

## Multilingual Novels as Transnational Literature: Yann Martel's *Self*

Oana Sabo

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**Abstract:** Yann Martel's experimental novel *Self* (1996) recounts the story of a young man's gender transformation as he negotiates his national and linguistic identity through cosmopolitan and multilingual affiliations. To convey the tropes of mobility and flexibility, the novel juxtaposes English and several other languages in parallel columns, inviting comparisons across discrete linguistic and literary traditions. Conceptualized from the start as a multilingual novel, *Self* challenges monolingual ways of classifying national literature and raises questions about plurilingual texts' placement in literary canons, their implied readers, and their translation into other languages. This article draws on recent debates about transnationalism to read *Self* as a novel whose formal strategies require a mode of reading predicated on comparison and translation. Readers are encouraged to simultaneously conceive of distinct languages relationally and uncover the hegemonic relationship between global and local languages in Canada and internationally. Through its formal aesthetics, which underscores both the opportunities and limits of multilingualism, Martel's polyglot novel contributes valuable insights to current discussions of transnational literature.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, transnationalism, Canadian literature, gendered identity, intertextuality, Yann Martel, *Self*

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In her essay "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer," Rebecca Walkowitz discusses the shifting disciplinary paradigms of English studies and argues that in an age of globali-

zation what we call English literature has multiple sites of production, reception, and circulation and should therefore no longer be conceived within national and monolingual literary systems. The location of literature, she suggests, has been amply called into question by migrant, diasporic, and cosmopolitan writers, who are increasingly being read “across multiple geographies” (528). As Walkowitz argues, “Books are no longer imagined to exist in a single literary system but may exist, now and in the future, in several literary systems, through various and uneven practices of world circulation” (528). These practices may include, for instance, a text’s circulation in translation, its simultaneous publication in several languages, or its reception and institutionalization far from its original site of production. In their focus on multilingual translation and global circulation, such practices assert both the inadequacy of the nation as a literary-critical paradigm and the importance of transnational contexts for the production and dissemination of contemporary literature. Most models of transnational and world literature, however, contend that a literary text becomes transnational when it circulates outside of its national context (Damrosch; Thomsen). They assume that there is a particular, possibly national, site of production, as authors often write from specific locations and in particular languages that prove pivotal for the reception and classification of their texts. If literature becomes transnational when it does not fit neatly into a single national tradition, however, through which literary strategies does a text transnationalize? How should we classify fictional texts that are written in several national languages and mix dominant and dominated languages, standard and vernacular forms, Latin and Cyrillic alphabets? Which linguistic traditions do they belong to, who are their implied readers, and how should one translate them into other languages? My essay endeavors to answer these questions in relation to Yann Martel’s debut novel *Self* (1996), a multilingual novel that reflects critically on the act of writing and reading transnationally. Through my analysis of the novel, I wish to shift the vector of the debate toward the ways in which multilingual texts transnationalize national canons—in other words, to draw attention to texts that are conceptualized as transnational from the very start and published in officially bilingual countries, such as Canada,

where the notion of a “national” literature is complex. I propose literary transnationalism as a productive theoretical framework for interpreting fictional texts that attempt to transcend and reflect critically on national boundaries. Such is the case of Martel’s novel, whose formal aesthetics challenge traditional conceptions of Canadian literature.

I argue that *Self* invites the reader to theorize multilingualism<sup>1</sup> as a form of transnationalism in order to both expand the bilingual framework of Canadian literature and question linguistic hierarchies and imperial legacies within the nation-state. As the novel’s most experimental narrative strategy, the insertion of French, Spanish, Czech, Hungarian, and Turkish (among other languages) into the novel’s main English-language narrative complicates its literary identity. *Self* may be read as a Canadian novel by virtue of its themes, its author’s ethnicity, its places of publication, and its main languages, English and French. However, as Gillian Roberts contends in *Prizing Literature*, the other European languages the novel employs also extend the paradigm of Canadian literature, which is in fact characterized by multilingualism (192). While I agree with Roberts, I suggest that *Self* can also be viewed as a transnational novel that encourages us to relate Canada’s main languages to other world languages and consider the histories of European imperialism that have shaped language formation. To this end, Martel juxtaposes both dominant and dominated languages in parallel columns, wherein the right-hand column is often, but not always, an English translation of the left-hand column. These parallel foreign-language texts as well as their English translations undermine the centrality of any single national language and invite comparisons across discrete linguistic traditions. Readers are encouraged to conceive of distinct languages relationally, through translational and comparative practices, and to view the novel as a transnational and multilingual space in which characters’ identity is negotiated through inter-lingual and cross-cultural encounters. Rather than merely celebrate border crossings, the novel also underscores the legacies of European imperialism in North America through violent encounters between subjects and languages. By reminding us that racial and linguistic violence often inflects cross-cultural encounters, the novel compels us to reflect on power asym-

metries in multilingual nation-states. In this sense, *Self* is useful to transnationalism debates because it qualifies aestheticized views that simply celebrate border crossing.

Transnationalism in literary studies highlights precisely the problematic of reading literature in global and comparative contexts. Given that the term is employed in various disciplines, its extreme conceptual porousness demands that it be contextualized carefully. Social sciences and humanities scholars offer numerous definitions that seek to understand transnationalism with respect to space (the local-global dialectics), globalization (the economic forces at play in the production of cultural forms), formal aesthetics (narrative structures that play with the notion of the boundary), and subjectivity (a diasporic consciousness and plural identifications that derive from crossing boundaries), among other categories.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Paul Jay argues in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* that the emergence of transnational literary studies in the North American academy is coeval with the study of globalization and, in particular, that the transnational turn has been spurred by radical social, political, and demographic shifts that have taken place in the wake of decolonization, mass migration to former colonial centers, and economic globalization. Like Walkowitz, Jay is concerned with the “global reframing of the origins, production, and concerns of ‘English’ literature,” and he contends that the locations of English studies have shifted away from the nation toward regional, hemispheric, and transnational spaces (5). In his readings of contemporary fictional texts by transnational authors, he emphasizes the category of space, particularly new spatial configurations that challenge the local/global nexus by intertwining several geographies as well as histories of colonialism, nationalism, postcolonialism, and globalization. Jay privileges transnational novels that shuttle between several geographical locations and unsettle the boundaries of national literatures. In comparison, Martel’s *Self* theorizes spatial displacement as well as linguistic and gender-based mobility—two categories that have received relatively little critical attention in recent discussions of transnationalism. By connecting language and gender to transnational space, I suggest, *Self* contributes new insights to the transnational turn in English.

The issues of language and gender mobility are equally left unexplored in Stephen Clingman's study *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary*. In his examination of the particular aesthetic form that transnationalism takes, Clingman defines transnational fiction as a genre concerned with "the nature of the boundary" (6) and emphasizes "questions of *form*" such as "structures of time and space . . . metonymy, chiasmus, constellation" (10; emphasis in original). Analyzing a set of writers who have crossed geographical and linguistic boundaries in their careers and fictional works, he regards transnational identity as a transitive space of encounter and transformation that is culturally enriching. I think, however, that such conceptions of formal aesthetics risk overlooking those subjects that are place-bound and powerless, such as the *sans-papiers*, refugees, and stateless. In privileging a poetics of border crossing, Clingman downplays the politics of transnational mobility.

Jay's theorization of literary transnationalism as a type of globalized fiction that is inextricably linked to economic and institutional contexts complements Clingman's understanding of transnationalism as a form of boundary-crossing identity. My own approach in this essay seeks to give equal consideration to both aesthetic and material aspects. I explore how *Self's* multilingual form and choice of specific languages highlight the politics of local and global languages; how the novel's publication in both Toronto and Montreal (Canada's main publishing centers for English- and French-language literature, respectively) might be seen as an attempt to avoid privileging one linguistic tradition over the other; and how its French and Italian translations deal with the issue of gendered and linguistic metamorphosis that the original English-language version playfully stresses. Furthermore, I suggest that the author's own shifting locations impact the transnationalism of a novel with an evidently allegorical title. In other words, the novel's project of decoupling national belonging and citizenship becomes clearer when read in light of Martel's global biography.

The issue of *Self's* transnational location is thus particularly interesting as it was written in English by a Québécois-born author who transcends national-linguistic boundaries and challenges a restrictive politics

of belonging. Before delving into textual analysis, it is worth pausing on Martel's global biography, as his case registers the disjuncture between his ethnicity, the language of his texts, and his overall reception in Canada and abroad. Martel, a figure of linguistic and cultural cosmopolitanism, was born in Spain and raised in France, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Canada and is known in Canada as a Francophone who writes in English. An Anglophone writer by choice, he was nevertheless recuperated back into Québécois literature upon winning the Man Booker Prize for his 2001 novel *Life of Pi*.<sup>3</sup> I mention Martel's bestseller about an Indian castaway and immigrant to Canada because the novel's transnational reception dramatizes Canadian anxieties about the author's ambivalent national and linguistic belonging, which is also one of *Self*'s central themes. Paradoxically, it was Martel's Man Booker Prize and his international reputation that consolidated his Canadianness for Canadian readers and critics. Anglo-Canadian journalists, for instance, view Martel as a Canadian writer who celebrates Canada as a hospitable country for immigrants in the context of anxieties about national identity (Roberts 211), while Québécois journalists stress that Martel hails from one of the oldest families in Québec, even as they considered him an atypical Québécois author (Courtemanche, par. 13–14). Yet as a Francophone writer, Martel also puzzles critics, who sometimes label his writing as "Anglo-Québécois," a literary genre produced by authors from Québec who write in English (Reid 60). As a Québécois who chooses to write in English, Martel straddles Canada's two distinct literary traditions. This unstable authorial positioning has led critics to assert that, despite his global background, he "nevertheless embodies one official version of Canada; his bilingualism performs the function of a national cultural passport" (Roberts 211). While Roberts demonstrates how Martel expands bilingual definitions of Canadian literature, I suggest that assertions such as these miss the interplay between the author's local and global affiliations and overlook the extent to which he actively transcends the linguistic economy of the Canadian nation-state. In fact, Martel actively blurs the locations from which he writes and redefines his literary belonging as a multilingual one. Asked in an interview whether he considers himself a citizen of the world, Martel replied:

No. I'm Canadian. I don't believe there are citizens of the world. Everyone is from somewhere, rooted in a particular culture. We're also citizens of the languages we speak. Some people speak many languages—I speak three, I'm a citizen of English, French and Spanish—but no one speaks World. (Sielke 30)

In contrast to Jacques Derrida's argument in *Monolingualism of the Other* that "citizenship does not define a cultural, linguistic, or, in general, historical participation" (14–15), Martel envisions the notion of citizenship in terms of one's elective affinities to particular languages and cultures. He rejects the ancient Greek and Enlightenment ideals of cosmopolitanism as world citizenship that are too abstract and fail to account for more linguistically-rooted forms of belonging. Martel's treading of the fine line between national and transnational identifications is in keeping with the project of blurring local and global affiliations he undertakes in *Self*. His use of the oft-employed trope of metamorphosis reveals his project of dismantling the traditional taxonomies through which we read literature, such as language, nation, ethnicity, and gender.

*Self* recounts the story of an anonymous male narrator who spontaneously turns into a woman on his eighteenth birthday and morphs back into a man after a violent rape twelve years later. The novel thus recalls other gendered literary metamorphoses in works such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable*, and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*. However, Martel's protagonist also changes languages and countries, suggesting an identity in constant flux. While most critics have read the protagonist's metamorphosis through the lens of gender studies, I argue that *Self* can be understood as a transnational novel that reflects critically on border crossing and plural belonging in a global age. Indeed, the categories of gender and space are closely related in the novel, as the protagonist's gender and sexual transformation is explored in the context of his/her cosmopolitan travel and multilingual identity. The son of Québécois diplomats, born in Spain and living, in turn, in Canada, Europe, and South America, the narrator experiences the tensions between national and transnational affiliations. He states, "I carried my roots in a suitcase, but the suitcase was originally put to-

gether in Québec, though I didn't feel strongly about that" (Martel, *Self* 251). At once attached to and distant from Québécois culture, the narrator associates the notion of home with plural linguistic abilities rather than a native space. The narrator amply illustrates the idea of linguistic cosmopolitanism: s/he is trilingual in Costa Rica, a Spanish-speaking foreigner in Paris, a Francophone in Anglophone Canada, a Franco-French in Québec, and a foreigner among the Hungarian-Canadian diaspora in Montréal. S/he fits perfectly in none of these linguistic spaces, yet is attached to all of them.

The protagonist is thus the figure of the cosmopolitan traveler who crosses borders easily and samples different cultures and languages for his personal enrichment. From Portugal, Greece, and Turkey, where he travels "in a leisurely way" (135), he brings back to Canada "a rich, redolent knowledge of the place, a masala mix of sights, sounds and tastes" (102). Although he reads Camoens' *Lusiads*, poems by C. P. Cavafy, and novels by Nikos Kazantzakis, there are almost no Portuguese, Greek, and Turkish words in the narrative, as he is not interested in acquiring new languages or a deeper knowledge of foreign cultures. Rather, he fancies himself "a chameleon" who adapts culturally to all these environments (135)—a flexibility enabled by his privileged economic status as well as his nationality. Despite the fact that the protagonist's cosmopolitanism is not ethically or politically transformative, *Self* mobilizes the concept successfully at the level of reading. The novel sets different languages in conversation with each other and encourages readers to view translingual dialogue as a practice of interlingual comparison and translation.

This transnational and translingual conversation is represented by the novel's *mise en abyme* structure. As a meta-novel of sorts, *Self* emphasizes a type of writing that seeks to transcend boundaries and identities through the example of its protagonist, an aspiring writer who envisions larger connections. The narrator strives to write a novel about nineteenth-century British polymath Peter Mark Roget, entitled *Thesaurus*, after Roget's polyglot *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. The novel would "take place on that same boat on the river Thames as *Heart of Darkness*—the cruising yawl *Nellie*" (280–81) and would explore "[a]n evening in the life of a man of good cheer, convinced of the unity



of life" (281). The juxtaposition of a multilingual dictionary and a canonical text about colonialism is striking, until one learns that Roger's *Thesaurus* is curiously organized not by synonyms but by antonyms, thus offering a new means of classification. Although Roger's thesaurus stresses oppositions, its Introduction expresses his hope that languages will help transcend differences and promote global conversations and connections:

Where *He* had divided and confused, *he* had classified and harmonized. Nor were his efforts confined to one language. In his proposed "Polyglot Lexicon," a multilingual super-thesaurus (with English and French as the first two languages, "the columns of each being placed in parallel juxtaposition"), he wanted to show how each language was not only itself a weave of kith and kin, but a twin, a synonym, of the language next to it. From this twinship of languages could emerge that international tongue which would conduce, he hoped, to the aforementioned world peace. (Martel, *Self* 280)

Roger's cosmopolitan vision is predicated on linguistic kinship and comparison that aims to bring about a universal language and world peace. Although the narrator admits to being "taken by his vision," she feels that the utopianism of Roger's project "would wreck itself against the shores of the Congo River, against Kurtz's hoarse "The horror! The horror!" (280). Although Joseph Conrad has previously appeared in the novel as a positive intertextual reference that connotes world travel and shares Martel's practice of "literary translanguaging" (Kellman ix), he returns in the guise of a foreboding sign. Roger's utopian vision is belied by both the colonial violence in *Heart of Darkness* and the violence that the female protagonist endures in a subsequent rape scene, after which silence (in the form of empty columns and pages) and the words "fear" and "pain" replace the transformative power of words in which Roger believed so strongly (Martel, *Self* 289). By juxtaposing Roger's polyglot dictionary and Conrad's colonial novel, *Self* is skeptical of optimistic views that underscore the power of languages to create peace, community, and kinship and emphasizes the limitations of such

humanistic visions in the wake of violent colonial enterprises. This is, then, the twofold way in which audiences might read the novel. Readers can see interlingual comparisons and intertextual connections as a way of transcending the parameters of national literature and grasp textual moments that are neglectful of race, class, and the place of minority and indigenous languages within nation-states. As I will show, however, *Self* does not always practice what it preaches; hence, it is necessary to examine the ways in which various languages work in the novel.

As Rainier Grutman notes, the particular languages Martel employs are not chosen haphazardly but are related diegetically to the narrator's life ("Moi" par. 51).<sup>4</sup> By allowing national and diasporic, major and minor, and global and local languages to coexist in the same text, Martel asks readers to reflect on the relationship of the languages to each other. In this sense, the novel participates in a phenomenon that Catherine Leclerc calls literary "colingualism"—that is, the situation in which several languages share the same textual space (73). Leclerc argues that by mobilizing more than one language to narrate their stories, colingual texts defy the power hierarchies between major and minor languages and contest the traditional categories used to classify literature. Whereas Leclerc circumscribes her study to the two main literatures of Canada, however, Martel expands this bilingual focus by adding other languages to the nation.

As the following analysis will illustrate, the juxtaposition and comparison between global, hegemonic, or colonial languages such as English and French, and diasporic and colonized languages such as Eastern European and Native Canadian languages, reveals power asymmetries and the ongoing legacies of European imperialism in Canada. English is a lingua franca as well as a colonial language in Canada. Similarly, French is simultaneously a hegemonic language and a "minor" language in Québec, in the sense used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (16).<sup>5</sup> As the languages of smaller nations, Czech and Hungarian are not only metaphors of cultural difference in an Anglophone novel, but also transnational languages linked to diasporic communities. In *Self*, then, languages function as signifiers of national identity, means of cross-cultural communication, and meta-

phors of linguistic alterity. English and French, the most frequently employed languages in the novel, mark the narrator's Canadian—that is, bilingual—identity. Although they point to distinct Canadian literary traditions, Martel puts them in conversation through translation. For example, in Portugal, the male narrator wakes up as a woman on his eighteenth birthday.<sup>6</sup> Her thoughts are recorded in two parallel columns:

<p>Tout était confus. . . . Je savais que <i>je pensais en français</i>, ça au moins, c'était sûr. <i>Mon identité était liée à la langue française</i>. Et je savais aussi que j'étais une femme. <i>Francophone et femme</i>, c'était le coeur de mon identité.</p>	<p>I was confused. . . . I knew that <i>I was thinking in English</i>, that much I knew right away. <i>My identity was tied to the English language</i>. And I knew that I was a woman, that also. <i>English-speaking and a woman</i>. That was the core of my being. (Martel, <i>Self</i> 107; emphasis added)</p>
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The left-hand column asserts a female identity tied to the French language, yet the right-hand column links this Francophone identity to the English language. Typographically, through parallel juxtaposition and imperfect translation, the text invites readers to consider both columns simultaneously and to view the protagonist's identity as bilingual. In another scene, the narrator expands his Canadian bilingual identity. In Costa Rica, where his family temporarily resides, the child narrator speaks French at home, learns English in kindergarten, and interacts with his friends in Spanish, a trilingual practice that his parents encourage and regard as exemplary of Canadian identity:

<p>'Tu seras bilingue. Même trilingue,' qu'ils me dirent. 'Très canadien.'</p>	<p>'You'll be bilingual. Even trilingual,' they told me. 'Very Canadian.' (18)</p>
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The narrator's Canadian identity is inscribed visually in parallel columns and in both English and French. However, his parents—diplomats who are immersed in multilingual situations and aware that Spanish may

constitute symbolic capital for their son—envision a model of Canadian identity based on linguistic multiplicity that exceeds the linguistic economy of the nation-state.

In addition to enlarging the protagonist's Canadian identity, Spanish also represents a global language that is linked to his parents' diplomatic mission in Cuba, where his father works as a translator of Latin American and Québécois poetry for a Cuban literary magazine. When the narrator's parents die in a plane crash, a Cuban fisherman who witnessed the accident recounts the episode in Spanish. The narrator's comment that his "parents' death was witnessed only by an old man and the sea" references Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (a text written in Cuba) and the context, shared by Martel, of expatriate authors who live between cultures and languages (Martel, *Self* 89). However, the novel also depicts Spanish as a minority language in Québec. When the protagonist uses it in the multiethnic Montréal neighborhood where she lives, she "delight[s] the older generation" but alienates the younger (238). In Québec, her linguistic cosmopolitanism is less of an asset among young Quebeckers.

Similarly, the narrator's use of English and French in a province whose identity is linked to separatist politics is not devoid of certain risks: "[W]hen I made the *faux pas* of addressing a nationalist Québécois in English and was replied to in French, which would bring out my French French, I went from being *une maudite anglaise* to being *une maudite française*" (238; emphasis in original). The tension between Parisian and Québécois French, as well as between French and English, underscores the power asymmetries between the languages of Canada's founding nations. These political and linguistic rivalries depict Québec as a province with nationalist and monolingual aspirations, and a cultural environment in which the protagonist is a linguistic misfit.<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps the reason why she feels comfortable within the diasporic Hungarian community in Montréal, among whom her multilingualism seems less problematic. The protagonist shares these diasporics' cultural alterity, just as she does earlier in the novel with exilic Czechs in Paris.

The languages of smaller nation-states such as Czech and Hungarian are linked to exilic and diasporic protagonists. As metaphors of linguis-

tic opacity (Grutman, “Moi” par. 1), these Eastern European languages underscore moments in which communication falters and foreshadows an unpleasant turn of events. For example, when introducing the child narrator’s interaction with Marisa, a Czech émigré girl he meets in Paris, Martel juxtaposes Czech and French in parallel columns that represent the simultaneous dialogues that the narrator and Marisa have with their parents in their native languages. The untranslated bilingual columns stress the foreignness of the Czech language, which sounds like “sweet East European Chinese” to the narrator’s ears (Martel, *Self* 34), and the possibility of transcending linguistic differences. Shortly after being put to bed, for example, the two children resort to German and Spanish in order to communicate. Their Babelic dialogue, which consists of “sweet Hispano-Teutonic nothings” (39), takes place in Paris and is translated into English in a right-hand column. The narrator’s and Marisa’s alternating lines show a comic lack of mutual comprehension, despite their desire to cross language barriers.

The novel depicts Hungarian, in contrast to Czech and German, as highly opaque. This unfortunately reinforces the stereotype of Hungarian as a difficult, inharmonious, and even violent language. The narrator observes: “Magyar is spectacularly incomprehensible. It tricks you with the familiarity of the Roman alphabet and the dress and deportment of its speakers, but then it erupts—and you might as well be in China” (263). In contrast, French—a Western European language—is “an oral alchemy, able to gild instantly the most ordinary, leaden communication” (72). Martel exoticizes Hungarian by associating it with what has been called the Orient; he disregards the fact that, culturally, the language belongs to European civilization. To defamiliarize Hungarian even further, Martel inserts an untranslated excerpt from Béla Bartók’s opera *Bluebeard’s Castle* in which Bluebeard’s wife begs him to spare her life. By purposefully leaving the Hungarian passage untranslated, Martel fractures the reading process by inciting his Anglophone readers to either seek translation or risk incomprehension.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, unless non-Hungarian speakers notice the source of the Hungarian passage on the second page of the novel and attempt to translate the excerpt, they miss the contrast between the violent scene in *Bluebeard’s Castle*, recorded

in the left-hand column, and the narrator's calm musings on the strangeness of Hungarian in the right-hand column. Martel's placement of Bartók's opera scene right before the episode in which the female narrator is violently raped is highly significant, as Bluebeard's violence foreshadows the gendered violence in *Self*. Martel's novel and its Hungarian intertext, as well as the association between language and violence, can thus be brought into conversation only through the willingness of readers unfamiliar with Hungarian to perform translation. However, in the absence of such effort, Hungarian will remain, stereotypically, an impenetrable language.

Martel's insertion of the Hungarian version (Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*) of a French text (Charles Perrault's fairytale "Barbe Bleue") in an Anglophone Canadian novel (*Self*) highlights the complex intertextual and multilingual networks in which his novel participates. Martel situates his novel within a transnational and multilingual literary history: Anglo-American (Woolf, Conrad, Hemingway), French (Perrault), Czech (Franz Kafka, through the trope of metamorphosis) and Hungarian (Bartók). Through his chosen intertextual references, Martel forges conversations between these different national traditions and urges us to read *Self* from a transnational point of view.

Despite the novel's intertextual networks, however, it is highly problematic that a novel that champions multilingualism fails to include or mention Native Canadian languages, thus reinforcing political and symbolic hierarchies in Canada. The glaring absence of indigenous languages in a novel partly set in a multiethnic neighborhood that welcomes immigrants from Europe, South Asia, and the Caribbean highlights the subjects and languages of transnationalism even more clearly. When a Native Canadian does appear in the narrative, he is depicted as a drunken "Indian" whom the protagonist attacks for no reason, "kick[ing] him again and again" (323), despite, or because of, the fact that "he could do [him] no harm" (322). The Native Canadian's disenfranchised status is further underscored by his uttering "nothing coherent, only a few syllables" (323). His inability to speak contrasts sharply with the cosmopolitan narrator's multilingualism—or at least bilingualism, as he emphasizes his Canadianness at the end of the novel.

In depicting his protagonist's trajectory from a linguistic "chameleon" (238) to the moment in which he asserts that "I am Canadian. I speak English and French" (331), Martel represents transnational and transgender mobility as a return to the protagonist's original male body and native landscape. However, unlike Woolf's Orlando, who remains a woman after her metamorphosis, *Self's* narrator morphs back into a man because inhabiting the female body has become unbearable. This shift suggests that male and female multiplicity cannot coexist in the same body in the wake of sexual violence.<sup>9</sup> Martel thus configures the wounded female body as a counterpoint to mobile and polyglot subjectivities. The narrator's victimization of the Native man seems to be explained in the economy of the novel by his (for the female narrator has, at this point, morphed back into a man) feelings of vulnerability, pain, and fear of men following the rape. Nevertheless, as Smaro Kamboureli cogently states, "there is no reason this man has to be Native" (958). The novel's use of ethnic stereotypes is indeed unwarranted even though it may try to suggest that the encounter between a cosmopolitan and a subaltern subject, or between a member of Canada's two dominant language groups and a representative of a linguistic minority, is predicated on violent racism. Roberts underscores the connection between language and violence and suggests that the narrator's "act of violence against the Native man . . . operates in relation to the text's emphasis on [her] bilingualism, itself a reflection of Canada's two original European colonizing powers" (193). In other words, the narrator's Canadian, bilingual identity can be understood in the context of European colonialism in North America. If the protagonist insists on her Canadian identity at the end, in spite of her multilingualism, it is to stress the importance of linguistic hierarchies in Canada that are the legacy of imperial conquest. The implication of this notion for a reading of the novel as transnational and multilingual is that the text urges the reader to place the tropes of hybridity, fluidity, and mobility that it earlier appears to embrace within a context of global hierarchies of power.

In my analysis thus far, I have insisted on questions of form and related them to linguistic, spatial, and gendered mobility. However, metamorphosis is also an attribute of the novel's global circulation. An

examination of the novel's translation into French and Italian forces the languages of the novel to enter into different interpretive configurations. Intratextually, for Martel, interlingual translation functions as a means of highlighting the bilingualism of his protagonist and undermining the monolingualism of national literatures. In setting French- and English-language columns side by side, he equally questions the hierarchical relationship between English and French in Canada. In performing cultural translation—that is, in translating this Canadian linguistic context into a different target culture—the translators make choices that seek to appeal to different readerships (specifically, French- and Italian-language speakers, for whom English and French may have different connotations than they do for Canadian readers). The translators' contextualization of the source text may help us view their translation as an act of “rewriting” (Bassnett, *Translation* 30) or “creative interpretation” (Bassnett, *Translation Studies* 83) of the original novel. It may also help explain why, when it comes to bilingual columns, they opted to translate only one language rather than preserve the source text's compositional arrangement.

In both the French and Italian translations, English is taken as the source language, despite the novel's mixture of various languages. This reading of the novel as primarily Anglophone accounts for some of the translators' language choices. Both translations contain modifications in form and content only when it comes to the passages written in English and French (the dominant languages of Canada), while they retain the parallel columns in Spanish, Czech, and Hungarian (foreign or minority languages in a Canadian context). For instance, in her 1998 French translation, H el ene Rioux replaces Martel's typographic technique of parallel columns with linear narration, italicizes the French passages of the source text, and omits their translation into English altogether. At first sight, this translation strategy seems to downplay the colingual relationship between English and French, which is meant to highlight the narrator's and his parents' bilingualism. However, the translation manages to preserve the foreignness of French in the source text and thus avoid what Lawrence Venuti calls “transparent translating,” a technique that “suppress[es] the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign



text” (183). Through the strategy of italicization as a form of “foreignization” (Bassnett, *Translation* 47), Rioux problematizes translation, which is one of *Self*’s formal and thematic concerns.

In terms of content, both the French and Italian translations of the important passage in which the narrator wakes up as a woman in Portugal, and in which the parallel columns record her simultaneous Francophone and Anglophone identity, omit the linguistic ambivalence of the source text. An examination of the two translations of the passage suggests the narrator is simply Francophone in the French edition and Anglophone in the Italian version. For the sake of translingual comparison, it is worth citing the original excerpt again:

Mon identité était liée à  
la langue française. Et je  
savais aussi que j’étais une  
femme. Francophone et  
femme, c’était le coeur de  
mon identité.

My identity was  
tied to the English language.  
And I knew that I was a  
woman, that also. English-  
speaking and a woman.  
That was the core of my  
being. (Martel, *Self* 107)

In Martel’s novel, the moment of the narrator’s gender metamorphosis relies on interlingual translation, in which “Francophone” and “English-speaking” are not semantic equivalents. These two linguistic identities are not reducible to each other, but must be considered simultaneously.

The bilingual passage is translated into French in the following way: “*Je savais que je pensais en français, ça au moins, c’était sûr. Mon identité était liée à la langue française. Et je savais aussi que j’étais une femme. Francophone et femme, c’était le coeur de mon identité*” (124; emphasis in original). Rioux’s highlighting of the narrator’s Francophone identity may bring the novel closer to French readers’ cultural context. In her 2008 Italian translation, Anna Rusconi similarly omits French and translates only the English portion, thus emphasizing the narrator’s Anglophone identity: “Sapevo che pensavo in inglese, questo mi fu subito chiaro. La mia identità era legata alla lingua inglese, e sapevo anche di essere una donna. Sapevo que quello era il nucleo del mio essere” (111). Furthermore, Rusconi omits the sentence “English-speaking and

a woman,” which in the original text rephrases the idea that the narrator’s identity was “tied to the English language” (Martel, *Self* 107). She may have considered the restatement redundant, even though the repetition underscores the idea that the narrator’s gender metamorphosis is recorded in two different languages simultaneously, pairing “man-woman” with “Francophone-Anglophone.”

The French and Italian translations of the metamorphosis scene stress the protagonist’s gender metamorphosis more than his/her negotiation of his/her Canadian, bilingual identity. The cover of the French version of the text, which features Egon Schiele’s highly masculine *Portrait of Friederike Maria Beer*, also emphasizes this aspect of the narrative, as does the title of the Italian translation (*Self: Lui, lei, o forse entrambe le cose* [Self: he, she, or both]). In the metamorphosis scene, English and French are locked in a symmetrical relationship: compositionally, they function as parallel but distinct languages. Their inexact translation deliberately troubles readers’ potential assumption of a necessary semantic equivalence between the columns and identities and invites them to reflect on the problem of identity negotiation. While this particular passage may specifically address Canadian bilingual readers, its translation into French and Italian does not necessarily target multilingual audiences. Rather, the novel’s translations function within what Naoki Sakai calls a “homolingual address” (2); that is, they address two separate linguistic communities or national readerships. Nevertheless, both French and Italian translations succeed in preserving the principal concern of *Self*: its deliberate challenge to the homogeneity of national languages.

Martel’s multilingual novel forces a reconsideration of the languages of transnationalism and existing hierarchies of power and raises problems of texts’ circulation in translation and classification within national literary traditions that are usually viewed as monolingual. Its multilingual aesthetics is thus linked to the destabilization of fixed, monolithic viewpoints and the blurring of gendered, linguistic, and canonical boundaries. A transnational and comparative novel, *Self* employs formal strategies such as language juxtaposition and (non-) translation to invite readers to bring the histories and imperial legacies of different languages into dialogue. If English and French represent cosmopolitan languages

that constitute symbolic capital and enable the protagonist to be a linguistic chameleon at home in many places and languages, they are also hegemonic languages that obscure the presence of subaltern languages. Minor and minority languages extend the boundaries of national literature and underscore the legacies of European colonialism in Canada. A critical transnational reading should not simply forge linguistic and cultural connections. It should compel a reconsideration of the power relations between the languages of smaller and more powerful nation-states. Through its invocation of a critical transnationalism, Martel's novel invites readers to celebrate comparisons, associations, and complementarity and offers them a lesson in the limits of multilingualism.

## Notes

- 1 Multilingualism constitutes the object of numerous scholarly studies, having sparked new critical interest in the wake of decolonization and postcolonial migrations to former colonial centers. Critics have employed numerous terms that connote different degrees of linguistic interaction within a literary work: “extraterritorial” (Steiner), “heterolingual” (Sakai; Grutman, *Des langues qui résonnent*; Díaz), “plurilingual” (Gauvin), “translingual” (Kellman), and “colingual” (Leclerc), among others. They have shown that multilingualism takes a variety of forms and discussed authors who are bilingual (Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Vassilis Alexakis), who switch from their mother tongue to one or more foreign languages (Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Franz Kafka), who incorporate standard and vernacular languages in their works (James Joyce, Tomás Rivera, Patrick Chamoiseau), and whose works are multilingual as a result of being translated into several languages almost simultaneously (Milan Kundera, J. M. Coetzee). Despite the plethora of scholarly works on multilingualism and the various permutations of languages within literary works, however, I find that most of these studies focus on what Sakai terms a “homogeneous language society” (4)—that is, on countries that, while comprised of various ethnic groups and thus different linguistic communities, are officially monolingual. Moreover, it is rare that the studies focus on authors who juxtapose different languages within the same literary text, as Martel does in *Self*.
- 2 See, especially, Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer's *Transnational Spaces* (2004), Vertovec's *Transnationalism* (2009), and Fluck, Pease, and Rowe's *Re-framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (2011).
- 3 The fact that Martel chose English as the language of his literary expression—in a reverse movement from that of his compatriot Nancy Huston, an Anglophone Canadian who opted for French—was an essential factor in his winning the

2002 Man Booker Prize for *Life of Pi* (2001), which subsequently became a best-seller and was adapted for film by director Ang Lee in 2012. As Imbert contends, the fact that the novel was written in English and won the most prestigious British literary award contributed greatly to the commercial success of the novel's French translation (*L'Histoire de Pi*) and to Martel's international visibility in general (14).

- 4 For instance, both Tito, who belongs to the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, and Marisa, the Czech émigré girl from Paris, are objects of the narrator's affection. They are also expatriates, their families having fled from the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and immigrated to Australia and Québec, respectively. The relationships between different languages in the novel are thus further underscored when readers notice the plot connections between different characters.
- 5 Deleuze and Guattari define a minor language as a language spoken by a minority "within a major language" (16). Such is the status of French in Québec.
- 6 This is an overt intertextual reference to Woolf's *Orlando*, whose narrator also suddenly morphs into a woman while serving as an English ambassador in Constantinople.
- 7 The image of a multicultural yet inhospitable Montréal recalls Robin's critique of the Québécois policy of cultural assimilation in the early 1980s in her novel *La Québécoise*. Written in a French mixed with English, German, Yiddish, and Spanish words, Robin's experimental novel presents a similarly hostile image of Montréal as a "ville schizophrène" in which "on parle français / et / on pense américain" (82, 86).
- 8 The non-translation of the Hungarian passage in *Self* recalls a similar technique in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she inserts untranslated words in Spanish and Nahuatl. By using minority languages, Anzaldúa challenges English-language readers to acknowledge ethnic difference, while seeking to pluralize meaning and disrupt the hegemony of English. Like in Anzaldúa's multilingual text, non-translation in *Self* is used as a way to challenge the hegemony of English.
- 9 Significantly, the narrator's final metamorphosis occurs in reaction to gendered violence rather than as a personal choice, as is the case in Eugenides' *Middlesex*, in which the hermaphrodite narrator, Cal(lie) Stephanides, chooses a male gender identity after learning about his/her genetic mutation.

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