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“Sounds of Silence Breaking”: Working Difference, Translation, and Curriculum

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Introduction

In this essay we engage a dialogical reading of Janet Miller’s (2005) book, *Sounds of Silence Breaking: Women, Autobiography, Curriculum*. Our engagement with the text is also mediated by our conversations with each other and with other texts. Since we are the co-translators of the text from English into Chinese, we also use translation and openings to the non-translatable as a metaphor for rethinking about connection, difference, and curriculum, issues which are also Miller’s central concerns.

Responding to Miller’s autobiographical explorations, this essay also blends our own autobiographical readings of Miller’s story to discuss various forms of silence and the educational significance of breaking those silences. Translation is used here both literally and metaphorically for “working difference,” generating intercultural creativity, and re-creating meanings like two-way traffic. Following Miller’s refusal to be mirrored back, we also attempt to leave room for empty space and non-translatable co-existence in the end. Hongyu speaks in the first and third section and Mei speaks in the second and fourth section, and end the essay with a conversation section.

Just as Miller points out that collaborative auto/biography is as much about the author as the “subject” (see Miller’s Coda), we would like to borrow this notion for our readings of her book, emphasizing that our efforts are to make sense of the text through our own perspectives. By no means can we convey the richness, complexity, and sophisticated scholarship of this text (see Pinar’s Preface for an elaborate understanding of this book); rather, what we will present is our interaction with this inspiring text and with each other to translate curriculum and pedagogy.

Struggles with Words of One’s Own

The dream is reoccurring: quiet is everywhere. It surrounds my classroom, saturates the halls of the building in which I teach. I wait with my students for the sound of our voices, horrified that we might scream in rage, trembling that we may never whisper.

—Janet Miller, 2005, p. 61

Winter, 1982. She was my junior high Chinese language teacher. She

was a graceful and elegant teacher whom I loved. She assigned us a year-long project: each of us would need to make up a dictionary of our own for translation between ancient Chinese and modern Chinese. I enjoyed this project immensely. I played with words and took a lot of pleasure going back and forth between the dictionary and the textbook to come up with my own definition. My classmates stood in line to copy from my dictionary. Somehow, she knew mine was the original. When I took my final examination, she gave me a full score: 100. I was embarrassed since I had made two small errors. But she refused to do the math. Only recently did I begin to appreciate her sense of “perfection without being perfect.” In my latest trip back to China, I visited her in my hometown. I was afraid that the perfect image of her in my memory would have faded after 20 years of parting. I was comfortably surprised to see her the same dear person as I had known, reaching out to hold my hands. She was, however, fragile and agonized by all sorts of illness. I don’t know if I can see her again. My language teacher.

This story of my teacher came back to me when I taught Janet Miller’s book in a graduate course on gender and teaching. One of the activities was to bring an autobiographical artifact related to gender issues to the class. As I looked through my reading room trying to find something “exotic,” I saw a dictionary I had brought from China—the one I used for my junior high Chinese language class to translate between ancient and modern Chinese. I had not even realized that I had brought it with me across thousands of miles! The moment I saw it, “sounds of silence breaking” rang true. I took the dictionary to the class and explained its significance to me struggling with words of my own—a silent gendered struggle only finding its emergent voice after teaching and living in a foreign country, away from the motherland.

As Mr. Brucker’s good girl in the sixth grade, Miller (chapter 7) loved his unconventional teaching styles, which simultaneously questioned and reinforced—despite his intentions—the gendered norm. As a schoolgirl, she worked hard to obtain his recognition, as his symbolic paternal authority signaled the sanction of the society even though he made great efforts to encourage embodied learning. Re-entering the past with a critical eye, she begins to question the gendered layer of this story. Miller is able to identify the contradictory image of Mr. Brucker for her and retell the story, acknowledging its social construction of gender relationships after decades of engaging feminist and post-structural critiques.

My language teacher was the only female school teacher who has had a long-lasting impact on my intellectual landscape. I also searched for male authorities’ approval. I did not recognize the gendered implications of my school education as a student but the worry of not having my own voice was a constant struggle. Only when I consciously searched for the maternal roots did I begin to hear recurring whispers and repressed screams. My teacher’s negotiation between the institutional expectation and a schoolgirl’s budding enthusiasm for language and thought has strengthened my connections with the world of words. The moment of “seeing” her influence in my life as a scholar was the moment for re-entering into the maternal power and re-affirming the creativity of the feminine self.

Miller’s engagement with “the personal” in academic writing provides “a memory site for deconstruction of what, for years, I simply considered to be my own ‘natural’ desires and interests as a young

girl, a student, a teacher” (p. 105). Although from a different culture, I find much resonance in this need to deconstruct “the given natural.” How many of us, especially women, have similar experiences of not seeing beneath the “natural” and the “personal” a larger imprint of the social? How many of us as women, even when highly successful and accomplished in the professional world, still don’t feel good enough in the public realm and take this not measuring up to the standard as one’s own problems? Through deconstructive memory work throughout this collection, Miller demonstrates the meaningfulness of the personal and powerfully challenges the patriarchal binary between the personal/female and the public/male. She asks, “to what extent and in what manner do layers of societal and cultural expectations and stereotypes become ‘personal’ expectations?” (p. 62). Without this questioning, autobiography can hardly serve the purpose of feminist resistance and contestation.

Goodson (1998) cautions us that life stories must be situated in broader historical, social, and cultural contexts to avoid reinforcing a romantic version of Western individualism or being arrested in the present state of school and educational “reform.” Much beyond a simple storytelling, Miller’s writings demonstrate how autobiography can be used as a site for “cultural critique and social change” (p. 50). Throughout the book Miller not only situates her engagement with feminist theories in larger contexts of U. S. feminist movements—her intellectual growth in the growth of the feminist field—but also depicts her post-structural autobiographical research in the development of the US curriculum field in particular. Her multiple identities as a woman, an academic, a teacher, an educational researcher are explored in shifting and changing social contexts so that her intellectual history and life history are intertwined to challenge any given norm, including the normative usage of autobiography. Criticizing popularized storytelling following the line of a humanistic and modern self progressing towards enlightenment and complete self-understanding, Miller asks us to attend to “gaps and silences in current constructions and uses of autobiography in education” (p. 219). Here the sounds of silence breaking take another turn to deconstruct the straight-line of conventional storytelling, particularly through queering both storytelling and the (female) subject (Chapter 14).

The ever-shifting and changing positioning of subjectivity in Miller’s writings unsettles any desire for fixed stability and certainty. Acknowledging that not all silences are oppressive, she is concerned with the necessity for breaking the “unnatural silences” (p. 62), but she further argues that the sounds of silence breaking are “harsh, resonant, soft, battering, small, chaotic, furious, terrified, triumphant” (p. 68). Such is a poetics full of multiplicity, paradoxes, and ambiguity. Thus struggling with words of one’s own follows a winding path. If “the one true story” (p. 48) is an illusion, as post-structural discourses claim, how can one assert words of one’s own? Drawing upon both her mother’s ability to carve out a solitary space while at the same time being watchful of her children (Chapter 5), and Maxine Greene’s efforts to be both in- and outside of the circle as a woman academic (Chapter 2 and Coda), Miller shows how maternal and intellectual creativity can be nurtured through doubled spaces in which one’s own words do not emerge in isolation, but in relationships, relationships that are created rather than given, relationships that are often woven on the boundary so that one can see both sides of the landscape.

Such an ability to both belong and not belong is essential for good

translation, as I will discuss later. What is clear here is that words of one's own are co-emergent, supported by both solitary and relational spaces. The authority of a woman's voice is acknowledged here with a deep sense of connectedness. However, affirming the value of women's thinking is not enough; asserting women's unique and peculiar modes of thought and writing in their difference is also important. But that's not the final answer for Miller either, as everything is always in the making. Following her lead, the next section Mei discusses the process of revealing gendered silence intertwining with racial invisibility to complicate but not reify the tales of difference.

Differences—Simulacra without Origins

In a graduate course I took, we were discussing the issues of white privilege and racism. When the discussion became frozen, I offered my personal and scholarly understandings of racism. Afterwards, a classmate told me that my black classmate who had stirred the pot actually wanted the white students to talk, to recognize their racist views and actions. However, no whites were willing to talk; they all kept silent. I was also told that some of my black classmates “do not get” what I said. I felt I had broken a silence of invisibility between whites and blacks; however, that silence resonates to more silences, which do not cross, dead in the air.

First as an international graduate student and later as a Chinese American graduate student, in various educational settings, I am quite often caught in such discussions about racism, which is usually considered “White-on-black oppression” and “White-to-black continuum” (Feagin, 2000). According to Feagin, this continuum is a racial measuring stick of status and social acceptance, from the degree of “civilization,” privilege, to desirability, locating whites at the higher end and blacks at the bottom. Racially I am not White, often considered the oppressor in a racist society, who is expected by minorities to acknowledge the impacts of racism in this country (Feagin, 2000). When whites do look into racism, quite often they return with a feeling of guilt or denial. Neither am I Black, often considered the historically and institutionally oppressed, and racially discriminated against by whites. I am different from both whites and blacks in terms of biological race. In discussions of racism, I am always taken as an irrelevant other, who does not have a pertinent say in this continuum. My voice in the classroom slipped away from the opposite racial walls between whites and blacks, leaving no trace, let alone echoes.

The analyses of white people's silent reactions to the discussion of racism have been addressed in Miller's book as well as by other scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Wang, 2005). My experience with the White-to-Black continuum in the class makes me wonder: What makes my white classmates not responsive? What makes my black classmates “not get it”? Is it because my experiences and my scholarly arguments are already labeled as international, Asian, or Chinese, different from either White or Black? If only whites are asked to do self-examination, and only blacks are regarded as the discriminated other, does that mean that there is only one essential racist other and one essential oppressed self? Does that suggest that only whites could speak for the White race and only blacks speak for the Black race? Caught in between, who can I speak to?

Reading *Working difference in education* (Chapter 12) helped me to

rethink difference in a new way and to trouble the dichotomous racial tensions in the U.S. Co-authored with Elizabeth Ellsworth, Miller explicates the story of Patricia Williams as a daughter, a Law professor, a Harvard graduate, a woman, a black woman, and a customer who was going to buy a sweater for her mother. Drawing upon Marshall (1992), Miller reads Williams' identity as both "constituted and constituting." As a social being, the formation of Williams' identity and subjectivity are in part socially constructed, for no one can escape the prints of social discourses and practices; we are part of that. However, the symbolic order of the social discourse and structure can not always signify without failures, and there is always a leak. For example, in patriarchal societies, a woman's body has been an object for the male's gaze, but various feminists have been working from the body to resist such gazes, to speak, and to reclaim women's political, economic, and social rights. Thus, a person's subjectivities are not totally defined by the symbolic order of social discourses. If a person's subjectivity also constitutes the symbolic, then there are possibilities for individuals to achieve agency and turn the leak into something new through re-working with the social discourses.

Hardly can a clear-cut line be drawn between those social, cultural, racial boundaries, which are shifting, ambiguous, unpredictable and blurred; neither is it easy to define who is outsider and who is insider in engaging with the tensions occurring along the "White-to-Black continuum." In dealing with the "insider" and "outsider" relationship between researchers and teachers (Chapter 11), rather than seeing the boundaries of insider and outsider as fixed, opposite, or predicted, Miller argues that "the very categories of insider and outsider are themselves socially constructed and complicated by the ways power is defined" (p. 175). Building upon Miller, I would say a racial outsider is rigidly defined and this naming turns racial tensions to restricted meanings and brings the complex debate and discussion to a close.

Examining Williams' book, especially engaging Williams' experiences in addressing difference, Miller and Ellsworth refuse to take their own interpretations of Williams as an authoritative understanding of Williams' text; instead, they choose the notion of reading it to respond to differences. In doing so, they themselves participate in the dialogue and take themselves as texts to be referred to in working differences. Thus Miller and Ellsworth become part of Williams' text, which is ongoing and unfinished. In this way, Miller and Ellsworth are "responsive to rather than repressive of difference" (p. 195), because "there is no prior difference, with meanings already in place, that is either put to use or replaced by some other oppositional or alternative difference, just as known and static" (p. 180). Therefore difference, for Miller, is always in the making and is "oxymoronic."

Miller and Ellsworth's reading of Williams and working difference in education provokes me to ask such questions: If race is not preexistent, but constituted and constituting and oxymoronic, Could I be both black and white at the same time as being an Asian? Could "the other in me" be possible (Wang, 2005) in rethinking the dynamic relationship between self and other? Black, Asian or White is less about solitary, invariable entities; but more about constructed terms that constantly affect each other and about being transformed through each communication, interaction, and even contention made and performed socially, culturally, and politically. Thus, identities as black, white or Asian are always in the ongoing process of construction and re-construction and each of them could be overlapping and merging with one another but not totally becoming the other.

Rather than seeing Black and White and Asian or Chinese as a static different other, reading Miller enables me to see that the seemingly pre-existent differences, such as skin color, race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender as well as other social roles, resemble simularca of complex tensions and contradictions, and each could be “references to other texts” (Rosenau, 1992, p.xi, quoted in Miller, 2005, p. 195). Jacques Daignault takes difference as a passage, the in-betweens where thinking about difference is situated paradoxically. The passage is not “from one to the other, but passage at their absolute difference and *différance* [here he uses Derrida’s term] between death, twice evaded” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 481; [] is in the original). Similarly, the tension between Whites and Blacks is not at the either ends, but in the passage, full of tensions, contradictions, controversial, diversities (including other races), complexities as well as possibilities that we can encounter and resonate to in working differences.

My story of being excluded from the White-to-Black continuum is not only mirrored as an essential racial other, but at the same time reveals a gendered other also. In that same class but a different discussion, in response to some classmates’ remarks about “affirmative action,” I got my points through in a tone that one of my Chinese friends thought was too emotional, although I felt I was holding in my rage. She advised me to talk “nice” and “soft” so people might accept what I say. Emotions and feelings at large have been considered as weak, inappropriate, unreasonable, irrational, private, and subjective and most often associated with women. As one kind of bodily feeling, emotions and passions even have been considered a “moral error” by Descartes (Leder, 1990). Talking nice and holding one’s emotions have become the only correct and rational way of speaking, of argument in academe or even in our daily lives, regardless of how many holes, wounds, and scars are troubling the emotional “other.”

For Megan Boler (1999), emotion can be “a site of resistance to oppression,” and resistance to social patriarchal control, because “the denigration of emotion and women is what enables reason and masculine intellectual mastery to appear as the winner in the contest for truth” (p. xvi). I would also say emotion can become a kind of critical inquiry of how we disciplined ourselves through internalized emotional management, and emotion could become one of our epistemologies as an “emotional literacy of curriculum.” Emotions and feelings are not women’s privilege, but many women have recognized and affirmed such knowing in terms of both knowing and being known (Boler, 1999; Campbell, 1994; Frye, 1983; Griffin, 1999; Spelman, 1989). Although the new way of knowing could be “strange, alien, and frightening” at times, women begin to “resist the attempts of those who wish to shape and recreate [them] in a sanctioned form” (Miller, p. 76).

In a classroom full of 30 or so graduate students from all corners, whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, when most Asian students remain quiet, my speaking out, especially in an emotional way, broke up the invisibility of both race and gender that is not “normal.” I could sense the whispers behind my back after the class. In retrospect, I question myself: did what I said and the way I said it fail to meet my classmates’ expectations of a “typical” Chinese and Chinese woman? In what ways should a Chinese woman speak?

In Resistance of women academics (Chapter 4), Miller resists unexamined social expectations of what a female should be in

academe: “I had, without thinking and without questioning, transferred an expectation of myself as a woman, which largely was a societal, cultural, and historically situated creation, to my professional role” (pp. 73-74). My negotiation of my space in a classroom where I can talk as a Chinese woman in American academe many times proceeded with defenses rather than affirmations. It has not proceeded without my own self-doubts and struggles, either. I have many times reflected whether it is a good way for my points to get through or whether I should seek the invisible wall of protection by just being quiet as others do. I will elaborate this point in a later section. However, I also realize that by intentionally breaking the silence, what has been presented is limited not only to getting my perspectives through, but also to exposing the unrepresentable, the invisible that constructs my identities. I not only refuse to be read as a permanent racialized/gendered other and but also intend to disrupt “sedimentation of gender norms” (Butler, 1990b) that Butler describes, so as to undo the expected “normal” gender roles and identities. Thus, I am also responding to those women educators who “struggled and continue to struggle against imposed norms of behavior and identity” (Miller, p. 75). Differences between races, genders, and at the intersection of race and gender need to be culturally translated so that silence is broken and invisibility is exposed. Situated at the intersection of gender and race, I believe that difference needs to be culturally translated. We next turn to the relationship between translation and difference.

Translation as Connecting Across Differences

I believe that we can creatively and imaginatively work those relationships most often in the gaps created by tension, rupture, disjuncture—“the controversy among us.”

—Janet Miller, 2005, p.213 (emphasis added)

A large portion of my translation of Miller’s book was finished when I visited my sister’s family in New Jersey in the summer of 2006. My mother came from China to help take care of the three-month-old baby. My nephew was the center of attention. My time for translation was frequently interrupted by feeding the baby with a bottle, rocking him to sleep, carrying him around, and walking him outside. My own sleep was disrupted by his cries during the night. Strangely, my translation went more smoothly in such a chaotic world than usual. Somehow the transition between two languages became easier with the presence of the mother tongue and the baby’s smile. I watched my sister mother her first baby, and watched my mother parent my sister and her grandchild. The initial and inescapable dependency of a child at birth, the fundamental interdependency of human life, and the “multiple tensionality” of maternity as Miller (Chapter 5) discusses, all provide vital links for me to translate between two languages, between different cultures.

Translation as a creative act is not usually acknowledged in the US academic world. In our culture which emphasizes the originality of ideas and purity of language, translation seems to be a service rather than a creation. But, I would argue, what we need to pursue in this world of simultaneous fragmentation and interconnections is precisely an ability to translate well across differences. Derrida (1991) affirms both the necessity and impossibility of translation and “clearly understand[s] translation as involving the same risk and chance as the poem” (p. 276). Translation is a poetically creative

activity living with the tension between attentiveness to “the other heading” and faithfulness to one’s own horizon. Intercultural creativity dwells in the tension of translation. Kristeva (2002) asserts that “future humanity will be made up of foreigners trying to understand each other” (p. 257). Here translation is not limited to a literal sense, but is also a metaphor for rethinking curriculum as a process of making connections across differences.

Susan H. Edgerton (1996) uses the metaphor of translation to argue for creating historical, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural imagination in curriculum. Ted Aoki (2005) plays with English, Japanese, and Chinese words throughout his book to demonstrate how translation of both language and culture generate new pedagogical meanings. Mei’s efforts to break racial and gendered silence as an Asian woman is also an act of translation, seeking passages to what is excluded by the cultural binary. My own works on translating writings and serving as an interpreter make me aware of the difficulty, humor, frustration, and insights of an inter-linguistic and inter-cultural space. Tang (2003) speaks about the “diasporic space” in which translation happens, “lost in the space of transformation” (p. 28). A transformative space between others’ foreign words and one’s native tongue must be cultivated. Between my translation of Bill Doll’s *A Post-modern Perspective on Curriculum* and of Miller’s book, almost a decade has passed. I can sense a change in my translation style: the first one more faithful to the author, the second one more playful with words; the first one less self-confident, the second one more self-affirmative. Words of my own playing with the authors’ texts come forward more at ease the second time. Such a change is not a simple shift of techniques but is intimately related to the change in the translator’s subjectivity through life experiences. Although it is difficult to say which way is better (depending on the preference of readers), we can see that the mode of translation is related to the translator’s identity re-formation.

Miller’s works embody a creative act of translation. Her collaborations with doctoral students, colleagues, and school teachers, her collaborative biography of/with Maxine Greene, and even the stylistic arrangement of this book all demonstrate multiple layers of translation. Her long-time devotion to explorations of connection and curriculum translates different terrains of educational inquiry, qualitative research, and curriculum theorizing. She discusses the paradoxes of collaboration in enabling dynamic interconnections. She asks “what might we do to shape communities and forms of collaboration in which we could struggle together to create versions of curriculum, teaching, and learning that do not posit particular voices, bodies, and experiences as representative of all?” (p. 82). In other words, she argues for a sense of connection that honors and respects rather than suppresses differences. These differences, however, do not stay static, but interact with each other and among one another to produce new words. She tirelessly points out that identity is not fixed, static, or essentialized, and that any fixed version of identity or self or state of the field is questionable. She emphasizes the need for not only affirming one’s own words but also bringing fluidity into those words.

Here words of one’s own are not only co-emergent through both the relational and the singular, but also become moving forces that challenge their own paths to make “permanent openness and resignifiability” (p. 219) possible. Always in the making, Miller refuses to freeze the movement. The unconventional stylistic

arrangements of this collection also invite efforts to translate on the part of readers. The putting together of chapters in parallel (for instance, see Chapter 1) written in different time periods creates a temporally flowing sense of her writings. The insertion of different texts into the main text of a particular chapter (for instance, see Chapter 13) shows the mutual embeddedness of her words and texts. She and her collaborators' creative format in juxtaposition (for instance, see Chapter 8) that disrupts the comfort of linear academic writing invites the readers to invent their own ways of connection weaving and sense making.

Taking translation as a metaphor for making connections across differences so as to enable new words, we need to move beyond both over-reliance on united commonality and reductive identity politics. Traditionally we rely on commonality to claim connections. While this can be used to form strategic alliances sometimes, the underlying assumption of sameness is troublesome. In my classes, when students take comfort in common humanity to denounce genocide and racism, I always turn around to ask them: Can differences connect? When commonality becomes the only basis for making connections, it can lead to social and psychic exclusion. On the other hand, when difference is reified and essentialized, identity construction becomes reductive. This reduction is reinforced by the current crisis of public education, which leads to more competitiveness and intensified anxiety over what if "my/our" voice is not heard. I believe that precisely at this moment when the external world tries to freeze movement, we need to work harder to enable more fluidity, together and alone, in order to keep the educational project alive. In order to connect across difference, we need to speak to, with and on behalf of one another and let different voices fill our shared world, but imposing one version of "truth," even with "progressive" intentions, does not serve well the collective struggle for educational equity and social justice. The fixation on difference is as dangerous as the fixation on commonality.

As Elizabeth Ellsworth and Janet Miller (Chapter 12) phrase it so well, we need to "work" difference. It is through working difference in the gaps and ruptures that we can negotiate a good translation, co-create curriculum meanings, and re-generate pedagogical dynamics. Translation is marked and sustained by the (at least) two rather than the singular and thus directly challenges our notion of creativity as the breaking away from the original. Thus, co-creation (and re-creation as Mei discusses further later) in an inter-space becomes a fundamental element of translation. Demonstrating another form of creativity, translation is more ecological and web-sensitive, more attuned to the vibration of maternity, more ready to passage back to the sensory experience.

Translation asks us to "complicate the notion of belonging: one has to belong and not belong" (Kristeva, 2002, p. 131). Often we assume that the goal of multicultural education (isn't this term problematic as it implies a static sense of a culture?) is to make minority students feel a sense of belonging. But this wish to make the other belong to us is implicated in the desire to keep our own comfort zone intact. In contrast, Miller believes that "an educator who conceives of autobiography as a queer curriculum practice doesn't look into the mirror of self-reflection and see a re-inscription of her already familiar, identifiable self. She finds herself not mirrored—but in difference" (p. 224). In seeing difference in the self rather than a mirrored-back image in its similarity, one is displaced and in such a displacement, one might be able to learn something new. As Alan

Block (1998) suggests, in order to be educated and to educate, one needs to get lost.

Displacement in translation happens in both directions not only mediating but also re-creating meanings.

Translation as Two-Way Traffic

This is my first translation of an academic book from English to Chinese. Hongyu discusses above the need for both being truthful to the author and being playful with the self; I think I was in a state of being truthful to the author before we two had a conversation about translation and before I came across Rey Chow's (1995) book – *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. During my early translation, I invested great effort in trying to figure out what exact Chinese words could best articulate Miller's points and arguments. I asked my niece in China to mail me two Chinese dictionaries so as to make sure my translated words (Chinese) appropriately expressed the original words (English). In translating, I am not only learning about another language/culture but also examining my own language/culture again, so I have enriched my understanding of Chinese words since I started translation.

My understanding of translation as one way from English to Chinese has been reconstructed since I re-examined the notion of translation by Walter Benjamin through Chow. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's work—*The task of the Translator*, Chow (1995) points out:

The notion of translation highlights the fact that it is an activity, a transportation between two “media,” two kinds of already-mediated data, and that “translation” is often what we must work with because, for one reason or another, the “original” as such is unavailable – lost, cryptic, already heavily mediated, already heavily translated. (p. 193)

Taking translation as a passage producing “two-way traffic,” Chow argues that there are interactions and mutual affections between the “original” and the “translated,” and “the ‘native’ should let the foreign affect, or infect, itself, and vice versa” (p. 189). Here, the meanings of the original are not fixed, and the original could be the native or the foreign and same thing for the translated. In translating Miller's English version to a Chinese version, the original is English, but that is not my native language; rather, the foreign, the Chinese is my native language, and it can be considered my original. Thus, we have to put both the original and the translated as infiltrated and flowing data that have to be transmitted. Both “original” and “translated” involve a process of “putting together” (p. 185) which is a mediated and treated creation. Thus, there might be no authentic originals that match with the perfect translated, and we have to translate the literal sense of the original. As an English educator, as a teacher of writing and reading, Miller also envisions an unfixed reading of meanings; she invites us to re-think that English Education “can be conceived as in-the-making in the sense that our knowledges as well as our teaching and learning selves are always positioned by and positioning, framed by and framing specific yet differing and always changing contexts and discourses” (p. 228). Therefore, the process of translating Miller also suggests the impossibility of interpreting Miller's “original” meanings without somewhat of the translator's own creation across contexts and differences, for the “original” Miller might be an illusion. The task of the translator, as Benjamin argues, is

to “release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (Illuminations, p. 80, quoted in Chow, p. 187).

Hongyu creates “words of one’s own” through intra- and interlinguistic translation in which she takes translation much as a process of imagination, creativity, and playfulness. A translation not only has to translate, to get the author’s intentions across, but also allow a space for the translator to be the self, to be affected by his/her foreignness to the original. In such a space that holds both going-out and coming-back, the significations of the original and the translated are grounded, communicated, and engaged in the encountering, in transporting and working the differences. Thus, translation is both faithful to the original and to the translated, “with loyalties split between a native language and a foreign tongue” (Johnson, 1985, quoted in Chow, p. 183). However, to be totally loyal to both—the original and the translated—becomes an impossible task for the translator, for during the translation process, the translator re-creates the meanings which could be “rebellious.”

Chow uses the Italian root of the English word “translation” (“translator, traitor”) to illustrate that translation indicates both “tradition” and “betrayal.” Even in the translation within one culture, one language, the translator at times can be both a messenger and a trickster, for example, in some biblical texts, hermeneutics—an interpretive process—can be both ambiguous, disguised, and informative.¹ The double meanings of translator provoke us to ask: isn’t the “betrayal” giving life to the tradition, enabling its transformation and re-creation? If translation involves the process of creation, of Benjamin’s notion of “putting together in the basic elements of human language – the words,” then our translated work, for the readers, does not delineate the authentic understandings or interpretation of the original, of Miller’s work; rather it is an invitation for readers to put together their own translations of Miller’s text, either to be a translator, to create their own words, or to be a traitor to our texts; that task falls in the hands of our readers in making meanings across their own contexts, and their differences. I anticipate that such meaning-makings are two-way traffic.

In this traffic, the uneasiness of the messenger remains even if she can trick. This discomfort spills over to our further conversation about translation and the un-translatable.

Empty Spaces and Resisting Translation

The strategy of juxtaposition is one that invites inconsistencies, ambiguities, ambivalence, and it emphasizes that there will always be “unspoken themes” that cannot or will not be interrogated.
—Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth, in Janet Miller, 2005, p. 114

Following Miller’s attention to excessive moments (Chapter 8), we turn to what cannot be contained, what cannot be translated, in order to highlight the meanings of those ruptures, differences, and empty spaces for working out meaningful relationships. Intending our thoughts to be both conversational and independent, we separate our voices through different flushing: Flushing on the left is Hongyu’s writing; flushing on the right is Mei’s writing. There is an internal

consistent flow in each author's writing, while at the same time we converse with each other by responding to the other person's themes. Visualizing both smoothness and ruggedness, we reflect on our own empty spots and the uneasiness we feel as we write this piece together.

In the middle of this writing, I grew unsatisfied with what I wrote down, which did not seem to convey what I wanted to say. This unhappiness with my words was loudest when I wrote the part on translation as making connections across difference. Why am I so concerned with "connection," I ask myself: What if disconnection remains as disconnection, and the non-translatable resists being translated? What if an empty space refuses to be traveled through?

As I reflect upon the process of engaging with this writing, I realize that working differences is more complicated than just acknowledging the shared experiences and connections. I could not relate to the "good girl" story: it is not me. I worry that I am telling a "bad girl" story, a story which does not mirror and parallel across the empty space. How could and what if the empty space becomes openings, possibilities, and accessibilities to richness rather than gaps and divisions?

I am both relieved and challenged by Mei's story of being a "bad" girl. Relieved because it disrupts the stereotypical image of sweet, docile (Asian) women; challenged because I am implicated in this image of a good girl. Miller's "nice but intelligent" woman who both disrupts and reinforces the gendered norm sounds pretty much like me. Perhaps it is also a female version of Mr. Brucker? If translation can be rebellious, as Mei asserts, perhaps connecting or disconnecting is no longer an issue?

I do worry about losing the invisible protections and the easiness of being quiet and trying to tone down as an "other" in multiple ways. How should I speak, talk, and approach others in a way that they are more comfortable and that gets my self accepted in the dominant "norm"? Could it be done without re-producing the violence of oppressing and denying my own identities? What if that is impossible? Is there a third way out?

Miller nevertheless affirms that she still gives of herself in teaching, but not without questioning the gendered construction of teacher identity. She does not abandon connections; instead, she theorizes and practices relationality towards openings to differences. I cannot denounce connections, either; as the translator between my students and the difficult knowledge they encounter in the texts, I tune in with students' inner struggles. Holding on to what pains me often gradually paves pathways to the vitality of an emerging learning community.

In what ways could I make possible moves across differences to reach others and to unwrap my own limitations? In what ways could I both queer others and at the same time being queered? What are the possible ways for the temporal co-existence of differences? If this is not in harmony? If this is not disengaged? If this is not doing violence on both self and other? If this is love for both, a love to the light of life?

Nowadays love is too "soft" for academics; if we use it at all, we are in a hurry to add "tough" in front of it. I don't know if love is "tough" or "soft" but I do believe it is a labor pedagogically, a labor of being

watchful, as Miller's mother and Aoki's (1992/2005) teacher were. We often discuss teachable moments in education. But what about those unteachable moments when meanings are broken down, when the untranslatable stubbornly stays in the gap to rupture any efforts to put things together, when the untouchable refuses to be approached? Is love not a form of holding back and holding on until the strength is accumulated in the gap? Starting with the untranslatable but ending with love: it is too smooth; I cannot stay.

The possible moves between self and other might be unable to escape from misunderstandings. However, the power of difference might lie in its unwillingness to say too quickly or too easily: I understand you or I know how you feel, what you know, what you experience. Isn't recognizing the inevitability of misunderstandings and the untranslatable bearing more hopes and space for moving toward understanding? Accepting the possibility of misunderstandings and at the same time actively working with differences, isn't it turning the gaze inward, to see the unspeakable, the unrepresentable and the disconnectedness so that openness and diversity can be nurtured?

So I go back to ruptures, again. Actually, when the untranslatable happens, it is not uncommon to leave the foreign word as it is, with a lengthy note from the translator who explains why the word is kept as it is. One of the common reasons for doing this is that the original word's multiple meanings would be lost since another language does not have such a word to keep its multiplicity. The coexistence of different languages, alien in the beginning for the readers, creates new words for the translated language in the long run. As a matter of fact, many languages contain components of those words that were originally foreign. The purity of a language is hardly a fact. Ruptures can lead to linguistic (and cultural) invention if we don't attempt to suppress the untranslatable difference. Without allowing disconnection and its potentiality, connection runs the risk of losing creative dynamics. This creation, however, becomes possible only as a result of trying to translate. Without this stretching out of both the self and the other, what is "new" cannot be enabled.

Unsettled and uncertain, I place myself in transitional positions. I am fragmented, incomplete, just as the theme that recurs in Miller's text. I refuse to be labeled as Asian, Chinese, woman as my only names and identities. They are where I start from, my originals; but I am already on the way, in between and among the multiple intensities that have emerged and interplayed through the encountering, intensities that are willing to be translated or resist being translated.

Miller and her collaborators use "excessive moments" to examine what is repressed in research, writing, and pedagogy through juxtaposition. Inspired by their creative co-authoring, we also decided to use a playful format to convey what is unsettling. What is repressed, as a psychoanalytic notion, is also unreachable. While we might be able to reveal more and understand more as we keep working, there is always something unspoken stirring, inviting us to hear. Such a play with the untranslatable is endless, but here is where we stop as this work will continue...

Notes:

1. My thanks to Patrick Slattery for making this point during one of our conversations about translation and tradition.

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