

Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?

Jahan Ramazani
University of Virginia

ABSTRACT: What kind of home has poetry provided for code-switching over the course of the last hundred years? Given that speech and literary writing overlap but are distinct from one another, how should we think about the code-switching that's particular to poetry? What can we learn from the analysis of poetry about code-switching, and from the analysis of code-switching about poetry? These are among the impossibly large questions I broach in this essay, exploring an understudied aspect of poetry's transnationalism, with a focus on mixed anglophone examples. I argue that code-switching in poetry often points in two opposite directions at once: by virtue of breaking with monologic literariness, it heightens poetry's speech-effect, its seeming orality; and yet by virtue of its pattern-rich code-stitching, it also signals poetry's literariness, its bending back of reference on to itself, its insistence on the verbal materiality and sonic textures that resonate even across languages.

"*Daahaa, taarof nakon!*," or "Darn it, stop being so self-denyingly polite!," my parents chided me affectionately in our largely English-speaking household. They would code-switch to Persian for expressions of irritation, anger, love, and culturally specific social norms, such as *taarof* (تعارف), or the Persian system of etiquette in which you deny your own will, as in the elaborate negotiations when you're offered food or you approach a doorway or you attempt to pay a restaurant bill. Despite having been born and raised in the United States, I've often been accused of being more prone to *taarof* than is our Iranian-born family. Like Persian in my family, Yiddish in my wife's Ashkenazi family often functions as what John J. Gumperz terms a "we code," the ethnically specific speech of an insider group, as opposed to a "they code."¹ Having gradually been partly assimilated into the "we" of this "we code," I find myself saying "*Oy gevalt!*" on a daily basis in

¹ John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

our blended household, and *farblondzhet* (פאַרבלאָנדזשעט) now seems to me the indispensable term for states of befuddlement. Like everyone else, I code-switch according to social context and the “we codes” I inhabit.

Except for the particular languages involved, none of this is unique to me: in a world in which plurilingual outnumber monolingual speakers, code-switching occurs with great frequency, especially in the wake of the intensified globalization of the last century or so, with multitudes on the move, whether as elective or forced migrants. As a code-switching student of poetry and of the globalization of culture, I wonder: What kind of home has poetry provided for code-switching over the course of the last hundred years? Given that speech and literary writing overlap but are distinct from one another, how should we think about the code-switching that’s particular to poetry? What can we learn from the analysis of poetry about code-switching, and from the analysis of code-switching about poetry? These are among the impossibly large questions I broach, exploring an understudied aspect of poetry’s transnationalism, with a focus on mixed anglophone examples.²

Code-switching is a term in linguistics for the alternation between two or more languages. The term comes from communications technology, originally referring to the electronic transference of signals,³ a metaphor that both illuminates and distorts: illuminates, in that it suggests sudden shifts between discrepant systems, but distorts, in that it hypostasizes the different languages as discrete. But languages are vastly more porous than “code-switching” may suggest: languages such as the English you are reading creolizes German, French, and many other languages (including, as my two sets of relatives often remind me, Persian-derived words like *paradise*, *khaki*, and *cummerbund*, and Yiddish words like *schlep*, *shtick*, and *kvetch*). As Roman Jakobson observed in 1952, wryly glancing at Cold War divisions, languages in contact with one another do not exist “in segregation. If there is an iron curtain, we know how easily such a curtain is penetrated by various forms of verbal communication.”⁴ And as Steven G. Kellman writes, “Linguistic purity is of course a chimera; English, Korean, and Arabic are each already mongrel, and creolization among existing languages proceeds wherever cultures touch and collide, which is to say virtually everywhere.”⁵ Alert to the origins of words and the routes they’ve traveled, poets often make visible the permeability of languages. Even though code-switching mainly designates, as in this essay, switching between what are conventionally understood to be languages, the distinction between interlingual and intralingual code-switching isn’t hard and fast. Switching sociolects—say, between formal and dialect or pidgin varieties of a language—can be as significant in plurilingual settings as interlingual code-switching.⁶ Creoles are often held to be

² Most of the criticism on code-switching poetry is culturally or ethnically delimited—Latino/a, Afro-Caribbean, Native American, African American, Arab—as indicated by the sampling in the notes below. On the US context, see Juliana Spahr’s recent overview, “Multilingualism in Contemporary American Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, ed. Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1123–43.

³ Penelope Gardner-Chloros, *Code-Switching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.

⁴ Roman Jakobson, “Results of a Joint Conference of Anthropologists and Linguists,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 561.

⁵ Steven G. Kellman, “Translingualism and the American Literary Imagination,” in *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, ed. Marc Shell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 460–61.

⁶ Michael Meeuwis and Jan Blommaert, “A Monolectal View of Code-Switching: Layered Code-Switching among Zairians in Belgium,” in *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity*, ed. Peter Auer

distinct languages, and so switching from Standard English to Jamaican Creole can be counted as either inter- or intralingual code-switching. But code-switching has often been denigrated as a corruption or as ill-mannered behavior, even by those who practice it, especially where linguistic purity is an ideal,⁷ and one reason poets bring code-switching into the culturally prestigious discourse of poetry is to legitimize such interlingual speech.

Is code-switching a liability for or a benefit to poetry? On the one side, it has been seen as detrimental. Exemplifying this position with clarity and force, Helen Vendler wrote, in a review of the poetry collection *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), that Derek Walcott, though admirable in many ways, had not established a “conclusive and satisfying aesthetic relation” between his formal diction and his Saint Lucian patois:

A macaronic aesthetic, using two or more languages at once, has never yet been sustained in poetry at any length. There are Hispano-American poets now writing in a mixture of Spanish and English, where neither language gains mastery; once again, such work may accurately reflect their linguistic predicament, but the mixed diction has yet to validate itself as a literary resource with aesthetic power. These macaronic strategies at least break up the expected; and anyone can understand Walcott’s impulse to wreck his stately and ceremonious rhythms.⁸

Walcott’s defenders have argued for the validity of his code-switching primarily on mimetic grounds: that the poet is being faithful to the texture of everyday speech in Saint Lucia, where people switch regularly among French Creole, English Creole, and Standard English—a legacy of alternating French and British colonial rule. Scholars of code-switching in English-Spanish poetry, Arabic-French rap, and Japanese-English popular songs often make analogous arguments. Although I agree with these scholars about the social contexts of code-switching and have made similar claims, when it comes to poetry in particular such sociolinguistic arguments aren’t exhaustive. As Gary D. Keller writes in relation to Chicano/a writers, “there *must be* significant differences between literary code-switching and real life code-switching.”⁹ Many poets living in interlingual societies have eschewed literary code-switching, writing instead in one or another language, often the more reputable one but occasionally the more humble. Although I am more sanguine than Vendler is about the possibilities of a “macaronic aesthetic,” she raises a question not fully answered by the mimetic defense—whether a given poet has established a “satisfying aesthetic relation” between the languages straddled in a poem. Like any other linguistic or poetic resource—parataxis and hypotaxis, rhyme and enjambment, alliteration and assonance—code-switching can be used poorly or deftly, in a way that is tired or fresh, hackneyed or vivifying.

Although not responding directly to Vendler, a critic on the other side of this issue, also writing about Walcott, makes the opposite general claim. Citing a heavily code-switching poem of 1976, “Sainte Lucie,” Ted Chamberlin argues, “Both for Walcott and for West Indian poetry, this poem marks a turning point, bringing together a mature poet’s confidence in his literary inheritance with a corresponding—and newly found—confidence in his West Indian heritage,” listing names of places, flora, and fauna of his island, such as “Laborie, Choiseul, Vieuxfort, Dennerly,” or

(London: Routledge, 1998), 76–98.

⁷ Gardner-Chloros, *Code-Switching*, 81–82.

⁸ Helen Vendler, “Poet of Two Worlds,” review of *The Fortunate Traveller*, by Derek Walcott, *New York Review of Books*, March 4, 1982, 26.

⁹ Gary D. Keller, “The Literary Stratagems Available to the Bilingual Chicano Writer,” in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, ed. Francisco Jiménez (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual Press, 1979), 269.

Pomme arac,
 otaheite apple,
 pomme cythère,
 pomme granate,
 moubain,
 z'anananas
 the pineapple's
 Aztec helmet,

 Come back to me
 my language.¹⁰

Chamberlin concludes: “This is where contemporary West Indian poetry begins, not so much with this poem alone as with the distinctive ambitions it represents.”¹¹ The stark differences between these claims for and against code-switching poetry can help frame our investigation. Bearing them in mind, let’s consider examples from a small sampling of worldwide communities to help develop and refine our understanding of both the aesthetics and the social mimesis of a macaronic poetics, including Latino/a, Caribbean, Euro-modernist, black British, Asian American, and Pacific Islander.

Published in the same year as Walcott’s *Fortunate Traveller*, “Poema para los Californios Muertos” in the book *Emplumada* by Lorna Dee Cervantes exemplifies the abundant Spanish-English code-switching in Latino/a poetry to which Vendler refers (and indeed, for all her misgivings about the macaronic, Vendler included the poem in one of her anthologies).¹² What light does this poem shed on either the social mimetic or the aesthetic templates for poetic code-switching? It meditates on a plaque outside a restaurant in Los Altos, California, which marks the site as a refuge for Mexican Californios. Written mostly in English, the poem switches frequently into Spanish, in keeping with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* manifesto, published a few years later with her own code-switching poems: “The switching of ‘codes’ in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands.”¹³ Cervantes turns to Spanish particularly for words that function as markers of identity, or a “we code,” as we might expect in Chicana poetry, such as words for the earth (“la tierra”), mother (“la madre”), blood (“la sangre fértil”), as well as curses on white people that might read less well in English.¹⁴ Linguists identify this as “metaphorical” or “emblematic” code-switching, the turn to a language

¹⁰ J. Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 99; and Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 309, 310.

¹¹ Chamberlin, *Come Back*, 100.

¹² Helen Vendler, ed., *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 168–69.

¹³ Gloria Anzaldúa, preface to *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Co., 1987), n.p.

¹⁴ Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Poema para los Californios Muertos,” in *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 43.

for the cultural world it evokes.¹⁵ Work on Latino/a code-switching often emphasizes its affirmation of cultural identity and resistance. In Cervantes's case, such emblematic code-switching is particularly intriguing since, even though we might assume she is returning to her "native" language, she grew up speaking primarily English because Spanish was forbidden to her. Reclaiming her ancestral and cultural language in the poem is itself a performative act. So the poem both meets and complicates the social context paradigm: a poem's code-switching may not merely reflect participation in a borderland or contact zone or mixed society but stage, enact, even will it.

Coming after four lines of Spanish, the poem ends with a code-switching strophe:

In this place I see nothing but strangers.
 On the shelves there are bitter antiques,
 yanqui remnants
 y estos no de los Californios.
 A blue jay shrieks
 above the pungent odor of crushed
 eucalyptus and the pure scent
 of rage.¹⁶

Although most of the poem pits Chicano/a against white culture ("white, high-class houses" and "fantasmas blancas"),¹⁷ seeing in the landscape a record of rape, exploitation, and violence perpetrated against the Californios, and although the poem closes on a note of resistant anger, the ending sonically and orthographically knits together the English and Spanish it has been playing against one another. In three successive words, Spanish in the middle, the phonemes /an/ and /k/ and the letters *qu* cross the linguistic and cultural divide: "antiques, / yanqui remnants." Three lines also begin with a /y/ sound: "yanqui," "y estos," and "eucalyptus." The eucalyptus, an alien species that, like the white settlers who imported it, took dominion over California, sonically recalls not only "yanqui" but also the apostrophe earlier to "you," the ghosts of the Californios, to whom the speaker pledges herself. Whereas prose fiction, TV, movies, and other genres also deploy code-switching to represent the sociolinguistic context of Chicano/a experience, cross-lingual chiming is more marked in poetry. It's in poetry that code-switching often becomes code-stitching. Almost against the grain of the poet's apparent desire to pit Hispanic and English cultures against one another, the poetic impetus toward sonic and conceptual coupling interbraids the two tongues.

¹⁵ Jan-Petter Blom and John J. Gumperz, "Social Meaning in Linguistic Structures: Code-Switching in Northern Norway," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972). Also pertinent is Carol Myers-Scotton, "Codeswitching with English: Types of Switching, Types of Communities," *World Englishes* 8, no. 3 (1989): 333–46.

¹⁶ Cervantes, *Emplumada*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

To return briefly to Walcott, we recall that his *Omeros* frequently switches from formal literary English into French and English creoles:

Mais qui ça qui rivait-ous, Philoctete?"

"Moin blessé."

"But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?"

"I am blest

wif this wound, Ma Kilman, *qui pas ka guérir pièce.*

Which will never heal."¹⁸

Walcott is playing here on a convention of literary code-switching in which the "foreign" language is translated, except that here it is punningly mistranslated, when the French and French Creole for "wounded," *blessé*, becomes "blest." The rest of the long poem will explore how the wounds inflicted by colonialism, including the imposition of European languages on enslaved Africans and their descendants, can sometimes be turned into blessings.¹⁹ Walcott and Cervantes are being true to the social worlds that formed them, but they are also being true to the medium of poetry. As in Cervantes's "antiques, / yanqui remnants" and Walcott's "*blessé*" and "blest," the campaign slogan "I like Ike" performs an insistent sonic repetition that, for Roman Jakobson, is fundamental to "poeticity" or "the poetic function of language."²⁰ "The poetic function," he famously claimed, "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."²¹ Poetry draws on the repeated sonic patterns in everyday language and intensifies them, amplifying this poeticity to the point where its artifice is inescapable. Poetry "is the form that most clearly asserts the specificity of literature, its difference from ordinary discourse," according to Jonathan Culler; "the specific features of poetry have the function of differentiating it from speech and altering the circuit of communication within which it is inscribed."²² The idea might well seem bizarre in this context, since code-switching is usually seen as bringing a literary text closer to speech, to the actual exchanges of daily life, as opposed to the monologic formality of high literary writing. Nineteenth-century novelists like Charles Dickens enhanced prose fiction's speechlike social mimesis by code-switching into different sociolects, a heteroglossia that was, as Bakhtin famously argued, less common in poetry.²³ But code-switching in poetry often points in two opposite directions at once: by virtue of breaking with monologic literariness, it heightens poetry's speech-effect, its seeming orality; and yet by virtue of its pattern-rich code-stitching, it also signals poetry's literariness, its bending back of reference on to itself, its insistence on the verbal materiality and sonic textures that resonate even across languages.

¹⁸ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 18–19.

¹⁹ On the wound trope in *Omeros*, see Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), chap. 3. On bilingual jokes, see Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Language and Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²² Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Language and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 162.

²³ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

There are, of course, precedents for the code-switching in contemporary poetry, such as multilingual medieval lyrics and Renaissance poems like Tifi Odasi's satiric "Macaronea," which may be the source of the word "macaronic,"²⁴ and later poems like Byron's *Don Juan* that embed learned foreign tags. The modernists Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, as well as Mina Loy, Louis Zukofsky, and Melvin Tolson, among others, dramatically break poetry open again to polyglossia. In the modernist era, poetry may lag behind fiction in its heteroglossia (intra-lingual code-switching), but it leaps ahead of fiction in its experiments in polyglossia (interlingual code-switching), partly because of poetry's relative freedom from the constraints of realist mimesis. In *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* Pound switches between English and multiple languages, both dead and alive, including ancient Greek:

O bright Apollo,
 τίς' ἀνδρα, τίς' ἥρωα, τίνα θεόν,
 What god, man, or hero
 Shall I place a tin wreath upon!²⁵

Here, the standard defense of code-switching as socially mimetic falls short—what sociologists Paul Drew and John Heritage term "the 'bucket' theory of context in which some preestablished social framework is viewed as 'containing' [and thus fully explaining] the participants' actions."²⁶ It would be hard to argue that, just as Cervantes and Walcott are imitating the speech of their social worlds, so too is Ezra Pound in adopting Attic Greek, or Eliot in switching to Sanskrit in *The Waste Land*. We would have to reconceptualize the argument at a higher level of abstraction, seeing their code-switching as belonging to a moment in the history of globalization, which brought poets and their elite readership into contact with multiple literary and cultural traditions, including those of East Asia for Pound, who script-switches into Chinese in *The Cantos*. As for the aesthetics of code-switching, Pound is alert to the cross-lingual chimes, puns, and rhymes we've seen in other poems: he ironically enacts in this sonic coupling the degeneration from the Greek Olympians eulogized by Pindar (the "tin" sound as an exclamation of wonder) to the "tawdry cheapness" of their modern replacements ("tin" now as a base metal). Such interlingual punning is to be found not only in such markedly scribal poetry but also in oral forms like rap and rai, with their cross-lingual play on homophones such as the French *là* (there) and the Arabic *la* (no).²⁷ Code-switching in everyday speech is often focused on the addressee, whether a speaker changes languages to signify cultural commonality or to resist the expectations of linguistic code and adopt an alternative affiliation. Though implicated in such efforts, poets partly short-circuit the path of direct communication and turn the emphasis back on the linguistic medium itself, as evidenced in such cross-lingual sonic play that couples phonemes across languages in surprising ways.

But is interlingual chiming the only aesthetic function of code-switching in poetry? Two contemporary poets who may seem Pound's diametric opposite but who, like him, switch into

²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, q.v. "macaronic," etym., accessed April 15, 2015, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

²⁵ Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, in *Poems, 1918–21, Including Three Portraits and Four Cantos* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), lines 57–60. The Greek line may be transliterated "tin andra, tin eroa, tina theon."

²⁶ Paul Drew and John Heritage, "Analyzing Talk at Work: An Introduction," in *Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings*, ed. Paul Drew and John Heritage (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19.

²⁷ See the rai lyrics cited in Eirlys E. Davies and Abdelali Bentahila, "Code-Switching as a Poetic Device: Examples from Rai Lyrics," *Language and Communication* 28, no. 1 (2008): 12–13.

ancient classical and other languages illustrate other possibilities. The black British poet of English and Nigerian descent Bernardine Evaristo, whose novel-in-verse *The Emperor's Babe* is set in third-century Roman London, switches at remarkable speed between languages and registers. Her Afro-Roman heroine Zuleika recalls the value of her elocution lessons, having learned not “How now brown cow” but “*How nunc brown vacca*,” imperiously confronting her Scottish slaves and “sounding like every magniloqua // matrona I’d ever had the misfortune to meet.”²⁸ The mishmash of English with Latin, Italian, Scots, and black British vernacular, of high literary registers with racily colloquial street slang—“these macaronic strategies,” as Vendler conceded of Walcott, “break up the expected.” Evaristo’s code-switching functions partly as social mimesis, although complexly indexed both to today’s postcolonial, multiethnic London and to the classical Londinium that surprisingly anticipated it. And it functions aesthetically, heightening the humor of the anachronistic paralleling of ancient past and present (“*How nunc brown vacca*”) and energizing the verse’s texture by shifting language gears to propel the verse forward. Along with code-stitching, code-skipping is part of what a macaronic poetics can do for a poem. Perhaps this combination of stitching and skipping shouldn’t surprise us, since various aspects of the aesthetics of poetry centrally involve the play of resemblances that both yoke and contrast, both lump and split—whether figures of thought, such as metaphor and metonymy, or figures of speech, such as rhyme, anaphora, and assonance.

In Korean American poet Cathy Park Hong’s *Dance Dance Revolution*, a desert city tour guide even more hectically switches between English and other languages, including Latin, Spanish, West Indian English, and East Asian pidgins, as in her *invocatio* of a neon billboard ad:

... Opal o opus,
 behole, neon hibiscus bloom beacons!
 “Tan Lotion Tanya” billboard... she
 your lucent Virgil, den I’s taka ova
 as talky Virgil... want some tea? Some pelehoo?

 I speak sum Han-guk y Finnish, good bit o Latin
 y Spanish... sum toto Desert Creole en evachanging dipdong
 ’pendable on mine mood... ibid...²⁹

In contemporary poetry studies, neither the avant-garde collage and pastiche paradigm nor the lyric, unitary-voice paradigm is adequate to a code-switching poem like this. No less than Walcott, Cervantes, and Evaristo, Hong has it both ways. She twins polyglot collage with integrative harmonic voicing: her poetry playfully compresses multilingual heterogeneity within the awareness of her Dantean tour guide, a survivor of the 1980 Kwangju uprising. Instead of seeing code-switching and creolization as the degeneration of English, its corruption by the forces of globalization, all these poets revel in the linguistic vitality made available by intercultural contact. As such, they don’t fully conform to the view that, in Juliana Spahr’s words, the motives behind multilingual poetry are often “a form of realism or a pointed resistance to globalizing

²⁸ Bernardine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (London: Penguin, 2001), 204. I offer a more extended reading in *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 175–80.

²⁹ Cathy Park Hong, *Dance Dance Revolution* (New York: Norton, 2007), 25.

English.”³⁰ In Hong’s case, along with the vividly macaronic aesthetics of code-stitching and code-skipping, the poetry has a “realist” (social and contextual) function. But it is far in excess of our usual accounts of creolization as reflective of communication patterns of sociolinguistic groups brought into contact. Instead, just as Evaristo’s code-switching evokes not only the present but also the ancient past and layers temporalities in surprising ways, so too Hong’s forges a made-up creole that corresponds to no currently extant hybrid society but one that might come about some day. Both poets make use of poetry’s relative temporal freedom by layering mimesis of today’s speech practices with those of other times, whether the ancient past or the emergent future. Overflowing the “bucket” of contemporary social context, the exuberant play and sonic excess of such macaronic poetics recall much older histories and project new futures of interlingual experience.

As is well known, postcolonial writers often code-switch into a local language to reclaim, as Chamberlin suggested of Walcott, lost or subordinate or denigrated areas of cultural experience (“Come back to me / my language”). They lace Standard English with the untranslatable names of local flora, fauna, or divinities, as in Okot p’ Bitek’s Acholi; with robustly humorous expressions and translingual puns, as in Daljit Nagra’s Punjabi; and with introspective self-address or implied address to a local audience, as in Lorna Goodison’s Jamaican Creole. But in these and other examples, as in Cervantes, code-switching often complicates even as it fulfills paradigms of cultural affirmation, resistance, and indigenization. Consider Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite’s epic trilogy *The Arrivants*, often seen as a poetic landmark of cultural decolonization. In the middle section, *Masks*, the poet delves into Akan, linguistically replicating the poem’s narrative and ideological return to the mother continent from which Brathwaite’s African ancestors were sold into slavery. But when the speaker travels to Ghana, where Brathwaite worked from 1955 to 1962, his welcome in Akan typifies his crisis of understanding who he is and where he is from:

Akwaaba they smiled
 meaning welcome

akwaaba they called
 aye kooo

well have you walked
 have you journeyed

welcome

you who have come
 back a stranger
 after three hundred years³¹

³⁰ Spahr, “Multilingualism in Contemporary American Poetry,” 1124.

³¹ Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, “The New Ships,” in *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 124–25. On *Masks*, see Robert Fraser, *Edward Brathwaite, “Masks”: A Critical View*, ed. Yolande Cantù (London: Rex Collings, 1981).

The welcome is warm, as echoed in self-translation, but the poet falters when asked, “do / you remember?”³² As Stuart Hall writes, and as Brathwaite’s code-switching from exuberant Akan to melancholy English suggests, “cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying outside history and culture. . . . It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return.”³³ The poet’s effort to reconnect with his African origins yields questions and uncertainties:

I tossed my net
but the net caught
no fish

I dipped a wish
but the well
was dry³⁴

Elsewhere in the book, Brathwaite incorporates Akan drum words and prayers that, as rhythms and sonorities seemingly echoing from the ancestral past, reaffirm black Atlantic continuities and connections. But sometimes the switch into Akan figures both longing and alienation, both the desire to rejoin and the estrangement from ancestral origins. In poems like Brathwaite’s, a macaronic aesthetic proves compatible both with the recuperative quest and with the ambiguities and ambivalences of that quest.

Another poet who code-switches partly to signify cultural identity and resistance, Craig Santos Perez, from the Pacific island of Guam, sometimes switches into Chamoru, the territory’s indigenous language, embattled under American occupation. The native words are like islands of cultural continuity, history, and identity in a sea of English. But Perez shows such words to be not only anchors of native rootedness but also arrivals in a history of routing, travel, and movement. In his first book, the prickly *achiote* plant signifies for Perez the indigenous culture of his grandparents, even as he also traces it back through trade routes to Mayan Central America and the Caribbean where it originated.³⁵ In his second book, the word *saina*, used for parents or ancestors, is also the name given in 2007 to a *sakman*, or outrigger canoe, built on Guam—the first such large *sakman* constructed there for centuries.³⁶ As such, *saina* in the book of poems by that name figures both indigenous ancestry and oceanic mobility. As in Brathwaite’s poetry, code-switching supports a strongly indigenist perspective, but one that is flexible enough to open out on to cross-cultural horizons, including in this case transnational affiliations with the code-switching writers Perez cites, such as Charles Olson, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Nathaniel Mackey, and Myung Mi Kim.

³² Brathwaite, “The New Ships,” 124.

³³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 226.

³⁴ Brathwaite, “The New Ships,” 125.

³⁵ Craig Santos Perez, *from Unincorporated Territory [hacha]* (Kāne’ohe, HI: Tinfish, 2008), 17.

³⁶ Craig Santos Perez, *from Unincorporated Territory [saina]* (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2010), 14–15.

A paragraph of Perez's prose poetry reflects directly on the code-switching it is enacting, noting the traditional power relations between the languages:

i say "saina" and i know i am not between two languages—not between fluency and fluency—not a simple switch—i say "saina"—heat along converging diverging linguistic boundaries—i write "saina"—seamount, island—within torrents of English—i am not between two languages—one language controls me and the other is a lost ocean—wavelength, wavebreak—not code, but compositions of history, story, genealogy, sound, change, meaning, practices—i say "saina" and it weaves the air i write 'saina' and it roots i read "saina" envelops—³⁷

More than most everyday code-switching for the purposes of communication among bi- or multilinguals, Perez's chanting of his relation to the Chamoru word—exhibiting poetry's characteristic recursiveness and reflexivity—meditates on the significance of moving between the languages. Bringing Chamoru words like *saina* into powerful "torrents of English" isn't as simple as "switching," because of the historical inequities between users of these languages; and the politically subordinate language isn't a mere "code," because it evokes a whole cultural history. Perez's poem enacts both code-switching and meta-code-switching. It straddles the charged divide between the languages and reflects on what it means to do so. It makes use of the gaps between the two languages it presses together to reflect on each in light of the other. The Chamoru word *saina* both "weaves the air" and "roots," both transnationalizes and indigenizes. Albeit drawing on the poet's intimate experience of Pacific Island code-switching, the poem's theorization of itself, its metaphorization of the subordinate language (at once "seamount, island" and "a lost ocean"), and its chant-like craftedness make of it more than a mere drop in the "bucket" of contextual speech.



The poetic uses of code-switching include those I've encapsulated as code-stitching, code-skipping, and self-reflexivity; humor, localized address, and self-address; the performance of cultural and cross-cultural identities in the present and of interlingualism in past and future histories; the reclamation of indigeneity and the marking of social alienation; the affirmation of rootedness and the enactment of geographic mobility. Sometimes the aesthetic and social mimetic functions of code-switching work together, as in Evaristo's and Hong's macaronic evocations of macaronic societies of the past, present, and future; at other times they work against one another, as when Cervantes sets English and Spanish against one another as social metonyms but aesthetically intertwines them, or when Brathwaite integrates Akan into his English but marks his distance from the African social world it figures. This complexity suggests caution in applying speech models to code-switching poetry, since poems have their own imperatives toward recursiveness, play, chiming, multiple temporalities, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity, which tend to figure less prominently—though they also occur—in everyday exchanges.

³⁷ Perez, "from sourcings," in *ibid.*, 111.

Because code-switching in poetry often seems to hover between speech and writing, we might look to it to resolve ongoing debates over whether to emphasize the scribal or the oral dimensions of poetry, its textuality or its performativity.³⁸ If we do, we are likely to be disappointed, since such positions are inevitably bound by the hermeneutic circle. Whether you come to poetry thinking about it primarily in terms of its written, textual, on-page or on-screen inscription, or primarily in terms of its vocal, performative embodiment and reception, you will unsurprisingly find the oral or literary dimension of specific poems to be paramount. Of course, some poems bear their own emphases on the scribal-oral spectrum, from concrete poems at one end to slam, rap, dub, and sound poetry at the other. But even a heavily “scribal” poem can be examined for its oral/auditory textures and resonances (e.g., high modernism or Language writing), and even a seemingly “oral” poem can be explored through a literary lens (e.g., rap or dub poetry). Code-switching poetry would seem to tip the scales in the direction of orality, often foregrounding the speech-effect of even highly literary poetry, but sometimes the opposite is true. When Adrienne Rich sprinkles “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” with the Latin “*tempora and mores*” and the “argument *ad feminam*” and the French “*ma semblable, ma soeur!*” and “*fertilisante douleur,*” she intensifies—much to her chagrin years later—the literariness of her partly high-modernist, partly confessional poem.³⁹ As we saw in Evaristo’s code-switching into Latin and Italian, a macaronic aesthetic can heighten a text’s speechlikeness, but in other moments, as when her novel-in-verse quotes Ovid or Cicero, the effect can be decidedly bookish. Code-switching can serve either the oralist or the writerly paradigm for poetry. Or in cases such as Walcott’s pun on *blesé* and *blest*, Pound’s on “*τίν*” and “*tin,*” or Cervantes’s cross-lingual patterning, it can serve both at the same time.

A macaronic poetics foregrounds the always-already dialogic nature of even the supposedly unitary poetic voice. All thought, all discourse, argued Bakhtin, is dialogic—formed in linguistic give-and-take with others—but with code-switching, it becomes all the more overtly so.⁴⁰ Even in lyric poems, though considered by Bakhtin and others to be expressions of a closed inner self, code-switching contravenes the notion of a subjectivity sealed off from linguistic impurities and delivering an inner essence on the page or in performance. Because poetry foregrounds the languageness of language—its verbal weight, texture, and history—code-switching poetry, creating an image of how different languages intersect, interact, and jostle, helps fine-tune our alertness to the congeries of languages, sociolects, and dialects even in seemingly monologic and monolingual speech. In a global age of increased human mobility and cross-cultural contact, code-switching is one of poetry’s most visible and audible ways of giving shape and meaning to the convergences of peoples, texts, and cultures across sometimes-large cultural and social distances. Poets intercept, reshape, and torque our multilects and in doing so help bring new interlingual forms into the world. A

³⁸ On these debates, see Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), chap. 1. See also Charles Bernstein’s introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–26.

³⁹ Adrienne Rich, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 10–11. Rich describes the poem as an advance over her earlier poetry but “too literary, too dependent on allusion,” in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision,” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, 175.

⁴⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 92.



Thanks to Vered Karti Shemtov, Anat Weisman, Amir Eshel, and Giddon Ticotsky for the invitation to write and present a version of this essay at the Stanford conference “Spoken Word, Written Word: Rethinking the Representation of Speech in Literature.”

