Ethnic Minority Writing:
The Complexities Surrounding Authenticity, Translation, and Representation in a Global Environment

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the complex issues surrounding authenticity and ethnic minority writing. It also addresses the broader global issues involved when an individual is educated in the West and then attempts to speak for his or her particular ethnic group. The paper concludes with a specific example regarding the complexities of translating a Japanese passage into English and discusses the little-known concept of "deterritorialization."

Key words: authenticity, ethnic minority writing, translation and representation, and deterritorialization

Who is an authentic ethnic minority writer? How do we know if an individual truly has the authority to speak for his or her particular community? Does a Western education limit one’s ability to speak for his or her ethnic culture? If we assume that an individual does have the authority to speak for a particular group, can his or her writing be translated into another language and still retain the intended meaning? These are just a few of the questions that arise when discussing ethnic minority writing in Western nations. In this essay, I will use Joseph Pivato’s “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction” and attempt to answer the questions above. I will then conclude with an example that demonstrates just how complex the problems of representation in ethnic minority writing can be.

Identifying with Minorities

In the essay “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” Joseph Pivato writes, “I have often focussed on the voice of the writer and his/her authority to speak about the minority experience” (Literary Pluralities, p. 153). Pivato raises a valid point and thus, before I start with my analysis, I will attempt to explain where my voice is coming from. In “Ethnicity and Race: Canadian Minority Writing at a Crossroads,” Enoch Padolsky cites the following provocative passage from Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms:

People talk race this ethnic that. It’s easy to be theoretical if the words are coming from a face that has little or no pigmentation (Literary Pluralities, p. 19).

I am, to all intents and purposes, a white man. I’m assuming that Goto is referring to me as an individual with “little or no pigmentation” in my face and therefore a person who can only be “theoretical” about the issues of race and ethnicity. Unlike many North American white men, however, I do know what it feels like to be a visible minority. I have been living in Tokyo for the past twenty years and have experienced the highs and lows that come with being visibly different in this society.

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In M.G. Vassanji’s *No New Land*, Nanji, an Asian immigrant from Africa, describes his typical ride on a Toronto streetcar:

He got in and remained seated alone all the way, even when most of the seats were taken and some passengers stood. This happened often to him. Racism, the word kept intruding into his mind and he kept pushing it back. On what basis racism (p. 93)?

Like Nanji, I know what it feels like to sit on a bus or a train and have the seat beside me remain vacant while other passengers elect to stand. I also know what it feels like to witness older women glare at my Japanese wife and openly display their disapproval of our relationship. Just like Nanji, I have let those guilty of racism “walk smugly away because you can never be quick enough with a reply. Feeling angry and frustrated afterwards” (p. 93). In “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” Pivato asks the question, “How can we understand the difference between the dominant cultures and the subordinate ones” (Literary Pluralities, p. 158)? My answer, if a person from the dominant culture in most Western societies lives in a country where he or she is not a member of the dominant group, then he or she will have a better understanding of what it feels like to be an ethnic minority in countries like America, Canada and/or Australia.

Being a visible minority in Tokyo has also taught me about the varying levels of discrimination. I have been an actor/model/extra for many years and I am typically cast as a bodyguard or secret service agent. Quite often, I will be partnered up with an African or an African-American man as tall or taller than I am. This is not uncommon, one white and one black man fit the Japanese stereotypical image of the American secret police. I am six feet four inches tall and yet I can walk down the streets of Tokyo with an African male as tall as I am and suddenly feel invisible. When we walk together, no one stares at me and no longer is the seat next to me the last one to be occupied. For some reason, all of the stares go right passed me and focus on my dark-skinned friend. For me, this is a unique and puzzling experience, but for my friend, it is just another day of being a black man in Tokyo. Am I describing racism? I don’t know. I do know that I am a visible minority in Japan, but I am looked at in a different way from other visible minorities. So, like Goto implies, I may be lacking in skin pigmentation, but maybe, just maybe, I am speaking with a voice that is not entirely theoretical, perhaps I am speaking with some sort of authenticity?

**Who Speaks with an Authentic Voice?**

Before we even begin to discuss credible ethnic minority writers, we still do not have a precise definition as to who actually is or is not an authentic minority writer. There also appears to be a difference of opinion as to who truly understands the Western ethnic minority experience. In “Imagination, Representation, and Culture,” Myrna Kostash writes, “In a word, I had discovered that, in the new terms of the discourse, I was white. I was a member of a privileged majority. I was part of the problem, not the solution” (Literary Pluralities, p. 92). In *Making a Difference*, Ven Begamudre is quoted in the following passage.

‘There’s a lot of agonizing going on about the role of the minority writer in this country,’ he says. ‘But you have to look at what kind of minority the writer is from, and what class they belong to. The kind of person who comes here from a Third World country and has to write when he’s not mopping someone else’s floor is in a completely different position from someone whose parents were allowed into the country because Canada needed doctors or scientists’ (p. 441).

So, who does and who doesn’t really understand what it is like to be an authentic ethnic minority writer? Myrna Kostash, Joseph Pivato and Caterina Edwards are all fine examples of ethnic minority writers, but as Begamudre points out, there is a big difference between their status and those of whom are much more visibly different from the dominant culture. Begamudre’s arguments are not without merit, but they tend to isolate or discredit others from feeling like legitimate ethnic minority representatives. Like Kostash, I believe, “We are involved with each other in a dialectic of community and society in which no single identity defines us. We
are, at one and the same time, persons of a certain sex, profession, religion, birthplace, language, ethnicity’’ (Literary Pluralities, p. 94). If writers and critics can just move past the issue of who does and who doesn’t understand ethnic minorities, then they will be able to focus on authentic and legitimate representation.

In “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” Pivato asks, “Who decides that someone speaks for a particular group” (Literary Pluralities, p. 153)? He answers his question by writing, “We must assume that the groups consent to these writers speaking for them” (p. 153). However, if we can only “assume” that an ethnic minority writer speaks for his or her community, then we will always be left with questions of authentic representation. On the other hand, it would be absurd to assume that ethnic minority writers can only write about ethnic minority experiences and thus one cannot simply assume that a person of a particular race or culture automatically represents his or her community with whatever he or she writes. According to Rohinton Mistry, members “in the establishment” expect ethnic minority writers to write about race or multiculturalism. He states that an ethnic minority writer has “an area of expertise foisted on him which he may not necessarily want, or which may not really interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations” (Making a Difference, p. 387). Austin Clarke echoes Mistry’s comments when he writes, “There was a time when I reveled in the characterization of a black writer…. Now I am simply a writer and if someone knows me he knows I am black. I am not writing things simply of interest to blacks” (p. 98). If one does not know the true intent of a writer’s work, then Pivato has answered his question above correctly, and one is left to make assumptions as to who actually represents his or her community. These individual assumptions leave us without any concrete answers and thus conflicts as to who is and who isn’t a proper cultural representative will always be debatable.

While some ethnic minority writers may not be concerned with representing their respective communities, others may face criticism from within their groups as inauthentic representatives. George Elliot Clarke is a renowned poet, playwright and literary critic and he has written several pieces on African-Canadian culture. In Making a Difference, Clarke is quoted in the following:

‘I seek to bear witness to the beauty, history and life of my too-often neglected, my too -often vilified community,’ says George Elliot Clarke. ‘I want to give voice to what it means, feels, to be Black Nova Scotian or, to use my neologism, Africadian’ (p. 491). In “Treason of the Black Intellectuals,” however, Clarke points out that even he has had problems representing his community.

My second proof of arguable treason transpired in Toronto, in July 1997, when, following a dramatic reading of my verse-play, Beatrice Chancy (pub 1999), which treats slavery in early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, a (presumably) mulatto poet, renowned in Toronto, looked me flat in my ochre eyes and said, damningly, “It’s a mulatto play.” I remain mystified as to the identity of the target of her imprecation, whether it was me or the mixed-race heroine of the tragedy. Perhaps she meant to denounce both author and character. Even so, her act of treason lay in her implication that the mixed-race reality, whatever it is, cannot be reasonably interrogated or critiqued by any truly black-oriented artist or intellectual (p. 1).

In the same piece, Clarke mentions that on more than one occasion his authenticity as an African-Canadian representative has been questioned because, to use his mother’s words, his skin colour is “‘tantalizingly tan’ and not ‘beautifully black’” (p. 1). Clarke is a seventh-generation Canadian. He was won numerous awards and critical recognition around the world, so the fact that his credentials and intentions can be questioned demonstrates the difficulties some ethnic minority writers face when attempting to represent their communities.

A second example that raises the question of authentic ethnic minority representation can be taken from M.G. Vassanji’s writing. Despite being born in Nairobi and raised in Tanzania, Vassanji is not typically looked upon as an African-Canadian. In Making a Difference, Vassanji is quoted as saying “Although we
were Africans, we were also Indians” (p. 355). In No New Land, Vassanji writes about East Africans from Dar es Salaam and their experiences immigrating to Canada. The characters in his story not only deal with the adjustments of living in a new country, they also face racial discrimination on many levels. One character named Esmail, gets thrown down onto train tracks and as a result breaks both of his ankles. Before the assault, Esmail’s attackers shouted, “What do you have there, Paki? Hey, hey? Paki-paki-paki…” (p. 95), an obvious discriminatory reference towards people from Pakistan and not East Africans. The characters in No New Land are often mistakenly referred to as “Pakis,” indicating that they share some similar physical characteristics to Pakistanis and thus deal with similar forms of racial discrimination. One could ask who exactly is represented in this book? Does it only speak to those immigrants from Dar es Salaam, or, because the characters face similar racial discrimination to Pakistanis, does it represent all Canadians sharing these similar physical characteristics? One character in Vassanji’s novel adamantly points out that she is not Pakistani when she says, “Why doesn’t someone tell these Canadians we are not Pakis. I have never been to Pakistan, have you been to Pakistan? Tell them we are East Africans” (p. 103)! The woman even uses the same derogatory language as the white racist Canadians when referring to the Pakistani people. She wants to be seen for who she is and there is nothing wrong with this, but does the statement, “we are not Pakis,” isolate other ethnic cultures? If readers assume that No New Land only represents East African communities from Tanzania, then entire communities sharing similar experiences will have gone unrepresented. This would be unfortunate, and once again we are left with our individual assumptions as to who is actually represented in this book. To my mind, No New Land speaks to a variety of ethnic minorities in Canada, but this is only my interpretation. Other readers may interpret the book differently and form entirely different opinions, further highlighting the difficulties of representation.

A Western Education and the Growing Separation from One’s Community

If an ethnic minority writer has been educated in a Western country, he or she may also face significant problems of representation. Pivato asks, if these writers use “the language of the dominant culture and the discourse of the sophisticated theory, can they still address the concerns of the marginal community” (Literary Pluralities, p 157)? He offers a possible answer to this question in his essay “Translation as Existence,” when he writes, “if the writer is successful with his English or French writing it is often because he has begun to be assimilated into the majority culture” (Echo, p. 118). In “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction” he writes,

With every university degree there comes a level of separation between the writer and his/h her community. And so we can see that the only concrete links this person may have with these original roots is to try to speak with and for these people (p. 157).

According to Pivato, a Western educated writer can “try to speak” for his community while readers can only “assume” that these writers in fact do speak for their ethnic cultures. This indicates that a higher education does not necessarily give a writer better insights into his or her marginal community. If anything, a Western education only seems to cloud the issues even further when one searches for authentic ethnic minority voices.

Translations and Original Meanings

Stephen Bonnycastle writes, “Ideologies, like languages, are largely hidden from consciousness, and pervade every aspect of our lives” (p. 92). Dionne Brand echoes this statement in her poem entitled “No Language is Neutral.” If this is true, perhaps it is impossible to translate specific texts or novels and retain the intended meaning. Therefore, if ethnic minority writing is translated into English, the intended meaning will be altered and thus one can never really expect to fully understand a writer’s story if it has undergone such a transformation.

In “Multi-Vocality and National Literature,” Tamara Palmar Seiler writes, “For North America’s Abori-
Ethnic minority writing is complex, involving authenticity, translation, and representation in a global environment (Samuel Rose).

European languages were not merely inadequate for expressing local experience; they also embodied a world view very different from, even hostile to their own (Literary Pluralities, p. 53). If this were and still is the case, then how is it possible to translate any First Nation’s language and retain full meaning? It isn’t, and thus miscommunication and misunderstandings may arise when particular pieces are translated. Seiler cites Daniel David Moses’ opinions on the matter of retelling stories in the following:

> When someone from another culture hears a story I tell, they perceive only the things that relate to their values. If they try to retell my story they are going to emphasize those things that are important to them. That only makes sense. So all we’re saying is don’t retell our stories, change them, and pretend they are what we’re about because they are not (Literary Pluralities, p. 60).

Seiler later discusses Moses’ opinions on one of the most “formidable problems in contemporary Canadian literary space” and writes that our “cultural constructions and biases inevitably make listening/reading a selective process that distorts what is perceived” (p. 60). If language helps shape our opinions and our cultural biases distort our perceptions, then translated scripts are essentially culturally transformed pieces that undergo further distortions once they are read by varying individuals.

In “Translation as Existence” Pivato writes:

> Nowhere is the ontology of otherness more apparent than in the process of translation; not just literary transcription from one code to another, but the transporting of ethnic values and issues from a minority milieu to the vaster one of the majority (Echo, p 104).

He later writes, “In Canada translation is the transformation of regional and ethnic values from one social context into another” (p. 105). He further discusses the inability to translate emotions when he writes, “The Italian nature of the emotion is changed when it is translated and absorbed into the majority culture” (p. 114). Pivato does not limit his discussions on translations to Italian texts. In “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” he writes, “With Joy Kogawa, the use of the Japanese culture also involves the use of silence, an element which is difficult to translate into another language, especially a dominant language such as English” (p. 154). One can see that there is more involved than just the simple linguistic process of translation. Ethnic minority writing can technically be translated, but the emotion and cultural background behind the words remain practically untranslatable.

I will argue that Joseph Pivato is one of North America’s leading experts in the development of ethnic minority writing. His Italian ethnic minority status and extensive work in the field of ethnic minority writing has provided him with culturally sensitive and informed opinions. Ironically, when he discusses the difficulties surrounding translations in “Representation of Ethnicity as a Problem: Essence or Construction,” he himself has fallen victim to one of the many problems. On page 154 of Literary Pluralities, Pivato cites the following line from Hiromi Goto’s Chorus of Mushrooms:

> What do you mean? Eigo hitotsu mo hanashitenai to omou kedo. Haven’t we been talking Japanese all along (p. 154)?

As a Japanese speaker, I was confused by the above passage. There isn’t a single word in the Japanese language that ends with the letter “l.” At first, I thought this was a printing or publishing mistake, but after researching the same essay on various websites, I have come to the conclusion that the “l” was a simple translating error. The word “hanashitenai” in the above quote should read “hanashitenai.” On its own, such a minor spelling error is not that important, but this mistake was made by an expert in an essay that discusses the problems surrounding translations. A mistake like this found in Pivato’s writing certainly demonstrates just how easy it is for misunderstandings and miscommunications to occur when translations are being discussed.

To further demonstrate the difficulties of translating languages, I asked several bilingual Japanese and English speakers to translate Hiromi Goto’s Japanese in the passage above. For the sake of brevity, I will only list five of my results. One associate university professor, translated Goto’s words and wrote, “I don’t think
they are speaking English at all.” Ryo Tamura, a Ph.D. student at one of Japan’s leading universities wrote, “I don’t think you are speaking a single word of English.” Another Ph.D. student, Yukiko Ideno, wrote, “I didn’t speak English exactly.” The head English teacher at a private college, Kuniko, Kishi, wrote, “I guess I haven’t spoken Japanese at all.” Finally, Christopher Trudel, a businessman born in Japan and raised in Canada wrote, “I think I haven’t spoken a word of English.” Each person has translated Hiromi Goto’s words in his or her own way and each translation impacts the intended meaning of her statement. As the above indicates, there isn’t a correct way to translate Goto’s Japanese. Not only is the intended meaning altered, we also see that the text’s translation is heavily influenced by the translators’ individual perceptions.

Pivato writes, “Hiromi Goto uses whole Japanese sentences to capture the untranslatable” (p. 154). As I have shown, it is theoretically possible to translate Goto’s words, but it is next to impossible to translate the intended meaning. To even further demonstrate the difficulties of translations, I asked numerous Japanese people what the phrase, “Eigo hitotsu mo hanashitenai to omou kedo” meant. Every person told me that Goto was using incorrect Japanese. Some people were even annoyed by the improper use of their language overseas. At first glance, it might appear that Hiromi Goto simply made a mistake, but there is another possibility. Pivato writes, “The Italian of Maria Ardizzi’s four Canadian novels is not the same language as that of Italy, because it is influenced by this process of deterritorialization” (p. 154). Perhaps Goto’s writing in Japanese represents the same “process of deterritorialization” and therefore it is not the same as the Japanese spoken in Japan. If this is the case, then we are left with the same question Pivato asks; how can the language “authentically represent the minority experience if it is itself changing in the new territory” (p. 154)? Such a question epitomizes the complexities involved when one discusses the problems of representation in ethnic minority writing.

The questions posed at the beginning of this essay do not necessarily have definitive answers. This does not mean that they are irrelevant, it just means that more discussion is necessary. Every writer struggles to find an identity and an authentic voice. These struggles are only compounded when one is an ethnic minority writer living within a dominant culture. The problems of representation in ethnic minority writing are very real but perhaps these difficulties pave the way for inspired and emotional writing that we may otherwise not get to experience. In “Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction,” Pivato concludes his piece by describing a scene from Padre Padrone and writes, “The film ends with an image blending Canadian and Italian elements: the black-clad Ninetta standing in a field of snow gazing out at the horizon” (p. 161). We may never truly be able to understand the complexities of other cultures and languages, but hopefully our attempts will always leave us with new and unforgettable images like the one above.

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