Final Writing Assignment: Writing: Living with/in Words
Length: 4-5 pages or 1000ish words

Part One:

Writing…is an action, an event, a performance.
David Bartholomae

We have been thinking and talking about editing and writing and reading and language, and the way they are always and already elegantly entangled. But you already know this: your in-class writing pieces (the ones you wrote in our first class of the term), in fact, are already flickering with ideas that are connected to an ongoing conversation and debate taking place among contemporary writers, theorists, philosophers, and sociolinguists who are writing about language, and who are paying attention to the relations between language and society, the relations between language and identity, between language and writing, between language and memory. What we don't know enough about, however, is what *you* think language is, what you think it does, what you think it can – or can't – do. We don't know enough about what *you* think it means to live with/in words.

Over the course of this term, you will be developing, with your editor, a writing piece that explores the notion of "Language: Living with/in Words", a piece that you will submit for potential publication to the PWSA's online journal *Inventio*. I am inviting you to add to the contemporary conversation about language/s by zooming in on a particular encounter you've had with language to investigate and explore an aspect of your relationship to language from your own personal, particular, and peculiar context.

I'm asking you to write about something that is interesting to you, to write about something you care deeply about. I'm asking you to open up a process of questioning and then write a conversational essay (or story, or series of poems, or graphic essay, or multimodal essay…or…or…) that shows your thinking on the page: develop a critical, contemplative, and reflective exploration on your topic that narratively and stylistically unfolds your insights about a specific question that addresses your particular encounter with language.

I ask that you also keep in mind the larger social, temporal, cultural, and educational context from which you are writing. Your experience in the world gives you access to this context. It's always a good idea, however, to think *with* somebody: another writer. Gilles Deleuze reminds us that "…writing is a flow among others." Write, then, in the company of one of your others. I supplied you with a few quotations to think-write with on our first day together; I will add a few more here at the bottom of the page. You are not limited to these quotations and are free to find your own writer to think with. Choose someone who can offer you a framework, someone whose views prompt you and guide you toward a different

way of “seeing language” and how it is implicated in the various ways we navigate and negotiate identities in everyday life.

Let me say this bit again: write about something you care about. Find out more about that thing you care about by writing through its complexities. I am asking you, above all, to produce knowledge, to take us into a scene of writing that will reveal insights about your experience with language. I’m inviting you to add to the conversation and let us know what you think about the topic and how, from your perspective, we might know about or experience language differently. By writing critically, creatively, and conversationally about the complexities of language, I invite you to help us see and experience language, uniquely, by de-familiarizing the familiar and showing us how we might think outside of the preconceived representational and/or traditional boundaries.

I am inviting you to think about how you think when you think about language.

Language is not just your topic this term, it is your event.

Finally, here are a few quotations about language which have inspired me and my own work, quotations I like to think with when I am thinking about language and writing:

If there is no risk, there is no writing.
Paul Auster

For each language you know, you are a different person.
Czech proverb

We don’t live in a country, we live in a language.
E.M. Cioran

I only have one language; it is not mine.
Jacques Derrida

…writing is a flow among others.
Gilles Deleuze

….there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. Sometimes – I would even say always – several tongues. There is impurity in every language.
Jacques Derrida

First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence.

Virginia Woolf

A sentence has been heard, now listen.
Gertrude Stein

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative.
Eva Hoffman

For some, to find beauty is to search through ruins. For some of us beauty must be made over and over again out of the sometimes fragile, the sometimes dangerous. To write is to be involved in this act of translation, of succumbing or leaning into another body's idiom.
Dionne Brand

...the humanists have always insisted that you don't learn to think wholly from one language: you learn to think better from linguistic conflict, from bounding one language off another.
Northrop Frye

We invented language so we could lie to each other and ourselves.
Charlie Kaufman

There are no truths, only stories.
Thomas King

We are fictions.
Lola Lemire Tostevin

Language is for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other.
Jacques Derrida

Language reveals the speaker, his position in terms of class, ethnicity, education, place of origin, gender.
James Baldwin

One never owns a language. A language can only be borrowed; it passes around like an illness or currency.
Roland Barthes

Living on the edge of two languages, living on the edge of two selves named and constructed by language, liberates the self from a monologic existence.

Smaro Kamboureli

From one day to another, from one page to another, writing changes languages. I have thought certain mysteries in the French language that I cannot think in English. This loss and this gain are in writing too. I have drawn the H. You will have recognized it depending on which language you are immersed in. This is what writing is: I one language, I another language, and between the two, the line that makes them vibrate; writing forms a passageway between two shores.

Helene Cixous

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.

Roland Barthes

Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what it is one is saying.

John Updike

A writer must resist the pressure of old formulae and work towards new combinations of language.

Jeanette Winterson

I have been given this language and I intend to use it.

Chinua Achebe

What counts and is counted then, is what we do while speaking, what we do to each other, how we again touch each other by mixing our voices.

Jacques Derrida

Style becomes nonstyle, and one's language lets an unknown foreign language escape from it, so that one can reach the limits of language itself and become something other than a writer, conquering fragmented visions that pass through the words of a poet, the colours of a painter, or the sounds of a musician.

Gilles Deleuze

Everything in my memory strives to be the collection of a language that has not yet been invented and the invention of a language that one recollects.

Maurice Blanchot

What a writer is looking for are the relationships within languages. The tensions and harmonies between words and meaning that gradually can be resolved into form.

Jeanette Winterson

One studies what one desires or fears.

Roland Barthes

I have withheld more than I have written.

Dionne Brand

I look forward to reading your pieces.

How to Find a Lost Language: My Search for My Grandfather's Words

My mother and I share a conspiratorial glance as we listen to the sounds coming from the family room. "*Mangu saciu*," she imitates, tightening her lips to perfect the accent. "They're speaking gibberish. The words just don't exist." I giggle. In the other room, the words coming out of my father's mouth must exist, or his father, my Nonno Stefano, who is on the other end of the phone, would not be able to understand them. They are speaking Sicilian, a completely different language from standardized Italian, the official language of schools, of the government, of Dante. I hear my father say something that sounds like *dee-choo-whey-to* amid the hard consonants strung together like a thorny Christmas garland. I think it sounds like the word for *eighteen*, though I don't know why. In standardized Italian, the number eighteen is *diciotto*: *dee-chotto.* Why does my father's word include the "w" sound, *whey*? I think back to elementary school French class, reciting the numbers from one to twenty: *dix-huit*. I try to construct an image of the word, thinking it might best be represented by something that looks like *diciu-huito*, a mix of Italian and Sicilian and what I believe to be a French influence. I will learn much later, from reading the cover of a history book in a London bookstore, that the Normans ruled Sicily almost a thousand years ago. Languages hold history within them, in their sayings and words. Even a fragment of a word can trace the story of a culture, a nation, and, as I will learn, the story of a single person.

They say the first thing you forget about someone after they die is the sound of their voice, but I would argue that what goes even faster is their language. This past August, my Nonno Stefano died at the age of ninety-five and a half, a distinction he never forgot to make. At his younger sister's funeral, he smiled and laughed with his nieces and nephews, declared that he would be next, and promptly died seventy-two hours later. He left behind a semi-detached house full of furniture and jugs of wine in the *cantina*; a garden in the back, ripe with vegetables at the height of summer; an ailing wife, no longer able to speak; three

children; four grandchildren. What he did not leave us were his words, except for the scant recordings we can gather from home videos.

As if in preparation, I had read a book about grief the month before his death. In her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion reflects extensively on grief after the loss of her husband and the illness of her daughter. She writes of her desire to intellectualize her emotions as her family crumbled before her eyes: “In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control.” Didion’s strategy describes what I started doing months later, unbeknownst to myself. Unlike her, however, my topic of research is not grief itself, but my grandfather’s language.

In my grief, I opened Google Translate. Only recently has Google used AI technology to add more than one hundred new languages to its roster, including *Sicilianu*. Just seeing the written word is jarring; I had never heard it pronounced with a “u” at the end, only an “o”. I typed the English word *eighteen* into the box, hoping to see the program confirm my suspicions from years earlier. But the computer program produced an unfamiliar-looking word instead: *diciadottu*. No matter which way I twisted my tongue, I couldn’t make this arrangement of letters sound like what my father had said to my Nonno over the phone. My father had confirmed that *diciu-huito* was how they said *eighteen*; my grandparents were born in Sicily and spoke Sicilian, so why do the words look so different?

I asked my father this first research question. “Of course they’re different. Everyone has their own way,” he told me. “Even the town down the road talks different than us.” This answer was illuminating, yet so unsatisfying. I should have been able to guess that just like Italian, Sicilian would have more than one dialect tucked within the language. But if everyone, even the people a few kilometres away, spoke different dialects, I assumed that there would be little recorded of any of them. Still, I searched. I typed “Sicilian Dialects” into my university library’s database. I tinkered with the search terms a few times before an article

showed up, titled: “Strategies of Indefiniteness Marking in Central Sicilian—Evidence from the Dialect of Delia” by Vincenzo Nicolo Di Caro. Without much difficulty I had found proof: an academic study conducted in my grandfather’s very hometown.

I scanned the article. I’ve never so much as stepped foot in a linguistics class; I don’t even know what an “indefinite term” is. All I knew was that as I fervently scrolled through the pages, picking out the dialectal words, few of them sounded familiar when I read them out loud. I closed the document halfway through. I had expected the effect to be immediate: for the words to speak to me in my grandfather’s voice. But on paper, they had very little life.

I looked at the date on the publication and realized that the study was done recently, within the past few years. However, my Nonno had left Delia almost seventy years ago. The townsfolk had kept on living without him, and the village likely became less isolated over time as cars, telephones, televisions, and radios became easier to own. The great wide world seeped into Delia and its language evolved in a different direction. Meanwhile, my grandfather’s speaking habits diverged from what my family would call *Delian* in 1954, when he moved to Canada. He lived in southern Ontario, working on farms and in bakeries before going back to marry my grandmother. He lived the rest of his life in North York, working in a predominantly English environment but speaking his native language at home. His emigration allowed for multiple influences to shape the way he spoke, altering his original dialect.

This realization led to my next research topic: I wanted to explore the idea of a personal language, unique to one person and their life’s circumstances. It was rather difficult to find the word that I needed to describe this phenomenon, so difficult that I was afraid the word did not exist. But after many more Google searches, a small, new word appeared on my screen: *idiolect*. As the Oxford Reference Dictionary defines it, an idiolect is: “In linguistics, the language special to an individual, sometimes described as a ‘personal dialect’.” The mere

existence of this term struck me like a thunderbolt of clarity: there was indeed a theory to describe why my grandfather's words do not match with any language on record. According to an Oxford Bibliography page, one's idiolect is: "… influenced by a wide range of other sources of variation, such as their life experiences; language encounters; what they have read and listened to; where they have been schooled; jobs they have had; their favorite hobbies and pastimes; and their parents, friends, and teachers." Discovering the concept of an idiolect opened endless ways to think of not just language, but what makes up a person. An idiolect captures every language, culture, and accent an individual has ever come into meaningful contact with; it tells the story of a person's home, their friends, their neighbours. It can also contain their personality: a busy person's words might leap over each other in a rush, combining two or three words into one, while a person who values serenity may speak their words as deliberately as a painter places their final brushstrokes. If we listen closely, we can hear the many facets of a person's identity subtly expressed in their idiolect.

Learning about the concept of an idiolect reminded me that my grandfather did not just speak Sicilian. He spoke a bit of Canadian English, from seventy years living and working in Toronto; he had some knowledge of Spanish, from the telenovelas he and my Nonna used to watch because the languages were similar and they understood the basics; he knew some Abbruzzese, the Italian region where the neighbours across the street, his best friends for more than fifty years, were raised. But, like anything in life, these factors change; the Oxford Bibliography page states that: "An idiolect, therefore, is not stable in its entirety. While some elements may persist throughout a person's life, others may drop out of favor, while new patterns, preferences, and features may be acquired over time." I recognized this phenomenon in my grandfather, too. By the time my sister and I were old enough to talk, he had been retired for many years and often could not understand us. He spent most of his time in Italian and Sicilian-speaking circles, causing the English to fade away. Perhaps there was

also a time when Portuguese words infiltrated his vocabulary, from the weeks he and my grandmother spent vacationing there. Maybe he had learned a few English phrases as a child, from the American cousin who landed on Sicily's shores at the end of the Second World War. Perhaps those words were practiced, treasured even, before being forgotten. This I will never know.

Language shifts. It's fluid on our tongues, running like water over rocks, never making the same splash twice. While language may change at the national or cultural level, it is a slow evolution, perhaps even taking hundreds of years. But our personal languages, our idiolects, are always ephemeral.

We will undoubtedly see more variance in our idiolects as the world continues to globalize, as we now have more access to other cultures and languages than ever before. The 2021 Canadian census revealed that roughly one in four Canadians are immigrants; my three living grandparents at the time were among them. In the Greater Toronto Area, children grow up with classmates who may hail from another continent and speak more than one language. We learn from teachers who have lived abroad and work with people who have just immigrated. We can become friends with people who live across the world just by playing online video games. While we may think that the English we speak in Canada is a self-contained dialect, it is in constant flux due to the variety of other languages to which English speakers are regularly exposed or use themselves.

The knowledge I have gathered leads me to this conclusion: I will never find a record of Nonno Stefano's language. His language was not gibberish, as my mother had thought; he also did not speak entirely in Google Translate's recorded Sicilian, or even in an old version of *Delian*, either. His language was a product of all the people he knew and places he visited, and I cannot recreate it because it is uniquely his. This outcome is disappointing, but also

comforting, in a way. One day my own idiolect will disappear, except for what is left of it within others.

I go back to open "Strategies of Indefiniteness Marking in Central Sicilian" again. This time, I am a little more diligent in reading the words, trying to absorb them instead of merely skimming; I take a long time to scroll through the jungle of academic terms. Finally, I stop. A familiar word has appeared, one I have never seen spelled out before: *tanticchja*. Though surprising, it is suddenly obvious to me that there should be a "j" in there, although I have never before considered what this word might look like. *Tan-tee-kya*. *A bit*, it means. Repeated at the dinner table, the words said in quick succession when someone was pouring him wine: *Tanticchja, tanticchja, tha's enough, tha's enough! Grazie.*

Just a little bit, I hear my grandfather's voice in my head, now in his English. The whole phrase rolls as one, with the word "bit" pronounced "bet-eh". *Jusalittlebet-eh*: an intonation we still imitate in the kitchen, a phrase of my grandfather's that continues beyond his death.

Works Cited

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