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## **MINING MULTILINGUALISM'S MATERIALITY: 'RE-REPRESENTING' LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN PRESIDENTIAL BIOGRAPHY**

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**Abstract:**

This paper engages in a “geo-semiotic” (Scollon and Scollon 2003) analysis of David Maraniss’s 2012 presidential biography, *Barack Obama: The Story*, and offers an alternative view to how the materiality of global multilingualism is utilized for enhanced literary effect in the hypercompetitive arena of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Presidential biographical writing. Utilizing an interdisciplinary paradigm of analysis (Block, Gray and Holborow 2012), the paper offers a detailed microlinguistic account of the visual and semiotic strategies employed by a Pulitzer-winning author, which appropriate multilingualism in a bid to peripherize both its use and its users. Through an astute use of polyglot etymologizing, translation, transliteration, and multilingual appropriation, Maraniss’s thematized multilingualism evinces a market-theoretic of asymmetrical linguistic valuation (Park and Wee 2012). Maraniss’s careful visual and verbal mapping of the linguistic journey of an American President seeking the unmarkedness of monolingualism over the markedness of multilingualism demonstrates how appropriations of multilingualism in material products, such as bestsellers, can be deployed to render multilingualism ‘immaterial.’

**Keywords:**

Geolinguistics ♦ language ideology ♦ code-switching ♦ multilingualism ♦ Presidential biography

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There is a phrase in Indonesian, *diam dalam seribu bahasa*, that means “to be silent in a thousand languages.”

—Maya Soetoro-Ng, sister of Pres. Barack Obama  
(Remnick 2010, 59)

### Geolinguistics and Multilingualism

This essay offers a “geo-semiotic” (Scollon and Scollon 2003) analysis of David Maraniss’s most recent hypermedia-influenced biography of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, titled *Barack Obama: The Story* (2012). In the tightly competitive and “crowded field of Barack Obama studies, with so many books already published about (not to mention by) a president” (Higgins 2012, 1), how do biographers manage to offer innovation? Maraniss succeeds by adopting a timely geolinguistic paradigm of biographical analysis—one which synthesizes the multidimensionality of geography with the “materialities of multilingualism” (Aronin and Laoire 2012, 299) to render a biography “widely praised by reviewers” (Higgins 2012, 20). Critics’ comments hailed the book to be “surprisingly fresh” (Harnett 2012, 20) and as possessing “a richness and scope” rarely “captured in short-form journalism” (Stiles 2012, 10). Other verdicts, even from tough critics, suggested the biography was “enterprisingly new” (Kakutani 2012, C1). Maraniss, unlike any other prior presidential biographer, succeeds in seemingly foregrounding plurilingualism on a massive and consistent scale.

The use of multilingualism to chronicle Obama’s life should not be surprising, considering that his biographical and familial history spans lives lived in two of the world’s most linguistically diverse continents: Africa and Asia. Raised in

Hawaii, Indonesia, and in the continental United States, both of his biological parents—his US American mother and his African father—were in fact fluent multilinguals. His mother “was fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, knew French, Latin, some Hindi and Urdu, and could throw in some native Hawaiian” (Maraniss 2012, 405). In an interview, Obama’s half-sister Maya is quoted as saying that “it was not uncommon for her mother to move from one language to another in the same sentence” (Maraniss 2012, 405). Obama’s father likewise was fluent in over four languages. Obama thus spent a childhood steeped in multilingualism, and was himself a speaker of Bahasa Indonesian and Hawaiian Creole, having also picked up other languages in his travels across the world.

David Remnick’s (2010) equally massive and exhaustive 586-page presidential biography offers sprinklings of multilingualism (about a dozen or so phrases and sentences) excerpted from, for example, Swahili (e.g., *Kiboko*, 29, and *panga*, 35); expressions from Hawaiian (such as *popolo*, 51); and even phrases from Bahasa Indonesia (such as *dalang*, 58, and *keris*, 87). However his use of these multilingual phrases remains de-thematized. In contrast to Remnick’s biography, David Maraniss’s stylistic deployment of multilingualism is consistent and on a grand scale. In his *Barack Obama: The Story*, readers encounter a strategic use of the “materiality of multilingualism” (Aronin and Laoire 2002, 299). This taxonomic procedure makes the many manifestations of multilingualism accessible and concrete.

As has been acknowledged, “Multilingualism is notorious for its elusiveness [and] complexity” (Aronin and Laoire 2002, 312). Part of the difficulty is that multilingualism has both a concrete manifestation as artifact and effect, as well as an abstract manifestation as cultural knowledge. Multilingualism therefore evinces what Aronin and Laoire (2012) term a “three dimensionality” (303), and it is this three-dimensional materiality that Maraniss’s biography is able to exploit. Textual renditions of multilingualism in this biography are carefully corroborated with artifact-like inclusions, such as maps and photographs. Readers find multilingualism conflated with visual mappings of geo-scapes. In fact, Maraniss matches a broad narrative conceit of moving from periphery to center, with geo-scaped movements from exteriority to interiority: indeed, from the otherness of multilingualism to the familiarity of monolingualism.

Extensive multilingual displays of cultural knowledge are one manner in which Maraniss deploys the materiality of multilingualism in the course of his

biography, including a careful and deliberate blending-in of approximately 60 appropriations and code-switchings from multiple languages. These foreignizations reiterate Maraniss's mise-en-scene of 'constant change'—whether in food, flora, fauna, childhood games, customs, rituals, music, family habits, titular conventions, cultural habits, routines or political movements. These changes, across three generations and three continents, are mapped and spotlighted via code-switchings and foregrounded translations—both lexical and sentential—of experienced localisms, cultural nuance, and proverbs. Further augmentation of such multilingual manifestation take form through over 20 detailed etymological explanations and transliterated borrowings. Maraniss describes approximately 40 examples of language learning attempts, and about a dozen commentaries on the diachronics of shifting accents, as protagonists leave one place in search of another.

The biography also includes approximately 25 multilingual appropriations encoded in the form of lexically-loaded phrases such as Hapa, Jadak, popolo, bule—even “Cool Head Main Thing” (borrowed from Hawaiian Creole), all of which function as semiotic tropes in the course of the biography. These uses of polyglossia are further augmented with dozens of allusions to shifting phonetic patterns in, for example, the onomastics of Obama's first name. Readers encounter detailed explanations of the shifting pronunciations and morphologies of “Barack,” as he traverses the exterior territoriality of diverse linguistic spaces. By *The Story's* end, carefully charted linguistic changes of Obama's multilingualism and multilidialectalism converge into in a de-ethnicized monolinguality.

David Maraniss's careful mapping of the linguistic journey of an American president-to-be, seeking the unmarkedness of monolingualism over the markedness of multilingualism, demonstrates how appropriations of multilingualism in material products can indeed be deployed to render multilingualism immaterial. Inevitably then, thematized complementarities arise in Maraniss's deployment of the materiality of multilingualism. The “co-presence of language” and space (Simon 2012, 160) in this meticulously detailed, 21<sup>st</sup>-century biographical account, far from being accidental, is deliberative and timely. Maraniss makes a compelling case for why both the physicality of territoriality and the abstractness of linguistic diversity (an opposition we can also conceive of as exteriority-versus-interiority) serves to reiterate a common thematic. Thus, spatially experienced movements from heartland to periphery

and back are matched with linguistically codified plurilingual moves from monolinguality to multilinguality and back. Through such rhetorical matchings, Maraniss demonstrates how the geography of space either as centeredness or peripherality shapes the dynamics of both monolingual and multilingual linguistic place in the journey of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century president.

### **The Sociolinguistics of Celebrity Culture**

As the first African-American President of the United States, with an equally unparalleled “mixed-race background which made his victory historic” (Fallows 2012, 1), Barack Obama is in fact another “first in his class”—to borrow a titular allusion to another successfully written presidential biography (on Bill Clinton), penned by this same multiple-Pulitzer winning author, David Maraniss. Part of the historic quality of Obama’s presidency stems from what many deem a historical catharsis of sorts, namely “the rise of a post-racial period in American history” (Remnick 2010, 551). As a relatively young president of one of the world’s superpowers, Barack Obama is thus to be viewed as an über-celebrity, particularly in spectator-oriented democracies such as the United States (Chomsky 1991), where fame constitutes the backdrop against which politicians are foregrounded in the public eye.

Since his first election to the Presidency, Barack Obama’s celebrity status has not waned. At the beginning of his second term, he still remains “the most famous person on earth (and first incumbent president since Woodrow Wilson to win the Nobel Prize” (Fallows 2012, 1). One reason for this fame could be that he is the first truly cosmopolitan president the United States has had, ushering in what some political theorists call his own unique “liberal internationalist agenda” (Remnick 2010, 430). His background spans three continents, and is very different from any of the predecessors in his office.

Particularly for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century of “flat-world globalization” (Friedman 2005), the timing of his ascendancy could not be any more fitting, a fact that Maraniss’s presidential biography captures. Maraniss’s biography was released just before the second-term election, and to some extent served as a re-reminder to readers of a quintessentially American tale of possibility. Already at the 2004 Democratic Convention, Obama had introduced himself to audiences with these often cited words: “I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country

on Earth is my story even possible." At the risk of oversimplification, this classic Cinderella tale is revisited in Maraniss's text, which one reviewer describes as "a nontraditional biography presented by an author marveling at the improbability of Obama's story" (Minzesheimer 2012).

Obama's fame feeds into what Hyde describes as the "hypnotic power of celebrity in contemporary culture" (2010, 2). In a sense then, Maraniss's biography engages in an "aestheticization of everyday life" (87) of a spotlighted celebrity. Particularly, Maraniss is able to capitalize on the populace's desire to familiarize themselves with every bit of biographical detail concerning the life of the first President of color and the first African-American President. Biographical authors glamorize a "narrative of ascent" (Remnick 2012, 219), which only add further folds of fame to Barack Obama's global recognition. Recent years have witnessed a flurry of publications focused not just on the President per se, (Remnick 2010), but also, on the First Couple (Kantor 2012), including extensive solo-biographies on Obama's deceased parents: on his mother (Scott 2012) and his father (Jacobs 2012). Given the hungering desire to know everything about him, it can be no accident then that Maraniss chooses to title his biography *The Story*—an attempt perhaps to give the *real* story.

The "pre-publication buzz" (Fallows 2012, 10) on Maraniss's book itself, was sensationalized. Some reviewers sent out teasers according to which the biography contained "juicy tidbits" in what was described to be "not a traditional biography" (Minzesheimer 2012). This effective attention-grabber was designed to get readers to re-examine Obama's biographical background. *Vanity Fair* even offered up excerpted quotes from Maraniss's book. Not just ordinary quotes, but extended quotes from one of Obama's ex-girlfriends who kept copious and meticulous diaries. The *Daily Beast* re-quoted these excerpts in a further attempt to entice reader-buyers to delve into other salacious details or "juicy bits" (Stiles 2012) about this renowned man.

But, with so much media attention on Obama, how does one really set their version of a biographic account apart from all the rest? In the words of Jill Lepore, "No American's ancestry has been the subject of more scrutiny than Barack Obama's, and for that reason, few American Presidents have had more of an effect on the writing of Presidential biography" (2012, 70). At last count, there were over 900 books on sale devoted to 'Obama-mania'. This list does not include books on Obama written in languages other than English, or even books

translated into other languages for multilingual audiences across the globe. A more extensive non-Anglophone analysis could show how biographies, as cultural products, serve as salient material manifestations of the global status of multilingualism in general. After all, Aronin and Laoire argue that it is in and through “material artifacts” such as books that one is able to “identify the vitality” of languages within particular settings (2012, 301). While their focus is on what they label “the materialities of minority languages” (300), we are concerned here rather with the materiality of multilingualism itself in a key material product, the best-selling biography.

Sorting out populist-oriented accounts from the more academically-oriented historical narratives reveals the field of Obama Studies to still be competitive. Maraniss, from a cursory examination of his own extensive biography, seems to have consulted over a dozen such sources: both left- and right-leaning. A certain striving for authorial uniqueness becomes immediately apparent in the reading of this book. In a detailed note prefacing the bibliography, Maraniss acknowledges how he had to race against time in bringing the biography to fruition. The note alludes to two rival authors also working on the Obama family: Janny Scott and Sally Jacobs. This race in journalistic time motivates the following qualification about the uniqueness of his work relative to theirs:

Because my book involved a wider scope, I knew from the beginning that their works would be published before mine and would include information that I might have wished to have to myself. I was, for instance, the first to interview Barack Sr.'s second American wife, Ruth, who later granted interviews to Jacobs. But no information is sacred, and when it comes to a world figure like Obama it is foolish to think in those terms. (607)

This qualification suffices to indicate an intricate striving for singularity in the crowded field of time-sensitive publication. Maraniss seems to have chosen the route of thematizing multilingualism to augment his stylistic innovation—especially on a subject that has already been so exhaustively researched.

A few years prior, well-know writer David Remnick released his sweeping saga of the rise of Barack Obama in the form of a poignantly titled biography, *The Bridge*, which starts out by positioning readers on an actual bridge, the infamous Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama—the site of a key, non-violent Martin Luther King civil rights march. Remnick then takes readers across this bridge—

this point in history—to a metaphorization of ‘bridging’ in the form of a metonymic creation of Barack Obama as *The Bridge* of a new “post-Oprah generation” (Remnick 2010, 422) of African Americans, and what he dubs the Joshua Generation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (19). Both Remnick and Maraniss seem to privilege a spatiality of movement, whether it is historical or geographical. Both writers allude to Obama’s multilinguality: “Obama is multilingual, a shapeshifter” (18) writes Remnick in 2010, and qualifies this further: “Like the child of immigrants who can speak one language at home, another at school, and another with his friends—and still be himself—Obama crafted his speech to fit the moment” (18). For Remnick (2010), Obama’s multilinguality afforded him a strategic advantage compared to, say, rival Hillary Clinton whose monolinguality he faults. According to Remnick, Hilary’s linguistic monochromaticity prohibited her from a “genuine delivery” (16) of different codes needed to get votes, and this in spite of “the extra effort” (16) she put forth. As an example, he cites her failed attempt to code-switch in a key speech delivered in Alabama—one in which Obama excelled. Remnick (2010) tells readers:

The writing was, at times, more convincing than the delivery, especially when Clinton, a daughter of northern Illinois, began dropping her “g”s and channeling her inner Blanche DuBois. Where had that accent come from? [...] It took no expert to hear the extra effort in Clinton’s voice. She was sincere, she was trying, but she did not win the day in Selma. (16)

In Maraniss’s biography, it is a metaphorization of movement, from multilinguality to monolinguality, from periphery to center, that is spotlighted thematically.

### **Mining Multilingualism’s Materiality**

How does one analyze the creation of authenticity in *Barack Obama: The Story*? Maraniss exploits the “materiality of multilingualism” to create both theme and trope in a journalistic work of non-fiction which soon begins to read like fiction. Languages constitute a key trope in this voluminous, 571-page text—the actual book spans a hefty 641 pages. Almost every page spotlights prolific tokenizations of multilingualness in a bid to augment the larger message of movement. We witness a saga built on multigenerational movement, familial and symbolic on



the one hand, and geographic on the other, indeed a mapped movement from a heartland center of interiority, to a global, peripheral space of exteriority.

Over 20 languages see some form of either mention or indexing in the pages of *The Story*. The languages, culled from African, Asian, and European linguistic families manifest themselves as sentential, phrasal and lexical code-switchings. Multilingual glossings from Afrikaans, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Dholuo, Dutch, French, German (including Swiss German), Hawaiian, Japanese, Javanese, Kiswahili, Korean, Latin, Spanish, Sanskrit, Swahili, and finally, Urdu are included. Allusions to other languages, both obscure and well known, such as Acehnese and Spanish, for example, emerge through further glossings. It is not uncommon to encounter explanations such as the following, in which Maraniss tells of a literacy project Barack Obama Sr. had worked on. The endeavor was spearheaded by the missionary Elizabeth Mooney, whose office “decided to publish reading primers in five tribal languages—Kikuyu, Kamba, Kalenjin, Masai, and Luo” (104). Several extended paragraphs and sometimes whole pages are devoted to the learning and utility of languages such as Russian. Countless author commentaries on linguistic diversity itself are included. Multilingual diversity is perhaps the most immediately noticeable feature in this 21<sup>st</sup>-century biography, a stylistic feature which sets it apart from countless others on the subject (Remnick 2010, Scott 2011, Jacobs 2011 primary among them).

Readers also encounter extensive author commentaries on dialectal diversity. They are treated to extensive commentaries on a continuum of world-English dialects spanning: Australian English, British English/RP, Midwestern American English, Hawaiian Creole, and finally, African American Vernacular English (AAVE). A detailed analysis of this linguistic variety is beyond the scope of the current study's focus. Of note however, is the representation of dialectal diversity that, in the course of the biography, moves towards monodialectalism. In tracking Obama's movement away from fluency in 'marginal' non-standard dialects such as Hawaiian Creole and eventually, AAVE, Maraniss strips Obama's linguistic repertoire of its variegated multilingual complexions. In short, by *The Story's* end, Barack Obama is in essence rendered accentless in the form of a de-ethnicized monolinguality.

Maraniss, a monolingual writer, soon begins nonetheless to acquire polyglot status. Details provided in the *Acknowledgements* and *Notes* sections of the biography point to Maraniss's complete reliance on translators both for the

numerous interviews he cites as having conducted around the world, as well as for the translations of all the multilingual content he includes in the book. In spite of this limited linguistic repertoire however, in the course of the actual biography, it is Maraniss, not his invisibilized translators, who assumes the status of a linguistic expert. Maraniss's countless multilingual inclusions afford him a folk-linguist, Indiana-Jones persona. Indeed, he emerges for readers as a knower of a great many languages. The analogy with Indiana Jones underscores similar filmic strategies utilized by Hollywood film franchises, in which lead characters such as Harrison Ford take on the concocted personae of polyglot translators. In the 2008 film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, for example, Harrison Ford (using linguistic knowledge provided by off-screen, invisibilized expert consultants) flaunts multilingual expertise. In one extended scene, he is even shown to painstakingly decrypt and flawlessly translate an obsolescent South American language to the wonderment of unsuspecting audiences.

Perhaps it is this disingenuousness that raises the ire of some critics of Maraniss who, while admitting that the biography effectively and "very minutely traced the President's African background," evinced obvious flaws—one of which was that "details pile up in encyclopedic volume, sometimes unrelated to their significance" (Fallows 2102, 10). Maraniss indeed offers encyclopedic details about languages and exploits the seeming 'otherness' of linguistic diversity with an uncanny familiarity. Only one (peripheral) mention is included describing the efforts of his real translators. Similarly, in the *Notes* section, no mention is made of the translators needed in the numerous interviews he conducted with multilingual speakers across the world. Names of people interviewed are provided, but no details of the translation process are furnished (Maraniss 2012, 579-606).

Maraniss's own performance of multilingualism unfolds via the astute deployment of a four-part strategy. First, readers encounter countless instances of linguistic etymologizing on his part. Taking on the role of a linguistic expert, Maraniss offers readers details on the roots and origins of salient foreignizations, which add just the right amount of literary flavoring and cinematic exoticism in the retracing of a presidential trajectory from boy to President. Second, Maraniss takes on the role of linguist-translator in which he engages in copious uses of linguistic translation offered either as side-by-side translations, or parenthetically explicated rewordings presented in the form of bilingually rendered sentential,

phrasal and sometimes, even single lexeme translations. This use of multilingual borrowing accomplishes two goals: it spotlights multiple languages while showcasing David Maraniss's own seeming fluency, facility, and dexterity in multiple languages. A third strategy Maraniss deploys is of transliteration. He offers readers English renditions of multilingual proverbs, sayings, and cultural allusions, which are translated without always indicating source languages in the text. These transliterations are used to enhance Maraniss's larger aim, namely to forge links between multilingualism and foreignness on the one hand, and to provide a "frame of intelligibility" on the other (Mowitt 2005, 52).

Inevitably, the most potent strategy Maraniss uses is that of multilingual appropriation. In this strategy, particular words acquire such familiarity for readers that they see semantic re-looping and re-use, not just within the span of the biography per se, but also extratextual appropriation and popularization on the part of critics. These semantic calques serve as perhaps the strongest evidence for how the fetishization of multilinguality—or the mining of the materiality of multilinguality, so to speak—yields impact. Multilingual scholars have increasingly argued for a need to move beyond "descriptive and distributional approaches" (Aronin and Laoire 2012, 302) and "enumeration-based accounts" of multilingual diversity (Mensel, Marten and Gorter 2012, 320), toward more nuanced causative accounts which explore the *how* and *why* of multilingual manifestation. In this sense then, abstract notions of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of multilingual manifestation, for example, can only be corroborated via an analysis of concrete material manifestations of such linguistic diversity, via what Aronin and Laoire (2012) call materialities of multilingualism. For them, "materialities can be used effectively as a barometer of actual language use" (306) in any particular linguistic scenario. Simply put, multilingualism manifests itself in and through material culture:

Material culture is the array of artifacts and cultural landscapes that people create according to traditional, patterned, and often tacit concepts of value and utility that have been developed over time through use and experimentation. These artifacts and landscapes objectively represent a group's subjective vision of custom and order. (Aronin and Laoire 2012, 302-303)

Two key words are particularly significant here namely, value and utility. Maraniss exploits both senses of multilingualism: artifactual and cultural, but not

to spotlight the utility and pervasiveness of linguistic diversity per se, but rather to other and peripherize the land, lore and languages encompassed in these spotlighted landscapes. Perhaps the strongest evidence for such an “asymmetric relationship” (Aronin and Laoire 2012, 306) as it pertains to multilingual “value and utility” (302) occurs in the way in which Maraniss conflates renditions of multilingualism in an unfolding biography with mapped movements, both real and metaphoric. Readers witness a movement away from the cacophony of multilingual space to the normative homogeneity of monolingualism. The final linguistic destination point for Maraniss’s protagonist president is monolingualism, a de-ethnicized monolingualism at that. It has to be emphasized that from a theoretical point of view, Maraniss’s biography—in embodying so much multilingualism—is in itself a token of material culture, hence the need to engage in such a close-reading of its inclusive multilingualism. As a material manifestation of multilingualism in and of itself, Maraniss’s biography functions in a dual capacity. It invokes multilingualism as it is evocative of the workings of modern multilingualism.

Perhaps the most potent evidence of this strategic use of multilingualism stems from Maraniss’s larger semantic use of languages to map movements. We witness in the course of this saga a carefully designed thematic of movement, which spans a trajectory of: navigating multilinguality, learning multilinguality, and eventually overcoming or shedding multilinguality. By the story’s end, Obama is rendered “normatively” monolingual (Cameron 2013). In a semiotic sense, the materiality of multilingualism is rendered immaterial by *The Story’s* end. Multilingualism’s value is peripherized in both real geographic space, and in psychic space: namely, the repertoire of a protagonist president whose final linguistic destination is a de-ethnicized monolingualism. The book ends when he leaves the peripheral cacophony and confinements of these multifarious languages and dialectal codes and enters the liberating center of American land and language. This journey is explored in the next sections.

### **Etymologizing and Linguistic Translation**

In the biography, we are offered detailed etymologies that signal both identification of the source language as well as semantic import. When tracing the meaning of the name of the school Obama attended, Maraniss writes: “from the Hawaiian phrase *ka punahou*, which means ‘new spring’” (264). One of the most potent and extended examples occurs when Maraniss takes meticulous care

to cite a six-sentence long, third-grade essay Barack Obama is supposed to have written, and which Maraniss chooses to render in complementary translation form, using a mix of italics and non-italics to set Bahasa Indonesian off from English. It might be emphasized that all renderings of language are in transliterated form—subjecting print diversity to homogenous forms.

*Nama saya Barry Soetoro. Saya Kelas III Strada Asisia.* My name is Barry Soetoro. I am a third-grade student at SD Asisi.

*Ibu saya adalah idola saya.* My mom is my idol.

[...]

*Cita-cita saya adalah ingin jadi presiden.* [...] Someday I want to be president. (220)

It is only after the translation that we are told: “The paper no longer exits, though Bu Fer’s [the teacher’s] memory is precise and there is no reason not to trust it” (220). Why such a strategy of verification? Could it be that such a stylistic strategy implicitly showcases Maraniss’s own seeming facility with “translatability and interlinguistic transparency” (Noorani 2013, 9)? After all, Maraniss also offers contextual translation encounters where knowledge of Hawaiian culture permits most readers to fill in untranslated meanings, as in this scene recounting Obama’s high-school graduation ceremony:

They all wore the glossy green-leafy *maile lei*, and the girls also had a delicate *pikake lei*, with its fragrant white flower. (322)

Particularly striking is the seeming ease and effortlessness with which Maraniss code-switches and offers translations of and from a multiplicity of exoticized languages, which are rendered in generous detail in the biography. Consider for example, the manner in which he tells readers of the roots of Obama’s writing ability:

The first author named Barack Obama was not the one who penned the twenty-first-century best seller *Dreams from My Father*, but rather that very father, who a generation earlier wrote an obscure primer entitled *Otieno Jarioko* (Oteine, the Wise Man).

Here again, Maraniss chooses to foreground multilingual fluency. The translation of the title is offered in parenthetical form. In an ironic twist, access to

this multilingual text with “its title page in English, and text in Luo” (104) remains housed not in Kenya, but in a library at Northwestern University. Does Maraniss speak these languages, which he so generously cites from, one is bound to ask?

With so many multilingual tokens, one has to examine the actual workings of multilingualism beyond a mere commonsensical uptake in which the sounds and sightings of these multiple languages merely serve to authenticate the geoscapes being described in each continent traversed by reader and writer alike.

Three words see semantic re-looping in the text. These three semantically similar words have tri-continental origins: Hapa (from Hawaiian); Jada (from Swahili); Bule (Bahasa-Indonesia). They function as three multilingual signifiers of alienation. Their multilingual iterations permit readers a glimpse into the workings of what Noorani (2013) aptly labels “soft multilingualism” (7)—a form of globalization-induced multilingualism that “comes to mean learning the same language in multiple forms” (26).

We first encounter Hapa in the preface to the text. It is translated as “where being *hapa*—half and half—was almost the norm” (xix). The early translation is a useful strategy and permits later decoding, as Chapter 7 is entitled “*Hapa*” (164). Much to the chagrin of several impatient reviewers, it is only in Chapter 7 that Barack Obama even makes any real appearance in the biography. For readers who may not have read the preface, a sentential explanation is again provided: “In Hawaiian, *hapa* is the name for someone who is half one race and half another. The newest state was full of *hapa* people” (165). Later iterations of the word therefore acquire a known meaning in the context of the reading encounter. This is for example the case when Obama’s 18-year old mother invites a friend over and “they sat in the sunshine and talked for a hour, mostly about the baby, her *hapa* boy” (176), and again, when one reads, “The *hapa* boy was too young to know that he was half white, half black, or to understand that in most of American society, because of his genetic combination, he would be called black...” (189). Readers encounter several further uses of “*hapa* boy” (266). So familiar does the word become in the course of the biography that when it is used for other children, readers understand what is being described. Obama’s sister, Maya, “was *Hapa* in Hawaii” (325). The same word is used to describe another half-brother, the child of another one of Obama’s father’s many wives, another American by the name of Ruth Baker, who after a particularly terrifying

episode of domestic assault flees back to Boston, “with Mark, her year-old mixed race toddler, her *hapa*, in tow” (209). This late into the biography, the meaning of this foreignization is familiar. Interestingly, Maraniss is able to offer polysemes to this key notion at a later point in the text while also exhibiting seeming expertise in yet another language:

There were several *hapa* Koreans at Punahou, and they had their own pidgin slang nickname for one another, *yobo*, which means “dear” or “darling” in Korean. (268)

This careful re-looping permits Maraniss to engage in a sweeping synergy of themes particularly at the culmination of his biography where, in charting the inner workings of Obama’s journey approximately 20 years later, he writes:

At age twenty Obama was a man of the world. [...] He could not be of one place, rooted and provincial. From his years living in Indonesia, where he was fully immersed in Javanese schools and culture; from his adolescence in Hawaii, where he was in a polyglot sea of *hapa* and *haole*, Asian and Islanders... from all of this he had experienced far more global diversity than the average college junior. (431)

Years later, when Ann has a daughter, Maya, Maraniss chooses to describe her peripheral status in Hawaii in familiar linguistic terms. He writes: “Like her brother, Maya was *hapa* in Hawaii, but in Indonesia she was Indonesian, and fully at home. She had learned Bahasa Indonesia as a first language, and as the daughter of Soetoro was accepted into the Martodihardjo family.” (325)

The semantic relooping of the term persists among reviewers as well. One critic concludes by saying “the evidence Maraniss has collected...suggests a richer view of the man we have become familiar with, without really knowing” (Fallows 2012, 1), and then proceeds to provide evidence in the form of: “Adolescence in Hawaii, where he was thought of as one of many *hapa*, or multiracial, people rather than placed on the unavoidable black-white grid of mainland America” (1). Appropriating the word with a slightly different gloss, Fallows’ citation indexes Maraniss’s success in privileging familiarity.

### **The ‘Otherness’ of African Multilingualism**

The view of African languages as a chaotic mass of exotic, indecipherable tongues with unique “click sounds” and tonal systems has been hyper-fetishized

in popular media and film (Pandey 2010). Maraniss's strategic use of Luo and Swahili in this presidential biography exploits linguistic diversity for effective literary ends. What makes Maraniss's multilinguality so noticeable is the facility with which proverbs are offered, especially when describing character traits of Obama Senior. This strategy of double translation opens, for instance, Chapter 15. Readers are offered a cultural aphorism—a proverb underscoring Maraniss's thematic of encounters with uncharted, unfamiliar territory: "The insects that feed on dead flesh don't want me, Barack Hussein Obama Sr. would say to explain why he was still alive. It was an African adage, so he said it in Swahili: *Wadudu hawanitaki.*" (389)

These carefully rendered foreignizations serve a stylistic end—they perform a distal function and successfully 'other' the father, Barack Senior, from the son, Barack Junior, the President. Obama's father inevitably emerges as African, a multilingual. He is unintelligible, an Other in need of translation, unlike his son—the American, the intelligible and familiar monolingual President. These details only serve to cement further the dichotomy Maraniss establishes between these protagonists—distal versus proximal familiarity for father versus son respectively.

Translated multilingualism is systematically used to flesh out other foreign character traits of Obama's father. Maraniss, is careful to note various language labels when he translates:

The Luo had another saying to describe Obama's generosity: *Thuol oonge o ofudome*. He didn't have snakes in his pocket. Meaning he was not afraid to reach in. (412)

Other transliterated proverbs form descriptions for the character profile of an unfamiliar father who on one occasion is said to have declared the following: "When I die, I will die thoroughly" (389). This cultural saying, though delivered in English, remains foreign. Such untranslatable cultural notions are what are referred to as Whorfianisms (Deutscher 2010). Other examples of the seeming dexterity in Luo on the part of Maraniss emerge in a detailed list of Obama Senior's other peculiarities. Maraniss reports that Barack Senior went days without eating because, in his words, "I don't want to be *oyondi*," a Luo word meaning "of a big tummy" (396). Sometimes, these localisms are offered up in sentential form, as when Maraniss reports on Obama's father arrogance at only wanting to identify with the elite. He recounts an episode where he is supposed



to have told a friend “in Kiswahili, ‘*Wewe Okoda unajua watu wadogo wadogo—You Okoda, you identify yourself with less important people, small people!*’” (397)

Such acts of linguistic exhibitionism (Pandey, forthcoming) in the form of deliberate, cosmetic, even ornamentalized uses of multilingualism create stylistic distance. A rhetorical distance is created in relation to the father, who is consistently presented in foregrounded multilingual terms, in marked contrast to the backgrounding of polyglossia used to outline the traits of Obama Junior, the ‘monolingual’ man Americans know. Almost predictably then, when English is used for Barack Senior, it is used to present ‘foreign’ character traits, as in the case of a transliterated idiom offered to describe his restless spirit, coded as: “A common Luo metaphor depicting his behavior was that he had “ants in his anus” (39). Interestingly, multilingualism is also used to define the traits of another unfamiliar man—Obama’s African grandfather—a man who is described to be “intemperate” (39) and who furthermore, had other ‘foreign’ traits: “The most common description of him was that he was *mkali* (very harsh), *mtu matata sana* (very troublesome), and *juoki* (easily irritable).” (39).

Whorfianisms such as these abound in the biography. Consider the manner in which Maraniss spotlights his seeming fluency in multiple languages—by offering careful sentential—and not just lexical translations—as when he describes what happens when Obama Sr. dies. A mother’s reaction is described in distal, multilingual, translated terms: “In Kosela, when Akuma got word of her son’s death, she cried out “*Awino Migosi!*”—The royal one is dead!” (414)

Readers learn that when Obama’s own father is eager to explore the world, he assuages his family with “*Winyo piny kiborne*”, citing an old proverb: “No place is too far for a bird” (118), a proverb that sees later semantic re-looping in English. Maraniss tells readers: “His confidence [Obama, the President] was only growing, as was his magnetism. As his father,...had said, “No place is too far for a bird” (154). This is a thematic reminder to readers of his father’s restlessness, his ambition—rendered not in a tongue needing translation—an unintelligible code—but rather, in the known language of English.

The foreignness of place emerges in and through multilingual translation. We are told of the Indonesian behavior of being “*mbeling*” (215)—exhibiting a stubbornness of sort, or of walking barefoot—“*nyeker*, a term conveying “chicken feet” (216). We encounter tight explanations of idioms both translated and

explained, such as the extent of Obama's stepfather Lolo's facility with flattery: "...[W]omen adapted a local saying to him: *Lolo ini piye, kambing dibedakin pun pasti dibilang cantik*—If a goat put on makeup, Lolo would compliment the goat too." (229) Sometimes, Maraniss offers detailed explanations for lexicalizations, as in the following description of Lolo: "He 'showed his happy face,' as one relative put it. In Javanese culture, they call this characteristic *sumeh*." (230) This stepfather, like Obama's real father, is rendered in unfamiliar multilingual terms. We witness here another link to Maraniss's larger thematic: juxtaposing foreignness against familiarity.

### **Whorfianisms and Appropriation: Peripherizing Native Informants**

Maraniss's use of native-speaker Luo and Bahasa Indonesian informants and translators suggests a neo-Whorfian understanding of the place of translation in our 21<sup>st</sup>-century interconnected "global cosmopolis" (Simon 2012, 159), and offers an alternative manner in which the materiality of multilingualism is utilized to spotlight the potency of monolingual writers. In the analysis provided, macrosocial evidence of the asymmetrical workings of linguistic valuation indicates a market theoretic (Park and Wee 2012) in which a monolingual writer's spotlighted multilingual knowledge, culled from invisibilized native-speaker informants, is centered at the expense of real multilingual speakers.

Few readers for example are likely to venture into the often unread portions, such as the peritextual domains like the "Acknowledgments" section of the biography where in *The Story* we learn of the real linguistic contributions of Maraniss's native speaker informants and consultants. For Luo, Maraniss offers the following statement of gratitude for what he generalizes as the "Kenya side of the story" (576). Maraniss, who is so meticulous in specifics elsewhere, offers meager details. He writes:

I found Beatrice during a summer in Madison when I needed someone to translate several documents from the Dholuo language and she turned out to be the one Luo student at the University of Wisconsin. As it happened Beatrice grew up in a village only a few miles from where the Obamas lived, and was returning home on holiday during the weeks of our trip, so she also served as our interpreter in western Kenya. (576)

It is unclear if Beatrice served as the sole consultant for Luo, Swahili and other African languages spotlighted in the biography. No mention of others is

provided. For linguistic insights and translations in Bahasa Indonesia, Maraniss offers passing acknowledgements to “The peerless Fenty Effendy,” whom he describes as “another great young journalist,” and who “served as our guide and interpreter in Indonesia” (576). A set of lines are dedicated in the “Hawaii part of the story” to “Ron Jacobs” (576) who was the linguist consultant for the Hawaiian Creole inclusions. One final acknowledgement is given to “several conversations with Maya Soetoro-Ng, Obama’s warm and insightful little sister” (576).

In an uncanny reflection of center-periphery dichotomies (Weber and Horner 2012, 153) we see a ‘centering’ and spotlighting of Maraniss’s own putative dexterity with multilingualism, in contrast to a concomitant peripherizing of the actual native speakers of these diverse languages whose names and identities remain relegated to the less ventured textual spaces of the biography itself—the acknowledgements section—where few readers ever venture.

### **Mapping Movements: The Visual in the Literary**

Part of this literary experience stems from the thematic organization of the text—a spotlighting of geolinguistics. There are allusions to such movement also in Remnick’s biography of two years prior. In what seems to be a foreshadowing of sorts to Maraniss, Remnick (2010) recounts an interview with famed singer Bob Dylan, who offers a similar summary of Obama’s rich biographical notes, and who “recognized what a unique set of influences, maps, histories and genetic codes they contained” (41). *The Story* proceeds then to foreground “the places” that shaped a president (Higgins 2012, 1), designing a thematization of place and space throughout the text. Maraniss comments at one moment in the flow of the text: “That is how history works, the history of families as well as the history of nations and movements” (101). Perhaps this is what explains the visual, geolinguistic emphasis in the outlay of the biography. Maraniss’s careful inclusion of 10 meticulously selected maps both locates places and augments the trope of moving from periphery to center, both geographically and semiotically. In the words of noted historian Jill Lepore (2012), so epic is the outcome of this literary encounter that “It’s like reading Michener” (70).

The tight focus on place emerges in peritextual form upon first reading of this text. Six of 18 chapter titles allude to geography: “In Search of El Dorado” (Chapter 1); “Luoland” (Chapter 2); “Nairobi Days” (a phonetic pun alluding to

"daze", Chapter 4); "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere" (Chapter 6); "Such a World" (Chapter 9); and finally, "Mainland" (Chapter 14). By the final chapters in the book, Obama has shed his polyglot skins in favor of a single linguistic shade, which guarantees him a sameness and blending-in with his space. The final chapter is thus poignantly labeled "Finding and Being Found" (Chapter 18). Ultimately then, complexities of 21<sup>st</sup>-century space, place, and transmigratory encounter impel a homogenization of linguistic medley and multiplexity into 'comprehensible' monolingual forms. These semiotic moves are mapped onto geoscaped movements from periphery to center on the part of Maraniss's main protagonists.

We witness then an attempt to locate the textuality of multilingualism in real geosemiotic space (Scollon and Scollon 2003). The "rhetorical strategy of mapping" (Tatou-Métangmo 2005, 126), far from functioning as an ancillary aesthetic inclusion in the biography, has to be analyzed as an important strategy augmenting Maraniss's larger argument of ideological "situatedness" (Englestad and Gerrard 2005) especially his thematized dichotomization of "centeredness" versus peripherality. Here, we are not just referring to concrete manifestations of geographical space per se, but also, symbolic space and the 'place' of languages contained within such mapped spaces. Maps, the staple of colonial encounter, have served as strategic artifacts in the "reinscription, enclosure and hierarchization of space" (Huggan 1989, 116). The maps included in Maraniss's biography, in addition to locating the space of unfolding action, serve to sustain a complementary hierarchization of space and linguistic diversity.

Readers begin this cartographic journey on page 1 in the North American heartland, and are provided with a map to make this semiotic connection. Bordering US states, which are carefully labeled, only serve as visual proof of the centeredness of this originating geospace. Playing on the popular filmic allusion of not being "in Kansas anymore" perhaps, familiar spaces soon yield to unfamiliar territory. Readers are provided with another map, which itself contains a map-within-a-map—one which both locates Kenya in the world of space, and which dually serves to transport readers to the 'periphery' of a carefully concocted geoscape labeled as "Luoland" (57). The use of land further heightens the vastness of this unknown space for many readers unfamiliar with this territory.

In the map of Kenya on page 57, readers are oriented to where Obama's father comes from. This 'foreign' land is textualized using copious foreignizations retracing "the cultures of various tribal villages, or *bomas*" (260). Maraniss code-switches and offers translations from a multiplicity of 'exotic' languages when detailing these spaces in his biography, whether it be passing reference to a favorite meal in Luo, as in "*Kuku choma*, a grilled chicken" (38); deliberative lexicalizations of food items as in: "*ugali* (a popular gruel that served as a staple for most meals); or "*nyoyo* (corn mixed and boiled with beans)" (51). Readers are given linguistic details of a geoscape that is foreign, exotic, other, and described for semiotic effect using multiple multilingual glosses. Inevitably then, multilingual showcasing on Maraniss's part acquires a similar function as in film namely, the creation of a *mis-en-scene* of unfolding literarily inspired biographical action. Early in the narrative, readers encounter depictions of an exotic landscape filled with the "sound of Luo drums, acoustic guitars, and eight-string *nyatiti*" (99); a land which entrances everyone, even Obama Senior, into a "sensuous swaying of his hips to the hypnotic *benga* music" (99). Faraway cities in the mind of the reader are filled with "overcrowded jitney buses, known as *matatus*," which ferry passengers "from the capital to the far stretches of western Kenya" (398).

Otherness then, is not just geographically located, but also literarily inscribed in this 21<sup>st</sup>-century biography. In describing the "four years of travel researching the world that created Obama" (xviii), Maraniss recounts "a harrowing seven-hour drive from the capital city of Nairobi" (xv) to other peripheral geographical localities in this 'foreign' space, including "a bumpy journey into the hills of southern Nyanza" (xv), where many years prior, a young Obama "went fishing for Nile perch...and drank *chang'aa*, a potent gin distilled from fermented corn" (xvi). Maraniss takes particular care to recount a memory, an incident, in which relatives recall Obama's visit to Kenya on hiatus from Chicago, where he is said to have "recoiled at the fish they served with bones and eyes still in it," (569) on this "first time trip to Africa" (569) in a foreign land whose 'odd' food is said to have given him "a stomach upset" (569). Maraniss's use of such ornamentized multilingualism creates a material aura of 'otherness.'

In a bid to build upon this metaphor of increasing peripherization from the center of things we are taken to real peripheries—remote geographical spaces—known to the implied reader. One of the included maps provides a meticulous semiotic indexing of "Mercer Island" (121), with the added map-within-a-map

strategy used for complementary literary effect. In his biographical account of Obama, Remnick (2010) had reported that Ann Dunham, Obama's mother, spent her life in "constant motion" (42). In what can only be seen as a journalistic coincidence, we see some of the same spaces that Maraniss thematizes as those Remnick (2010) gives of Obama's itinerant life. His mother, we are told,

was as much at home in a Javanese village as she ever was in El Dorado, Kansas, where she went to grade school. Everywhere she landed, in a rural outpost in Pakistan or a densely populated Indonesian city, she looked around and said wryly, "Gee, Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." (42)

The meeting point of these two parents of Barack Obama, the President, occurs for Maraniss in real, but peripheral space, namely, the island of Hawaii. This space is carefully indexed via a map of Hawaii with another map-within-a-map focus (138). That the focus is on one of many islands in the middle of a vast sea (map-within-a-map), only strengthens further the semiotic import of multilingual glossings which unfold in these specific chapters.

Nowhere does a focus on otherness and peripherization occur more obviously than in the careful inclusion of another page-length map of the entirety of the island nation of Indonesia (226), which is included in the chapter centered on the family's move there. It is here that we are told that Obama:

learned Bahasa Indonesia, the national language so well that by the end of his first year his classmates assumed he was Indonesian, a little darker than the rest, probably from one of the easternmost islands. Just another kid playing *kasti*, a form of softball, under the shade of the commodious mangosteen tree. (xvii)

By this point in the narrative, space, and place remain metaphorically peripheral, at least for most American readers unfamiliar with these geographies. These spaces, non-coincidentally, are also the points in the narrative when most of the multilingual action of the biography takes place. There is a constrictedness that one encounters in Maraniss's description of Jakarta for example. He writes:

In Jakarta, in the midmorning humidity of early September, our *taksi* driver wended through the traffic-clogged roadways of Indonesia's booming capital city... He turned left and let us out at the entrance to the

Menteng Dalam neighborhood, or *kampung*. To the right, we looked down at a swampy urban culvert strewn with trash. (xvi)

Later, Maraniss adds more multilingual material in the description of this congested 'other' space.

But the sensibility of the neighborhood remains much the same: the narrow pathways and alleyways; the street carts with pungent offerings of *nasi goreng* and *rendang*, fried rice and spicy beef; the symphony of neighborhood rhythms and sounds; a daily song of the *kampung*, the low undulating buzz of call to prayer at the nearby mosque; the beseeching voice of the bread seller; the hollow bock-bock-bock-click of a meatball vendor knocking his bamboo *kentongan*; and the shrieks and laughs of children down on the playground at the neighborhood school, SD Asisi. (xvi)

For Maraniss, a recurring theme in Obama's life was a "determination to avoid life's traps" (xxi). One of such traps according to Maraniss was "the trap of geography" (xxi):

Then the trap of geography, being born and spending most of his childhood in Hawaii, farther from any continental landmass than anywhere in the world except Easter Island, along with four formative years on the other side of the world, in Indonesia. (xxi)

In an almost predictable rhetorical move which matches Maraniss's larger thematic of moving from periphery to the center, we see two final inclusions of space that semiotically augment this movement from exteriority to interiority, indeed, from otherness to familiarity. First, is the inclusion of a tight, Google-inspired street-level map (getting to the heart of things at both a symbolic and literal level). This is the first and only one of its kind in the text. For most travelers to Hawaii, this map is thus already 'familiar' (267).

The final map included in the text, a street level map of Chicago, is of the heartland at least for American readers, the main audience of the text. This move to actual interiority for most readers familiar with Chicago also signals a 'return' to familiar space (538). These maps, taken in isolation and as a whole, are as much a part of the semiotic import of Maraniss's message as the multilingual medley with which they see matching in the course of the biography.

## Navigating Multilingualism

The seeming indecipherability of codes forms an important theme in this biography keen on charting movements from the center to the periphery and back. Maraniss reminds readers of his thesis at several points in the biography. 100 pages in, he offers a reminder in which he tells readers that the trajectory to the Presidency was set into motion generations prior—"when missionaries encountered Onyango [Obama's grandfather] in Kendu Bay, taught him English...[T]his is how history works, the history of families as well as the history of nations and movements" (101). There are several points where spatial peripherization sees conflation with linguistic incomprehensibility. In narrating the details of Hussein Onyango, Obama's great grandfather living in colonial Africa, Maraniss takes care to tell of how he navigated the multilingual medley of Nairobi of the 1940's—a plan which involved crossing linguistic divides and seeking out friends in parts of the city that were home to the Luhya tribe. Maraniss tells us: "The Luo and Luhya, whose home territory was to the north of Luoland, had been on friendly terms historically although their tribal languages derived from different roots and were largely unintelligible to one another, so they communicated in Swahili or English" (52).

Inevitably, in this literary journey traversing three continents, there emerges a need to set aside multilingual medley in favor of the familiarity of 'known' languages. There are allusions to the unreliability of 'translation' and the need for a 'common' code. In assessing the veracity of Obama's grandfather's torture at the hand of British colonists, Maraniss notes that only one survivor remains to verify this account, a fifth wife, Sarah Ogwel. However, the sole surviving testifier's memory Maraniss deems apocryphal. It is in this quote we catch a glimpse of multilingualness as potentially 'unreliable' especially in comparison to the fact-checking potential accorded monolingual English. Maraniss writes:

While there can be no obvious reason for her to contrive such a tale, her accuracy on other matters that can be documented is uneven. She only speaks in Luo, knowing some Swahili and no English, so her quotes are dependent upon the inclinations of the interpreter. And five people who had close connections to Hussein Onyango said they doubted the story or were certain that it did not happen. (54)



## Learning Languages

Maraniss's monolingual orientation (in spite of the linguist-persona he adopts in the text), comes through in his encodings of various acts of language learning attempts on the part of key players in the biography. Numerous accounts detail the learning of languages. Implicit in a number of the descriptions is the seeming ease with which one can 'learn' languages. Consider for instance how Maraniss recounts the language acquisition output of a 1906 Canadian missionary keenly attempting proselytization in Africa—Arthur Asa Carscallan. Maraniss informs readers: "Though he had dropped out of school at age ten in Canada, he was a self-taught scholar, gifted enough to pick up Luo, an unusual Nilotic language (tonal and sing-songy) unlike the Bantu dialects spoken by other tribes in Kenya" (46). Even more fascinating from a linguistic point of view is how seemingly quickly this linguistic learning happens. Maraniss is quick to quote that this pastor was "preaching in the native language in three months" (46), and that furthermore, he single-handedly managed to take an orally-occurring language, and "compiled a five-thousand-word Luo-English dictionary and began translating the Gospel of Matthew into Luo" (46). Language acquisition in three months is impressive certainly, but no details are afforded as to this missionary's actual fluency other than his own professed doubt of comprehensibility in the form of a direct quote as reported by Maraniss: "[B]ut I still wonder whether the natives understood me or not" (46).

An offhanded detail that Maraniss provides regarding Barack Obama's mother's fluency in languages on the surface emerges as a passing detail in the transcript of this biography. We are told that, when she was seventeen, she was getting ready to graduate from Mercer High school, in the state of Washington with a GPA of 3.5 in "a challenging curriculum including four years of French and advanced chemistry and Math" (135). One cannot fail to miss the unstated adulation of this remark. At the risk of over-interpreting, some readers may inadvertently come away with the impression that Luo needs but a few months to learn (on the part of a missionary), but French, years to master.

It is language learning that brings Ann Dunham, Obama's mother, and Barack senior, his father, into contact with each other according to Maraniss. By 1960, the year they met, and in part impelled by the rise of Cold-War sentiments, "Russian had become the third most popular language course at Hawaii that fall, behind only Spanish and French" (155) Maraniss reports. One of Ann Dunham's

friends is said to have remarked to Maraniss in an interview, "I was really impressed that she had opted for Russian" (157). Years later, Ann Dunham—Obama's mother—the eternal traveler (Scott 2012), embarks on another language-learning endeavor as recalled by the young Obama and reported by Maraniss in narrative form. Readers are given vivid details of: "shards of memory from that trip: ...bronze Buddhas and green tea ice cream; "bone-chilling rains" and high mountain lakes in Japan; his mother studying Bahasa Indonesia flashcards at night" (213). Over 100 pages later Maraniss reports that that by the time Ann was doing anthropological fieldwork, she "was fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, but most villagers spoke only the native Javanese language, which Djaka would translate for her" (328), and that she would spend hours at night "translating and transcribing interviews" (328). Ann's multilingual facility was crucial in landing her a job with the Ford Foundation, and in the words of one of her colleagues, "She was unique in the sense that she was American but spoke Indonesian fluently" (406).

We are told that languages came easily to Barack Senior, and "that he had memorized the English alphabet when he was still a toddler, could read by the age of five, and always learned new things faster than his peers" (56). Later, he enrolled in a private missionary school where he learned "Swahili and English, along with Dholuo" (56). By the time he was enrolled at the University of Hawaii, he was "already fluent in Dholuo, Swahili, and English, had taken Latin at CMS Maseno, and had linguistic facility that allowed him to pick up a smattering of other languages, according to friends" (155-156). Maraniss's subjective take on Obama Senior becomes apparent when he quotes a resume which Elizabeth Mooney, his mentor, helps him put together to garner financial assistance for graduate school, in which he fails to mention key information about Ann Dunham or the new baby he had just fathered. This comment, while parenthetically rendered, is nonetheless semantically significant. Writes Maraniss, "The first category was *Personal*: 'Luo from Kenya. Speaks Luo, Sawhili, English.' (He had not followed through in Russian enough to become fluent.) 'Wife and 2 children in Kenya.' (No mention of Ann Obama and Barack H. Obama II)" (178).

Maraniss is equally meticulous in describing the language learning habits of the son who, as a young first grader in Indonesia, exhibits the same linguistic facility: "He was a fast learner, but in the meantime, some boys communicated with him in a sign language they jokingly called 'Bahasa tarzan.'" (216) At some point he

had difficulty “articulating the Bahasa Indonesia *r*,” so that “words like ‘Baru’ which meant ‘new’ came out as “*bau*” which means smelly” (239). This was one word classmates did not take kindly to, especially since it served as a prefix to many names. Maraniss tells readers, “Barry persevered and by second grade said to his teacher ‘Ibu, boleh saya bantu hapus?’—‘May I help you erase, ma’am?’ (218). Here Bahasa Indonesian speech, unlike at other points in the biography, is unitalicized. We see an attempt on the part of Maraniss to render unfamiliar languages in familiar, unmarked terms.

By third grade he was comfortable in the language and his teacher “became familiar with his cry, ‘Saya bu, saya!’ Pick me ma’am. Pick Me!” (219). Barack’s fluency was apparently useful in helping another expatriate returning from Australia acculturate to the classroom routines of Indonesia. With direct quotes, Maraniss recounts how Barack (then called Barry) helped this young boy named Mardi:

“I cannot speak Bahasa, so Barry was helping me. He explained what Ibu Fer said, almost every word.” Mardi struggled especially when it came time for tests, and would have been clueless if not for Barry, who helped him... (221).

These foreignizations remain unitalicized, though Maraniss’s use of italicized code-switchings at other points in the saga points to a semiotic distance from the language. In these unitalicized forms, Maraniss assumes a familiarity rather than a distance from multilingualism. Consider for example, another use of this strategy, when a grown-up Barack, studying at Columbia University, meets some Pakistani friends at a party in San Francisco. Maraniss recounts what happens using direct quotes from an interview transcript in which a friend of the President recalls the following:

A lanky, broad-smiling Barry wearing a tattered straw hat endeared himself immediately by greeting me in Urdu slang with “Kiayaa haal heh, seth?” (“How are you boss?”). (367-368)

If Maraniss aims to encode Obama’s many linguistic skins and his eventual ease at chameleonizing into different codes, these unitalicized forms are an effective literary strategy.

### **Losing Languages**

Language learning inevitably gives way to language loss in this epic biography spanning three generations and three continents. Consider, for instance how carefully Maraniss uses the seeming cacophony of polyglossia to describe Obama's outsider status as he grows up outside the mainland. This geographical distance is foregrounded in the form of the chapter title "Such a World." Readers soon encounter descriptions in which the particularities of many languages begin to serve as Saussurian signs for encoding polyglot choices and the polysemy of one semantic lexeme: namely, alienation. Maraniss, in the role of folk-linguist, underscores this point:

In the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, *bule* means "stranger," but of a particular type, with white skin. *Bule* is a linguistic cousin of *jadak*, the Luo word for "alien" in western Kenya, and *haole*, the native word for someone (usually a white Anglo) not of Polynesian descent in Hawaii, but it was not necessarily meant as an insult, more as a matter-of-fact description. (212)

This multilingual rendition of alienation of outsider, peripheral status sees thematic reminder at several points in the text. Readers encounter multifarious multilingual encodings linked to spatio-temporal themes: "a cycle of leaving and being left" (279). Maraniss reasserts this leitmotif in linguistically labeled terms:

The loneliness and uncertainty of his early years heightened his sensibility as an outsider, an observer, a *jadak*, even as it propelled him toward a future...having a black African father and a white American mother, dealing with people who regarded him as black, or *hapa*, or Ambonese, or different in one way or another—all the issues of race intensified the outsider aspect of his character. (279)

The geographical move from heartland to periphery and back in the book is carefully conflated with an equally compelling, though not so predictable journey from multilingual medley to monotone monolinguality. We are told for example that the young Obama moves as a monolingual child to Indonesia and pretty soon speaks the language. Several eyewitness accounts testify to his fluency in the language:

"Saya Barry," I am Barry, and continued speaking in the familiar *lu-gue* (you-me) terms. After two years in Jakarta, he could make his way comfortably in Bahasa Indonesia. (236)

Later in the narrative we are offered more details. A childhood friend recalls Barry's prowess in street slang, and tells Maraniss that upon a verbal challenge he replied with linguistic appropriacy intact:

'Ah, *ogah*,'" he said. *Ogah* is slang for "no way," showing how fluent in street talk Barry had become. (236)

Barry's bout with Bahasa Indonesia soon ends. He moves to another linguistic hot spot—Hawaii. Maraniss carefully details this linguistic shift and its implications:

He was Barry Obama again. No need to speak Bahasa Indonesia anymore, either. In the future another exotic tongue would become more useful to him, a creole Hawaiian street slang known as pidgin. *Howzit?* Sound it out and the greeting becomes clear. *Da kine*, an all purpose word for "something." *Das why hard*, a sardonic explanation for something difficult. *Bra*, brother. And the question whose answer provided the most telling definition of a fellow Hawaiian: *What school you went?* (264)

The last phrase forms the telling title of the chapter. Like a protagonist of a created tale, Maraniss creates his authenticity of experience in and through language. A bit of Hawaii works itself into Obama and stays. We are told that soon the young Obama "exemplified the local pidgin expression 'Cool head, main thing'" (294) —another non-italicized phrase which, like other polyglot expressions, sees re-looping into the *mis-en-scene* of his character at several other points later in the narrative. There are hints however of a desired move to the comfortableness of sameness. Maraniss tells readers that when prodded by teachers as to what tribe his father came from, "the tittering from his classmates" (269) prompted him to recount a memory in which he "paused in embarrassment before answering "Luo" (269). Here we see an overt encoding of the 'immateriality' of multilingualism's worth in an evolving Obama. In *The Story*, bits of culture in and through language work their way into the personae of a man who later becomes a two-term president—the first African-American President; the first biracial President, the first cosmopolitan President.

Inevitably, however, we are told, he has to choose a language. This is a choice that confounds Obama when he is enrolled in an Ivy League college situated in the monolingual 'mainland'. Here, he has to navigate the stratum between so-called standard and non-standard dialects (Lippi-Green 2012) as well. One of the interviewees in the book is quick to tell Maraniss: "...you learn to speak two

languages" (435), and then hastens to describe that "this probably relates to Obama his whole life. You learn to be bilingual when you are in there and you're talking about the philosophy of Aristotle or Kierkegaard..." (436). For this interviewee, code-shifting out of so-called standard dialect is for peripheral purposes only: i.e. for when you "want to let your hair down and say, 'Yo, wassup? I'm still in New York. Be chill. Where you gonna be hanging?'" (436).

Understandably then, when Obama eventually arrives on the "mainland" (another title of a chapter), he opts for the homogeneity of Standard English and an academic rhetoric which Maraniss writes "could be summarized in three words: *listen, analyze, decide*" (359). This italicization of language takes on a double entendre, especially when examined in relation to all the other italicized multilingual glosses included in the narrative. By this stage in Obama's linguistic journey, the endorsement of the seemingly "enunciative power of monolingualism" has become, if not imperceptible then certainly normalized, thereby casting bilingualism into the pit of foreignness (Mowitt 2005, 46). We see here an instantiation of what Cameron (2013) labels "English boosterism" (71), a not so overt endorsement of the "core values of rationality, moderation, tolerance and democracy" seemingly implicit in commonsensical rationalizations of the power and potency of English the world over (Park and Wee 2012). Soon we see how prescient the move towards monolinguality becomes. We witness the end of a linguistic chameleonizing of a president whose journey to fame begins when he sheds his many linguistic skins for one so-called Standard English. By *The Story's* culmination, Maraniss renders Obama, de-ethnicized and normatively monolingual.

In a letter written in the summer of 1983, from Indonesia to a soon to become ex-girlfriend, Alexandra McNear, Obama on holiday from Columbia University writes of a transformative shift he seems to be experiencing that Maraniss recounts in poignantly linguistic terms. Readers are told: "To Obama, this place halfway around the world, once so familiar, now seemed alien as well...Indonesia seemed distant...he felt "a little disconnected" (468). Maraniss then proceeds to provide direct quotes from a letter Obama writes to McNear—authentic Obama words strategically re-quoted at the right point in the narrative to underscore Maraniss larger thematic of his protagonist's linguistic movement from multilingualism to monolingualism:

I can't speak the language well anymore. I'm treated with a mixture of puzzlement, deference, and scorn, because I'm an American. (468)

The desire to linguistically fit in sees iteration in another telling scene recounted by an interviewee in Chicago. Maraniss details a memory of Obama seeming to apologize for his 'obvious' linguistic differences. By this point in the narrative, we see the completion of a full psychic cycle matched with geographical movement from heartland to periphery, and then back. This journey is rendered not just in and through spotlighted maps, but also in and through linguistic shifts. It is in Chicago, an autobiographical return to the heartland, that Maraniss gives readers some parting linguistic details. He recounts an interview Obama has with Reverend Love, an important mentor of Obama in Chicago (Remnick 2010). Here, we see a foreshadowing of presidential aspiration on the part of Obama:

"And he came in and kind of disarmed you with that spiel about his name," Love recalled. "My name is Barack Obama and I'm going through the community... to see what can be done.... You're probably wondering about that name and my accent. I've got this funny accent because my mother's from Kansas and my dad's from Kenya." (525-526)

By the last page in the biography, spatial movements are nicely matched with linguistic movements. We find that the young Obama has moved out from the 'cacophony' of multilinguality to the 'comprehensibility' of monolinguality. The final pages of the biography chronicle a few details, which Maraniss carefully excerpts from the President's visit to Kenya, a journey he embarked upon before fully diving into politics. We see here another instance of strategic re-sequencing and a re-quoting of autobiographical content on the part of Maraniss. Using strategically selected episodes from Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, Maraniss recounts what happens on that fateful sojourn when the young Obama feels "That a full circle was beginning to close, so that I might fully recognize myself as I was, here, now, in one place" (569). Maraniss adds his own commentary as follows:

The mood was broken only once, he recalled, when he found himself alone with Granny and the conversation stopped abruptly after they had exhausted their knowledge of the other's language. She had said "Halo," he had said "*Musawa*," and that was that, at least in the book. [...] In his

memoir, Obama presented a twenty-page section as one long narration...  
She did not speak English, and he did not know Luo..." (570)

The book ends with Obama's return to Chicago. Maraniss's conclusion reminds readers of his spatio-temporal theme. He writes: "A life of leaving and being left had come full circle...In Chicago he had found the place to which he could always return" (570-571). Here, we see a geolinguistic match, a bookending of movement from known heartland to foreign peripheral space and back, matched to an equally transparent mapping of a linguistic trajectory: a movement from monolingualness to multilingualness, and back. Eventually then, it is in and through the materiality of multilingualism that we understand how Maraniss renders its immateriality. Indeed, in Maraniss's careful mapping of the linguistic journey of an American President seeking the unmarkedness of monolingualism over the markedness of multilingualism do we comprehend how multilingualism in this Presidential biography is eventually rendered immaterial.

### **Conclusion: The 'Place' of Geo-Semiotics in a Globalized World**

Inevitably then, we witness a subversion of multilingualism in the service of monolingualism in a flattened world (Friedman 2005) of 21<sup>st</sup>-century 'accessibility.' Such linguistic exhibitionism (Pandey, forthcoming) inevitably serves to showcase author linguistic prowess rather than the potency of actual linguistic diversity itself. In effect, the spotlight is cast not on the richness of global linguistic diversity in an interconnected world per se, but rather, on David Maraniss the author, taking on the role of a folk-linguist, and translator-in-chief, managing to spotlight *his* prowess in a multiplicity of languages: a carefully exhibited facility and familiarity in navigating the specifics of not just a few languages, but rather, an impressive number of languages. In the mind of most readers, such foregrounded and centered authorial linguistic dexterity is bound to get noticed.

Furthermore, in this poignantly narrated multigenerational sojourn of a black presidential candidate's journey to the White House, Maraniss manages to semiotically position monolingualism and multilingualism as "metaphorical correlates" (Cameron 2013, 69) of cohesion and centeredness on the one hand, and fragmentation and peripherization on the other. In effect, by the end of *The Story*, it is the sameness of monolingualism that sees valorization rather than the



diversity of multilingualism. Multilingualism in effect is used as a semiotic tool to augment Maraniss's larger thematic of peripheral positionality in the geoscape of 21<sup>st</sup>-century language use. Very much like the marginalized, peritextual space Maraniss relegates his actual invisibilized multilingual language informants and translators to, we witness in this biography a peripherization of multilingualism on two fronts: use and users.

What are the implications of such microlinguistic analyses of geosemiotic workings such as have been scrutinized in this study? Firstly, the findings provide tangible evidence of a similar privileging of linguistic homogeneity as has already been demonstrated at other macrosocietal levels. We witness diametric conflations of familiarity with monolingualism and otherness with multilingualism on a grand scale world-wide (Park and Wee 2012). Secondly, interdisciplinarily oriented paradigms of analysis (Block, Gray and Holborow 2012) offer nuanced examinations of the workings of language in actual discursual output. After all, material cultural products such as biographies enjoy mass audience appeal and influence, amid the continued construction of dispositions towards the utility or immateriality of either societal or individual mono- or multilingualism.

This analysis has demonstrated that any superficial reading encounter with this biography may well point towards an interpretation in which the multilingualism as carefully encoded in Maraniss's biography sees spotlighting and valorization. Such a reading would most likely argue for evidence of the pivotal place and representation of multilingualism in 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular writing. An interdisciplinarily oriented paradigm however offers an alternative account. Analysis reveals a "re-representation" of 21<sup>st</sup>-century multilingualism as secondary to the spatial and semiotic centrality accorded to monolingualism. In essence, this analysis lends evidence of the existence in yet another genre, popular writing, of what Noorani (2013) has dubbed globalization-induced "soft multilingualism" (98). Here, the rendition of linguistic difference occurs "within the confines of familiar linguistic norms" (8). Via a novel mix of visual and linguistic strategy, the materiality of multilingualism is in essence rendered immaterial.

In spite of the copious uses of multilingualism on the part of David Maraniss, it is monolingualism, rather than multilingualism that eventually acquires "normative metalinguistic status" (Cameron 2013, 60). This finding becomes

evident by the culmination of the biography. Eventually, microanalyses such as this demonstrate that while larger-level macrosocial forces instigate reification and eventual representation of linguistic diversity and linguistic homogeneity as otherness versus familiarity in the public eye, it is also the machinery of microsemiotic acts such as are adopted by bestseller-oriented publications which serve as “surrogates” (Cameron 2013) through which public taste, distaste, fear and/or familiarity with linguistic diversity continue to be reproduced. Indeed, the “linguistic analog of heterogeneity” continues to be “multilingualism” (Cameron 2013, 66) particularly in most modern, migration-receiving nation states such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Park and Wee 2012, Lippi-Green 2012). In a biography tracing the geographical and sociopsychological movement of a president from periphery to center, indeed from multilingualism to a de-ethnicized monolingualism, it is no accident that linguistic homogeneity, monolingualism, acquires centrality and valorization. By the biography's culmination, David Maraniss makes monolingualism, not multilingualism, the geosemiotic destination point of his famous protagonist.

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