

## Editor's Column

# From Penn Station to Trenton: The Language Train

**W**ALT WHITMAN'S "WHEN LILACS LAST IN THE DOOR-YARD Bloom'd" is one of the most powerful poetic meditations on death and the work of mourning in American literature. An elegiac reflection on Abraham Lincoln's funeral train as it made its way across the eastern United States to his burial place in Illinois, the poem is a powerful example of how authors draw their authority from what Walter Benjamin called the authority of death:<sup>1</sup>

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,  
 Through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land,  
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,  
 With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women,  
     standing,  
 With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,  
 With the countless torches lit—with the silent sea of faces, and the  
     unbared heads,  
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,  
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising  
     strong and solemn;  
 With all the mournful voices of the dirges, pour'd around the coffin,  
 The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—Where amid  
     these you journey,  
 With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual clang;  
 Here! coffin that slowly passes,  
 I give you my sprig of lilac. (sec. 6)

Whitman's elegy has always been the measure of how the dead body and the work of mourning coalesce in a language that the poet animates while trying to turn wanton loss into spring, or a sprig, for a national consciousness recently wounded.

The train commute from Penn Station, New York, to Trenton, New Jersey, does not have the symbolism associated with the great locomotive journeys that defined such transformative moments in history. It does not carry the weight of grief or the buildup of sorrow that Whitman reads as he witnesses Lincoln's body on its way home, the "dirges through the night" or "the thousand voices rising strong and solemn." There is no poetry in the prosaic trip from Penn Station to Trenton. There is no politics either, for this commute does not, will not, ask to be read in the same terms as, for example, Lenin's arrival at Finland Station, Saint Petersburg, in 1917, an event allegorized by Edmund Wilson in *To the Finland Station* as the inaugural moment of the Russian Revolution. Defying any claims to poetry or allegory, the journey on the Northeast Corridor of the New Jersey Transit system appears to be no more than the quotidian passage of the American middle class from offices in the glamorous locations of Manhattan, through mixed-income neighborhoods and a few university towns, and ending at a dilapidated state capital, a sad reminder of the glorious days of American labor and capital.

But for scholars of literature and language, the journey from Penn Station to Trenton can be the thrilling and unexpected gift of a thriving Silk Road of languages and dialects in what is often assumed to be the land of monolingualism. Here one encounters a postmodern Babel that reminds us that beneath the veneer of monolingualism, the United States might well be a place where world languages come together (Roberts). As editor of *PMLA*, I look forward to the regular meetings of the Editorial Board in Lower Manhattan, where questions of language and literature and of the place of modern languages in the public sphere are always on top of the agenda. Taking the train to and from these meetings is, however, a constant reminder of the other side of the language debate; here the crisis of language and literature

in the United States is overshadowed by the lived experience of world languages.

When I enter the crowded corridors of Penn Station, between Thirty-First and Thirty-Third Streets, I first hear a smattering of languages from behind the counters of the kiosks that line the station's walls, selling bagels, pizza, and tacos. Then, as I create a path for myself through the crowds waiting for the Long Island Railroad trains, the languages rise up slowly until they reach an exhilarating and overwhelming peak. At first it is hard to distinguish languages above the din of the travelers and the loudspeakers. Nevertheless, I have learned to ignore the noises and to strain my ears long enough to identify individual languages, both those that are familiar and those that call attention to themselves because they seem out of place. At Penn Station one can always separate the tourists and the migrants by their different modes of projecting their mother tongues in public. Tourists are loud. You hear their French, Italian, or Chinese above the noise in the station, affirming their temporary ownership of the territory. In contrast, migrants try to keep their mother tongues under the radar, often camouflaging them with an English that does not come easily to the newly arrived.

I'm not, however, interested in the language of tourists. Once they return home—to Paris or Rome or Beijing—their tongues will become authorized. I'm interested in the languages that thrive yet have to stay under the radar so as not to offend monolingualists. These are the languages spoken behind the counters of the kiosks and stores that bring Gujarati and Punjabi to New York or the food concessions in which a variety of other languages, including some threatened ones, are spoken under the table, as it were. In seeking the fugitive or underground languages, I hope to figure out how multilingualism thrives where it is least expected in the American public sphere.

There is English at Penn Station, of course, but this language is surrounded by



Food truck vendor outside Penn Station, New York City, 2009. Photo by Filipe N. Marques.

unexpected complications: What do we mean when we speak of English in America? It is obvious that in the train station one finds not the singular English associated with PBS news (especially when it is read by Canadians) but an English that carries the intonations of speakers born elsewhere, not an ESL English but the English of India, of the Caribbean, of West Africa. As these Englishes try to figure out their relation to one another, a relation better sorted out on the cricket field than in the corridors of Penn Station, they seem in constant collision.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes I fear that these Englishes might be seeking to coalesce into what has been called globish, so I'm relieved when they are interrupted by a now ubiquitous Spanish, the second language of New York City.<sup>3</sup>

I often ask myself why Spanish creates terror in some parts of the United States, triggering the rise of English-only movements. Why are these movements driven by anxiety about Spanish (in Texas, for example) and not Portuguese (in New Bedford, Massachusetts) or Swedish (in Minnesota)? Is it

about numbers, country of origin, or the fear that Spanish might one day acquire the power of monolingualism? Surprisingly, those who worry about the hegemony of Spanish in the United States often do so because they fail to sense the differences in the language. For the Spanish heard at Penn Station and across the Northeast Corridor is so varied that I can't comprehend how anyone could mistake it for an authorized language, that of the law and command. How can Spanish be a language of power when most of those who speak it are powerless and often disenfranchised? Isn't it significant that the Spanish that comes to the United States is already creolized?

The Spanish heard at Penn Station and throughout the Northeast Corridor carries the tones of distant places, from the tropical islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Hispaniola to the Caribbean coast of Colombia and the highlands of Mexico. Experts tell me that if you listen carefully, what appear to be the tones of a particular Spanish-speaking country reveal subtle and complicated regional registers, many only audible to insiders. For

example, the Spanish of Mexico, I'm told, may bear traces of Oaxaca or the Yucatán Peninsula. The distinctions of Spanish that were common in my graduate school days—between Peninsular and Latin American Spanish—don't make sense at Penn Station. Here in the resurgent house of Spanish are many mansions, and perhaps this is why the language has become part of the cultural fabric of New York City. A language thrives when it can no longer claim purity.

It would be easy to explain the plurality of languages at and around Penn Station by the character of New York City, the quintessential city of migrants, but as the train makes its journey through the tunnel to Hoboken, the linguistic multiplicity of the Northeast Corridor comes into sharper focus, even as the cityscape fades. Now I hear the occasional Italian spoken, not by tourists, but by migrants from the old country; and, depending on the time of the day, the Haitian Creole of students returning home from the

city colleges of New York mingles with the Igbo of nurses on their way to work. Newark appears to be an epitome of urban decay, and some of its long-standing languages (Yiddish, for example) may be disappearing, but on a good summer day, especially during the soccer season, its thriving international languages emerge in full bloom.

A few years ago, I attended a soccer match between the New York Red Bulls and Barcelona, the European champions, at Giants Stadium. It was my first time watching a soccer game in a football field, and I have to confess that it was a miserable experience. The size of the field seemed to overwhelm the players, many of them small men, as good soccer players often are; the sturdy white lines laid out for American football made the puny yellow soccer lines almost invisible; and, worst of all, because everything was too far away from the benches, there were no good seats. The best one could hope for was a good view of one of the big television screens



Platform bridge at Penn Station in Newark, NJ, in 1935, shortly after it was built. Photo by Gottscho-Schleisner, from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-G612-24245.

placed around the field. As it turned out, however, there were compensations outside the field. Fans had turned out several hours before the game not simply to cheer their favorite teams but also to serenade their favorite players as national heroes. Fans from a large swath of the eastern seaboard had come to celebrate nations and national languages left behind; decked out in the colors of their countries, they had turned the stadium parking lot into a cavalcade of foods, drinks, and languages from around the world.

The parking lot at Giants Stadium reminded me of carnival, except that where I expected drummers, dancers, and marching bands, I was faced with a kaleidoscope of colors from the so-called global South and the scintillating sounds of its living languages. The Argentinians had come to cheer Lionel Messi, whom they serenaded from behind makeshift grills that reminded me of the pampas; the Brazilians were in a samba mode as they tried to counter the Argentinians with chants to monomial stars such as Ronaldinho and Kaka; not to be outdone, a large contingent of Cameroonians were screaming for Eto, sometimes in French, sometimes in Ewondo. I don't remember who won the game, but the *mélange* of languages spoken at the stadium was unforgettable. That is when I realized that despite the rust and boarded-up buildings of cities like Newark, world languages thrived as part of an urban renaissance rarely acknowledged in discourses on the future of the American city. In the Ironbound, a district of Newark immortalized by Philip Roth, the first language spoken is Portuguese or Spanish. On a Newark main street, where classic American department stores once stood, business is transacted in multiple languages: the Cuban bodega rings with speech distinct from the Wolof spoken in the Senegalese video store next to it or the patois one hears in the Jamaican bakery across the street. Here monolingualism is either an orphan or a lonely child.

As the train moves forward toward Trenton, so does my repertoire of languages. I can't quite make out some of them. I try to figure out whether what I hear is Laotian Hmong or highland Laotian; when the language classes are close, it is hard to tell which is which. Sometimes I'm woken from my occasional slumber by the sound of languages that remind me of familiar places. At Metro-park Station, two women bearing huge plastic bags full of black hair are carrying on an animated conversation in Twi. I don't speak the language, but I know how it sounds, and this particular conversation, which moves up and down like the motion Ghanaian women make when they braid hair, reminds me of several summers spent in Accra. As the train arrives at Edison, New Jersey, an Asian dimension is added to the repertoire of languages. If the traveler decided to stop here and take a drive or walk down Route 27, memories or dreams of China or Korea would be kindled. By the time the train gets to Trenton Station, monolingualism seems to belong to another country. Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, Haitian Creole, and Igbo are just a few of the many languages spoken here.

Sometimes teachers of language worry about language pedagogy in an impoverished context. They lament the fact that even after hours spent in the classroom, it is difficult, if not impossible, for students to acquire fluency without immersion in the language, in its culture and community of speakers. The dictum that there is no substitute for deep language learning makes study abroad an inevitable stop in the language journey. But how far does one need to travel to be immersed in a language? Can the thriving world language communities in North America function as sites for immersion and deep language learning?

On Route 27, around Edison, a giant department store called H-Mart serves as a gathering place for the thriving Korean community in New Jersey. Inside the store, as one negotiates around tanks full of live fish and

elderly women making kimchi, one feels as if one has been transported to Seoul. Except for the occasional stranger, everyone here speaks Korean. Farther down the street are South Asian zones defined by Hindi, Punjabi, and occasionally Pashto signs on shop windows. In New Brunswick, around Rutgers University, a Mexican community brings together the cultures and traditions of the old homeland. On these American trade routes, it is hard to imagine why languages die or why monolingualism persists. Still, for me Route 27, the American Silk Road, provokes a question that is both profound and empty: what are the pleasures of monolingualism in a world of many languages?

In *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Jacques Derrida gives us insights into the anxieties that enable monolingualism: "I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it." Far from being a sign of lack or of shame, monolingualism is born out of, and thrives in, the faults of history; it is treasured because it provides a place of dwelling—"an absolute habitat" (1). The clinging to this element of being is, however, underwritten by the knowledge that the language one lives in is not one's own. For Derrida French is the one authorized language and so is the only register in which the self can be imagined and made manifest; and yet it is also a sign of radical alienation, the source of a suffering that cuts across "my passions, my desire, my prayers, the vocation of my hopes" (2). Monolingualism persists not because one possesses only one language (Derrida speaks other languages), but because one language is, like the King James Bible, the Authorized Version. Monolingualism may create anxieties (what does it mean to speak in a language of the other?), but it also provides a certain kind of security.

Furthermore, what Derrida considers the pleasure of monolingualism comes from the discovery that one has no mother tongue,

that one is an orphan in one's home. The self adopts the prison house of language as a place of belonging out of the realization that the "monolingualism of the other" constitutes sovereignty—"that law originating from elsewhere, certainly, but also primarily the very language of the Law" (39). And if the "Law is Language," to be monolingual is to be recognized as a sovereign subject. Here, in an ironic reversal, bilingualism or multilingualism of the kind that I celebrated at the beginning of this column comes between the subject and the claims of sovereignty. It marks one as a stranger.

Famous for calling all notions of purity into question, Derrida confesses that he has "a shameful but intractable intolerance" for linguistic differences such as regional accents: "insofar as the language is concerned, I cannot bear or admire anything other than pure French" (46). He has become a custodian of the law of language. Significantly, this defense of pure French is driven by Derrida's awareness of his marginal relation to the language that he calls his own. Unable to claim the languages of Algeria, where he was born, Derrida feels he has no option but to own French. Only in monolingualism can he become a naturalized citizen. In Algeria the Jewish community into which Derrida was born constitutes a subgroup estranged from the roots of the French, Arab, and Berber cultures (53). What does it mean to speak French without being French, to be Jewish without a Jewish culture, or to be Algerian without the languages of the country? Monolingualism attracts because it is a compensation.

The Chinese, Koreans, West Africans, Mexicans, and South Asians I encounter on the journey from Penn Station, New York, to Trenton, New Jersey, do not appear to share Derrida's situation. Instead of being cut off from their native tongues, the migrants have reproduced their home cultures in their marketplaces and towns and created oases of belonging where one would expect alienation.<sup>4</sup>

In the Korean supermarket, I'm the one cut off from everything, an object of pity when it comes to choosing the best cut of fish or pork. At the fish counter, the Korean workers feel sorry for me as I use gestures and what the Voice of America used to call "special English" to explain my desires. The situation is the same in the parking lot and the street outside the store, spaces where vendors have set up something resembling the proverbial Third World market. There is no sign that the Koreans have lost sovereignty here; on the contrary, they seem to impose a new monolingualism operating under a different law—the law of the other in the American heartland.

But I'm trained to mistrust surfaces, so as I deploy special English to find out which end of the tuna makes the best sushi, I start asking myself questions: What does it mean for the monolingualism of the other to be implanted so far from its homeland? How can these enclaves of migrants claim to have the authority of the law through their own languages when there is a higher law, the law of the country in which they live, the law of monolingualism? Is the sovereignty exercised here purely performative? How long can it last?

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## NOTES

1. For Benjamin "[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his author-

ity from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (94).

2. A complex account of the difficult negotiation of languages, cultures, and values through sport can be found in O'Neill.

3. My reflections seek to counter both the unquestioned celebration of global English by McCrum and its radical questioning by Phillipson (*Linguistic Imperialism and Linguistic Imperialism Continued*).

4. My view of this reproduction of locality in global spaces is more sanguine than the account presented by Appadurai.

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