

National Language Departments in the Era of Transnational Studies

FRANÇOISE LIONNET

University of California, Los Angeles

COMMON THOUGH IT MAY BE IN MOST of the United States today, monolingualism is an aberration in most of the world. In western Europe, for example, primary schools teach foreign languages to young children; in urban areas of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, switching between local, vernacular languages and national tongues is a common daily occurrence among all citizens, even those who may not be literate in the traditional Western sense. In a speech for the formal inauguration of the University of California, Irvine's new International Center for Writing and Translation on 5 April 2002, the 1986 Nigerian Nobel Prize laureate for literature, Wole Soyinka, asserted that the United States is "one of the most insular, mono-linguistic communities [he has] ever encountered in [his] life." Along with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, author of *The Monolingualism of the Other*, and Bei Ling, a dissident Chinese poet, translator, and editor, Soyinka is on the executive board of Irvine's new center, an initiative funded by a large endowment from Glenn Schaeffer, a successful Las Vegas casino executive (Johnson E1, E3).

Schaeffer, a graduate of the University of California, Irvine, with a master's degree in literary theory and an alumnus of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is the founder of the Las Vegas International Institute of Modern Letters. He is well known as a businessman and intellectual in Vegas, the postmodern city par excellence: proof positive that literary studies and French theory can lead to major financial and business success! Schaeffer's contribution to the humanities underscores the importance of linguistic diversity and the need to protect and nurture new literary voices in a global context. His gesture is a sign of the

times: languages are back on the national agenda, the business world knows the value of linguistic skills, and students want to learn those skills.

Over the past two decades, economic globalization has resulted in increased student interest in international studies, as well as in the global cultural realities that are the legacy of the colonial era. Identity, nation, and language have become prime topics of research in the humanities and social sciences, whether scholars are dealing with contemporary immigration issues or the history of nation formation. We now realize that research is not always objective and that the great paradigms of European scholarship (e.g., orientalism) have often led to limited, if not downright parochial, understandings of history and culture. For all these reasons, scholarly inquiry has become more attuned to non-European and non-United States issues and approaches.

New economic agreements between North and South, the making of the European community, the rise of top-rated and competitive research centers on all continents, and the availability of generous sources of funding (from private or governmental agencies) have led to an explosion of transcontinental collaborative activities that make us all aware of the need to be conversant in more than one language. If there is a widespread belief that English is becoming the universal language of science and research, it is also true that international exchanges have brought attention to scholarship and literary or cultural works published in languages other than English. It is therefore not surprising that studies in translation and bilingualism are becoming areas of conceptual innovation as linguists and literary scholars realize the importance of understanding and theorizing the interplay between dominant and second or even muted languages. This is a great opportunity for language departments to teach languages not just as expressions of one or another narrow national culture but as instruments of communication that are first

and foremost transcultural and transnational: French, for example, is spoken in more than fifty countries; it is not just the language of Paris, but has many regional and local idioms that translate different sensibilities, and is thus an important vehicle of diversity.

In the wake of 11 September, the need to promote a better understanding of transnational communities has refocused Americans' attention on the way languages and cultures cross borders and continents. This year, the United States Department of Education awarded larger FLAS Title VI grants to many area-studies programs initially funded during the cold war and geared toward research on self-contained nations or regions of the globe.¹ But the Department of Education has shifted its outlook toward initiatives that transcend traditional regional boundaries and encourage scholars to focus on thematic and transnational research projects as opposed to country-specific ones. This is our academic reality today. This changed environment will make degrees in international studies increasingly important, especially when coupled with strong language training. Small European language departments may be wise to offer joint European studies majors, provided the transcontinental dimensions of Europe's colonial legacy are built into the curriculum, so that the rich cross-continental and diasporic aspects of literary and cultural studies are highlighted.

Let me suggest UCLA, if I may, as an exemplary case of the implementation of transcontinental approaches in a national literature department. In 1999, we proposed renaming the Department of French as Department of French and Francophone Studies. We wanted to stress the importance of a broad reconceptualization of the field of French studies that formally takes into account France's hexagon as well as the multilingual francophone countries in Europe and on other continents.² After a slight decline, we have now seen our enrollments go up, and last year our majors and minors increased by twenty-three percent. The biggest jump was in the cin-

ema courses, followed by a forty percent jump in graduate courses on comparative francophone studies. Today, our francophone literature and culture courses are overenrolled, thus keeping afloat those courses in traditional literary history that we continue to teach as part of our commitment to a view of the field that includes full coverage of all historical periods. This commitment to coverage is something we share with our neighbors in the UCLA English department. In a large university, we have the luxury of insisting on giving students the historical perspective on contemporary trends that exist in tension or in dialogue with the writings of earlier periods.

I think this long historical view is important to understanding francophone studies in all its richness because, on the one hand, those areas of francophonie that share a history of colonial domination, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Mashreq, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean, have contributed an enormous amount to the development of a specifically French *imaginaire* ever since the Renaissance. Think, for example, of Montaigne's cannibals, Montesquieu's Persians, Baudelaire's Créole ladies, or Gide's Congo. On the other hand, writers from the aforementioned francophone areas have had to negotiate with the historical European representations of their identity and have often found inspiration in the literary works of the past. Indeed, Europe figures prominently in the history of francophone writings. Francophonie was born in the 1930s with René Maran's *salon littéraire* and grew during the encounter in the 1940s between black American expatriates (Countee Cullen or Richard Wright) and Senghor, Césaire, and Damas. To understand the full historical and intertextual dimensions of contemporary writing in French we thus need to keep focused on the genealogies of this field and to take into account the other forms of literacy (cultural, visual, oral, and linguistic) that interfere and interact with the French language of the written text (Lionnet).

Of course, it would be deceptive to think of the francophone field as a homogeneous category

because it is written in one national language. To illustrate the point, we can look at some of the award-winning writers recently published in French in Paris: François Cheng, Milan Kundera, Andreï Makine, Raphaël Confiant, Assia Djebar, Emmanuel Dongala, and finally Dai Sijie, whose first novel, *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise*, was a best-seller. All these writers hail from places other than western Europe, and all use the novel as a vehicle of diversity that simultaneously reflects and records in French the traditions and transformations occurring in many different localities. As critics, we cannot do justice to this literary output without venturing into the history of those localities and dialoguing with scholars who specialize in studies of China, Eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Algeria, or the Congo, since these authors appropriate the French language and produce palimpsestic narratives that reveal their transnational sensibilities and the eclectic models they bring to the practice of French. As Dominick LaCapra puts it in his recent work on the field of French studies, “This process [. . .] include[s] an awareness and elucidation of the significant interaction between francophone and metropolitan currents and figures that, in turn, have various backgrounds and itineraries” (224).

We are now also collaborating with English, Italian, German, and Spanish, and we hope to offer soon a joint seminar in theory and global literature that can be taught on a rotating basis by faculty members from each of these departments, with guest speakers invited from other countries or from around the United States. The purpose of this course is to bring together graduate students from English and the language departments to read a broad range of theoretical and literary texts in translation.

Responses to these proposals—the departmental name change, the joint theory course—have so far been positive, despite initial fears that francophone studies would be taking over and displacing the traditional historical periods, especially the courses in early modern literature. What has happened, in fact, is that students who may

never have thought of taking French literature classes are attracted to our French and francophone offerings and end up taking other courses as well. (I should also point out that in 2000 we made a junior hire whose charismatic teaching has done a lot to transform the department.)

At the graduate level, we try to give students a broad approach that exposes them to big intellectual questions, encouraging them to study francophone literature in relation to issues and theories and themes that cut across a wide range of philosophical and cultural issues such as the universalism/relativism debate; the question of visual and linguistic representation; the ethical problems raised by questions of reparation in a postcolonial and postapartheid context; the role of psychoanalysis and gender; and the question of grief and grievance in race and identity politics. It is important to insist, I think, that francophone texts be incorporated into the current academic conversations humanists are holding. The incorporation of these texts into those conversations changes the stakes, broadens the fields, and shifts the emphases in ways that benefit us all.

NOTES

¹ It is estimated that UCLA’s total funding from FLAS grants will increase 72 percent in 2003 (“Final Report” 3n5).

² France is often referred to as “the hexagon” because of the shape of the country.

WORKS CITED

- “Final Report of the Strategic Planning Committee for International Studies at UCLA.” *ISOP Strategic Planning Reports*. 29 May 2002. Intl. Studies and Overseas Programs, U of California, Los Angeles. 21 Aug. 2002 <<http://www.international.ucla.edu/report.asp>>.
- Johnson, Reed. “Many Languages, a Common Passion.” *Los Angeles Times* 12 Apr. 2002: E1+.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Reading: Tocqueville, Foucault, and French Studies*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000.
- Lionnet, Françoise. “The Colonial and Postcolonial Francophone Novel.” Ed. Tim Unwin. *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern French Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 194–222.