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Research Article

Multilingual Literature of the United States

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Abstract. Like the Russian Federation, the United States is a multilingual, multicultural society. A nation of immigrants and indigenous peoples, it has produced a rich body of literature in dozens of languages in addition to English that scholars have only in recent decades begun to pay attention to. Of particular note are texts in Spanish, Yiddish, Chinese, French, Hebrew, German, Arabic, Norwegian, Welsh, Greek, Turkish, Italian, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Vietnamese and numerous American Indian languages. In this paper we observe the most significant texts of multilingual American literature. The corpus of literary works shows us, that despite Americans' pervasive and enduring xenolinguaphobia — aversion to other languages — the United States, like other large countries, is a heterogeneous amalgam. Ignoring the variety of works written in languages other than English impoverishes the national culture and handicaps serious readers.

Key words: multilingualism, translingual literature, literary text, American literature

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Мультилингвальная литература в Соединенных Штатах Америки

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Аннотация. Как и Российская Федерация, Соединенные Штаты — многоязычное, многокультурное общество. Страна иммигрантов и коренных народов, она произвела богатый объем литературы на десятках языков в дополнение к английскому, на который ученые начали обращать внимание только в последние десятилетия. Особо следует отметить тексты на испанском, идише, китайском, французском, иврите, немецком, арабском, норвежском, валлийском, греческом, турецком, итальянском, корейском, польском, португальском, русском, вьетнамском и многих языках американских индейцев. В этой статье мы рассматриваем наиболее значимые тексты многоязычной американской литературы. Корпус литературных произведений показывает нам, что, несмотря на повсеместную и стойкую ксенолингвофобию американцев — отвращение к другим языкам — Соединенные Штаты, как и другие крупные страны, представляют собой неоднородную смесь. Игнорирование разнообразия произведений, написанных не на английском, а на других языках, обедняет национальную культуру и ставит в затруднительное положение исследователей.

Ключевые слова: многоязычие, трансязыковая литература, художественный текст, американская литература

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Introduction

Like the Russian Federation, the United States is a multilingual society. And just as discussions of the literature of Russia often ignore texts in Chechen, Kazakh, and Tatar, American literature is usually studied as an exclusively Anglophone phenomenon. However, according to the United States Census Bureau, 65.9 million people (21.6 percent of the population) speak a language other than English at home (data.census.gov/cedsci/table?tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP02&hidePreview=true). The United States is a nation of immigrants and indigenous peoples, and it has produced a rich body of literature in dozens of languages in addition to English. That fact has begun to be recognized by individual scholars, journals, and universities. The Longfellow Institute at Harvard University (www.

fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus/) has been a leader in the study of what it calls LOWINUS (Literature of What Is Now the United States in Languages Other Than English).

Just as authentic American history does not begin with the English settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts, American literature begins much earlier, with oral compositions in indigenous tongues. Travel narratives by Spanish explorers and French explorers predate texts in English in America. The subsequent four centuries have produced remarkable texts — by travelers, exiles, immigrants, and natives — in dozens of languages other than English. They refute Theodore Roosevelt’s contention, in 1907, that: “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house” [1. P. 554].

The motto on the Great Seal of the polyglot United States, *E pluribus unum*, is in Latin, as are the official mottos of more than twenty states. The motto of California is Greek, of Hawaii is Hawaiian, of Maryland is Italian, of Minnesota is French, of Montana is Spanish, and of Washington is Chinook. Such place names as Alaska, Anaheim, Baton Rouge, Brooklyn, Honolulu, Los Angeles, and Mississippi constitute fossilized evidence of the presence of languages other than English. Despite sporadic movements to promote “English only”, the government of the United States has never sanctioned a single official language. Details of the Declaration of Independence were first made public in *Der Pennsylvanische Staatsbote*, a German-language newspaper, on July 5, 1776, a day before the English-language press reported the story. At the time, about half the population of Pennsylvania spoke German. After the Revolution, hostility in the former colonies toward English, a vestige of their subservience to London, led some patriots to propose a new tongue for the new nation; French, German, Greek, and Hebrew were briefly considered [2. P. 37]. In subsequent years, hundreds of newspapers with sizable circulations would be published not only in German but also Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Vietnamese, and other languages.

Several notable authors have made important literary contributions in their native languages while temporary residents of the United States. They include Bertolt Brecht, Federico García Lorca, Thomas Mann, José Martí, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Franz Werfel. However, claiming them for American literature would be as preposterous as designating Heinrich Heine, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, and Marina Tsvetaeva as French authors merely because they wrote some books while in Paris.

Discussion

More validly considered as literature of the United States are the writings produced by its Hispanic or Latino residents. At 18.5 percent of the population (60.6 million persons), Hispanics or Latinos — people whose background is in a Spanish-speaking culture — are a large and vocal minority in the United States (www.infoplease.com/history/hispanic-heritage/hispanic-americans-by-the-numbers).

The Longfellow Institute (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus/>(accessed)). Many are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants from varied origins in Mexico, the

Caribbean, Central America, South America, and Spain. Others who live in a wide swath of territory from Florida to California that once belonged to Spain or Mexico did not emigrate but instead were absorbed by the United States. So it is no surprise to find Spanish texts written within what is now the United States. Because of the magnetic power of mainstream American culture, it is also no surprise to find Hispanic writers abandoning Spanish entirely or else mixing it with English.

The journals kept by Juan Ponce de León during his exploration of Florida in the early 16th century mark Spanish as the first European language to be written within what is now the United States. Other explorers, conquistadors, missionaries, and settlers in Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California before those territories were absorbed into the United States wrote in Spanish. Composed between 1606-1607, Alonso Gregorio de Escobedo's epic *La Florida* is probably the first poem composed in and about a part of what is now the United States. *Corridos*, popular, topical ballads, continue to be composed in Spanish and performed along the Mexico border.

However, Latinos in the United States have increasingly turned to English as their medium of expression. Yet one of the foundational texts of modern Chicano fiction, ...*y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971; *And The Earth Did Not Devour Him*), Tomás Rivera's autobiographical stories about childhood as a migrant farm worker, was written in Spanish. Though she has been living in California since 1989, prolific, popular Chilean-born Isabel Allende has written all of her books in Spanish. Ariel Dorfman, another Chilean based in the United States, in North Carolina, publishes in both Spanish and English. He is best known for *La muerte y la doncella* (1990), a play about the aftermath of a brutal government regime, which he translated himself as *Death and the Maiden* (1991). Dorfman wrote his memoir in English as *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* (1998), but then a few months later reconceived it in Spanish as *Rumbo al Sur, deseando el Norte* (1998).

In his Klail City Death Trip Series, a cycle of fifteen novels depicting life in a fictional county in the Rio Grande Valley throughout the twentieth century, Rolando Hinojosa employs both Spanish and English — the Spanish his characters would have spoken early in the century ceding to the English that comes to dominate in later years. Many contemporary Hispanic writers employ code-switching — mixing both Spanish and English in a single work, even a single line of poetry, as in the work of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Pedro Pietri, and Tino Villanueva, among others. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa refuses to be confined to a single language and celebrates the eight different registers of English and Spanish that constitute Chicano identity: standard English; working-class and slang English; standard Spanish; standard Mexican Spanish; northern Mexican Spanish dialect; Chicano Spanish; Tex-Mex; and *pachuco/caló*.

Between 1881 and 1924, Yiddish was emerging as a supple medium for outstanding poetry, fiction, and drama. That same period coincided with the massive migration to the United States of about 2,500,000 Yiddish-speaking Jews, mostly from Russia, Poland, Romania, and Austria [3. P. 70]. The center of gravity for Yiddish moved from Europe to America, a process facilitated by the extermination of most of Europe's Yiddish speakers. And when, a year before his death in 1915, Sholem Aleichem, the most beloved of Yiddish authors, whose stories about Tevye the Dairyman later inspired the musical

Fiddler on the Roof, moved across the Atlantic to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, it signaled the displacement of Warsaw by New York as the center of Yiddish literature.

The most popular form of Yiddish literature was drama, and after Russia banned Yiddish theater in 1883, the leading Yiddish actors, playwrights, and impresarios began to make their way to the United States. Second Avenue in New York became the Yiddish theater district, catering to working-class immigrants with relatively inexpensive tickets to a wide variety of unsophisticated entertainments as well as attempts at more elevated art. “By 1918 the city boasted 20 Yiddish theaters, which, in a single year — before the inroads of movies — attracted two million patrons to over a thousand performances” [4]. Moreover, between 1890 and 1940, audiences were attending productions by more than 200 Yiddish troupes based in other cities or performing on tour throughout the United States [5. P. 529].

Yiddish poets register a keen awareness of the marginality and vulnerability of the language that they, multilingual, chose as their medium of expression. If it is necessary to impose categories to make sense of one of the richest bodies of American literature in a language other than English, it might do to begin with the “sweatshop” poets, writers such as Morris Rosenfeld, Dovid Edelshtat, and Morris Winchevsky who respond to the harsh conditions of blue-collar jobs in New York. The movement known as “Di Yunge”, whose members included younger poets such as Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Zishoy Landoy, H. Leivik, and Mani Leyb, pursued an aesthetic of art for art’s sake. “*In Zikh*” (“The Introspectivists”) were a self-conscious avant-garde who flaunted their rejection of conventional forms and their freedom to explore non-Jewish themes; leading Introspectivists included Yankev Glatshteyn, A. Léyeles, and J.L. Teller. “Di Linke” were poets such as Menke Katz, Malke Lee, and Moyshe Nadir who aligned themselves with the Communist left and regarded their poems as instruments of revolution.

Though born in Poland, Isaac Bashevis Singer spent most of his life in the United States. And he used Yiddish to write all of the novels and stories that earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978. Some insist that his older brother, I.J. Singer, who had proven his mastery of the family saga with *Di mishplke Ashkenazi* (1936; *The Family Ashkenazi*) and *Di mishpokhe Karnovsky* (1943; *The Family Carnovsky*) was the greater artist. However, I.J. died in New York in 1944 at age 50, perhaps before fulfilling his literary potential... Another contender might have Chaim Grade, author of novels that depict the lives of pious Jews in Eastern Europe. A prolific specialist in historical fiction, Sholem Asch created controversy when, in a trilogy of novels drawn from the New Testament, he painted a sympathetic portrait of early Christianity.

Signed into law in 1882 and not repealed until 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act not only shut off immigration from China but, in its expanded provisions, prohibited exit and reentry of Chinese already in the United States and even immigration of Chinese from any other country. It effectively impeded the production of Chinese literature in the United States for more than half a century. However, some Chinese did manage to make their way to American soil, and some of the most powerful examples of Chinese literature in the United States are the poems carved into the wooden walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station. A government facility near San Francisco, Angel Island is where from 1910–1940 approximately 1 million immigrants from Asia were processed and, under the terms of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese arrivals were held for as long

as three years while their identities were verified. Of the more than 135 mostly anonymous and undated poems that have been preserved, most evidence a sophisticated familiarity with Chinese literary traditions. Some are eloquent expressions of sorrow and longing, and some advise future immigrants to work hard, cherish their opportunities in America, and remember those left behind. “Imprisoned in this wooden building, I am always sad and bored”, reads one. “I remember since I left my native village, it has been several full moons. / The family at home is leaning on the door, / urgently looking for letters. / Whom can I count on to tell them I am well?” [6. P. 40].

Following the lifting of regional immigration quotas in 1965, the presence in the United States of Overseas Chinese increased dramatically, numbering almost four million by the 21st century. Like offspring of other immigrants, ABC (American-born Chinese) assimilated into English, but a continuing influx of newcomers made Chinese, with more than two million speakers, the third most widely spoken language (after English and Spanish) in the United States. A substantial literary corpus has been produced in Chinese. Some of it found popular success with both Overseas Chinese and readers in China and Taiwan. Immigrants come from a wide variety of regions and speak dialects — Cantonese, Mandarin, Min, Wu, etc. — that are mutually unintelligible, but, because the dialects employ the same characters, writing has helped create a coherent community of Chinese in the United States.

Overseas Chinese who write in English often feel wary of creating or confirming negative stereotypes of their people that outsiders might be inclined to embrace. However, those who write in Chinese and thus beyond the radar of *gweilos* (“foreign devils”) feel free to represent more sordid experiences of Chinese in America than are found in the works of Anglophone Chinese writers. Many Chinese-language novels have lacked any inhibition about exposing the poverty and crime of American Chinatowns. Many portray the ordeals of characters who dare violate the taboos of interracial romance and challenge conventional views of Chinese as the “model minority”. Cao Youfang examines the plight of workers in Chinese restaurants, while Yi Li takes on the exploitation of women in Chinatown sweatshops.

A French presence in what is now the United States began in 1524 with Giovanni da Verrazzano, who, though Florentine, sailed under a French flag while exploring the Atlantic Coast. French literature in what is now the United States could be said to have begun with the letters that Verrazzano sent to his royal patron, *François I*. One of the most frequently anthologized voices from the post-Revolutionary period of American history is J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a native of Normandy who settled on a large farm in Orange County, New York and celebrated the virtues of a pastoral life in North America in an influential volume of essays that he called *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782) and that he revised and expanded in a French edition titled *Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* (1784).

Even after the 1804 Louisiana Purchase, when Napoleon Bonaparte sold what would become all or part of fifteen states of the United States to the Francophile Thomas Jefferson, French remained widely spoken. It was the principal language of Victor Séjour, a native of New Orleans whose short story called “Le Mulâtre” (1832; “The Mulatto”), is thought to be the first published work of African American fiction.

The most notable example of literary Francophonie in the United States in the twentieth century was Julien Green, who was born in Paris to parents from the American South. Green wrote most, but not all, of his books in French, but most, like *Mont-Cinère* (1926; *Avarice House* 1991), *Moïra* (1950; *Moïra* 1980), and the “Dixie” trilogy of *Les Pays lointain* (1987; *The Distant Lands* 1993), *Les Etoiles du sud* (1989; (*The Stars of the South* 1996), and *Dixie* (1994) are set in Georgia or Virginia.

The son of French Canadian immigrants to Massachusetts, Jack Kerouac, who spoke only French until age six, became famous in English as one of the leading figures of the Beat movement. However, Kerouac was also wrote two novellas in jòual, Quebecois French. He wrote *La Nuit est ma femme* in 1951 and *Sur le chemin* in 1952, but, not discovered until 2006, they would not be published until 2016.

The resuscitation of Hebrew, an ancient tongue that had ceased to be a daily spoken language, coincided with the mass migration of almost three million Jews from Eastern and Central Europe to the United States. Most were eager to learn English. However, a few quixotic newcomers attempted to fashion Hebrew into a modern literary instrument, despite the fact that it was alien to the urban America they now called home. Inspired by American literature enough to translate Walt Whitman and Robert Frost into Hebrew, the American Hebraists were estranged from what they saw as the crassness of American society but also cut off from the vibrant Hebrew culture that was flourishing in Palestine.

From modest apartments in New York City, Hebrew authors idealized rural America and took a special interest in the extinction of the American Indian, in whom they saw a parallel to their own marginal situation as Jewish immigrants. The stubborn dedication to Hebrew by immigrant poets such as Hillel Bavli, Shimon Ginzburg, and Abraham Regelson is contemporaneous and somewhat analogous to *Juneco kaj Amo* (1929; *Youth and Love*), a novel set in Venice that Edward Saxton Payson wrote in the artificial language Esperanto while living in Lexington, Massachusetts. Their linguistic utopianism anticipated the 691-page volume *Capti: Fabula Menippeo-Hoffmaniana Americana* (2011), which its author, Stephen Berard, wrote in the state of Washington and proclaimed “the first novel written in Latin in more than 250 years” [7].

Numbering more than 46 million, German Americans are the largest ethnic minority in the United States (“Latino” is a somewhat artificial amalgam of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other groups). The Germans are also one of the most fully assimilated groups; fewer than 5 percent speak German (“The Silent Minority”) [8]. Yet the German language was so widely spoken during the early days of the American Republic that in 1794 it took a close 42-41 vote in Congress to defeat a bill mandating the federal government to print laws in German in addition to English. The failed revolutions of 1848 dramatically encouraged German departures to the United States (during the peak decade of immigration, the 1880s, 1.5 million Germans arrived), and German newspapers and publishing houses proliferated throughout the country. With some exceptions, most writing in German was journalistic or scholarly.

World War I incited antipathy to all things German. Not only was “sauerkraut” renamed “liberty cabbage”, but the teaching of German was discouraged, even prohibited in some states. Although such writers of German descent as Theodore Dreiser, H.L. Mencken, Henry Miller, Sylvia Plath, John Steinbeck, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. made their marks in American literature, they did so in English, not German. One exception is Margot

Scharpenberg, a poet and fiction writer who was born in Cologne in 1924 but settled in New York in 1962 and published almost two dozen volumes of poetry in German, in addition to short fiction.

Conclusion

A thorough discussion of multilingual literature in what is now the United States would require many volumes of detailed analysis. More than 250 first languages of the continent, those of the indigenous peoples, fall outside the scope of a discussion of written literature. American Indians such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor have made important contributions to English-language writing, but tribal cultures expressed themselves most effectively orally and in their own languages — stories, chants, speeches that were not written down because those languages lacked alphabets until relatively recently.

Literature in Arabic in the United States goes at least as far back as 1831, when Omar Ibn Said, who was abducted out of West Africa into slavery, wrote an account of his life in that language. Another Arabic-speaking transplant, from Lebanon, Khalil Gibran is best known for *The Prophet* (1923), one of the most widely read books of poetry in any language. Gibran wrote it in English, but his popular Arabic writings include *Al-Ajniha al-Mutakassira* (1912; *The Broken Wings*).

One of the most admired accounts of pioneer experience in the Upper Midwest is *Giants in the Earth* (1927). Novelist Ole Edvart Rølvaag, a Norwegian transplant to Minnesota, first published it in two volumes, in Norwegian, as *I de dage* (1924; *In Those Days*) and *Riket grundlægges* (1925; *The Kingdom Is Founded*), before assisting in its English translation.

Among books in less commonly spoken languages, *Dafydd Morgan* (1897), a novel written by R.R. Williams in Michigan in Welsh, is of particular interest. And Stratis Haviaras should be mentioned for *νεκροθάβεια* (1972; *Apparent Death*), a poetry collection written in Greek, as should Seyfettin Başçillar, who published several volumes of poetry in Turkish after trading Anatolia for New Jersey. Italian, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, and Vietnamese, among many others, have also been employed by writers in the United States. But the examples cited must stand as synecdochal reminders that English is only the starting point for an appreciation of the full range of multilingual literature in what is now the United States.

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