity.” In colloquial usage, the adjective *raro* appears in ¡*qué raro!*—“how strange.” Grammatically, *rareza* the common noun is perfectly conventional as Mestre de Caro has it, but semantically it is an odd choice to describe the relation between interlocutors. It is *un poco raro*, if you will, and she intends it to be so—as she signals with her scare quotes. This problem gave me pause in working out my ephemeral translation, and, as you can see above, I decided to retain *rareza* as a temporary loanword.

Crane and colleagues (2009), in their reflections on social geography, describe a kind of conceptual empty space, a “moment of friction and hesitation,” when an interpreter is unsatisfied with a word choice in field notes. In such a moment, the interpreter might offer the researcher a revision immediately, or they might revise later, upon reviewing the transcript. Sometimes, in a *you-just-don't-have-a-word-for-this* situation, conceptual mediation is entirely stalled. But Crane and colleagues see opportunity here: “these ruptures in knowledge have the potential to open up new horizons, and one must allow for these and explore them” (p. 45). Rupture. *Rareza*. These may be other words for the wisdom of difference.

Moments of *rareza* have always challenged translators, as Ali Reza Ghanooni (2012) makes clear in a historical review, and resolving them invokes a set of questions that run from aesthetics to ontology. A common formulation going back to antiquity poses “word-for-word” translation against “sense-for-sense.”<sup>7</sup> Later, Schleiermacher offered a more nuanced idea, suggesting that the translator’s job is rather to create the “same impression” in the translation reader as the source text would have had on the original reader (Ghanooni, p. 77). But in my little translation of Mestre de Caro (2013), I felt there was truly no English equivalent in either word or sense for her “*rareza*.” Plus, there was the matter of wordplay. Scare quotes signal *meaningful* friction and hesitation, and Mestre de Caro rightly uses them to mark the novelty of the connotation she calls up in *rareza*. She’s being witty. Per Schleiermacher, I needed the same impression in English, but how does one convey a play on words in a source text without equivalent choices in the target language? Retaining the word *rareza*, I thought, might not be witty, but it might create a meaningful rupture and invite the reader to explore it.

Traditional translation practice would argue I should *not* retain a word foreign to the new reader. Traditional practice tells us 1) that a reader is (assumed to be) monolingual and 2) that a translator should be invisible, to preserve the reader’s illusion that the text is unmediated. We have to notice, however, that both of these conventions motivate editorial smoothing by the translator—substitutions that, in effect, suppress *rareza*. In transforming the work

6 Paper or talk presented.

7 Cicero mentions this tension, for example, as does St. Jerome (cf. Yang 2010 or Ghanooni 2012).

into a new language, one might say, a translator substitutes a comfortable counterfeit for what was a meaningful friction in the source text.

Lahiri is on board with this. In her 2021 *New Yorker* essay, she defends a very strong version of translation as substitution. She describes translating an Italian novel into English this way: "Word for word, sentence for sentence, page for page, . . . [m]y version of this book was produced to stand in place of the Italian. . . . It is now an English book instead of—invece di—an Italian one." She is not wrong that translating produces a new work, but as an author who has been handled roughly in translation, I am a little concerned by how entitled Lahiri feels to replace—*sostituire*—the source with her own text and then theorize this substitution not as a mediating translation but as a new and non-derivative "English book."

Lawrence Venuti's (2008) term for this approach is *domestication* of the source text. While one legitimate goal of any translation is to make the source text comprehensible in the receiving language, Venuti is naming something deeper, something ethical. Ethical because, in effect, domestication re/forms the source text while occulting the reformer. It is a silent revision, in other words, a form of conquest tacitly authorized by the mandate to be comprehensible. Venuti advocates replacing domestication with *foreignization*. By this, he means that a translator, without sacrificing essential comprehensibility, might choose to candidly signal strategic points of cultural *rareza*, specifically to make the translator visible and thus to remind readers of the revisionist, counterfeiting tendency of translation itself. Although translating cannot deliver a source text unmediated, it can *por respeto* acknowledge that "translation changes everything" (Venuti, 2013). So, to foreignize it, to retain its *rareza*, is a snatching gesture.

My own idea with Mestre de Caro's text above may have been only aesthetic; I just wanted the *rareza* of "rareza." I wanted that momentary estrangement for the way it would dramatize Mestre de Caro's concept, and my aesthetic choice created a foreignizing effect. In theoretical terms, I retained "an ethnodeviant pressure" in my translation, "to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, *sending the reader abroad*" (Venuti 1995 p. 20 quoted in Yang 2010, p. 78, emphasis added).

To be sure, there are other ways to do foreignizing in a translation. I also retained Mestre de Caro's concepts "mother," "foreign," and "tongue," though I did translate them. *Lengua materna* and *lengua extranjera* are standard in contemporary academic Spanish. But US academic culture would be likely to degenderize and decolonize and disembody—i.e., to smooth them—into "first," and

"second," and "language." Here, I felt it was useful to preserve the little *rareza* that these cultural concepts might cause for the provincial academic reader—sending them abroad.

## MEXICO II

In my *ponencia*, a major pivot point was my report of a tutoring session in which I had worked with a struggling student at our local community English language center. It was the kind of session that many a college or university writing center sees every day. Javier<sup>8</sup> was a novice English speaker, and he had been given a writing assignment by an English-Only sort of ESL teacher. The assignment—more precisely its U.S. cultural context—was incomprehensible to him. As we sat down together, it was clear that Javier was almost completely blocked and unable to produce any English at all that would respond to the assignment. He could produce a response in Spanish, however. *Okay*, I said. *Dime en español lo que quiere decir and I will write it en inglés.*<sup>9</sup> As Javier whispered a draft in Spanish, I scribbled a translation; he then recopied the English and submitted the paper.

We cheated, in other words. Javier's wife, there with us, was a bit scandalized, but there was no pedagogical scandal in my tutoring. Readers of this essay may agree with me, but in ESL curricula, the *solamente inglés*<sup>10</sup> tradition remains strong. That's where the scandal is—in the theory base of English Only (or any target-language only) teaching—and this is what I argued in my *ponencia*. *Solamente inglés* is a pedagogy of immersion, which is not a bad idea in itself, but, because it imagines only a *monolingual*—often a colonialist—immersion, it is misconceived for teaching multilinguals, even emergent ones. This is not a new critique, as I reported in my *ponencia*. What many researchers think would be better, I said, is a pedagogy that we could call an "*inmersión bilingüe, un modelo que podría animar, o usar—o al menos no castigar—la translanguaging*"<sup>11</sup> (Spooner, 2019).

Here I encountered *rareza* in my own source text. How would you say *to translanguague* in Spanish? It sounds *raro* enough to most native speakers of English, including most academics beyond just a few fields.<sup>12</sup> *To language* is already a problem, because we're pushing a noun into a verbal function. We can process it, especially if English is our L1. But still: Verbing weirds other parts of speech. In popular culture, we *text*, we *email*, we *DM* or *Slack* or *post* or *message* or *tweet*, all of which verbed nouns we find more specific than *to write*. Many English speakers might argue that academics are even worse than adolescents for casual neologizing. (See what I did there?) At a convention in the 1980s, I heard a

8 A pseudonym, of course.

9 "Tell me what you want to say, and I will write it in English."

10 "English only," but expressed in Spanish as an ironic resistance—a *rareza*, if you will. Hat tip to Victor Villanueva, from whom I've heisted this wordplay.

11 "bilingual immersion, a model that could encourage, or use—or at least not punish—translanguaging."

12 I should note that it was in Welsh, not English, that the concept and coinage of "translanguage" first appeared (cf. Williams 1994).

politician tease the president of NCTE about academics and their jargon. In reply, the NCTE president quipped, "I see we need to inservice you languagewise." (Ba-da-boom.)

Spanish does this, too, of course, in spite of the Royal Academy of Spanish. A recent example is *textear* (to text), as is the shimmering *mensajear* (to message). But apparently, at least at this writing, Spanish does not "language," let alone "translanguage." I did serious member-checking on this, and I was turned away in no uncertain terms. By normal patterns in Spanish, "to language" would be "idiomar" or "lengüear." However, these neologisms, I was told, *no tienen ningún sentido en español*.<sup>13</sup>

I dithered for a long while in what Laura Gonzales (2018) calls a "translation moment." In some ways, this concept of hers echoes the hesitating moment identified by Crane and coauthors. But where Crane et al. focus on lexicon, Gonzales attends more deeply to the rhetorical dimension. In her description, a translation moment is an audience-focused mini-reflection that occurs when we are working "to negotiate meaning outside the limitations of a single named language. . . . Signaled by a pause, translation moments are instances of rhetorical action embedded in the process of language transformation" (pp. 1–2). *Signaled by a pause*. A moment of friction and hesitation.

Gonzales, who was researching layers of engagement at a small community-based translation/interpretation office, dwells on the rhetorical decisions made by translators in such moments (pp. 87ff). In one example, a participant assigned to medical interpretation found herself beside a woman ready to give birth. How does an interpreter of maladies say that the doctor wants to "break your water to get the labor started"—in Spanish? Well, you don't say "water" and you don't say "labor." *No tienen ningún sentido* in the birthing room (p. 95–96).

The stakes of rhetorical attunement were not so dramatic for me, but, in the long moment of transforming my little 20-minute *ponencia* into Spanish, I began to realize how unique the rhetorical situation is for translation. I had understood Mestre de Caro's *equilibrio de la comunicación* too superficially. To translate *translanguaging*, I would need either 1) to invent a circumlocution—a cumbersome option; or 2) to coin a term in Spanish—maybe *trans-idiomando*—which . . . no; or 3) to foreignize my own text and retain the English portmanteau *translanguaging* in a deliberate *rareza* . . . and jeopardize the rhetorical equilibrium with my audience.

I was getting disoriented.

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Me: So what about "translanguaging"?

Maria-Luisa: What about it? There is no word *en pinche español*.<sup>14</sup>

Me: So . . .

Maria-Luisa: No, you just say it in English. Make it a loanword. In context, they will get it.

Me: But maybe I should . . .

Maria-Luisa: *No te preocupes*. Don't worry. They will get it.

## SNATCHING ENGLISH II

The conundrum reminded me of LuMing Mao's (2006) concept of "togetherness in difference" in the "ethnodeviant" choices available in Chinese American rhetoric. Suresh Canagarajah's (2010) Tamil/English bilinguals "shuttling between languages" also came to mind, of course. However, unlike those examples, I was not protecting an identity under pressure from a dominant language and culture; I was the oppressor. I was coming to Guadalajara from a language with a history of global hegemony and a reputation for unwillingness to experience the regular discomfort of L2 colleagues. A foreigner foreignizing himself gives foreignizing a different look altogether. What ethos would it communicate? Coming from a person like me, wouldn't it be more of the same old Anglo paternalism? I couldn't say *there's-no-word-for-this-en-pinche-español* right there in my *ponencia*.

And what was a person like me, anyway? Crane et al. (2009) point to a responsibility that sounds a lot like snatching yourself.

[M]ultilingual settings require more intensive, reflective, and careful thinking about the researcher's identity and positionality. . . . [R]esearchers in privileged positions . . . should be encouraged to constantly examine their position in the wider research world, and the implications this has for others. . . . Discussions about language may therefore have potential to provide space for reflexivity for human geography as a discipline, as well as for individual researchers. (p. 44)

For writing studies, the insight is no less germane. Contact between the languages of writer and responder, regardless of which is L2 for whom, marks out a space available for reflection on the part of the writer, responder, researcher, theorist, even publisher, ultimately the field itself. Sociolinguists have fruitfully explored such contact zones for many decades (as have literary writers). This work, in fact, grounds the foundational insight of translingual theory: Languages are dynamic, always in motion, always in contact. Despite valid concerns like those of Jaspers (2017), which

<sup>13</sup> They have no meaning—make no sense—in Spanish.

<sup>14</sup> "in [expletive] Spanish."

I share, to view languages as separate unbridgeable ontologies is an error.

Still, reflecting on my own grasp of Spanish, I began to wonder if I would truly be speaking from *respeto a la tierra*. I knew my audience in Mexico would be hospitable and might even empathize with me as an L2 speaker and as a tutor of L2 speakers. Even so, might I be overreaching? Maybe I should be trying harder. Maybe I should wait until my Spanish is more mature.

And the “language barrier” aside, other layers of my positionality were just as potentially problematic: white, U.S., academic, older, cis, man. Retired. Maybe it had been an act of gringo paternalism even to propose a paper for this conference. As much as I loved my subject, as much as I loved Spanish, I wondered if I should just let it go. I didn’t know whether I was feeling impostor syndrome or imposture itself. Maybe there’s no real difference. Maybe I should withdraw.

## LAHIRI AND ME II

Throughout *In Other Words*, Lahiri frets. “Can I call myself an author, if I don’t feel authoritative? . . . I know that my writing in Italian is something premature, reckless, always approximate. I’d like to apologize,” (pp. 83–85). She thinks of her three languages as a triangle, three sides framing her mirror, in which, “Because of my double identity, I saw only fluctuation, distortion, dissimulation. I saw something hybrid, out of focus, always jumbled. I think that not being able to see a specific image in the frame is the torment of my life,” (pp. 157–159). She thinks of Daphne, who transforms into a tree. She thinks of Pessoa, who reinvented himself as four separate writers.

A total metamorphosis isn’t possible in my case. I can write in Italian, but I can’t become an Italian writer. . . . Maybe what I’m doing, by means of Italian, resembles [Pessoa’s] tactic. It’s not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two. (pp. 171–173)

The interpreter of maladies, at the end of Lahiri’s story, settles into disillusionment about his tourist crush and into a kind of grief for the affair never consummated. This made me wonder about my affair with Spanish. I can write in Spanish, but beyond the land of English, I may always be an *extranjero*, a stranger, an Other in that language. Could this be how Lahiri herself—disillusioned, unrequited in Bengali and English—will someday feel about Italian?

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“You can’t be sure,” says my wife from the other room. “Maybe Italian will be for Lahiri like I am for you—not the first, but the best.” Ha. Third-spouse humor.

## RAREZA II

“*No te preocupes*,” said Maria-Luisa. Don’t worry.

In Spanish, where the word for wait is “hope,” the word for retirement is *jubilación*. While I approached my new status with as much jubilation as my Puritan ancestors would allow, I also prepared several long-term projects, so the transition into freewill would not rattle me. I began to travel in Latin America each year, studying Spanish; I began formal study of L2 teaching; I volunteered at the community ESL center; I contacted my former literary agent to let him know I was writing novels again. (He did not reply—*pinche gringo*.)

(Travel, volunteer, write. Seniors don’t really want to do these things, but when you retire, that’s the law.)

One thing a rustic upbringing may prepare you for is accommodating realities you cannot change. Even so, I found that *jubilación* required room for more *rareza* than I had expected. In *Latinoamérica*, there is no way for a tall white *extranjero* to blend in. Back home, enrolling in my third master’s program in 40 years, I was unprepared for how young graduate students had become. And professors—I had shirts and ties older than some of them. I felt deeply self-conscious and afraid of failure. I don’t like being conspicuous, so I contrived a quiet and studious persona. A retiring presence, if you will.

I had spent three decades as an academic publisher and editor and writer, and, although I loved my work, the pressure had been intense. The stakes were always high (unlike the salaries), and I was burned out. Now, as a *jubilado*, I was a free man in the cities of Latin America—I felt unfettered and alive. Yet I hesitated, because although my interests were much the same as before, my lived rhetorical situation was radically different. I don’t think I was becoming two—Pessoa’s trick. My hesitation was not over how to write a new chapter but how to stay legible, how to translate myself while retaining . . . I don’t know. I don’t know why it felt tricky. Except that maybe *jubilación* is a translation moment; I had rhetorical life decisions to make.

## MEXICO III

At some point, I began to wonder if translation was truly what I was doing with my *ponencia*. In the interplay between my rhetorical and discursal needs and my limitations in Spanish, I found myself reconceiving what I needed to say in terms of what I was *able* to say. I was accustomed to circumlocution, a default strategy for L2 learners, but here something else was going on. The process was triggering changes in how I understood my own content. Not radical changes of direction, but noticeable changes of nuance. I thought of Lahiri’s (2016) comment, “Even if I remain half blind, I can see certain things more clearly” (p. 229). As I redrafted,

reconsidered, and refined my translation, my English version (my source text) was losing control of me. That is, what I was able to say was getting me closer to what I wanted to say, and soon I was beyond the bounds of my *lengua materna*, gamely writing in my premature Spanish as if I were on the street in some faraway *país*. I wasn't substituting words for words or sense for sense; rather, language was my *activity*. I had been "languaging," in Merrill Swain's usage (e.g., 2008), employing language to mediate cognition—i.e., not to convey meaning but to *make* meaning. Moreover, ironically, I had been *translanguaging*—I had been mediating cognition in L1 and L2 simultaneously.

Translation changes everything, Venuti says (2013), and here it was changing the translator, too. I was becoming an Other, writing in Others' words.

### LAHIRI AND ME III

To Lahiri (2016), named languages are ontological realities, infinitely separate. "The closer I get, the farther away. Even today, the disconnect between me and Italian remains insuperable" (p. 91). She imagines concealed layers of meaning, secret pathways, like the underground streets at Hadrian's villa in Tivoli. "I walk [like Hadrian] on the surface, the accessible part" (p. 93). But she is not happy there; she wants to command the Real, the Invariant, the Heart, "the true life of language" (p. 92) that she imagines below. What she seeks is not there, alas. A literary writer and a multilingual, Lahiri is writing about multilingualism without having read the literature on multilingualism. Possibly, she needs us to inservice her translanguagewise.

That she believes in this ontological divide might seem to conflict with her eagerness to translate others, but I don't think it does; if you see languages as irreducibly different, then translation logically becomes a bald domestication—a creative substitution justly claimed by a different author. I'm not content with this idea, but I can empathize. As I headed for Mexico, Spanish still felt remote, maybe inaccessible. However, I knew that hoping to gain "mastery" of a language is like trying to solve the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, or the dour Puritan idea of God: The more we know of the Infinite, the more we know it is unknowable.

Unlike the drill writing I had done in language school, this translating/revising project was an exercise in making meaning. It was meaning/full. Maybe I could gain on my L2 only by half-lengths, but it was never immeasurably far away. In fact, to work with its unfamiliar possibilities had become a delight, and I loved how my frictions and hesitations were helping me refine my thinking. It felt secretly fabulous to see myself as a beginning L2 writer. It was like noticing the Infinite just out the back of the house—Spanish was not only quite available, I was already drawing on it. Imperial tunnels don't worry me, because when I recognize that I myself am

"something premature, reckless, always approximate," I see that learning is as ineffable and full of wonder as mastery would be.

From these paradoxes and these transits between Spanish and English emerged not poverty but a richer, deeper sense of translingual cognition.

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On the street, I pass a cluster of sidewalk umbrellas, and I glance at the early morning coffee drinkers. Young people inhabit their pressed clothes and coiffures, their messenger bags and bike helmets. The security man nods; we see each other every day. At a table near the wall, three older guys, maybe *jubilados*, tip back in their chairs, sharing a laugh. I am the only gringo in sight, but—*qué raro*—nobody looks up at me. It is as if, when I worry less about translating myself and just compose myself, I almost belong in this scene.

At the end of *In Other Words*, Lahiri feels it too. She now dreads leaving Rome and returning to the States. She writes,

I wish there were a way of staying in this country, in this language. I'm already afraid of the separation between me and Italian. . . . [and] if I go back to working in English, I expect to feel another type of loss. (p. 229)

I know that feeling. But *No te preocupes, Lahiri*. Let's skip school and get a *cafecito*.

### EPILOGUE: HOW'D IT GO?

The room was full, the audience engaged and opinionated. Teachers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Argentina, understood implicitly my tutoring session with Javier. They said their multilingual writing students—often L1 or heritage speakers of Indigenous languages and nonprestige dialects—face a system not very different from what Javier faced in the racist and classist heritage of *solamente inglés*. They had read of translanguaging and were pleased to hear a summary of the research. It was a good session.

They made no remarks on my L2 proficiency.

Once home, I spent some time reading works in translation studies, searching article databases, looking for research that might help me theorize self-translation. I wasn't planning to write; I just wanted to understand the experience better. I went back to Lahiri. I went to Eco and to other literary writers who have commented on being translated. I have written only three novels myself, but two of them have been translated, so I pulled them down. And I laughed aloud. As I could see now, my novels had been coercively domesticated for the German market. (*Pinches* translators.)



I began this paper on my experience of composing in Spanish while I was still feeling tentative and self-conscious about everything, including my right to present (let alone write) formally in Spanish. Ironically, just a week after completing a workable draft, I received an email from the *Red Latinoamericana de Programas y Centros de Escritura*. I will translate the first lines here:

Dear presenter,

By this letter we extend an invitation to participate in the collected publication of the works presented at the 4th International Conference of the Latin American Association of Writing Programs and Centers . . .

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