

# LANGUAGE MEMOIRS AND LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

THE MULTILINGUAL SUBJECT'S SELF-NARRATIVE  
IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE TODAY



Seminar organizer: Louise Sampagnay  
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris - Université de Caen Normandie



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## AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE(S), AUTHENTIC SELF(-VES?)

➔ 10.30 - 10.40 - SHORT INTRODUCTION

### 10.40 - THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN THE SELF-NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSLINGUAL FRENCH-SPEAKING AUTHORS

*Nathalie Borgé - Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, France*

We would like to emphasize the role of literature in the self-narrative construction of translingual, exiled, French-speaking authors. We will shed light on the literary heritage of exophonic writers who, for personal or political reasons, have been compelled to switch from one language to another, from one culture to another. We propose to go beyond focusing solely on the chosen writing language or the geographical displacement of the multilingual author and explore the influence of literature in terms of cultural and transcultural circulation on self-narrative writing. After providing a comprehensive overview of what a translingual writer is (Kellman, 2020; Ausoni, 2018), we will examine a few examples taken from the works of recognized multilingual French-speaking writers such as Vassilis Alexakis, Akira Mizubayashi, Dai Sijie, Nancy Huston, etc., as well as more contemporary writers on the French literary scene like Shumona Sinha (2022) and Silvia Baron Supervielle (2023). Beyond analyzing the symbolic power exercised by literature (Casanova, 1999), we aim to show how the exploration of literary texts (originating from French-speaking countries and others) fosters a dynamic of "foreignness," distancing, and emancipation in translingual writers' self-narratives. To what extent do multilingual autobiographers, by embracing several literary horizons, contribute to developing a relevant, reflective, and transcultural stance for comparative literature? »

### 11.05 - LINGUISTIC AUTO-POETRY: AN AUTO-THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE MULTILINGUAL SUBJECT'S SELF/VES AND RELATIONSHIP TO LANGUAGE(S)

*Natasha Jane - University of Brighton, UK*

This paper will explore the contribution auto-reflexive poetry can make to research on multilingualism in literature, or "heterolingualism", and how heterolingual poetry can be a literary space for expressing the multilingual self/ves. In this regard, I wish to propose a case study of my autobiographical-heterolingual poetry collection, *ORCHESTR A.E* (AB publishing 2023). This auto-theoretical work addresses my identity as a bilingual person and provides insights into my creative process. My code-switching is motivated not only by lexical differences, but also by how I relate to English and French. I experience languages as more than communicative tools: they are sensory and aesthetic phenomena which elicit various emotions. I am currently working on new bilingual poetry dealing precisely with how I express my feelings and emotions differently in each language. As part of my PhD (The polyglot writer: what multilingual texts reveal about writers' emotional attachment to the languages they speak), I will draw on existing work from authors such as Suchet and Grutman, Gümüşay

and Pavlenko to specify the way polyglot writers identify with the languages they speak, and the cognitive processes behind the choice of language(s) they use in writing. Focusing on auto-reflexive work bears the larger question of whether heterolingual poetry has an inherently autobiographical dimension, a question I aspire to elaborate on as my research advances.

### **11.30 - LANGUAGE MULTIPLICITY AND AUTOFICTIONAL SELVES IN THE WORK OF XIAOLU GUO**

*Fiona Doloughan - The Open University (UK)*

As a writer and documentary filmmaker who continues to cross linguistic and cultural borders, Chinese-British novelist and memoirist Xiaolu Guo (b. 1973) can be said to have contended with “the war between languages in the formation of self” (Ungar, 2006, p. 135). Already a published writer and filmmaker in China, her move to England in 2002 resulted in her switching languages and producing her first novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary*, in English in 2007. In terms of form, style and thematic content, this dictionary novel introduced an Anglophone audience to what was to become typical of Guo’s novelistic work in English: a focus on what it means to live in translation as a second language writer, struggling to communicate one’s meaning and sense of self. In “writings [that] disclose a cultural layering” (Ungar, 2006, p. 132), Guo goes on to make of her situation as a “nomad in both body and mind” (Guo, 2017, p. 1) a virtue of necessity and creates across her novels and memoirs a sense of the impact of the multiplicity of languages on self- and cultural translation. This paper will examine language multiplicity as it pertains to Guo’s work by focussing on issues of cross-cultural communication, silence and wordlessness in her novels. It will relate this to the “vision of language” (Guo, 2023, p. 326) expressed in her memoirs and relate the autofictional selves presented in her work to a search for an authentic language and an authentic life as an artist.

➔ **11.55 - 12.15 - QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION**

**SATURDAY 16**

*Room 513F, 10.30 – 12.15*

### **LANGUAGES, EMOTIONS, AND LOSS**

➔ **10.30 - 10.35 - SHORT INTRODUCTION**

### **10.35 (IN FRENCH) - AUTOBIOGRAPHIE LINGUISTIQUE ET SOUCI ÉCOLOGIQUE DES LANGUES MINORISÉES / LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERN OVER MINORITY LANGUAGES**

*Mathias Verger - Université Paris VIII Saint-Denis (France)*

Ma proposition concerne l'articulation de formes différentes de « langage memoirs" et le souci de préservation des langues mineures, minorisées ou « en danger". Il s'agit de s'intéresser à des cas littéraires où l'identité plurilingue concerne des langues de statuts différents dans les imaginaires et les réalités sociopolitiques. Comment ce déséquilibre de reconnaissance de langues majeures ou minorisées se traduit-il dans les consciences linguistiques des auteurs et

leur rapport à l'écriture? Dans *Trois langues dans ma bouche*, Frédéric Aribit pose la question de la place du basque, sa langue maternelle qu'il croyait avoir perdue, dans les dynamiques linguistiques contemporaines. Dans sa *Lettre à Antonio Saura* écrite en judéo-espagnol et autotraduite pour une publication bilingue, Marcel Cohen médite sur le sentiment du "dernier locuteur" face à la disparition du ladino. Abraham Bengio, Tangerois polyglotte, transforme dans *Quand quelqu'un parle*, il fait jour son autobiographie linguistique en un véritable plaidoyer pour le plurilinguisme et la défense de toutes les langues du monde. Il s'agira de prendre la mesure de la manière dont notre époque contemporaine articule la question du sujet plurilingue à un souci plus vaste d'écologie des langues, en jouant des échelles entre le local et le global.

*My paper aims to consider how different forms of 'language memoirs' are articulated, and why there exists a concern to preserve minor, minority or 'endangered' languages. Looking at literary cases where multilingual identity involves languages of different status both within imaginations and socio-political realities. To what extent is this imbalance in the recognition of major or minority languages reflected in the linguistic awareness of authors and their relationship to writing? In *Trois langues dans ma bouche* [Three tongues in my mouth], Frédéric Aribit examines the position of Basque, his mother tongue, which he thought he had lost, within contemporary linguistic dynamics. In his *Lettre à Antonio Saura*, written in Judeo-Spanish and self-translated to be published bilingually, Marcel Cohen ponders the emotions of being the "last speaker" in the face of the demise of Ladino. Abraham Bengio, a polyglot from Tangiers, turns his linguistic autobiography into a plea for multilingualism and for the defence of all the languages of the world in *Quand quelqu'un parle, il fait jour* [When someone speaks, it is daytime]. The goal of this paper is to assess the way in which our present era articulates the issue of the multilingual subject with a wider concern for the ecology of languages, playing on the scale between the local and the global.*

## **11.00 - BETWEEN TEARS OF JOY AND TEARS OF SADNESS: TAWADA YŌKO'S EXOPHONIC SELF-NARRATIVE**

*Anna Bourges-Celaries - Université de Montréal (Canada)*

Tawada Yōko's practice of exophony paved the way for authors who were not forced into exile, but instead chose to write in a language that is not their native language since *Exophonie: Anderssprachigkeit (in) der Literatur* (2007) has been published. In her essay *akzentfrei* (2016), she explores in a chapter called "Namida" ("tears" in Japanese) the topic of tears as a display of humanity. She bridges the public and private spheres by writing about people's reaction in Germany after seeing pictures of Japanese people after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami happened, thus also establishing a bridge between Germany and Japan. People were shocked that these pictures did not show crying faces, and asked Tawada the reason why as if she, a Japanese person who's been living in Germany for a long time, could answer for the whole Japanese nation. According to Ausoni (2018), multilingual writers have to describe their experience, being forced into self-narrative writing practices. Tawada Yōko's exophonic writing reminds us that national cultures are not as fixed as it seems, and that self-narratives do not have to take sides. I argue that the transcultural quality of multilingualism in the chapter "Namida" reveals how essential multilingual self-narratives are to comparative studies: Tawada's writings portray her reality between "national" expectations and personal experience, thus finding a way out through the unapologetic in-betweenness of exophony, choosing not to define herself.

## **11.25 (IN FRENCH) - DEUIL ET TRADUCTION DANS LES OEUVRES DE JHUMPA LAHIRI ET VASSILIS ALEXAKIS / MOURNING AND TRANSLATING IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI AND VASSILIS ALEXAKIS**

*Aurélie Moioli - Université de Poitiers (France)*

Nous proposons de réfléchir aux liens entre deuil et changement de langue dans des autobiographies linguistiques contemporaines. Tout en inscrivant ce rapport dans une tradition remontant à des autobiographies du XIXe siècle, nous nous concentrerons sur les oeuvres de Jhumpa Lahiri et de Vassilis Alexakis qui ont en commun d'être polyglottes et traducteurs, d'écrire dans une autre langue que leur langue maternelle, de réfléchir à ces transferts linguistiques dans leurs oeuvres et de choisir d'apprendre une troisième langue sans lien apparent avec leur origine spatiale, linguistique et familiale. L'hypothèse est que le deuil apparaît comme un lieu privilégié de pensée et d'expérience de la traduction de soi. Née à Londres au sein de la diaspora bengali, émigrée aux Etats-Unis où elle devient professeure, Jhumpa Lahiri choisit l'italien comme langue d'écriture et réfléchit aux rapports que cette langue d'élection entretient avec les autres langues dans des récits et des essais mêlant fiction et non-fiction : *In altre parole*, *Dove mi trovo*, *Translating Myself and Others*. Toute l'oeuvre de Vassilis Alexakis raconte les allers et retours entre les langues grecque et française dans lesquelles il s'écrit et s'auto-traduit. Nous nous concentrerons sur *Les Mots étrangers* qui retrace son apprentissage du sango après la mort de son père. Il s'agit de réfléchir à la manière dont ces autobiographies translinguistiques endeuillées mettent en crise les catégories d'identité et d'origine.

*We intend to explore the links between grief and language change in contemporary linguistic autobiographies. Although this relationship is rooted in a tradition dating back to nineteenth-century autobiographies, we will focus on the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Vassilis Alexakis, who share several common features: being polyglots and translators, writing in a language other than their mother tongue, reflecting on these linguistic transfers in their works, and opting to learn a third language with no apparent connection to their spatial, linguistic or family origins. Our hypothesis is that bereavement appears to be a privileged locus for contemplating and experiencing how the self is translated. Born in London into the Bengali diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri emigrated to the United States, where she became a teacher. She chose Italian as the language of her writing, reflecting on the relationship between this elected language and other ones in stories and essays combining fiction and non-fiction: *In altre parole* [In Other Words], *Dove mi trovo* [Where I stand], *Translating Myself and Others*. The entire work of Vassilis Alexakis recounts the back-and-forth between Greek and French, two languages in which he writes and into which he self-translates. We will concentrate on *Les Mots étrangers* [The Foreign Words], which details his learning of Sango after the death of his father. Our aim is to reflect on the way in which these mournful translinguistic autobiographies challenge the categories of identity and origin.*



**11.50 - 12.15 - QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION**

**POST-MONOLINGUAL MEMOIRS, OR THE MULTILINGUAL SELF  
"BEYOND THE MOTHER TONGUE"****10.30 - JHUMPA LAHIRI: TO WRITE AND EXIST BEYOND THE MOTHER TONGUE**

*Benedetta Cutolo - The Graduate Center, CUNY (USA)*

In 2016, following the publication of her memoir, *In Other Words*, Pulitzer Prize author Jhumpa Lahiri announced her intention to abandon English to solely write in Italian. Six years later, having become an acclaimed Italian writer and translator, Lahiri returns to English to consider her role as a "postmonolingual" subject (Yildiz) in an era still dominated by a paradigmatic monolingualism. Released in 2022, *Translating Myself and Others* extends to the field of translation, the reflections initiated by *In Other Words* on the questions of language, identity, and cultural assignation. Through the analysis of both texts, this paper discusses how the notion of 'mother tongue', which has played a pivotal role "in the imagination and production of the homogenous nation-state" (Yildiz), is progressively deconstructed in Lahiri's works and how translation and self-translation become instruments to break the frontiers of all cultural, ethnic, and linguistic assignation.

**10.50 - CODE-SWITCHING IN EDWARD SAID'S OUT OF PLACE:  
QUESTIONING THE STATUS OF ARABIC IN RELATION TO ENGLISH**

*Ammar Kandeel - Independent Scholar*

This proposal examines the display of language multiplicity in Edward Said's autobiographical work, *Out of Place. Memoir* (1999). Said usually combined English, Arabic, French, and German, but his practice of code-switching (English-Arabic) in this text reflects a specific late style. The practice is intriguing because he uses almost exclusively dialectal Arabic words and sentences of Palestinian, Egyptian, and Lebanese dialect (without translation sometimes). By incorporating dialectal Arabic in the English self-narrative, Said destabilizes our perception of his theoretical scope on the "overlapping" and "intertwined" co-existence of cultural and linguistic identities. The discussion will tackle two questions: to what extent does this autobiographic multilingualism blur the distinctions and/or hierarchies between the 'main' and the 'secondary' language of the linguistic memoir? What is the status that Arabic acquires in Said's memoir (i.e., is it a language of intimate expression, of shaping a literary stance of the author, and/or a language that constructs new type of communication between Said and the readers)? The discussion will be based on analytical examples, based on a literary approach of translation, and supported by comparative remarks between *Out of Place* and the works in the Saidian bibliography (especially his other auto-/biographical work, *After the Last Sky. Palestinian Lives* [1986]).

## 11.10 - A LANGUAGE OF ONE'S OWN: IDENTITY AND MULTILINGUALISM IN AMAZIGH LITERATURE

*Ye Ram (Esther) Kim - University of Chicago (USA)*

Many Maghrebi (North African) writers cannot write in their mother tongues— Dialectal Arabic or Tamazight (language of the Amazigh/Berber)—because they are not written languages. Thus, they resort to writing in French or literary Arabic, seldom used colloquially. Then, in what language can the multilingual Maghrebi write his literature? I propose to interpret the development of Amazigh literature as a means of reclaiming multilingualism in the Maghreb by studying what it means to write one's identity in the language of the Other. Through novels written in French, literary Arabic, and Tamazight, I explore the writing of Amazigh authors who express their Amazighity in Arabo-Muslim societies through various linguistic and literary strategies: 1) a "return" to Tamazight, 2) a form of *écriture féminine*, and 3) the appropriation of the language of the *Other*. Moving away from the purely static model of a monolingual Arab identity, I argue that Amazigh literature, an ill-defined denominator, functions as a space for the exploration of multilingual literary expression through processes of exchange and translation, engaging the plurality of the region's literary and dialectal languages even if the author and audience do not share them. The multilingual space of Amazigh literature becomes a unifying force in the Maghreb to own one's language, by blurring the boundary between the spoken and the written to reshape Maghrebi identity against strict monolingual and nationalist ascriptions.

## 11.30 - SELF AND OTHER, TRANSLATION AND GEOPOLITICS IN XUL SOLAR'S *SAN SIGNOS*

*Thomas Genova - University of Minnesota Morris (USA)*

This paper deals with the translational, racial, and geopolitical implications of Argentine surrealist Xul Solar's *Los san signos*. The purportedly autobiographic, mystical text is written in Neocriollo, an artificial creole (Span/Port/Eng) created as a lingua franca for the Americas. Based on visions that he claims to have received using the *I Ching*, Xul elaborated his work during the 1920s, a period in which Argentina, Brazil, and the U.S. vied for hemispheric hegemony. The book mobilizes the mystical union of self and Other as a trope for regional unity, metaphorized by the sublimation of the linguistic differences between the languages of the Americas into the amalgamated Neocriollo (Benjamin, Ricoeur). The author uses the term "Neocriollo" to refer both to his hybrid language and to its ethnically mixed speakers, who, he suggests, have overcome racial divisions through miscegenation in the same way that his first-person narrator has overcome ontological divisions through mysticism. While scholars have criticized Xul's polyglot project as elitist, less attention has been paid to the intersection of the aesthetic and the geopolitical in his avant-garde sublimation of boundaries. I will consider Xul's translingual (Canagarajah) process as a South American intervention into the period's racialized discourse of Pan-Americanism that leverages Latin Americanist constructions of linguistic and racial hybridity against U.S. imperial discourses of Anglo-Saxon purity.



**11.50- 12.15 - QUESTIONS, DISCUSSION & SHORT CONCLUSION**

This seminar seeks to explore whether self-narratives dealing with multilingualism are likely to challenge the heuristic foundations of comparative studies. If 'multilingual subjects' (Kramsch 2006) are capable of negotiating their own literary identity beyond any attachment to a specific national literature and language, what does this imply for the representation of multiculturalism in the arts and what is left to compare at the individual level? To what extent do multilingual autobiographers, by embracing several linguistic and cultural areas in their own life narrative, contribute to the reflective, transcultural stance comparative studies often seek to adopt?

Multilingualism in literature has been the concern of comparative literature at least since the 1970s (Forster 1970, Steiner 1975). For over three decades, scholars have not been confining themselves to studying novels and poems that mix languages. Heeding the growth of autobiography as a genre since the 1990s, they have imported the concept of "linguistic autobiography" from the field of language acquisition to explore memoirs in which language multiplicity is displayed. When it comes to language memoirs, there seems to be two main areas of interest: firstly, scholars look at writers such as Hugo Hamilton, Elias Canetti or Emine Özdamar who stage their life either as traumatically torn between several languages, and/or benefitting from the cultural richness of a multilingual childhood. Another focus of research is the case of exiled writers who are compelled or called to write in a late-acquired language (Nancy Huston, Agota Kristóf, Hector Bianciotti).

But are there other ways of describing the construction of one's personality that goes beyond the focus on the chosen writing language ('translingualism' as described by Kellman 1991 & Ausoni 2018) or on the geographical displacement of the multilingual subject (the 'exophony' Arndt, Naguschewski and Stockhammer refer to in 2007)? Does the autobiographer's level of fluency in each of their languages and/or the time of life at which their languages were acquired find an echo in the depiction of said languages in self-narratives? If there exists a heterolingual poetics, as Grutman and Suchet argue (2006 & 2018, both within the field of Francophone studies) - i.e. a specifically literary form of code-switching, how does this impact language memoirs?

The contributions encompass a wide range of linguistic and cultural areas and look at a variety of self-narratives, in which writers consistently attempt to represent themselves with various degrees of fictionalization (first- or third-person-narrative, autofiction, faction, autotheory...). Over the course of these three days, we shall examine generic-related definitional problems ("language memoirs", "linguistic autobiographies" ...), case studies of specific writers, especially in a post-colonial perspective, and issues regarding self-translation.

