

## **Speaking in an Other's Words: Coloniality, Neo-Babelianism, and Translation in Guillermo Gómez-Peña's 'The New World Border'**

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article I draw from Roman Jakobson's 'translation "proper"', Jacques Derrida's '*différance*' and '*dissémination*', and Homi Bhabha's 'cultural translation' to approach traditional models of translation vis-à-vis questions of coloniality, racialization, and minoritization involved in the construction of Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity in the United States. Then I look at border writing and, more specifically, at Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance piece 'The New World Border' in order to discuss translation as a paradigmatic mode of *différance* (Derrida 1992), 'newness' (Bhabha 1994), and unexpected meanings. Finally, I critique the two-side border model of translation to point to a new understanding of translation as speaking in an Other's words that seeks to rethink the ontological dimension of translation *from* the border and *with-in* language.

**KEYWORDS:** migration, bilingualism, hybridity, globalization, coloniality of power, border writing.

**"The American dream is not dreamt in English only."  
Ana Celia Zentella (1997:287)**

### **Introduction**

Within the social sciences and the humanities, the study of translation is increasingly gaining visibility as a significant object of study in a two-fold manner: primarily, as a means for the examination of literary/cultural systems and interliterary/intercultural relations, and secondly, as a source for the formation and regulation of such systems and relations (Toury 1980; Even-Zohar 1990). This double role of translation shows its relevance not just as an instrument for the study of both purportedly monolingual fields such as philosophy and social theory and multilingual fields such as postcolonial criticism and comparative cultural studies, but more importantly as an intrinsic component of those fields.

Indeed, over the last two decades, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the spread of the paradigm of globalization and, more recently, the global economic downturn have often been regarded as fuelling the conditions conducive to a reconsideration of the foundations of the social disciplines in the aftermath of a so-called post-nationalist, transnational era (Cronin 2003:54) —as the currency of notions such as hybridity, diaspora, creolization, and cosmopolitanism seems to indicate. Given not only the technological, economic, and organizational but also the socio-cultural changes entailed by the new global order, it becomes obvious that the study of the social sciences and the humanities cannot but be affected by, and engaged in, the processes of attribution of meaning that underlie globalization, and translation stands at the core of such processes (Venuti 1998; Mignolo 2000). Yet, how is the shifting geography of translation practice affecting dominant conceptualizations of translation? In other words, how is translation theory being reframed at the current stage of post-Babelianism (Eoyang 1993) in relation to the

interplay of processes of economic internationalization and cultural globalization? Ultimately, how can such interplay inform translation studies?

Although the notion of ‘cultural translation’ as developed in Homi K. Bhabha’s compilation of essays *The Location of Culture* (1994) has become a staple in contemporary debates in postcolonial translation studies (Tymoczko 2003; Cronin 2006:72; Batchelor 2009:250-253; Pym 2010:143-148), I suggest that the reconsideration of translation from the standpoint of transnationalism, globalization, and displacement should start from what is largely understood as translation and, more specifically, translation ‘proper’ as one of the foundational conceptualizations for translation studies. In this article, I draw from Roman Jakobson’s ‘translation “proper”’, Jacques Derrida’s ‘*différance*’ and ‘*dissémination*’, and Homi Bhabha’s ‘cultural translation’ to approach traditional models of translation vis-à-vis questions of coloniality, racialization, and minoritization involved in the construction of Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity in the United States. Then I look at border writing and, more specifically, at Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance piece ‘The New World Border’ in order to discuss translation as a paradigmatic mode of *différance* (Derrida 1992), ‘newness’ (Bhabha 1994), and unexpected meanings. Finally, I critique the two-side border model of translation to point to a new understanding of translation as speaking in an Other’s words that seeks to rethink the ontological dimension of translation *from* the border and *with-in* language.

### **Translating Translation ‘Proper’: Meaning, *Différance*, DissemiNation**

In line with earlier theories of semiosis,<sup>1</sup> Roman Jakobson argued in ‘On Linguistic Aspects of Translation’ (1959/1992) that, rather than the linguistic recreation of an original meaning contained in the source text, translation necessarily implies the active creation of meaning. His contention was summed up as follows:

The meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign “in which it is more fully developed,” as Peirce, the deepest inquirer into the essence of signs, insistently stated. (1959/1992:145)

From this perspective, translation is no longer a perennial *ad hoc* representation of meaning, but instead, the existence of meaning is contingent on translation. Jakobson’s argument posed important questions for the theorization of translation. If translation is not the consequence but the condition of signification, then translation operates on an extensively wider level than translation discourse had contended, not only between languages but indeed within languages.

However, Jakobson’s problematization of translation turns deceptive on account of his indebtedness to traditional accounts of the nature of reference and meaning. In opposition to the other two types of translation devised in his article (intra-lingual/rewording and intersemiotic/transmutation), Jakobson pointed to interlingual translation or translation ‘proper’ as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (*ibid.*), a surprisingly deterministic categorization that left little room for a comprehensive theory that moved away

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<sup>1</sup> Jakobson was mainly influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of semiosis, whereby a sign is not reproduced but produced through the interaction with its ‘object’ (that is, what the sign stands for) and its ‘interpretant’ (that is, the sign that results from the interpretation of a previous sign). For a discussion of theories of semiosis in translation studies, see Tymoczko (2007:293-297) and Pym (2010:107-108).

from dominant notions of translation as derivative and mimetic. The deterministic assumptions of a theory of translation based on Jakobson's tripartite conception were subsequently pointed out by Jacques Derrida, who in 'Des Tours de Babel' (1987/1992) problematized the strict differentiation between interlingual translation as the 'proper' or ordinary form of translation and intralingual and intersemiotic translation as 'improper' or figurative types of translation. In particular, Derrida remarked that, whereas Jakobson 'translates' both intralingual and intersemiotic translation by means of other words (rewording and transmutation, respectively), no translation is provided in the case of translation 'proper':

But in the case of translation 'proper,' translation in the ordinary sense, interlinguistic and post-Babelian, Jakobson does not translate; he repeats the same word: "interlingual translation or translation proper." He supposes that it is not necessary to translate; everyone understands what that means, because everyone has experienced it, everyone is expected to know what a language is, the relation of one language to another, and especially identity or difference in fact of language. If there is a transparency that Babel has not impaired, this is surely it, the experience of the multiplicity of tongues and the 'proper' sense of the word 'translation.' (1987/1992:225)

According to Derrida, if there is no need to translate translation 'proper' on account of its condition as the proper sense of translation, it follows that the 'true' meaning of translation is rooted in translation 'proper'. In other words, Jakobson's contention, that "it is not necessary to translate" because everyone understands what translation 'proper' means, underlies the assumption of an essential core of meaning in language that becomes revealed in interlingual translation. Such an assumption clashes with previous arguments by Jakobson a propos of the nature of language, which he approaches from a constructivist perspective. By downplaying the notion of translation 'proper' as covertly deterministic, Derrida not only shifts the focus of translation theory away from dominant paradigms of meaning transfer but also significantly questions the identity of the languages involved.<sup>2</sup> For, even if one of the central foundations of the consideration of the nature of translation in recent times is the concept of representation (Tymoczko 2007:111-115), isn't representation couched in the notion of language as a system of representation and the unity of the languages involved?

Drawing from James Joyce's comic ballad *Finnegan's Wake*—a paradigmatic example of the imbrication of translation and multilingualism (O'Neill 2005; Apter 2006:156-157)—Derrida asks: "How is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated? How is the effect of plurality to be 'rendered'? And what of translating with several languages at a time, will that be called translating?" (1992:223). Although the questions posed by Derrida tie in with his larger argument about God's deconstruction of the Tower of Babel as the liberation of language, it is worth considering the implications that they carry from the specific standpoint of translation 'proper': if the existence of multilingual texts renders the notion of translatability as only relative, what consequences does it have for the ontological interplay of translation and language systems? Where do such texts feature on the axis of translatability-untranslatability? And how may their

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<sup>2</sup> Given that they have become foundational statements for the study of translation, both Jakobson's and Derrida's essays have been extensively discussed in translation studies, albeit from different perspectives. See for example Gentzler (1993/2001:83; 157-167), Chan (2002), Hayes (2007), and Pym (2010:107-110).

alleged untranslatability contribute to a reconsideration of the limits of translation vis-à-vis language unity and specificity?

Certainly, even if Derrida's approach to the question of translation and multilingualism seems, at first glance, not to contribute much to the deconstruction of translation theory given the emphasis placed on the axis of translatability-untranslatability, the arguments presented in 'Des Tours de Babel' acquire a renovated force in light of Derrida's *différance* as that which has been repressed within language (Gentzler 1993/2001:157-167; Davis 2001:10-19) —symbolized by the alteration from '*différence*' to '*différance*' (which, although homophonous with the standard French noun *différence*, introduces an orthographic deviation that seeks to direct attention to the presence of the unheard in language). If *différance* highlights the disruption from within that appears concealed in metaphysical categorical thinking and if, following his argument a propos of the word (of) Babel, translation is but a paradigmatic mode of *différance* given that dissemination (instead of fixation) of meaning underlies the very act of (re)naming, the notion of translation ceases to operate implicitly between languages and becomes very much part of the fabric of languages *per se*—in other words, translation 'proper' loses its alleged property.

Within the framework of Derrida's conceptualization of *différance*—or the lack thereof, in light of his suggestion that the term is "neither a word nor a concept" (1972/1982:7) —Homi Bhabha adds a new component to the redefinition of translation by way of the interplay of migration and 'newness' along the lines of the above-mentioned cultural translation. Although translation in the Bhabhan sense remains a highly elusive concept,<sup>3</sup> it becomes clear that Bhabha does not understand semantic *différance* as an inherent feature of translation. Instead, he draws on Derrida's notion of '*dissémination*' —another Derridean wordplay, this time on '*sème*' and '*semen*' —and coins the term 'DissemiNation' to tackle the question of 'nationness' as a grand narrative of identity and difference, and of translation as the in-between, frontier space where migrant and minority identities are found (1994:199-244). *Dissémination* connects with both the dispersal (or surplus) and the loss (or lack) of meaning that underlies every reading of a text. For Derrida, the inherent "plurality of filiations" (1992/1995:224) enabled by signification (whereby meaning is perennially dispersed and dissipated through connotation and context) undermines the idea of an underlying unequivocal meaning to a text—hence Derrida's focus in translation as a paradigmatic form of *dissémination*. Yet, and in the purest Derridean fashion, Bhabha's DissemiNation adds (or, rather, disseminates) a new dimension to the role of translation in the operation of *dissémination*. For Bhabha, the power of translation lies in "the performative nature of cultural communication" (1994:326),<sup>4</sup> hence downplaying the traditional significance of the translatability-untranslatability axis and focusing instead on the position of the translator as it intersects with the construction of national identities and the material movement of peoples. In Bhabha's approach, translation departs from the reinforcement of binary oppositions such as 'source' and 'target' that is generally enacted in translation discourse towards a theory of cultural hybridity and minoritization where the task of the translator is not to make the 'foreign' go

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<sup>3</sup> To mention two of the most recent examples in translation studies where a critique of Bhabha's approach to translation is made, Batchelor (2009: 246) reflects on Bhabha's tendency to assert an overall meaning to the notion of cultural translation by inserting it repeatedly into the discussion without ever providing a clear definition, whereas Pym (2010:145) criticizes Bhabha's lack of reference to translation theories prior to Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'.

<sup>4</sup> Bhabha's articulation of cultural translation is partly inspired by the work of David Lloyd and the idea of a 'minor' Irish literature (see Lloyd 1987).

'native', but to undermine purportedly homogeneous and monolithic categories that underlie assumptions of cultural supremacy. To put it differently, Bhabha's notion of translation does not seek to reinforce previously-established borders (as commonly represented by the two-side border where translation is assumed to operate), but instead to rethink translation *from* the border (Mignolo 2000).

It is in this regard that cultural translation distances itself and feeds into previous conceptualizations of translation mentioned above: whereas both Jakobson and Derrida approach translation as an inherently hermeneutic practice (that is, translation as an interpretive act of reading—potential meaning in Jakobson, unheard or covert meanings in Derrida), Bhabha's cultural translation becomes, as Pym argues, "a way of talking about the world" (2010:148). In this regard, even if the ambiguity that characterizes Bhabha's use of cultural translation ultimately downplays the validity of the concept for translation studies, the connection it creates between translation, 'nationness', and migration a propos of contemporary cultural dynamics should not be overlooked.

### **Translation, Bilingualism, Coloniality**

One of the most prominent areas of research in the field of sociolinguistics in recent times has been that of heritage language literacy (Ferdman *et al.* 1994). Indeed, the category of 'heritage language learner' did not come into currency until the 1990s, when sociolinguists witnessed a rapidly growing interest in the effects of recent demographic changes on what might be termed "the ontology of bilingualism" (Sommer 2003:24). The use of the term 'heritage' acknowledged the relationship of bilingual literacy with political, economic, and sociohistorical factors, hence downplaying the dominant belief in a perfectly-balanced bilingualism and redefining literacy as a socially-determined construct (Chevalier 2004). Somewhat predictably, the increase of interest in heritage language literacy was determined by the unprecedented minority population growth experienced in the United States during the period 1990-2000 and the resulting increase in the population who spoke a language other than English (17.9% of the total population).<sup>5</sup> At present, although the number of citizens who speak a language other than English at home has only risen by 1.8%, one third of the population of the United States is categorized as minority, and approximately 50 million Americans speak a language other than English at home (16% of the total population).<sup>6</sup> Significantly, the United States has become one of the most fertile grounds for the future of many of its minority languages, in particular Spanish, which is predicted to have 132 million speakers in the United States by 2050, hence becoming the country with the largest Spanish-speaking population in the world (López-Morales 2009).

Rather than merely substantiate the role that migration is playing—and certainly will keep playing—in the processes of language shift and language diversity, these figures further complicate the notion of bilingualism. Yet, they remain oblivious of the existing asymmetries among languages where bilingualism is couched. Even if large-scale migration brings to the forefront the need to incorporate questions of language loss and shift into research on bilingualism, the function of language as a symbolic instrument of power is only too often overlooked. The issue of bilingualism and second-language acquisition does not simply involve the mastering of two language systems at least to some degree, but it appears inextricably linked

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/index.html> (accessed January 10, 2010).

to the power/language relation (Cervantes-Rodríguez and Lutz 2003) and, by extension, to issues of hegemony, minoritization, and translation. By power/language relation, I refer to the power relations designed to regulate language use and hence shape language asymmetries, as well as the role of translation and bilingualism in the construction of language identities that, although codified as factual and unbiased (as reflected in the terms ‘major’ and ‘minor’), seek to homogenize, represent, and perpetuate minor(itized) language groups and differentiate, legitimize, and empower major(itized) language groups.

In the case of the United States, given that it derives from an extensively restrictive interpretation of nationality and citizenship, the dominant discourse on bilingualism appears rooted in the promotion of a purportedly egalitarian integration in the name of a “politics of common culture and a national identity” (Daniel 2006:213), especially at a time when the unprecedented growth of the Hispanic/Latina/o population poses a significant dilemma to its Anglo-Saxon/Protestant foundations. In particular, the racialization of the Hispanic/Latina/o population—in other words, the construction of ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latina/o’ as social markers—stands at the heart of a history of exclusion and disenfranchisement that underlies the racial classification system of the United States since its very formation. In addition, it appears determined by a series of historical threads related to imperial/colonial relations in the Americas (Mendieta 2000; Cervantes-Rodríguez and Lutz 2003) and the emergence of the ‘coloniality of power’, a term coined by sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1991).

Quijano points to coloniality as “the specific colonial structure of power [that] produced the specific social discriminations which later were codified as ‘racial’, ‘ethnic’, ‘anthropological’ or ‘national’, according to the times, agents, and populations involved” (1991:168). Projected as seemingly transparent categories, notions of race, ethnicity, and nation were produced and reproduced at different times as sources of subjugation. By conceiving, organizing, and legitimizing the construction of Eurocentric knowledge, colonialism not only developed a means of domination of indigenous populations but indeed the *raison d’être* of colonial domination in the shape of coloniality. Coloniality served the conquest of indigenous peoples via the formation of a colonial matrix of power and, more importantly, it justified the existence of such matrix of power by the configuration of an epistemological perspective from which social discriminations were channeled. From such a perspective, even if today colonialism as a formal system of domination has been defeated in the large majority of European colonies, coloniality—as the framework where colonial structures are found—continues to operate in contemporary intercultural relations, including the power/language relation (as I discuss below by way of the idea of ‘translation burden’).

While it is certainly true that both happen to be paradigmatic cases of colonial/imperial languages, the present asymmetry between English and Spanish in the United States is strongly determined by the rise of the Anglo-Saxon/Protestant hegemony in the nineteenth century and a series of historical processes that triggered immigration—such as the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and the participation of the United States in World War II (1939-1945)—and contributed to the construction of Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity. The English-Spanish asymmetry becomes a highly revealing example of the overlap of power and language inasmuch as it appears rooted in the production of racialized colonial subjects (at present referred to as ‘minorities’),

particularly in a so-called ‘nation of immigrants’ where bilingualism and multilingualism were very much present during its formative years (Gentzler 2008:8-39).<sup>7</sup>

What is so distinctive about Hispanics/Latinas/os in a country that throughout its history has received immigrants from just about every ethnicity? Mainly, their place of origin (that is, the position of Hispanic/Latin America in the geopolitics of knowledge as informed by the coloniality of power) and its subsequent relation to the construction of Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity. In other words, the “geosocial border” (Cervantes-Rodríguez and Lutz 2003:526) embedded in the coloniality of power whereby, in the aftermath of the rise of the North American hegemony in the Americas, the relation of the United States with what had come to be known as ‘Latin’ America was redrawn from the standpoint of ethnicity and the Anglo/Hispanic differentiation became enacted—and subsequently influenced by interventionist politics in Latin American territories. Although it is indeed accurate to argue that racialization has played an important role in the formation of each and every immigrant group in the United States given the currency of politics of racial stratification, it is also accurate to point out that the development of certain racial markers has tended to deracialization or assimilation into the dominant racial category—that is, the so-called ‘White American’ (for example, the Irish and the Italians). In contrast, immigration from Latin America (multiracial *per se*) has rooted the notion of ‘Hispanicity/*Latinidad*’ in United States society as historically laid out in the Anglo-Saxon/Protestant ‘imaginary’,<sup>8</sup> including the Spanish language—itself a problematic assumption in light of the array of indigenous and creole languages spoken in officially Spanish-speaking Latin American countries.

Translation has played a significant role in the construction of Hispanic/Latina/o ethnicity vis-à-vis questions of hegemony and minoritization in two different, yet complimentary, respects. First, even if multilingualism has indeed been part of the fabric of the country since its very foundation, translation, as a practice that is couched in the coloniality of power, has participated in the “neo-Babelianism by default” (Cronin 2003:60-63) that has commonly characterized official language policies in the United States. Neo-Babelianism by default seeks to transcend the diversity of languages and the often associated idea of fragmentation by way of an apparently universal language that guarantees mutual and, what’s more, instantaneous intelligibility. From this perspective, it follows that English, as a global lingua franca, comes closest to the notion of universality implicit in the operation of the coloniality of power and, hence, should be appropriated as the language of human interaction, rendering invisible—or at least irrelevant—the attached processes of cultural hegemony and language loss. In this respect, translation has perpetuated the English-Spanish asymmetry not by making Hispanics/Latinas/os fully translate into the dominant language in the name of linguistic assimilationism, but rather by placing the so-called “translation burden” (Cronin 2003:60) on those at the lower level of the language continuum—from Spanish (featuring a low social prestige) to English (featuring a high social prestige). In this way, translation enters a paradoxical dynamic whereby it facilitates its own disappearance from the public sphere: Spanish language use is functionally restricted to private

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<sup>7</sup> Also, the English-Spanish asymmetry appears determined by nationality in connection with U.S. foreign policy. See Cervantes-Rodríguez and Lutz (2003:530-541).

<sup>8</sup> Here I follow Walter Mignolo’s reading of ‘imaginary’ (inspired by the work of Martinican writer Edouard Glissant) as the conception and perception of the world by a given culture. See Mignolo (2000:23-33).

domains (namely the home) whereas a strategy of translation into English is required in public domains (mainly education and employment).

Secondly, the growing incorporation of immigrants from officially Spanish-speaking countries and heritage learners into the economy of the United States, along with mechanisms of market-oriented globalization and transnational corporatism, has placed translation at the heart of the recreation of Hispanicity/*Latinidad* and the commodification of the purported Hispanic/Latina/o culture, most visibly in the area of localization. This process manifests itself in the creation of Spanish-language media markets (Internet, television, radio, advertising, and so on) that, although seemingly empowering Spanish-speaking groups, remains a reflection of the production of racialized colonial subjects and the perpetuation of the English-Spanish asymmetry (Cervantes-Rodríguez and Lutz 2003:547-549). In this case, translation ceases its customary unidirectionality from Spanish to English towards a greater interactivity between both languages, yet minoritization does not become obliterated. Rather, translation facilitates the development of a scenario of “sameness through difference” (Cronin 2003:89-92) whereby the apparent recognition of the value of bilingualism and sensitivity to language loss underlies the homogenization and commodification of the Hispanic/Latina/o population. Although it would certainly be misinformed to claim that bilingualism has solely been utilized for racial—and racist—categorization, race has persistently influenced the status of minority languages in the United States and official translation policies. From neo-Babelianism by default (with minority languages regarded as un-American), through sameness through difference strategies (with language diversity closely linked to the spread of consumerism), the interplay of translation and bilingualism has generally benefitted the English-Spanish asymmetry and the Anglo-Saxon/Protestant hegemony.

In this regard, while it is often assumed that translation reinforces the (dominant) identities of the languages involved under certain social conditions (in this case the English-Spanish asymmetry in the United States determines and regulates the translation dynamics), I propose to add a new type of translation that, rather than reinforce the asymmetries embedded in the coloniality of power, seeks to undermine the very identities underlying the power/language relation. Such a new type of translation both stems and departs from Jakobson’s deterministic conceptualization of translation ‘proper’ (translation as the condition of signification, yet resulting from an essential core of meaning) and Bhabha’s non-substantive conceptualization of translation (translation as detached from notions of ‘source’ and ‘target’, yet working between previously established borders) to incorporate language asymmetries as they intersect with racial subjectification.

In his study of translation and cultural formation in the Americas, Edwin Gentzler points to ‘border writing’ as a form of writing that “originated in the oldest colonies of the Americas” and where “languages are in constant flux [...], ‘native’ language is almost an oxymoron, and translational identity is a given” (2008:165). Gentzler’s discussion of border writing is visibly influenced by deconstruction and, particularly, by Jacques Derrida’s essay ‘Living On/Border Lines’, where Derrida calls for a reconsideration of classical models of translation a propos of multilingual reference, polysemia, and *dissémination*. Through a combination of philosophic, psychoanalytic, and historiographic models, Gentzler portrays translation, rather than as a formal activity that takes place between national(ized) languages, as a permanent condition in the Americas that extends beyond national borders—yet his approach remains indebted to the two-side border model of translation.

Seeking to uncover marks and traces of subaltern languages covered by hegemonic languages, Gentzler retains the idea of translation as “speaking in another’s words” (2008:179). Indeed, that is one of the basic premises of Western translation discourse—that is, the production of texts from one language to another under the assumption of a shared expressive capacity. Yet, how do traditional models of translation apply to border writing and, more importantly, how does border writing inform the ontological dimension of translation? If, as D. Emily Hicks argues, “by choosing a strategy of translation rather than representation, border writers ultimately undermine the distinction between original and alien culture” (1991:xxiii), to what extent do traditional approaches to translation shed light on the study of border writing? And if the nature of translation appears inevitably linked to the notion of representation, how is it possible that border writers opt to choose translation *rather than* representation?

As I pointed out above, translation has participated in the formation of racialized colonial subjects and ethnocultural minorities as a source of apparently unmediated representation. Detached from questions of coloniality, translation has dominantly been conceptualized as a mimetic activity that seeks to render an essential meaning or a transcendental signified, hence dehistoricizing the materiality of language and the asymmetrical relations of power among languages. In this regard, far from negating the interplay of translation and representation, the strategy of translation to the detriment of representation that is present in border writing seeks to problematize the dominant mode of representation as a regime of truth (translation ‘proper’ as the proper sense of translation) and to rethink translation as a site of revision. For Hicks, “the border writer as translator understands that art is not a representation of reality that lies beyond itself but rather a nonlinear movement among the fragments that constitute it” (1991:67). Translation in border writing stems from, and reclaims, the metonymic construction of racialized colonial subjects—that is, translation as a purportedly transparent means of representation that, nevertheless, (re)presents particular versions of the colonized that obliterate the ethnocentric violence that underlies translation as driven by power asymmetries. In other words, border writing aims at problematizing dominant notions of representation by pointing to the metonymic nature of translation and, as Hicks points out, ‘understanding’ the potential of translation not only as a hegemonic practice of representation but also as a form of self-definition that is, however, fragmentary on its own condition.

Certainly, as argued by Maria Tymoczko (1999:41-61, 278-300), translation is necessarily a metonymic and, consequently, fragmentary activity: translators make choices and, by so doing, engage in ideological negotiation. Translation, as a form of cultural conceptualization, is partial and incomplete *per se*, regardless of whether it is aimed at self-definition or at the definition of the Other. Hence, even as a counter-representation of a hegemonic representation of the Other, any translation as a form of cultural representation will be affected by its fragmented nature: intrinsically incomplete and perennially negotiated. What differences, then, exist between translation ‘proper’ as a (deceptive) regime of truth and the type of translation developed in border writing? Namely, the problematization of the borders crossed by translation or, put differently, the (uni)linearity of translation. Translation in border writing departs from the two-side border model in the direction of the border itself that figures translation as speaking in another’s words. Far from the transformation of a unified (‘proper’) core of meaning that reinforces the identities of the languages involved, translation in border writing stems from a relationship of non-identity. If translation inevitably entails the recognition of difference

(linguistic or otherwise), for without difference translation would cease to exist *ipso facto*, it becomes clear that such recognition inevitably appears embedded in questions of hegemony, the power/language relation, and the commodification of difference (as I discussed above in relation to the recreation of Hispanicity/*Latinidad* in the United States).

By shifting from the recognition of difference to a relationship of non-identity between cultural theory and praxis, border writing seeks to confront the ontological division of ‘source’/‘domestic’ and ‘target’/‘foreign’ standing at the very heart of Western translation discourse and its participation in processes of racial subjectification and the perpetuation of language asymmetries. Rather than an uncritical submission to sameness that negates the possibility of self-definition, non-identity in border writing becomes a means to appropriate and transcend the ideological rigidity of hegemonic cultural models—hence the significance of the border not simply as a place of differentiation but, more importantly, as a space for *différance*. As Harry Polkinhorn writes, “When you pass through it [the border], changes happen. *You* change; your perception of *it* changes. *It* is no longer it. Identity becomes non-identity” (1993:26). With that goal in mind, translation becomes a fundamental strategy, albeit not between (‘proper’) languages but within language itself, given the multiplicity of codes within any single language that, in light of Derrida’s notions of *différance* and *dissémination*, border writing emphasizes. Along the lines of Polkinhorn’s articulation of the border, translation in border writing is adopted as an agent of change from within or, what’s more, *from with-in: from the border, with multiple codes, in language*.

In this respect, I believe that Homi Bhabha’s otherwise elusive approach to translation becomes enlightening. For if translating from the border and with-in language inevitably leads back to the problematics of untranslatability (albeit in a significantly different sense than that posed by Jakobson), it also reveals the inadequacy of translation ‘proper’ vis-à-vis the language asymmetries embedded in the coloniality of power, and creates a site of interrogation of the rules of recognition and transformation that guide translational activity. Rather than a paradigmatic break with traditional models of translation, Bhabha’s non-substantive translation invites us to revise the notion of a ‘proper’ mode of translation, whereby “everyone is expected to know what a language is, the relation of one language to another, and especially identity or difference in fact of language” (Derrida 1992:225), toward the points of intersection in which the dominant identity of systems of signification and subjectification (and their attached norms and values) is questioned. Thus, translation allows for the performance of unexpected meanings and, hence, of *différance* and newness. From this perspective, translation does not consist so much in “speaking in another’s words” (Gentzler 2008:179) as in, following Chicano and ethnic studies scholar Alfred Arteaga (1994), speaking in an Other’s words.

### **Performing Translation: Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s ‘The New World Border’**

If translation not only holds the power to perpetuate but also to challenge hegemonic systems of signification and subjectification, how does it ‘translate’ into a discursive project of non-identity? In this section, I wish to approach the connection of translation with the ontology of bilingualism, the formation of language asymmetries, and the construction of racialized colonial subjects, by pointing to a paradigmatic example of contemporary border writing: performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s seminal piece ‘The New World Border’.

A founding member of the Border Arts Workshop/*Taller de Arte Fronterizo* (a bi-national arts collective that, from 1984 to 1990, explored the bilateral relations of Mexico and the United States), Guillermo Gómez-Peña is an outstanding figure in academic and public debates in the American continent, focusing on questions of identity, language, race, transnationalism, and globalization. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gómez-Peña shifted from a site-specific concept of the border to a so-called ‘global border consciousness’: “For me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go” (Gómez-Peña 1996:5). In this regard, Gómez-Peña’s ‘blurring’ of the border also signals a departure from the neo-Babelian dynamics of translation as approached from the standpoint of national languages: “Through multilingual publications, radio, film, video, and performance collaborations, more complex and mutable notions of ‘North American’ cultures and identities could be conceived” (1996:9). Translation, indeed, is the language of the Americas for Gómez-Peña, albeit not from a traditional perspective.

On account of its nature (performance art), the work of Gómez-Peña is constantly rewritten and (re)translated. The themes developed in ‘The New World Border’ (one of his most controversial performance pieces, and also the title of his seminal collection of essays, poems, and performance texts) have appeared throughout his oeuvre in different versions and under different titles: *Friendly Cannibals* (1996), ‘Borderscape 2000’ (2000), *El Mexterminator* (2002), and so on. At the same time, translation stands as one of the main themes of ‘The New World Border’, which features a mixture of “Spanish, French, English, Spanglish, Franglé, and several made up ‘robo-languages” (1996:21). In ‘The New World Border’, Gómez-Peña turns the so-called New World Order upside down by envisioning an American cartography where, following the opening of the Berlin Wall, the U.S.-Mexico border has disappeared and a series of micro-republics (such as Nuyo Rico, Cuba York, and Mexamerica) have emerged against the “capricious hands of economic domination and political bravado” (1996:6), giving way to a border zone in, and of, itself. The official language of the resulting New Federation of U.S. Republics is Spanglish, a hybrid tongue resulting from the contact between Spanish and English, and regulated under the ‘Spanglish-Only Initiative’:

I oppose the sinister cartography of the New World Order with the conceptual map of the New World Border — a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place in which no centers remain. It’s all margins, meaning there are no ‘others,’ or better said, the only true ‘others’ are those who resist fusion, *mestizaje*, and cross-cultural dialogue. In this utopian cartography, hybridity is the dominant culture; Spanglish, Franglé, and Gringoñol are *linguas francas* [sic];<sup>9</sup> and monoculture is a culture of resistance practiced by a stubborn or scared minority. (1996:7)

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<sup>9</sup> *Franglé* is a transcription into Spanish of the French coinage ‘*franglais*’ (*français* + *anglais*), a hybrid tongue that, in ‘The New World Border’, takes the shape of English spoken with an exaggerated French accent. Likewise, in Gómez-Peña’s performance piece, *Gringoñol*—a blend of the Spanish words ‘*gringo*’ (foreigner) and ‘*español*’ (Spanish)—refers to Spanish spoken with a thick U. S. English accent.

Embedded in Gómez-Peña's strategy of so-called 'reverse anthropology',<sup>10</sup> translation in 'The New World Border' apparently functions as what might accordingly be termed a strategy of 'reverse neo-Babelianism' of the power/language relation. That is, the dynamics of translation in 'The New World Border' apparently operate from formerly official languages (namely English and Spanish) to hybrid tongues (namely Spanglish). As Gentzler points out, for Gómez-Peña "there are only hybrid forms of language—Spanglish, Gringoñol, colloquial French, and shifting indigenous languages—which he uses strategically to exclude traditional Western readers" (2008:158). While it is certainly true that border writing emphasizes the violent experience of border crossers and requires a strong effort on the part of the reader to grasp the multiplicity of underlying discourses, I believe that the implications of Gómez-Peña's use of Spanglish, as well as other *ad hoc* hybrid tongues such as *Franglé* and *Gringoñol*, extend beyond the mere rhetoric of reverse neo-Babelianism. Quite to the contrary, they problematize the type of translation involved in neo-Babelianism by default, and function as points of access to ethnocentric assumptions on translation and identity:

The masterminds of the New World Order insist that the media, computer communications, cyber-space, and the global economy have already created a single, borderless world community. They speak of 'total culture' and 'total television,' a grandiose pseudo-internationalist world view à la CNN that creates the illusion of immediacy, simultaneity, and sameness, thereby numbing our political will and homogenizing our identities. (1996:10)

As I discussed above, translation stands as a crucial agent in the strategy of sameness through difference that characterized the construction and commodification of Hispanicity/*Latinidad*. In the public domain, translation promoted a dynamics of sameness whereby the incorporation of immigrants from officially Spanish-speaking countries and heritage learners was contingent on English language assimilation. In the private domain, translation triggered a dynamics of difference that homogenized and commodified Spanish-speaking immigrant groups into a single subordinate entity. This double movement of translation features prominently in Gómez-Peña's reflections on globalization and certainly informs his articulation of neo-Babelian Spanglish translation.

In *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language*, Ilán Stavans discusses the use of Spanglish as an "intra-ethnic vehicle of communication" (2003:43), that is, as a means to show empathy among the speakers of a given (minority) community. Yet, the imposition of Spanglish—or any hybrid tongue for that matter—in 'The New World Border' does not belong in the sphere of the intra- or the extra-ethnic, but indeed aims at questioning the notion of ethnicity itself. Gómez-Peña's use of Spanglish does not simply exclude deliberately the monolingual reader (after all, his work has been extensively incorporated to predominantly-monolingual Anglophone cultural studies), but it is also part of a larger political strategy whereby monolingual audiences face the linguistic vertigo derived from a system of hybrid multilingualism and *lingua francas* that does not coincide with their world experience. Far from the dominance of transparent

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<sup>10</sup> Gómez-Peña explains reverse anthropology as follows: "What if Latinos were in power and could decide the terms of the debate? What if the United States was Mexico? What if Spanish was the official *lingua franca*? What if imagination was a form of political praxis? What if Anglo-Americans were nomadic minorities? We call this strategy 'reverse anthropology'" (2005:246).

and intelligible translation in the Anglo-American tradition (Venuti 1998), translation in ‘The New World Border’ highlights its performative nature and the interplay of *différance*, newness, and unexpected meanings. In this respect, as Gómez-Peña claims, “The ‘simultaneous translations’ were purposely incorrect. The idea was to force the audience to experience the cultural vertigo of living in a multilingual/multiracial society” (1996:21).<sup>11</sup> Quite rightly, Gómez-Peña points to the incidence of the coloniality of power in the New World Order and the configuration of languages as racial markers. In this way, translation—and, in this case, mistranslation—links with dominant ethnolinguistic assumptions and points to the geo-social border on which the Anglo/Hispanic differentiation has traditionally rested. Yet, it is precisely translation (albeit in the form of speaking in an Other’s words, as I suggest) that allows for the identitarian metamorphosis that so-called ‘traditional Western readers’ are incited to experience, whereby they become border crossers facing the trials of cultural, or rather transcultural, translation.

Whereas the act of exclusion is certainly an intrinsic component of the border experience, the type of exclusion that monolingual audiences are subject to in the shape of reverse neo-Babelian translation is not as one-dimensional as it may seem. Gómez-Peña’s strategy does not simply seek to reverse the roles that Anglo-Protestant and Hispanic/Latina/o communities have played in the recent history of North America, but to do so in a way that releases the multiplicity of discourses surrounding the idea of an official national language. Under its apparent fabric of neo-Babelian Spanglish-only policy, Gómez-Peña reveals the mendacious commensurability of the national signifier and the language it claims to signify, hence creating a crisis of authority based on a system of language recognition. Monolingual audiences are not only expected to experience a sense of exclusion but, more importantly, to feel interrogated throughout the process of translation. After all, as Gómez-Peña argues, “people with social, racial, or economic privilege have an easier time crossing physical borders, but they have a much harder time negotiating the invisible borders of culture and race” (1996:9). In this way, monolingual readers are prompted to experience the anxiety of representation derived from the border, that is, to travel not simply from North to South or from English into Spanglish, but more importantly from a politics of a common culture and a national identity to a politics of a translational non-identity. In this context, the tensions that stem from cultural interface are not eventually resolved, but the process invites readers to reconsider the mechanisms that homogenize identity as it intersects with ethnolinguistic assumptions.

Consequently, I argue that, whereas most attention has been paid to the instrumentalization of Spanglish, Gómez-Peña attempts to liberate the multilingual condition of language *per se*, hence undermining the assumption that hybrid tongues are exclusively produced by a geopolitical situation of language contact and revealing the inherent attachment of language to processes of hybridization. I believe that one of the most significant contributions of Gómez-Peña’s performance piece lies in his reconceptualization of languages, which extends beyond or, as I argue, within the constraints of language. By shifting the perspective from translating *between* languages to translating *with-in* language, Gómez-Peña articulates a reconsideration of the ontological hierarchy in which notions of ‘major’ and ‘minor’ ethnolinguistic groups appear trapped. Rather than a neo-Babelian erasure of difference by way of reversed assimilation, ‘The

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<sup>11</sup> By ‘simultaneous translations’ Gómez-Peña refers to the (often pseudo-) simultaneous interpreting that frequently accompanies the interventions of the characters in ‘The New World Border’.

New World Border’ undermines the discourse that legitimizes the continued domination of major languages under the banner of equality and democracy. In this way, Gómez-Peña triggers the recognition of difference by pointing to the inherently displaced and heterogeneous core of what is deemed unified and homogeneous.

Indeed, when Gómez-Peña writes, “I find myself in kinship with nonwhite English-speaking writers from India and the West Indies, Native Americans, and Chicanos” (quoted in Fusco 1995: 157), he is not simply stating the obvious—that he finds himself in a peripheral position to hegemonic centers of power. Instead, he is articulating the functioning of the multilingual body, whose multiple belonging makes the annihilation of the geopolitical realm of words possible. In ‘The New World Border’, languages do not signal linguistic belonging but the transitional zones from which identity emanates. In the case of Gómez-Peña, the use of Spanglish, Spanish, English, *Franglé*, and *Gringoñol* in an inter-inclusive fashion underscores the multiple identities of language use on the border zone. Ultimately, languages and translation in ‘The New World Border’ are embraced not simply as intra-ethnic vehicles of communication, but as axes of interaction that keep questioning, retracing, and crossing the borders that surround them.

## **Conclusion**

This article opened with a discussion of translation ‘proper’ from the standpoint of *différance*, *dissémination*, and newness, traced the role of language and translation in the racialization of the Hispanic/Latina/o population in the United States, and looked at Mexican-American border writing as a site to rethink dominant conceptualizations of translation. In this respect, I suggested that translation *from within* languages draws from Jakobson’s articulation of translation as the condition of signification while repositioning the two-side border model of translation around the border itself and the multiplicity of codes that coexist, interact, and conflict with one another. Yet, rather than focusing *on* the border, I believe that, in order to move beyond dominant conceptualizations of translation ‘proper’ in the direction of new forms of translation as speaking in an Other’s words, translation studies should think *from* the border (Mignolo 2000) to address those questions couched in the coloniality of power and the power/language relation towards the performative and transformative dimensions of translation.

I suggest that translation studies reconsider its involvement with forms of resistance and counterdiscursiveness that exceed the foundations of ‘proper’ forms of translation. While it is certainly true that translation would self-destruct were it not for the existence of different languages (hence the necessity of borders), it is not sufficient to look at languages as underlying a single identity. As I argued, translation not only holds the power to reinforce the identity of the languages involved, but also to question the pervasive dichotomies of Western translation discourse. If, as Maria Tymoczko argues (2007:7), the assumed neutrality of translators only facilitates the ascendancy of the values of the dominant powers, the theory and practice of translation should question its compliance with hegemonic arrangements that place a systemic translation burden on those who do not speak the major language in the shape of policies of neo-Babelianism by default and sameness through difference. Ultimately, translation should participate in the elaboration of a new cartography that, far from hegemonic language ideologies, reveals and engages in the fluctuating boundaries of cultural interface.

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