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An Introduction

Jennifer Burns and Derek Duncan

Myriam Gurba's 'nonfiction novel' *Mean* (2017) is a humorous and dark account of growing up queer and Chicana in California in the 1990s.¹ The book's first-person narrator explores contemporary racism, homophobia, and misogyny in a text that shows little respect for the formal boundaries of fiction or life-writing. The memoir is also part ghost story and part crime fiction, as it recounts in non-chronological order the narrator's own experience of sexual violence, and her traumatic haunting by the woman brutally murdered by the same assailant. 'Mean' is how the narrator characterizes the robust humour she adopts to speak back to an often-hostile world: for a young Chicana lesbian, the world itself is a very 'mean' place. While most reviewers of the book praised Gurba's original and incisive social critique, none of them made much of the narrator's queer monolingualism: 'I began as an only child with an only language. This language was English and Spanish' (p. 4). She also grows up knowing some Nahuatl and Polish. Much of the violence the narrator experiences as a child is caused by derogatory cultural responses to her linguistic versatility. Her nursery teachers attempt to correct her creative fusion of Spanish and English, and the management of Spanish is a constant focus of discipline throughout her education. Yet as an adult reflecting on the response of her nursery teachers to her unconventional bilingualism, she understands its added value: 'They didn't get that my first language was double theirs' (p. 5). Language, too, is the site of complex identity formation. The narrator ironically self-identifies as 'Molack' (part Mexican and part Polish), but is the target of racially abusive terms such as 'wetback' and 'chola'. Language is also the platform from which she experiences, and experiments

¹ Myriam Gurba, *Mean* (Minneapolis and Brooklyn: Coffee House Press, 2017).

with, cultural difference as advocate and connoisseur. Her literary interests challenge demeaning stereotypes of illiterate Mexicans, although she knows that her middle-class educational privilege makes her 'whiter' than most. Cyndi Lauper, Kazuo Ishiguro, Gertrude Stein, Michael Jackson, Van Halen, Walter Benjamin, and Anne Frank are only a few of the names who feature in her idiosyncratic cultural catalogue. The lives and work of feminist artists Hannah Wilke and Ana Mendieta who documented the multiple, varied forms of violence enacted on the female body offer uncanny parallels to the narrator's own experience. And if 'meanness' started off as little more than a jokey exchange with her father, the Black and Hispanic drag queens in Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990) offer her the fullest expression of 'mean' as cultural critique. To be 'mean' is to be acutely aware of borders and their enforcement, but also to know how to find the resources to transgress them creatively and with purpose. 'Meanness' or indeed 'queerness' protests against white, American middle-class norms of race, ethnicity, class, and embodiment that find material form in languages and cultures.

Set entirely in the US, *Mean* is a thoroughly transnational text, and an ironic retort to the view that knowledge of two or more languages is an impairment, and monolingualism a marker of accomplishment. It celebrates cultural diversity yet warns of the dangers of being different. *Mean* reflects on the mobility and fluidity of languages and cultures as sources of enrichment but not as safe spaces. It is an essay on how to think critically and creatively across conventional boundaries of language and culture, but not necessarily on how to emerge unscathed from the formations of power in which mobility is entangled. *Mean* is what *A Handbook* is all about.

Like Gurba, the authors in *A Handbook* offer an original take on a familiar term to suggest how it might work as a tool for thinking about languages and cultures transnationally. Each essay starts from and works with a keyword as an example of transnational critical practice reflecting on the ways in which languages, cultures and the people who inhabit them connect and intersect. The authors attempt to think themselves as transnational subjects asking what it means to write critically across linguistic and cultural borders. They do not simply try to describe or account for transnational phenomena as something external to them, but involve themselves in the process of transnational knowledge production, or world-making.

The essays in *A Handbook* are written in English, but contain words from other languages. Many are written by people whose first language is English, but many are not. Some are written by teachers and researchers working in Departments or Schools of Modern Languages, others by scholars in other disciplines attentive to how the work of cultural and linguistic crossing matters. *A Handbook's* authors mostly don't live and work in places where

the languages they write about are most commonly spoken. The chronological scope of the essays goes from the Middle Ages to the present day and the geographical spread is equally broad. Some of the contributors focus on processes of human mobility to emphasize the consequences or legacies of transnational displacements. Others identify instances of the transnational in particular localities and bring out its transformative effects in apparently settled communities. In a few cases, authors bring transnational thinking to bear on questions that do not seem, at first glance, to have much to do with the issues of migration and demographic change with which transnationalism as a concept has been commonly associated.

Each essay in *A Handbook* expresses and is underpinned by the lived experience of its author and their particular history of cultural and linguistic connectedness. Some quite explicitly make biographical connections between writer and subject matter, while others are more reticent about bringing that link to the fore. In other respects, too, the essays diverge in terms of style. Some adopt an almost conversational tone, reflecting directly on both the research and writing process, while others appear to retain a more distanced perspective. Yet each articulates the active, real-time and human practice of work in Modern Languages and offers suggestions on how to operate across languages and cultures in everyday life and professional practice.

One of *A Handbook's* most striking features is that its authors create a field of study as they go along. They do not attempt to analyse a pre-existing body of work or explicate a pre-determined area of disciplinary knowledge. Each keyword serves as a prompt to think about how languages, cultures, objects, and modes of critical enquiry come into contact with one another in one particular instance from one particular perspective. They touch, influence, and irritate in ways that are unpredictable and surprising. What counts in these essays is not the detail of these contacts, but rather the fact that these contacts took place, are identifiable, and that they made a difference to interpretations of language and culture seen solely in national, or singular terms. A different researcher working with a different set of linguistic and cultural co-ordinates would have made different transnational connections as they worked with their chosen keyword. There is no ambition to define, or lay claim to, the term itself. One of the functions of the keyword is to foreground the creative and intellectual agency of the researcher in calling on disciplinary expertise and subjective experience as platforms from which to engage in the critical exploration of connectivity. In consequence, the authors openly display the ways in which knowledge is actively produced, inviting their readers to draw on their own, varied, and possibly idiosyncratic linguistic and cultural toolkit to devise patterns of cultural connectedness that are transnational both in terms of the constellations they describe, but more particularly

in terms of the critical imagination they bring to bear on their identification and analysis of how patterns of transnational connectivity put pressure on bounded understandings of national cultures and allow for more inclusive and flexible forms of cultural and linguistic cohabitation.

This form of creative critical practice extends to and includes the readers of this *Handbook*. The essays are not grouped in sections nor placed in a specific order and instead invite readers to plot their own itineraries through the materials, tracing and developing different connections between keywords according to resonances in the content or approach of the essays and according also to their own work and thinking at any one time of reading. As this suggests, readers may read different clusters of essays in different combinations at different times in their use of *A Handbook* and of the other volumes in the series; they may read two or three essays repeatedly and another never; an essay that may suggest little to them on first reading may acquire sharpened significance on second and subsequent readings when placed in relation to another essay in *A Handbook* or to a book, sound, film, phrase, object, or encounter experienced elsewhere. At different points in a study or research programme, different kinds of reading might be used along a spectrum from distant readings of multiple essays to map lateral connections and inspire flexible methods of critical analysis, to minute and intimate readings of a single essay as a critical counterpart in developing an analytical response to a specific question, task, or project. If *A Handbook* is to achieve its aims, it will very simply be kept to hand throughout an extended itinerary of engagement with the range of materials, experiences and ideas that populate work in and beyond Modern Languages.

Definitions are avoided in *A Handbook* and their place is taken by demonstrations of active critical practice. The list of keywords themselves has no ambition to demarcate the intellectual field of Modern Languages nor to explain it exhaustively. The motivation that drove the selection of keywords was to prompt questions and creative reflection rather than instant and assured recognition. With this in mind, certain terms that researchers in Modern Languages regard as core to their current and forward-looking thinking may seem to be absent. 'Race', 'gender', 'visual culture', and 'memory', for instance, are terms that have long been prominent in research and in the curriculum in Modern Languages and related degrees, and will continue to be at the forefront of enquiry. As this implies, they are terms that critical practitioners of languages 'know', and also know to be shifting in terms of their range, conceptual re-tuning, and the objects of critical analysis that they engage. Other handbooks, readers, and introductory volumes furnish extensive and inclusive explorations of these terms. In *A Handbook*, they instead inhabit various other keywords and the essays that discuss them, offering dynamic

and perhaps disruptive evidence of the insistence of questions of race, for example, in activities or experiences where it is not instinctively known to be a pertinent category of understanding.

'Transnational' is similarly everywhere in *A Handbook* and in all of the volumes in the series that it accompanies but nowhere as a keyword in this collection. The purpose of the series is to demonstrate that the transnational is an optic owning the capacity to sharpen our insight into any question or experience related to languages and cultures and, as such, the term is multiply and persistently present. 'Translation' as a key practice and concept of transnational critical thinking is comparably extensive and penetrating and yet often goes unremarked or under-investigated, regarded as a given of global linguistic and cultural practice and as a default in the skill set and the working practice of a linguist. Precisely because translation is fundamental to fathoming how languages and cultures touch one another and interact, there are three essays in *A Handbook* that address translation from different perspectives, challenging readers to recognize the radius of specific knowledge that a focus on translation exposes. Two essays explore 'Stories' in order to prompt diverse consideration of the extent to which the narratives that humans tell, through verbal, visual, aural, and sensory communication between languages and cultures, construct understanding of particular places, times, and experiences. Two essays addressed to 'Me' tell two such stories that invite reflection on how languages and cultures inflect individual, embodied subjectivity in specific settings and encounters.

Recognition of the unique positionality of the active student and researcher is an undergirding principle of *A Handbook*, whether in approaching the collection as an author or a reader or both. The volume aims to encourage readers confidently to bring into their engagement with the essays their own sense of their purposes, curiosities, and anxieties in investigating linguistic and cultural interactions. A reader who approaches the ideas offered in the essays both armed with the knowledge developed through their own intelligence, experience, and feelings and at the same time disarmed by the awareness of not knowing quite how readers or writers of other formations might apprehend the same material is a reader in a powerful position to acquire new understanding and, in doing so, to create new knowledge. Displacing any rigid connection between the materials analysed and a specific language or domain of expertise, the essays ask readers (and authors) persistently to put themselves in someone else's shoes and to find out how it feels when things mis-fit and what can be learned when a part of themselves comes to adapt to and feel like a part of someone or something else. The possibilities opened up by strangeness and discomfort, as well as awareness of the pain and exclusion that they may bring, are what there is to be explored and gained

through the conjoined study of languages and cultures, and what *A Handbook* seeks to foster and inspire.

This tentative poise between being at once inside and outside the languages and cultures of others – along with the critical and creative opportunities of analysing the effects of being between – is the position that most who study and teach Modern Languages inhabit. Definitions of the work that is done under that broad disciplinary heading are endlessly problematic: the vitality of the interconnecting fields known as Modern Languages lies in part in their inclusive intellectual capacity to range purposefully into other disciplines and to share reciprocal forms of expertise in order to co-produce new understanding. Essays in this volume, its title, and the title of the entire series use the term ‘Modern Languages’ as the expedient that it is to denote a disciplinary area and practice that readers recognize and variously identify their own work with, but all uses of the term in the essays equally connote the challenge of defining a discipline that progresses as dynamically and inventively as the languages and cultures that are its object. In this sense, *A Handbook* and the volumes with which it dialogues offer an active contribution to and critical reflection on the ongoing process of making a field of knowledge and expert practice. This is a process that the essays in this volume pause to take critical stock of without envisaging closure and instead aiming to pilot informed and distinctly orientated progression into knowledge futures that the volume and series may contribute to shaping.

Vocabularies of ‘other’ languages and cultures, ‘other’ academic disciplines, and ‘inside’/‘outside’ are useful in nominating the position that practised students and researchers in Modern Languages occupy and the specific value of their expertise, but they also whisper of the very boundaries that understanding of languages and cultures reveals often to be artificial, or at least artificially binary. Working with a language and the cultures associated with it becomes almost instantly a practice of identifying patterns and processes largely in terms of their relations with plural languages and cultures, geographically and linguistically both proximate and distant. For this reason, to begin from a transnational perspective in approaching languages and cultures and to apprehend the construction of national languages and cultures within that broad panorama enables an academic practice that speaks coherently to the evidence of how languages and cultures operate and interact across spaces and times. Stepping into another’s shoes is not just an act performed by a speaker of one language when speaking in a distinct other language: the combined possibilities and constraints of that act are also the repeated and various lived experience of human subjects across the globe, linguists included.

A further step takes the critical analyst of languages and cultures – or of the ‘humanities’ – beyond the anthropocentric systems of communication

and engagement foregrounded so far in this introduction into forms of co-production of understanding with non-human agents of the planet that humans share. The disposition as well as the expertise common to those who work with Modern Languages – that drive to discover how unfamiliarity or dislocation feels – has long motivated researchers in the broad field to explore the sentience of physical forces and presences in the planetary environment and of non-human animals, and to envision techniques of knowing and communicating in contexts where human reason is displaced or redundant. Likewise, understanding of how cultures work exceeds the canon of cultural artefacts conventionally associated with Modern Languages and extends into histories and geographies of human co-habitations with the non-human, and into stories or speculations of how human and non-human make sense of, or with, one another. Essays in *A Handbook* that speak of soil, coral, seas, animals, climate, plants, and visions of the beyond-human diversely voice this enquiry. Seen in this light, the awareness of borders, risk, damage, and also creative transgression that ‘meanness’ articulates may inform a kind of intersectional awareness across human and non-human thresholds as well as within an anthropocentric purview of languages and cultures.

It is in mindful recognition of the precarious connection between processes and experiences selected as an object of intellectual enquiry and those same processes and experiences endured in everyday planetary life, whether beneficial or not, that the ethical charge of work in Modern Languages weighs. Here, too, rests its capacity to contribute purposefully to understanding of societal and ecological patterns and challenges such as mobility, inequality of opportunity and access, social injustice, climate injustice, rights, community, identities, and communication. Languages matter and make difference in the lives of individuals, communities, and the non-human environment, so knowing languages and how they operate is an instrument of meaningful participation and intervention in the world, as the essays in *A Handbook* diversely and imaginatively enact.

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