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Translingual Inheritance: Language Diversity in Early National Philadelphia

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Elizabeth Kimball’s Translingual Inheritance: Language Diversity in Early National Philadelphia challenges the dominant account of the United States’ founding, offering a counter-narrative that decenters the English language from the established historical tradition. Kimball argues that the United States has always been translingual, employing a wide range of integrated language practices and epistemologies. Using a translingual approach to explore “language as a network of cultural significations” (37), Kimball analyzes the ways in which speakers mobilize their multiple discursive repertoires to engage with networked and complex identities and communities. This translingual orientation reinterprets language as collective, less a singular uniform discourse/genre and more a conceptual space where language sources a multiplicity of discourses/genres that disrupt oppressive, socially constructed hierarchies and categories of languages. Kimball’s groundbreaking use of translingual methods has earned recognition and honorary mention from both the Rhetoric Society of America Book Award for 2021 and the 2022 CCCC Outstanding Book Award Committee. Her work complements Jonathan Hall and colleague’s Translingual Identities and Transnational Realities in the U.S. College Classroom, Steven Kellman’s Nimble Tongues: Studies in Literary Translingualism, and Scott Wible’s Shaping Language Policy in the U.S.: The Role of Composition Studies.

Building her argument on historical evidence of overlooked translingual practices, Kimball’s project is a reimagining of U.S. history. Through her archival inquiry, Kimball is guided by the question: “what if?” What if we look at the whole history? Specifically, what if the nation had embraced translingualism? What if English was decentered in the modern-day nation? Taking a translingual approach to language and historical methodologies, Kimball examines the contributions to the foundation of U.S. democracy of three communities: Germans, Quakers, and free African Americans. These case studies point to the epistemic dynamics of language-based
meaning-making. Across these case studies, Kimball highlights the fluidity of genre and the coexistence of diverse linguistic logics. She also challenges the assumptive monolingual status of both the historic and modern United States. Because Kimball foregrounds difference as an asset for a more just and equitable future, it is also an invaluable tool for approaching conflict wherever it arises. Hence, in this well-crafted volume, Kimball writes, not only for readers interested in language and literacy development of the fledgling nation, but also for scholars, students, and a broad public audience.

Chapters one and two introduce the book's methods and central concepts, highlighting Kimball's exploration of neglected archival records of early national Philadelphia, an integral time and space from which many founding documents emerged. Attuned to translilingual social practices, Kimball's methods illuminate how people featured in her cases approached genres dynamically to coordinate activity within community networks of education, government, and religion. Her historical approach reveals the systemic biases that allowed English to assume its status as the only legitimate language of the United States. She rejects monolingual accounts of history and implicates the weaponization of language differences in both historical and contemporary contexts. Examination of these textual archives provides space for democratic invention to be viewed as dynamic, hopeful, and intentional, as the country's governance was not yet steeped in bureaucracy. Perhaps most importantly, Kimball's progressive methodology highlights what can be learned when we engage with history through a metalinguistic lens that attends to how we speak and think about language. Through the study of the language practices of multiple groups of people moving in time and space, the reader is given a window into the vast linguistic landscape that existed, thriving and interconnected, at the founding of this country.

To mediate this approach, Kimball uses her conceptions of commonplace, a cosmopolitan canopy, and spatiality as tools for translilingual practice. Commonplaces provide readers with familiar anchors or locations one can use to approach an argument. Kimball interprets commonplace as means by which audiences “select or deselect how they will act in response to a message,” make decisions, and arrange their thought processes (96). Indeed, commonplaces preserve a community’s belief and cultural system as they flex to change and adapt. This important aspect of the book offers a conceptual space from which counternarratives may be read and written. The concept of a cosmopolitan canopy demonstrates space as a catalyst for belonging, facilitating communication even when people do not speak the same language. Early Philadelphia offers examples of these canopies. They are not only diverse, but also familiar in that “. . . people feel equal ownership” of them (124). Citing Philadelphia’s historic Reading Market and building from the work of sociologist Elijah Anderson, Kimball notes the canopy “offers the promise of edification for all who enter. Within a cosmopolitan canopy, exposure to others’ humanity generates empathy; fears dissipate, and [the grounds] for mutual appreciation appear” (Anderson qtd. in Kimball 125). This concept informs Kimball’s attention to sameness and difference as they produce spatiality throughout the book. In service of Kimball’s translilingual approach, spatiality demonstrates how the act of communication transcends “formal, recog-
nizable, and inevitable language boundaries” (6). Spatiality draws attention to four realms: the divine (the realness of the divine in material space); the bodily (the construction of meaning that takes place between an audience and a speaker); the geographic (the physical proximity of races and how this proximity might betray systems of segregation); and the hermeneutic (the latter referring to the positions of rhetoricians “in relation to their interpretations of texts . . .”) (142–143). Temporal spatiality refers to how translingual practices are situated, networked, mediated, and integrated intertextually among resources, environments, and individuals over time. Temporal spatiality further opens the opportunity to understand how linguistic performance and meaning is constructed beyond traditional conceptions.

In chapter three, “Language and Education Among Philadelphia Germans,” Kimball investigates how this community used and theorized the educational value of the German language in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries. German was levied as a means for accessing religion, art, and intellectualism; moreover, multilingualism offered access to multiple meanings and even more complicated worldviews. Insisting that exact translation is often impossible when approaching biblical or spiritual texts, Kimball explores the correlation between cultural losses and language loss. Kimball examines historical archives, such as the *Evangelisches Magazin*, that highlight the need to preserve German in light of the limited ideological capacities of English (favored for utilitarian and economic practices and deliberations). In the context of this case, the ideological access that the German language offered to early Philadelphians provided an exemplary system for alternative ideological perspectives, as German made the conception of a wide array of cultural and religious knowledges accessible to the general public. Kimball highlights a time period when translingualism was an everyday part of the Philadelphia community, as well as a topic of debate in early school development. This context presents the potential for an alternative translingual present where English is decentered, and functions as one of many possibilities that may fuel the development of more diverse educational projects, governmental policies, and communities.

In chapter four, “Quakerly Genres and The Language of Liberal Learning,” Kimball scrutinizes the Quakers’ *Ascham Essays*, a collection of tracts from the 1830s proposing changes to the curriculum at Haverford College. In a period when the Quakers were re-assessing their sense of identity in the wake of the factional split between the Hicksite and Orthodox Quakers, the *Ascham Essays* manifested a common point of access for local Quakers to re-interpret their conservative resistance to classical education and classical language studies. By reinterpreting commonplace texts and synthesizing these insights with concepts from the Scottish Enlightenment, the *Ascham Essays* generated a conceptual space for community members to advocate for the teaching of classical languages, especially Latin. This translingual framework highlights how the Quakers came to promote language diversity. To elucidate those assumptions, Kimball compares the *Ascham Essays* to the *Yale Report* from the same time period. Both documents advocated for teaching classical languages, especially Latin; however, the Quakers’ logic differed vastly from Yale’s. In response to the calls for modernizing the curriculum, the *Yale Report* tied (the study of) classical languag-
es to the formation of “correct taste and nationalism” or the creation of an ideal citizen. In contrast, the *Ascham Essays* approached language as a means of knowing, that is, as mode and method for inquiring into truth and for ending disputes. Though the genre conventions of Ascham’s work and the *Yale Report* are quite similar, Kimball elucidates vital differences in the aims of the two documents.

Kimball opens chapter five, “African American Language,” with a discussion of African American educational and literacy networks that existed and created space for the voices, writings, and genres of African American Philadelphians during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beyond formal school settings, the African American community created several informal social networks with the goal of developing intellectual, spiritual, and scientific connections among its members. Against this backdrop, Kimball explores the writings of former slave and preacher Richard Allen who founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816. Through the examination of his text *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, this chapter tackles the ways in which genre form can provide spaces for re-situating power in fluid and unexpected ways. Through his inventive and intertextual writing, Allen shifted social and spatial imaginings. Kimball argues that Allen’s work gave him access to different domains of knowing and seeing the world, and in turn, granted him greater control over his audience’s reading of legal, spiritual, and political states (156). Allen’s acumen in genre fluidity enabled him to re-imagine and reconstitute divine, bodily, geographic, and hermeneutic spaces. Kimball engages the concept of the cosmopolitan canopy to illustrate Allen’s translingual approach to communication—an approach that was shared, collectively built, and open to interactions of sameness and difference. In this way, Kimball’s examination of Allen’s legacy offers a hopeful what-if “model of what social relationships could become” (157).

Kimball’s central argument, to rethink history through a translingual framework, provides readers with a lens that opens up new possibilities for expansive world-building and a more diverse future. Through the use of accessible language, Kimball takes the readers by the hand to thoroughly explain her approach, not assuming a baseline or comprehensive knowledge of her subject matter. The book’s approachability is consistently seen through the easily discernible points of clarification provided to readers. Through the use of reader-friendly concepts and case studies, Kimball’s book prompts audiences to consider the relevance of the presented ideas to their own inquiries, interests, and experiences. As reviewers, we believe that this book will benefit researchers, scholars, teachers, and graduate students alike, as the book can be used as a tool to approach and tackle modern day challenges through mediating linguistic difference. Readers interested in direct application of Kimball’s approach will find the conclusion instructive. There she takes up pedagogies that elicit students’ situated knowledge as resources for problem solving. What is most translingual about Kimball’s own mode of being is her capacity to shuttle across the social categories that her method both invokes and rewrites.

With *Translingual Inheritance*, Kimball has brought to the forefront significant forms of language diversity and language epistemologies that have been ignored within the mainstream historical tradition. Although Kimball situated her book in the
disciplines of linguistics and history, her translingual approach extends beyond these disciplines. This text helped the reviewers consider the principles of belonging in Dr. Elenore Long’s graduate global rhetorics course at Arizona State University. We find Kimball’s work invaluable to our current cultural and historical moment, as it can inform new approaches to inclusive and diverse social justice practices. In a time of divisive rhetoric, Translingual Inheritance offers a framework to unite the U.S. across differences. A solution to address the nation’s division is to examine its translingual heritage and to learn from previously overlooked narratives. Additionally, Kimball’s sense of the cosmopolitan canopy offers an imaginative path forward for a divided nation. Rather than adhering to a narrative that insists on a monolingual point of view, which weaponizes the English language by diminishing the rich translingual roots of the United States, we can embrace language diversity as an asset to ignite other ways of thinking, problem solving, and being. Kimball shows that a more holistic reading of the past has the potential to provide an antidote for our present challenges.