Presidential Address

Multilingual US

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Hello, and thank you for coming. This is not how I expected to be addressing you today, and it was an extraordinarily difficult decision not to travel to DC. I want to begin by offering my deepest thanks to Paula Krebs, Karin Bagnall, and the entire MLA staff, who have worked so hard to hold us together through the pandemic and to make sure that we are having a convention as omicron forces us to change so many of our plans. I also want to thank Isabel Gómez, Jenny Forsythe, Esther Allen, and Patricia Arroyo, who were key interlocutors in planning the presidential theme and sessions and in developing this talk.

It has not been exactly the presidential year I imagined. Part of my motivation behind the theme of Multilingual US was to think about our labors outside the university, in public-facing work, to promote multilingualism and, more broadly, to encourage a deeper engagement with the place of multilingualism in the public humanities. Yet one of the many consequences of COVID has been the disappearance or temporary closure of many public and community spaces, as so much moved onto *Zoom*. My neighborhood library still will not allow patrons to enter the building, though books can be picked up at the door. So much for advising on the collections, multilingual story hour, and other fond thoughts.

At the same time, a year of profound upheaval has also opened up the space to think more critically about the nation and belonging, on the one hand, and about the reality of global interconnection, on the other. The remarks I offer here provide a framework for thinking about the work literary scholars do to support multilingualism in our

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various national contexts. Though most of us are not physically in DC, its symbolism holds: What better place to convene our thoughts about language and nation, immigration and political projects?

In 2003, my teacher and predecessor in this office, Mary Louise Pratt, published an impassioned call for "building a new public idea about language" in *Profession*. We have made some progress since then but have also lost significant ground, especially in the teaching of languages in universities, which is, of course, our particular purview. The country is more linguistically diverse: in 2019, 22% of respondents over the age of five spoke a language other than English at home, versus 18% in 2003. When you factor in the net growth of the population, that translates into almost 68 million people in 2019 versus 48.4 million in 2003. The Seal of Biliteracy program in high schools, which was launched in California in 2008 and has since expanded to forty-four states and to DC, recognizes the wealth of multilingualism that resides in local heritage communities and ideally should produce many language learners eager to continue their studies at the college level.

Spanish in particular has made great strides as a second national language, spoken at home by almost 42 million people. In my first presidential column, I noted how jarring it was to have Jennifer Lopez's use of Spanish at Joseph Biden's 2021 inauguration subtitled "speaks foreign language" by a major network. In late 2021, I went with some trepidation to see a reimagined *West Side Story* only to find that all the Spanish in the film was presented without subtitles, in contrast with the diegetic insistence that everyone in 1950s New York use English as a mark of their assimilation. In our time, an audience that treats Spanish as a US language is a given and makes space for allegiance to a multilingual America.

At the same time, the dual economic blows of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, and the growth of nationalism and populism that they fueled, have led to the closure of countless language programs, suspicion of the humanities, and a recrudescence of nativism in this period. At a conceptual and at a practical level, the need to address a broadening range of languages and cultures with fewer and fewer resources poses new challenges (see Damrosch). Meanwhile, machine learning has begun producing translations that grease the wheels of global capitalism. In the long wake of 9/11, Pratt was primarily focused on how to reset the United States' relationship to the world through the study of languages and cultures. To think about multilingualism today requires a frank recognition of how deeply imbricated it is in the history of the nation and its present domestic challenges and thus how it must be part of urgent projects of recuperation and critique. In this talk, I will pick out just one strand in the grand tapestry of languages in the US: promoting multilingualism, in all its complexity, requires understanding its layered and weaving threads and the constant tension that underlies the United States' relationship with other possible Americas.

Tongue and Groove

I begin with two pieces of public art in the vibrantly bookish city where I was fortunate enough to hold my first job. When you walk into the Allen Library at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle, you are greeted by a remarkable multipiece sculpture by Mare Blocker, Carl Chew, Ron Hilbert Coy, and J. T. Stewart. In the lobby, forty large ravens are suspended from the ceiling, carrying in their beaks various bits of type and other cultural symbols. On one wall is the title of the piece, *Raven Brings Light to This House of Stories*, in English and in the phonetic representation in Lushootseed, the language of Native Americans ancestral to the area (Chew et al.):

ʔuʔəx̌cəb ʔə kaẇqs
tiʔəʔ sləx̌il dxʷʔal
tiʔəʔ ʔalʔal ʔə syəyəhub

In the lore of Pacific Northwest peoples, Raven is the creature sent east to bring light to the west—one myth describes a time of such darkness that the People sent both Raven and Mink to bring back light (I certainly recall some rainy weeks like that in

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Seattle). The various parts of the sculpture, positioned throughout the building, adapt the story so that light becomes the knowledge assembled in the library's collections.

For the viewer unfamiliar with Lushootseed, the text underscores the limits to knowledge collected in settler books, libraries, and linguistic repertoires. Yet, instead of a fetishization of difference, it serves as a public announcement of UW's investment in Indigenous languages, as they transcend the province of ethnographers and elders to reach a much wider audience. The sculpture dates from the early nineties, yet it is predated by a long history of engagement with Native languages at UW, including the pioneering work of the Upper Skagit tribe member Vi Hilbert and the UW linguist Thomas Hess, whose collaboration spanned four decades as they documented, preserved, and standardized Lushootseed as a modern language. Current initiatives to teach Lushootseed to students Native and non-Native—some of whom are exploring their roots, while others are simply satisfying their language requirement—build on this important work, and the recent hire of Tami Hohn (Puyllup), a permanent, full-time southern Lushootseed instructor, suggests an enduring commitment.

At Rem Koolhaas's Central Library in Seattle, completed since I moved away, another sculpture foregrounds the multilingualism of the city and its collections. The conceptual artist Ann Hamilton designed a floor made of wooden planks with raised letters in the eleven languages that form the bulk of the library's literacy, English as a second language, and world languages collections: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. In these languages, and across 7,200 square feet of walkable surface, the sculpture spells out, backward, 1,543 opening sentences selected by patrons and librarians from books in the collections.

The inverted relief letterforms of Hamilton's installation evoke printing, foregrounding the materiality of language in a digital age as they register the many European and Asian tongues that animate the city's public sphere. To call them all settler languages, however, would be to whitewash the complex histories that led to their presence in Seattle. Immigrants and refugees across the decades enjoy varying degrees of agency, linguistic and otherwise, and bring with them different experiences. They join the conversation from different positions and with different investments in a linguistic commons. As is clear from the work of someone like the distinguished Korean American poet and translator Don Mee Choi (herself based in Seattle), the goal is not the seamless conjunction of languages and the concomitant erasure of the histories that, often violently, brought them together. Of her own labors as a translator, Choi writes, "I want to make impossible connections between the Korean and the English, for they are misaligned by neocolonial war, militarism, and neoliberal economy" (4). Though Hamilton's floorboards might fit together seamlessly, tongue in groove, the conjunction of languages is more complicated, and splinters of difference and rough edges of historical awareness appear at the places where they meet.

There is clearly a further distinction between the languages mapped on Hamilton's floor and the Indigenous Lushootseed referenced across the city at UW. The dialogue and tension between these two artworks illuminate the complexity of negotiating multiple overlapping multilingualisms in a settler nation. The recognition and promotion of linguistic multiplicity in the present should not occlude the distinctions among the various kinds of languages involved. Indigenous languages must take their place in the linguistic ecosystem, even when they are underrepresented in collections and archives, as we strive to remedy their omission.

Similar dynamics operate in many spaces beyond the United States. The ascription of one language to one nation, as critics have long noted, generally involves the denial of complexity in the service of so-called unity. Across the Americas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, *criollo* nations privileged Spanish as a language that would provide a sense of commonality, thereby simultaneously cementing their own Spanish-speaking status and diminishing the import of the many Indigenous languages spoken across their territory.

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Together, these two artworks make space within the institutional, textual sphere of the libraries for a multilingualism that speaks with many voices, inviting us to recognize the richness in a multiplicity that cannot quite be reconciled.

Historicizing Mono- and Multilingualism

The connections between monolingualism and multilingualism are complex and cannot be captured by the unidirectional mathematical logic of one before the many, for often the deliberate erasure of multiplicity is what leads to monolingualism. Monolingualism is not an originary condition; linguistic multiplicity must be managed, disciplined, and ultimately erased to ensure it. This occurs on both sides of the Atlantic and across the globe. (I recall a graduate student, whose native language was Galician, explaining to me that she had never taught Spanish or, indeed, felt Spanish, until she came to the United States.) Moreover, as Elizabeth Ellis has noted, monolingualism is hardly "the unmarked case;" instead, it, too, is in need of inquiry and specification (qtd. in Gramling, *Invention of Monolingualism* 50).

As David Gramling shows in his powerful dyad, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (2016) and *The Invention of Multilingualism* (2021), both conditions are contingent and multiple; they occur in different locations and different combinations within a variety of cultural and political relations. Gramling calls attention to the specific histories of how languages are racialized or persecuted, promoted or canonized, in relation to one another, and how uneasily linguistic multiplicity fits within projects of rationalization and "common language" strategies (Gramling, *Invention of Monolingualism* 209). Hence the move in many countries across the world over the past few decades to insisting on competence in a national language as a standard for citizenship, often in contradistinction to *ius solis*, the right conferred by place of birth, or *ius sanguinis*, which enshrines a nationalist ethnos.

An important corollary, Gramling points out, is that multilingualism and monolingualism are more than just individual conditions. Characterizing monolingualism, for example, as an individual's fault or deficit rehashes the neoliberal logic by which individual actions are the measure of all things, regardless of whether those actions are enabled or hampered by larger phenomena. Like so much else, monolingualism and multilingualism are part of broader social and political conditions that largely determine how individual actors—heritage speakers, language learners, citizens, migrants—experience their relationship to languages. Language may feel absolutely individual and personal, intimately connected to our story and key to who we are, but it cannot be extracted from these conditions.

At the same time, I think it is too soon to give up on the possibilities of individual agency in fostering multilingualism, even if only in those eddies of specialization in which we counter machine translation. Our pedagogic investment in language, culture, and literature argues for the complex interpenetration of the three in ways that machine learning still seems ill-equipped to reproduce. The humanities seem particularly well positioned to attend to semiodiversity—the range of meanings that do not necessarily align across languages and cultures—as opposed to glossodiversity—the range of codes available to express the same meanings, which are increasingly reproducible by artificial intelligence (Michael Halliday qtd. in Gramling, *Invention of Monolingualism* 31). Historical contextualization, for example, might help us understand when a translation is not just a translation but an ironic allusion, or when a repeated title might involve a contestation rather than simply an echo. I turn now to three books of the apparently same title, whose own arguments and translation histories illuminate what language can and cannot suture, what communities it enables, and how multilingualism might be imagined in the national space.

On American Belonging

Consider the history of three works titled, in two different languages, *Nuestra América* and *Our America*. In various ways, all three texts explore the relationship between language and politics, the macro and the micro. Yet, even though they share a title, they represent different genres and

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conceptions of belonging. As they grapple with the complexities of language as a marker of solidarity or inclusion, their own multiple publication histories and implicit dialogue with one another adumbrate their conclusions.

The first, and by far the most famous, is José Martí's essay "Nuestra América," first published in 1891 in Mexico City's *El Partido Liberal* and in New York's *La Revista Ilustrada*. The second is Felipe Fernández-Armesto's popularizing history *Our America*, which adds the subtitle *A Hispanic History of the United States*, published in New York by W. W. Norton in 2014 and almost immediately translated into Spanish. The third is Claudio Lomnitz's family memoir *Nuestra América: Utopía y persistencia de una familia judía*, published in 2018 by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in Mexico City and subsequently adapted and expanded by the author as *Nuestra América: My Family in the Vertigo of Translation*, published by Other Press in New York in 2021.

Martí's strongly anti-imperialist manifesto is hopeful about the power of language and culture to produce political alignments. The *nuestra América* that Martí conjures as a bulwark against US imperialism, after decades of war among the new nations of the Americas, is a much-desired mirage. The author is frank about the challenges of transcending centuries of imperial domination to reconcile different populations behind a united political project. Yet Martí challenges Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's dichotomy of "civilización y barbarie" as the racializing, internal choice facing the new nations to warn instead against an encroaching US imperialism. The choice Martí stresses is therefore between "la falsa erudición y la naturaleza" ("false erudition and nature," in Esther Allen's fine translation), rendering the natural and the local the source of true knowledge (*Nuestra América* 33; "Our America" 290).

Although Martí urges the convergence of Latin American nations, he is rueful about opportunities missed and phrases them in the past conditional:

> El genio hubiera estado en hermanar, con la caridad del corazón y con el atrevimiento de los fundadores, la vincha y la toga; en desestancar al indio; en ir haciendo lado al negro suficiente; en ajustar la libertad al cuerpo de los que se alzaron y vencieron por ella. (*Nuestra América* 36)

> The wise thing would have been to pair, with charitable hearts and the audacity of our founders, the Indian headband and the judicial robe, to [release] the Indian, make a place for the able black, and tailor liberty to the bodies of those who rose up and triumphed in its name. ("Our America" 293)

Martí's own racial prejudices, which critics have noted in recent years, complicate the project of Latin American unity. Yet a kind of imagined community, based on shared experience in a shared language, remains a powerful beacon: "Se ponen en pie los pueblos, y se saludan. '¿Cómo somos?' se preguntan; y unos a otros se van diciendo cómo son" ("The nations arise and salute one another. 'What are we like?' they ask, and begin telling each other what they are like"; *Nuestra América* 37; "Our America" 294).

Martí elaborates, imagining new and more inclusive American forms of knowledge:

> . . . se saludan, de un pueblo a otro, los hombres nuevos americanos. Surgen los estadistas naturales del estudio directo de la Naturaleza. . . . Los dramaturgos traen los caracteres nativos a la escena. Las academias discuten temas viables. La poesía se corta la melena zorrillesca y cuelga del árbol glorioso el chaleco colorado. La prosa, centelleante y cernida, va cargada de ideas. Los gobernadores, en las repúblicas de indios, aprenden indio. (*Nuestra América* 37)

> . . . the new men of America are saluting each other from one country to another. Natural statesmen are emerging from the direct study of nature; they read in order to apply what they read, not copy it. Economists are studying problems at their origins. Orators are becoming more temperate. Dramatists are putting native characters onstage. Academies are discussing practical subjects. Poetry is snipping off its wild, Zorilla-esque mane and hanging up its gaudy waistcoat on the glorious tree. Prose, polished and gleaming, is replete with ideas. The rulers of Indian republics are learning Indian languages. ("Our America" 294)

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There is much shedding of the apparatus of European culture, and much learning from "nature," before Martí makes room for Indigenous languages and, presumably, the knowledge that they bring.

"Nuestra América" has had a complicated reception history, to say the least. As Allen notes, the protracted translation of Martí into English significantly limited his impact in the United States. Initially, Allen explains, Martí's work lacked the context or the cultural capital to make it legible: unlike Alexis de Tocqueville or Charles Dickens, Martí did not have a European's a priori claim on a US reading public. By the time Latin America became more legible, the Cuban revolution and the Cold War had made Martí suspect as a communist sympathizer avant la lettre. Remarkably, a selection of his prose did not appear until one hundred years after his birth when Juan de Onís translated and published *The America of José Martí* in 1953 (Allen 416).

More recently, however, the fortunes of "Nuestra América" have changed. The essay has helped reshape the field of American studies by offering both evidence of how Latinx subjects shaped American modernities (as the work of Laura Lomas shows) and an example of a hemispheric perspective, despite Martí's strong distinction between two Americas at odds with each other. "Our America" is now part of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, alongside (translated) pieces by Christopher Columbus, Bartolomé de las Casas, Hernán Cortés, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. What would Martí have made of this gesture, generously intended, no doubt, but which subsumes these Spanish and *criollo* authors into national and linguistic uniformity?

Fernández-Armesto's *Our America* offers a powerful rationale for those authors' inclusion, arguing for the Hispanic presence in what would become the United States long before the nation itself came into being. By emphasizing all the ways that "Hispanics preceded the United States in what is now national territory," his book argues against the "Anglo unease" that categorizes Spanish speakers as recent immigrants (xxv). Fernández-Armesto thereby challenges Martí's imagined boundaries: in his title, *America* is the US, but the cultural and linguistic distinctions between it and Martí's *América* break down at every stage.

Fernández-Armesto's history from the south, rather than from the east, emphasizes other strands beyond the standard Anglo narrative:

> Today's plural America looks, in these perspectives, like a product of the whole of America's past, not a threat to traditional US identity. There was, we learn, no single frontier, no single language, or tradition, or identity, no manifest destiny, no culture that deserves to be hegemonic or that predominates or ought to predominate by virtue of US historical experience. (xxviii)

Contesting the origin stories and trajectories that inevitably privilege an Anglo version of the US, Fernández-Armesto reimagines our America to include Hispanics at every stage. Though he underscores the violence against Native peoples from the English as well as that from the Spanish, he is more interested in examining the interimperial rivalries than in interrogating the givens of a settler nation —the more challenging project that Martí, however partially, addresses in *Nuestra América*. Nonetheless, Fernández-Armesto's history effectively demonstrates how any notion of the United States that does not include Hispanics and the Spanish language is contingent and partial. As Fernández-Armesto tells the story of the earliest European settlements on the continent, from Florida to California, Hispanics become a population displaced or dislodged instead of the latest arrivals. The first Europeans to settle in what is now US territory, he archly notes, were the Spaniards in Puerto Rico in 1505, over a hundred years before Jamestown (3–4).

The more recent *An American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States*, by Rosina Lozano, makes the even stronger argument that, in the Southwest, "Spanish was a language of governance required to build a U.S. political system" (3). The recognition of multilingualism historically and in the now, these historians argue, is key for changing our conception of the US.

Most recently, anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz returns us to a complex vision of multilingualism and

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migration in *Nuestra América*. Lomnitz initially set out to write a family memoir, recounting how his grandparents fled anti-Semitic persecution and violence in Eastern Europe for Peru, Colombia, and Chile. Yet between the original Spanish text and the English translation, Lomnitz explains, the project gradually grew into a reflection on how "the traditional formulation about Latin American culture is missing something key, which is the connection between the 20th-century destruction of Europe and what we understand today as Latin America" (Beer 70). Lomnitz notes that he first commissioned a translation of the book, but then realized it would need to be completely rewritten, in the light of new archival evidence but also to balance what was and was not familiar for a Latin American versus a US audience (Lomnitz, "Claudio Lomnitz"). Though Lomnitz moves between Americas, there remains a need for cultural translation beyond language itself.

The expanded English version begins with a paradox, defamiliarizing notions of belonging: "This is an account that speaks of how strangers help shape everything that we call ours," Lomnitz tells us (*Nuestra América: My Family* 1). As shadows, scapegoats, and witnesses, and as those willing to do what the normative subject will not do, strangers play a role far greater than their "cameo appearances" (1) would suggest. Lomnitz thus connects the migrations of his own diasporic family to migrants today and explores how those who may be absolutely necessary to their societies are nonetheless "always made to feel dispensable" (3).

When Lomnitz's parents, Cinna and Larissa, left Europe for Chile and Colombia, respectively, they brought with them a set of complex relations to languages, from the father's "chameleon's strategy" to the mother's refusal to teach Russian or Yiddish to her children (14, 13). Yet, arguably, the central figures in the volume are the author's maternal grandparents, Misha Adler and Noemí Milstein, who fled Romania for Peru. In the Lima of the mid-1920s, the two become part of the circle of the notable Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui. As he excavates this intellectual connection, Lomnitz foregrounds the universalism of Peru's most famous advocate for Indigenous rights. Mariátegui, he notes, argued for the "Peruvianization of Peru" with the motto, "All that is human is ours" (23), and reiterated in the first issue of his famous journal, *Amauta*, "Everything human belongs to us" (Mariátegui qtd. in Lomnitz, *Nuestra América: My Family* 23). This vision of Mariátegui's *indigenismo* as a porous, cosmopolitan movement was bracing for its time, acknowledging Peru's past and present indigeneity while squarely facing the future.

Lomnitz explores how a minoritarian presence—the Jewish exiles of whom his own family were notable examples—participated in the intellectual fervor of these years. His grandparents, he argues, contributed to the universalism of Mariátegui's circle while also reconceiving their own identity through their encounter with indigeneity in a place where Jews were "ambiguously identified as European" (*Nuestra América: My Family* 117). Lomnitz's implicit dialogue with Martí's essay suggests that *nuestra América* might apply to relative newcomers, in the north as in the south. It also underscores the role that unacknowledged and minoritarian migrants play in the construction of the nation, even when those contributions are unremarked. Personal stories of displacement, in a multitude of imperfectly preserved tongues, are the warp to the weft of national languages.

The Classroom and the Kitchen Table

My comparison of the various *Américas* and their modes of belonging in these texts is a scholarly move, for the colleagues joining us today. Yet Lomnitz reminds us also to recognize and honor the intimacy of linguistic experience among relatives or friends and in spaces of multiplicity, which the academy is fortunately beginning to recognize.

Some of this is occurring in exciting ways across the fields. Beyond the work of applied linguists charted by Gramling, I would note wonderful initiatives in heritage-language pedagogy, and thoughtful interventions in translation studies. A project such as Clorinda Donato's, at California State, Long Beach, for example, recognizes that heritage speakers of Spanish can learn other romance languages with greater agility and along a different path from English monolinguals.

In *Kitchen Table Translation*, a published volume of essays from a series of events in New York

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City, Madhu H. Kaza reflects on the complexities of selves translated across borders: "immigrants, children of immigrants, or people who identify as part of a diaspora might bring a particular set of concerns to the task of translation distinct from the mainstream of literary translation in the United States." (13). She opens with a poignant reflection on how personal the loss of language feels: "[s]omething went quiet in me when I was brought to the U.S. from India as a child. Although I assimilated and lost my accent, a vital part of me got stopped at the border. My inner life remained untranslated, its contours beyond what the receiving culture wanted to or could comprehend" (12). Language supposedly affords assimilation, yet it simultaneously bears the burden of belonging, here or there. Elsewhere in the same collection, Zohra Saed notes how "exilic consciousness tends to preserve languages and customs as if time stopped at the moment of migration," perhaps in an unconscious effort to maintain the ties strained by geographic and temporal distance alike (34). Though new arrivals become newly or increasingly multilingual by learning the language into which they immigrate, the unstated assumption is that other, less assimilable languages will drop away. In this way, assimilation becomes a process of language loss as much as a process of language learning, as has been the case for generations of immigrants to the United States.

In response, Kaza offers a vision of translation as hospitality, a recognition that difference is not to be overcome but "greeted with care" in a practice that "acknowledges that the host, too, will have to be changed by the encounter" (17). Multilingual us, around that kitchen table, in a multilingual US. We move back and forth between these terms, *aquí y allá*, because the nation, for better or for worse, continues to be a key category for language use. To promote multilingualism, then, is not just to encourage traditional college students to take a chance on a new language, opening up new cultural vistas, as the MLA must certainly do, but also to validate multilingualism across the US, around the kitchen table as in the public sphere. The multilingual is us.

Muchas gracias.

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