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Translating Earth: Indigenous Poetry, Critical Translation Practice and Social Justice

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*The classroom remains the most radical space
of possibility in the academy—bell hooks*

Abstract

Building on the relation between translation, bilingualism, language learning, and the actual practices of translators, this article examines the nexus between Indigenous poetry and translation, and its potential to expose readers to urgent aspects of social justice. It makes the case for the unleashing of bilingual readers' full critical, analytical, and creative potential through a more student-centered and aesthetic approach to literary criticism that is guided by translation praxis. In addition to engaging in a theoretical dialogue with various decolonial, translation, and Indigenous and Native American theories and methods, it presents the blueprint for a collective translation exercise, supplemented by extension an analysis of valuable testimonies from some of the students who participated in the exercise and found in translation a place for reflection on what it means to translate other ways of being and to inhabit other cognitive spaces. At its core, this article represents an attempt to transform the classroom into a more open space for critical engagement where students embody the figure of the translator and, in doing so, experience the role of cultural translation in social justice actions.

Keywords

Indigenous literature; translation; bilingualism; decolonial praxis; social justice

In this article, I examine how cultural and linguistic translation are essential components of oral and written bilingual Indigenous literatures, and how such processes can be unveiled and transformed into a critical pedagogical tool in literary study. I situate my reasoning specifically in the context of the US model of departments of Spanish and Portuguese Studies, where the curricula tend to gravitate around exposing students to reading, speaking, and writing almost exclusively in Spanish and Portuguese as second languages. In these joint programs, instructors promote sophisticated and authentic uses of the target language. Yet by discouraging bilingualism in our courses, we may limit the critical and

creative potential students may have already developed in other classrooms or through their embodied knowledge as bilingual people.¹ This is quite contradictory, considering that Indigenous literature of the Americas emerges mostly from bilingual communities that have historically resorted to translation to defend their ways of knowing, artistic expressions, and autonomy within hegemonic societies. Furthermore, Indigenous communities fight for their rights by capitalizing on their bilingualism, finding ways to appropriate other artistic and epistemological models to record and expand their knowledge and thus build alliances with other disenfranchised peoples who speak different languages. Bilingual Indigenous literature, then, offers a two-way mode of entrance (via the Indigenous and Spanish/Portuguese languages) that bridges two cognitive spaces through the act of translation. When we overlook the critical role of bilingualism—and, by extension, of translation—we deny our students the possibility of exploring in depth the bilingual experience and, from there, understanding the challenges of cultural translation and its overall desired effect in society.

This article promotes bilingualism in the classroom when used in tandem with translation exercises where creating an English version of a poem from the version in Spanish/ Portuguese can empower students and make them more accountable by involving them more actively and learning about the privilege and responsibilities of bilingualism in societies where monolingualism seems to be the norm. I want to help other instructors realize that our pedagogical attitudes and practices should be congruent with our learning objectives, so that we can advance teaching practices that can then yield a decolonial praxis. I follow Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh's decolonial category of *thinking-doing*, that is, going beyond understanding the various mechanisms of coloniality in order to materialize ways to dilute it (*On Decoloniality*, 2018). In the classroom, within an institution that inevitably replicates the coloniality of power, to use Aníbal Quijano's term, this means presenting students with the opportunity to engage aesthetically with bilingual literature on a very personal level, positioning our thinking and bodies in the act of cultural translation. Exercises of critical collective translation provide a more horizontal learning environment where language, and thereby students, become more politicized by materializing their knowledge into a poem. In examining this process, my hope is that the experience can be compelling to students and that they continue to engage in social justice efforts beyond the classroom.

This article is in close conversation with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's meditations on social justice, which center non-Western epistemologies as an important component toward the emancipation processes of the peoples of the Global South.² In this major social effort, translation, as De Sousa Santos argues, "is the alternative to both the abstract universalism that grounds Western-

centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures”(212). In this vein of decolonial thinking, cultural translation is an alternative to challenging the dichotomies established by Western thought in its valuing of scientific knowledge over other epistemologies, which perpetuates the exclusion of the oppressed in the realms of knowledge production. Translation has allowed Indigenous Peoples to show how, for example, spiritual practices explicitly encode medicinal and environmental knowledge. In this way, the misunderstanding and exclusion of Indigenous knowledge also stems from the inability of the social sciences and humanities to articulate broader interdisciplinary questions that might shed light on the interconnectedness of issues to be solved, and a lack of the sensibility required to perceive that many problems come from dehumanizing and unilateral methods of knowledge production. In other words, theory and scientific advances are limited because Western thinking is understood as the only possible solution to our multiple crises.

For De Sousa Santos, emancipation also includes a cognitive liberation where “[i]ntercultural translation is a tool to minimize the obstacles to political articulation among different social groups and movements across the globe for social justice and human dignity when said obstacles are due to cultural differences and reciprocal unintelligibility” (213). Therefore, translation can be explored as a living process and pedagogical tool that can yield a more active engagement in readers making them *witnesses* of cultural translation. However, my thinking and praxis of decolonial teaching seeks to turn *witnesses* into active thinkers, perhaps even *practitioners*, of social justice.

I argue that by shadowing the experience of Indigenous writers through meaningful experiences of critical translation, students can acquire a deeper understanding of the challenges related to translating the epistemologies imbedded in poetry and the voices of non-human beings, like those of animals, as present in Indigenous storytelling practices. At the same time, this also exposes students to the social and philosophical reasons why bilingual literature exists in the first place as the result of a colonial legacy. I seek to provide students with the opportunity of experiencing how Indigenous poets thrive in the collision of two cognitive spaces, one being the hegemonic which manifests through Spanish/Portuguese and, the other, a counterhegemonic one evoked through the Native language. I follow De Sousa Santos closely here because “the work of translation enables us to cope with diversity and conflict in the absence of a general theory and a commando politics. [Translation] is a living process to be carried out both with arguments and with the emotions deriving from sharing and differing under an axiology of care” (213).

The effectiveness of the exercise I present here also relies on accounting for students’ reception of translation praxis and how students feel when they embody the translator’s persona in

the classroom. For this reason, this article offers a hybrid approach, where theory and praxis will be in conversation with a qualitative-like component. Because the design of my translation activity is informed by the testimonies of students who participated in translation exercises in the various literature classes that I taught in recent years, at times the article somewhat resembles a case study.³ Through my analysis of the students' reflections, I aim to show the positive effects of giving students the freedom to switch back and forth between two languages (English and Spanish/Portuguese) when analyzing the complex ontological values present in Indigenous poetry.

I follow bell hooks's fundamental investigations on alternative ways of teaching and learning that rehumanize classroom conversations by embracing the full body and mind approach to knowledge-making; a conversation she directs at instructors and students alike (*Teaching to Transgress* 1994). I am inviting scholars to consider the potential of activating student creativity, allowing students to think out loud and learn to collectively analyze poems through and within their two languages. I reflect on offering students real, meaningful opportunities to see what is at stake when Indigenous poets translate the voices of their communities. I am bridging social, political, and affective spaces because I am cognizant that a great majority of the students in my institution come from white and privileged backgrounds; therefore, my intention is to be instrumental in helping them reflect on social injustice in a more personal way. In this sense, this essay is also meant to show how I transform my classroom to make it more congruent with the realities from which Indigenous literatures emerge, and how their work replicates a double existence through which writers fight for the survival of their languages, epistemologies, and territories. I want my students to feel accountable for what they read, for what is being shared with them. Therefore, I speak of this activity as *critical translation* praxis because we are engaging with translation beyond an artistic and intellectual craft. Translation can and should be used as a critical mode of *seeing*, perceiving, and *feeling* what is like to be on *the other side of the line*, to use De Sousa Santos's concept of abyssal divide.⁴

The article is divided into three sections. In the first one I explain why it is essential to understand how Indigenous literature is inherently deeply rooted in the act of translating verbal and non-verbal ways of communication. Students need to be able to detect how writers engage with a multi-spatial and multi-sensory creative act that involves a translation of ceremonial rites, oral-based knowledge, elders' voices, non-human ways of communicating, and the fusion of a collective subjectivity. To demonstrate this rational in action, I unpack and analyze a poem by Mazatec poet Juan Gregorio Regino. In the second section, I present the theorization and design of the critical translation exercise using poems by Mè'phàà poet Hubert Matiúwàa, showing how the different steps

of translation surround many aspects of the interpretation process through a decolonial approach, where students work together to solve problems as one, using various technologies that can support their creative and intellectual process. This decolonial approach to group work is rooted in Indigenous ways of learning, where there is an effort to interrupt the sense of individualism in knowledge-making spaces. In the last section, I weave together student testimonies with my own personal experiences as an instructor with almost a decade of experience teaching literature and Spanish as a second language. In doing so, I demonstrate how group exercises in critical translation can decentralize the figure of the instructor and thus promote a more horizontal, student-centered, and aesthetic encounter with literature.

Rooted in Translation: the Indigenous Poet as Earth's Translator

“Why is Indigenous literature bilingual?”—I ask my students. I address the elephant in the room as quickly as possible because this is when students tend to offer the most politically informed answers, which look something like this: “Because translation allows for the politicization of language,” “Do writers have a choice? Would any major publisher be interested in their work if not published in the national language?” or “Well, Spanish is also a part of their identity, right?” These are common answers I have heard throughout the years, and they all hold some truth. All the social political stakes implied in their answers, like Indigenous communities’ demands for publishing venues or urging the state for a comprehensive bilingual education reform, I explain to my students, help us trace the political trajectory of Indigenous literature in the Americas. Public opinion on these issues makes visible how writers are changing the landscape of national literary systems across the continent, which helps writers secure more and more spaces for critical debate in higher education, and, hopefully, inform political discussions at the governmental level. However, when Indigenous literature is simplified and understood as a literature in translation, then, it makes it seem as if translation is just a technical craft, separate from the poetic act.

We can perceive that students’ views are shaped by the privileges they experience here, in the US, with respect to language dynamics. Students know that in the US, Native languages have been silenced due to the imposition of English as the colonizing language. Even with the many waves of migration and asylum scenarios throughout history, this country still fails to acknowledge how its population largely resists the idea of becoming bilingual and ignores our own diverse contexts of multilingualism. I emphasize this point because students possess valuable personal knowledge, given that they grew up around people who stigmatized “foreign” languages and they know first-hand what

it means to make others feel obligated to speak the dominant language. In this country we “foreignize” any language other than English, and ignore the historical fact that English is a settler language. Students’ experiences offer valuable affective knowledge that I, like De Sousa Santos, believe compels them to reflect on why cognitive injustice translates into social injustice. The fact that my students have chosen Hispanic and Lusophone studies, means that they have a sincere interest in knowing more about the world. I value and see so much potential for change in that.

Indigenous literature in great part deals with the constant shifting between community and hegemonic spaces; here, shifting not only signifies mapping and moving between Indigenous geographies and territories, but also an ongoing negotiation between epistemologies that continue to collide. Writers explore the metaphysical spaces that give continuity to material ones: the ceremonial, spiritual, medicinal, and intellectual spaces that all deal with languages that go beyond the human. When I say languages, I’m also referring to the view and practice of interconnectedness that many Indigenous Peoples have established between them and the land, animals, plants, seas, rivers, and so on. Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson calls this belief system of interconnectivity *relationality*, an understanding of every living organism as part of the bigger entity: earth (*Research is Ceremony* 86). As a living entity that precedes human life, Earth has developed relationships of mutual sustainability and care.⁵ Scientists call this system an ecology. Indigenous writers have dedicated themselves to understanding the symphony of sounds, colors, taste, textures, voices, and images they have inherited from the elders and all the living nonhuman beings who also *communicate in their own ways*. Writers search for alternative ways to engage with and reclaim the freedom to understand life beyond the hyperbolic individualism taught by capitalist realities. In this sense, Indigenous literature is a translation of many voices and languages.

Take for example the work of Mazatec poet Juan Gregorio Regino, born in 1972, in the community of Nuevo Paso Nazareno, Oaxaca, Mexico. His poetry emulates the ceremonial chants used in the mushroom ceremony, a medicinal vein that stems from a tradition of healers who, like the widely known María Sabina, still practice medicine by activating all the senses and promoting the body’s natural regenerative mechanisms. In this ceremonial context, the consumption of medicinal mushrooms intensifies synesthetic abilities that allow both the healer and the patient to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell in other ways as part of their search for the cause of illness, which, according to Mazatec medicinal knowledge, originates from a spiritual level. However, spiritual ills can be caused by any disrespectful behavior against sacred mountains, communal crops, rivers, lakes, seas, and caves (Incháustegui 56). As one can see, *relationality*, to borrow Wilson’s term, has shaped medicinal and

spiritual practice around the care and worshiping of the Earth. To cure human illness is to protect and honor the non-human world. The healer, *xota chjnie* (the wise one), seeks divine counsel through the consumption of the mushroom. The expertise of the healer is to *translate* the voices and visions they see during the ceremony and transform them into chants that will help the patient heal (Gómez Velázquez 228). The chants are the aesthetic component of the healing process and the root of artistic expression. The Mazatec medicinal paradigm is a clear example of how a single-minded approach and a lack of interdisciplinary knowledge when approaching these topics can yield a limited understanding of Indigenous knowledge.

Although Juan Gregorio Regino is not a healer by profession in his community, when he participates in the mushroom ceremony and later recreates the ceremonial chants in his poetry, he engages with at least three levels of cultural translation: 1. Reconciling the visions and the voices of the sacred; 2. Emulating sound and translating the oral formulas embedded in the songs into a writing system; and 3. Translating (recreating) his songs from Mazatec to Spanish. The poet's craft relies heavily on a fusion of translation and anthropological methods, mainly because Regino translates verbal (acoustic) and physical (behavioral) performance, and by extension, in the words of Hanks and Severi, translation exceeds language because “[w]ords are translated into images, music into words, and gestures into objects. . . . even within a single culture. Translation processes enable the passage from one context of communication to another” (“Translating worlds” 8). Here is a short excerpt of chant “IV,”⁶ which helps illustrate what I mean by translating the presence of multiple voices:

I am the wise singer

I am the wise touch

I am the one who defeats darkness

who frees suffering spirits.

. . .

Tell me what happened?

What is the harm?

Where's the fault?

I come to set order

I come to give justice

because it's my flesh

because it's my blood

because I speak the wise Language . . . (*No es eterna* 113)

Gregorio Regino follows the healer closely by recreating the solemn tone and by addressing questions to the spirit of the patient for whom the ceremony is being offered. My English translation of the chant is only possible because I know the poet is emulating the presence of two voices: one being that of the healer, manifested as “I am the wise singer” (in blue), and the other, the mushroom’s (divine) voice ciphered through “because it’s my flesh” (in green). Mazatec chants represent subtle shifts in perspective that aim to underline how healers can speak from and with the divine, and that’s what they call the *Lenguaje* (Language). Therefore, the shifts also denote a healer’s capacity to speak in multiple dimensions.⁷

The mushroom ceremony involves the offering of copal incense, the smoking of tobacco, and massaging the body of the patient with San Pedro, thus creating a healing dynamic that activates all the senses (Gómez Velázquez 225).⁸ The poet makes a great effort to include these aspects in the poem “Be’an éhen ngasondiehe / I speak the language of the world”:

. . .

Let there be flowers.

Let there be birds.

Let there be roosters,

come sing with me.

Let there be copal.

Let there be tobacco.

Let there be cocoa,

so they can listen to me.

They will guide me.

They are the keys

that open the doors.

They will see me
 in brightness, in the clear,
 in darkness and in the shadows.

They will guide me. (*No es eterna* 25-26)

This is a *Lenguaje* where medicinal practice and aesthetics become one with each other. The speaker is a voice rooted in the soil (through the mushroom), which is a conduit to the spiritual and sacred realms. When a poet like Gregorio Regino researches and honors this ceremonial tradition, song becomes more than a political act where the Mazatec language is taken to a national space, it is a way to translate the ontology that explores the ways in which Mazatec healers have learned to understand human illnesses through the voices of nonhuman beings. Ceremonial poetry like this represents an extraordinary and brilliant effort to honor the synesthetic component of the medicinal wisdom still practiced in Indigenous communities around the globe, which is lacking in modern biomedicine. In biomedicine, the patient is a subject, not a participant of medicine.

The meaning of these alternatives to scientific knowledge explored by Indigenous poets become more important when we acknowledge that hegemonic Western-centered research has described these types of practices as superstitious, failing to value how historically many cultures around the world have, for example, identified the important role of sound in connection to the natural neurological self-healing processes of the human body.⁹ In the words of Māori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, “[r]esearch ‘through imperial eyes’ describes the approach which assumes that western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and human beings (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 58). That is exactly what Indigenous literature challenges.

There is another stage of translation involved in Indigenous poetry that manifests through the first person plural speaker “we/us” (*nosotros*), an emblematic perspective deployed in poetry, storytelling, and nonfiction writing. The “we” voice is also rooted in the idea that language, voice, memory, knowledge, and stories are all sounds that have been inherited across millennia (“Xàbò Mè’phàà” n.p.). According to Wilson, relationality is supported by *accountability*, the belief and practice of community where everything is honored, protected, and shared with the utmost respect for the generational keepers of knowledge: the elders. In this sense, knowledge, which emerges from Mother Earth, is owned by everyone and no one at the same time. Knowledge has been passed down by many voices who have contributed to it. Knowledge cannot be owned (*Research is Ceremony* 127). The same

goes for the land, there is no sense of proprietorship because it has been inherited and it is a living gift (Wall Kimmerer 115). Therefore, the *nosotros* concept of a plural subjectivity—or intersubjectivity—stems from the idea that “we/us” includes the people in the community, as well as earth, animals, plants, and the ancestors. It is not only a way of evoking the collective entity, it is a way of manifesting the totality of life which also includes the non-human (“Xàbò Mè’phàà” n.p.).

To put this into perspective, let us analyze the poetry of Mè’phàà poet Hubert Matiúwàa. Born in La Montaña, Guerrero, Mexico, the heart of the Mè’phàà people, Matiúwàa is the first poet from his community to ever publish a bilingual poetry collection. Therefore, his growing body of works represents his community’s first written literary and intellectual exchange with Mexican society and Latin America at large. According to the poet, the Mè’phàà people have developed over the centuries a unique understanding and practice of literature called: *la palabra*. For the Mè’phàà, *la palabra* is closely related to the practice of philosophy, with a unique understanding of sound. When the *palabrero* (the poet-philosopher) shares the *palabra* in a ceremony, from that moment on the knowledge and beauty belong to everyone present at the ceremony, and now they are bearers of that knowledge and therefore responsible for sharing it (“Language as Alliance” n.p.). This is a crucial aspect that critics need to consider when they contest the idea of plurality in Indigenous literature and philosophy, for example by questioning why books reflect single authorship. My answer to this is simple: these writers challenge the very notion of single authorship by always acknowledging that their voice is only made possible by the voices who have spoken before them, reinforcing the belief that knowledge is owned by everyone and no one at the same time.¹⁰

Matiúwàa’s poetry emulates this ceremonial context, bringing to the fore not only the voices of the elders, the community, the territory, but also that of animals. The poem “Ná inuu gĩa/ In Midair” captures the transcendence of an elder’s knowledge regarding territorial defense:

Reach for the rocks in midair
 as they are aimed at us,
 remember you won’t have these arms,
 this face, this body forever.
 If we must go out,
 let there be blood,
 in the presence of Our Father
 in the presence of Our Mother
 no matter what, we will be reunited with the earth

—Said the elder . . . (*Xtámbaa* 41)

Matiúwàa speaks to Mè'phàà youth, underlining the presence of Father-Mother (Earth), a belief we can understand as an extended physiognomy where the land and human body are one. The human body, however, has been given the gift of movement, the ability to work, a face and a body whose job is also to protect Mother-Father. In this sense, the voice of the elder reminds the imagined listeners of the principles of relationality (Wilson) where survival means securing the well-being of the territory, not only of the self. The storytelling-like framing of the poem emulates the elder's ways of knowledge-keeping and sharing. Matiúwàa translates the solemnity and story-like dynamics used by Mè'phàà elders in ceremonial and educational settings. According to Margaret Kovach, “[w]ithin Indigenous epistemologies, there are two general forms of stories. There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences” (*Indigenous Methodologies* 95).¹¹ Storytelling is also a practice of mapping; as the stories tend to emphasize the importance of animals and plants, such presences cannot be left out of the geography in concert with all living and non-human beings. Matiúwàa, therefore, foresees the strong potential that the soundscape of Mè'phàà ontology can have in territorial defense.

In the poem “Mbàxta/Rooster,” Matiúwàa deploys the voice of the rooster. The key to understanding the representation of the voice of an animal is knowing that in Mè'phàà ontology, and in Mazatec culture alike, animals are not understood as inferior to humans. The animal is a sibling.¹² The Mè'phàà have developed a culture of gratitude within their philosophical tradition that honors the contribution of animals to sustenance and to medicinal and territorial knowledge. This stems from what Patowami botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, calls “Grammar of Animacy,” where human beings honor the ways in which animals have taught them to live and survive by sharing with them their ways of knowing in conditions in which humans could not survive on their own. Grammar of Animacy endows aliveness status to animals; *they* are, which is different to referring to them as *things* (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 56). Here's an excerpt of the poem:

The Rooster said:
 My voice will get louder every day
 until your heart trembles
 so keep your head up.
 Do not be afraid of seeing other places,
 the Mountain is with you
 even if you slide into another tongue.

Honor the cicada

buried at the tip of your throat. . . . (*Xtámbaa*, 18)

Animals have long been part of oral and written literature, and anthropomorphizing their beings and images has served didactic purposes for many cultures around the world. For the Mè'phàà and many Indigenous nations, however, the animal is not only part of mythological representation; animals are continuously honored as beings who still possess virtue beyond their existence as myths because their lives are still acknowledged as part of the ecology (relationality) that sustains life. The honoring of animals and the understanding of their knowledge and relationship with plants is a gift to humans that sustains the world, and this is something that Indigenous poets are still exploring, trying to reclaim and reframe it as an epistemological component in literature.

The intent to speak with and from the voice of animals can be understood as an important lesson to humans, as we ourselves are beings with limited knowledge but who nevertheless negate life, intelligence, and worthiness to animals because of our own inability to communicate with them. Therefore, when I say that Hubert Matiúwàa and other writers are finding ways to translate the “Grammar of Animacy,” I am referring to the ways in which they represent how Indigenous Peoples understand inherent intelligence in the nonhuman, which goes beyond the verbal and includes learning from animals how to care for the land and live congruently on Earth. Take for example, the beautiful and powerful story of Skywoman, the Ojibwe creation narrative of how the first human fell from the Skyworld and was only able to survive with the help of the animals who had aquatic capabilities. After being helped by the animals, Skywoman created more life on top of a turtle’s shell. Hence, many Native communities refer to North America as Turtle Island. This story endows animals with a central role in life and evinces a clear understanding that animals are intelligent and caring beings, that is why Native scientists are reframing scientific advancement through the knowledge embedded in the Creation stories taught by elders (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 5). Therefore, the work of researchers like Robin Wall Kimmerer is very important when it comes to challenging narrow Western-centered research.

De Sousa Santos emphasizes that intercultural translation affords us the opportunity of approaching alternative epistemologies at work, new ways of imagining the possibility of other worlds. When Gregorio Regino and Matiúwàa translate their poetry from a ceremonial to a written system, they translate how their communities resist the hegemonic Eurocentric way of conceiving and experiencing literature, which opens a window to an alternative cognitive space. De Sousa Santos sustains that

intercultural translation consists of searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication that may be useful in favoring interactions and strengthening alliances among social movements fighting, in different cultural contexts, against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy and for social justice, human dignity, or human decency. (*Epistemologies* 212)

Indigenous poets initiate the translation process because Indigenous literature, as I conceive of it, is not complete until the reader enters the alternative cognitive space and decides, as De Sousa Santos argues, whether to just read or to continue the intercultural translation that may result in some form of action. Similar to Roland Barthes's notion of the *active reader*, Indigenous bilingual literature is a continuous process, creative work that seeks further interaction and symmetries of possibilities; it calls for a reader that detects the multiple levels of translation active in the work. De Sousa Santos underscores the strength and liveliness of intercultural translation in the following paragraph:

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of "living philology" (*filologia vivente*), I conceive of intercultural translation as a living process of complex interactions among heterogeneous artifacts, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, combined with exchanges that far exceed logocentric or discourse-centric frameworks. (*Epistemologies* 215)

Only when we understand the intricacies involved in writing from Indigenous ontologies, we can truly acknowledge that Indigenous literature is a monumental task of translating different ways of being and thinking with Mother Earth. I, like De Sousa Santos, envision this furthering of understanding and practicing hybrid intercultural translation in the classroom, where involving students in critical translation can expose them to superior nonverbal experiences of seeing and being seen: the purest act of translation.

The Student as Translator and the Making of a Collective Space for Critical Translation

In the following subsections, I will focus on the design of the translation exercise and discuss the two parts of the activity: one to be completed in class and the other one at home. I will alternate between describing the activity design and engaging with the underlying theoretical principles for this interdisciplinary approach to the textual interpretation of Indigenous poetry supported in the theoretical contributions on teaching, translation, and bilingualism made by bell hooks, Roman Jakobson, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and Doris Sommer, among others.

To begin, I recommend that the instructor introduce the translation exercise after students have been introduced to the history, genres, and central themes of Indigenous literature. After this step, the instructor should assign introductory reading about the history and aesthetics of Indigenous literature for the students to read over the weekend. I assign Pilar Máynez Vidal's "Particularidades de la literatura actual en lenguas mexicanas" (2019), which offers a succinct overview of Indigenous literature in Mexico. Kelly S. McDonough's and Gustavo Zapoteco Sideño's "Indigenous Literatures of Mexico" (2010) is a good resource written in English, and this piece is particularly important because Zapoteco Sideño offers his perspective as a Nahua poet.

Activity design: Part one

Preparing the technical aspects for the translation activity is simple, and I recommend that the instructor outline the following details three days before executing the exercise in class: 1. Dedicate a slot of fifty minutes for the activity in your lesson plan and ask students to bring their laptops to class; 2. Using a Google Doc, transcribe both versions (Indigenous language and Spanish/Portuguese) of one poem in side-by-side view and share the link with students before class through Canvas, Moodle, or Blackboard Vista; 3. In the same Google Doc, include hyperlinks to digital resources such as [Linguee.com](https://www.linguee.com), [WordReference.com](https://www.wordreference.com), [Writers.com](https://www.writers.com); 4. Plan on dividing the class into two groups if you have more than fifteen students, and ask students to sit in a circle. I choose Google Docs for the convenience of not using a whiteboard or crowding the front of the classroom. Further, using Google Docs encourages the participation of students with introvert personalities because they have the option of communicating directly to the document and connecting with their peers. Google Docs' digital space is also helpful in regards student accessibility because it accommodates students with different physical capacities, considering students would typically have to stand or participate in a presentation-like performance. Overall, this activity set-up is designed to break the lecture style dynamic and to avoid the low student interaction typical in an instructor-centered classroom.

This activity is about building student agency, so allowing students to use digital resources to seek linguistic support, such as an online dictionary, increases digital mobility, which is what this generation is all about. We do not want to prohibit the use of Google Translator because that is part of their personal learning process, and it helps break the stigma of using English in the classroom. Overall, Google Docs allows students to center their attention on the text, and it initiates the process of decentering the figure of the instructor as the "source of knowledge."

Dynamic (creating a bilingual classroom atmosphere)

Prior to announcing the activity and giving instructions to the class, the instructor should promote an atmosphere of bilingualism. From experience, we should know that students feel and act differently when instructors code-switch “by accident,” and the point is to show them that for that day it’s “OK” to speak English and Spanish/Portuguese. Students might be reluctant at first and even resist the idea of breaking the rules, but if the instructor stays in bilingual mode, students will eventually follow.

Translation praxis in the classroom follows De Sousa Santos’s understanding of cultural translation, which stems directly from a postulate of linguistic relativity, meaning that the translator engaging with a text is inevitably more concerned with the understanding and transfiguration of discourse. According to linguist and translation studies scholar Juliane House,

given that language structures necessarily change in translation, any argument concerning the feasibility of translation necessarily has to be located at some other linguistic level, i.e., the level of discourse. Since discourse is realized inside the social and cultural traditions in the two linguistic and cultural communities meeting in translation, and these can be analyzed and compared, a basis of translatability may be guaranteed. (“Translation” 521)

Further, in order to approach translation naturally and use it as a pedagogical tool with the potential for activating a deeper sense of connection between the two languages and cultures, we must contest differences in codability and obligatory structural distinctions, as House notes,

through the creativity and flexibility of individuals and their languages. [Because] when one subscribes to the hypothesis of linguistic-cultural relativity, which emphasizes the importance of the context of the situation for assessing the meaning of words and structures, translation is conceptualized not solely as a cognitive process but as a sociocognitive act of recontextualization (“Translation” 526)

When we contextualize Indigenous poetry in terms of its connection to bilingualism, it’s easier for students to relate to the implications of identity, freedom, and human rights within this literary production. In other words, our aim is for students to understand the sociocognitive process involved in translation.

The next step is to pose the uncomfortable question: *How would you feel if you lived in a society where everything was executed in a language other than English?* The lesson, now, becomes more personal than ever, and this is the perspective that we need to promote in the classroom when we discuss the many manifestations and strategies of resistance. The idea is to get students to recognize that bilingualism is

a privilege but, given the circumstances of coloniality, Indigenous Peoples have a different encounter with their two languages. Therefore, the classroom, at least for a day, will be a space to experience how translation and bilingualism are methods and modes of resistance. Here, I follow Korean poet and translator Don Mee Choi, whose anti-neocolonial stance on bilingualism stems from the idea that people born into formerly colonized countries or with a history of US militarism are subject to a “power takeover,” that is, the task of translating and internalizing the power of the dominant language. Put another way, people translate and internalize a hierarchy, a lexicon of repression, neologisms born of a shift in power, and thus the mother tongue, as Choi argues, becomes absorbed by the dominant language:

Because in a neocolonial zone, as Deleuze and Guattari have already noted, “there is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language” ... My tongue and your tongue are already an aggregate, a site of multiple and collective enunciation. “There is no individual enunciation” as Deleuze and Guattari have said. I say, we are all floaters, we are all motherless translators. (“Translation is a Mode” 5-7)

Rather than a pessimist view, Choi’s metaphor of the “motherless translator” offers another perspective on understanding how, even inherently, and beyond contexts of migration and asylum, Indigenous Peoples are born into the task of translating. When languages are not used in public, political, and academic settings, they are pushed to eventual decline because speakers only use them in intimate spaces. To resist this loss of language and knowledge, these communities engage in a lifelong process of inward-outward translation, that is, bringing to their communities what is useful, and putting their own perspective out as counterhegemonic views. This is an intimate, intellectual and most political process, a form of vigilance and self-evaluation.

One of the best-known examples of bilingual resistance in practice is the essay *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, by Gloria E. Anzaldúa. In this genre-bending book, the Tejana poet deploys an exemplary praxis of self-criticism through a poetic language enriched by English, Spanish, Nahuatl, and Chicano Spanish. Anzaldúa engages in search for the self through the many cognitive spaces that her multilingualism allows her to inhabit. *Borderlands* is a fierce critique of the patriarchal power felt through her Mexican side, but Spanish and Chicano Spanish endow the poet with a privileged positioning from which she can see the *in-betweenness* of her identity as a Mexican American. Anzaldúa translates, breaks down, and analyzes the internalization of the colonial lexicon to understand the limits and possibilities of her languages that, in the intimacy of her community, have birthed a hybrid language and its many derivatives: Spanglish. De Sousa Santos would say that Anzaldúa ventures into

the abyssal divide, as the poet challenges and bridges the supposed incommensurable differences between her two cultures. For Anzaldúa, facing this divide is an epistemological opportunity in that she can critique the belief that Chicanos are an incomplete community, made to feel inadequate in the US and in Mexico. Her dual experience is liberated by the translation between two cognitive spaces, through which she dignifies Chicanas and forges a sense of true belonging through a life of *in-betweenness* and by reclaiming the duality of the territory on which her body stands.

On the other hand, the context of our (temporary) bilingual classroom is one of privilege, where our students seek out personal, cultural, social, and intellectual advancement, hence their interest in pursuing a professional career based on learning another language and culture. We must acknowledge this explicitly. There is an intellectually driven bilingualism and a coercive bilingualism that is essential to survival; one is a luxury, the latter, living resistance.

In *Bilingual Aesthetics*, Doris Sommer examines the urgent need to reevaluate, dignify, and promote bilingualism within broader paradigms of multilingualism, such as the one here in the US. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of monolingual approaches to philosophy and the sciences, Sommer sees the potential in distilling cultural differences by increasing bilingualism in social, political, intellectual, and cultural processes that may even help the current diminished state of democracy (*Bilingual Aesthetics* 158). I concur with Sommer's suggestion that the bilingualism we have to promote in the classroom should be an ethically driven one, a socially conscious bilingualism where people see that all *motherless translators* have to intervene in situations in which injustice and human rights violations are a threat to the wellbeing of the members of the communities we study (with?) and come in contact with daily. While it is important to acknowledge the importance of bilingualism in the role of micro- and macro-level politics, we have to delineate the practical and didactic spaces that will ensure that those who choose to learn a second language know that, in a multilingual nation, bilingualism involves a civil duty. This will debunk the perception that only immigrants should be the ones to adapt, transform, and fight for democracy and justice. Justice, as De Sousa Santos emphasizes, is about both *sides of the line* facing the depth of the abyssal divide.

Priming activity (10 minutes)

We must be aware that this is perhaps the first time that our students are asked to translate in a classroom, so a good priming activity to further contextualize the shift to a bilingual classroom is to translate an excerpt of a poem with the whole class. Using the whiteboard or computer, share with them the chosen excerpt and read it out loud together. Tell your students that you are the translation assistant and that they will be overseeing the actual translation process. Be as systematic as possible.

A good strategy is to do a very literal translation of each verse, then ask students to propose better words to suit the ideas expressed in the excerpt. Ask them to help you write a list of possible terms. Ask about the euphemisms, metaphors, imagery used in the excerpt. This is a great opportunity to review the names and uses of poetic devices. This reduces anxiety about reading poetry, which sometimes can come across as an intimidating and complex aspect of literary study. The idea that poetry is difficult to analyze is still a prevalent belief in the classroom, and this can hinder student participation. This is in part due to the fact that instructors tend to explain poetry and then expect students to know how to articulate their interpretations clearly without giving them (or reviewing) basic analytical tools. To understand how poetry works, we therefore need to shift from explaining what poetry is to modeling a guided practice such as that of translating poetry.

Contextualizing the activity and instructions (5 minutes)

The priming activity ensures that students feel like they are back in a language-learning classroom where a warm-up activity has just taken place. This is an important step because we want students to give us more than their attention; our aim is for every student to engage with the poetry and not expect the instructor to give a lecture. Helping students be more actively involved in their learning is already half of what teaching is about, so the next objective is to find an interesting way to bring together all those minds into thinking and doing as one. Tell them that for today all of them will be poet-translators, that today's lesson is totally up to their talents. Remind them that today is the day when they will come out of the closet and confess to the world their deep love for poetry, which is the real reason why they joined the major. Call them Romantics, make them laugh.

Be precise: speak in English, go back and forth between Spanish and English, or Portuguese if the course is offered in that language. Give them the assurance that today they are using their bilingualism to help an Indigenous poet amplify their voice in another language. Once students are sitting in a circle tell them to open the Google Doc you prepared and ask them to follow you in reading the Spanish/Portuguese version out loud. This will absorb their attention and help them concentrate on the poem. Be clear and succinct when providing instructions because at that moment students will already be paying more attention to their screens than to you. Ask them to translate the poem as a group by negotiating words and expressions. Tell them they must negotiate lexicon, poetic devices, and the imagery to be used. Emphasize the idea of justice: "we want to do justice to this poem," meaning that the result must be as powerful and meaningful in English as it is in Spanish or in Portuguese. Tell them that you don't want a perfect translation, because perfect doesn't exist; rather, they should aim to give *new life* to the poem. In other words, we are implicitly asking our students for

a first draft of what Roman Jakobson would call a *translation proper*, where the translation interprets “verbal signs by means of some other language” (“On Linguistic” 127).

Write these questions on the board to guide them: *Can something be omitted because it has no equivalent in English? Are you offering an exact linguistic translation or are you challenging yourselves to contribute something new to the poem? As translators, what are you bridging: messages, culture, intellectual content, emotions? Is the purpose of a translation to make an identical copy in another language? Which version is the original?* As one can see, these questions allude to those posed by thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Roman Jakobson, Jorge Luis Borges, and Gilles Deleuze.¹³ But our intent is to frame these important (and complex) questions as simply as possible. We want to incite our students to overcome these problems in their own creative and intellectual ways, not give them a lecture on translation theory. The theory will come with the practice. This is what happens when teaching Spanish or Portuguese through a communicative approach: students engage with implicit grammar lessons through speech (praxis) and instructors thus avoid explaining applied linguistics theories. We model and contextualize the use of language, students, as Gramsci would say, engage in “*filología vivente*.”

The rules are also simple: 1. Everyone must contribute to the translation on the Google Doc; 2. Speaking out loud is encouraged in both languages; and 3. Divide up duties: some people can be responsible for looking up information about the poet’s culture on the Web, others can look for different media (video, audio, visuals, texts) like interviews to share with their peers. The idea is to have everyone working either on a linguistic or a cultural aspect of the translation and contributing to the best possible version of the poem.

Collective translation process (25 minutes)

The instructor can monitor participation by opening the Google Doc, and this is a great technological advantage because it decenters the figure of the instructor as one of authority. If students are not participating or exchanging ideas out loud, then, it is recommended that the instructor walk around the room (but without getting into the circle) and ask about particular lines or words in the poem. The instructor, here, is just another resource, not the “keeper of knowledge.” Help students initiate an exchange of ideas, suggest words, and always compliment their word choices. Promote an atmosphere of support, not one of surveillance.

Do not worry about students who hardly speak, as that is not exactly a bad thing because those students tend to be the ones with introvert personalities, but if you continue to monitor the activity on the Google Doc, you will see that they do contribute to the translation. Some students interact better via technology. The pandemic has exacerbated this aspect of intellectual exchange. By now three

things are working in favor of the instructor: 1. Students are slowly acknowledging themselves as the center of the classroom and as responsible for the division of duties amongst themselves; 2. Students are building agency on their own terms, looking to excel and contribute to the group by assigning themselves specific tasks that pertain to their personal potential, such as those who are tech-savvy conduct effective Web searches, extrovert students maintain communicative exchange, creative ones share their knowledge in literature, and others look out for grammatical adequacy; and 3. Students punctually assume roles of mentorship/leadership by encouraging others whose level of Spanish/Portuguese or creative abilities might be lower. This is a community working within a poetic ecology.

In literature and culture courses, we rarely have/offer the opportunity to solve something together. However, the collective atmosphere generated at this point of the activity sort of resembles that of task-based activities used in language courses. Task-based activities focus on making something or solving a task, such as making a list of groceries and then *performing* the act of asking a store clerk for help and then purchasing the items. In task-based activities students are expected to complete a task, ask for something, look for something, and answer a question about something. Accountability is at the center of this kind of activity, and the completion and effectiveness of the learning objective rely heavily on the level of authenticity (how close is the activity to a real-life scenario) embedded in the activity design. Task-based activities have simple grammatical objectives, such as using the correct “usted” or “tú” form when framing questions posed to strangers or elders. In this manner, the task-based activity includes a linguistic practice and a cultural aspect to it.

In our activity, the translation of a poem becomes a real-life scenario. Students accept the pressure involved in completing their task when they realize that by the end of the activity, they will have a poem, knowing that their intellectual efforts will have materialized. Translation is about solving a problem in that we are looking to break a barrier of silence between two languages. The task of the student-translator is to find ways of breaking barriers of sound, intelligibility, cognition, abstraction, intangibility, imagery, and language. Students *perform* the translator’s task. If no such word or grammatical feature exists in the English language to convey an idea, then, the students will have to find a way to explain that concept.

Our learning objective is to expose students to cultural and ontological spaces that will facilitate a more personal and profound intellectual encounter with the knowledge of the *other*. Yet, there must be a shift in who and what is perceived as the *other*. We are the others; we are the people who don’t know that there are other ways of being; our vision has been limited by the imposition of

Eurocentric views. We are learning from Indigenous Peoples; we are the settlers. Given the current global climate and environmental crisis, we are the ones in desperate need to learn different ways of inhabiting places and our bodies. We need to learn that other worlds are indeed possible. De Sousa Santos would say that these are the close encounters that challenge the incommensurable spaces between cultures, where one can experience life through alternative worldviews. The experience of translating goes beyond learning about the social contexts or reading through decolonial theory because reading is conducted through the surface of language. Translation, on the contrary, is about knowing and manipulating the poetics, the reality within the text; as such, it imposes a greater level of responsibility on the student. As a group entity consisting of many minds, the group translating centers the task of bringing a distant voice to the fore, one that lives far away from our realities. However, the creative component of translation opens an intellectual vein that can be exercised collectively. Jakobson's ideas on translation are inseparable from what we understand as an analytic system. For the theorist, translation is a process through which the translator breaks down language, it is a rewording of a piece in its original language before it can be transferred to another language ("On Linguistic" 127). In other words, translation forces the translator to break down the L1 before it can be taken to the L2.

A great number of intellectual resources have been dedicated to amplifying the benefits of building a learning community in the classroom. The scholarship with which we engage in the field of applied linguistics signals that the learning experience can be more enjoyable, natural, and even more beneficial for students. I envision a classroom community in the more critical sense, like the one explored by bell hooks's radical ideas on teaching. A community where our whole existence (body and minds) are truly acknowledged in the classroom. According to hooks,

one of the unspoken discomforts surrounding the way a discourse of race and gender, class and sexual practice has disrupted the academy is precisely the challenge to that mind/body split. Once we start talking in the classroom about the body about how we live in our bodies, we're automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space. (*Building a Teaching Community* 136-37)

When we acknowledge that we learn with our bodies, we truly situate ourselves in the social contexts before us. The classroom becomes less of a metaphysical space for knowledge exchange as we speak less from the voices of books, theorists, and their work. hooks's radical reimagination of the classroom calls for a re-humanization of knowledge, one where affect and experience are understood as potential conduits of critical intercultural dialogue. According to hooks, "[t]o engage in dialogue is one of the

simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (*Building* 130). Like hooks and De Sousa Santos, I envision a classroom where the building of a learning community translates into the acknowledgement that many minds can join to solve complex problems and that there are other ways of learning and inhabiting our bodies. I’m exploring critical collective analysis through translation; I want to go beyond the surface of language.

When I designed the translation activity, I imagined how my classroom would resemble a Maya Tojolabal community classroom. Carlos Lenkersdorf, an anthropologist who spent years with Tojolabal communities of Chiapas, Mexico, witnessed how the youth rejected the concept of the exam. To them, the evaluation of how much a person knows is useless. Knowledge, as they and many Maya communities conceive of it, is the practice of activating and concentrating everyone’s intelligence on one task; every single member present in the room thinks out loud and focuses on solving one problem at a time. This is my source of inspiration: describing a problem, dismantling it, and then trying to solve it by acting as the group wishes. I see how that epistemological process happens naturally in collective critical translation, the task of having many present bodies working together with their emotions, experiences, and memory. Knowledge is in real movement; it is a transformational force in every sense of the word. The Tojolabal teacher, often an elder, is doing something with the group, they are part of finding a solution, not giving a lecture.

In the previous section, I showed the nature and functions of the “we/us” poetic voice—*nosotros*—a feature of all Indigenous literature. The Tojolabal classroom setting is the physical and intellectual performance of the *nosotros*; it is a blown-up view on how many Indigenous communities practice knowledge-making as a plural multi-sense transformational entity, something like what Lenkersdorf calls the “activación nosótrica”: the *wecentric* activation (*Filosofar en clave tojolabal* 59). This all must ring a bell, as for the last four decades many disciplines have been trying to find alternative ways of knowing, building theoretical frameworks that can help us understand how humans naturally *perform* knowledge. Take for example, Diana Taylor’s investigations into how performance studies can serve as a model to understanding how we can challenge power structures and the notion of theater as a place-thing-centered art (2003, 2016). We all want to find ways of liberating knowledge.

Closing the activity (10 minutes)

Dedicate the last ten minutes of the activity to going over the poem with the whole class. Ask students *what was most challenging about translating a poem that was already in translation? How do they feel about their translation? How did they solve those untranslatable concepts?* Congratulate them on accomplishing the task of

creating a poem *together*. Read the poem with them. As they all feel eager to share their final product, even the introverted students will join. Discuss the process beyond technical aspects. Even though the poem is not polished, the important thing is how much they reflected about cultural differences, reconciling (finding solutions!) between languages that seem *strange* or *bizarre*. Take the conversation to those places where, as hooks would say, critical dialogue is about breaking the barrier of difference. Students are always eager to discuss how exciting it is to translate animal voices because most of them are used to reading fables or stories where animals are anthropomorphized. This is the perfect setting to elaborate on the principles of “Grammar of Animacy” and ontological differences between our cultures. Be critical with the issues of human-animal hierarchy and the treatment of animals in our society; how we have commodified their lives and really do not appreciate the extent to which ecologies depend on them and how much we can learn from them. The direction of this part of the conversation can go in many ways, depending on the selection of the poem. You have the freedom to choose a poem that deals more with race, extractivism, language rights, gender, violence, animal rights, and queer lives issues. Indigenous poetry encompasses all those critical and urgent themes.

From the Collective Space to the Personal: Notes on Student Self-reflections

Part two of the process: Translation at home

The critical collective translation activity enabled a degree of self-reflection. Therefore, the second phase of the exercise is to be completed at home. Have students individually translate a poem, but this time with the privacy, time, and bibliographical tools to expand their creative process. Depending on the reception of the poem selected for the in-class exercise, decide whether to assign the same poem or another one. Students already have considerable input on the aesthetics, language, history, and biography of the poet, so use that to your advantage. In this second part of the activity, their individual process of translation can involve further reading and basic research because students will already be acquainted with the literary culture and can fall back on that experience. You are not sending your students completely out into solitude; they have as their basis the collective analysis they conducted as well as preliminary readings on the context of bilingualism in Indigenous literature, and your lecture. They are inheriting knowledge that they should understand in an Indigenous community sense.

Self-reflection: Students rethink translation

Have students record a brief 3-5 minute audio self-reflection on their translation process. I also require that students include a reading of their translation of the poem, so that they have yet another chance

to hear the sounds, messages, and the materialization of their work. Although this is a limited practice of orality, it reminds students of the importance of thinking out loud, and the transcendence of listening in Indigenous settings. To give their self-reflections a sense of direction, I offer my students the following questions: *How did translating the poem give you a deeper understanding of the role of bilingualism in creative writing? Did translating the poem help you better understand the poem, or support your analytical process? Having engaged in translation, what is your understanding of Indigenous literature now?*

At this point, I don't recommend assigning readings on critical race or decolonial theories because theory is better learned in conjunction with close analysis, and that should be done in class to avoid overreading or sending out the wrong idea that theory precedes literature (experience). The objective is to center the writings and oral testimonies by the writers, using the theoretical frameworks expressed and constructed in their communities.

Asynchronous technology at the service of translation

Hubert Matiúwàa en el bosque de La Montaña, estado de Guerrero, México

Traduce al inglés el poema "[El gallo](#)" ↓ de Hubert Matiúwàa. Después de leer el poema, lee [la siguiente entrevista](#) ^e donde el poeta habla sobre su poesía, cultura y entendimiento de los animales y la tierra según el pueblo mè'phàà. Obviamente, tu traducción tiene que basarse en la versión en español, por tanto tu trabajo es continuar un significado, un objetivo, y un lenguaje que el autor ya trasladó desde el mè'phàà. Tu traducción no será "descriptiva", "estéril" o algo que daría Google. Tu trabajo debe ser artístico, debes sentir la responsabilidad que todos los traductores sienten y llevar el poema a un lenguaje poético que penetre el pensamiento y cultura norteamericana en inglés.

Esta tarea tiene dos componentes:

1. La traducción textual, es decir, en un documento Word incluye la versión en español y la tuya en inglés.
2. Cuando hayas terminado tu proceso de traducción y tengas el documento, después graba un audio donde lees tu traducción y reflexionas brevemente sobre los desafíos que encuentres, tu proceso de negociación (por qué usaste una palabra o por qué optaste por un cambio radical del enunciado/ verso). Este proceso reflexivo te ayudará a pensar en tus lectores posibles y la audiencia para quien preparaste tu traducción.

Punto clave en tu reflexión oral, contesta estas preguntas:

¿Haber traducido el poema te sirvió para comprender el proceso creativo bilingüe? ¿La traducción te ayudó como una herramienta para el análisis de la poesía? ¿Qué piensas sobre la literatura indígena después de haber tenido esta experiencia?

Ambos archivos (doc y audio) se entregan en Canvas.

¡Adelante, poetas-traductores!

Fig. 1

Fig. 1 is an image taken from one of my classrooms' Canvas pages. I'm including it here to help instructors visualize how I design and contextualize the second phase of the translation exercise from a digital space. I would like to underline how Canvas's technological tools facilitate accessibility to materials, for example, the [video](#) where poet Hubert Matiúwàa speaks about the multiple subgenres of *la palabra* (highlighted in red). This media resource is useful and engaging because the poet delves

deeper into the sacredness and community uses of *la palabra* in different ceremonial contexts. Multimedia spaces like Canvas are great tools to present different media that combine sound, image, and the digital textualities through which Indigenous writers are decentering the role of the book as the primary artifact of knowledge production. Therefore, by having access to this media in the privacy of their homes, students can see and hear how poets theorize and practice Indigenous epistemologies. The digital private space gives students the opportunity to engage with more technical learning strategies like close reading, glossing, and drafting; of course, even though these practices foreground typically individual intellectual activity, we must acknowledge they are also inclusive of visual, audio, and hands-on learners.

Feedback and assessment

After students turn in their translation and audio, I use Canvas's "Track changes" tool to provide feedback on lexicon, grammar, and imagery, and students really appreciate the suggestions and praise they receive from me. In this last section, I will analyze some student reflections regarding their creative, intellectual, and self-critical processes. My aim is to show the positive experiences my students had but also analyze how they overcame particular challenges of translatability, and finally show how having the option of using English helped them solve conceptual issues.

Fig. 2 shows two phases of the translation process: linguistic and cultural, and we must underline this student's dedication, systematization, and drafting strategies:

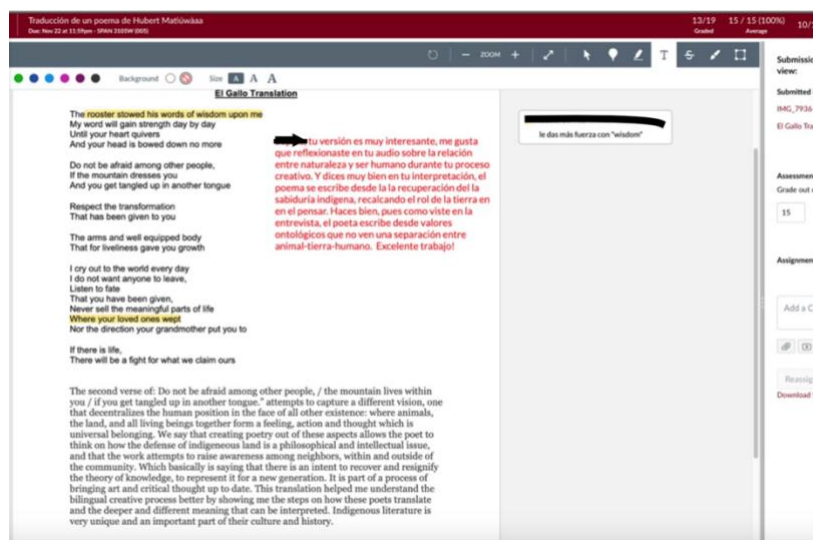


Fig. 2

The student also wrote about their creative process below their translation, and the notes reflect that the student caught on to how Matiúwàa engages with decolonial praxis, reclaiming and transforming

Mè'phàà epistemology: “there is an intent to recover and resignify the theory of knowledge, to represent it for a new generation.” This is an outstanding case where we can see that even with no explicit requirement to speak about any branch of philosophy in particular, the student was able to reach a greater level of abstraction through their translation process. Also note how the student opens their statement by showing how they broke down the poem and explains the rationale behind their translation decisions.

In other cases, I center my feedback on the audio reflection because in that oral (now digitized) space, students tend to offer more intimate reflections on their encounter with *the other side of the line*, to use De Sousa Santos’s term. In my response (in red) to this student’s reflection (Fig. 3), you can perceive how I allude to the content of the audio:

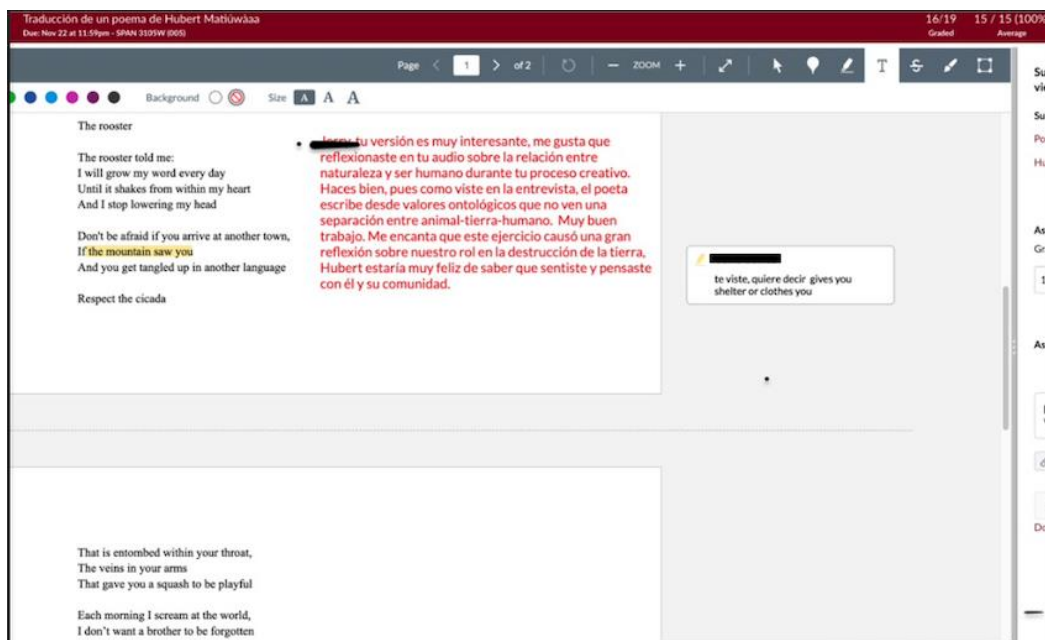


Fig. 3

Here’s a translation of the last part of my commentary: “I love that this exercise inspired you to reflect on our role in the destruction of the planet, Hubert would be very happy to know that you engaged with him and his community with your feelings and through your thoughts.” As we can see, the student expressed an affective connection with the text and alludes to feeling responsible for knowing that our actions (or inactions) contribute to the global environmental crisis. This is the kind of encounter where students not only channel their intellectual and creative potential but also acknowledge their privileges and how social inequality is a matter that involves everyone. Furthermore, the student signals an intimate encounter with emotionally charged poetry, and we have to ask

ourselves if the student would have reacted to the poem the same way if they had only had the chance to read it in Spanish/Portuguese? One thing we can conclude from this example is that the student was able to channel their affective reactions via their dominant language. As linguists Hugh Knickerbocker and Jeanette Altarriba suggest, the “different experiences and daily routines that people experience can influence the perception and processing of emotional language in bilinguals” (“Bilingualism and the impact of emotion” 474). Once again, when we acknowledge bilingualism openly, we can bring a double experience of *feeling*; we welcome familiar ways of sensibility when we are exposed to sensitive topics.

Here’s another interesting reflection reflected in Fig. 4:

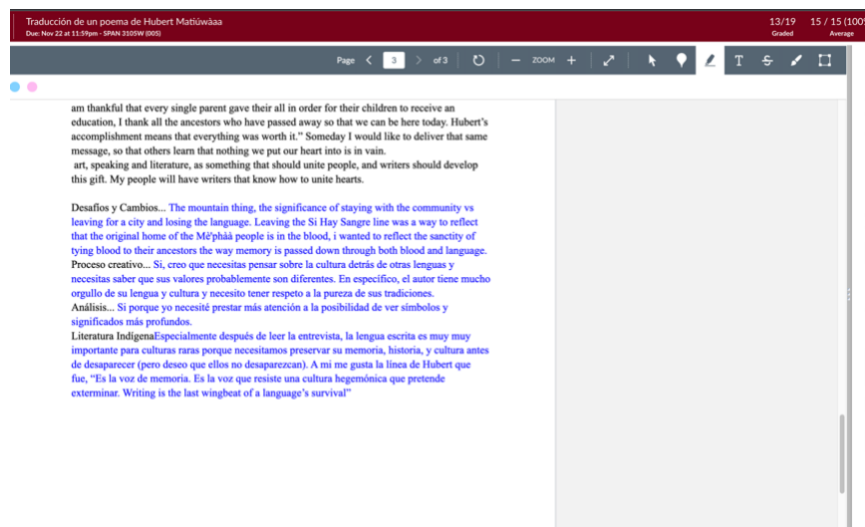


Fig. 4

The first thing that caught my attention was the student’s use of code-switching in their reflection. We must underscore that the student resorts to English when they speak about the creative process. In other words, English was the preferred linguistic system when more complex theoretical implications came into play. Or when: “[I] wanted to reflect [on] the sanctity of tying blood to their [the Mè’phàà] ancestors the way memory is passed down through both blood and language.” This experience resonates with Jakobson’s understanding of translation through the science of language: “No linguistic specimen may be interpreted by the science of language without a translation of its signs into other signs of the same system or into signs of another system” (“On Linguistic” 127). Put another way, the student *reworded* their interpretation of verbal signs intralingually, then proceeded to find equivalency in codes and messages.

I find comfort in the fact that my student resorted to their first language when approaching a very complex cultural translation. This particular student had a hard time expressing their ideas in class, but their translation was great, and we can perceive the excitement in their tone. The exercise exposed the student to a process of deep cognitive selection or what is known in linguistics as language control. As linguist David W. Green proposes, language control may pose a cognitive advantage for bilinguals because

in selecting one language rather than another, bilingual speakers must coordinate potentially competing representations of a gestural, prosodic, syntactic, and lexical nature that differ between languages. It is perhaps this process of continually negotiating a more complex multimodal internal space containing a manifold of competing alternatives or attractor states (see Spivey & Dale, 2006) that distinguishes the subjective worlds of bilingual and monolingual speakers. (“Bilingual worlds” 231)

Bilingualism, thus, points to a greater level of concentration and creative dynamism in speech, which, naturally, requires a higher degree of awareness from the student.

I have many other student reflections that I really cherish and that I wish I could share with you here, all varying in tone, perspective, and emphasis in their way of honoring Matiúwàa’s work. Others focused all their intellectual energy and craft on offering an excellent translation of the poem, and they are also valuable because they show a high level of commitment to the task; they truly inhabited the voice of the poet.

Assessing the activity, thus, should not be centered on the result, the translation itself. Rather, I assess the process of how the student confronts obstacles, finds solutions, and recognizes the shortcomings of their knowledge. I look for the ethical consciousness the student develops during the two phases of the activity and, in doing so, I challenge myself by having to find new ways of evaluating *performance*, which is a form of knowledge-making and transmission.

Conclusion

I expect that many scholars will be critical of my excitement about opening the door to bilingualism in the classroom, and my not addressing the possibility of student resistance to speaking Spanish or Portuguese until after the exercise. In my experience, my students were thankful for the brief shift in activities. I suspect that they all meant a shift in perspective, a shift in acknowledging who we are, what we do, and what that says about us. That is what bell hooks explored in her ideas on what a new classroom should *feel* like.

I want instructors to engage with me, to give this exercise a try because I want to know how different social contexts can influence the translation process. We must know how translanguaging may also transform the results. I call on instructors from community colleges and state universities, people who are in contact with more diverse student communities, who come from different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, to imagine different versions of my idea. I want to engage with instructors in Chicana and Latina studies, Creative Writing, Lusophone studies programs who can transform my idea, and offer other possibilities for it—as these fields will have varying levels of bilingualism between Spanish or Portuguese. I also invite instructors in Creative Writing and Comparative Literature programs to practice my exercise in other languages represented in their courses like French, Arabic, Russian, German, and many others. I ask, why close the door to translanguaging? Why not follow Gloria Anzaldúa's legacy and allow our students to transverse and transform any two languages they may know?

There is an urgent need for instructors to engage with the literatures of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil. There is also a critical need for imagining how Indigenous literature of the Global South can have a stronger presence in Comparative Literature programs, a program and theoretical approach born out of the boom of literature in translation. Spivak initiated such conversation almost two decades ago, looking for new ways to challenge Anglophone dominance in the field.¹⁴

At the moment, diversifying the syllabus is a popular topic of discussion given recent attacks on the teaching of critical race theory. Yet, diversifying reading material means that we are still relying solely on the book, on the minds, and on writing to promote change among our students. Such contribution to broadening and changing what is considered to be intellectual material is important, but in the case of Indigenous literature, *una literatura viva*, the literature through which Mother Earth speaks, it calls for a continuation of cultural translation. This is a literature that will translate other ways of being, but the key is knowing if we, the readers, are going to be ready to be-think-feel-do differently after we inherit that knowledge?

Notes

¹ In this essay, I refer to a bilingual as a person who is fluent in two languages. I am aware that there are various levels of fluency or dominance of one language over the other. I follow Knickerbocker and Altarriba (2011), who argue that “[b]ilinguals do not necessarily have equal abilities in both of their languages and can exhibit dominance and preference for one of their known languages. . . . It is important to note that the dominant language is not necessarily the bilingual’s first language (L1) and can be and individual’s second language (L2) under some circumstances (“Bilingualism” 453).

² I would like to express my gratitude to my steamed colleague, Ana Paula Ferreira, who referred me the work of De Sousa Santos during the early stages of this research project.

³ I am indebted to the reciprocal teaching/learning experiences my students have given me for the past four years, and I am especially grateful to those students who have given me permission to include their assignments/reflections as examples in this article. Their identities will not be revealed.

⁴ “Modern western thinking is an abyssal thinking. It consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the real of ‘this side of the line’ and the side of ‘the other side of the line’. The division is such that ‘the other side of the line’ vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. Nonexistent means not existing in any relevant or comprehensible way of being” (*Epistemologies* 118).

⁵ In his book, Wilson elaborates on the ways in which the practice of relationality extends to aspects of knowledge-making and -keeping, bringing to the fore an understanding of wisdom that sees intelligence in all living and non-human entities. For Wilson, research is a ceremony because a Native researcher cannot speak about anything that has not been previously gifted to them by generations of ancestors. In this way, Wilson shows how many Indigenous Peoples practice knowledge-making in the sense of contributing to the well-being of the relationships between the community, land, and animals (*Research is Ceremony* 87).

⁶ Translation from the Spanish is mine here and throughout.

⁷ Sabina describes the aspects of sound, imagery, affect, synesthesia, that constitute the *Lenguaje*: I can see what Jesus knows. I contemplate him. I can be near him but cannot touch him. . . . I enter another world different from this one. It’s a beautiful world but unreachable. It’s like cinema. . . . Like in cinema, an image follows another image. Then another one appears. That’s how I feel the effect of the mushroom. . . . I’m the one who reads, the interpreter. That is my privilege (*Vida de María Sabina* 78-79); translation is mine.

⁸ San Pedro is a homemade balm made of tobacco leaves, garlic, and lime (calcium hydroxide), which the healer rubs all over the patient’s extremities.

⁹ See Mark Pretorius, “A metaphysical and neuropsychological assessment of musical tones to affect the brain, relax the mind and heal the body,” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 2017, vol. 38, no. 1, n. p.; John Beaulieu, *Music and Sound in the Healing Arts. An Energy Approach*, Station Hill Press, 1987.

¹⁰ Seeing how sharing and protecting knowledge implies a paradox, many writers deal with the tension and taboo of taking knowledge outside of the community. Matiúwaa conceives of *la palabra* as the tool to defend and be defended with, so his career is also marked by a courageous impulse to fight by sharing, by opening up to the world. The poet elaborates on this subject: “We, the Mè’phàà, use the expression ‘Murigú Ajngáa ló’ ‘to place the word,’ meaning that words are placed on the table, so that everyone can contribute and make them grow, it’s like sharing food. So, I write to express what is happening in my community, I think that this can encourage others to share their stories and views in diverse artistic forms” (“Language as Alliance” n.p.).

¹¹ Kovach on the uses of story as elements of relationality: “Stories are vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective. They promote social cohesion by entertaining and fostering good feelings. In times past, as now, stories were not always transferred in lexical form, but through visual symbols, songs, and prayer” (*Indigenous Methodologies* 95).

¹² Matiúwaa explains how the Mè’phàà hold a ceremony right after the birth of a child, where an elder finds out *who* the child’s animal sibling is. From then on, it’s the parent’s responsibility to teach the child to respect that animal sibling, as they will leave a life together, mutually looking after each other (“Language as Alliance,” n.p.).

¹³ See Benjamin’s “The Translator’s Task”; Borges’s “The Translators of the *One Thousand and One Nights*”; Deleuze’s *A Thousand Plateaus*; Jakobson’s “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” whose didactic approach is particularly useful in guiding instructors through different forms of translation.

¹⁴ See *The Death of a Discipline*, Columbia UP, 2003.

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