

Forum

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Aspiring to True Multilingualism

TO THE EDITOR:

Paul Kei Matsuda offers useful observations about language differences, code-switching, and translingual writing in "The Lure of Translingual Writing" (129.3 [2014]: 478–83). The combining of codes and languages has a lengthy history: notable twentieth-century examples include poetry by Jorge Guillén, who links "death" and "vejez" ("old age"), as well as "Jesús" and "orange juice," in bilingual rhymes; the poem "Chicano Teching," by Phil Goldvarg; and "Jack y el güagüero" ("Jack and the Bus Driver"), a short story Edmundo Desnoes appended to his novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*). As an academic who has presented multilingual papers and as an author of bilingual fiction, I find these issues fascinating. Like Matsuda, however, I worry about potential misuses of translingual assignments, and I feel that the troubling questions raised in his article need to be brought out more forcefully so that composition and literary scholars stop ignoring these language concerns. In short, the conversation should be expanded.

"Why are writing teachers so eager to incorporate ideas and practices that they do not fully understand?" asks Matsuda (480). The problem, touchy enough to keep it out of many forums, is that too many academics do not know enough to comprehend their own misunderstandings. Instead of learning languages or codes, they build myths of their own abilities based on insufficient exams taken as graduate students or on viewings of television programs and films that supposedly impart knowledge of alternative modes of speech. As a result, they think they know more than they know.

Professors without the experience of thinking, conversing, reading, writing, and publishing in a second language fail to inculcate their students with a desire to engage in the serious efforts required to

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surpass monolingualism. As a student, I found that almost all the multilingual classmates I met entered into postsecondary studies with a command of multiple systems of communication that they continued to develop at a university. Lifelong monolinguals, by contrast, found a way out by taking a minimum number of courses, passing a dictionary-assisted translation exam, attending an “intensive” summer session, or finding some other short-term solution that allowed them to dispense with language requirements and return to their monolingual existence. Even so, they subsequently considered themselves multilingual and, more harmfully, passed along this conception of multilingualism to their students. From there, it’s easy to pass off the occasional insertion of foreign terms as translanguaging practice or the employment of social-networking slang as code-switching. As a remedy, the abolition of university language requirements might allow professors to stop fooling their students and themselves.

“If the teacher is a monolingual user of the dominant variety of English who does not normally code-mesh, asking linguistically diverse students to do so in the teacher’s presence would not go over well,” observes Matsuda. “The reverse is also true: imagine someone who grew up speaking the dominant variety of English trying to speak African American English; the result would likely be embarrassing, if not offensive” (483). In some ways, code-switching—or code-meshing, perhaps a more useful term—leads to more-insidious concerns. Even professors who have gotten past the language-exam hurdle generally have a sneaking suspicion that they do not really function in a second language. When it comes to African American speech, however, all sorts of people claim expertise after listening to a bit of hip-hop or watching movies or television programs featuring African Americans. As a musician traveling the “chitlin circuit,” I heard a wide variety of African American speech around the United States and learned that these ever-evolving idi-

oms can be hard to master and even more difficult to maintain in an environment where the meanings and pronunciations of terms hardly remain static. Thinking otherwise reveals an academic bias; countless episodes of *Treme* will not take the place of language learning, even if the language is merely considered a code performed by supposedly lower-class people.

The complications of classroom code-switching do not only involve African American speech. Bollywood movies, for example, have spawned a new school of professors who fancy themselves versed in mixtures of Hindi and English, often based on little, if any, viewing of actual films. One professor with whom I studied added Bollywood to his list of “specialties” and even taught a course that included this topic, solely on the basis of having seen *Slumdog Millionaire*. Clearly, the possibilities for academic mischief expand with each new successfully marketed exotic discovery. In an effort to forestall these affronts to academic integrity, we must ensure that the discussion initiated by Matsuda continues.

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Reply:

I am grateful to Marco Katz Montiel for sharing his thoughtful response. I agree about the need to extend this conversation and to raise the awareness of various perspectives and practices that have long existed outside the currently popular focus on translanguaging writing. I also agree that, to engage in pedagogical practices that involve language differences, scholars and teachers need to develop more than a superficial understanding of language, language learning, and language use. I have elaborated on these ideas in another recent piece (“It’s the Wild West out There: A New Linguistic Frontier in U.S. College Composition”); *Literacy as Translingual*