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### Education as Translation: Students Transforming Notions of Narrative and Self

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Alison Cook-Sather

## **Education As Translation: Students Transforming Notions of Narrative and Self**

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In this article the author explores the educational process in which college sophomores enrolled in a reading and writing course are engaged. She defines this education as translation: a process of preservation, re-vision, and re-rendering of both texts and selves, prompted by particular course assignments, readings, and forums for interaction.

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*Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us  
that everyone sees it differently. (93)*  
—Jeanette Winterson

*[E]ach of us is, to a large if not exclusive sense, the genetic  
translation of our biological parents, the psychological  
translation of our childhoods, the social translation of our race,  
gender, and class, the emotional translation of our loves and  
losses, fears and joys, transgressions and personal betrayals . . .  
It may be that much of what we call "sensibility" is, in fact, more  
a translation of extrinsic factors than the features of some fixed  
identity we call a "self." (9)*  
—Sherod Santos

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The first semester of the sophomore year is a particularly challenging time for the traditional-aged, undergraduate students who attend the selective women's liberal arts college where I teach. After their first two semesters of study, then a return home for the summer, many of these students have a difficult time reconciling their "original selves," defined primarily by their families and friends in their precollege years, with the selves they are becoming in various relationships and contexts at Bryn Mawr College. Part of the difficulty is that the narratives of themselves and the world that have thus far held them in place come under scrutiny (their own and others') as their personal connections expand and their academic careers unfold. Differences in perspective and discrepancies in interpretation thrust these students into what one describes as "a period of self-upheaval." The changes of context, of language spoken, and of stories told and heard prompt crises of identity and meaning in students embarking on their second year of higher education. Because the world and words around them become strange and because they must make sense of both not only to survive but also to thrive in college, *translation*, in its multiple senses, is a useful metaphor for the process in which students must engage at this period of intellectual and social disorientation.

In this essay I explore how the metaphor of translation captures students' transformations of their notions of narrative and self in *Finding the Bias: Tracing the Self Across Contexts*, a sophomore reading and writing course I codesigned with colleagues in the history and English departments at Bryn Mawr College. *Finding the Bias* is one among many courses offered through Bryn Mawr's College Seminar Program, which takes an interdisciplinary approach to the fostering of critical thinking and writing skills in first- and second-year students. As articulated by the faculty who oversee the program, all courses offered through the College Seminar Program as described in internal college documents are "designed to engage students in examining issues and debates that are fundamental to the lives we lead, both within and outside the framework of particular disciplines or professions." To achieve this goal, the seminars require "critical reading of texts, focused and analytic classroom discussion of those texts, and cogent, idea-driven writing about the texts and the issues they raise." The courses taught through this program are codesigned by teams of faculty from different disciplinary fields who collaborate to produce a common syllabus. The teams of faculty meet regularly during the semester to plan the details of each class meeting, but each faculty member teaches his or her own section of the course in which twelve to eighteen students enroll.

The title of the course that my colleagues and I designed signals the lexicon that guides thought, discussion, and composition during the semester that students spend in this world; it includes the key words *bias*, *self*, and *context*. These are words that we define and redefine throughout the course as students define and redefine their understandings of narratives and of selves that constitute and are constituted by different biases. The course title is adapted from the title of a personal essay in which Linda Brodkey uses the metaphor of bias in sewing to analyze her development as a thinker, writer, and person. In “Writing on the Bias” Brodkey begins with the literal meaning of *bias*—a line cutting diagonally across the weave of a piece of fabric. In *Finding the Bias: Tracing the Self Across Contexts*, we begin with the figurative meaning: a slant, a preference, a perspective, a prejudice. In academic practice and in life, finding a bias is the process of deciding how one will cut across various facts, ideas, experiences, and contexts—and discerning how others have done so. Just as Brodkey argues that finding and following the bias is as critical to writing as to sewing, we develop the course around the premise that when students engage in thinking, reading, talking, and writing along a particular bias, they continually see one thing in terms of another—the essence of metaphor and of critical thinking (see Cook-Sather, Rowe, and Shore for a full description of the course).

In challenging students to develop their critical and creative abilities, we ask them not to separate and distance themselves from what they study and who they are but, rather, to recognize, name, and trace a variety of biases along which they and we live, think, and write. Among the biases students bring to the course are those derived from their personal identities. All women, all sophomores, these students issue from many states in the U.S. and many countries around the world. Students from India, Indiana, the Caribbean, and California congregate in this course each fall to look back and forward at various versions of their identities and the possible narratives and selves that lie ahead. The fact that the course in which these students are enrolled is about explorations of selves—the biases selves have and how those selves interact with others in various contexts according to those biases—not only makes it an ideal context for translation but also throws into relief the need for and the possibilities of translation. Translation and its particular challenges (e.g., linguistic,

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conceptual, ethical) open to instructors of reading and writing a way of thinking about learning as students experience it at this stage of their development that can help us better support those students in their transformations.

The most basic definitions of *translation* in and of themselves characterize education. To translate can mean to bear, remove, or change from one place or condition to another. It can mean to make a new version of something by rendering it in one's own or another's language. It can also mean to change the form, expression, or mode of expression of, so as to interpret or make tangible, and thus to carry over from one medium or sphere into another. And to translate can mean to change completely, to transform (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed.). Generally, translation is something done by someone (a person) to something (a text). There is a level on which I am using translation in this way in the following discussion: in regard to the written texts that students produce, the narratives that they compose, which are re-presentations of their own earlier perspectives as well as the perspectives of others. But I am

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also pushing translation beyond this literal sense. In an essay entitled "Translation As a Decision Process," Jirí Levy argues that there are two points of view in translation: teleological and pragmatic. From the teleological point of view, translation is a process of communication. From the pragmatic point of view, it is a process of decision making (148). As it is applied to the experiences students have in *Finding the Bias*, it is both. Students must be at once characters, authors, and critics; they must be text, translator, and reader. And in each of these roles, they

must engage both in decision making about re-rendering words and in communication. Occupying these multiple positions in relation to texts helps them see how they occupy multiple, relational positions in life. Having to balance these in writing and recognizing the impossibility of the task catalyzes the profound transformation that students experience. They are always translating, not only texts but also themselves.

Thus I am using translation in not only a metaphorical but also a reflexive sense. I am suggesting that students are themselves both the translators and the thing translated. Furthermore, I am suggesting that this understanding of education addresses and aims to redress one of the central flaws in traditional schooling: that it is something one person (a teacher) does to another

person (a student). My use of the metaphor of translation to characterize education follows in the spirit of constructivist and critical pedagogies that argue for students as active producers of their own knowledge (Dewey; Duckworth; Freire). But it goes one step further: it argues that not only do they produce knowledge but they also produce themselves.

Through their work individually, with their instructors, and in the class community of *Finding the Bias*, students must change their condition, make new versions of themselves, make themselves comprehensible to others in a new sphere, transform themselves. These processes are backward- as well as forward-referenced and thus both produce something new and acknowledge that something of previous versions is preserved in the change. Translation in general and in this particular case is a process that is at once duplication, revision, and re-creation, with meaning lost, preserved, and created anew. And like a new translation of a text, responsive to a new context and audience, a new translation of a self is an entity more vital, richer, more resonant, and more open to expression and to interpretation.

To engage in translation of narrative and of self, students must struggle on two levels: to convey the significance (Santos), the spirit (Nabakov), the essence of literal written texts as well as the texts of their own and others' selves. Because, as Eva Hoffman points out in her book, *Lost in Translation*, "you can't transport human meanings whole from one culture to another any more than you can transliterate a text" (175). As they acclimate and adjust to the college culture, students must translate their texts and themselves "by the motions of understanding and sympathy . . . by slow increments, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase" (Hoffman 211). And with the changes of context, of language spoken, of stories told and heard that college presents, if students do not want to lose some aspect of their selves in the translation (Agosín) or feel themselves to be "living oxymoron[s]" (Kondo 11), they must learn to speak of "selves in the plural" (48) and as "inextricable from context" (33).

*Finding the Bias* aims to "open up for students ways of knowing that are too often underrepresented in the curriculum—a willingness to value ambiguity, to invent, to suspend closure, to situate the self in multiple and complex ways through discourse" (Forman qtd. in Comfort 557). Deliberately merging the personal and the academic realms, this course aims to counteract the force under which many students have buckled after years of schooling premised on keeping those realms separate. One student, Monica Hesse, eloquently describes this division:

When I was young, I was a very good writer. I had no spell-check, no deadlines, and so my Fisher-Price desk was covered with half-finished stories scrawled in crayon diligently revised until my five-year-old attentions were drawn elsewhere. But somewhere in the course of my schooling, I forgot how to write. Instead, I learned formulas, and I learned them well. I learned how to use the passive voice, and I clung to it until my writing indeed became passive. It was no longer an extension of my heart, but a mass-produced product that ran tangential to my thoughts. I built a wall of scholarly essays around me, closing in everything that was a spark of *personality*. It took me 18 years to become truly proficient, but by the time I reached Bryn Mawr [College], I was a master.

Hesse is not the first to suggest that school writing requires an eclipsing of the self through the elimination of personal voice, of bias. As Brodkey laments, students are not taught “what every writer knows, that one writes on

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the bias or not at all” (546), that a writer’s “search for a narrative” (546) traces that bias that emerges, insistent, from within the self. As instructors of college reading and writing courses, our classrooms are filled with students like Hesse or like Faith Fraser who reflects: “Sometimes I think I’m not cut out for academia because I can’t write well in formal

language for my life.” What reads at first glance as an awkward construction is in fact Fraser dislocating language into meaning (Eliot)—illustrating in her sentence the disconnect between formal language and life.

Such descriptions of how selves are split, silenced, and submerged through their schooling are offered by other writers as well. Adrienne Rich describes how her schooling to write poetry, which consisted primarily of reading and emulating male writers, clashed with her identity and impulses as a woman. What she calls the dissonance—between the images in the poems of male writers that she was expected to mirror and the daily events of her own life and the words that would capture them—“demanded a constant footwork of imagination, a kind of perpetual translation, and an unconscious fragmentation of identity” (“Blood” 49).

Finding the Bias: Tracing the Self Across Contexts strives to work against that division of word from experience, of self from self, that fragmentation of language and identity. The course invites each student to “situate the self in multiple and complex ways through discourse” (Forman qtd. in Comfort 557). It offers her the opportunity to move in and out of the “multiple communities against and within which she defines herself” (Skorczewski 230). It urges her

to engage in writing “as a self-defining activity” (Comfort 542). By its very nature, this course requires acts of translation—drawing connections and distinctions among the ways of living, speaking, understanding that are specific to the students’ different communities—communities that often have few values, language, or cultural practices in common. And the course throws into relief the ways in which the self is composed like a story and is composed of stories—stories that must be revised and retold if their vitality is to be preserved (Constantine).

Translations of texts and of selves pose challenges of identity and authority as well as problems of interpretation and representation of both the self and others. These are all challenges that students face in Finding the Bias through a variety of forums in which they are asked to engage. Individually, they read texts by published authors and by one another. As a class, they meet once a week with their instructor to discuss the texts assigned. In small writing groups, they meet once a week to share their own and respond to one another’s writing. They also meet with their instructor individually for writing conferences, and they rotate classes, meeting once with each of the faculty members in our teaching cluster—a professor of history, a professor of literary studies, and a professor of education—to learn from our respective disciplinary biases as those are applied to the published texts we read.

The challenges of the entire course, the challenges of translation, are thrown into the starkest relief, however, by an assignment that falls roughly halfway into the semester. The assignment is presented in the syllabus this way: “Tell the same story or offer the same (focus of) analysis from two or three perspectives and then write a postscript or afterward (one page) which offers a critique of which perspective carries what kind of authority and why.” The first part of the assignment is about taking on and tracing biases. It is essential that students assume those perspectives and write from them, not simply describe them. It is equally important that students then step back and analyze how as authors they invested each perspective with authority, how they followed or failed to follow each bias faithfully.

I focus on the multiple-perspectives assignment in the following pages because it is pivotal for students in terms of redefining the self and the stories selves tell. The analyses of what they produce in response to the assignment, offered both in the final segment of the assignment itself and in the portfolios that students compose at the end of the semester, provide particularly vivid

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illustrations of translation. Translation of a text involves figuring out what sense words can carry and how to make that meaningful in another sense system. Translation of the self is about what that self can carry and how to make that meaningful in another community. Through the multiple-perspectives assignment and in their final reflections on it at the end of the semester, students effect the latter by struggling with the former. In attempting to translate their

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own and others' perspectives and words in a *deliberate and self-conscious way in a text, then reflecting on that attempt*, students actually translate themselves: they transform their understanding, and thus themselves, through the attempt and the analysis of that attempt. This is a transformation that makes meaning for themselves and for others. And that, I argue, is learning. As Paulo Freire explains, "to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a

view to changing" (67). Although something may be lost in the change, in the translation, some essence survives and is strengthened through the process.

Like the course as a whole, the multiple-perspectives assignment deliberately challenges conventions in the academy that separate the personal and the academic. Although the instructions we give to students regarding the assignment do not specify the kind of story students should tell, most students in my section of the course choose to tell very personal stories, and they almost invariably choose to include their own perspective as one of the multiple versions. In choosing to tell very personal stories, students "call upon the resources of their personal lives in order to make sense of their subject matter and to negotiate their stances relative to the conventional demands of academic discourse" (Comfort 549). The subject matter in this case is bias. Their stances relative to conventional demands of academic discourse vary. But the intersection of bias, personal stories, and analysis throws into relief the disconnect between the personal and the academic and what it might mean to *reconnect them through a process of translation*.

Many students feel a strong need to retell the story they choose to focus on for this assignment, to work it through. Zhanara Nauruzbayeva's urgency in choosing to write about a moment when she became aware of the loss of a significant family member in her home country of Kazakhstan is representative of this need. Describing her conversation with another family member about the event and her own subsequent silence regarding it, Nauruzbayeva

writes: “All the words of our telephone conversation still ring in my ears. I had to voice all of my experience.” For many students, the combination of emotional investment in an event that was life shaping, and the pressure, always present in an elite educational institution, to write well and achieve academic success makes for a highly charged atmosphere around this assignment.

The unconventional nature of the assignment coupled with students’ emotional investment in the stories they tell require that as instructors we must ensure that there are clear structures and supports in place for students to keep them from straying into an unexamined confessional mode—a mode that might, in fact, obviate the need for translation. Comfort suggests that the reason many student efforts to include the personal in their academic writing fail is that they are “invited to invoke the personal, but not given any explicit rhetorical insight regarding its effective use” (552). The multiple-perspectives assignment requires not only that students write the same story from two or three perspectives but that they must also write a postscript, an analysis of the process, the challenges, frustrations, epiphanies, etc., that they experienced while writing the different versions of the stories. This postscript may not simply be descriptive nor may it simply reiterate what each perspective already revealed. Rather, it must offer a cogent, thoughtful, critical analysis of the experience of authoring the different perspectives—the authorial choices students made, the rhetorical effectiveness or ineffectiveness of those choices, and the lessons about reading and writing that students learned through completing the assignment. In other words, by the end of the assignment, students have offered three translations of a particular story they had in their memories and an analysis of those stories.

These are not the only requirements built into the assignment. In addition, students take their papers through several drafts, as they do with all their writing in the course. They meet first with their writing groups, then individually with their instructors. In these conferences students are challenged to revise their work. Dawn Skorczewski suggests that in a classroom in which professors are not the only readers of student work—classrooms in which students are also readers of one another’s work—student writing can become what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “safe houses . . . places for healing and mutual recognition . . . [places] in which to construct shared understandings,

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knowledges, claims on the world . . .” (Pratt qtd. in Skorczewski 223). It is from within such safe houses that students can draw the courage to take risks, both emotionally and intellectually. As Freire emphasizes, to learn one must be “open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit” (67). These are all both descriptions of necessary conditions for translation and of translation itself.

When we reach the multiple-perspectives assignment in the syllabus, students usually start by writing their own version of the story, writing from the perspective with which they feel the most comfortable, rendering the translation of which they feel the most certain. They evoke narratives, most often from their precollege lives and almost always involving family, friends, or other intimate relationships, that they “know” from their perspectives but that they want to work through again. Many students recognize that these renderings of their own perspectives are translations, but they generally experience less difficulty and express less concern with representing their own perspectives in texts than they express about representing others’ perspectives. As Nauruzbayeva explains: “It was easy to write my own story. Words formed by themselves into sentences letting my feelings pour out on paper.”

Some students come face to face early on, however, with the potential this assignment has to upset their confidence or comfort in their own perspectives and the stories they have told themselves and others about themselves. Of course they know in the abstract that different people have different perspectives on an event, but knowing that in the abstract is not the same as learning it on a deeper level—of thinking through the consequences of that difference as a deep feature of communication, whether in writing or in conversation.

Katya King articulates the necessity of regrounding herself in her own experience before she can begin to imagine other people’s: “It was essential that I wrote my account first to establish myself and my bias.” Not only was it essential for her to identify her bias for herself, it was also essential to establish it for a reader. This assertion of her own story gave her the confidence to turn to others’ versions: “Because I felt confident that my own story was my own personal ‘truth,’ I was no longer afraid of finding a story that was different than my own interpretation because my story was already strongly established and

I believed in its validity.” King’s approach proved reassuring to her; she was successful at restabilizing herself and accepting her version as one but not the only valid one.

Hesse had a more unsettling experience. After having drafted her own perspective on the event she planned to write about—the first time she met her boyfriend’s mother—she consulted her boyfriend about his recollection of the event. Hesse was stunned by how much his recollection differed from hers, and she recognized, with a jolt, that “I expected his memory to support my own.” Reflecting on this startling awakening, Hesse wrote:

[B]efore even writing the perspectives, I had subconsciously centered the story around my experiences, viewing [his] and [his mother’s] renditions as supplementary. As the tailor of these pieces, the reconstructor of these events, I inevitably awarded myself more emotional authority, and the other two characters only possess the thoughts and feelings I allow them to have.

This is a very honest and sophisticated expression of what many students may know on some level but, if pushed, might not wish to admit: they believe that their story, their version, is *the* true one, even if they acknowledge that others have other perspectives. Not only does Hesse think about the emotional consequences of this realization but also about the cognitive and intellectual ones—how that authority matters in explaining, describing, presenting the event for a reader.

Thus one of the most powerful realizations that completion of this assignment can prompt for students is that the search for truth in narrative and in life, the search for an authentic “original,” the belief that such a thing as truth with a capital *T* even exists, is problematic. Of her attitude and approach to writing early in the course, Juliana Belding writes: “I was still in the mode of searching out ‘the answer,’ pinpointing ‘the truth,’ and piling up concrete evidence in support of it.” Likewise, Mandy Burton explains,

When I entered [this class], I had hoped for my ideas about and grasp of the truth to change and grow. Instead, I find myself looking for a different perspective on the ideas I already have, a different side of the tiny truths I already know rather than an epiphany of cohesion of all of those bits of reality into The Answer I sought at the beginning.

While this point could be made about intellectual understanding in general, here it is a more precise point about translation—that in narrative (including narratives of the self) only parts of an idea, experience, or message can be cap-

tured and made meaningful. Those parts that are captured and rendered are the translation; they are what is learned and carried forward.

These students' reflections on their assumptions about narrative and its relationship to truth offer glimpses into students' rethinking of themselves in relation to others and all selves in relation to narrative. As notions, such as that there is a true story, that it is possible to tell one, come under scrutiny, so do the "true stories" that students have told of their own lives. For some, this scrutiny results in a re-vision of the self that resonates with the perspective and self that students thought they knew. For others it results in a complicating of that self and narrative. But in all cases, it results in a reconsidering of the notion of truth. And once "the true story" as a category, as a possibility, comes into question, the necessity of translation becomes clear.

Once students have settled on an initial version of the story they tell for the multiple-perspectives assignment, they must move on to the attempt to tell one or two other versions. Like translators of a text from one language into another, students approach this assignment with known voices in their heads; the perspectives students attempt to represent belong, for the most part, to people they know (themselves, family, friends) and issue from contexts with which they are familiar. Like translators, the students' first concerns are with finding or choosing the right words in which to render those familiar voices. They pose and answer questions for themselves such as, "Would he use that word?" "Is that something she would say?"

Some students do not find this a daunting prospect. Rachel Johnson states: "I have no problems writing from someone else's perspective. Although I tried to be as accurate as possible, I know there is no way I was completely correct in the choices I made. It does not matter, however, because this is my representation of how I think of these people." Johnson leans toward one pole of what Santos claims is a necessary balance in translating: on the one hand "the artistic impulse to take over a text, to overcome its otherness and force its assimilation to one's own language" and on the other "that scruple which begs to preserve the integrity of that otherness" (13-14).

Johnson is somewhat of an exception in her comfort with rendering others' perspectives; most students are concerned about preserving the integrity of whatever otherness they are struggling to render. As Amanda Levinson explains: "the hardest aspect of this assignment was trying to get inside other people's heads and think as they do . . . I discovered that describing a person and how they think and then thinking like them are very different." Emily Bogner offers a similar explanation of her struggle with this assignment: "It is

one thing to inspect and explore my own biases, quite another to try and put myself into the biases of two other individuals. At first it was intimidating to think of telling a serious story through the eyes of my mother and sister. I had a fear of misrepresenting them, or doing little justice to their feelings.” Bogner is concerned about what the narrator in A. S. Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* suggests is true of all writing: that it betrays “our own desire to translate everything, everyone, all reasoning, all irrational hope and fear, into our own *Procrustean grid of priorities*” (167).

As with the challenge of finding words in a translation from one to another language, a good translator, according to Margorie Agosín “translates what is not said” (57). A good translator does not focus on the words, Agosín continues, but on “how to arrange all of these words so that these words will have a meaning, so that these words will have an echo, will have a sound” (57). This notion of capturing an echo is articulated in some of the earliest work on translation theory; Walter Benjamin writes of translation achieving an “echo of the original” (20). Students face this challenge if the words are in their own language but need to convey the sense of belonging to others. Beth Gendron describes the challenge this way: “The most difficult part of writing these two perspectives was always attempting to keep certain ideas out of them; there was so much to say, but not all of it was true to the voice in either perspective.” Because the voices Gendron strives to represent belong to real people and thus have a vocabulary and tone familiar to her in real time, she hears in her head an “echo of the original” but struggles with how to capture and render it in this new context and for a different audience.

Every act of naming, listening, or reading, any act of communication at all, is a translation (A. Benjamin) and rendering someone else’s perspective is a translation as well. This is particularly apparent when that person’s perspective is situated in another language and culture. Ananya Misra explains the challenge she faced in rendering her mother’s perspective: “I am used to hearing her speak Oriya, and even her English seems to me more like Oriya words translated to English with the tone remaining mostly Oriya.” Misra describes her task succinctly: “I had a multiple translation problem: I did not know how to translate my idea of her thoughts into written language.” Misra wishes “to preserve the integrity of that otherness” (Santos 13) in her mother’s words. Her efforts reflect Antoine Berman’s claim, quoted in Douglas Robinson’s most recent book: “Translation that fails to maintain alterity, or succumbs to ‘the danger of killing the dimension of the foreign’ (155)—translation that . . . erases all trace of foreignness, otherness, alterity—is impure or ‘bad translation’”

(Robinson 83). More than writing their own version of the story they choose to tell, writing someone else's version helps students become aware of the trans-

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lation in which they are engaged and the ethical as well as linguistic dimensions carried in the choices they make.

Translation is not simply a matter of finding for the words already written in one language corresponding words in another. Some words have no counterparts (Constantine; Malinowski), and meanings are not so easily transferred. A successful translation is more than transliteration; it is "the re-articulation of a complex human experience" (Constantine 15). For these reasons, students are right to struggle with re-rendering the voices and perspectives of others and themselves.

Some students frame the challenge of choosing words so they "will have a sound" (Agosin 57), an "echo of the original" (W. Benjamin 20), as an issue of loyalty. Misra writes about her struggle to be "loyal" to the people she represents in her story—her mother, her brother, and herself. She explains:

Loyalty could have meant making readers see my family members the way I see them, even though that might have involved deviating from their actual behavior to make the writing fit my readers' context. Or it might mean sticking to the "truth" as far as I could, or to my true beliefs when I did not know the truth. Or it could mean disclosing as little as possible and thus protecting my family from . . . outsiders.

The process with which Misra struggled is the process in which any translator engages: "translating is a decision process: a series of a certain number of consecutive situations—moves, as in a game—situations imposing on the translator the necessity of choosing among a certain (and very often exactly definable) number of alternatives" (Levy 148). As Misra puts it: "Trying to write from others' perspectives . . . always involves a compromise of some sort—I can only have the choice of which direction to compromise in." Thus narrative is about withholding as well as furnishing meaning. It can mean streamlining or narrowing possible avenues of interpretation by selectively shaping a text according to specific interests. The multiple-perspectives assignment throws into relief these qualities of narrative and the translation required both to compose narrative and to learn through and from the composing process.

As students become conscious of the choices they must make in com-

posing the different perspectives for this assignment, they begin to gain insights in two directions: toward the perspectives of the others they are trying to represent and toward their own selves. It's as though the translation process holds up an interpretive lens in two directions. Nauruzbayeva captures the dual effect in this succinct statement: "Through assuming my mother's bias, not only did I get to understand her better but I also realized that my point of view is also a bias." Johnson surprised herself with similar insights that she gained through telling the story of an old family argument from the perspectives of her sister and mother as well as herself: "I have been forced to acknowledge the validity of my sister's point of view and my mother's behavior. The worst part, seeing all these events in retrospect, is that had I realized what I was doing at the time and how damaging it was to my own situation, I would have acted differently." Through completing this assignment, Johnson gains an appreciation for her family's perspectives that she did not have before, and she gains a critical perspective on herself and the repercussions in real life of the stances she has taken.

Mridula Shrestha explains how her awareness has increased in these two directions as well, how she too gained insights about others and herself:

Being forced to "speak" through my father and my grandfather gave me an opportunity to stand in their shoes, advocate their roles, voice their concerns, and weigh their responsibilities and their priorities. In doing this I came to a clearer understanding of our differences and came to appreciate some of the sacrifices and some of the mistakes we have made. I feel less accusatory towards them now, because I have let myself explain what they felt in a way that makes sense to me. I took from all of our long discussion and arguments the components of what they said that felt most convincing to me and reiterated them so that I could hear them explicitly. I also saw how narrow-minded I had been all along, how badly afflicted with tunnel vision. What I feel I have achieved is a heightened understanding of a situation I was too closely tied to by stepping a little bit out of my own set place and letting other people seep through, exploring the same thing through their eyes, recognizing in a tangible fashion that I'm not the only one involved, that other people have their reasons for what they do too, and that their decisions and judgments are just as valid, even if they aren't agreeable to me.

These recognitions of others' perspectives and the complementary revision of students' own perspectives parallel one of the effects of translation: George

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Steiner explains that “our own being is modified by each occurrence of comprehensive appropriation” (188)—as we translate, we are translated.

King offers a comparable epiphany, but she adds another twist: “as impossible as it is in reality, the mere experience of creating biases for [the two other perspectives from which I wrote] was by far the most rewarding risk

**King identifies one of the essential qualities of translation: its impossibility. She is referring specifically to the impossibility of knowing another’s experience from the inside, and the utopian ideal would be that in translating one could do this.**

because it brought to light more aspects of myself that I would never have discovered from my own autobiographical bias alone.” Embedded in what is almost a throwaway phrase at the beginning of her reflection, King identifies one of the essential qualities of translation: its impossibility. She is referring specifically to the impossibility of knowing another’s experience from the inside, and the utopian ideal would be that in translating one could

do this. As Jose Ortega y Gasset queries, “Isn’t the task of translating necessarily a utopian task?” (49). Edwin Gentzler echoes this sentiment: translation is “concerned with the recovery and representation of meaning (or the impossibility thereof)” (xi).

Students express this realization in a number of ways. Rose Kovacs writes: “I discovered (after much trouble) that I cannot be someone else or even step outside of myself ... Trying to construct two perspectives ... does not mean actually accomplishing two different perspectives.” And elsewhere Kovacs elaborates:

Being able to actually tell the same story from two perspectives requires separating from yourself, stepping outside of yourself, letting go of your interpretation of the event. You have to be someone else. Regardless of what language techniques I used, how hard I tried to let go of my interpretations, or how different both perspectives seem to an outsider, there is only an ostensible or surface difference. Deep within both stories, I find myself.

Hesse comes to a related realization about the impossibility of translating someone else’s perspective through one’s own: “As a writer I may supply words, but voices can never be duplicated.”

Attempting to write as someone else, reflecting on that attempt, and recognizing the impossibility of the attempt prompts students to call into question some of the assumptions and beliefs that previously guided their thinking. For instance, Hesse writes: “I have come to detest the word ‘authority’ because in its traditional definition, it implies right and wrong, good and bad, model

and student. I am beginning to learn that authority is an extremely subjective term, and is defined by perception.” Johnson elaborates on this notion: “We only have authority in relation to others . . . Only after writing [this paper did I realize] . . . how much people are defined by their relationships to others—how much we define ourselves that way . . . Without others, authority does not exist.” What these students are learning is that “translation is not an abstract equivalence game, divorced from real people’s actions in a social context, but a richly social process” (Robinson 25), an “ongoing negotiation between self and other” (Santos 10), a process through which not only is the message changed (Reiss 160) but so also is the messenger.

Contrary to what one might expect, students find neither the realization of the impossibility of re-rendering their own or others’ words nor the relative and relational nature of authority discouraging. They find these realizations liberating; they feel released to take further risks of expression and interpretation. They feel propelled toward the translation of themselves; they embrace the possibilities afforded them through learning the double meaning of *perspective*: to see from a particular, narrow angle and to see as though through a wide angle.

At the end of the semester, students compile portfolios in which they draw on the readings, writing, and discussions they have engaged throughout the semester and offer a critical narrative of their learning in the course. These portfolios capture the transformations in students’ sense of narrative and self, and therefore I draw the student words quoted in this discussion from the portfolios that students enrolled in my section of the course produced. It is in the portfolios that the second level of translation becomes apparent. In composing critical narratives of their own learning, students effect the translation of themselves that their translations of texts prefigured.

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The pronouns students use in their portfolios embody the transformation in understanding of themselves that the students undergo. Abayomi Walker opens her portfolio with these words: “When referring to the self, the individual, Rastafarians use the word I-N-I. It is a complex word that expresses the multiplicity of the individual. It is spelled with two ‘I’s and an ‘N’ in between. I like that! To me the ‘I’s demonstrate many sides of the self and the ‘N’

consists of everything else that shapes the ‘I/eye.’ Walker writes her portfolio in the voice of I-N-I.

In the preface to her portfolio, Misra writes to her reader: “I do not yet know who you are. You may be me, or you may be a stranger. In fact, even if you are me, you are a stranger, because you will be a different me from the one who is writing this letter. I hope you rejoice in the difference.” Not only does she recognize herself as occupying multiple pronouns, Misra self-consciously uses different spelling conventions in her portfolio to reflect the different aspects of herself. She explains: “You may, perchance, notice some inconsistencies in spelling. I am aware of them. I have two conflicting selves—one conforms to American spelling and the other clings to British spelling. To mark the spirit of freedom and acceptance of bias, I have chosen to spell each word here according to the standard I really wished to follow at each point.” As Misra learns, she can render herself and her learning in a hybrid language, and she need not be “split by the difference” (Hoffman 274).

Hesse opens her portfolio with a letter to her future self that pushes pronouns to capture the multiplicity of that self:

Before you read this, please remember that we never do things the easy way. We are stubborn, and impetuous, and we would rather climb a thorn-covered mountain than give someone the satisfaction of showing us the shortcut. I tell you this in case you’ve forgotten why we organized our portfolio this way . . . this collection traces our learning, from the initial work, to finding our bias, to accepting its value. I stitched together the texts we read and the writing that we did, and left the thread of our bias showing.

Quoting Antoine Berman, Robinson writes: “A translation that ‘smacks of translation’ is not necessarily bad (whereas, conversely, it might be said that a translation that does not smack at all of translation is necessarily bad)” (83). Hesse’s leaving “the thread of our bias showing” lets her text smack of translation. It lets both the literal text and the self that has composed it be good translations.

Hesse’s use of pronouns not only captures the multiplicity of herself but reflects as well how that self/those selves must be continually translated. This pushing of pronouns, what T. S. Eliot calls dislocating language into meaning, is a narrative approach and a rendering of self that Adrienne Rich uses as well. In one of her poems that we read in the course, “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich uses the metaphor of searching a sunken ship to capture her experience, as a woman, of looking for her self in “the book of myths” that is the record, the history, of human experience. She writes:

We circle silently  
 about the wreck  
 we dive into the hold.  
 I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes . . .

We are, I am, you are  
 by cowardice or courage  
 the one who find our way  
 back to this scene  
 carrying a knife, a camera  
 a book of myths  
 in which  
 our names do not appear. (24)

The narratives students in *Finding the Bias* choose to tell are efforts to retell more inclusive stories. The selves that tell those stories are more inclusive selves. They are also selves that must be perceived as different and rendered differently over time.

The selves people are at different points in time are acknowledged in the translations they render: Santos tells of William Wordsworth's choice:

When Wordsworth in the 1850 *Prelude* omits from the 1805 version over three hundred lines recounting the story of his affair with Annette Vallon (told through the characters of Vaudracour and Julia), has he not performed an act of translation? Has he not attempted to "carry across," to render for posterity, a version of himself as a young man that was more reflective of himself as an old man? (9–10)

We might expand upon Santos's interpretation of why Wordsworth made this choice, speculating that the latter representation might have been more socially acceptable or more suited to his vision of himself in posterity. This example is particularly apt for a discussion of young people translating themselves because *The Prelude* thinks particularly in terms of translation between selves with different cognitive capacities: the child has the experience but doesn't know it or what it means; the adult has lost the experience but gained the capacity to know it and what it means.

With less time across which to translate themselves and a more explicit challenge to do so, each of the students quoted in this discussion not only

recognizes but also embraces her multiplicity—her various selves in relation to other selves. Each follows in her own way Dorinne Kondo's lead in learning

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to speak of "selves in the plural" (8). These students' education is at once duplication, revision, and re-creation, with meaning lost, preserved, and created anew. Furthermore, that education is never complete; it is not a single rendering that fixes and defines the student's self. Rather, it is a recursive as well as a progressive process of reading and rendering

texts and selves in relationship, with an eye to the multiple interests that come together in that relationship (Cook-Sather, "Translating"). At the metaphorical level, it is also a reflexive act, and as such it becomes the student's own.

In "No Two Snowflakes Are Alike: Translation As Metaphor," Gregory Rabassa writes: "It is my feeling that a translation is never finished, that it is open and could go on to infinity" (7). Rabassa suggests that the "matter of choice in translation always leaves the door open to that other possibility . . . The translator can never be sure of himself, he must never be" (12). Writing in the first-person plural, from and to her present and future selves, Hesse writes of her rendering of her learning in my course: "The finishing knot is loosely tied, so that you may pick it up in the future. I hope the construction will never be complete."

King writes about this unfinishedness as something she now sees as an exciting opening, a compelling possibility, rather than a frightening prospect:

What I can take forward from this class is a new sense of confidence, and the knowledge that I am worthy to be heard, to express myself, and to share my energy and passion just as I am right now. I used to be leery of taking risks and exploring new areas alone, even within contexts that I was already comfortable in, a constant little internal monologue playing in my mind: "Omgod! I'm not ready yet! Wait! It won't be perfect, I can't do this right now." I realized I was always waiting for perfect confidence and ability that would never come. By seeing that what I am capable of doing right now is important and worthwhile, I have gained the confidence I always thought would come with future perfection.

Freire claimed, "education does not make us educable. It is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable" (58). Students in *Finding the Bias* learn this through their individual explorations (conversations with texts and

themselves). They learn it through the multiple ways in which they are challenged to translate their texts and their selves in their writing groups and in their conferences with instructors. And they learn it through re-narrating their learning experiences in composing their portfolios. As instructors, we must not only create forums within our courses for students to read and respond to one another's work—Pratt's "safe houses"—we also need to create forums or media that give students the opportunity to reflect on, evaluate, and learn (again) from their own work. The learners themselves can make sense of the experience of learning they have had in a way that no one else can. In other words, the most powerful education is translation of the self effected by the self. And the recognition that that is an unending process.

The students I have quoted in this discussion have used writing "as a self-defining activity" (Comfort 542). They have learned that every telling of a story is different and that there are as many biases to be traced in a text, and a self, as there are threads in a piece of fabric or thoughts in a mind. They have translated themselves, but there is "no identity in detail" (Nida 126) between the "original" and the translation. There are, rather, unfinished works and selves that will be translated again and again, with each new reading and writing of a text, in each new context and in each new relationship. William Proefriedt argues, "the immigrant, the outsider, the person moving from one society to another and, importantly, undergoing the experience in a reflective fashion, becomes the model for what it means to be educated in the modern world. For what is needed henceforth is a capacity to measure the values of one society against another, to embrace the radical decentering of the world brought home by the movement from one culture to another" (87–88). This is the task, the life, of the translator.

If, as Comfort argues, students want "meaningful instruction in using writing to assess, define, and assert who they are becoming as knowing beings" (558) and, as she also asserts, we want to foster the development of students who are "personally invested in the world of ideas" (547), we as instructors of reading and writing must offer students opportunities to develop "complex and versatile writerly selves who are able to place their extra-academic worlds into carefully constructed relationship" with the academic discourse communities into which they are entering in college (543). We must provide opportunities for students to "relocate the personal . . . in a way that allows a more critical engagement with experience" (Kamler 1). The way I think of this responsibility, and as I argue it here, is that we must provide for students the contexts and challenges within which they can translate themselves.

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