

## An Introduction

Multilingual writing has been ubiquitous since—when? The ancient Romans used multilingualism to pay homage to their literary forebears and for expedient communication. Medieval poetry mixed Latin with vernacular languages, for comic and lyric effects. The modernists delighted in linguistic collage. In the 1980s, Chicana feminists moved between Spanish, English, and Spanglish as they composed their *autohistorias*, and Quebecoise and Anglophone Canadian feminists collaborated on translational *corps/textes*. Among contemporary writers, it seems that everybody's doing it, whether "it" refers to drawing upon mother tongues, writing through translation, tracking sedimentary layers of Indigenous and colonial languages, or enacting the violent juxtapositions of geopolitical conflict.

In this way, literary multilingualism is not so different from other representations of multilingualism in contemporary culture. It has a double valence, signaling the cultural capital gained through an elite education as well as the stigma attached to an outsider status. Whereas educators and policymakers once considered bilingualism an impediment to children's education, scientists and business researchers today view the ability to speak at least two languages as a valuable skill in an increasingly globalized society. Pop-cultural representations tend to cast multilingualism as a unique modern-day advantage, equating the co-presence of many languages with the additive pluralism of our apparently post-racial multi-cultural societies.

Perhaps this view of multilingualism is best exemplified in Coca-Cola's 2014 Super Bowl commercial, a four million dollar, sixty-second ad featuring a group of young girls singing "America the Beautiful" in English, Spanish, Tagalog, Mandarin, Hindi, Hebrew, Keres, Senegalese French and Arabic. The ad was heralded as a coup for diversity, but as *The Guardian's* Gary Younge points out, it is virtually "indistinguishable from the official videos the U.S. state department [sic] shows you while you're waiting in immigration." He's right: the ad begins in English, with a shot of a cowboy on a white horse. It then jumps to a series of

diaphanously lit outdoor scenes, cut back and forth with wholesome images of kids in a movie theater, surfers bobbing on the waves, break-dancers, a family on a road trip, a brightly lit Chinatown. Urban modernity and rural tradition are seamlessly interwoven, united by the girls' different yet eminently recognizable song. These young girls "too, sing America," to quote Langston Hughes. But unlike Hughes's poem "I, too," which turns on its impassioned critique of anti-Black racism, the ad offers no fundamental challenge. If anything, its celebration of "America" glosses over histories of race-based exclusion and present-day racial inequality.

Coca-Cola's representation of diversity is pretty typical in its framing of multilingualism as a benevolent and exciting expansion of the national body. In the realm of literature, however, multilingualism functions differently. As the brief, schematic list at the outset of this essay suggests, literary multilingualism embraces a longer history of cultural exchange and confrontation. The authors that I present in this short selection—LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, Amy Sara Carroll, Anne Tardos, and Paolo Javier—exemplify the many other things that multilingualism can do. In Diggs's and Tardos's work, rhythm pulls us through any number of languages, which we encounter like clusters of urban street signs. In Carroll's and Javier's poems, other languages create the impression of voices coming from *somewhere*, a feeling that touches the English-language words as well, and prompts us to wonder about etymology and its embedded histories.

The volume of multilingual writing seems to be increasing. Happily, this work is receiving increased attention from readers, editors and critics. In addition to this special issue of *The Capilano Review*, the Arizona Poetry Center hosted a recent exhibit of multilingual poetry, Juliana Spahr and Charles Bernstein have written significant essays about multilingual writing, and a number of scholars (including myself) are working on academic books describing the phenomenon. The interest, I believe, comes from the fact that multilingual writing does difference differently. It asks that we attend to the untranslatable, to the resolutely unassimilable: whose language are we speaking, what languages aren't we hearing, what histories are contained within a loan word? To read multilingual writing is to trace the soft and sometimes permeable boundaries of our own ignorance. Without an invitation to engage in grabby expansionism, what can we do at this limit? In multilingual writing, we wrestle the possibilities.