Abraham Acosta
University of Arizona

THE WAGER OF CRITICAL MULTILINGUALISM STUDIES

Abstract:
This essay reflects on the potential meanings of 'critical multilingualism studies' in an era of unparalleled cultural and economic porosity, exploring how such a scholarly and theoretical field might reimagine inter- and multilingual inquiry in the Humanities, Comparative Literature, Latin American Studies, critical theory, and second language acquisition. Applying insights from Jacques Rancière, Jean Baudrilliard, Carlos Montemayor, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Acosta interrogates the ideological distinction between 'monolingual signification' and 'translational signification,' between universalist abstractions and the specific language(s) from which they issue. Taking the Zapatista uprisings of 1994 as a case study, Acosta then turns to how the ascription 'monolingual' has been mobilized in Mexican public discourse.

Keywords:
Political theory ◆ use-value ◆ Jacques Rancière ◆ Zapatista movement ◆ monolingualism

On the 11th of December 2013, following the globally televised memorial honoring Nelson Mandela's passing in Johannesburg, South Africa, it was revealed through multiple agencies that the sign language interpreter provided for the ceremony, seen standing stage-left of the podium and translating for almost all of the honored speakers during the event, was in effect *not* translating anything at all. Groups such as the Deaf Federation of South Africa, among others, accused the interpreter of simply not using any recognized sign system or variation thereof, and rather to have been making up hand gestures with no relationship to either the speeches he was 'translating' or the standardized

Acosta, Abraham. "The Wager of Critical Multilingualism Studies." *Critical Multilingualism Studies* 2:1 (2014): pp. 20-37. ISSN 2325-2871.

medium toward which their content was destined. As a result, it is assumed that not one meaningful word from the more than four-hour memorial was ever conveyed to its intended communities: the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

Official inquiries briskly revealed 34-year-old Thamsanqa Jantjie as the interpreter in question and, while in interviews with the media he claimed his translating competence at the memorial had been impaired by a sudden schizophrenic attack, this was reportedly not the first accusation of gross negligence he had faced. In this latest, globally broadcast instance, he was exposed finally as a fraud, rather than a malpractitioner. In an opinion piece appearing a week later Slavoj Žižek—in his usual provocative fashion—asked if, after all, "sign language translators for the deaf are really meant for those who cannot hear the spoken word?.", or if rather they are "not much more intended for us—it makes us (who can hear) feel good to see the interpreter, giving us a satisfaction that we are doing the right thing, taking care of the underprivileged and hindered?" (16 December). With this sole question, Žižek turned the tables on the debate and suggested that the real fraud perpetrated at the Nelson Mandela memorial lay not with Jantjie but with the conventional, token inclusion of sign language interpretation—the unguarded, uncertified status of which Jantjie simply elaborated to its most radical extent.

This is not to suggest that Jantjie's simulations communicated nothing at all. The virtuosity of Jantjie's performance at the memorial, according to Žižek, was that it "was not meaningless—precisely because it delivered no particular meaning (the gestures were meaningless), it directly rendered meaning as such—the pretense of meaning." What Jantjie's ultimately illiterate gestures foregrounded was that "although we were not able to understand them," "those who hear well and do not understand sign language assumed that [they] had meaning" and therefore took them as guarantee not only of the existence of a concrete, substantive, ground-level of meaning underlying language itself, but also of the capacity of this meaning to be wielded within a spoken language and then readily and efficiently transcoded to a nonverbal sign system when the need arises. In other words, the supplementarity of sign language interpretation (never front-and-center, always just off to the side) generated the security and comfort that comes with knowing that one's spoken language can actually sustain and carry meaning, that it is legitimated by it, and is not, like Jantjie's translations, a mere sequence of empty, meaningless impostures. Sign language interpretation, as it is staged at events such as this, provides 'officially'

recognized languages with a guarantee of the real with which they all purportedly share access and a primary relation. Jantjie's illiterate signing brought this ideological edifice to the brink of collapse.

Despite initial objections then, some translation did indeed take place: Jantjie is not a complete fraud, his work at the podium was not hollow. Something was communicated even if only the banality and "nonsense" of a self-congratulatory reassertion of global capital's presidence over the occasion of a dead man's wake. But that is not all, for there is something put further in play through Jantjie's illiterate signs. Žižek submitted it was "signaling" to poor, black, and deaf South Africans that these world figures, despite their incessant, faint praise of Mandela's legacy, care very little about them and won't do so until they become a "collective political agent." I would hazard something even more precarious: that wittingly or not, Jantjie's illiterate short-circuiting of linguistic codes at the memorial already conditioned the emergence of a confrontation between previously unrecognized political actors about what hearing/speaking means in the very rationality of the speaking situation. Jantjie's illiteracy has instantiated a political confrontation—between those who hear and those who do not—over the very meaning of speech itself, as it is used to determine belonging in the social order and to regulate the allocation of its resources.

For critics like Jacques Rancière, politics names a very specific relation between parties, subordination, and the capacity of speech. "Political activity," he argues, is

> Whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise […] Political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. (1999, 29–30)

What Jantjie's illiterate signing managed to lay bare, in irrevocable and unreconcealable ways, was the symbolic and asymmetrical distribution of bodies that constitutes the social order: between those capable of speech and hearing

and those without these capacities—the part-of-no-part effectively excluded from all communication with the event, and further alienated from their already subordinated social position. Jantjie's illiteracy itself served as the specific "mode of expression" that, by unbinding the "perceptible divisions" of the social order––that is, by foregrounding and rendering visible the very group that had no business being seen—confirms the equality of any speaking being with any other, regardless if that speech is conveyed through hand signs or voice. Never have the deaf/mute impinged so profoundly on an international event as on this day in December 2013, when Jantjie first stepped on stage and began his day of work interpreting for the memorial. The social order has been altered, the world has been reminded of their existence as a social group, of their equality as speaking beings, and of their demands that, from this day forward, *legitimate* sign language interpretation be ensured at all public events. We can be sure that we will never again see the likes of a Thamsanqa Jantjie on a national and/or international stage; event organizers all around the world will make sure of that. And yet, given what his illiterate signing was able to accomplish politically, that is a shame.

What intrigues me most about semiological disruptions to the social text such as Jantjie's are the theoretical and disciplinary provocations such moments might foster, particularly as a means of reimagining inter- and multilinguaul inquiry in the Humanities. I am a comparatist by training and currently work in a language Department—Spanish and Portuguese. These are areas of study where, while the existence of languages (in the plural) is always assumed, only on rare occasions are the relations between these languages historically and critically explored. By and large, the Humanities are still bound by/to the conception of national languages, and fields like Comparative Literature, far from demystifying such a proposition, in effect tends to compound it. I have previously written about the ways in which the field of Comparative Literature, particularly as it relates to the study of culture and history in Latin America, frustrates and disappoints lines of inquiry seeking to move beyond the increasingly obsolete parameters of language, territory, and 'peoples' (Acosta 2005). Because the assumptions of language and linguistic difference in Latin America almost always turn on the question of otherness, alterity, and resistance, it becomes difficult to distinguish between naturalized and differential cultural claims. As illustrated in the above case, we need an analytic model or formal principle that would allows us to understand language, and linguistic contact and conflict—not only in Latin

America but worldwide—as a reflected relation in which positions, identities, sensibilities and differences are generated through relationality itself.[1] Given these disciplinary conditions, it is my suspicion that 'critical multilingualism studies' might be that hermeneutical disposition that will finally yield language's inherent unboundedness and sheer heterogeneity for critical reflection. With this in mind I'd like to devote the next few pages to sketch out what something like Critical Multilingualism Studies can hope to advance, as well as to identify certain critical pitfalls a project like this would do well to avoid.

The timing for a critical agenda such as this is not arbitrary. The last 40 years, which we may call the contemporary, has been marked globally by the sudden and dramatic collapse of national and economic borders: where previously sealed-off spaces of relative cultural, ethnic, and linguistic consistency have given way to enormous, transnational flows of commodities and labor. We are therefore confronted with a profound and irrevocable reconfiguration of social and cultural fields of intelligibility, the results of economic rationality having become the sole arbiter of governance and social ordering. As such, if there was ever the hint of any truth to previous claims to cultural or linguistic homogeneity, these claims are impossible to sustain with any seriousness today. Consequently, what the present bears witness to is the critical debilitation of the nation-state as a culturally and politically binding model of social organization and the withering of hegemonic categories of linguistic identity and cultural difference. In a global context such as this, languages simply do not *mean* what they used to; they certainly no longer work to mark and distinguish boundaries between adjacent territories and neighboring groups. The question before us, then, is how to rearticulate and reconceive what something like multilingualism is and does in this globalized, neoliberal era of unparalleled cultural and economic porosity?

If, for instance, we contend that the contemporary is fundamentally marked by radically different conditions of emergence and possibility, might it then be the case that the multilingual practices and environments one encounters today are marked by that same radical quality? In other words, if contemporary multilingual practices diverge so markedly from those conceived and theorized in previous eras, must they not now then, by necessity, be conceived along new lines of inquiry and interrogation drawn from previously unavailable sites of tension and asymmetrical relation?

Given this historical and critical vantage point, the implications for critical multilingualism are extensive and far-reaching. What conditions are necessary to imagine such a model, and what might such a model make visible within the field of cultural intelligibility that had previously been hidden from view? Is it possible, or rather are we prepared for the possibility, that the multilingualism we witness today is of such a profoundly different sort that predominant accounts of language (Saussure, Chomsky, and so on), and deeply held assumptions about language acquisition, are now inadequate for it? Is it possible that the contemporary multilingual subject at play in our work, is fundamentally irreconcilable within many of the abstract formalizations we rely on and use today (i.e. native speaker, L2 user, SLA)? Could today's multilingualism constitute more of a conceptual rupture to language theories than a continuation?[2] What if, in short, in contemporary multilingual environments, the subject's very relationship to language has undergone irrevocable alteration? How would we know? And if so, how might multilingualism come to be understood as a critical concept that directly, and explicitly, engages the contemporary in all its precariousness and heterogeneity?

It would be unfortunate if we never once asked ourselves if contemporary multilingual phenomena are an object of inquiry for which our current methods and principles are still adequate. Such is the wager of something like Critical Multilingualism Studies: the objectives of which would a be fundamental reevaluation and critique of all previous knowledge related to language and language acquisition, in the hope of building new disciplinary principles of inquiry that address contemporary social, (geo)political, and economic conditions.

There are however some significant challenges that obtain with a project like this that, if not carefully negotiated, will lead to a misapprehension and compounding of the crisis we are tracing. The first is the challenge of uncovering the ideological substrate grounding all disciplinary assumptions about the production of meaning and value. I am referring to the predominance of certain economies of signification that we have come to rely on in the formal determination of meaning within and between languages (Sr/Sd, Sr/Sd/Rt; syntagms/paradigms, and so on). This problem, which Jean Baudrillard identified as use-value fetishism, exists as an unacknowledged ascription of primacy and foundation of use value over and above exchange value, an impulse spurred exclusively on the former's assumed concreteness and particularity, and

a suspicion of the latter's presumed illusory and artificial—i.e. abstract—nature (Baudrillard 1981). Baudrillard's lesson, of course, is that use value, as a presumably material and unmediated model of valuation, is ultimately as insubstantial and abstract as exchange value: "value in the case of use value is enveloped in total mystery, for it is grounded anthropologically in the (self-)'evidence' of a naturalness, in an unsurpassable original reference" (139). In effect, use value is not only (already) permeated throughout by processes of exchange, but is in fact the very product of—as the guarantee and alibi for—exchange value itself: "use value and needs are only an effect of exchange value" (137). As such, utility can serve then as no grounds for determining primordial (non-exchange-based) forms of value. What this means for the present discussion is simple: from within a generalized economy of value, like Marx's general value-form, wherein languages are inscribed, valuated, and expressed from within an assumption of general linguistic equivalency, the ideological guarantees asserted by the distinction between use value and exchange value are the same ones that sustain the distinction between monolingual signification and translation. This Baudrillard calls signifier fetishism, which emerges as a misidentification of the source of ideology on the arbitrariness and fluidity of sign systems alone, and does not extend to include an interrogation of that very system of referentiality—fixed and coherent—that serves as the former's ontological guarantee.

Given these conclusions, it might very well be that contemporary multilingual phenomena can no longer be conceived from within a distinction between (monolingual) signification and translation. The assumption that signification *within* a particular language system is categorically distinct from signification that can and does occur *between* languages is, I suggest, no longer binding or beyond questioning. If Critical Multilingualism Studies is to contribute anything at all to contemporary thought, it is to posit that universal claims about language can no longer issue from abstractions developed from individual, autonomously-conceived language systems, but instead must emerge from cultural contexts within which multiple languages are in play and in various degrees of displacement and subordination.

Said otherwise, it is imperative that, in our work on the historical and political asymmetries between languages, we simultaneously and persistently foreground the inherent problems of ideology, representation, and truth that binds each language to itself. Or, as Nietzsche famously pronounced, "The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of

truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise, there would NOT be so many languages" (1990, 82). Nietzsche here reminds us that for language to work at all, it must disavow its inherent metaphorical / representational function, and assume the transparent, denotative, literal form (utility) we know now is as just as illusory as the metaphoricity (exchange) it seeks to subordinate under itself. This is a consideration whose critical significance we cannot overlook, for the denotative and the literal, like use value, ultimately function as the first metaphors of language: "They provide the latter [exchange value] with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete; they are the guarantee of an objective reality for which, however, in the same moment, these systems qua systems substitute their own total logic" (Baudrilliard 137). We must not lose sight of the fact, and most particularly at this historical juncture, that signification within a given language does not exist in any positive relation with itself, but rather emerges only through an arbitrary and negative relationship against that from which it is differentiated.

A particular case of semiological and axiological misapprehension between languages may do well to illustrate the case I am making. On 1 January 1994, Chiapas, Mexico, was awakened to the presence of a then unknown and armed group of insurgents that had taken over several municipal headquarters in different areas the state. We will later come to learn that these insurgents were members of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), a mobilized, intertribal, plurilingual association of indigenous peasants from Chiapas who would immediately rise to global prominence not only for their ability to withstand the government's ensuing counterinsurgency efforts, but for their capacity to effect a fundamental shift in the Mexican political landscape itself. But this was not accomplished through weapons, artillery, and airstrikes. Indeed, the EZLN's virtue is precisely having effected this shift through a dedicated and continuous production of language. As a sign of what he calls the "post-Mexican condition," Mexican critic Roger Bartra classifies the EZLN as a "culture of ink," arguing, "the Zapatista army threatened to wash the country in blood, but what it actually produced was a vast ink stain: fortunately, more letters than bullets came out of Chiapas" (2002, viii). After countless communiqués and, to date, six Declarations from the Lacandon Jungle, the EZLN, it could be argued, have persisted precisely through their ability to make their discourse heard and understood on a worldwide scale.

But, a mere twenty years ago, this had not been so. The *minimum* assumption of understanding and commensurability that the Zapatistas gained from their worldwide visibility had never been historically matched in their dealings with the Mexican State; that is, the question of political and semiological equality (longstanding since the 1911 Revolution) is precisely the concern for which they launched their campaign of insurgency in the first place. Their uprising on 1 January 1994 resonated loudly, and in effect made it possible to ask (or rather, repeat) the following questions: What counts as speech? Who counts as a speaking being? On what grounds? Furthermore, their recent reemergence in a massive, five-city "March of Silence" on 21 December 2012 is a reminder that their campaign for social justice (beginning two decades ago) is not only not over, but further exemplifies how their understanding and deployment of language (silence, in this case) advances a far more radical instantiation of democratic politics than currently presumed (Acosta 2010).

But again, it didn't quite look like this on Day One of the insurgency. On that day, unsurprisingly, things were presented in a starkly different manner. Depending on the news source, Chiapas was being overrun not by rational human beings with legitimate sociopolitical grievances but rather by an onslaught of incommensurable noise that Gyan Prakash identifies as underwriting subalternity itself, where "on the one hand, the subaltern [is projected] as an irrational other beyond authoritative reason and understanding [and]…that the subaltern is completely knowable and known as an embodiment of irrationality" (288). That is, looking back, one could see confirmed in writing, both for the first and the millionth time in Mexican history, the very terms by which the state came (culturally and politically) to know, classify, and subordinate these then unaffiliated and unidentified, indigenous combatants. In fact, one need only return to the very first communication report broadcast by the state government of Chiapas after the EZLN's uprising on 1 January. The first paragraph of the communication reads:

> Various groups of Chiapan peasants, numbering close to 200 individuals and consisting mostly of monolinguals, have carried out violent, provocational, attacks in four districts within the state, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas (translation mine).
>
> Diversos grupos de campesinos chiapanecos que ascienden a un total de cerca de 200 individuos, en su mayoría monolingües, han realizado actos

> de provocación y violencia en cuatro localidades del estado que son San Cristóbal de las Casas, Ocosingo, Altamirano y las Margaritas. (Díaz Arciniega and López Téllez 1997, 106)

No doubt the designation that draws immediate significance in this passage is "monolinguals." A quite curious choice of word, since its immediate discursive function is not at all clear or consistent. As it functions in the report, the choice of the word "monolingual" is seemingly employed to counter-distinguish a small, predominantly indigenous peasant population from greater Mexican (and purportedly multilingual) society. As the report seems to imply, the majority of Mexican society is multilingual. Further, the word "monolingual" is enlisted with the charge not only of distinguishing between those who speak only one language and those who speak more than one language, but it is also charged with the catachrestic task of rendering it abundantly clear that the language the monolinguals speak is a language not spoken by anybody else. That is, being that they only speak one language, and that this language is of no purchase to anyone else in Mexico, there is simply no way for them to understand why they cannot be understood.

One simply cannot speak with monolinguals, the Chiapan state officials suggest. The late Mexican critic, Carlos Montemayor, was quick to point out the implicit and willfully flawed reasoning behind the government issued report, asserting:

> On our continent, the monolinguals tend not to be the Indians: monolingual is the typical Mexican, as he only speaks Spanish, as is the typical North American, who only speaks English. Mexican Indians, in addition to speaking their language, often have knowledge of another, neighboring, indigenous language as well as Spanish. (translation mine)
>
> En nuestro continente los monolingües suelen no ser los indios: es monolingüe el mexicano promedio, que sólo habla español, como el norteamericano promedio, que sólo habla inglés. Los indios mexicanos además de hablar su idioma suelen conocer otra lengua indígena vecina y también el español. (1997, 38)

While Montemayor is right to point out that empirically, indigenous groups do tend to know and speak more languages (including Spanish) than the "typical" Mexican, and that between the two, greater Mexican society is vastly more monolingual, he seems to be overlooking in the report itself an exercise in a far more fundamental claim to power. That is, the report enlists "monolinguals" not

just to confirm a previously established ethnocultural hierarchy between indigenous and Hispanic populations, but to rehearse the specific form through which this hierarchy is established in the first place.

Within any given social order, Jacques Rancière (1999, 22) sees a "symbolic distribution of bodies" that is divided between "those that one sees and those that one does not see, those who have logos—memorial speech, an account to be kept up—and those who have no logos," between those who have a name and the "lowing of nameless beings" who cannot speak. Between them, Rancière asserts, "no situation of linguistic exchange can possibly be set up, no rules or code of discussion. […] The order that structures […] domination recognizes no logos capable of being articulated by beings deprived of logos, no *speech* capable of being proffered by nameless beings, beings of no *ac/count*" (24). What Rancière means by this is not that those without names are incapable of speech but rather that they are made to appear as nameless beings who, as such, have been given no space from which to speak: "There is no place for discussion with the plebs for the simple reason that plebs do not speak. They do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of logos—meaning, of symbolic enrollment in the city…. Whoever is nameless *cannot* speak" (23). As such, what the social order conditions is a symbolic distribution of speaking bodies wherein some are ascribed the capacity for speech and others are not, the latter relegated as "beings of no ac/count," "the part of no part." In other words, "monolinguals" serves as the specific figure through which to convey that the language the nameless, indigenous peasants speak, purportedly the only language they speak, is not even a language. "Monolinguals" in this report is thus used to communicate that, because they only speak one language and that language is not a language, the combatants are incapable of speech, and therefore may obtain no right to political representation. As such, nameless and deprived of logos, anything these indigenous peasants express will carry no meaning other than noise; they do not speak at all, they are simply of no account.

This is not only an instance of the Mexican state's willful misrecognition about which group is more monolingual, but about the contestation of what exactly speaking means in the very rationality of the speech situation. It is clear now that the figure of the "monolingual" sought to discredit the Zapatistas' speech in advance of their speaking, as otherwise nameless, voiceless beings of no ac/count. Contrary to expectations, the history of the EZLN's emergence and impact is ultimately much clearer (and not 'confused'), thanks to the state's

deployment of such an arbitrary and ill-fitting distinction. But it is important to note that the report itself obeys the economy of value previously articulated by Baudrillard: use value (monolingualism) is overdetermined by exchange value (multilingualism). That is, there is simply no communication possible between monolinguals and multilinguals, because monolinguals are the mere ideological effect (and alibi) of exchange value. In this context, however, the willful misrecognition exhibited in the report turns on itself, for what it ultimately reveals is that all linguistic unities, including Spanish, are themselves effects of exchange, and as such result without any positive substantiation or designation. It is not about the Zapatistas turning the tables on the Mexican state, nor is it about discerning that it is indeed greater Mexican society who are the monolinguals; rather it is about the Zapatistas themselves subverting the general economy of value (multilingualism) that underwrites such distinctions and hierarchies in the first place. For Rancière, politics occurs when the grounds of a speaking situation are disputed—in the form of a semiotic irruption that emerges from within the logic of an entrenched social order—and which effectively both exploits and transforms the conditions of speaking within that social order. Multilingualism, or in this case the general economy of linguistic value thrown asunder by Zapatista uprising, results in confirming the fundamental equality of every speaking being with one another *irrespective* of the language they speak.

Lastly, and on a related though inverted point, I would suggest that we guard against reproducing what in other contexts is called reverse-ethnocentrism, or simply neocolonialism. What this suggests is the contemporary inversion of (previously held) negative values associated with certain aspects of non-Western cultures into exceptional ones. In this discussion, it would mean, for example, that as a continuation and refashioning of orientalist fantasies of alterity, the qualities ascribed to non-Western languages that had previously confirmed their inferior (e.g. "monolingual") status to Castillian, English, French and German, become now valued and sought-after by Westerners themselves, often used as evidence of indigenous moral and cultural superiority to the West.

This nativist/reverse-ethnocentric slippage underlying most, if not all, claims to cultural difference continues to go largely unheeded, and disacknowledged, even in recent scholarship. For example, Estelle Tarica, in her book *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism* (2008), offers the following reassessment of orality/literacy as a mode by which to read Peruvian writing.

> Orality […] is not opposed to writing. It is rather a function of a specific quality of Quechua, its highly developed sound-symbolic resources, specifically onomatopoeia, a quality noticeably underdeveloped in Spanish and other European languages […] Thus, rather than speaking of "oral culture," I will focus specifically on "Quechua." And Quechua, furthermore, will come to configure a whole socio-geographic sphere and become a way of enframing indigeneity more broadly, as a field of natural belonging that is constructed by language and is organically linked to the Andean landscape. (98)

The problem, immediately visible, is that while Tarica seeks a ground by which to establish Spanish and Quechua on equal terms ("orality […] is not opposed to writing"), she nevertheless asserts Quechua's highly developed onomatopoetic features derived from their "natural" and "organic" link to the "Andean landscape." The problem, if not already evident, is Tarica's attributing an indigenous language's unparalleled onomatopoetic qualities to its profound and inextricable relationship to Nature. Ultimately, the "field of natural belonging" into which Tarica seeks to enframe indigeneity, is nothing less than a reinscription of predominant Western civilizational codes, for which indigenous life is always overdetermined by nature. Of course, one does not simply counter the narrative of Western exceptionalism with a reverse-ethnocentric narrative of another's without further entrenching the very logic of identity/difference from which one sought to escape. Such gestures accomplish nothing but confirm an unyielding and irreducibly Western desire for Logos, and the neocolonial fantasy of finding and unconcealing such Logos in formerly colonized space.

Unfortunately, this interpretive disposition can very easily be traced further. Horacio Castellanos Moya's recent novel offers us a way in. *Insensatez*, recently translated into English as *Senselessness* (2008), is a novel framed as a testimonio that recounts a brief period of events related to an unnamed protagonist and narrator as he is hired to serve as a copyeditor for a human rights report being published by the Archdiocese of an unnamed Central American country (a thinly veiled Guatemala). As a novel structured as a testimonio (about the Report itself, another testimonio), this text presents our narrator-protagonist intimately describing his attitude and feelings related to his involvement on this report. However, instead of getting expressions confirming his conviction of the "righteousness of a just cause [he] was committing [him]self to" (20), as one might anticipate, the reader is presented with frantic, and mostly untoward

ethical reactions, a fragile and anxious psychological state, and professional malcontentment. In effect, a good portion of the novel itself is dedicated to describing just how this narrator-protagonist regrets taking this job in the first place, how he took it for so little pay, being employed by the Catholic Church, the size of his office, etc. In brief, and in a quite serious departure from the conventional testimonio apparatus, one finds a radically ambivalent relation between this unnamed intellectual and his participation in this project: not one word on the ethical and political stakes of the work in which he's engaged. Instead, what becomes clear is that this narrator-protagonist has absolutely no ideological, social, or even cultural investment in this project; as an intellectual-writer turned freelance editorial contractor, he would rather not be working on such a controversial, sensitive, and therefore politically dangerous project such as this one in the first place—documenting testimony and compiling the genocidal acts committed by the country's military against its indigenous populations.

Nevertheless, there is one element of his involvement in this project that does indeed captivate our narrator-protagonist's attention: the apparently literary quality of some of the survivors' very own testimonial accounts contained in the Report itself. Indeed, the narrator-protagonist himself describes his fascination with various fragments and snippets of direct testimony that he secretly copied from the tightly guarded manuscript and which he collects for his personal enjoyment. The novel itself begins in fact with his contemplating the resonance of one such fragment: "I am not complete in the mind" (13). As these instances of indigenous speech appear during his editing work—phrases which tend to be catachrestic or heteroclite first-person descriptions of traumatic witnessing and reflection—the narrator-protagonist writes them down in a small notebook that he carries with him in order read them aloud later, either privately or to an acquaintance. Examples of this kind of transcribed speech that he inscribes into his notebook include, "*The houses they were sad because no people were inside of them*" (19 [30], italics in original) or "*while the cadavers they were burning, everyone clapped and they began to eat*…" (36 [48]). Regardless of the specific fragment, what the narrator-protagonist seems most to delight in, the only thing he appears to enjoy from his involvement in this project, is the fortuitous and unintentional production of poetic signification that emerges from the combination (translation?) of indigenous expressions of pain and loss and aberrant Spanish syntax and grammar.

It is clear that our narrator-protagonist's manner of engagement with these indigenous testimonial accounts is demonstrative of a predominant aesthetic cultural program that includes appropriating indigenous oral speech into the field of metropolitan intelligibility, and ascribing to it both a poetic, literary quality and therefore a cultural value equal to or surpassing those found in Western languages themselves. However, *Insensatez* simultaneously illustrates to us that this aesthetic ideal can only come about by the complete and utter abrogation of any ethical (even if problematic) relation with the subject of state violence. Instead, Castellanos Moya suggests how, in our narrator-protagonist, that aesthetic relation is conditioned ultimately by a disavowal of that violence. The following passage renders this clearly:

> those sentences that seemed so astonishing from a literary point of view…sentences I could, with luck, later use in some kind of literary collage, but which surprised me above all for their use of repetition and adverbs, such as this one that said, *What I think is that I think*…Wow. And this one, *So much suffering we have suffered so much with them*…: its musicality perplexed me when I first read it, its poetic quality too high not to suspect that it came from some great poet rather than from a very old indigenous woman who with this verse had brought to an end her wrenching testimony (32 [43]).

A collage functions precisely via a divorcing of the phenomenon from its historical, cultural, and political context, and this makes it the most apt literary genre to understand our narrator-protagonist's multilingual project: a literary collection of fragments taken from the transcribed direct testimony from survivors of the Guatemalan genocide. The implications here are stark. It is only under conditions like these that indigenous speech reveals itself to the narrator-protagonist as literary and as just as developed as the Western languages it is continuously defined against. In the case of our narrator-protagonist, it means retaining certain formal aspects of the fragments themselves ("repetition and adverbs") while discarding the reference within which these statements were made ("wrenching testimony"). But this inversion does nothing to upset the normative multilingual economy within which our narrator-protagonist operates, in fact, to the extent that it seeks to substitute one general equivalent for another, it only further entrenches this economy of reading. The very idea of a literary collage—the arranging and rearranging of disparate though semiologically related matter—is not too dissimilar to the work our narrator-

protagonist is already doing for the report—with one exception of course: here he desires to have these voices even further disembodied for their poetic plenitude and not, as we see in the Zapatistas, as instances of speech asserting the fundamental equality of all speaking beings, irrespective of the language they speak.

Ultimately, what Critical Multilingualism Studies foregrounds is the need to isolate the irrevocably political nature of the speech situation, not simply nor necessarily the languages that are uttered or in play in that situation. Unintelligibility, incommensurability, noise: these are concepts that do not signal a failure to understand, but a wielding of power over the other that comes with the pronouncement of not needing to understand. Such a reconceptualized understanding of multilingualism brings into view a notion of the political grounded in speech, that confirms the equality of each and every interlocutor involved and a further notion that, irrespective of the particular language(s) of any speech situation, the contention over what speaking means constitutes the very rationality of the speech situation. Such is the wager of Critical Multilingualism Studies: that, given the fundamental equality of each and every speaker and language, we ask ourselves are every turn: What counts as speech, Who counts as a speaking being, and On what grounds? As a conclusion, and because there is simply no better way to articulate what I see as the fundamental aim of Critical Multilingualism Studies, I end this discussion with another passage from Rancière:

> The problem is not for people speaking "different languages," literally or figuratively, to understand each other, any more than it is for "linguistic breakdowns" to be overcome by the invention of new languages. The problem is knowing whether the subjects who count in the interlocution "are" or "are not," whether they are speaking or just making noise. It is knowing whether there is a case for seeing the object they designate as the visible object of the conflict. It is knowing whether the common language in which they are exposing a wrong is indeed a common language. The quarrel has nothing to do with more or less transparent or opaque linguistic contents; it has to with consideration of speaking beings as such. (1999, 50)

References

Acosta, Abraham. 2005. "At the Margins of History, the Nation-State and Literature: The Discourse of Comparative Literature and Latin American Subaltern Studies." *Dispositio/n* 25(52): 249-264.

Acosta, Abraham. 2010. "Contingencies of Silence: Subalternity, the EZLN, and the Accounting of Speech in Latin America." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 19(2): 203-223.

Bartra, Roger. 2002. *Blood, Ink and Culture: Miseries and Spendors of the Post-Mexican Condition*, translated by M. A. Healey. Durham: Duke University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1981 [1972]. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* translated by Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press.

Castellanos Moya, Horacio. 2008. *Senselessness* [*Insensatez*], translated by K. Silver. New York: New Directions Books.

Díaz Arciniega, Víctor, and Adriana López Téllez, eds. 1997. *Chiapas para la historia: antología hemerográfica, 1o de enero de 1994 al 10 de abril de 1995*. 1st ed. Vol. 3. México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco.

Ellis, Elizabeth. 2006. "Monolingualism: The Unmarked Case". *Estudios de Sociolingüística* 7(2): 173-196.

Mignolo, Walter. 2000. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Montemayor, Carlos. 1997. *Chiapas: la rebelión indígena de México*. México: J. Mortiz.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1990. "Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, edited and translated by D. Breazeale. New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International.

Prakash, Gyan. 2000. "The Impossibility of Subaltern History." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(2): 287-294.

Rancière, Jacques. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy,* translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London; New York; Dunedin, N.Z.: Zed Books; University of Otago Press.

Tarica, Estelle. 2008. *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2013. "The 'fake' Mandela memorial interpreter said it all." *The Guardian*. 16 Dec. Link.

[1]A proposition such as this aims to overcome the now conventional, though shortsighted rhetorical strategy in much postcolonial scholarship that merely inverts the Self/Other antinomy (Other as "I" or "We") in order to oppose Eurocentric subjectivity with the figure of a universal, homogenous, resistant consciousness. One does not so easily discharge and decenter the asymmetrical relation that this binary inevitably reproduces, even in more careful hands. Noteworthy examples of this tendency can be seen at work in Walter Mignolo's *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999).

[2] See, for instance, Elizabeth Ellis's analysis of monolingualism as a linguistic ideology that tacitly normalizes itself as a primary, normal, state of being that comes before acquisition of another language and serves disciplinarily as the "unmarked," and necessary *a priori* condition against which bi- or multilingualism is conceived and defined (Ellis 2006).