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978-0-521-72161-5 - Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature

Lawrence Alan Rosenwald

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MULTILINGUAL AMERICA

Throughout its history, America has been the scene of multiple encounters between communities speaking different languages. Literature has long sought to represent these encounters in various ways, from James Fenimore Cooper's frontier fictions to the Jewish-American writers who popularized Yiddish as a highly influential modern vernacular. While other studies have concentrated on isolated parts of this history, Lawrence Rosenwald's book is the first to consider the whole story of linguistic representation in American literature, and to consider how multilingual fictions can be translated and incorporated into a national literary history. He uses case studies to analyze the most important kinds of linguistic encounters, such as those between Europeans and Native Americans, those between slaveholders and African slaves, and those between immigrants and American citizens. This ambitious, engaging book is an important contribution to the study of American literature, history, and culture.

LAWRENCE ALAN ROSENWALD is Anne Pierce Rogers Professor of American Literature at Wellesley College.

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For Sacvan Bercovitch
Teacher and Friend

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I

This book is about how writers of American literature, both in English and in other languages, have represented encounters in America between communities speaking different languages, in particular those between Europeans and Native Americans, those between slaveholders and African slaves, and those between immigrants and Americans.

Most definitions, even the simplest, have hidden complexities and polemical points to make; mine has three. The first concerns the word “American.” It is an imprecise term; as used above, it implies wrongly that America is co-extensive with the United States. But “United States” is also an imprecise term, especially when it is used to refer to events in parts of North America that became part of the United States only later. There is no perfect term here; I use the imperfect ones as seems appropriate, and “American” more often.

The second concerns the word “encounters.” A fair amount of recent sociolinguistic work argues against using that term (or terms similar to it, e.g., “contacts”), and in favor of using the term “conflict.” “The debate,” writes Henri Boyer, “between the advocates of a sociolinguistics that *describes language contacts* and those of a sociolinguistics that *investigates language conflicts*, whether latent or declared, is still alive.”¹ Those who prefer “conflicts” have much going for them; too often terms like “encounter” or “contact” have been used to obscure invasion, oppression, slavery, all the horrific instances of what Louis-Jean Calvet has called “glottophagie,” the eating up of languages.² But to use “conflicts” to replace “encounters” altogether is to deny in advance the possibility of happily productive relations between languages – for example, the interanimation of Yiddish and English that

¹ Henri Boyer (ed.), *Plurilinguisme: “contact” ou “conflit” de langues?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), p. 7.

This translation, and all translations not otherwise attributed, are my own.

² See Louis-Jean Calvet, *Linguistique et colonialisme: petit traité de glottophagie* (Paris: Payot, 1974).

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produced, among other great texts, Jacob Glatshsteyn's "If Joyce had Written Yiddish." Many of the language encounters this book investigates are full of conflict; but I retain the term "encounters" so as not to determine the outcome of the investigations in advance.

The third concerns the word "communities," which I use to imply a defining exclusion: the wide range of distinguished American memoirs about the complexly multilingual lives of individuals – for example, in alphabetical order, Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, and Charles Simic's *A Fly in the Soup*. I admire them all. But this book is not focused on their vivid, individual cosmopolitanism. Rather it is focused on literature that seeks to represent *collective* encounters.

So defined and circumscribed, the topic of this book matters in two ways: as bearing on some crucial patterns in American history, and as bearing on how literature works and is judged.

Developing the first point means, to begin with, establishing the importance of the subject matter. That is easy. Colonization, slavery, immigration have shaped and are shaping American life. They need to be understood in all their aspects, linguistic aspects included.

Linguistic aspects in particular, in fact. The historical record consistently dramatizes what we know from our own daily experience: the intimate, frequent, almost universal relations between language³ and individual and collective identity, between language and communication. Christopher Columbus's journal of his first landing in the Caribbean (which did not as yet have that name): "I have caused six of [the inhabitants] to be taken on board and sent to your Majesties, that they may learn to speak."⁴ Olaudah Equiano, a newly arrived slave in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia: "I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand."⁵ Theodore Roosevelt in 1917, a high point of immigration to the United States: "We must have but one flag. We must also have but one language . . . We cannot tolerate

³ More than once, in working on this project, I have wished English had the distinction French has, between *langue* and *langage*, *langue* being used to refer to such things as French, English, and German, *langage* to refer to our particular mode of using whatever *langue* we're speaking. I have tried to make that distinction explicit, but the ambiguity in the English word is hard to resist.

⁴ Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, Jr. (eds. and trans.), *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492–1493, Abstracted by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 68.

⁵ Olaudah Equiano, "The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself," in Arna Bontemps (ed.), *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 34.

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any attempt to oppose or supplant the language and culture that has [sic] come down to us from the builders of this Republic with the language and culture of any European country.”⁶

To understand these large dramas in American linguistic history we need to read linguistics, and this book draws on a fair amount of writing by linguists then and now. But we also need to read literature. For one thing, literature plays a primary role in the reception and interpretation of linguistic history. James Fenimore Cooper’s novels of the frontier, Kate Chopin’s stories of Louisiana, Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread-Givers* have done more to shape a shared sense of the language encounters they depict than have Ives Goddard’s expert accounts of Delaware and Delaware Pidgin, Albert Valdman’s dictionary of Louisiana French Creole, or Max Weinreich’s “Vegn englishe elementn in undzer kulturshprakh” (“On English Elements in Our Culture-Language”).

We also need to read literature to understand linguistic history itself; we need the artistic imagination if we are to integrate linguistic fact into a portrait of individual and social experience. It is that imagination which seeks to figure out, say, what it felt like to be made a slave, stripped of one’s language, obliged to create language anew; what the relation was between that linguistic trauma and the physical burdens of slavery, its daily oppression, the slaves’ hidden moments of solidarity, their sly or open rebellions, the coded language in which these rebellions were plotted or announced; the slaves’ search to build new families, knit together by a new language, the experience of having those families torn apart, the language for lamenting that sundering. Makers of imaginative literature may not succeed in so ambitious an enterprise; but even their failures are instructive, and their successes are revelatory.

So literature can teach us something about linguistic history. The reverse is true as well, indeed is true in consequence. If, that is, we argue that literature has something to teach us about linguistic history, then we have to consider the quality of its teaching, its intelligence about these matters, as an element of its aesthetic success or failure. We cannot, to put it overschematically, think of literature as a mode of truth-telling and then not require it to tell the truth – about language and language encounters no less than about, say, the experience of working women and slaves and union organizers, the details of meat processing in Chicago or migrant labor in California, Nat Turner’s Rebellion or the American Revolution. There

⁶ James Crawford (ed.), *Language Loyalties: A Source Book on the Official English Controversy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 85.

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are facts of the matter here, and literature needs to be judged at least in part on its representation of them.⁷ Much of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* represents Native American languages as non-linguistic: as gesture, as music, as grunt and exclamation. Most of Chopin's stories represent Louisiana French Creole as a quaint shade of local color. Much of Yezierska's *Bread-Givers* represents Yiddish simply as a series of curses, and in a crucial scene the narrator refers to the Yiddish influence on Jewish immigrant English as "murdering the language." These are all falsifications, however influential then or now, and it is important to expose them.

It is also important to praise what is praiseworthy, and censoriousness makes that possible; condemning literary failure enables us to admire literary success. A few passages of Cooper's novel anticipate by over a century the fine insights into Native American poetry of such twentieth-century anthropologist-translators as Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock. A few passages of Yezierska's, not crucial passages, seeming almost casual, suggest in their rhythm and syntax something of the wonderfully fruitful influences English and Yiddish were to exercise on each other across the twentieth century and beyond. Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde," or rather a single moment of that deeply ambivalent story, lets us see Louisiana French Creole as a real language, one that we do not know but which is full of expressive power. These representations convey surprising truths and deserve celebration.

II

The book consists of seven sections. The first two, consisting of this preface and a methodological introduction, are an orientation. They are followed by three lengthy case studies, each commenting on both a particular language encounter and a particular text representing it. In the first case study, the language encounter is that between Native Americans and Europeans, and the text is Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. In the second, the language encounter is that among English, French, and Louisiana French Creole, and the texts are George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* and Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* ("The Saint-Ybars Plantation"). In the third, the language encounter is that between Yiddish and English, and the text is Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns* ("Motl the Cantor Peyse's Son"). The last two chapters of the book, one on translating multilingual literature and one on how to write the history of American literature in

⁷ See on this Christopher Ricks's wonderful "Literature and the Matter of Fact," in *Essays in Appreciation* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996).

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all its languages, explore how the great American language fictions can be integrated into our sense of American literature.

The methodological introduction is necessary for a high reason and a low one. The high reason is that assessing literary works as language fictions requires figuring out some difficult questions of poetics, of literature's means of mimesis. The introduction is intended to contribute to that large task. The low reason is that much assessment of language fictions has been done very badly. It has too often depended on sloppy description, on unexamined assumptions about what is and is not possible in literature, on confusions between dialect and language, on being insufficiently attentive to the constraints and possibilities of particular genres, on unwarranted indifference to linguistic fact. The introduction is also intended to expose and get rid of some of these hindering practices.

I have written about what I could read and what interested me. But I have also chosen texts and encounters in relation to my sense of American linguistic history. I have come to see language encounters in America as falling into three large categories: between invaders and locals, between immigrants and locals, and between slaves and slaveholders. Believing that a book intended to offer a broad view of this subject should consider all three, I have devoted one case study to each.

There are leaks in these categories, of course, and cases right at the boundaries between one category and another. But the categories are both typological and historical; each corresponds to a kind of relationship between two language groups encountering each other, but each real encounter happens in a particular time and place. Classifying encounters is therefore less tricky than it might seem; it depends not only on the languages in question but on the historical situation in which they meet. In the sixteenth century, in Mexico, Spanish-speakers were invaders in relation to Nahuatl-speaking locals. In the twenty-first century, in New York, Spanish-speakers are for the most part immigrants in relation to English-speaking locals. In the sixteenth century, in much of North America, both English and French were invaders' languages in relation to Native American languages. After the Civil War, in Louisiana, English was the invaders' language, French that of the locals.

The first category is best exemplified by encounters between Europeans (and later European Americans) and Native Americans. Europeans came to the world they called new, sought to take control of the land, sought variously to conquer, dispossess, exploit, convert, study, remake, and unmake its inhabitants. Native Americans sought for the most part to resist these undertakings, though also to engage the invaders to their own benefit. The

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linguistic aspects of these encounters include, on the European side, study and classification and evaluation and suppression of Native American languages, contrastive evaluation of European ones; on the Native American side, surely a reciprocal study and classification and evaluation of European languages (though much less abundantly documented than on the European side), imposition of Native American languages on European ones, resistance in diverse forms to having Native American languages suppressed and supplanted.

These encounters began with Columbus's 1492 arrival at Guanahani, which he renamed San Salvador, and a good many of them had taken place before 1826, when Cooper published *The Last of the Mohicans*. But Cooper was the first great American writer to make these language encounters a central artistic subject. Nor was he simply looking backward at that subject. Rather his complex and influential novel, tenaciously attentive to the representation of language and languages, was written during a grimly important episode in American intercultural history, namely that of the United States' project of Indian Removal, intended to expel eastern Native Americans from their lands, and thereby to make those lands available for European American use. In life, Cooper supported that project and the linguistic ideas that rationalized it, but he also read and admired the work of his contemporaries John Heckewelder and Peter Duponceau, meticulous students and admirers of Native American languages, whose sense of those languages was sharply at odds with the arguments by which Removal was defended. Cooper's novel both undergirds and undermines the project of Removal that was its most pertinent environment.

The second category, encounters between immigrants and locals, is the reverse of the first. Again, groups choose to come to North America from other parts of the world. But now they seek not to conquer but almost to be conquered: to be assimilated, to become citizens of the local state. Here too the linguistic story is complicated. On the immigrant side, it includes learning and judging the new language, sometimes abandoning the old and sometimes stubbornly holding on to it, incorporating elements of the new into the old, having arguments about such incorporation. On the local side, the issues are similar: judging the immigrant language, teaching the local language, incorporating elements of the former into the latter, arguing about the propriety of doing that.

The peak year of American immigration is 1907, the peak period between 1880 and 1924. Of the immigrant literatures I know from that tumultuous period, the richest in texts dealing with language encounters is that of the Eastern European Jews who came to the United States towards the end of

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the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. They spoke and wrote Yiddish (among other languages) in Eastern Europe, and they often held fast to Yiddish when they came to the United States, stubbornly choosing to write in it long after they had mastered English, making it the vehicle of their perceptively ambivalent accounts of two languages and civilizations in contact. The fictions of Joseph Opatoshu, the poems of Anna Margolin and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, the sketches of Moshe Nadir all bear witness to that encounter. But no work in the repertory is more dazzlingly, playfully perceptive than Sholem Aleichem's *Motl the Cantor's Son*, one of the great American language fictions, and the most cheerful.

The third category consists of encounters between slaves and those who enslave and then exploit them. Here the linguistic story involves not only relations between pre-existing languages, but also the creation of new ones, which most linguists call creoles. The process is both common and almost miraculous. First, contact languages – jargons, pidgins – are improvised for communication between slaves on the one hand, slave-traders and slave-holders on the other, and among slaves not having another language in common. (Usually the slave-traders' language becomes what linguists call the lexifier, i.e., the principal though not exclusive source of vocabulary.) But then, and most often when slaves' access to the lexifier is sharply restricted, contact languages become nativized – that is, become the native languages, often the only native languages, among slaves' children; and in becoming nativized they acquire the full range of expression, suppleness, and complexity that all languages have that are someone's native language. In slavery, despite slavery, slaves create and develop new languages.

In the United States, creoles are rare. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant argue in *Éloge de la créolité* that this has to do with an American habit of mind:

The sociohistorical processes that produced Americanization are not of the same sort as those at work in producing Creolization. Americanization, and thus the feeling of Americanness that emerges from it, is a term describing the gradual adaptation of western peoples to the realities of the world they called new . . . Americanness is thus in large measure an emigrant culture in splendid isolation.⁸

But the better and simpler explanation is demographic. Many linguists argue that for a creole to develop, one needs a slave:slaveholder ratio of at least 4:1; otherwise access to the lexifier isn't hard enough to get. In most parts of America where slaves were held, the ratio was lower. The two

⁸ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp. 29–30 (my translation).

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creoles documented in North America, English-based Gullah and French-based Louisiana Creole, confirm these principles of explanation. Gullah speakers were cut off geographically from access to the English lexifier; Louisiana Creole did not originate in Louisiana, but came there by way of the Caribbean, its place of origin, where the slave:slaveholder ratio was 4:1 and higher.⁹

Of the two creoles we have, Louisiana Creole has the advantage, for a critic looking for complex language encounters, of being situated in an already polyglot context; French and English had already begun their long conflict in Louisiana when Creole arrived there, with Spanish also playing a significant role. Creole is also the more richly documented of the two languages, the more vigorously disputed, and the more ambitiously and exactly depicted.

It is not, as it happens, documented by any distinguished literary artist at the moment of its forming, in the early eighteenth century; as with the encounter between Native American languages and European ones, the encounters between Louisiana Creole and the languages interacting with it become a literary subject only sometime after the encounters have begun. The two great accounts of that subject date from the late nineteenth century: George Washington Cable's *The Grandissimes* and Alfred Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*, published respectively in 1880 and 1881, differing sharply in mode of representation, similar in seriousness of purpose and closeness of attention.

For distinguished American non-anglophone language fictions to matter, two things have to happen. First, we have to figure out how to translate them into English; otherwise they won't be read. Second, we have to figure out how to write the history of a national literature in multiple languages; otherwise these fictions can't be integrated into our national story.

Chapters 4 and 5, the last two chapters of the book, are devoted to these two tasks. Chapter 4 concerns translation, exploring how, as a matter of the translator's art, the task of translation can be accomplished. Translating works that seriously seek to represent language encounters raises tricky questions for translation theory generally, which for the most part rests on an unstated assumption that both source work and target work are

⁹ Some linguists regard Black English as a creole; see, e.g., J. L. Dillard, *Black English* (New York: Vintage, 1973). I don't find their arguments convincing; in all the documents we have, Black English seems to me a variety of English, not a language distinct from English in the way that Haitian Creole is distinct from French. On creoles generally, see Chapter 2. My thanks to John McWhorter for help in understanding these issues.

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unilingual. So does translating such works when, as often happens, a single language, in this case English, is both one of the languages represented by the work and the target language of the translation.

The chapter begins with some general reflections on the translation of multilingual texts, then presents brief case studies of five texts, two previously discussed and three new ones: Mercier's *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*; Sholem Aleichem's *Motl*; Jeannette Lander's 1971 German-language American novel, *Ein Sommer in der Woche der Itke K.* ("A Summer in the Week of Itke K."); the Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega's 1981 story, "Pollito: Chicken"; and the Chicano writer Rolando Hinojosa's 1981 novel, *Mi querido Rafa*, and his 1985 translation of it, *Dear Rafa*.

Chapter 5 concerns the writing of literary history. No comprehensive history of American literature even comes close to representing the multilingual literatures of America, and though some of the deficiencies result from ordinary laziness and shortsightedness, some result from stubborn problems of theory. The chapter begins with some reflections on the definition of American literature; it then examines how our comprehensive literary histories, above all Sacvan Bercovitch's ambitious and often wonderful *Cambridge History of American Literature*, have dealt with non-anglophone American literatures, assesses their successes and failures, and offers suggestions about how to do better.

III

Some of the best work on this subject in its broadest sense has focused on the literary representation of dialect. I have read some of that work and learned much from it. But dialect encounters are significantly different from language encounters; so are texts representing the former from texts representing the latter; so are critical studies of the one sort of text from critical studies of the other.¹⁰

Of the work that does focus specifically on the literary representation of language encounters, some is hampered by the critic's decision to look at that topic in isolation from whatever can be known about the languages and language encounters themselves. Thus Andrew Newman's thoughtful essay, "Sublime Translation in the Novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott," which quotes Flora's remark in *Waverley* that Gaelic is an "uncommonly vocalic" language but does not investigate whether that claim is true, is practicing another kind of criticism than the sort I have in

¹⁰ See below, pp. 5–11, for an extended technical account of the distinction.

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mind here,¹¹ which is distinguished by its insistence both on knowing the linguistic facts and on judging literature in relation to them.

Other work, notably that of the fine critic Doris Sommer, is hampered by its own passionate advocacy; her enterprise might be summed up as a case for polyglot cosmopolitanism. Sommer describes her *Bilingual Aesthetics* as “a range of friendly provocations about the benefits of bilingualism.”¹² “Come play bilingual games with me,” she says to her readers. “Maybe you already play them . . . In that case, the invitation is to think together about why the games are good for you and good for the country” (xi). Or, more exaggeratedly: “only on the multilinguistic borders, where Rabelais wrote, are reason, humor, and wisdom available” (50).

There is great value, in this often rigidly unilingual country, in celebrating complexly multilingual identities and their multilingual literary expressions. But such celebration can become melodrama, featuring multilingual heroes and unilingual villains. It assumes we have already assigned positive values to hybridity, multilingualism, and *mestizaje*, negative ones to parochialism and homogeneity. That assumption is a limitation; the values of these qualities need to be investigated, and respectful attention paid to works that portray, say, the unilingual as the servant of her endangered culture, the multilingual as the rootless cosmopolitan, the polyglot as the traitor from within. As a matter of personal choice, I side with the cosmopolitan. But the goal of this book is investigation.¹³

That leaves a small body of fine work on the topic as I define it, investigating it by what seem to me the necessary methods. Of that work I would single out Meir Sternberg’s fundamental theoretical investigations; the wide-ranging explorations, both critical and anthological, of Jonathan Arac, Eric Cheyfitz, Gavin Jones, Marc Shell, and Werner Sollors; and particular studies of Cooper and his context by Helen Carr, Cheyfitz, and David Simpson, of the multilingual literature of Louisiana by Jones, and of literature representing the encounter between English and Yiddish by Sollors, Aviva Taubenfeld, Hana Wirth-Nesher, and Kenneth Wishnia.¹⁴

¹¹ Andrew Newman, “Sublime Translation in the Novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 59: 1 (2004), p. 14.

¹² Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. viii. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from this work will be given in the text.

¹³ Not always, but often, critics like Sommer focus not on the social fictions that are my central texts here, but on the brilliant personal memoirs I have chosen not to consider. That focus is in accord with the aim of such criticism, i.e., to celebrate cosmopolitan individuals.

¹⁴ For Sternberg’s work see the Introduction. For the other scholars cited: Jonathan Arac, “Babel and Vernacular in a Postcolonial Empire of Immigrants: Howells and the Languages of American Fiction,” *Boundary 2* 34:2 (Summer 2007), pp. 1–20, and “Global and Babel: Two Perspectives

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It's a tricky balancing act, on the one hand acknowledging the work of other scholars, on the other defining one's own new contribution. I owe the scholars just cited a great debt of gratitude, impersonal in some cases, happily personal in most; their work has enabled me to take some new steps in our collective investigation, in particular to bring together aspects of that investigation that have mostly been carried out in isolation from one another. This is, to my knowledge, the only book on our shared subject that begins by sketching a technical method of analysis, proceeds to consider all the chief kinds of language encounter, and before concluding explores how the literature of American multilingualism can be brought into our readerly consciousness and our national narrative. It offers, that is, a first synthesis, tentative and no doubt impermanent, but useful.

IV

One Saturday morning in the summer of 2005, traveling from South Station in Boston to Davis Square in Somerville on the way to shabbat services at Havurat Shalom, I noted in my commonplace book all the languages I encountered along the way, plus a number of other evocations of American multilingualism. The first part of the trip was in a subway car; there I noted the familiar English/Spanish bilingualism of the transit authority notices – for example, “Passenger emergency intercom unit at end of car/ Sistema de intercomunicación para pasajeros en caso de emergencia situado al extremo del tren”; an advertisement for “guaranteed Swahili”; a similar

on Language in American Literature,” *ESQ* 50:1–3 (2004), pp. 95–119; Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from The Tempest to Tarzan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), above all the chapter called “White Writers, Creole Languages”; Marc Shell, “Babel in America: Or, The Politics of Language Diversity in the United States,” *Critical Inquiry* 20:1 (Autumn 1993), pp. 103–27, and Shell (ed.), *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Werner Sollors (ed.), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Shell and Sollors (eds.), *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Reception of Native American Literature, 1790–1936* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); Cheyfitz, “Literally White, Figuratively Red: The Frontier of Translation in *The Pioneers*,” in Robert Clark (ed.), *James Fenimore Cooper: New Critical Essays* (London: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1985); David Simpson, *The Politics of American English, 1776–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Aviva Taubenfeld, “‘Only an L’: Linguistic Borders and the Immigrant Author in Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* and *Yankee der Yankee*,” in Sollors (ed.), *Multilingual America*; Hana Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *New Essays on Call It Sleep* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), which includes fine essays both by Sollors and by Wirth-Nesher herself; Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Kenneth Wishnia, “‘A Different Kind of Hell’: Orality, Multilingualism, and American Yiddish in the Translation of Sholem Aleichem’s *Mister Boym in Klozet*,” *AJS Review* 20:2 (1993), pp. 333–58.

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advertisement for TOEFL courses; a man to my left reading a newspaper in a language that looked to me like Chinese; two men across from me conducting a conversation in Amharic (not a language I recognize, but as one of them left the car I asked him, in English, what language he had been speaking). I was making my own contribution to this multilingual scene, too, in that when I wasn't looking around or writing something down I was reading Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*.

Then, walking on College Avenue from Davis Square to Havurat Shalom, I passed the Église Baptiste de la Bible, a Haitian church with a Haitian-speaking congregation but a French name and two French Bible verses posted outside: "Levons-nous et Bâissons," "Voici la porte de l'éternel; c'est par elle qu'entrent les justes." The latter verse was especially resonant for me; I had seen it, or rather its Hebrew original (*zeh ha-she'ar hashem, tsaddikim yavo'u vo*), on the shadowed front door of a synagogue in Ahmadabad, in India, and I have often sung it in its Hebrew form, since it is part of the Jewish liturgy on most holidays. When I reached Havurat Shalom, I encountered the last two languages of my unspectacular morning journey: the Hebrew of the liturgy, which this morning did not include the Haitian church's Bible verse, and the Russian spoken by two members of my congregation (one Russian, one American) to each other and to their infant daughter.

It is exhilarating to imagine a novelist, one with a Dickens-like alertness to the ways in which apparently sundered lives intersect one another, who could make these diverse phenomena into a single story. It would be a story of modes of immigration, of individual and collective choices to assimilate or to refuse assimilation, of religious communities linked by common texts but understanding and using those texts in deeply opposed ways, of the local rootedness of congregations and communities juxtaposed to the cheerful globalism of "guaranteed Swahili," of the simple, solid, official bilingualism of the subway car juxtaposed to the dazzling multilingualism of the car's transient passengers, of the relation in language use between collective and individual identity.

Such a novel would have to be a multilingual one, one that found ways of doing justice to the linguistic diversity of its characters and scenes. Neither American literature nor any other literature I know has many such novels, and that fact seems to me to mark a failure of response and ambition. A final aim of this book is to help create a climate in which gifted writers might dream of such a novel as a legitimate artistic goal, publishers assess such a novel as an enterprise worth supporting, and readers and critics feel that such a novel should command their attention.

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In writing this book I have been more than usually dependent on the generosity of other scholars, and am deeply grateful to those who have helped me.

I shall group most of these generous colleagues in relation to the chapters on which I consulted them. For the Introduction, Meir Sternberg. For Chapter 1, Gregory Dowd, Jan Terje Faarlund, Ives Goddard, Victor Golla, Steven Hackel, Kenneth Lincoln, Peter Nabokov, Andrew Newman, Barry O'Connell, Vicki Patterson, Blair Rudes, Peter Wogan, and above all Edward Gray and Laura Murray, who have been supporters and wise counselors for this part of my project for a good many years. For Chapter 2, Yvonne Hajda, Gavin Jones, Dana Kress, Andrea Levitt, Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh, David Sutcliffe, and Henry Zenk, with special thanks to a small group of creolists whose generosity was not only admirable but also indispensable: Michel DeGraff, Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, Tom Klingler, Mikael Parkvall, and John McWhorter. (As anyone who knows the creolist world will know, these scholars have their disagreements, but they share a willingness to help educate a curious outsider.) For Chapter 3, Gershon Freidlin, Stephen Jones, Michael Kramer, Eliezer Niborski, Joel Ratner, Karen Rosenberg, and Margaret Winters; special thanks to Hana Wirth-Nesher, and thanks above all to David Roskies, without whom – I mean this literally – my life and work would never have been such that I could write the chapter at all. For Chapter 4, Mona Baker, Dolores Prida, Raul Rubio, Judith Weiss, and especially my patient and generous Wellesley colleague Nancy Hall.

Some colleagues are harder to categorize, their contributions going beyond the scope of any single chapter. My thanks to Ray Ryan and Ross Posnock, for being willing to have a look at this idiosyncratic book, and to my Cambridge University Press readers, both for their support and for their criticism. Alison Thomas, the book's Argus-eyed copy-editor, read the manuscript with great care and improved it in numerous ways. My

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I owe a special debt to three Wellesley English Department colleagues: Bill Cain, Lisa Rodensky, and Margery Sabin. All read many of the chapters, all improved whatever they read, all supported the project as a whole, Bill put me in touch with Cambridge University Press, Margery vigorously supported the project even at moments when I was ready to give up on it. Lisa and I were on leave together when I was writing the book, and she read, scrutinized, and improved each chapter and each argument.

My wife, Cynthia Schwan, is my most rigorous and supportive reader; she demands that I make sense and not be pompous.

Two chapters draw significantly on earlier work of mine on this subject. Chapter 2 draws on "*The Last of the Mohicans* and the Languages of America," *College English* 60:1 (January 1998), pp. 9–30; Chapter 3 draws on "Alfred Mercier's Polyglot Plantation Novel," in Marc Shell (ed.), *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), and on "Sur quelques aspects de la traduction de textes créoles louisianais du xix^{ème} siècle" ("On the translation of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana Creole Texts"), *Études Créoles* 25:2 (2002), pp. 153–71.

We read in *Pirkei Avot*, *aseh lecha rav, ukeney lecha chaver*, "get yourself a teacher, find yourself a friend." Saki Bercovitch has been both teacher and friend to me since we first met, in 1970, and it gives me great, heartfelt pleasure to honor his teaching and friendship by dedicating this book to him.