



Translingual Creative Writing in, and Beyond, Modern Languages

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ELISE HUGUENY-LÉGER 



ABSTRACT

With a growing corpus of translingual literature embedded in Modern Language curricula and research, this article makes the case for the integration of translingual creative writing as a creative, (self-)reflexive and critical process. Through reflections from translingual writers and concrete writing prompts, it examines the role of creative writing in enhancing literary and linguistic competence, in affirming transnational trajectories, while discussing possible productive tensions between language accuracy, artistic ambition and personal expression. Translingual competence also opens up new critical perspectives, which are alert to cross-lingual and cultural dialogues: this article suggests that expertise developed in Modern Languages can provide stimulating frameworks for the practice and discipline of Creative Writing.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Elise Hugueny-Léger

University of St Andrews, UK
esmh@st-andrews.ac.uk

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As the majority of the world population is multilingual, in an epoch marked by processes of mobility and migration, the practice of writing in a second language (whether this results from choice or from constraints) has expanded, becoming a lively field of critical study: literary translanguaging, defined by Steven Kellman as “the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one” (*Translingual* ix). Translingualism differs from multilingualism in that it refers to the acquisition, at a later stage in life, of a new language. The prefix “trans-” also points to a constant process of movement and interaction between languages instead of viewing them as separate entities. Recent publications (Kellman and Lvovich, “Literary”; Kellman and Lvovich, *Handbook*; Garcia and Li Wei) have embraced this conceptual move, discussing the implications of translanguaging in literature, pedagogy and identity formation. This fluid conception of languages goes hand in hand with a transnational shift in Modern Languages studies which has led, in the past decades, to a radical questioning of the symmetry and equivalence between language and nation, pointing to “the instability of national borders and to the rich potential of reading narratives beyond them” (Edwards 5). As Derek Duncan and Jennifer Burns write in *Transnational Modern Languages*, “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” (6). This plural, relational approach to Modern Languages has opened new paths of interpretation of literary texts, paying attention to marginalized or minoritized stories and to the narrative strategies deployed to tell them. This shift has also permeated university curricula through a process of decolonization and deconstruction of established literary canons. By questioning structures of power and domination, literature highlights the empowering role of writing to reveal transnational trajectories and experiences which may have previously gone unnoticed.

Through the study of literary texts, language and literature scholars are in contact with heterogeneous voices: those of writers, and those of the many characters who fill their stories. We are trained to identify and analyse these voices and their resonance with broader communities, including communities of readers. In the discipline of Modern Languages, however, literary creation tends to be approached from the perspective of commentary and discourse analysis, and not from the active position of writing practice. Creative writing¹ prompts, when embedded in the curriculum, are often conceived as vectors for linguistic development, as opportunities to practise specific grammatical points, and less as steps towards literary engagement and artistic expression. Creative Writing research has demonstrated that writing promotes language use, confidence, critical reading, and a sense of narrative identity (Godard). By shifting the perspective of literary expression from the position of analysis of existing texts to a writerly position of creation, this article proposes that translanguaging creative writing can act as a space to explore plural identities, generating innovative literary and linguistic practices which contribute to renewing our approach to Modern Language pedagogy and research and to providing fresh critical frameworks for the discipline of Creative Writing.

Creative Writing curricula are long established in the English-speaking world, with a large body of handbooks and guides designed to assist tutors and students, providing “how-to” tools and advice for aspiring writers. However, in this critical mass, the question of multi- and translanguaging plays a minor part, usually in sections devoted to creative writing and/in translation. Conversely, in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), many studies do address the specificities of approaching writing with a multilingual background, and the need to move away from monolingual practice. In *Second Language Creative Writers*, Yan Zhao analyses the benefits of creative writing for second-language learners: in addition to enhancing linguistic and literary skills, Zhao notes that creative tasks contribute to shaping autobiographical identities and writers’ voices, hence emphasizing the empowering role of writing. Dan Disney’s *Exploring Second Language Creative Writing: Beyond Babel* argues in favour of conceiving Creative Writing courses as “pluricentric” and heteroglossic (1), as opposed to the traditional “Creative Writing in English” denomination. Disney posits that “Creative Writing (SL) is a creolized

1 In the body of this article, I capitalize Creative Writing when referring to the academic discipline and research area. However, I do not use capitals when referring to creative writing as a process.

discipline incorporating difference, experimentation, hybridity, invention and intervention” (10). These conclusions chime with Anna Pavlenko’s demonstration that writing contributes to appropriating a new language, gaining control over it. Basing her research on a corpus of memoirs written in English by translingual writers, she argues that writing helps them to “claim and validate their own subject positions of legitimate users of their L2”, hence allowing a sense of “language ownership” (326).

Both Disney’s and Zhao’s studies are situated within the field of English as a Foreign Language, in which the denomination “SL” stands for “Second Language”. Noticeably, while Disney argues that second-language creative writing is crafted in a methodological dialogue with a variety of disciplines, the disciplines which he lists – “Creativity Studies, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Teaching English Through Literature (TETL), Translation Studies, Linguistics, Cultural Studies, and Literary Studies” (2) – do not include Modern Languages. The terminology used in second-language acquisition studies, which gives its title to the academic publication *L2 Journal*, includes the abbreviations “SL”, “L1” and “L2”. However, even if these refer to a temporal sequencing, they also suggest hierarchies between languages while affirming the dominant place of English as the target language of expression. Maybe more crucially, they could imply that whatever an individual’s background and trajectory, a language acquired at a later stage in life is bound to remain secondary, not as well mastered as the “first” or “native” language, categories which have also been widely questioned. However, many translingual writers have expressed the view that their “first” language has somehow faded, or even disappeared, under the overwhelming influence of the newly acquired language, whether they actively sought it or not. Eva Hoffman wanted her native Polish “silenced” (“P.S.” 50) to make space for English when she moved to Canada as a teenager, while Ágota Kristóf describes how her native Hungarian has slowly been engulfed under the French language, which she started using in adult life and does not fully master: “C’est pour cette raison que j’appelle la langue française une langue ennemie, elle aussi. Il y a encore une autre raison, et c’est la plus grave: cette langue est en train de tuer ma langue maternelle” (*L’Analphabète* 24).²

In comparison to the L1/L2 classification, the notion of translingualism stands against hierarchies and points to the complex, moving relations between languages in an individual’s journey. Alain Ausoni, in *Mémoires d’outre-langue: L’écriture translingue de soi*, explains that he coined the term “translingue” in reference to Kellman’s landmark study *The Translingual Imagination*. For Ausoni, the adjective “translingual”, which can refer at once to writers, their writing process and their books, “à l’avantage, par son préfixe, de signifier un passage qui n’est pas nécessairement définitif” (28).³ Natalie Edwards considers that “translingualism, understood as the interactions between languages, is a critical category that deserves far closer attention. In light of current inquiry into transnational and transcultural studies, attention to the translingual could nuance our understanding of literature and culture” (7). In this article, I follow Edwards’ proposition by focusing on the writerly potential of translingualism and its potential impact on pedagogical and research practice.

For the purposes of this article, in line with Kellman’s conception of literary translingualism, I define translingual creative writing as the process of producing literary texts in a language other than that which one grew up speaking, resulting in pieces written in more than one language or in a language other than one’s native tongue. I shall evaluate the value and benefits of integrating creative writing practice in Modern Language curricula, providing concrete workshop prompts and examples. Debating the creative and aesthetic value of foreign tongues and the risk of exoticizing translingual writing, I will discuss possible tensions between linguistic accuracy and creative expressivity. This will lead me to reflect on translingual critical encounters and their creative potential, arguing for a productive dialogue between the disciplines and methodologies of Creative Writing and Modern Languages in a practice-based approach to literary creation.

² “It is for this reason that I also call the French language an enemy language. There is a further reason, the most serious of all: this language is killing my mother tongue” (*The Illiterate* 35).

³ The adjective *translingue* “has the benefit, thanks to its prefix, of referring to movements that are not necessarily definite” (my translation).

What do you like and what do you not like about being a translingual speaker? This is a question I asked students in a French-language class, using Roland Barthes' "J'aime/je n'aime pas" as a starting point (Barthes, *Roland Barthes*). The sample of answers below points to nuanced and varied responses:

J'aime le "r" français – *I like the French "r"*

J'aime comprendre les autres quand je voyage – *I like understanding other people when I travel*

J'aime pouvoir regarder les films sans sous-titres – *I like being able to watch films without subtitles*

J'aime les lettres arabes qui sont impossibles à translittérer dans l'alphabet latin – *I like Arabic letters which are impossible to transliterate into the Latin alphabet*

J'aime explorer l'étymologie des mots d'autres langues – *I like to explore the etymology of words in other languages*

J'aime trouver des similitudes inattendues entre les langues que j'étudie – *I like to find unexpected similarities between the languages that I study*

J'aime créer des mots composés en allemand – *I like to create compound words in German*

J'aime les synonymes – *I like synonyms*

J'aime passer d'une langue à une autre quand je suis ivre – *I like to switch from one language to the other when I'm drunk*

J'aime corriger les gens quand ils font des erreurs dans ma langue – *I like to correct people when they make mistakes in my language*

Je n'aime pas quand mon accent anglais apparaît quand je parle d'autres langues – *I don't like it when my English accent shows when I speak other languages*

Je n'aime pas vouloir parler une langue étrangère quand il n'y a aucune personne avec qui on peut tenir conversation – *I don't like wanting to speak a foreign language when there is no one to talk to*

Je n'aime pas quand les locuteurs natifs des langues que j'étudie me parlent en anglais – je préférerais qu'ils parlent un peu plus lentement – *I don't like it when native speakers in the languages that I study talk to me in English – I'd rather they spoke more slowly*

Je n'aime pas le nombre d'exceptions aux règles grammaticales qu'il faut retenir en français – *I don't like the number of grammatical exceptions we have to remember in French*

Je n'aime pas quand les gens sont confus au sujet de ce que vous essayez de dire dans une autre langue – *I don't like it when people are confused about what you're trying to say in another language*

Je n'aime pas confondre l'allemand et le français quand je parle en allemand – *I don't like to mix up German and French when I speak German*

Je n'aime pas quand je raconte une blague, et personne ne la comprend – *I don't like it when I tell a joke, and no one understands it*

Je n'aime pas que mon accent ne soit jamais parfait – *I don't like that my accent is never perfect*

Je n'aime pas faire des fautes – *I don't like making mistakes*

Je n'aime pas réaliser que l'anglais est une langue vraiment difficile pour les non-natifs – *I don't like to realize that English is a truly difficult language for non-native speakers*

Je n'aime pas les "false friends" (les faux amis) dans les langues différentes – *I don't like "false friends" in different languages*

These "I like/I don't like" comments make a stimulating springboard for discussion. They point to the critical, self-reflexive disposition of translingual speakers who possess, as coined by Lise Gauvin, "une surconscience linguistique" (6) and are expert at mobilizing cross-lingual

competence. Importantly, they recognize the position of translingual speakers, their diverse cultural backgrounds, the joys and challenges which they face in their language journeys. Such prompts invite speakers to reflect on their trajectory while giving them the freedom to decide which items on the list they will decide to share with other class members – an element of determination which encourages free writing. In the context of a writing workshop, they can be further deployed into more ambitious writing prompts, done in class or at home, individually or collaboratively. Each of these sentences harbours a real situation, a micro-narrative which could be expanded, allowing the discussion of literary forms, from lists and fragments to prose, poetic or dramatic scenes, to inventions and re-enactments. They would lend themselves particularly well to multilingual pieces, as a way of letting other languages than the one being studied into written work and spoken rendition.

When we think about translingual expression, we often start from a position of deficit, focusing on the many words or nuances that we do not master, the lack of an immediate access to affective language which develops during childhood, the fear of getting lost in translation, of being misunderstood, of not being able to convey humour in another language. This insecure position is conveyed in some measure by bias and prejudice, and the commonly held view that translingual speakers cannot master a language as well as native speakers. As Pavlenko notes, translingual writers “have to continuously argue their legitimacy and defend their language rights” (329). However, translingualism can also be envisaged from a position of gain. Translingual speakers possess particularly rich linguistic repertoires, which are both composite and ever-changing. The notion of linguistic repertoire was first suggested by John Gumperz to refer to “the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed within the community in the course of socially significant interaction” (85). Building on this initial definition, the Council of Europe proposes an expanded version which emphasizes heterogeneity:

The repertoire of languages known by each individual (individual repertoire) comprises languages acquired in different ways (languages learnt at home from infancy onwards, learnt subsequently during schooling or afterwards, learnt independently, etc.) for which people have different competences (everyday conversation, reading, listening, etc.) at levels of mastery which also differ (elementary, independent, experienced, etc.). (Council of Europe, “Language Repertoire”)

Multilingual speakers and writers possess tools which are invaluable in bringing together critical thinking and creative expression: the ability to confront and compare words and modes of expression, the acute awareness of the poetic – and the political – functions of language, with a potential for nuances, playfulness and inventiveness. After all, the heightened linguistic awareness of translingual speakers as identified by Gauvin is first and foremost “une conscience de la langue comme d’un vaste laboratoire de possibles” (10)⁴ – in other words, a workshop for creative expression.

THE TEXTURE OF TRANSLINGUAL WRITING

Students in Modern Languages are trained to become experts at handling the communicative and persuasive function of language, at engaging in discourse analysis and literary commentary, while the practice of the poetic and creative function of language tends to become secondary as their command of the language progresses. This is a great loss, as Claire Kramsch remarks in *The Multilingual Subject*: “pedagogies that reduce language to its information value, be it grammatical, social or cultural information, miss an important dimension of the language-learning experience” (14). The sentence “I like the French *r*” reminds us that one of the many pleasures of learning a language is the experience of new sounds, new textures which make linguistic acquisition not just a cognitive but a sensorial process. This process is one that every individual experiences as a young child, as Roland Barthes writes in his 1975 essay “Sur la lecture”: “même le très jeune enfant, au moment du babil, connaît l’erotisme du mot, pratique orale et sonore offerte à la pulsion” (44).⁵ The “eroticism of the word” is latent in the ability

4 “an awareness of language as a vast experimental space” (my translation).

5 “even the very young child, at the stage of prattle, knows the eroticism of the word, an oral and aural practice available to pulsion” (“On Reading” 40).

to experience, at a later stage in life, the “pleasure of the text” – another Barthesian notion referring to the ability to become co-creator of a *writerly* text instead of mere commentators on a *readerly* text (S/Z).

As learners progress along their academic trajectories and indeed along their adult life, this sensual, playful function of language tends to be overshadowed by the demands of academic and professional writing, which are often quite normative. In her series of essays *In the Margins*, Elena Ferrante recalls her initiation into writing and her earlier attempts at writing fiction, which remained strongly influenced by the demands of school: to remain within the two vertical margins traced on the sheets of paper used in Italian schools. This demand might be especially acute in countries where creative writing courses are not integrated within mainstream education. Ferrante notes that when she learned to write, she was educated “to stay on the lines and between the margins” (20). That controlled, “well-balanced, calm, and compliant writing” (29) soon became uncomfortable, too tight, and she sought another kind of writing, less predictable, “a convulsive act” (35) that would also require mastering. Writing and finding one’s voice will eventually mean disrupting margins. The balancing act which Ferrante describes is probably even more delicate and tangible for translingual writers, who have internalized a need to master their second language(s)’ conventional usage.

A growing corpus of transnational texts integrates the experience of translingualism, providing spaces for identification and reflection. Claudia Durastanti grew up in Italy before moving to the United States, thereafter regularly travelling between the two countries. In her memoir *La Straniera*, she expresses her affection for certain foreign words, which stems from their evocative value that cannot be directly transposed into other languages. I am quoting a passage in the original Italian alongside the English translation, as each version gives multilingual writing a different texture:

La mia parola preferita in inglese è *marshes*. È il plurale del sostantivo *marsh*, acquitrino. Viene dall’inglese antico *mersc*, e dal protogermanico *mori*, “corpo d’acqua”. Le mie altre parole preferite le somigliano, e descrivono tutte un paesaggio. *Moor* dall’inglese antico *mor*: brughiera. *Morass*: palude. Ognuna di loro deve qualcosa allá radice proto-indoeuropea *mer*. *Mer* significa “far male”, “morire”. (*La Straniera* 160)

My favourite word in English is *marshes*. It’s the plural of the noun *marsh*: acquitrino in Italian. It comes from the Old English *mersc*, and the Proto-Germanic *mori*, “body of water”. Other favorite words resemble these, all of them describing a landscape. *Moor* from the Old English *mor*: brughiera in Italian. *Morass*: palude. Each of them owing something to the Proto-Indo-European root *mer*. *Mer*, meaning “to hurt”, “to die”, or even “sea”. (*Strangers I Know* 144)

Even if this passage deals with words from the English language, the translation into English retains the complexity of cross-lingual encounters. The inclusion of Old English and Proto-Germanic terms, the movements between English, Italian and other languages, the etymological enquiry, all give a sense of depth and opacity contained within the word “marshes”. This example also illustrates the creative role of the translator, who chose to add the word “sea” in the English translation to emphasize the polysemy of the root “mer”. Bodies of water are a privileged image used to represent cross-lingual thinking, as Guldin remarks in a study of metaphors of literary translingualism: “The sea is not only a visual but also an acoustic metaphor for linguistic plurality” (390). The fluidity of translingual imagination hence promotes creative criticism, a form of writing which thrives under word encounters and etymology, the latter “represent[ing] the twists and turns and adventures of words and thoughts over time, the material and conceptual adventures of language itself, its slippages and nonsense and half-senses and rhymes, and these are the tracks and the ether, both of history and of thought” (Benson and Connors 8).

Durastanti’s take on favourite words in her linguistic repertoire exploits the affective dimension of language, the self-reflexivity of multilingual users, and sustains the belief that different languages hold a specific *Weltanschauung*. I propose below a few more translingual writing prompts, which are by no means exhaustive:

1. Think about your favourite words (in any language). What draws you to them? Is it to do with their sounds and texture? With their meaning(s)? With a personal experience? Write a piece containing (some of) these words.⁶
2. Choose a few of your favourite words and unfold them, paying attention to their sounds, their etymology, to words that sound similar in the same language and in other languages.⁷ Expand some of these words into a longer piece of writing or write a fictional story containing a selection of these words.
3. Create calligrams with words from prompts [1] or [2].
4. Select a common word, in your native language and in the other languages that you speak. Say it out loud, again and again, until you can no longer relate its form to its meaning.⁸
5. Select a town or city that is meaningful to you. Take each letter of this town's name to list words that evoke this town, in any language. Use these words as a starting point to write a piece about this town. This can take the form of a letter written to this place.
6. Do you know any “untranslatable” words, for which you don't know an equivalent in other languages? What makes them so specific? Can you try to use them in a translingual piece of writing?⁹
7. Take a piece of writing, either something already published or something you wrote. Translate it, give the translation to someone who will translate it back (or use translation software to translate back and forth) and compare the differences between the two versions. Use the differences as starting points for original writing.
8. Think about *faux pas* or misunderstandings that you might have experienced as a translingual speaker. Turn them into short dialogues.
9. Think about a social situation in which a character would be speaking in one language but thinking in another language – a foreigner going to the hairdresser's, or going in a lift with other people. Devise a scene in which you will contrast interior monologue and external dialogue. This scene could be further developed and staged.¹⁰
10. Keep a multilingual journal in which you reflect on the process of acquisition and use of various languages you know, including dialects or regional languages.¹¹

Even within the area of Modern Languages, more opportunities are needed to bring languages into dialogue, as Benaglia and Smith argue in a stimulating essay which debunks the myths of standard language, native vs. foreign speaker, and advocates the use of plurilingualism in the classroom with a view to fully taking into account “the multilingual, multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic reality of our communities” (21). By mobilizing processes such as code-switching, hybridization and translation, such prompts engage the sensorial dimension of language through writing practice and through speaking: repetition, rehearsal, recitation, performance all constitute important aspect of the delivery of texts. Importantly, by valorizing the “translingual sensibility” (Kellman and Stavans) and competence of their users, they promote a comparative approach to language use and engage us to reassess our monolingual habits. Translingual writing also raises important editorial and aesthetic questions: when producing a multilingual text, how to integrate foreign words? Should they be italicized? Translated? Explained in footnotes? Could they be integrated in different fonts or colours? Such

6 When I used this prompt with students, favourite words in French included *ainsi, l'apéro, une araignée, une baleine, une bougie, un câlin, une châtaigne, une crèche, une feuille, une fille, une grenouille, une guêpe, le lendemain, un naufrage, un parapluie, un pamplemousse, souligner*.

7 For this prompt, I take inspiration from Camille Laurens's series of essays on words, *Quelques-uns, Le Grain des mots* and *Tissé par mille*.

8 I am borrowing this suggestion from Myriam Suchet's “Kit de désapprentissage” (“Unlearning toolkit”), which is designed to promote varieties of French for French as a Foreign Language tutors and students, hence unlearning representations of standard French. See Suchet, “En français au pluriel”.

9 A valuable resource for this is Cassin et al.'s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, itself a translation from the French *Le Vocabulaire européen des philosophes*.

10 This prompt was conceived in collaboration with Sara Greaves and Florent Da Silva at Aix-Marseille Université.

11 Some of these ideas are borrowed from Godard. The suggestion of the multilingual journal is made by Benaglia and Smith.

DEFAMILIARIZATION IN CREATIVE WRITING: TRANSLINGUAL DISTANCE

Writing workshops develop critical thinking and promote “defamiliarization” (Shklovsky) on many levels. They invite us to approach literary texts in a way that differs from the position of commentary or close reading required by literary analysis. For Benson and Connors in *Creative Criticism*, such positioning towards literary texts can turn into a mechanical process which takes away the joy of reading: “But when we learn – in establishments of further and higher education, say – to read *critically*, and to respond *critically* in our own writing, it can often feel as though, even as we acquire new skills, we are losing something” (3). While I believe that reading critically can trigger or even enhance the pleasure of reading, I have noticed that in writing workshops, excerpts from literary texts tend to be approached in a more active, more motivated way, than in a traditional literature course. Such engagement stems from identifying patterns, forms, effects, and evaluating their pertinence for one’s own writing. As Dan Disney suggests, creative writing turns participants into “expert readers” (4). Critical reading also lies in the peer reading and peer review process on which writing workshops are based, as they rest on writing-in-progress being shared by class members.

Is the process of defamiliarization made easier in a translanguing context, when writing in a language which may be less steeped in the writer’s own personal history and therefore less emotionally charged? Nancy Huston, originally from Canada, who has been living and writing in France since the 1960s, recounts in *Nord perdu* an anecdote from a woman, originally from Scotland, who has been living in Corsica for two decades: she can use the most blasphemous swear words in French while feeling completely detached from their transgressive meaning, while she cannot barely utter “God” in English without being morally self-conscious (63–64). However, assuming that translanguing speakers are necessarily detached from their “second” language does not take into account the personal investment that comes with language acquisition. In translanguing contexts, defamiliarization often applies to one’s own native language. Eva Hoffman remarks that, upon arriving in Canada from her native Poland, she went through a conscious process of acculturation: “All my energies were absorbed in trying to make myself at home in English, to take it into the psyche and make it my own” (“P.S” 52) – as if trying on new clothes that are too loose in places, too tight in others, altering them, trying them on again and again, until, by virtue of effort, imitation and repetition, they finally fit. For Hoffman, this process of adjustment was not only linguistic but meant embracing American culture to become “a recognizable example of a species: a professional New York woman [...] I fit, and my surroundings fit me” (*Lost* 170). And while new clothes finally fit, we realize that old ones, the ones we wore when we arrived, might be faded or no longer tailored to our new self. In an essay entitled “The Mask and the Pen”, Huston comments upon the process of alienation from her first language which stems from living in another country for an extended period of time. She writes, “I’d turned my back on my mother tongue for too long, and it no longer recognised me as its daughter” (66). Swear words might resist this, as part of prohibitions strongly ingrained since childhood. But more often than not, the translanguing speaker experiences a sense of distance in all the languages they speak, as they are “condamné à penser la langue” (Gauvin 8).¹³

Such reflections, which rely on images and metaphors of transcultural identity, challenge the traditional division between primary or literary texts on the one hand, and secondary or critical texts on the other. Language memoirs such as Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Durastanti’s *La Straniera*, Kristóf’s *L’Analphabète* remind us of the role of writing in shaping and owning one’s own story, when that story includes unexpected migration to another country and the sudden loss of one’s cultural background. Excerpts from literary texts by translanguing writers are a valuable inclusion in creative writing workshops and, more broadly speaking, in language curricula, as argued by Benaglia and Smith, who recommend “systematically introducing translanguing and multilingual writers in the corpus of texts studied

¹² I am indebted to discussions around this topic which took place during the seminar series “Figurer les langues” at Sorbonne-Nouvelle in 2022–23. Literary devices of translanguing writing are also discussed notably by Besemerres.

¹³ “condemned to thinking language” (my translation).

in language, culture, and literature classes” (25–26). These texts act as further ways to decentre the established literary corpus while providing possibilities for identification. They expose learners “to different varieties of [a language] but also to the ways in which individuals relate to this language and use it as a space to form their multilingual selves through writing” (26). Translingual memoirs also show that even published writers who seem to perfectly master their language of expression go through moments of embarrassment, confusion, and occasional cultural or linguistic *faux pas*, as is the case in Akira Mizubayashi’s memoir *Une langue venue d’ailleurs*. In French, *faux pas* (“wrong step”) sounds terribly close to *fait pas* (“one must not”), a phrase signalling interdiction, whether this interdiction comes from someone else or is self-imposed. We are reminded, through these homophones, that one of the most enduring and most paralyzing obstacles to writing, even more so writing in another language, is not allowing oneself to write, thinking that one lacks legitimacy or requires authorization, that one should only write if perfectly mastering the language – and, as a consequence of this, that your story might be less valuable if you come from the margins. Translingual authors, through the account of their experience, provide legitimation for users who can recognize their own hesitations and may even turn them into humorous situations (Godard 57).

Reflecting on one’s relation to multilingualism and attempting to write one’s own “language biography” (Council of Europe) is a stimulating self-reflexive exercise for any speaker, whether they perceive themselves as translingual or not, and a fruitful task which can be developed over several weeks and adapted to learners’ ability (Berlou and Domp martin).¹⁴ Importantly, language biographies can be used as springboard for more ambitious texts and expanded into different genres, as a literary and formal process which mobilises writerly competence. Which episodes to include? How to order them? Should these be fictionalized? How to integrate different languages and possibly different media within one text? How to negotiate tensions between coherence and discontinuity? These questions are central to the writing process, and they will be appreciated differently from an active writerly position than from the more traditional position of literary analysis.

TRANSLINGUAL WRITING, BETWEEN CORRECTION AND CREATIVITY

Along this process, the role of writing workshop leaders differs from their role in a language class. By definition, language tutors have acquired a high level of proficiency in the language of instruction and will in some cases be native speakers of that language. We should not assume, however, that writing somehow comes more “naturally” in one’s native language, or that the tutor’s role is to guide participants towards “authentic” structures in the target language. If I may draw on my own experience, not having lived in France, not having lived *in French* and experienced that language in everyday social situations for most of my adult life, my native language has somewhat become, if not foreign, at least a distant language which is not always accessed that directly. My relationship to what I ought to call, for want of a better word, my “native language” has changed – this change leading to “donner le change”, as the French phrase goes, literally “give change away”, more idiomatically to put up an appearance, to pull the wool over someone’s eyes, to play a socially constructed role. The position of the distant native speaker – that of sitting just beside one’s native language instead of fully inhabiting it – is not always an easy one. As Guldin puts it, “Switching languages can be a liberating experience but to be suspended in the space in-between two languages can turn out to be uncomfortable” (389). But maybe there is something to be gained from this discomfort, when language is the very material that we teach, that we work on, that surrounds us, when it is the material of writing. Accepting this defamiliarization may be especially valuable in a creative writing context. For Ocean Vuong in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, writing is akin to stepping back, as if splitting into two different individuals, as he expresses in this dialogue between a mother and her son, who narrates the story:

“Have you ever made a scene,” you said, filling in a Thomas Kinkade house, “and then put yourself inside it? Have you ever watched yourself from behind, going further and deeper into that landscape, away from you?”

14 For more about language biographies, see also Suchet, <https://www.enfrancaisapluriel.fr/kit/24>.

How could I tell you that what you were describing was writing? How could I say that we, after all, are so close, the shadows of our hands, on two different pages, merging? (6)

Many aspiring writers will agree with Proust's affirmation that "les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère" (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 361).¹⁵ In this instance, Proust does not refer to actual foreign languages but to the original, reinvented use of a language shared with others – in short, to literary, poetic expression. And this is indeed the purpose of writing workshops and creative writing courses, whether with translingual, multilingual or monolingual participants: to allow participants to develop and express their uniquely crafted writerly voice. However, the situation can be more complex in translingual writing workshops, with participants who also want to perfect their use of a language in light of standardized norms, who want to be able to use idiomatic phrases "like a native speaker". When I am leading a creative writing workshop in French, on the one hand, my position – my duty – is to correct errors, to point out when something is not grammatically accurate or doesn't correspond to standard usage. On the other hand, a writing workshop is not a regular language class: I am hesitant to encourage participants to resort to images and metaphors which have already been extensively used. The French mirror word of "used", *usé*, means worn out, tired, precisely like clothes that have been worn for too long. Should I encourage participants to use well-known, well-established collocations of words which native speakers will already have come across, which will sound familiar at the risk of sounding worn out, or to create new, unusual ones, to stimulate images and words that will be striking and will keep their readers alert?

On Serge Gainsbourg's emblematic album *Melody Nelson*, Melody is a character inspired and acted out by English actress-singer and Gainsbourg's partner Jane Birkin. The first song of the album, "Melody", relates the encounter between the narrator and Melody, and ends with the following words:

"Tu t'appelles comment?"

"Melody"

"Melody comment?"

"Melody Nelson"

Melody Nelson a les cheveux rouges

Et c'est leur couleur naturelle. (Gainsbourg)¹⁶

Gainsbourg chooses the adjective "rouge" instead of the more commonly used "roux", which contributes to anglicizing the song and pointing to Melody's British nationality, which is affirmed by Birkin's unmistakably English accent. Elsewhere in the song, he uses "ses pantalons" in the plural, a direct translation of the English "her trousers", when "pantalon" should normally be used in the singular to refer to a pair of trousers. These deliberate choices might surprise listeners, reminding us that what is "naturel" for one person is also culturally constructed, and might not be "naturel" for another: here, the junction between languages confirms Sara Greaves and Marie-Laure Schultze's observation that "Creative writing, and bilingual workshops especially, are a rare opportunity for breaking the natural form/meaning monolingual habits" (n.p.). After all, the character of Melody might have "natural" red hair, but on the album cover Jane Birkin is wearing a red wig, deliberately disturbing the notion of authenticity.¹⁷

Let us go back to Proust's quotation. The sentence that follows "Beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language" indirectly raises the question of the artistic and aesthetic value of foreign languages: "Les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère. Sous chaque mot chacun de nous met son sens ou du moins son image qui est souvent un contresens. Mais

15 "Beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language" (*Against Sainte-Beuve* 93).

16 "'What's your name?' 'Melody.' 'Melody what?' 'Melody Nelson.' Melody has red hair, and it's its natural colour" (my translation).

17 The community-run website "Lyrics translate" proposes two different translations of the song, with interesting variations for the last sentence: one with "Melody has red hair/And it's her natural colour", another one with "Melody has red hair/And it's their natural colour" ("Melody").

dans les beaux livres, tous les contresens qu'on fait sont beaux" (*Contre Sainte-Beuve* 361).¹⁸ It is indeed tempting to idealize or exoticize the beauty, the oddity of language usage that may be unusual or "foreign". However, translingual users might legitimately aspire to leave behind traces of their alterity. Such is the case of Luba Jurgenson, a Russian-born writer and translator living in France, who writes in her language memoir *Au lieu du péril*:

En arrivant à Paris, je parlais français avec un petit accent. On me demandait d'où je venais. Je me suis acharnée à le perdre afin que cette question ne puisse jamais être posée. Je choisis à qui je raconte d'où je viens. Les Français sont toujours étonnés qu'on puisse apprendre leur langue. J'ai souvent droit à la question : "Mais comment se fait-il que vous parlez sans aucun accent ?"

Garder un accent, s'est comme ne pouvoir jamais refermer complètement la porte de sa chambre : tout le monde peut s'y introduire. Je tiens à pouvoir vivre la porte fermée. (16)

When I arrived in Paris, I used to speak French with a slight accent. People always asked me where I came from. I worked hard to lose it, so that this question might never be asked. I choose whom I tell where I come from. The French are always surprised to realize that it is possible to learn their language. I'm often asked: 'But how come you speak French with no accent?' To keep an accent is like never being completely able to close your bedroom door: anyone can come in. I want to be able to live with my door closed. (my translation)

Jurgenson's remark is an important one in the context of translingual creative writing: it suggests that while there is undeniable value in presenting translingual users with writing prompts that make the most of their linguistic and cross-cultural competence, there is also a risk of reducing translingual experience to a sense of foreignness.

There is no clear-cut answer to the oscillation between developing unique voices and original use of language on the one hand, and ensuring linguistic and grammatical accuracy (one might even say conformity) on the other. These questions can lead to disagreement, or hopefully, to productive negotiation. David Hanauer explains his own position towards language correction and innovation in the context of second-language creative writing classes in English: "But when faced with an unfamiliar construction ... my first impulse is not to standardize it to the norm but rather to consider the intent of the statement itself. In this sense the aim is affective, aesthetic communication rather than accuracy" (12). The question of originality and usage, the friction between what is *usé* (worn out) and in use, can therefore lead to productive discussions and to stages of rewriting.

The guidelines used in my department for creative writing work try to encourage original use of language, while maintaining cohesion in form and content, through the following assessment criteria: knowledge and understanding of the brief; coherence and cohesion of the texts; awareness of context and genre; audience engagement; reflexivity and critical approach; grammar and spelling accuracy; command and breadth of resources of language; linguistic ambition; oral performance (if pertinent to the task). Alongside their creative piece(s), students are asked to provide a reflective piece of writing, which gives the chance to reflect on the various stages of the writing process, to bring to light the aims and objectives of the piece, the hesitations and choices encountered in relation to readerly expectations. Integrating a reflective piece alongside translingual writing is also a way of establishing if "beautiful misinterpretations" are deliberate or accidental. For Garcia and Li Wei in *Translanguaging*, creativity lies precisely in the ability to position oneself in relation to language use and rules, to "choose between following and flouting the rules and norms of behaviour, including the use of language, and to push and break boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging" (32). The reflective commentary is an opportunity to develop critical distance towards one's writing practice, in broader relation with existing literature (particularly contemporary literature) and genres. It is not an essay, understood in the traditional academic sense. In many ways, it leans towards the practice of

18 "Beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language. Beneath each word each one of us puts his own meaning or at least his own image, which is often a misinterpretation. But in beautiful books all our misinterpretations are beautiful" (*Against Sainte Beuve* 93-94).

creative criticism, which does not equate to “a free play of so-called personal opinion” but does “admit and acknowledge voice” (Benson and Connors 14), including the use of the first person, to situate one’s writing process in an informed dialogue with others.

FEEDBACK ROUTES

When Luba Jorgensen talks about deciding whether she leaves her door open or not, she is pondering whether she lets people into her intimacy, into her personal history by exposing her origins. Leaving the door closed or opening it is an image that Stephen King also uses in his handbook *On Writing*, albeit with a different meaning. When he was an aspiring writer, he received the following piece of advice from the editor John Gould: “write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open” (56), which refers to two distinct phases of the writing process: the phase in which you put everything on to the page, not worrying (yet) about a potential reader. This is followed by the phase of rewriting, when you metaphorically – or literally – open the door of your study and re-examine your writing as a potential reader, or indeed ask a potential reader to read your drafts. King explains this further: “I don’t believe a story or a novel should be allowed outside the door of your study or writing room unless you feel confident that it’s reasonably reader-friendly” (232). The space of the writing workshop allows you to do both: writing with the door closed, in a secure place, with no obligation to share your writing, and writing with the door open, as texts are shared, commented on by others and reworked.

There are multiple routes and strategies for dealing with feedback. May provides a few in *Doing Creative Writing*, in which he suggests that instead of asking the author of a draft piece to read it, it can be beneficial to ask another member of the group to do this, as “this allows the writer to concentrate on the words rather than the stress of reading. Also, the way a reader deals with your piece can tell you a lot about which parts work and which don’t” (58). In that respect, the stage of reading can already be a part of the feedback stage, which reminds us of the musical connotations of the term feedback: a process of amplification of sounds. Listening to someone read your piece, and/or to someone commenting on it, is similar to listening to your voice the way other people hear it: unsettling and surprising, something which we want to avoid at first, but eventually get used to and accept. When receiving comments on a piece of work, we decide which ones to develop and amplify while integrating them in stages of rewriting, hence forming a feedback loop. This metaphor highlights the transformation which a piece of writing undergoes from the moment it is produced by its author to the moment it is interpreted by others. Using a musical metaphor also points to the ability to *feel back*, both for the reader and the writer, to be alert to the texture of a text and to its sensorial qualities. As a writer, reader-response helps shed light on one’s own writing and put it at a distance. Being faced with interpretations that you had not anticipated when you were writing leads to a process of defamiliarization of your own text, which is necessary to be able to see its limitations and its potential and to rework it. This is by no means a straightforward task, even for writers used to sharing their work in progress. Providing multiple routes and strategies for feedback, for rewriting and self-reflection, can facilitate it. So can the integration of creative writing workshops at all stages of the language curriculum, which ensures that students encounter creative writing techniques and methodology in the same way they develop translation techniques.

As transnational users, we are used to leaving the door ajar. We tend to be self-conscious and self-critical about language use, and our sentences often bear traces of our translingual journeys. This position might be an uncomfortable one at times, but it is one which leaves a space for creative-critical dialogues. This starts with the very notion of “creative writing”: the French equivalent, *création littéraire*, which has now gained a legitimate place on university courses, puts more immediate emphasis on a possible distinction between literary and non-literary types of writings, and reminds us of the social prestige of writers in the French-speaking world, as noted by Martin Winckler (15). Had I decided to write this piece in French, I would be situating my analysis in a different context altogether, both culturally and linguistically. Attempting to translate it from one language to another would also entail a process of displacement: as I switch languages, I also switch to different notions, theoretical frameworks and critical traditions. As Mireille Gansel elegantly pointed out, translation is akin to a process of transhumance, trying to

find the most nourishing soil in the other language. In order to translate, one needs “much more than a dictionary”: one needs to confront a “different reality” (Gansel 31).

While in English we “give feedback” on a piece, in French we talk about “donner du retour” or “faire des retours” – quite literally, giving or making “returns”, a notion which reminds us, especially in a transnational context, of its geographical dimension. The polysemy of words, their shape and sounds, unavoidably influences thinking and argument. In French, discussing feedback in a translingual context, I am therefore tempted to comment on the interior journey which is initiated by critical reading, and to reflect on what it means to return somewhere: transnationals know that there is no such thing as “retourner” or going back to the same place; that the transformations we experience mean that, even if a place does not change, our relation to it does, and so does our relation to our former self. As Jurgenson writes: “Un retour s’effectue à la première personne ; or (hors) de celle qui se retrouverait là-bas, je ne pouvais dire que ‘elle’. De ce ‘Je’ prononcé en russe là-bas, moi, ici, en français, je ne pouvais dire que ‘elle’”(18).¹⁹ This is what “retour” is designed to achieve, in the context of a writing workshop: feedback (from the tutor and from peers) is meant to give constructive tools to be able to return to a piece of writing with a different perspective on it. In that respect, the “double distance granted by writing in the second language” (Pavlenko 324) equips translingual users with a precious disposition to evaluate the writing process and engage in stages of rewriting. The French word “retourner” also means to turn something (for instance a piece of clothing) inside out. Processes of feedback and self-reflexive writing allow for the discussion of the making of texts, its craft, the stitches and the lining which might not be visible to the naked eye.

These observations based on the word “retour” are quite different from the ones I made earlier about the musicality and sensory dimensions of feedback. Does it make them less valid? These various interpretations, inspired by the very materiality of language, suggest that linguistic tools shape our methodologies and critical thinking. For Guldin in their study on metaphors of translingualism, the confrontation between different linguistic landscapes can lead to “a creative tension” (382). To bring together different languages also means to confront ways of thinking, at the risk of reaching diverging conclusions.

TRANSLINGUAL CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS

Embedding translingual creative writing in language curricula is a way to renew our approach to literary texts, to foster linguistic and narrative identities, and to reflect the transnational dimension of languages in the twenty-first century. The location of translingual creative writing is an unstable one, as it supposes decentring and defamiliarizing our own practices and our own relation to everyday language and to academic writing, and rethinking our approach to literary texts. More precisely, it is situated in the interstices between languages: slippages, friction, contradiction or misunderstanding, with the risks that it entails from both a pedagogical and critical perspective. Integrating translingual encounters in the fabric of the text, merging languages or bringing them into dialogue, acknowledging the fact that “words will do things, rather than merely recount what they have done or what they might or should do” (Benson and Connors 11) can lead to surprising poetic innovations. It is also a way of letting participants’ other languages, their plural identities and individual journeys, into a shared language that they can inhabit.

Translingual creative writing should not remain exclusively on the perimeter of Modern Languages or EFL, though. Each individual possesses a rich linguistic repertoire, even when they think of themselves as monolingual: this repertoire includes foreign words picked up from education and from travel, from films and commercials, but also regional variations and dialects, and even words or phrases specific to a family. As noted by the Council of Europe: “The concept of repertoire of languages (or language repertoire) is not specific to migrants: it refers to the fact that all individuals are potentially or actually plurilingual” (“Language repertoire”). This echoes Kellman, who states:

¹⁹ “A return is something that happens in the first person; yet about the person who used to be (out) there, I could only say ‘she’. Of that ‘I’ that had been pronounced in Russian over there, I, writing here in French, could only say ‘she’” (my translation).

Furthermore, if we consider that even the most obdurate xenophobe who refuses to learn anything but L1 (his or her first language) negotiates several registers (slang, formal, intimate, regional, standard, etc.) of just L1 each day, we are all multilingual, and all texts are translingual. (*Nimble 5*)

Multilingual writing can, and should, be an integral part of any creative writing approach, whatever the cultural or linguistic background of writers. In addition to language memoirs or other accounts by translingual writers, many resources can facilitate the integration of multilingualism in writing workshops. Some scholars experiment with translation workshops “without requiring pre-existing language skills” from participants in the source language (*Beauvais and Ryland 289*). Online dictionaries and translation software are accessible tools which may have their limitations, but can also be used creatively to go beyond monolingual writing. Google Maps and Google Earth can allow us to travel remotely, integrating virtual journeys and foreign imaginaries in writing.²⁰ However, if used purely to accessorize a situation or a character, these tools risk exoticizing or stereotyping foreign languages and cultures. Used in conjunction with the linguistic competence of participants and their individual trajectories, however, they can develop and advance translingual writing and intercultural understanding, leaving the door ajar for translingual expression.

Modern Language scholars, who have expertise in multilingualism and cross-cultural dialogue, have a lot to contribute to debates in Creative Writing research and pedagogy. Theoretical approaches and pragmatic frameworks to creative writing differ considerably from one country or language to another, and so does the place of writers in the cultural sphere, including in Creative Writing curricula. The discipline of Modern Languages can provide comparative, transnational frameworks, and the benefit of intercultural knowledge in order to put different critical traditions in perspective. Translingual research not only examines contact between languages, but it uses as a methodological tool the position of the researcher, themselves situated between cultures, languages, academic and critical traditions. As such, there is potential to integrate translingual and Modern Language perspectives as stimulating frameworks in Creative Writing practice, pedagogy and research.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Elise Hugueny-Léger  orcid.org/0000-0001-8588-7461
University of St Andrews, UK

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²⁰ I am borrowing this idea from a workshop by Virginie Gautier based on Olivier Hodasava’s *Dreamlands Virtual Tours*, <http://dreamlands-virtual-tour.blogspot.com/>.

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