Language for the Fluid, Multiple, Unified Self

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This talk is about how I am using my artistic practice to look for nonviolent language. It might be more accurate to say "create" nonviolent language, because I think it's a practice. I'm trying to create situations in which people have access to use language in new ways, to create their own meanings, and to have others hear them.

In this talk, I'll share some of what I'm working on, as well as past projects. I'll give some background to my artistic research, suggest a few characteristics that I imagine for nonviolent language, and present different projects that I'm using to investigate these characteristics. I do this by staging what I call "acts of languaging" that might give insight into the characteristics that I propose for nonviolent language. I'll share from a number of projects that I've worked on throughout the last fifteen years. You can access links to all of the projects at this website: https://amirahanafi.com.

I'll start by talking about a book I published way back in 2009. I self-published this book through a platform called Lulu, if you remember that. It might still be functioning. It's a print-on-demand service.[1] The book is called *Minced English*. This book is a collection of usage quotations appropriated from the Oxford English Dictionary, which I was a bit obsessed with at the time. I composed the book using a list of 29 terms that are used to describe people with mixed heritage. The term you're seeing up here right now is "half-breed."

The work depended on the OED being available and searchable in electronic form. I think, around that time, the OED put their entire database

1 Indeed, the platform is still functioning and the book can be ordered at https://www.lulu.com/shop/amira-hanafi/minced-english/paperback/product-1jev56zn.html

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online for the first time.[2] Each entry in the book has two paragraphs. The first chronologically organizes all usage quotations under the headword in the OED. Those are the examples that the OED provides of where this word has been used historically. The second paragraph chronologically organizes all other instances of the word found in usage quotations in other OED entries. Basically, I was looking at what the "official" history of the word was according to the OED, and also seeking out a sort of hidden history that was also available in the dictionary.

I looked at these quotations as evidence of a particularly brutal history of language use. As a person with mixed parentage, I'm often described as half-this and half-that, which makes me feel like I'm being chopped into bits. At the time I was making this book, I lived in Chicago, which is a city that's segregated in a very particular way, and my feeling of being chopped up was particularly intense. In whatever space I occupied, I felt that I was being forced to make a choice about my racial identity. If you read through the text that I assembled, you find a particularly brutal example of how language can be violent.[3] I think you can see clearly that it's violent because it's designed to classify a person.

You might also take this project as a broader comment on language as violence—on the idea of language as a classifier or tool to categorize. People using language communicate by generalizing about specific objects, beings, and ideas. By claiming to name what is, language presents itself as transparent, although the particularities of things are blurred by the very active naming. All my life, people around me have wanted to know, "Where are you from?" Most recently, in consultation with a surgeon, I was asked, "Where are you from?" quickly followed by, "Where were you born?" I've

2 The OED Online was launched on 14 March 2000. (Oxford English Dictionary)

3 "On the 18th a Half-Breed, who is a Leader and Head Warrior, came to Fort Augusta. One Molton, a half-breed fellow, seized the fellow that wounded Mr. Atkins. Before the English traders came among them, there were scarcely any half breed, but now they abound among the younger sort. His mother being a Chactaw slave, and his father a half breed, betwixt a Creek and white man. A few civilized Indians and half breeds. Half-breed boys were paddling about in their little canoes. All the Jacks in the county, consisting of T. H. Owen, John Harper, Backenstos, Bedell, and a few 'half breeds'. Qualities which are, in a measure, artificial, change not only with the breed of one species, but with the different individuals of the same breed, of the same half-breed, and often of the same family. A half-breed woman in the fort. The laws which interfered with the marriages of English and Irish, and forbade the inheritance of half-breeds, were relaxed or abolished. A Cabinet of 'Half-breeds', as the party of Civil Service reform are called. This reminds me that a remark of a very peculiar nature was made here in my neighbourhood (in the North) a few days ago: 'He hadn't ought to have went.' How is that? Isn't that a good deal of a triumph? One knows the orders combined in this half-breed's architecture without inquiring: one parent Northern, the other Southern. The 'Stalwart' and 'Half-breed' sections of the Republican party. I'm a half-breed myself. My father was from an old, staunch Democratic family, and he was a Presbyterian. My mother was from an equally old and staunch Republican family and she was a Unitarian." (Hanafi, 2009: 12)

come to understand that folks like the doctor are asking me to caress their anxieties by providing a category to which I belong. They demand a kind of transparency, but whatever story I tell remains incomplete. Often, I think all language might share a propensity towards violence. The way we use language to communicate, by limiting and categorizing, trains us to continue to desire these kinds of categories and fixed meanings.

Fig. 1

The next project I'm sharing is one that may be familiar to some of you. This picture (see Fig. 1) is from the set of vocabulary cards that I and my team used when conducting research for *A dictionary of the revolution.* My team and I traveled around several governorates of Egypt with this box, asking people to define language that was strongly related to the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. The box was a tool that was meant to try to document the explosion of speech around politics that happened in public space following the revolution in Egypt. I'm showing it because I think of it now as a kind of activist tool that my team and I used to ask our interlocutors to reclaim language that had been, in many cases, stolen, co-opted, and redefined by those in power. The box shifted relations of power in a momentary way. When folks were talking about what these words meant to them, they were reclaiming language from the media or other state actors.

The project is related to *Minced English*, through which I investigated an already existing dictionary. For this project, I wanted to create a dictionary of my own that contained complex and conflicting meanings for a particular

set of words (a lexicon). This is a screenshot (see Fig. 2) from the digital publication that I created from the research that we'd done with the vocabulary box, through which we recorded about 200 hours of conversation. I sat with that material for several years, listening, transcribing, and creating texts for each of the terms in the dictionary. They were polyvocal texts with many people talking about a particular term at a time, meant to contain conflicting and complicated meanings.

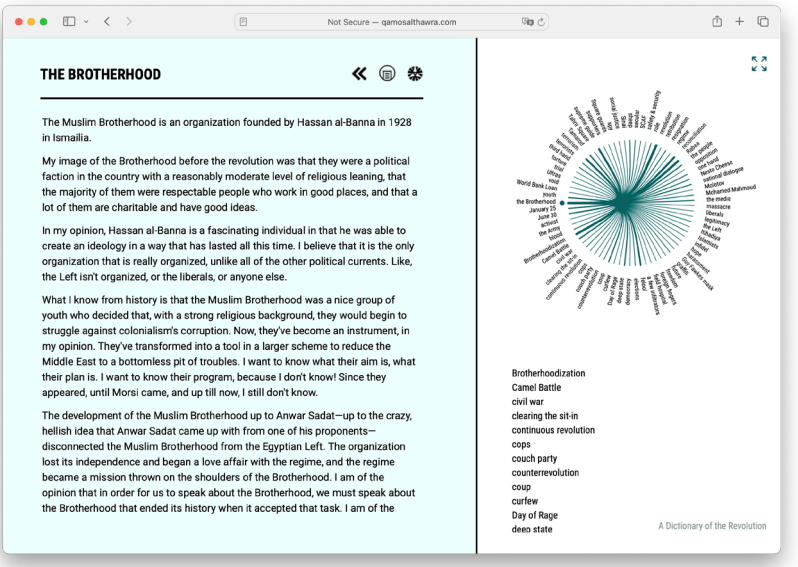

Fig. 2

There are definitely successes in this project, a number of successes, but today in the context of this talk, which is about violent and nonviolent language, I want to talk about some of the issues that come up—places of failure, fragility, or weakness in the project. As an aside, as a larger comment on my artistic practice: it's always unfolding in a sort of continuum, each project in response to the last. Often, I design a creative work to address the frailties of the previous project. I feel that my artistic practice is a research practice in which I'm continually building on what I've learned before.

That said, I will talk about some of the issues that come up in the digital publication of *A dictionary of the revolution*. For one, the text is fixed. The text that I've written, which I published online, delivers a stable narrative of the revolution in Egypt and its aftermath. Although it's a polyvocal text, it always remains the same. As a digital publication, it has the potential to be changed, but that change can only come from me, the person with access to

the back end. That is related to a second frailty: I am the singular author of this work. Although I engaged many participants, they are contributors, and not in fact authors. I am the central figure in this work, who makes decisions about what gets taken out of the publication and what gets left in.

A third fragility comes about because I was trying to be all-encompassing or fair or objective— something in that realm of terminology—in terms of what got left in and what got left out. There are a number of instances in *A dictionary of the revolution* where acutely violent forms of language are used, such as hate speech or calls for the death of people with particular political belongings, for instance. In my attempt to document, I've restaged or reenacted that violence. Beyond that, the project documents a series of events that are traumatic for many people. For myself, even a dozen years after some of these events, I have a difficult time looking back and reading this text because it can be retraumatizing.

Something I also want to mention is that I noticed, while working on this project, a way that people use language to perform a desire for belonging. I think it's a very human thing. One of our main motivators as humans is the desire to belong to a group, a desire we often perform through language. What I noticed was that different people would repeat certain words, phrases, or even complete sentences. These are people who are not in the same location, who might be in geographically distant locations, who might come from different generations and have different backgrounds, but they're using very, very similar language to talk about things that happened. Sometimes the language is identical. I think this is demonstrative of people's desire to belong, to echo and sound like others around them. This is something I've kept in mind and think about in terms of the kinds of freedoms and liberties that we are able to use in language.

I was involved with making *A dictionary of the revolution* on some level for about seven years. It was a very long project and it took some time to reflect on what I had made once I emerged from the process in 2018. In this reflection came the question that I have come to pursue in my current practice: "What might a nonviolent language look like?" In thinking about the strengths of the project, I kept returning to the performative research that my team and I had conducted with the vocabulary box. The box facilitated language as a social practice—the ephemeral, mercurial process of people talking. Using that box to converse with each other, a kind of fluid creation of meaning takes place. This was a prompt to shift relations of power.

Around that time, I read Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, which was a book that provided me answers to many of the questions that I had been asking myself about the violence of language and categorical violence. I've

pulled a quote here from the book.[4] I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I do want to draw attention to the distinction made in the final bullet point, which some of you may be familiar with if you've read the book. Glissant makes a distinction between two types of understanding that can happen when folks are in relation. He makes a distinction between "grasping" and "donner-avec," which the translator here calls giving-on-and-with. To Glissant, these are different modes of relating, the former of which is violent and the latter of which is not.

Grasping refers to what I was talking about with, for instance, the doctor who asks me, "Who are you? What are you? What category can I put you in?" The doctor wants to be able to grasp me, to hold me, to limit and contain me in a particular box or category or pen of some kind, so that I cannot spill forth and flow out of my bounds. I won't try to give a definition of the other type of communication, which Glissant calls donner-avec or giving-on-and-with. Instead, in the coming part of the talk, I'll offer some of the characteristics that might be part of this kind of open, generous exchange that happens in relation.

Here are some characteristics that I propose for a nonviolent language, which I'm testing out in my current projects: it is polyvocal, multimodal, translingual, fluid and changeable. It is language that loves difference. It is language as a social practice. In order to use my creative practice to research these characteristics, I've shifted emphasis from attempts to document to a social or performative practice. Rather than make texts, I build tools. I approach language as a site where displays of power are continuously produced and contested. From decolonial scholars, I've borrowed the term "acts of languaging."[5] I stage acts of languaging: interventions like the conversations that my collaborators and I initiated with the vocabulary

4 "Relation identity
- is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures;
- is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation;
- does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee of entitlement, but circulates, newly extended;
- does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps.

Relation identity exults the thought of errantry and of totality." (Glissant, 1997: 84)

5 "Although the book disinvents language, asking us to question languages, conceptions of language and metalanguages, it also reconstitutes it, warning us that the results of the invention are real, but that we must rethink what the social, political and economic consequences would be if we no longer posited the existence of separate languages. In other words, this book argues that the invention of languages has implications that are situated in very material language effects. Rooted firmly on the communication that takes place among people and not on language as 'a thing that leads a life of its own outside and above human beings' (Yngve, 1996: 28), the book takes a step beyond the allegations of language as imagined or invented and yet roots itself firmly in the discursive field that constitutes acts of *languaging*." (García, 2007: xi)

box in Egypt. I invite collaborators to engage in meaning-making processes rather than producing fixed meanings. I try to fabricate spaces for polyvocal states of being rather than fashioning polyvocal texts.

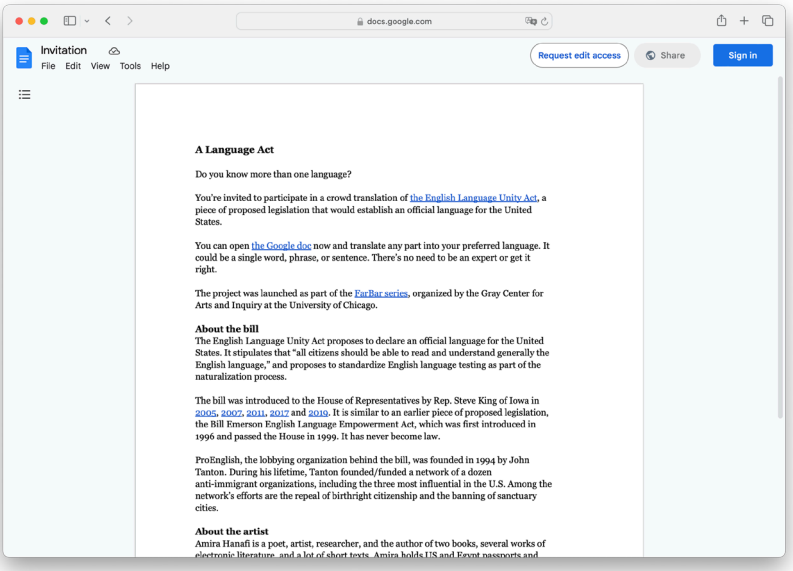

Fig. 3

Here's a project that I launched in 2020 (see Fig. 3). It's called *A language act*. It is an open invitation to intervene into the text of H.R. 997, which is a proposed bill in the U.S. Congress. The bill aims to declare English as the official language of the United States, which does not have an official language. Functionally, you find an imaginary state of monolingualism in the U.S., which is rooted in the fact that the founders of the United States of America were all of British descent. They founded the nation by writing documents, and those documents were written in the English language. However, monolingualism has never been encoded into federal law, which means that government services can be accessed by people who do not speak English because there are translation and interpretation services available. H.R. 997 proposes, among other things, to eliminate funding for those types of services. Its supporters want to remove access to translation and interpretation as well as place other limitations on who can immigrate or become a naturalized citizen of the United States. The bill is part of a much larger anti-immigration and anti-immigrant movement.

When I posted the text of the bill to Google docs, I used the same type and formatting as the original bill. Then, I invited people to contribute a translation of any part of the text, small or large, into another language.

I used very specific phrasing to invite people "who know more than one language" to contribute. What you see here is one result of the invitation (see Fig. 4). You can see that the text now contains different alphabets.

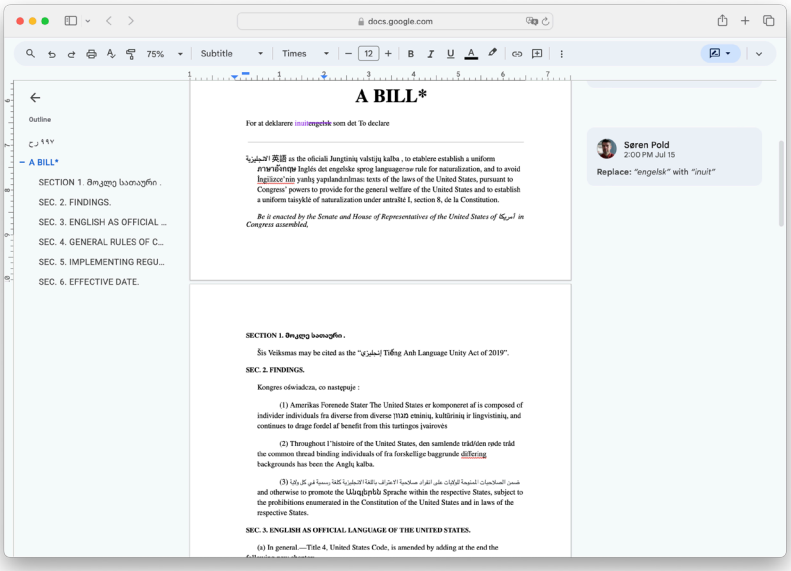

Fig. 4

The project asks people to intervene into an official legal document that intends to do violence to particular groups of people. It becomes a fluid document, which is very important to me; it remains open for edits in perpetuity. It's changeable by anyone who visits, and it's collaborative. Returning to the idea of comprehension or understanding that Glissant talks about, the text becomes less graspable as it evolves. Its meaning becomes less fixed; more new and different interpretations are allowed.

This next work was exhibited this year at the 2023 Electronic Literature Organization conference. I hope some of you got a chance to see it and to interact with it. It's also of course available online.[6] This is the CreaTures Glossary (see Fig. 5). It was a commissioned work so there was a negotiation between achieving the objectives that needed to be fulfilled and investigating some of the questions of my own research. I'm just going to draw attention to one main characteristic of the work, which is that if you see this box here where it says "community," that box is a real time collaborative text editor (see Fig. 6).

6 https://glossary.languagin.gs

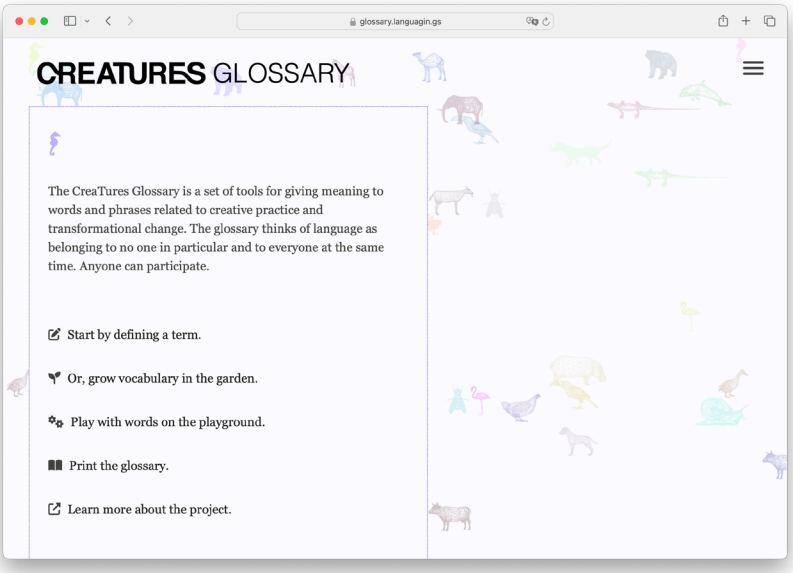

Fig. 5

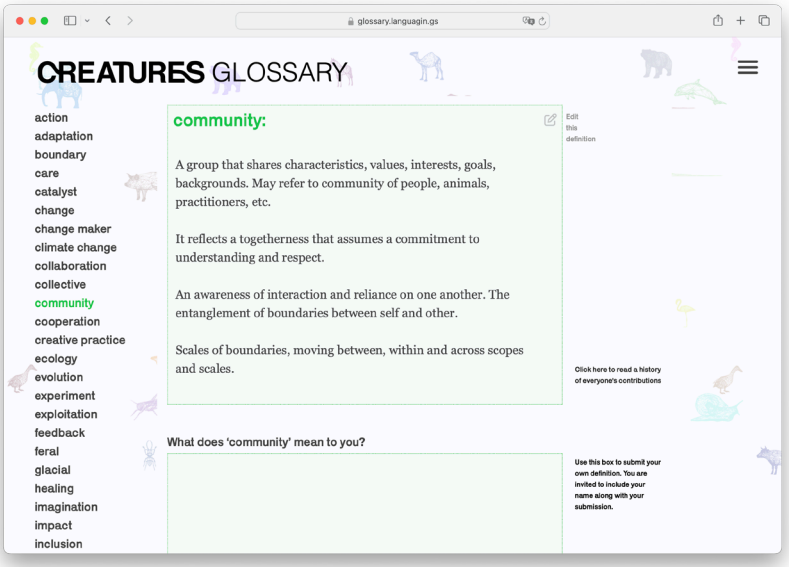

Fig. 6

What I wanted to do with this project was invite any user to become someone who could access the back end of the website. Anyone can change the Glossary; they can add to or erase any existing definition. This blurs the relationship between author and reader. It brings in a plurality of authors. I

would say I'm much less of an author of this work than I was of *A dictionary of the revolution*. I'm the author of the platform that allows interaction, collaboration, and co-writing to happen. I like to think that it's a radically open interface. I'm not certain I achieved that, but one can hope.

The commissioners of the work were very concerned about the ability for people to erase what had been entered onto the website. So I built a feature that makes visible the history of keystrokes on each part of the website. This is actually one of my favorite parts of the website, where there are a lot of different things going on. This screenshot you're looking at here is also from the word "community" (see Fig. 7). See, that's the front part of it. And then if you click on this button that says "Read a history of everyone's contributions," this is what shows up. This particular text documents a workshop that was done together online, so you can see that folks were collaborating to write this definition of community and it creates this kind of nonsense language that I think is still somehow accessible. I think it can be interpreted. There's something that I find very lovely about it. Perhaps it's approaching an expression of nonviolent language.

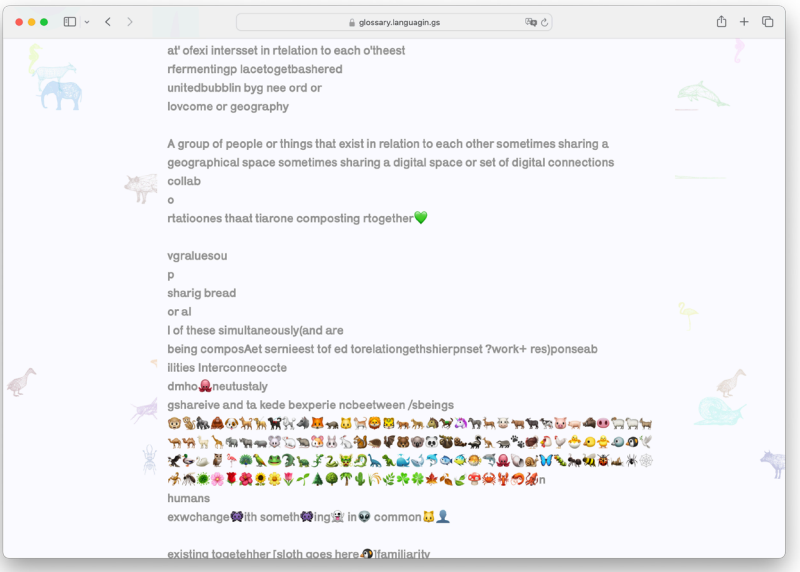

Fig. 7

Another part I'm going to show you from the CreaTures Glossary project is a game that we played in workshops and that shows up also on the website itself. The game is called "Interview with a Word." It turned out to be a really fun way of making meaning for words, especially during the height

of the pandemic when people needed structured ways of interacting with strangers online. It involves three players, one of whom plays the word; they embody the word and speak as the word. We choose a word. In this case you see up here, the word is *love* played by Jaz Hee-jeong Choi (see Fig. 8). One person plays the word and pretends that they are the word. A second person interviews the word; they can choose from a list of questions that was developed through play, but usually they go off script and into more free conversation. There's a third person in the game who transcribes the interview, and all three of these people are engaged in meaning-making processes. The interview is later uploaded onto the platform, where any user can continue to play with the computer asking the questions.

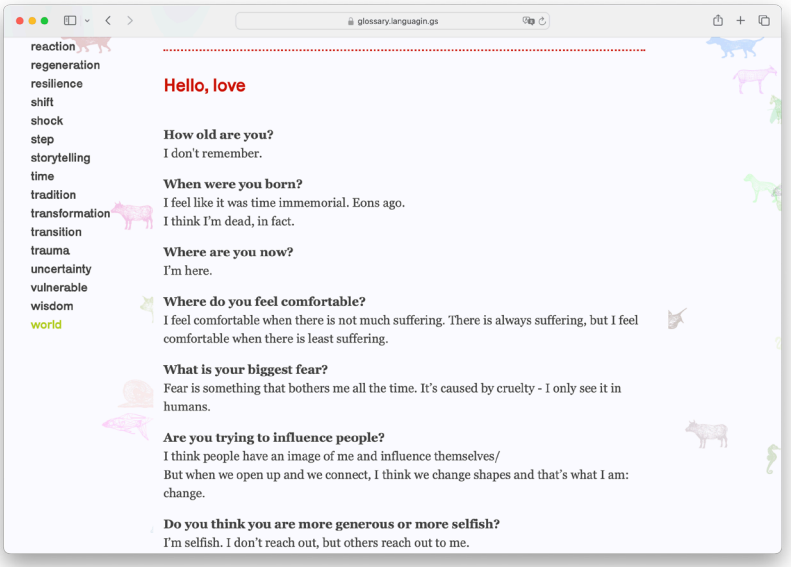

Fig. 8

I want to share a comment that many people have made when reflecting on game play. When a person plays the word in this game, they blur the identity of the word with their own identity. They occupy a liminal zone between what they know of the word and what they believe about themselves—between knowledge of the word's context, history, and etymology, and the speaker's identity. They speak from this blended position, continuously shifting between perspectives. In each instance of play (in each instance of speaking language) the word means something different. That's brought to the surface through the interview, both for the reader who can read its document, but maybe even more so for the people who are involved in playing the game. I would call this a translingual space.

It's multimodal, it's multisensory, and in some cases it engages different named languages.[7]

I'm going to show you a couple of examples and read from them. The following is from the word *glacial*, played by Grace Janczak and interviewed by Deena Larsen.[8]

WHY DON'T YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF?

> Yeah, I'm still figuring out who I am, what I am. Time moves slower for me than most people, for the humans and people I've seen. I'm still figuring it out, but I do know that I've always been here.

Here's another that gives a great example of a translingual response. The word *slowness* is being played by Prasad Bidaye, who is interviewed by Molly-Claire Gillett.[9]

THAT MAKES ME THINK OF ONE OF YOUR SIBLINGS OR FRIENDS, REST. WHO ELSE IS IN YOUR FAMILY OR FRIEND CIRCLE?

> My circle is really diverse and eclectic. We all share the suffix-ness. I have blankness, fullness, blackness and whiteness. There is also someone named Indian-ness. Because I come from a family of immigrants, in Sanskrit the suffix is -tva, which means "the quality of being something." The ugliest one in my family is a fascist named Hindutva. -tva mirrors -ness, but in Sanskrit it describes the quality of something, rather than its essence, which I think we mean over here.

These fascinating ways of defining language resist the fixed way that dictionaries typically make meaning.

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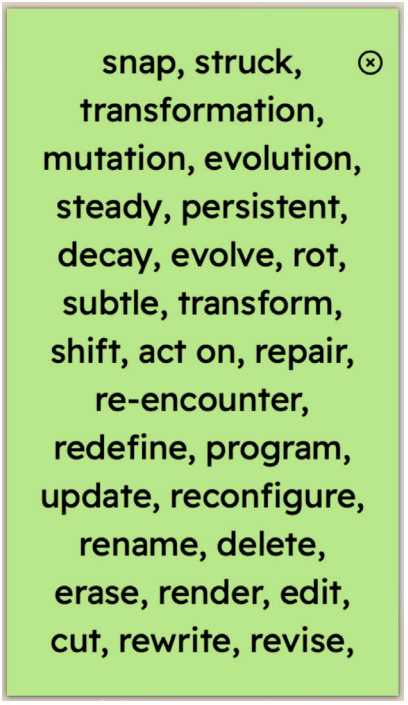
7 "...[A] named language is defined by the social, political or ethnic affiliation of its speakers. Although the idea of the social construction of named languages is old in the language fields, it is often not understood. The point that needs repeating is that a named language *cannot* be defined linguistically, cannot be defined, that is, in grammatical (lexical or structural) terms. And because a named language cannot be defined linguistically, it is not, strictly speaking, a linguistic object; it is not something that a person speaks." (Otheguy, 2015: 286)

8 Deena Larsen, Lyle Skains, and Amira Hanafi, "Let's Engage the World" (workshop, Electronic Literature Organization 2022 Annual Conference, Como, Italy, 30 May - 1 June 2022).

9 Amira Hanafi, "CreaTures Glossary" (workshop, Future of Writing Symposium: Pedagogy, Process, Potential, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, 1 May 2023).



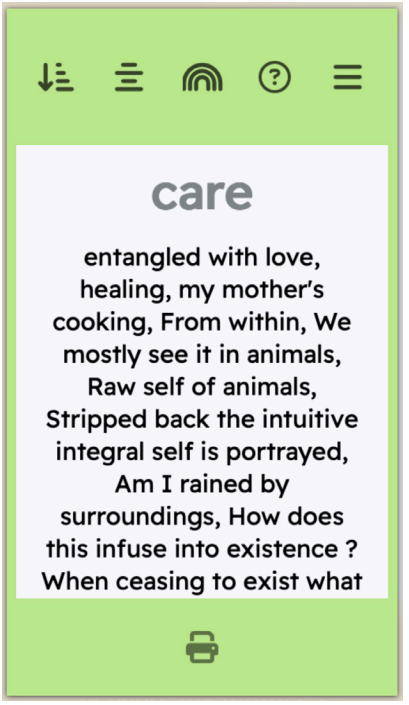


Fig. 9, 10

Fig. 11, 12

I want to wrap up not long from now, so I won't spend a lot of time on these. These are screenshots (see Figs. 9-12) from an adapted version of the Glossary tools that I used in a workshop in the context of the Biennale Casablanca curated by Christine Eyene last fall, where I also exhibited my work.[10] I took the opportunity to run this workshop in which we created a lexicon for the biennale. These are some screenshots from the small app that I developed to do that. The app is similar to the CreaTures Glossary. It's a pared down version of its tools, specifically focused on the real time collaborative text editors which give users the ability to edit, erase, and add to definitions. We played some games in person. This was actually the first time that I held a CreaTures Glossary workshop in person. It was kind of strange and awkward because I realized about halfway through that I'd developed these tools in an online space and that I hadn't quite adapted them to in-person play. But that's a future project.

I'm going to end the talk by briefly recounting the research that I am engaged in as writer-in-residence at Coastal Carolina University. I'm here in South Carolina, which for those of you who don't know, is in the South of the United States. This part of the country is particularly conservative; not simply religiously conservative, but it has many of the features of a culture that promotes conformity rather than embracing difference. That's the context in which I'm doing this research. The institution where I am teaching appears to be very homogeneous. Here in the United States, we would say that it's a PWI—a primarily white institution. When you are on campus, it very much appears that way. You look around and you see what appear to be a lot of white people on campus.

The project that I'm working on is still very emergent and unfolding. I would call it at this point discursive research. I've been holding one-on-one conversations with people who give a positive response to the question, "Do you know more than one language?" A positive response, which means they don't have to give an unequivocal "yes." Often, the kinds of answers that people give to that question are more like, "Maybe. Sort of? Kind of." Instead of thinking of people as being bilingual or multilingual, I'm thinking about translanguaging. In the translingual worldview, no one is bilingual or multilingual, but everyone is a translingual. When translanguaging, a person chooses from their available resources to communicate without thinking of the difference between languages. One needn't think, "I speak English and I speak Arabic; which do I use now?" One thinks, "I have a whole pool of linguistic resources and I pull from that pool what I feel that I need."

10 Amira Hanafi, "Change Language" (workshop, 5ème Biennale Internationale de Casablanca: The Word Creates Images, Casablanca, Morocco, November 17-20, 2022).

Language resources can be words, but they're also more broadly any kind of communication tool. What I've done so far in this project is to invite a person into my office where I first make a nonverbal gesture, which is that I make mint tea. That's drawn from my particular repertoire of communicative resources. Once the tea is shared, we have a conversation about our languages. I generally talk a bit about translanguaging to this person, and then we just have a sort of free conversation about the languages that we use and where we got them from. What ends up happening, in the context of the institution that I've described, is that conversations tend to gravitate around language, race, and identity. They keep coming back to questions of race and identity.

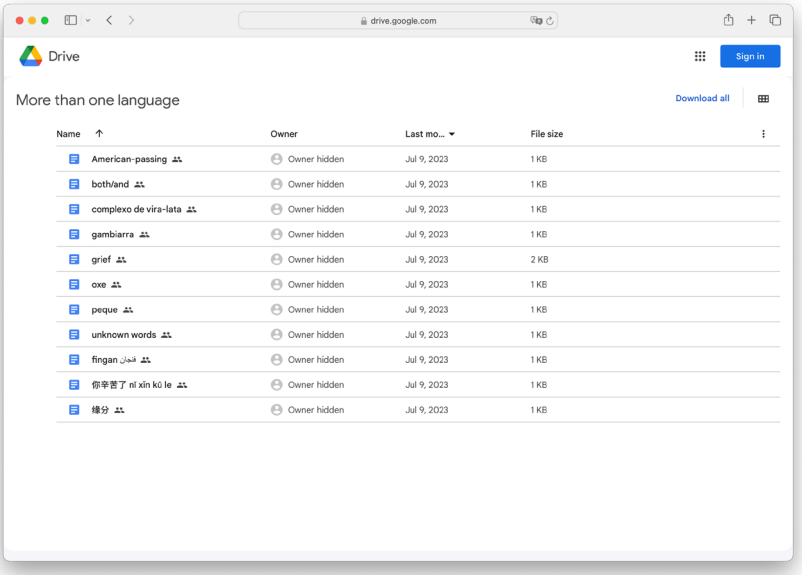


Fig. 13

At the end of each meeting, I ask my interlocutor to contribute a word and a short text to this collection I'm making. That's the screenshot that you've been looking at all this time, and you probably have looked at some of the words that are up there (see Fig. 13). What I think I might be trying to do with this project is to make something visible that is not made visible by a countable model of diversity. A countable model of diversity would report that there's this many white students at this university, this many Black students at this university, this many Latinx students, etc. Rather than diversity, I am thinking about fluidity. I'm thinking of multiplicity of identity rather than of categories and classifications.

I'm going to give you a couple of examples of some of the words and texts that folks have contributed. One is *American-passing*, contributed by Ina Seethaler. I really like this term; it's one that I've never heard anyone use before, actually. It's a name for being perceived as or assumed to be an American citizen due to a combination of race, accent, etc.

Here's a sadder word: *grief*, contributed by Selena Mendoza. I will read this:

> For me, growing up knowing two languages was intertwined with grief, and it often still is. As I entered the U.S. education system, freely spoken Spanish at home was replaced with English, which I quickly grasped onto since I was so young, but I now find myself grieving over the distance I was forced to have from my first spoken language. I take pride in being able to understand both English and Spanish fluently, in listening to songs and watching shows in both languages with ease, but grief is felt at every slightly mispronounced word, every translation that has become a bit foggy, every use of an online translator to "double-check" after myself. I think I feel grief the most during moments I am laughed at or teased by friends and family when I choose to sprinkle in Spanish while having conversation with them. Spanish has become this hidden superpower that I wish I could use more freely out in the world without the gasps or wide eyes, without the questions or shock I receive from others, without feeling like no matter how connected I am to this language, my relationship with it seems to be invalidated more often than it is seen, welcomed, and uplifted.

I'm hoping for the project that I'm working on to make space for healing from this kind of grief. To make way for people to use more of the linguistic resources that they have access to without feeling shut down. In the next chapter of the project, which I'll carry out when I'm back to teaching this fall, I plan to hold a writing workshop, an open workshop that I have yet to name. Rather than one-on-one meetings, we'll have group meetings and we'll see what emerges—what activities or solutions we might come up with together.

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