RESPONSE ESSAY

ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGES: LOSERS WEEPERS, SAVERS REAPERS

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It used to be that people in the U.S. could pretend that we had a linguistically homogeneous culture. It used to be that many schools enrolled only students who spoke the mainstream variety of English as a first language—and a certain number of schools are still that way. It is still the case that probably most people assume that the mainstream spoken English is the same language or dialect as mainstream written English (edited written English). But linguistic difference is now unavoidable—especially for most teachers at all levels. It's exciting to see this special edition of *The Journal of Teaching Writing* focusing on multiple and alternative languages.

When I read the important essays that precede mine, I began to hear the childhood jingle that I've tried to echo in my title. The essays come together for me around the theme of sadness at languages lost, richness through languages honored and maintained.

An Old Story of Loss—Newly Learned

Lachen Ezzaher tell us in his essay ("Writing with an Accent") that he grew up in the "rich multilingual environment" of Fes, Morocco, with pride in its tradition of political and intellectual resistance to French colonialism. "I learned to speak, read, and

write in classical Arabic, French and English (10)." He calls it a "dream city"; but it was real.

I want to call attention to an earlier dream time in Morocco—when it was part of a much larger space. Again it was no dream; it only seems so because it's been so largely written out of history.

I draw here on two remarkable books by Maria Rosa Menocal: *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*, and *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Her period is what she claims as the true Middle ages, the tenth through the thirteenth centuries—the period before the national Romance languages began to exert a divisive force and people began to think there was such a thing as a "renaissance." It was during the Renaissance that people began to use the word "dark ages" for the period Menocal describes as bright. Her latter title proclaims her larger theme of brightness. (The first is a scholarly book that focuses on lyric poetry and song but works at building a picture of the large region she calls "Romania"—the entire area that spreads most of the way around the Mediterranean—from Northern Africa up through Spain and right across the north side of the Mediterranean to Italy or farther. The latter book focuses more particularly on Al-Andalus—what we call Spain or the Iberian peninsula. It aims at a larger general audience and tells the stories of illustrative key persons.)

Menocal's books are a learned hymn to a period of remarkable multiculturalism and toleration—of experimentation in thinking and poetry—and most of all a flourishing of multiple and fluid languages, especially of vernaculars. The tenth through the thirteenth centuries in Romania saw the flowering of Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin culture: all equally strong and respected—cheek by jowl. Arabic was the lingua franca for the whole region. (Columbus took a learned Jew fluent in Arabic with him—specifically in order to talk to the "Indians" he planned to encounter.)

> [T]he first official diplomatic conversation in the New World took place between Luis de Torres, a Jew of recent conversion, speaking in the lovely Romance-accented Arabic that was the language of both high culture and stunning nostalgia—and a Taíno chief in the hinterlands of Cuba, in the Cu banacán that Columbus took to mean "el gran can" (11 *Shards*).

Much of the lyric poetry she looks at in her first book is oral, not written, and the poems continually mix languages. These poems engage in the kind of code switching we see in "language contact" situations all over the world—and that people in the US associate with Hispanic/Latino/a speakers. She celebrates the medieval toleration for different languages: hybrids and mongrels and mixtures. She cites an illustrative poem/song in one of the main languages of the time and region, Provencal, a language later lost in the battle waged for French to be the "proper" language for the new nation France. The poem's refrain had always been seen as nonsense syllables—medieval "hey nonny nonny." Only recently, a medieval scholar thought to knock on the door of a scholar of medieval Hebrew—and they discovered the refrain was actually in Hebrew. She and other scholars are working to recover this oral poetry.

She describes a period not just of multiple languages but cultures. People moved freely throughout this whole region: no borders, no nations. It was a period of toleration of Jews, homosexuals, and dark skinned Muslims from North Africa.

She celebrates "mongrel poetry" and "mongrel history" and talks of poets using "speech of blacks" in "mixed" and "bastard" forms, that "incorporate the other." She speaks of "messy, cacophonous and painfully disruptive" language versus the Renaissance push for "purification" of language, and her book celebrates the "aesthetics of difference." She links all this with the oral language and love songs. One of the reasons we don't have many of the texts she's trying to find is that they were seen as

popular song as much as "poetry." They weren't intended as timeless texts. She quotes Adonis from a *History of Arabic Poetry* on

> "poetry born as song": it developed as something heard and not read, sung and not written. The voice in this poetry was the breath of life—"body music." It was both speech and something which went beyond speech. It conveyed speech and also that which written speech in particular is incapable of conveying. This is an indication of the richness and complexity of the relationship between the voice and speech, and between the poet and his voice. It is the relationship between the individuality of the poet and the physical actuality of the voice, both of which are hard to define. When we hear speech in the form of a song, we do not hear individual words but the being uttering of them. (*Shards* 260).

Menocal notes that *distancing of self* and *lack of presence* in texts was another renaissance value—whereas presence in language was characteristic of the speech and writing in Romania and Al-Andalus.

So how was this multilingual tolerant mingling cultures *lost*? Amazingly most of us have never been told that it existed. The problem comes, she says, with the set of values brought in by the Renaissance, "or at least. . . a powerful ideology that has called itself 'Renaissance' . . ." (*Shards* 13). She speaks of a mindset she calls the "Renaissance paradigm" and how it dominated most later scholarship on the Medieval period and "rewrote" and "smoothed out" the story into a narrative of Renaissance "birth" out of "dark" "middle ages."

She uses 1492 as a real and symbolic date of loss. 1492 was the deadline for all Jews to leave Spain. Columbus couldn't sail from Spain's best port nor get the best ships and sailors because most were being used for thousands of fleeing Jews. At the same time, Spain was also expelling the very Arabs who had earlier been the dominant political and cultural group.

The new story for this period, calling it a rebirth, didn't have room for the "messy, cacophonous, and painfully disruptive" oral grammar, language, and poetry. Also around the period she marks with 1492, people—the "better" sort of people—began to hunger for more purity. There came to be a privileging of good language and grammar and monolingualism—and an ultimately victorious push to write the earlier stuff out of history. For 1492 was *also* the date of the writing of the very first grammar of one of the new national languages, Castillian or "Spanish." The goal of this grammar was to curb and cure the "bad" mixed versions of this dialect—and all the other flourishing oral dialects. Columbus wrote his famous log in the vernacular, but it was corrected into proper grammar by a grammarian soon after he returned, and the original was not deemed fit to save. The "correct" version is all we have. Menocal's fascinating books are about the disappearance of the vernaculars; so many of the songs and poems and other writings she wants to look at have been lost—because of the nationalistic moves of the languages that used to be called "vernacular" (Spanish, Italian, French and so forth).

She describes this orthodox historical story as a "smoothing over" of history. Muslims and Jews are written out of "our Western" history—thus no one ever noticed that the "nonsense" refrain was actually Hebrew. "[W]hat survives is the palimpsest, the accentless narration, . . . [a story of] moving purposefully—struggling inexorably—toward pristine Castilian, or pure Italian, or perfect French" (13-14). (Remember Ezzaher with his insistence on accent as a positive value.)

It's interesting to notice that the Renaissance values she describes are exactly what have been permanently enshrined in most cultures and institutions of schooling everywhere. Menocal keeps coming back to Petrarch as central and symbolic of the beginning of the Renaissance—1492 also being a year when Petrarch was at his height as an influential scholar and poet. He is repelled by the chaos of cultures and languages all around him—the mongrelism of all the oral poetry and vernacular. He

continually looks to the newly found classical texts from Greece and Rome (and finds some texts himself):

> In his role as arbiter of high cultural standards, Petrarch . . .and the tradition that follows him all the way into our classrooms is horrified by all the same things that horrify others today: the reveling in pluralities; the refusals to cultivate the great tradition; the writing of literature in the crass dialects instead of the great literary language; the embrace of the popular and ungrammatical into the exclusive clubs only the learned could once join; an ethnic and religious variety that would be unequaled in Europe thereafter; the secret and unholy alliances with the heterodox "cults," and so forth. In contrast, the reactive posture is that of longing for a golden past when real men were really educated, of lamenting the barbarous society all around us now that the noises of the rabble have been let in as real literature. (*Shards* 37).

But, as she keeps pointing out, Petrarch "who, alone in his room in the dead of night is very much the lover of vulgarity and scatteredness" (37) writes some of his best love poetry in the messy vernacular he disapproves of:

> Long were the nights he stayed up until dawn, writing superb love sonnets in the vernacular, and then he got up in the morning and lamented the fragmentation of the self that the invention of the sonnet and poetry in the vernaculars had wrought on his culture, his age. . . . [For this lament] the language of his narrative and his idealized past [was] taut and orderly Latin. (*Shards* 49).

She shows how the spirit of the incipient Renaissance is ominously analogous to our own. Europeans began to want to "fix grammar" (notice the two meanings of *fix*) and think of the previous age as a "dark" time of bad language and bad grammar.

There were forces in the air "calling for clear distinctions, loyalties to self and hatred of others, and, most of all, belief in the public and legal discourses of single languages and single states .. . (89)."

Another Story of Loss

Where Lachen Ezzaher's essay suggests for me that story of medieval language loss, Gail Okawa's essay about historical records and artifacts suggests a language loss closer to home. Okawa researches the Smithsonian for artifacts of languages we've lost here in the U.S. And she encourages students to research their family histories. "[D]espite their current monolingualism, the students' histories were far more complex, linguistically and culturally, than many realized. Themes of language loss are particularly poignant" (56). I have found the same thing. My students tell stories of how they—or more often their parents—rejected languages from the old country. Or just as frequently, it was a parent or grandparent who didn't want to "burden" their children with an "unAmerican" language.

The *extent* of language loss in this country may seem just as surprising to readers now as the extent of language loss from multilingual multicultural Romania. Consider the case of just one language in the U.S., German:

> At the time of the American Revolutionary War . . . not all that many people in the colonies were English-speakers. (Some scholars say that English-speakers numbered fewer than 40 percent; others point out that the German-speakers in one state [Pennsylvania] numbered more than 50 percent.) Many German-Americans believed that German would eventually become an official American language; a few people argued that all Americans should learn to speak German; several endorsed the view of Benjamin Rush (a "founding father") that there should be a German-language national college; hundreds hoped to found a New Germany following the model of New France or New England. In any event, by 1900, there were millions of German-

> speakers in the United States. German-Americans had published tens of thousands of German-language books and pamphlets. The German-American ethnic group was well educated, wealthy, and influential.
>
> What happened to all these people? . . . . Thanks to fears of a German-American "third column" during the Great War, it became illegal in many parts of the United States even to teach German in American schools. In 1917, President Theodore Roosevelt said that "we must have but . . . one language. That language must be the language of the Declaration of Independence." The problem was one of "language loyalty." (Shell 258-59)

This passage is from a useful collection of essays: *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (Sollors. See also the useful companion volume: *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations.* Marc Shell and Werner Sollors, eds.). German was the language of instruction in many schools around the U.S. from the time of the colonies up through the nineteenth century. Other essays in that collection bring back to memory other languages that flourished and have been so often suppressed: Yiddish, Polish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Ladino, Italian, French, the various African languages of slaves—and of course the many Native American languages that covered the entire Western Hemisphere. Okawa cites the hopeful 1926 judgment of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that upheld the right to have Japanese language schools in Hawai'i: "The protection of the Constitution extends to all; to those who speak other languages, as well as to those born with English on the tongue" (57). Yet with the Second World War, our nation sweeps aside this right and herds Japanese Americans into prison camps.

Why So Much Loss?

Why do humans throw away languages and walk away from linguistic and cultural tolerance? Why do we seem even to *hide the traces* of linguistic diversity that flourished? I won't try answer such a large question in any full or satisfactory way, but let me quickly point out some obvious possibilities:

• Menocal emphasizes the role of competitive nationalism at the time of the early Renaissance—and how it somehow seemed to encourage a desire to nail down a single, stable, correct form of that nation's language.

• With nationalism comes war. The First and then the Second World Wars seem to have played the biggest role in stamping out language diversity in this country.

• When people are insecure or afraid, they seem to "clump" or "huddle" into groups of "us" and see others as "them." "They" are "other"—and viewed with suspicion. When the early Greeks heard all those "others" speaking a language that didn't feel like a true human language—going around saying "bar, bar, bar, bar"—they gave us the word *barbarian* for foreigners we don't like. People seem to link "bad language" with deep inhuman badness. In our culture most white people feel that they shouldn't call others bad or stupid if they have a different color skin, but many people feel free to call others bad or stupid if they speak a certain "nonstandard" version of English. David Kirkland's essay argues how language prejudice and racism (and class prejudice) reinforce each other. (For an insightful analysis of specifics about language prejudice in the classroom, see "Error and Racialized Performances of Emotion in the Teaching of Writing," Strickland and Crawford.)

• Humans have a weakness for "either/or" thinking—for feeling that if X is right, then not-X must be wrong. Psychologists

talk about "cognitive dissonance" resulting from trying to accept two things that appear to conflict with each other. When Menocal refers to Al-Andalus as a "first rate place," she's taking the phrase from an oft quoted statement by F. Scott Fitzgerald: "the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time" (*Ornament* 10). When either/or thinking is applied to language and culture, there is pressure for rightness, for a winner—and ultimately for homogeneity. (Dewey constantly warned against either/or thinking. On this theme, see my "Uses of Binary Thinking.")

• Literacy itself—or at least a certain "culture of literacy"—seems to get itself tangled up with a desire for a "standard" language—often a "better" and "purer" language. Literacy itself doesn't always have this effect; this is a complicated matter that I wish I understood better. After all, writing in many eras in many languages has been as variable in spelling and grammar as spoken language. But there seems to be some *potential* in the culture of literacy—at least as it gets itself somewhat institutionalized—to invite the assumption that one must have a single standard form of a written language rather than the fluid and changing forms of spoken language. We take this assumption for granted now, but it used to be a new, odd idea.

Two periods in our history stand out when the pressure was strong for standardized literacy: the Renaissance and the eighteenth century (at least in England). In both eras, there flourished a reverence for a "better" literacy allegedly found in Greek and Roman texts. Of course the written languages from Greece and Rome were *not* unchanging or stabilized into some "classic" perfect form, but they sometimes seemed that way and had a "classic" aura since they were available only in a relatively few "classic" texts (thanks to the Arabs for preserving and often translating them!).

The eighteenth century in England was the era of dictionaries and standardization. This was when the common word *dout* was changed into *doubt* in order to make it seem closer to Latin *dubitas.*

Amiral was changed to *admiral* in order to give it an honorable parentage in Latin *admirabilis*. *Amiral* was actually from Arabic (*emir al* = "leader the").

It's as though a reverence for classical (dead?) languages makes people want to *improve* the humble everyday, home grown language they hear and see all around them. Menocal speaks of a growing Renaissance *puritan* spirit that runs away from the sensuous, erotic, open minded, pleasure loving spirit of the Medieval era she describes—and how this links with a drive for alleged *linguistic* purity.

Savers Reapers

Menocal's theme is the power of how history is written—of what story we are told. Let me mention an example from a different realm: when political history is primarily a story of violent conflict, much gets "written out." Armed conflict seems inevitable. Gene Sharp and his colleagues at the Einstein Institute at Harvard have produced (and are still producing) an amazingly extensive body of work about the myriad occasions when humans successfully used *nonviolent* means to deal with armed adversaries. His point is that most people need to believe that something is possible before they put their best efforts into attaining it.

So let me cast a cold eye on my daunting list of reasons why people throw away languages and resist a tolerant multiculturalism. I had fun generating that list, but it is suspiciously overdetermined. It smacks of the assumption that loss is merely inevitable—like the assumption that violence is the only way to deal with conflict. I can end more usefully—and do better justice to complex reality—by calling attention to the many signs that humans are also good at living with multiple languages and often desire to *have* them and *save* them—signs found in this valuable issue of *The Journal of Teaching Writing*, and elsewhere too.

Menocal is unearthing some neglected history in order to fight that smooth "accentless" "Renaissance" narrative of darkness giving way to rebirth and light—a narrative that has stuck.

Menocal insists that history is more contingent, and that we must avoid either version of smooth inevitability: that progress is inevitable or that violent conflict is inevitable. In a contingent world, it makes sense to work for the outcomes we believe in. Humans have already shown they are capable of rich linguistic and multicultural tolerance—in small towns and large regions; we can do it again. Let's review some examples of saving and reaping to show us that saving is feasible and worth the effort.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is the perspective that Mary Louise Pratt gives us in her noted essay, "Linguistic Utopias." She helps us extricate ourselves from the pervasive assumption (especially in the U.S.) that single-language homogeneous groups are the norm for humans, and that borderline multilingual cultures are the exception. She argues convincingly that multilingual situations have been the norm around the world and that same-language homogeneous groups are the exception.

Yes, languages are disappearing from the earth at a frightening rate for reasons that are both simple and complex, but it's worth reminding ourselves of movement in the other direction too. Hebrew was a virtually "dead" language used only for scripture, and now it's a vibrant living language. The Hawai'ian language had been virtually wiped out, but it's been revived and there are many schools on the Islands where almost all classes are taught in Hawai'ian. You hear Hawai'ian not just in schools or celebratory ceremonies, but in grocery stores and on the bus. There are some other examples.

"World English" is a sad story of the crowding out of other languages; but "world Englishes" is a somewhat more encouraging story: most English speakers in the world have no roots or ties to the traditional soil of English (England, the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, perhaps South Africa). Many teachers and speakers of English around the world (especially in Asia) are moving with amazing speed toward a situation where they don't want British or American English as their norm but rather the various other versions of English—versions that are more useful to them in their local uses. It used to be that England "owned"

English and that the U.S. has been vying for that role. But now ownership is diversifying. (On world Englishes, see the international linguistics journal of that name; journal *English Today*; also work by Braj Kachru.)

Turning to the essays in this journal, we find more reasons for hope and diligence in working for a tolerant multiplicity of languages. Gail Okawa notices that when her students tell their language histories, the complete story is not just language loss. Students often talk about their decisions to *study* those languages that they failed to get from their families. I've noticed the same thing with my students. Lachen Ezzaher illustrates what we often see in small children: the pleasure in taking on new languages and new views. He refuses "accentlessness" as the ideal. (See Doris Sommers' eloquent and interesting essay about the positive benefits of double languages and accent.)

Ezzaher reminds us that the main reason why we get to read Aristotle and many other of the "classical" texts (in whose name there's been so much squashing of linguistic diversity and pluralism) is that these authors became "accented" by being translated into Arabic and thereby saved for us. We live with the *effects* of the pluralistic "first rate place" but this story tends to go unnoticed. (Menocal points out how the Jewish Synagogues in New York and elsewhere often have Arabic minarets and other architectural touches: we don't "notice" this and just take it for granted, but it's a visible sign of the passage of Judaism through the guts of the Arabic kingdom.)

I think we can have more hope and make more progress in linguistic pluralism if we can understand a complex difficult question. Consider the situation that happens again and again across time and geography: people find themselves in a situation where they must get command over a new language or dialect—usually because their language somehow lacks prestige or power. Why is it that some people manage to take on the new language or dialect as a wholly "additive" process—as merely a new and useful string to their bow; whereas others cannot take on the prestige or schooling or business language without a threat to their home

language and to their very sense of themselves. Helen Fox (in her *Listening to the World*) does a lovely job of opening up this question as she looks at adult foreign graduate students in a U.S. doctoral program struggling to deal with U.S. academic discourse—and some of them still not strong with English:

> Why is resistance almost a non-issue for some students while it stops others in their tracks? . . . Though Shu Ming is engaged in rejecting her former ways of expressing herself, other students manage to view the change they are experiencing as additive. Maria, for example, a graduate student from Brazil, says she is happy to have a variety of styles in her repertoire. (83)

In another passage, Fox talks about gradually learning "to begin to see ways to help students adjust their styles to their new audience without completely losing themselves" (109). This is a question that will not be quickly or simply answered, but Fox helps us with it by eliciting so many phenomenologically rich testimony from her subjects:

> "And so [Surya continued] I began to lose confidence. I began to feel, 'Gee, Surya, you're stupid.' And you know, 'You can't write.' That voice was coming from here, from this [U.S. academic] culture. But at the same time another voice which was with me was saying, 'Surya, don't worry, you're all right, don't lose your confidence, you can do just fine, just try to learn the ideas, you don't have to concentrate on the language or the writing style.' And really, sometimes it got very tense between the two voices, and I would feel very depressed. And then I would just sit and watch TV and not do anything, not even read for my courses, and then I would begin to worry and think about home." (70)

Here's another student:

> "I was very struck when I read an article by the Chinese student who had to construct a different self-identity in order to be able to write the way Americans do. That made me think a lot. Because I *was* resistant. I had been trying to make a single identity, somehow my Japanese self and my American self merging, so I wouldn't lose the Japanese part of me. That was my fear, that I would lose my old identity, which was very important to me. Creating a new self-identity would mean that I would have to evaluate the one I originally had. And that was *such* an incredible fear! So as I read the article, I guess I finally accepted that I would have to construct, in a sense, a second personality. I told myself, 'Well, I may have to.'" (71-72)

Fox doesn't really end up with a firm answer to this complex question. That is, sometimes she uses the word "inevitable" in talking about "changes in personality, outlook, and world view that go hand in hand with the new writing style" (82). But sometimes she seems to show people just taking in stride the new discourse and language—learning to use it when needed, not being knocked off balance, feeling "themselves."

We still have a lot to learn here. Some of it is theoretical: what is identity? what does it mean if I feel I have to "change my self?" what is a discourse? Some of it is very practical: how can we plan our classrooms and our teaching? I'm particularly grateful for the essays by Ellie Kutz and Arthur Palacas because of the light they throw on these questions—particularly the pedagogical dimension. Kutz describes a first year writing curriculum ideal for helping virtually all our first year college students take on academic discourse. Her essay gives a wonderfully concrete answer to the theoretical question of "what is a discourse?" Palacas also describes a first year writing curriculum, but his centers on the study of African American Vernacular English. Both essays show how we can help students take on new discourses, languages, or dialects in a generously

constructive, "additive" process—in a way that affirms rather than threatens their home language and sense of themselves.

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