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TRANSLANGUAGING AND ABECEDARIOS ILEGALES

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Language-minoritized bilingual communities throughout the world are always required to perform linguistically in the dominant language according to a standardized variety imposed by the majority language community. They are treated as if their bilingualism was invisible and as if only their performance in the dominant language was valid. Often, that monolingual performance, rendered through the speaker's bilingual system, is different from that of monolinguals and evaluated as deficient. This is especially so in the context of schools, instruments of nation-states that impose one way of using language, *un alfabeto, un abecedario y un discurso*.

Tomás Kalmar's *Illegal Alphabets precisamente y no sólo lricamente*, turns this position upside down. Instead of considering bilingual performances from the perspective of the dominant majority and schools, Kalmar adopts the perspective of Spanish-speaking workers who pick manzanas and peaches in orchards around Cobden, Illinois, and, in so doing, also pick up *sonidos del inglés*. But there's more than just Spanish sounds and English sounds going on here; there are intermingled sounds, just like in the old corridos that the men from Los Altos de Jalisco sing and that Kalmar documents in his book.

Kalmar describes the old traditional style of the corridos—"two men sing in such close harmony and with such complete recall of the entire text that you cannot tell who is leading and who is following, which is *la primera voz*, which *la segunda voz*—which is the first voice, which the second" (p. 2). This is precisely what is happening as the workers pick up English. Their voices in what is considered to be Spanish and then English *comienzan a interpenetrarse*, so that you can't tell anymore which is *la primera voz*, which *la segunda voz*. Their home language practices start to be simultaneously accompanied by language practices that some call English. To the speakers themselves, however, these practices do not constitute separate languages, external to them and relating to nation-state systems. These practices become part of their integrated language repertoire, of

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one semiotic system of meaning. Thus, to the world, and especially to schools, the language practices of bilingual speakers can be assigned to one language system (English) or another (Spanish). Although both practices are *bueno* to communicate, they are not *correcto* according to the imposed monolingual norm by which they are judged. The bilingual speech is considered not *correcto* English; but neither is it judged *correcto* Spanish, now intermingled with other words, other voices. To the bilingual speaker, however, these practices are not either *una primera voz* or a first language, and *una segunda voz* or a second language. They are not only *bueno*, but also *correcto*. They are simply the complex bilingual practices that are easily observable among all bilingual speakers.

The intermingling of voices in a corrido is not unlike the counterpoint of Bach's music, where there is a melodic interaction between several independent lines of music sung simultaneously, thus producing something interdependent and new. The counterpoint/*contrapunteo* between tobacco and sugar, with the aroma of the *cafécito con azúcar* and the *humo del tabaco* intermingled with pleasure and sweat in consumption/production is the topic of the monumental study of the Cuban ethnologist, Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar*.¹ In the prologue to this work, Bronislaw Malinowski explains Ortiz's concept of *transculturación* as referring to "a process in which a new reality emerges, compounded and complex; a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of characters, not even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent."²

Just as in *transculturación*, bilingual speakers engage in multiple and discursive practices taken up simultaneously in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds. I have referred to this simultaneous and integrated rendering of two voices as *translanguaging*,³ a concept that has much to do with the transliteracies that Kalmar describes in his book.

Translanguaging, just as transliteracies, takes as its starting point the language practices of bilingual people as the norm, and not the practices of monolinguals. Kalmar's hybrid alphabet was first developed in Su Casa Grocery. In the same way, translanguaging and transliteracies are practices created *en su casa bilingüe*, a *casa* that is a "No man's land," as Kalmar titles the first chapter of his book. Mexicanos and gringos meet in that no man's land that they make *su casa*, and it is there that *la lengua* was *doblada*. Kalmar quotes one of the men, Alfredo, as saying, "*La lengua tiene que doblarse donde uno la maneja*" (p. 6). But to the translation provided by Kalmar of "your tongue has to fold the way you tell it to," we can add other meanings of *la lengua doblada*. The language that Alfredo craves is like that of Gloria Anzaldúa, "neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders."⁴ "Doblar" *en español* has a sense of "to double."

1. Ortiz (1978[1940]).

2. Ortiz (1978[1940]: 4), my translation and emphasis.

3. García (2009), García and Li Wei (2014).

4. Anzaldúa (1997: 84).

By incorporating language practices from Anglos, Alfredo is doubling his capacity to speak, his voice rings and echoes further, as in *doblar campanas*, the bells which ring wildly. But "*una lengua doblada*" also has meanings as a language dubbed or translated. When Alfredo picks up sounds of English, it is as if his voice in Spanish is being dubbed in English—in no way substituted, but simultaneously present. Spanish starts to *doblar*, to change directions, as it responds to many more voices and interlocutors with different histories and ideologies. *En esa casa bilingüe, la lengua y la escritura* are released from the historical and academic constraints to which they have been subjected as "Spanish" or "English" in order to ensure *doblar* in other directions, so that other ideologies, visions, and realities are included. Alfredo is claiming agency for himself as an emergent bilingual and demanding a different direction from that offered in the traditional government ESL classes that Kalmar so well describes. Alfredo is, in many ways, taking a translanguaging epistemological stance *al demandar que JUELLULIB* be seen for its *significado* in the life of Panchito, *pero también al amplificar una voz bilingüe* that incorporates different *historias e ideologías*, thus forging new possibilities and a new political reality for Mexican workers.

Throughout *Illegal Alphabets*, Kalmar keeps raising the same question in different ways: "What is this word? *Es inglés? Es español?* Both? Neither?" (p. 18). "In which language is JUELLULIB written?" (p. 41). This stance is also reflected in some of the reactions of some teachers of English as a Second Language Kalmar cites: "This isn't English, it isn't Spanish, it's nothing, it's worse than nothing, it's not bilingual, it's zero-lingual." The reason why this is an impossible query is because it stems from a belief that there is such a thing as a language.

The concept of a language is closely linked to the construction of the nation-state. In a convincing book, Makoni and Pennycook argue that the concept of a language *es una invención Europea, producto of colonialismo* and of a Herderian nineteenth-century nationalist romanticist ideology that insisted that language and identity were intrinsically linked.⁵ Languages do not exist on their own, *y todas las lenguas están en contacto con otras*—being influenced by others, and containing elements *de otras*. National "languages" are constituted from resources *de diversos* places and times.

Likewise, Jørgensen argues that it doesn't make sense to talk of "a language" per se, although he defends the concept of "language." Languages are constructs that cannot be counted or categorized. Jørgensen claims that language in itself consists of human behavior between people by which we form and shape our social structures. He convincingly argues that "the concept of a language is thus bound in time and space . . . and it is not part of our understanding of the human concept of language. Features are, however. Speakers use features and not languages."⁶

5. Makoni and Pennycook (2007).

6. Jørgensen (2008: 166), my emphasis.

For Spanish, it was the publication of Antonio de Nebrija's *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* in 1492 that constructed what we learned to call *castellano/español*. Nebrija dedicates the grammar to Queen Isabella by saying: "Siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio." A single "Spanish" language was needed to rule subjects and to build *el imperio*.⁷ The standardization of language as carried out by grammarians, linguists and language academies in conjunction with politicians has played an important role in the construction of nation-states and ethnic identities. It is this construction of a standardized way of using words that we call today "language."

If we take this position, then the "illegal" alphabets of the *mexicanos* in Cobden, Illinois, are *doblando* the linguistic border between what is known as *español* y English and acquire legitimacy and authority. What is being produced is, as Anzaldúa writes, "neither eagle nor serpent, but both" (1999, p. 84) because it is also neither. Su Casa Grocery acts as a Thirdspace:

a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, uncombinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other.⁸

The space and process that Kalmar describes invigorates languaging, and traditional *abecedarios*, with new possibilities from a site of both creativity and power. As Li Wei and I have said in describing translanguaging: "Going *beyond* language refers to transforming the present, to intervening by reinscribing our human, historical commonality in the act of languaging."⁹ Translanguaging, as well as the transliteracies that Kalmar describes, is a creative process that is the property of the speakers' way of acting in interactions and in their literate lives, rather than belonging to the language or *alfabeto* system itself.

As Kalmar shows, transliteracy practices are not new and are not unusual. Translanguaging in writing has been common from ancient times to today.¹⁰ We have evidence of bilingual texts, as well as transliterated texts and "mixed-language" texts where writers use different language conventions and scripts as far back as the early Roman Republic. Today, some languages, such as Wolof, Pular, and Manyika, are written in either Arabic or Roman scripts or a combination of the two, depending on writers and audience.¹¹ The Dominican-

7. García (2011). And see Peter Elbow's commentary above, p. 126, n. 2.

8. Soja (1996: 5).

9. García and Li Wei (2014: 25).

10. Adams (2003).

11. Makoni et al. (2012).

American Junot Díaz, the 2008 Pulitzer winner for his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, describes what he calls his "mash-up of codes", which includes no way to privilege one or another way of speaking by focusing on linguistic simultaneity: "By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English."¹²

Today, more than ever, new technologies have enabled the production of more fluid language texts.

In presenting Latino migrants as gamers, as creators of new realities and from a position of power, and not from that of undocumented brown immigrants to which they are often relegated, Kalmar portrays the human ability to be creative and critical, and the ways in which people resist the constraints of standardized ways of speaking and writing. Kalmar reminds us that the men in this community are involved in the same kind of fieldwork done by missionaries and linguists. In rendering words *como de veras se oye* (and not with conventions imposed externally from the top), these men are operating in the "margin of literacy," a literacy standardization that has been constructed to privilege some and exclude others. The Mexican workers in Kalmar's book are operating, as are all fieldworkers, anthropologists, linguists, and ethnographers, using their creativity and intelligence, fudging, solving the puzzle as in a *rompecabezas*. The writing practices of these workers, as they make sense of sounds that they hear, are in no way "illegal." What should be illegal is using language and literacy to undermine the ways in which those who have been marginalized by society use their own resources to *romper el círculo de opresión*.

JUELLULIB will never be accepted in school and will not be made part of the Common Core State Standards that are so much part of the educational discourse today. But it was, as Kalmar makes evident, transformative in the life of Panchito. The game in which Panchito engaged enabled him to make sense of the English sounds that he needs in society and to make contact with someone else. It transformed his life because it gave him the ability to speak, to voice, to make human contact. The question for educators who hold onto traditional views on language and literacy is: What is more important? Is it more important to teach narrowly the conventions of English writing or to give many like Panchito the ability to speak, and also the ability of the English-speaking Martha to hear Panchito's words? So what if it is fudging? Isn't that what linguists documenting languages do? So what if it doesn't fall within institutionalized forms of writing? Hasn't that standardization also been a game? Which games count? What are the games for?

12. Díaz, cited in Ch'ien (2005: 204).

These are all *preguntas importantes* for all of us who are interested in language and education. The answer for me, as I think for Kalmar, is clear—*tenemos que doblar/bend and turn in order to doblar/double and amplify the voices of those who have been robbed of the ability to speak. A translanguaging/transliteracy approach gives us ways to make this desdoblamiento possible and to let the multiple simultaneous voices of the corridos take the due course that is also their due.*

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WAYS WITH LETTERS AND SOUNDS

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Illegal Alphabets and Adult Biliteracy represents an important and innovative contribution to an area now sometimes referred to as “New Literacies Studies.”¹ New Literacies Studies starts with a rather paradoxical claim: If you want to understand how reading and writing work, don’t look at them directly and in and of themselves. Rather, look directly at specific social practices in which specific ways of writing and reading are embedded. Furthermore, look at how these specific ways of reading and writing, within these social practices, are always integrally connected to specific ways of using oral language; specific ways of acting, interacting, thinking, believing, valuing, feeling; and specific ways of using various sorts of objects, tools, technologies, symbols, places, and times. All these “ways with words, deeds, and things” allow people to do certain things (and not others), to mean certain things (and not others), and to be certain kinds of people (and not others).²

Thus, there are as many literacies as there are ways in which written language is recruited within specific social practices to allow people to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities (being a certain kind of person) and specific socially situated activities (doing a certain kind of thing). That’s why New Literacies Studies often uses the word *literacy* in the plural, *literacies*. The graffiti of a Latino gang member in Los Angeles are different from those of an African-American gang member in Los Angeles, and both, in turn, are different from tagging carried out by often multicultural tagging crews in Los Angeles. Each of these groups of people are being different kinds of people doing different kinds

1. This commentary originally served as the Foreword to the first edition of this book.

2. For programmatic statements, see Barton (1994), Gee (1996), and Street (1995).