

Vernacular English in the Classroom
A New Geopolitics of the English Language

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It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl
 or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the
 blues.

Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *History of Voice*

Decolonize What? What's Decolonization?

Soon after enthusiastically agreeing to write this essay, I panicked at the enormity of the task ahead: Decolonizing the English Literary Curriculum. As a scholar of postcolonial studies, I read and write with a commitment to the decolonial possibilities of comparative methodologies. Against the parochialism of a racialized English literature, I work across south–south political geographies and Hindi, English, and Urdu media. Of course, I wanted the opportunity to reimagine the English curriculum.

I talked to colleagues and students about what the decolonization of an English literary curriculum meant to them. A few people expressed cynicism about the institution-speak of decolonizing, some others noted the urgency of decolonial practice. In an email exchange, Bhakti Shringarpure, scholar and series editor of *Decolonize That! Handbooks for the Revolutionary Overthrow of Embedded Colonial Ideas* (OR Books) framed decolonial practice in terms of “what we ‘do’ and how we ‘behave,’ ‘interact’ etc. and stage our particular positionalities in everyday life.”¹ It quickly became clear that to write about decolonization meant writing about praxis and practice. In terms of literary studies, decolonial practice calls attention to what we teach and how we teach it, as well as what and how we choose to write in our scholarly and public work. This accountability from the daily – often unseen and unsung – work of being in our culturally specific classrooms and the ongoing pursuit of our strongest political beliefs was not something I had always stopped to consider.

Broadly, decolonization refers to the critical appraisal of the hierarchical and racialized logics of Western European cultures and institutions that organize knowledge. Referring to the literal end of colonial rule, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) wrote that decolonization is necessarily violent. To decolonize is to unsettle. Thus, any institution that wishes to decolonize should return the land to Indigenous populations.

There were questions that needed answers: Could everything be decolonized? Which English literary curriculum did I wish to decolonize? Would decolonization demand different strategies in different parts of the world? I recalled discussing with Ato Quayson the largely sophisticated scholarship on the institution of English literary studies from India (one of my areas of study). But I had neglected to ask what we meant when we said the English literary curriculum. While there was a reasonable answer to this second question based on our professional locations in the United States, it nagged me that I had understood what the editors meant when they said *the* English literary curriculum. This was exactly the path from language to identity I hoped to disrupt in my scholarship.

At the same time as calls for decolonization have grown across scholarly fields, so have calls to caution. We know from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's foundational essay that decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck and Wang). It is not possible to decolonize in culturally, historically, or geopolitically abstract ways. Thus, at the outset, it is important to acknowledge – in the spirit of decentering and decolonizing – that there is no one English literary curriculum. Today, English literature is not only taught or studied in the US American academy but in many anglophone and nonanglophone countries, where it can be a vehicle for language skills and taught with a wide variety of textual materials beyond a shared understanding of a literary canon (Ben-Yishai; Kuortti). Scholars of English literature in erstwhile colonies have also engaged with it with a keen understanding of the colonial foundations of the English literary curriculum. Well before institutions in the United States changed their departmental names to reflect the diversity of what can be studied under the sign of English, Indian universities were offering degrees in Literature in English (Flaherty).

Surveying the contemporary decolonization discourse, Roopika Risam argues that the verb “decolonize” often functions as “extractive currency,” and “decolonization” itself becomes a metaphor for “diversity work” that “assuages white guilt and obfuscates institutional complicities with the structural violence of racism” (11). Less pessimistic about the possibility of decolonization, Christopher J. Lee nonetheless

attributes a “cruel optimism” to the imagined revolutionary potential of decolonization movements and projects. Lee argues that decolonization is not necessarily revolutionary, as the calls to decolonize are bound doubly in the tragedy of the postcolonial and the eternal hope of a revolution.² Writing about political cul-de-sacs and fantasies of radical change that debilitatingly never arrive, Lee leaves the reader with more questions about the political objectives of decolonization. Is decolonization a resetting of the order to a prior moment before colonization or is it an end in pursuit of a future yet to come? That decolonization – literal, figurative – may not equal revolution or progress is amply illustrated by neocolonial postcolonial states and the ascendance of ethnic and religious nationalism across the world.

In the specific context of English literary curriculum, a generation of postcolonial scholars have shown that both the English language and English literature as a disciplinary field of study were first piloted as political and administrative projects in the colonies.³ The translation of local cultures into the English language made governance efficient and English literature held up values of morality and civility for the colonial subjects. This well-known history – brought to bear upon English literary studies through postcolonial scholarship – prompted Gaurav Desai to write in his essay “Rethinking English Studies: Postcolonial English Studies” (2005) that “no aspect of English literary studies, whether it be concerned with the Medieval period or the Renaissance or the Romantics can ignore its own colonial conditions of possibility” (525).

How does one decolonize a field of study that was invented in and for the better control of British colonies? How does one decolonize when coloniality is not a bug but a feature? Briefly, these questions made me wonder if perhaps Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o had the right idea when he called for the abolition of English departments, rejecting the primacy of English language and literature and turning instead to African literature (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o). He and Obiajunwa Wali before him both argued that African literature in English was a contradiction of terms. Instead, in “On the Abolition of the English Department” (1972), Ngũgĩ, along with Taban Li Liyong and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, proposed the possibility of imagining literary studies from the perspective of African cultures.

What is at stake in wanting to hold on to English departments and English literary curricula in the first place? Why decolonize, why not burn it all down?

A New Geopolitics of the English Literary Curriculum

These deliberately provocative questions are not meant to diminish our collective efforts in this volume or to cast doubt on them but to gather context. The political and intellectual challenges to the project of decolonization can clarify what is at stake and illuminate the path ahead. If English is the language of British colonialism and US American neoimperialism, it is also the language lived and made anew by the colonized every day. At stake in holding onto an English department is the potential to restage the encounter with a colonial language and to retell the story of English – as resistance, rebuttal, and regeneration. Decolonizing the English literary curriculum is an opportunity to reworld the sign of “English” from its historical and cultural others, where “reworlding” as “re-creating/remaking/reconstituting after centuries of de-constitution and destitution of other worlds and other lives of those who were subjected to genocide, enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchal sexism” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni).

My essay answers the call to decolonize the English literary curriculum by proposing what María Lugones has called a “new geopolitics” of the English language. In her essay, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” (2010), Lugones wrote that the potential for decoloniality lies in a new geopolitics of “knowing and loving,” calling decolonization a practice that is concerned with the politics of knowledge production and contesting the colonial world order established by European empires (756). Thinking between the colonial and neocolonial geopolitics of English cutting through my classroom in the US American South, I call attention to the embodied, multimedia, and multilingual mediations that bring something called English language and literature into the classroom. The pedagogical objective of decolonization is not simply to substitute and replace English literature with other language literatures. Instead, I understand decolonization as an active program of reading and critique – of reworlding – that traces the relations of an “English literary curriculum” with other languages and literary cultures. This program of reading implicates the reader in challenging the stable meanings of an ideological, historical, and geographical English.

To this end, I reprise the term “vernacular” which I proposed in *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India* (2022) to argue that the unmarked neutrality of English as a scholarly medium as well as its much remarked-upon expropriations as a global imperialist language both perpetuate the absorptive logic of English. In *Vernacular*

English, I examine the English language as part of the multilingual local milieu of postcolonial India by turning to a transmedia archive of little-known debates and practices that have shaped the meanings of the English language in India – from English, Hindi, and Urdu literature to law, film, visual art, and public protests. For instance, British colonial administration in the eighteenth century advanced English as a translational vernacular that could encode Indian languages. This functional administrative role of English as a language of universal communicability takes on a new political life as the Roman script becomes a vernacular writing system for numerous Indian languages in digital media. At the same time, the English language was adopted as postcolonial India's associate official language along with Hindi. Low castes, Dalits, and tribal/Adivasi (Indigenous) groups have routinely used the "elite" language of English – available in the Indian Constitution – to protest the Hindu casteist Indian state. The representative power of English, its imagined and desired capacity to speak for colonized and independent people, makes English a vernacular language in India.

As it explores the vernacular registers of a global language, *Vernacular English* challenges postcolonial and comparative literary studies' reliance on the vernacular as something non-English – something common, native, local, nondominant, and Indigenous. Vernacular is often used to refer to a common – demotic, nonelite, nonstandard – experience of language. In scholarship on India, vernacular is a term reserved for quotidian and local registers of modern Indian languages, or *bhashas*. But reading across medieval, early modern, and African American discussions of the vernacular shows that a vernacular is as much a political assertion as it is an embattled position. Indeed, as much historically grounded scholarship has shown, equating the vernacular with authenticity is historically inaccurate and theoretically suspect, as it loses sight of how languages are politically marshalled as expressions of cultural authenticity.⁴ As Christina Kullberg and David Watson write, "the vernacular is not only a language or a thing such as an expression of the local, rather it refers to certain potentiality of language to become something else; it is a pre-coded language that may be politically, aesthetically, or culturally charged" (19). Associating vernacular with only the minor misses how vernacular languages, literature, and knowledge brace religious fascism and anticaste resistance in India.

Against the groundswell of discussions on global English, "vernacular" reframes the English language within multilingual landscapes where it is often, in the words of Rebecca Walkowitz, "less than one

language” (“Less Than” 95). Vernacular English is a way of asking “what becomes intelligible as English and how does English become intelligible,” questions that can be asked about any language. “Vernacular” surfaces a new geopolitics of English language and literature by convening literary production outside of metropolitan centers. At the same time, it also models a practice of reading that explores nontextual modes of languaging at the limits of ability, expertise, and literacy. To call English a vernacular is not to simply say that English is another Indian language or that English is suddenly not a language of power and dominance. Instead, vernacular is a way of naming the colonial and global power structures associated with English without reinscribing them each time we discuss the language.

In this pursuit of English as a vernacular, existing work by postcolonial scholars offers a starting point to think from. Postcolonial studies as a field has led the examination of the colonial foundations of English literature as a discipline (Ahmed; Bhattacharya). It has brought attention to literatures from the previously colonized parts of the world, showing that colonial Englishness is always tied with the subjectivity of the colonized (Bhabha). The comparative methods of postcolonial studies have centered translation as a critical practice and concept to examine transnational cultural flows. This scholarship offers us new perspectives – different ways of staging the colonial and capitalist encounters – on the compulsory global-ness of the English language and English literature. As Gauri Viswanathan argued in an interview with Michael Allan, “To regain the world through other imaginings that recapture texts from a point outside the institution offers a challenge to English studies that its postcolonial offshoot has considerably reinvigorated” (Allan 246).

Thus, in contrast to Lee’s ambivalent conclusions about the objectives of decolonization, I find useful Debashree Mukherjee and Pavitra Sundar’s special issue on decolonial feminist media studies. Mukherjee and Sundar present “decolonial” as a term to describe an active process, not the marker of a particular historical epoch that has passed but an active, evolving set of strategies. Like them, I see “the future not as an endpoint, the decolonial not as a goalpost, but rather as an ongoing struggle, a revolution that is not past or impending, failed or irretrievable, but continual” (13).

This ongoing nature of decolonization is not simply temporal or chronological. The call to decolonize is multidirectional and not just directed at the imperial center. Postcolonial scholars such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Ania Loomba have shown how English literature “became the surrogate – and also the split – presence of the Englishman,

or a repository of abstract and universal values freely available to the colonized as much as to the colonizer” (Rajan 12). It offered anticolonial and nationalist thinkers the epistemic grounds from which to critique the empire. As a scholar of South Asia, the imperative to decolonize English literary curriculum is meaningful both in the Anglo-American academic contexts and in India where “decoloniality” has given credence to casteist and majoritarian consolidation of what native or local culture should be. Aditya Nigam’s *Decolonizing Theory: Thinking Across Traditions* argues that the idea of the nation demands a homogeneity of culture in anticolonial gestures and that the Hindu Right in India ironically relies on colonial knowledge production to claim a Brahminical Hindu past as Indigenous (Nigam). In the context of global modern and premodern histories of migration, the turn to Indigeneity can also justify a politics of exclusion.⁵

Indeed, the risks of romanticizing an unsullied precolonial past or elsewhere and the awareness of an enduring coloniality as the condition of our work make decoloniality an ongoing struggle. This is also what makes Ngũgĩ principled position unsustainable. In the context of the famous language debates between Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ, I often think of Ken Saro-Wiwa’s essay “The Language of African Literature: A Writer’s Testimony” (1992) in the special issue on the Language Question in *Research in African Literature*. Saro-Wiwa not only defended his decision to write in English, as British colonialism had rendered English education an integral experience in Nigeria; but Saro-Wiwa also framed colonialism as “not a matter only of British, French, or European dominance over Africans” but also the rule of the numerical majority over the numerical minority. “In African society, there is and has always been colonial oppression,” wrote Saro-Wiwa, and he raised questions about “the implications of [Ngũgĩ’s] decision for the minority ethnic groups in Kenya and for the future of Kenya as a multiethnic nation or, indeed, as a nation at all” (156).⁶

Or take the example of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education.” No story of postcolonial studies or English literary studies can begin without invoking this speech, which changed India and English education for ever. It highlights the complicity of English education with colonial expansion as well as the institutional marginalization of local linguistic and literary cultures in India in favor of English education. The Orientalist-Anglicist debates are important to teach students about the history of English education in the colonies. One way to build on the existing body of scholarship on the lasting impact of Macaulay’s

policies is to introduce the question of caste. For instance, the introduction of English language and literature did not simply create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 171). It also sharpened what Aatish Taseer has called the linguistic colorline in India. Historian Shefali Chandra’s *The Sexual Life of English: Languages of Caste and Desire in India* (2012), for instance, discusses how English education presented a way of consolidating caste privilege in India even as it opened paths to mobility for those not privileged in terms of caste and gender.

It would be pedagogically productive in this context to pair Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” with Dalit writer Chandrabhan Prasad’s short essay “The Impure Milk of Macaulay” and excerpts of Chandra’s work (which includes poems of praise in English by feminist anticaste thinker Savitribai Phule). With libertarian leanings, Prasad has praised the English language for its potential to usher Dalits and other minoritized groups into circuits of global capitalism where the Brahminical dominance is contested and made irrelevant. Prasad specifically celebrates Macaulay’s birthday publicly every year and has argued that Macaulay’s proposal was not in itself wrong but just imperfectly executed. He draws attention to the lines after the oft-cited ones I have quoted above: “To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population” (Macaulay 171). The problem with Macaulay’s proposal, according to Prasad, was not the hierarchization and replacement of Sanskrit and Persian knowledge systems but the brahmins’ abdication of their responsibilities to the castes below them.

While Prasad might be one of the most provocative and playful proponents of the English language in India – he has built a temple for the English goddess – he is far from the only one (Saxena). The English language continues to live in less identifiable ways as the Roman script for languages understood to be more “native” or as the language of choice for writers who may not have access to other linguistic and literary traditions (Misra). For instance, in his work on Santali language in *Graphic Politics in Eastern India: Script and the Quest for Autonomy* (2021), Nishaant Choksi shows that a Roman alphabet-based script devised by missionaries came to be the preferred script for Santali, an Austroasiatic language spoken in eastern India, Nepal, and Bangladesh largely by Adivasi (original inhabitants, “Indigenous”) communities. A nonstandard Romanized Santali transcription, which was initially created to mediate between

several other scripts of Santali, gained prominence as Santali speakers started using it in digital and online communication in the twenty-first century. Choksi calls this script a “trans-script” since the graphic choices involved in it invoke the knowledge of multiple scripts by people utilizing the script digitally and in print (62). Examples like these require that as literary critics and teachers, we keep in view what English – across modalities of sound and script – reveals and what it remakes. This objective also demands new reading practices that can take an expansive approach to reading and language.

Tracing my path toward decolonizing through the insights and work of postcolonial scholars, I find useful Mukherjee and Sundar’s words that claim no newness for their pursuit of decolonial feminist approaches to media studies but see it as unfinished work that needs to be done. According to them, the challenge is to ask how to do this work – how to think decolonization – in the contemporary moment. They call for humility that traces different genealogies of their own efforts to decolonize. This means acknowledging the work of communities, practitioners, activists, and scholars before us. This collaborative and coalitional approach to literary history is necessarily comparative and interdisciplinary.

Decolonizing Language

The question of language – in all its forms – has been critical for scholars in postcolonial studies. Knowledge of “other languages” and language as such is foundational to challenge colonial projects. As Julietta Singh writes in *Unthinking Mastery* (2020), “across twentieth century anticolonial discourses, language repeatedly emerged as one of the most vital problems in the production and articulation of decolonized subjectivities” (69). But “the intellectual authority of literary and area studies, its ‘credibility’ and ‘viability,’ continuously relies on mastery as its target, as that which will produce authoritative, legitimate knowledge and in so doing resist the power of Eurocentrism” (8).

Such an approach to language, ironically, works with a monolingual model and loses sight of the diverse modes of languaging and subject formation. Today, these concerns with multilingualism and translation have come closer home as scholars reflect on the classroom space in the United States and how the global lives of languages challenge the monolingual logic of our institutions and critical methods. Yet, at the same time as language learning has become critical to thinking our classrooms and universities, the questions about *our* reading method are still less concerned with them.

Decolonizing English literary curriculum does not conclude with the curricular inclusion of languages besides English, whether in the original or in translation. Instead, we must interrogate how languages reveal and disappear a variety of linguistic experience. The corollary of the critique of the monolingual paradigm is that notions of multilingualism also rest on the countability/cohesion of languages. We cannot count without assuming languages to be discrete, and we cannot think linguistic discreteness without ascribing to some kind of monolingual logic.⁷ By asking how we know what we know, we might take multilingualism as a decolonial method without counting languages and reinforcing colonial notions of language.

The vernacular lives of English language and literature outside of South Asia also emphasize the people who use the English language rather than any inherent colonial meanings. I will take just one example from Caribbean anglophone literature. Writing about the late eighteenth-century history of Creole “dialect” literature, Belinda Edmondson in *Creole Noise: Early Caribbean Dialect Literature and Performance* (2021) rejects the racialization of English as White and creole as Black as historically inaccurate. She shows the lived multiracial and transnational origins of literary dialect that counters its story as “mimicry” or merely as a political strategy. For conceptual purchase on Edmondson’s arguments, I turn to perhaps the most foundational and memorable for vernacular English – Edward Kamau Braithwaite’s idea of the “nation language.” It frames English as a vernacular that is used by the people. The politics of English – whether the master’s tools can ever destroy the master’s house – depends on the people who bring the revolution. Nation language, thus, not only brings English closer to the bodies that speak and in whose name English is spoken, it also suggests that we take the different sensory experiences of Caribbean language users into account to understand its meaning. About Caribbean poetry, Braithwaite writes, “noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning” (17). Thus, as we read the English language in the classroom, we might also be alert to its sonic and phonic materiality.

Vernacular English – as a practice of reading in translation and transmediation – seeks to hold on to the part of the meaning that Braithwaite thought would be lost in language as written. It approaches multilingualism through relationality with other named languages and highlights different sensory engagements with language itself. In doing so, it also approaches the “bodies and experiences [that] have served as structuring

absences” in our scholarly histories and attempt to remediate their absence (Mukherjee and Sundar 7).

As I have argued before, the term anglophone – with its emphasis on the heteronymic speakers (people and technologies) – can be a productive term to read the vernacular life of English. Anglophone as a term also centers practices of translation and transmediation. The argument that anglophone literature necessarily translates between different linguistic cultures also provides the opportunity to examine through what embodied and material mediations languages come into being (Walkowitz, *Born Translated*; Mufti Forget English!). Theorists and practitioners of translation in critical translation studies have thought how language becomes meaningful in relation to other languages. They have shown that translations bring languages into being, they do not just translate from one existing linguistic discourse to another. Attention to how language happens – how English become recognizable – can also center the people who make it and inflect the colonial logics of language imposition.

Literary studies have long been concerned with the liberal axiom of voice – who speaks – and have thus sought to bring new voices into the scholarly field. While this is an important step in decolonizing the English literary curriculum, it is not the only one. The next section asks the critic and teacher to situate themselves and their conceptual categories: who listens and how? Which English is legitimized as “English” and which as its “other”? How do we, as readers, make English speak on the page?

English lives contested politically and mediated across the world in South Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and anglophone Africa. For instance, English is not only a formerly colonial language in South Asia or a language of the postcolonial state in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. As we saw in the brief survey above, it is also a populist language that mediates Dalit, racioethnic, and Indigenous assertion against the fascist logics of vernaculars such as Hindi, Urdu, and Sinhala. Here, English often lives outside literary works – on other media and in other languages – as “less than one language,” as a sound, a sight, and materiality that inflects meanings on the page. We must make the diverse English practitioners in the Global South our interlocutors so that literatures of the anglophone world, for instance, are not just read through the language – English, theory – of the Global North.

Strategies in the Classroom

So how do we teach vernacular English in the classroom or teach in the shadow of vernacular English? This section answers the question with a multipronged approach. It makes suggestions for building a syllabus, an early classroom exercise, and a teachable literary text.

Syllabus In their essay “Twisted Tongues, Tied Hands: Translation Studies and the English Major” (2010), Emily O. Wittman and Katrina Windon model how translation history can be taught as English literary history. Translation makes visible voices and stories that disappear within a univocal and racialized understanding of what it means to be English and study English literature. Using translation as the organizing principle of literary survey courses or world literature courses can strengthen relations with other literary cultures and language departments. It can make space for the study of marginalized authors and texts and shore up affinities between the knowledge students bring from outside the classroom and the materials they encounter in it. It models a possible conceptual framework for students to situate literary fields such as early modern, American, and postcolonial studies. In doing so, translation also illuminates moments in time and space where – either by love or violence – discontinuous literary cultures become continuous.

For instance, in my world literature course, I often teach Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* to discuss how p’Bitek uses Acholi words and idiomatic expressions to construct a linguistically grounded literary world. *Song of Lawino* is modeled as an epic poem. The poem is addressed by Lawino to her clansmen and invokes an oral tradition. Lawino’s husband, Ocol, has returned from England with a newfound distaste for his native customs. In each of the verse chapters of *Song of Lawino*, Lawino bitterly criticizes Ocol’s now-preferred “Western” customs of food, clothing, and kinship and argues that these are not sensible ways for her to adopt within her cultural context. Given Lawino’s investment in authenticity and her desire to persuade Ocol to see the wrongheadedness of his cultural mimicry, it is easy to read *Song of Lawino* as a literary text that claims authenticity for itself when, in fact, it stages the dangers of binary ethnocentric thinking in colonial and anticolonial positions.

The chapter “The Poet as ‘Native Anthropologist’: Ethnography and Antiethnography in Okot p’Bitek’s *Songs*” in Jahan Ramazani’s *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2001) can be a valuable secondary resource to teach *Song of Lawino*. It brings together reviews of p’Bitek’s

poem to show how it was praised as a literary work that was quintessentially Ugandan. By showing p'Bitek's stylistic debts to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and examining the relation of postcolonial studies and anthropology, Ramazani argues *Song of Lawino* reverses the ethnographic gaze often cast on postcolonial literature.

Building on Ramazani's work, I teach *Song of Lawino* with sections of Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* and Ojibwe poet Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's poems collected in Robert Dale Parker's *The Sounds the Stars Make Rushing through the Sky* (2008). This pairing complicates expectations of authenticity or cultural immediacy we might bring to a poem that features several Acholi "untranslatable" words and idioms. Jane Johnston Schoolcraft is perhaps the first known Native American poet. She wrote in Ojibwe and English. Her husband Henry Rowe Schoolcraft was an Indian agent who liaised between Indigenous communities and White settlers. As he collected Ojibwe stories and translated them to further his career as a writer, he erased the collaborative contribution and work of his wife, Jane. Teaching *Song of Lawino* through its longer history of literary influence and "cultural theft" (Parker 26) can help address anxieties of authenticity and create conditions for a coalitional thinking that reads Indigenous and African literature relationally.

Assignment A classroom exercise that can sharpen students' awareness of the uneven relation between language and identity is "Linguistic Autobiography." I borrowed this exercise from Pavitra Sundar to heighten students' awareness of their own linguistic and lingual experiences in a collaborative course on "accent." I have since found it useful to ask students to craft a linguistic biography at the beginning of most courses that deal specifically with language and power. The exercise also draws out for students their own latent multilingualism, which can destabilize the classroom as a monolingual space. We revisit the exercise at the end of the course to reflect on the way readings on translation and multilingualism may have transformed their own sense of themselves. Rather than further a straightforward relation between language and identity, this assignment turns attention to the students' lived experiences of language to answer the question, how do we know what we know?

Write an essay 2–3 pages long outlining your history and relationship to language. What is the relationship between language and your identity, your personal and familial history? Your linguistic autobiography should address not only languages you've studied formally, but the accents, registers, and dialects (or varieties) that have come to mark your speech and your language

use more generally. How was language categorized for you in your growing years? What institutions have been linked to language? What people do you associate with different varieties of language that have been important in your life? Think also about how your understanding of language – your own and others' language – has shifted since arriving at [Vanderbilt]. What did you come to know about other people and their language use when you came to college?

In thinking about these questions, you may recall moments of linguistic stereotyping you've experienced or observed. Feel free to write about such moments of linguistic discrimination. But think also about moments that were (or seemed) less fraught. Think of moments when you have struggled with a language or when it came so easy you were told you have an "ear" for language. What assumptions about language (about particular languages, accents, or dialects) were embedded in those moments of learning and disciplining? How were you taught about language – how were you being taught language ideologies – even as you were learning to read, write, and speak?

Text Much has been written about the insufficiency of the frameworks of world literature and global anglophone because they eclipse other languages. I want to propose a lesser known text, *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara* (2019), which asks us to consider the latent multilingualism of one language in the spirit of the assignment above, the materiality of language in the spirit of Braithwaite's nation language, the question of translation as mediation, as well as the comparative grammars of caste and race that bring necessary nuance to discussions of decoloniality in the United States and the Indian subcontinent. This text could be taught in a postcolonial studies course, a world literature course, or a translation course for a presumed monolingual audience. As we teach translation, the English translation of *I Even Regret Night* challenges our relation to those translations. It complicates any expectation of an anticolonial or resistant politics from a writer of color or Bhojpuri and thwarts other marginalized languages and writers as essentialized identity positions from where to extract indigeneity.

I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara was written by Lalbihari Shastri in the early twentieth century and published in 1916. Through it, translator Rajiv Mohabir offers us an example of recovery as well as of English as a translational vernacular. *I Even Regret Night* is the only known literary work written by an indentured laborer in the anglophone Caribbean. Sharma originally belonged to what is now the state of Bihar in India. He was bound to the Golden Fleece Plantation in British Guyana, and his poems describe his life on the island.

Originally published in the Bhojpuri dialect as a pamphlet of spiritual songs in the style of sixteenth-century devotional poetry, *I Even Regret*

Night became available in English only recently, in 2019, through the collaborative efforts of several different people, including Gaiutra Bahadur and Rajiv Mohabir. Bahadur is the author of *Coolie Woman* (2013). Her research in that book reveals that Shastri was likely an upper-caste director on the plantation in British Guyana. He wrote Hindu songs of devotion in Bhojपुरi to celebrate the festival of Holi. Decades later, Mohabir, with the assistance of several different translators, translated this rare record of indentured diasporic experiences in the Indo-Caribbean. The act of translation and the constitution of the poems into a book form dramatizes a return to home promised by the unfulfilled indenture contract. English translation of Shastri's poetry is an act of historical recovery and literary discovery.

In her introduction to *I Even Regret Night*, Bahadur writes that she had really wanted to recover this "footnote" in history into English to bring it to the descendants of indenture. She understood the value of anglophone availability and wanted to render into English what she at the time thought must be a radical voice. The songs penned by Shastri were in, what Mohabir has called, a "broken" language – the Bhojपुरi of the plantation, with few speakers in the world today – and had lived a flimsy textual life up until the publication. Bahadur writes poignantly about her desire for Shastri to be a politically radical figure but learns over the course of her research that he was indeed a man of conservative politics, who likely sided with the plantation owners rather than with the indentured workers on the land. Still, it is a story that gains importance as a document about identity as it is and disseminated by other Indo-Caribbean descendants.

Bahadur approached and entrusted this translational project to Rajiv Mohabir. For Mohabir, the translator, poetry and folk music are important poetic inspiration. He has written in the doubly broken language of the indentured laborers and their descendants in his other works such as *The Cowherd's Son* (2017) and also reflected beautifully on coming into language through idioms cast away by history in *Antiman* (2021). He writes:

By reading and translating Sharma, I've learned to constantly engage with the materiality of sound as I attempt to reclaim what is lost to my generation. I have come to truly appreciate that in order to do so I must write in and out of all my languages: Guyanese Creole, English, and Bhojपुरi. In Sharma's plantation Hindi, I hear echoes of my own ancestors singing for the spring of the soul, praying colors into play. (Mohabir 203)

In his “Translator’s Note,” Mohabir writes that his translation was itself a kind of activism and he hopes that readers will appreciate the texture of Caribbean political existence through its oral cultures:

Given that South Asian languages rarely appear [in] the world of postcolonial Caribbean literature, it is my sincerest hope that people come to this text understanding what this tradition of oral language gives to the Caribbean landscape. Our particular mix of South Asian languages has been almost entirely extinguished by the cultural hegemony of English. (Mohabir 202)

Keeping these political resonances of different linguistic registers in play, the English translation of *I Even Regret Night* published by Kaya Press is bilingual. It places Bhojpuri and English verses *en face* and categorizes Shastri’s songs into different traditions of song and poetry such as *Chautal*, *Kavitt*, *Chaupai*, and *Ulara*. Additionally, it includes Creole transliterations of the songs for contemporary users of the songbook, along with sounds of the early twentieth-century Golden Fleece through Shastri’s poetry as in this song, “*Dimki dimkil* on the damaru drum / *tanana* plays the bhrigi. / *Sararara sararara* / the bowed sarangi lilts / the solfa” (Shastri 63). This archive of sound, spirituality, image, orality, and music curated by Sharma is translated into English against English. The collection also features transliterations as Mohabir and others transform a text for music “originally intended to be worn in throats and ears, into one that belongs to an entirely different world” (Mohabir 197).⁸ Different kinds of sounds ricochet across the pages of this small book and create a sonic effect quite different from Shastri’s already polyvocal songs. Mohabir writes that his desire was to reproduce the materiality of sound in these poems, sounds that were lost to him as a descendant of indenture. Anglophone poetry in the works Mohabir is itself a migrant from different media forms and languages.

The translations highlight the wide and varied worlds that English lives in today and reminds us that English has always had plurilingual and polyvocal lives. From here, Mohabir’s translation of *I Even Regret Night* demands a newer conceptualization of English as a language that is necessarily always in translation. Mohabir runs his fingers over the coordinates of political history to recover a personal history, conjuring the ghostly memories of ancestors passed. In this process, he also remakes and resounds the language of dominant power carving out a specifically resistant postlingual aesthetics that rises from the much-maligned racialized body that speaks English. Rebecca Walkowitz and Yasser Elhariry describe postlingual as a turn to the lingual (happening around the

tongue) against the linguistic, that recognizes languages as necessarily learned and not natural. “No one is born speaking or writing a language. We all begin as language learners, and in that sense, there are no native languages. There are only foreign languages” (3).

The text is helpful to think about the oral cultures that have shaped the life of the English language. Reading the poems out loud in the classroom can recreate some of the sonic atmosphere of the anglophone. It is important to create a sense of how different languages exist together and through our breath suffuse the English language with the sounds of other languages.

Taking their English seriously and distinguishing it from hegemonic forms of language is crucial to decolonizing and not consolidating the authority of a global language. In this goal, historical scholarship and postcolonial studies are both our ally. Works such as Lalbihari Shastri’s can help respond to the global hegemony of languages like English and Hindi as well as invite a critical eye on the Hindu diaspora’s role in supporting Hindutva ascendancy in India. Decolonizing also means being critical about the nation as a category and a continuing commitment to antiracist and anticaste pedagogies.

Notes

1. Bhakti Shringarpure, email to the author, August 19, 2022.
2. See also Quayson.
3. This well-known history can be found in several works including Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* and Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!*
4. See Kullberg and Watson.
5. See for instance Parreñas.
6. “In my case, the Ogoni had never been conquered by their Igbo neighbors. But the fact of British colonialism brought both peoples together under a single administration for the first time. And when the British colonialists left, the numerically inferior Ogoni were consigned to the rule of the more numerous Igbos, who always won elections in the Region since ethnic loyalties and cultural habits were and continue to be strong throughout Nigeria. Biafra propaganda invariably claimed that the Biafrans were one. But this was a lie, hoax. I saw it as my responsibility to fight that lie” (155).
7. See also Sakai; Yildiz.
8. Mohabir, “Translator’s Note,” 197.

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